

Newsletter

Welcome to this 1st Edition of the PlayMatters Newsletter!

PlayMatters is an education initiative led by the International Rescue Committee, and includes Plan International, War Child Holland, Innovations for Poverty Action, and the Behavioural Insights Team in partnership with the LEGO Foundation. Using the power of **learning through play**, our goal is to reimagine childhood for **800,000+** refugee and host community children **aged 3-12+** in Uganda, Ethiopia, and Tanzania through helping them develop the skills needed to navigate a complex and ever changing world.

The PlayMatters Consortium

In partnership with



The LEGO Foundation

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About PlayMatters

Right from infancy, children have an amazing natural potential to learn about their environment through play. As they grow up in today's dynamic and ever-changing world, it becomes more important for them to build holistic skills which can help them thrive in future.

For refugee and host community children whose education and social development has been affected by crisis, the need for positive experiences and coping skills that can counterbalance negative factors in their lives is critical.

For PlayMatters, learning through play is a methodology for enhancing children's cognitive, social, creative, emotional, and physical skills. This is through the integration of child-centered and play-based interactions into early childhood development centers, primary schools, homes, and communities.

Our Approach

The PlayMatters consortium is working primarily with teachers, facilitators, and other educators in promoting integration of learning through play in the classroom.

This is following a technical assistance approach designed to integrate learning through play within the existing curriculum and learning systems.

PlayMatters is also working with caregivers, community leaders and system actors in children's lives to transform everyday interactions into learning opportunities and for the integration of learning through play teaching methodologies in education services.

Areas of Implementation



Kyegegwa, Isingiro, Kikuube, Lamwo, Arua, Madi Okollo, Terego, Obongi, Yumbe, and Adjumani Districts.



Kasulu, Kibondo & Kakonko Districts.



Benishangul Gumuz, Gambella, Afar, Tigray, Somali Regional States.

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Disruption, Recovery, Disruption: How learning through play is helping refugee children in Uganda cope with a painful past and an uncertain present



In 2018, an eruption of deadly gunshots and violence meant that Mary (center) and her family had to immediately flee their home in South Sudan. They spent the next 3 months fearing for their lives; surviving, while searching for safety in the hot and vast bushes of Lainya district where she was born. She was 9 years old at the time.

“We had to leave everything behind,” Mary’s father recalls. “Our home, our farm, our livelihood, everything...” he added.

They later joined a group of other families and made their way to BidiBidi refugee settlement in Uganda, which was the start of a new life as refugees. In 2019, Mary enrolled in a nearby school. “I advised my daughter to repeat grade 3 to catch up with the lost time,” said Mary’s father, a former NGO worker and agriculturalist who used to train farmers on income generation. The transition was not easy. “I miss my old friends,” Mary said.

“I am now in a new environment, and in a new education system, but at least I have made other friends,” she adds.

Uncertainty

Barely 2 years on, as Mary was regaining rhythm, the COVID-19 pandemic broke out and schools in BidiBidi closed. It has been over year since she last went to class. In this new reality, Mary and her peers now spend their mornings and evenings playing various learning games under the guidance of parents and community caregivers.

Some of the games are found in the “PlayMatters at Home” learning packets. These packets contain fun learning games that the whole family can play and are helping to mitigate learning loss and overcome stress.

They were developed as part of the response to the COVID-19 emergency to support caregivers with fun and creative ideas to keep children learning while they are at home as well as reduce

stress for families while schools are closed.



Mary playing a "tossing rock" game with her peers

The PlayMatters at Home packets use pictures to show play and learning activities that children can do by themselves and others for caregivers to do with their children. Our response also included an educator's guide for them to support families in their engagement with the learning through play activities and check on their wellbeing. It also included radio shows with learning through play educational content meant to supplement the packets.

In Uganda, the packets were translated into 10 languages reaching refugee and host communities: Madi, Dinka, Rutooro, Kinyabwisha, Acholi, Aringa, Kiswahili, Lugbara, Kakwa, and Juba Arabic. The same packets were distributed in Ethiopia and Tanzania, reaching over 100,000 children in the three countries.



Mary playing with her peers

The blindfold obstacle game

One of the games contained in the PlayMatters at Home packets is the "blindfold obstacle game." "Here, children, under the supervision of caregivers, blindfold each other and attempt to jump obstacles while counting the number of successful jumps," Mary explained.

This activity makes young learners actively engaged, while at the same time building on basic numeracy skills. It is also a fun activity for children and their caregivers to engage in!

The efforts continue to promote learning through play among vulnerable refugee & host community children, while building their creative, cognitive, physical, social, and emotional skills.

PlayMatters in Uganda, Ethiopia and Tanzania is now piloting content for educators, caregivers and the community to foster playful learning experiences among refugee and host community children while nurturing a generation of lifelong learners in and out of school.



“Students do not get tired quickly,” Refugee teachers in Tanzania speak on playful learning

Jerome, 30, and Ayungu, 33, are teachers at Tumaini Primary School in Nyarugusu refugee camp, which hosts Burundian and Congolese refugees. Jerome, who has two kids under five, teaches science to Grade 6 students while Ayungu teaches in Grade 2 for all subjects.



Eager students surround Jerome (left) and Ayungu (right) when they first received the learning packets

Both teachers received the PlayMatters at Home packets, which they started to use to facilitate learning through play when schools reopened and at home with their own children. The packets included an educator’s guide for pre-primary and primary children 3-6 years and 6-12 years respectively.

“There are so many advantages of using games and play to teach children. Students do not get tired quickly. They follow lessons more easily and are more attentive. They also retain things more easily,” said Ayungu.

Both teachers explained that learning games give children the confidence to participate in classroom activities while also teaching them concrete things such as vocabulary and counting.

“They also allow students to be more collaborative, leading to other positive outcomes, such as the inclusion of students with disability in play-based activities who otherwise tend to stay

separated,” said Jerome.

“Gukina amabiye”



Jerome playing “gukina amabiye” with his sons

On a sunny evening after school, Jerome’s sons excitedly met him at the entrance of their house. In their hands were small marbles, ready to play “gukina amabiye” with their father.

In this game, a small hole is dug on the ground. A round marble is placed near the hole, and others allocated to each player are spread around it at finger-length distance. A player uses their middle finger to shoot the opponents’ marbles into the hole. The one who shoots most marbles into the hole wins.

“This game nurtures social interactions between caregivers and their children, and teaches basic numeracy, helps in precision and focus, which creates meaning in the whole activity,” said Jerome.

“I have adapted some of the games described in the packets to my own classroom. I also remind children to keep on using the packets at home and ask them how things are going when they come to class to ensure that they are still using them,” he added.

How a pilot Interactive Voice Response improved teacher wellbeing in Ethiopia

The PlayMatters Consortium used Interactive Voice Response (IVR) to conduct a remote teacher training pilot to promote teachers' wellbeing and provide them with playful learning tips. This was to support them when schools re-opened after long closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The PlayMatters Consortium partnered with social enterprise Viamo to conduct the pilot. The pilot targeted 350 early childhood and primary teachers in three refugee camps in Gambela, Benishangul-Gumuz, and Somali regions.

Through their phones, the teachers received free-of-charge calls with eight, five-minute pre-recorded messages over four weeks. Ahead of each call, the teachers received a text message informing them about the next module and after listening to a module the teacher would receive a text message with a key point from the module. The teachers also had the choice of participating in the trainings as they were scheduled or taking it at their own convenience by calling a designated phone number and the system would call back free-of-charge at a time of their choice.

The remote pilot training consisted of eight training modules: teacher and student well-being, tips for teaching during COVID-19, social and emotional learning, and playful learning activities. At the end of each training module, the participant answered a comprehension question about the content of the module and received feedback on the answer.

25-year-old Daud, has been a teacher at a primary school in Tsore Camp, Benishangul Gumuz, Ethiopia.

He participated in the interactive voice response pilot program and explains how the program improved their ways of teaching.

“Previously we relied on traditional teaching techniques, but after we listened to the Interactive Voice Recording (IVR) messages and engaged with the PlayMatters project, we changed some of the teaching techniques. For instance, when we took our students outside the classrooms, we started playing new games that we created while still abiding to the COVID-19 restrictions,” said Daud.

“The students play a range of new games. For example, we teach students about different fruits. We assigned an action to each fruit like banana means ‘clap,’ mango means ‘sit down’ and so on. One child stands in front and sings and if the student shouts ‘mango’ they must sit down. The children enjoy the game and learn the names of the fruits at the same time,” he added.

Apart from being fun, this activity also promotes concentration and focus, contributing to their cognitive development.



Refugee Education & the role of Community Structures and Systems in creating an enabling environment that enhances Early Grade Learning



Mr. Aggrey Kibenge
Permanent Secretary,
Ministry of Gender, Labor & Social Development,
Uganda

Aggrey David Kibenge is an education, public policy, administration and management expert. He has over 25 years of experience with the greater part of this at the Ministry of Education in Uganda (1993-2012) and (2016-2019). He also served as Under Secretary at the Ministry of Tourism, Wildlife and Antiquities as well as the Office of the Prime Minister. He then returned to the Ministry of Education and Sports where he served up to August 2019 when he was appointed Permanent Secretary. He was later deployed to the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development (MGLSD) in September 2020 in the same capacity.

The MGLSD, through its systems and structures, lays a foundation at local and national level that links learning at home to a transition into learning at school. This is critical because of the role of communities in facilitating learning processes.

Through its structures, the MGLSD welcomes co-creation of resources that facilitate play-based learning for adults to effectively deliver playful methodologies to benefit refugee children and offer emotional well-being support to their respective caregivers/parents.

Having played a key role in the formulation of the Education Response Plan for Refugees and Host Communities, Aggrey spoke to PlayMatters on refugee education, teaching pedagogies, and skills needed by young learners to thrive today and in future.

Q: It has been 2 years since Uganda operationalized the Education Response Plan for Refugees and Host Communities. How is this going and why is it important?

A: As the first sector-specific operationalization of the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework worldwide, the Uganda Education Response Plan represents a key milestone in efforts to galvanize action by state and non-state actors to effectively support learning and protection needs of children and young people in refugee hosting areas. Many refugees are born and grow up in the country as their home, and therefore it is important to provide the right learning environment and infrastructure. Despite challenges like large class sizes, lack of enough teaching materials and trained teachers, there are improvements to the service provision. We are glad to have partners like PlayMatters supporting learning through play teaching methodologies which put the child at the center are critical in today's world.

Q: Speaking of children at the center of learning, there is a deliberate shift from teacher to child centered teaching methods. Why is this shift important?

A: Teacher centered methodologies follow traditional views on education as a process to impart, not generate, develop and/or build knowledge. As the world continues to evolve, learners need skills like problem solving, critical thinking, and social skills. These skills are best nurtured through keeping the child at the center of learning and through their active participation. This can further be enhanced when the environment embraces children's active participation, and parents & caregivers have adequate skills, resources, and motivation to drive change.

The environment and experiences learners are exposed to through interacting with their parents, caregivers and the community system influences the quality of learning they

obtain. The feeling a child gets when they are trusted to participate in their own learning has immense benefits.

Q: ...and what do you think of learning through play as a methodology?

A: Learning through play generates interest among learners. When learning tasks that children can accomplish are incorporated in play, they will enjoy it. They are also more likely to remember whatever they are taught. They will accomplish the task in a less stressed manner and at the end of the day you can achieve the desired outcomes from the lesson as a teacher.

In addition, the teaching methodology will also improve teacher and student trust, relationship and wellbeing, because it promotes social interaction. Even in the workplace, team building improves staff interaction which can lead to increased productivity.

The only challenge (and opportunity) with play is that it requires teachers to be properly trained and shift their mindset so that they can apply play methodologies in class while delivering the curriculum.

It may also require facilitation materials, which can be a challenge especially in remote schools. However, there is room for innovation.

For example, a doll made from banana fibers can still be a good and durable doll. At the end of the day, a doll is a doll, what matters is if a child is using it to learn something.

“ We have a big task in helping our teachers adopt new teaching pedagogies which are child centered. When you use teaching methodologies that enable and encourage child participation, the outcomes will be more enduring,”



Other Highlights

Supporting resumption of learning amidst crisis in Tigray

As part of the efforts to support the resumption of learning in parts of Tigray, Ethiopia affected by the conflict, PlayMatters working in collaboration with IDP community representatives provided access to early childhood education services for young children in three IDP sites in Shire. The PlayMatters consortium distributed learning supplies like crayons, papers, pens, pencils, books, chalk, and markers.



The PlayMatters at Home learning packets were also distributed, and educators were trained on how to use them to facilitate/engage in playful learning activities with children. This contributed to overcoming trauma and improving on their wellbeing.



An early childhood education and safe space centre for refugees and IDPs in Shire

PlayMatters at Home in Rwanda

PlayMatters at Home in Rwanda, a LEGO Foundation funded 9 months emergency program to support learning and wellbeing for children through the COVID-19 pandemic concluded in Rwanda. This program, led by Plan International Rwanda, utilized the PlayMatters at Home learning packets and radio shows developed by the larger PlayMatters consortium, and in collaboration with Ubongo Learning. It aired 24 episodes and distributed 360 packets in Kinyarwanda, reaching 1,080 refugee children in seven refugees camps located in seven districts.

“Our neighbors appreciated the way we play with our children, and they requested us to share our skills and the learning packets with them so that they can support their children to learn and play,” said one of the recipients.

Coming Up: Rollout of Play Well in East Africa

Play Well, a LEGO Foundation funded emergency program aiming to build children’s social emotional skills through playful, interactive audio stories and activities is preparing to roll out in East Africa.

The program involves producing and airing audio educational content targeting socio-emotional learning, literacy, and numeracy skills. Initially launched in Colombia and Venezuela in May 2021, Play Well will extend to Uganda, Ethiopia, and Tanzania in the coming months.

Learn more about the work of Play Well in East Africa in our upcoming issue!



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