



Sparking Lifelong Learning in Ethiopia, Uganda & Tanzania

What is PlayMatters?

PlayMatters (2020-2025) is an education initiative funded through a \$100 million grant from the LEGO Foundation. The program reimagines childhood for 800,000+ refugee and host-community children across Ethiopia, Tanzania, and Uganda – children whose education and social development has been affected by displacement and trauma. Building on children’s amazing resilience and a growing evidence base supporting Learning through Play methodologies, PlayMatters cultivates holistic learning for children ages 3-12+. PlayMatters is led by the International Rescue Committee and includes Plan International, War Child Holland, Innovations for Poverty Action, the Behavioral Insights Team in partnership with the LEGO Foundation.

Play is not frivolous: it enhances brain structure and function and promotes executive function (ie, the process of learning, rather than the content), which allows us to pursue goals and ignore distractions.

-Yogman et al, 2018.

The Problem: Children Affected by Crisis in East Africa

Of the three million refugees currently living in East Africa, more than half have been displaced for as long as three decades (UNHCR, 2019). Children can spend their entire childhood living as refugees, many without access to quality education or the simple normalcy of having playful, meaningful, happy childhood experiences. Some children are out of school altogether, but even for those in school, the conditions are not conducive to active learning. Learning assessments carried out in these communities reveal devastatingly low literacy and numeracy levels, even among older children (UWEZO, 2017).

In these conditions, many refugee children (and caregivers and teachers) are suffering from the excessive or prolonged activation of stress response systems in the body and brain (INEE, 2019). “Toxic stress” can have damaging effects on learning, behavior, and health across the lifespan (Shonkoff, 2012). Holistic psychosocial support and social-emotional learning strategies are needed to address the effects of toxic stress in children (INEE, 2016), but in most refugee schools, rote memorization and recall of information remains the norm, and large class sizes limit the freedom of both children and educators to move towards more active and playful methodologies (UNICEF, 2018).



The Solution: A Methodology for Learning and Healing

In every culture and community around the world, children play, and children learn through play. Play is fundamental to human existence and is a known pathway for healing and recovery during and after crisis. Due to a growing research base, we now know that children can deepen their learning when their play is joyful, iterative, meaningful, actively engaging, and socially interactive (Zosh et al, 2017). Because of this, learning through play is something that can be nurtured, supported and scaffolded in important ways by the adults in children's lives in order to enhance holistic learning and heal from trauma.

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

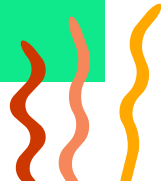
Parents and primary caregivers are children's "first teachers" and have an important role in creating the space for learning through play (UNICEF, 2018). Programming can support caregivers and empower them to take an active role in shaping children's learning and development, as well as to facilitate playful learning for their children at home, out in the community and during day-to-day experiences.

For refugee children, education is a lifeline, not a luxury, and schools must take a central role in building lifelong skills. In pre-primary settings such as preschools and ECD centers, enhanced play experiences should provide children with the time and space to engage freely with the environment. In primary grades, play opportunities build children's mastery of academic concepts and motivation to learn. Encouraging interest and motivation in the early grades allows children to contribute to their own learning. For example, book clubs and reading games help struggling readers to keep going, while playing board games can strengthen math concepts and social competencies at the same time (UNICEF, 2018).

For example, children at play learn how to:

- Make a plan and follow through [*"I want to draw my family. Who will I put in my picture?"*]
- Learn from trial and error, using imagination and problem-solving skills [*"My tall tower fell down! Maybe my friend can help build it up again."*]
- Apply concepts of quantity, science and movement to real life [*"I like these big seeds. How many will I need to cover this part of my picture?"*]
- Reason in a logical, analytical manner by acting on objects [*"There are still some pieces missing in this puzzle. Which ones might fit?"*]
- Communicate with classmates and negotiate differences in points of view [*"I want to be the mother. Could you be the baby? Or maybe the grandmother?"*]
- Derive satisfaction from their own accomplishments [*"We did it together!"*]
- Develop creativity and explore aesthetics and artistry [*"I wonder what will happen if I mix these colours together?"*]

Borrowed from UNICEF (2018).





Mounting Evidence of the Importance of Playful Learning

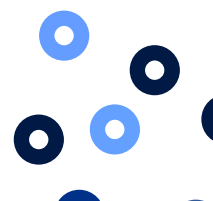
There is a growing evidence base demonstrating that play is one of the most important ways in which children gain essential knowledge and skills (Zosh et al, 2017), and that these impacts can have long-term societal benefits. The early years matter most, from birth to eight years old (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; Garcia et al, 2017), but play can be beneficial across age groups.

Research shows that children need to develop a breadth of skills that goes far beyond memorising academic content: their physical, social, emotional, cognitive and creative skills must also be nurtured, and play is a great way to do this (Toub, et al, 2016; Dore, Smith & Lillard, 2015; Tominey & McClelland, 2011; Zosh et al, 2017). Importantly, these different skills and aspects of development are not silos; development in one influence development in another, and children who are actively learning through play can develop multiple skills simultaneously (Zosh et al 2017). Knowing how to write, read and do maths is still important, but 21st century children must also build a broader set of skills that allows them to better utilize their academic skills for lifelong learning (Zosh et al, 2017).

For children facing adversity such as the refugee and host community children targeted by PlayMatters, play is arguably even more important. Play can support children's relationships with their caregivers, which is the most important factor in enabling children to thrive (Ginsberg, 2007, Hassinger-Das et al, 2017). Children who endure stress, poverty and conflict need positive experiences and coping skills in their lives to counteract the negative factors, which can also support their confidence and agency. Agency in learning through play means seeing the child as capable rather than a blank slate to be filled (Zosh 2017; Daniels & Shumow, 2003).

Engaging children in playful activities with supportive caregivers, teachers, and other adults in their lives can help build this agency and also mitigate the effects of toxic stress (Shonkoff, 2012; INEE, 2016), allowing children to heal, and learn, and develop to their fullest potential.

In fact, some evidence from research on Learning through Play methodologies shows long-term societal and economic benefits stemming from improved academic, social, emotional, creative, and physical outcomes for children.



For example, Marcon (2002) found that playful learning in preschools in the USA was associated with better short and long-term academic, motivational and well-being outcomes by the end of primary school. Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford & Taggart (2004), in a cohort study of 3,000 children in the UK, showed that extended play-based preschool experience (i.e., 3 years) was advantageous to children from disadvantaged households in relation to their academic and social development.

Because PlayMatters is one of the first large-scale programs to advance Learning through Play approaches in refugee settings, and the only one to include primary age children, the implementing consortium has committed to building the evidence base through rigorous research across the program cycle. Thus, PlayMatters will contribute to this growing evidence base on the importance of play for children in crisis contexts.

Technical Assistance Model

Often, PlayMatters consortium partners IRC, Plan, and War Child Holland work in direct service delivery for the refugee populations we serve, and given the range of program mandates and scopes, we typically find ourselves working in siloes.

But in PlayMatters we are doing things differently. Built using a technical assistance model rather than a service delivery model, PlayMatters will develop user-driven interventions that complement and infuse play into existing practices and resources. We aspire to develop a Play Library that will serve as a resource for a range of stakeholders, including the government and all implementing partners, to facilitate their use of learning through play techniques. For this to be useful, it is important that stakeholders work with us and help to shape the content in the Play Library to their context.

PlayMatters interventions will encourage playful experiences and interactions across the many spaces and relationships in children's lives, including supporting the teaching of all subjects across their school curriculum at each developmental level. In this way, our technical assistance in the development of these resources and the professional development of all stakeholders who would access them can have the broadest reach, enhancing the learning and development of all refugee and host community children.



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