

POLICY BRIEF

Evaluation Office
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UNICEF EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT KIT FOR EMERGENCIES

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for every child



INTRODUCTION

Emergencies arising from armed conflict or natural disasters negatively affect the physical, mental, and psychosocial well-being of children, their families and communities. With emergencies and protracted crisis on the rise, UNICEF is committed to safeguarding children's development and contributing to resilient and sustainable societies. One way that UNICEF puts this commitment into practice in humanitarian settings is by encouraging play-based early learning opportunities for young children. UNICEF believes quality early childhood development (ECD) programmes that incorporate play-based activities can mitigate against toxic stress by promoting positive caregiver-to-child, as well as child-to-child interactions.

The purpose of this policy brief is to guide UNICEF Programme Chiefs, Managers and Specialists engaged in ECD programming on future applications of the ECD kit intervention within early childhood development programming in emergency contexts. This document summarizes the main messages and set of actionable recommendations derived from a synthesis of the evaluative evidence on UNICEF Early Childhood Development Kit (ECD kit).

The *ECD Kit Evaluation Synthesis* summarized the evidence from global monitoring data and national ECD Kit evaluation case studies from Senegal, South Sudan and Uganda, judged according to three evaluation criteria – the relevance, effectiveness and impact of the ECD kits. Identification of common results or challenges with the ECD kits through the triangulation of data sources ensured the findings were based on systematic evidence and not by chance. Thus, the reader can have confidence in the main messages presented in this brief as a basis for future decision-making.

Key Terms and Concepts

- **Caregiver** – In this document, the term caregiver refers to any adult or youth who works directly with children in an ECD programme, serving in the role of facilitator or teacher.
- **Child Friendly Spaces (CFS)** – This term refers to one delivery model or approach to early childhood services that focuses primarily on child protection and psychosocial support to children of all ages. It also refers to the specific place where early childhood services are provided.
- **Early Childhood Development (ECD)** – This term applies to children ages birth through eight and refers to the continuous process of acquiring skills and abilities during this age period across the domains of cognition, language, motor, social and emotional development.
- **ECD Centres** – This term refers to one delivery model or approach to early childhood services that focuses primarily on school readiness. It also refers to the specific place where early childhood services are provided.

- **Early Stimulation and Care** – UNICEF defines early stimulation and care as a key aspect of a nurturing care environment, a core set of interrelated components, including behaviours, attitudes, and knowledge about caregiving (e.g., health and feeding); stimulation (e.g., talking, singing and playing); responsiveness (e.g., early bonding and secure attachment); and safety (e.g., routines and protection from violence).
- **Emergency** – A situation that threatens the lives and well-being of large numbers of a population and requires extraordinary action to ensure their survival, care and protection.
- **Humanitarian Situation** – Any circumstance where humanitarian needs are sufficiently large and complex to require significant external assistance and resources, and where a multi-sectoral response is needed with the engagement of a wide range of international humanitarian actors.
- **Parent** – This term refers to the biological mother and father of a child, or the primary caretaker of a minor child.
- **Play** – A freely chosen, spontaneous, voluntary, pleasurable, and flexible activity involving a combination of body movement, objects, symbol use, and social relationships.
- **Play Affordance** – The term play affordance is used by researchers to describe the opportunities provided by the physical and social environment that support children’s play.
- **Play-based Learning** – Children’s development of cognitive, physical and social skills through play-based activities with adults and their peers.
- **Play-based Facilitation** – A pedagogical approach in which adults stimulate and care for children through guided play-based interactions.

PLAY PROVISION



MESSAGE 1

The objectives of the ECD kit are still valid for UNICEF in its emergency programming for young children. Without UNICEF ECD kits, most early childhood programmes in humanitarian situations lacked appropriate play opportunities to promote children's early stimulation and care. However, using the kits in non-Western cultures and in low resource settings requires context-specific local adaptations to ensure the relevance of the play opportunities for children, their parents and caregivers.

Objectives of the ECD Kit. The ECD kit was developed by UNICEF in 2009 to strengthen the response for young children in emergencies arising from conflict or natural disasters. The kit consists of a box of toys and learning materials for children ages six and under in emergencies, with the aim of: (1) creating a safe and secure play and learning environment, (2) establishing positive and supportive adult-child interactions; and (3) developing children's early learning skills, curiosity, creativity, and self-expression.

UNICEF Mandates for Young Children in Emergencies. The ECD kit addresses UNICEF mandates for young children in emergencies, as expressed in the [Core Commitments for Children in Humanitarian Action](#). The ECD kit supports the education sector's strategic result for the provision of play and early learning opportunities for young children in affected communities in emergencies. The kit also supports the fulfilment of children's right to play, as articulated in Article 31 of the [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#).

ECD Kit Global Reach. From 2009-2018, more than 140,000 ECD kits were procured by 104 Country Offices, reaching an estimated 7.1 million children globally. Countries in the Eastern and Southern Africa region procured the largest number of all ECD kits globally from 2009 to 2018 - 37,776 kits benefited an estimated 1.9 million children in the region. The kits were considered relevant from the perspective of global and national decision-makers in both humanitarian and development contexts.

Play in the Context of Increasing Levels of Violence Against Children. There is a clear need for the provision of play and early learning opportunities in fragile states, low-resource settings, and especially in emergency contexts. Conflict was the most important factor associated with the procurement of ECD kits, especially in Eastern/Southern Africa, the Middle East/North Africa, and more recently in South Asia and Western Africa. An estimated 102,770 kits have benefited more than 5.14 million children residing in fragile states within these regions.



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Photos provided by UNICEF Country Offices in Africa (left), South Asia (middle) and Uganda (right)

Evaluation Best Practices



Traditional Clay Toy from Uganda



Localized Version of the ECD Kit Shape Sorter



Felt Baby Book from Kyrgyzstan

Engage parents in creating culturally relevant play opportunities

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Contextualize the ECD Kits. The context in which the ECD kit is used matters. The ECD kit interventions that yielded observable or substantial caregiver outcomes and child impacts were those which addressed the cultural relevance of the toys and which incorporated local play experiences.

Many studies on the impact of play on children's early learning and development assume children's exposure to artefacts, such as puzzles and building blocks, for the purpose of measuring their cognitive development. However, exposure to these types of learning aids is rare and unevenly distributed in Africa, Asia, the Middle East and Latin America, especially in low-resource, subsistence agricultural or rural communities.

The evidence indicates that contextualizing the materials with parents and caregivers and incorporating their traditional forms of play are important for the effective use and sustainability of the kits in practice. UNICEF staff members reported that local materials are more likely to be appropriate to the specific needs of the emergency, culturally-relevant, supportive of the growth of the local economy, and environmentally-friendly.

To learn more, visit this interactive map of UNICEF ECD kit use cases
<http://bit.ly/ECDkit>



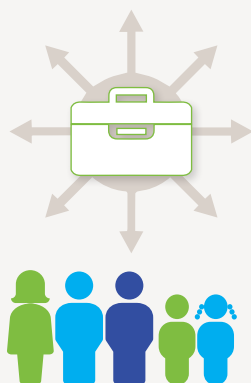
Engage Parents in Local Toymaking. Evaluation case studies indicated that local toymaking: (1) ensures children's access to culturally relevant toys and play experiences; (2) strengthens caregiver capacities in play-based facilitation and interactions with children; (3) encourages nurturing parenting practices; and (4) provides a continuum of play-based opportunities for children at home and in early learning settings.

The evaluation case study from Uganda provides an effective blueprint for reaching frontline users through a specialized training on the localization of the kits that also improved the sustainability of the intervention. In this approach, UNICEF engaged caregivers, parents, youth and artists from the community in using local materials to make traditional toys, and in replicating the most popular ECD kit toys.

ECD kit use cases from 31 countries, such as Nepal, Rwanda, Kyrgyzstan and Cote d'Ivoire also provide additional examples of local adaptations that could be scaled (see map). Those countries that have encouraged local adaptation of the kit tended to do so with non-durable, low-cost or recycled materials. For example, caregivers or teachers have made local puzzles out of cardboard, or used rocks, cork, paper-mâché, or recycled paper to create new storybooks or toys. The procurement of local materials in emergency settings must be considered in scaling any approach to toymaking.



PLAY ADVOCACY



MESSAGE 2

As a global leader of early childhood development, UNICEF should more clearly articulate the conditions required for play-based early stimulation and care in emergencies. The quality of children's play opportunities influenced the extent to which outcomes and impacts were observed from the ECD kits. The presence of an ECD enabling environment, the safe integration of play opportunities into ECD programming, play affordances, and caregiver training were important factors shaping the effectiveness of the ECD kit interventions.

Characteristics of High-Quality Play Opportunities

An ECD enabling environment and/or ECD emergency preparedness plan is in place.

An important assumption for the effective deployment and integration of play-based opportunities into emergency programming for young children is the presence of a strong enabling environment for ECD on a national level, and/or an ECD emergency preparedness plan. Play opportunities can be deployed quickly when UNICEF has prepositioned ECD kits, or when guidelines for ECD centres in emergencies and national ECD training mechanisms already exist.

Play opportunities are integrated into ECD programming. High-quality play opportunities consist of interventions that are deployed as part of an integrated and intersectoral strategy for children's early stimulation and care in emergencies. The ECD kits were not intended to be used as a standalone intervention. They are only one tool among a suite of packages that target children's critical needs in humanitarian situations.

The ECD setting must provide adequate play affordances for children to safely interact with and play with the toys. The term play affordance is used by researchers to describe the opportunities provided by the physical and social environment that support children's play. Three play affordances influenced the effectiveness of the ECD kit interventions (see Box 1).

Training in play-based facilitation is required. UNICEF should require training on play-based facilitation in Partnership Contract Agreements that integrate the ECD kits, and support partners to effectively build the capacities of frontline kit users. If training is not provided by UNICEF or its partners, it is likely that the ECD kit interventions or other play-based opportunities will not yield the intended outcomes or impacts.

Adequate Spaces for Play:

Children's exposure to the ECD kit materials should ideally occur within a structured and safe setting with trained adult facilitators. There is strong evidence that spaces for play were not often conducive for the use of the ECD kits in humanitarian situations. Heavy rain, high winds, and exposed dirt or sandy floors with little to no matting for children to sit on prevented caregivers from using the ECD kit toys more frequently.

Appropriate Classroom Size:

The number of children in a classroom should typically not exceed 50 children to facilitate play-based activities within a space. A surge in demand for ECD programming is often generated quickly or unexpectedly in emergencies, which can over-stretch the supply of services that are delivered to an affected population. This surge in demand results in overcrowded classrooms and disproportionate caregiver to child ratios. Overcrowded classrooms of up to 400 children with 1 to 3 caregivers were observed in humanitarian situations, which prevented the caregivers from using the ECD kit toys more frequently.

Appropriate Caregiver-to-Child Ratios:

Appropriate caregiver-to-child ratios (1 caregiver for every 20 to 25 children) are required for play-based learning to occur. In emergency contexts, caregiver-to-child ratios far exceeded national and global standards for ECD centres. In South Sudan, partners and facilitators of the ECD centres and CFS reported high caregiver-to-child ratios of up to 1:100, or 1 facilitator for every 100 children. In Uganda, the estimated ratio ranged 1:65 to 1:230. An insufficient number of caregivers, combined with their lack of capacities to facilitate large groups of children, often prevented caregivers from using the toys more frequently and effectively.

Play and Nurturing Care in Early Childhood Development

In addition to promoting quality play opportunities and adequate play affordances, it is also important to consider the role of play in providing nurturing care in early childhood development.

Nurturing care refers to the conditions created by public policies, programmes and services that enable communities and caregivers to ensure children's good health and nutrition, and which protect them from threats.

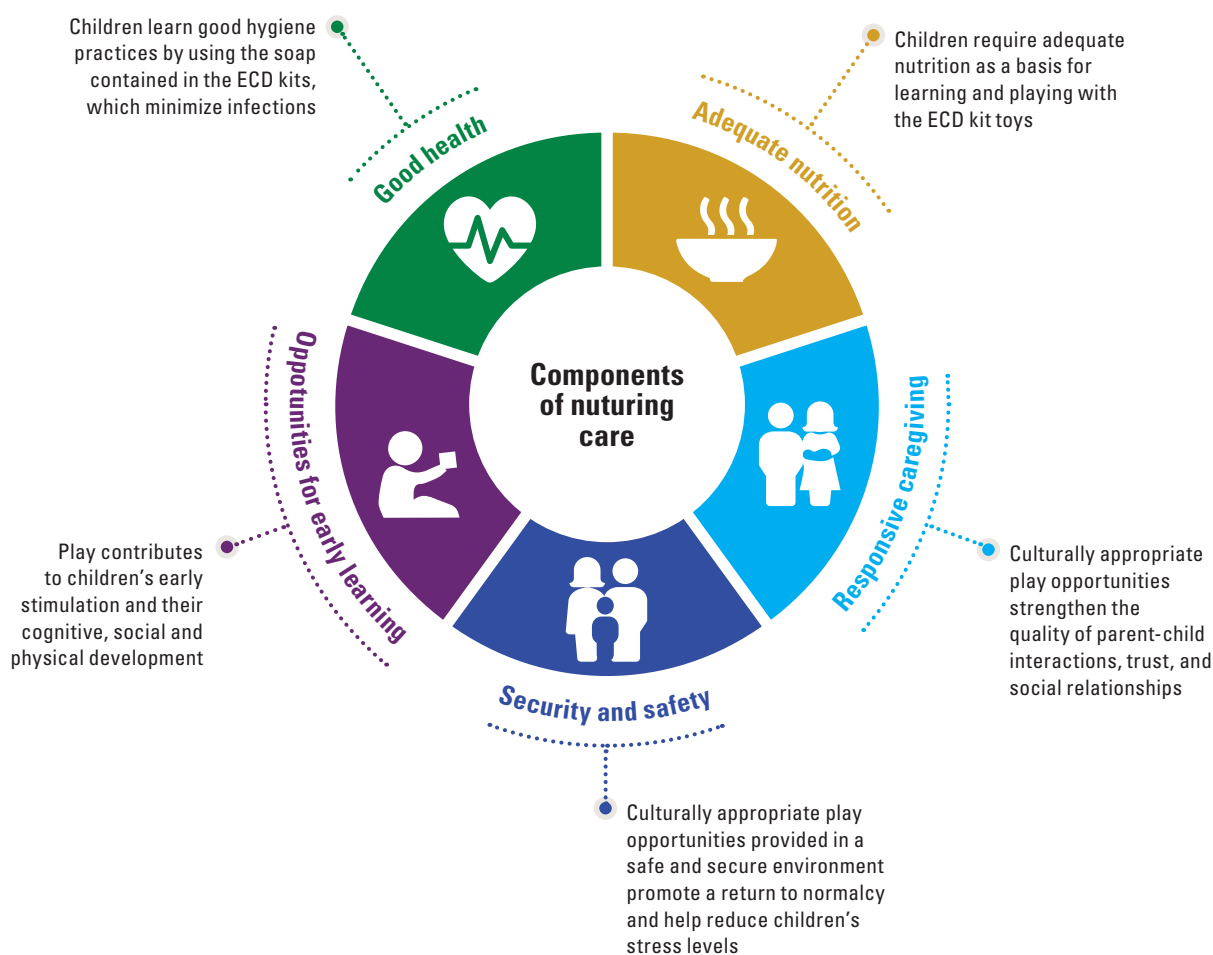
Nurturing care also means giving young children opportunities for early learning, through caregiver and parent interactions that are responsive and emotionally supportive.¹

In emergency contexts, there is a greater need for integrating a nurturing care framework into humanitarian policies, programmes and services. ECD Kit interventions and other play opportunities have an important role in providing a nurturing care environment.

¹ Adapted from: World Health Organization. (2018). *Nurturing care for early childhood development: A framework for helping children survive and thrive to transform health and human potential*. A joint publication of: WHO, UNICEF, World Bank Group, ECDAN, Every Woman Every Child, and the Partnership for Maternal, Newborn and Child Health.

Culturally appropriate play opportunities can provide a holistic approach to families' and children's well-being, help to re-establish security and routines as quickly as possible, and support the rebuilding of community social capital and cohesion by encouraging positive relationships between members of displaced and host communities.

The diagram below summarizes some examples of how play opportunities (such as the ECD kits and locally made toys), when combined with adequate nutrition and caregiver training, can support nurturing care in humanitarian situations.



Evaluation Best Practices

Integrate a variety of high-quality play opportunities across all UNICEF sectors engaged with early childhood programming in emergencies.

Play Opportunities	Early Stimulation Strategies	Caregiver-Child Interactions	Example Child Outcomes
Singing (no toys)	Caregivers manage large groups of children by engaging them in the learning activities through call and response and with body movement.	Children learn classroom routines (such as where and how to sit) and social skills (such as paying attention when a caregiver is speaking).	Children develop cognitive skills (such as vocabulary and hygiene practices), and small motor skills (such as clapping and dancing).
Free play (all toys, no toys)	Children have the opportunity to choose a toy and to decide how to play with it. Caregivers promote partnerships between children to facilitate play among peers.	Facilitates children's participation in shaping their learning experiences and encourages children to interact with each other through play.	Children develop a range of social and emotional skills, such as sharing and taking turns.
Guided play (all toys)	Caregivers capitalize on a child's thoughts or feelings when playing; ask children questions that lead to further discovery and exploration; and offer help when children are playing because their small and gross motor skills are developing.	Enhances nurturing caregiving practices and facilitates interactive play-based teaching learning (in contrast to rote teaching and learning).	Children develop a wide range of cognitive, physical, social and emotional skills. Children form positive attachments with caregivers through play leading to a greater sense of security.
Symbolic play (clay, building blocks, string beads)	Caregivers help children replicate objects in their environment (such as an animal figure) to stimulate role play and pretend play	Caregivers share their knowledge of community norms and social roles to pass down cultural practices.	Children develop imagination and creativity by pretending and mimicking behaviours and situations they see and experience in their lives.
Restorative play (puppets and drawing)	Caregivers use play to support children in returning to normalcy from an emergency situation.	Children express their feelings and emotions as they play with caregivers, who reassure children and help them feel a sense of security.	Children's stress levels are reduced and their social emotional learning and coping skills are nourished.
Traditional play (locally made toys)	Caregivers work with parents to make traditional toys that draw upon cultural norms and practices	Caregivers relive their experiences as children and become playful in their interactions as they recall fond memories.	Children learn how to make toys on their own using local materials and develop a wide range of cognitive, physical, social and emotional skills.

PLAY PARTNERSHIPS

MESSAGE 3



UNICEF engaged a diverse set of partners to deploy and implement the kit in emergencies. However, UNICEF and partners were often unable to deliver effective training on the kits with frontline users. Without appropriate training, children will not fully benefit from these play opportunities due to the challenges caregivers face when introducing toys into emergency or low resource settings. It is important to find ways to deepen caregiver understandings of play-based facilitation and learning, such as through the enhanced ECD kit intervention approach.

Unlock the potential of play in emergencies.

The ECD kit theory of change suggests that **if** the kit interventions empower caregivers to engage in play-based facilitation with the toys and learning materials, and **if** parents are engaged in the localization of the kits, **then** caregiver interactions with children will be strengthened, nurturing parenting practices will be enhanced, and children's engagement and participation in program activities will increase, **which will** ultimately impact children's psychosocial well-being, early learning and development.

Depending on the quality of children's play experiences, play-based learning with the kits contributed to children's relief from stress, their social emotional development, and cognitive development. Positive impacts on caregivers and parents included improved caregiver well-being, more nurturing parent-child interactions, and increased social cohesion.

Build caregiver capacity to facilitate high-quality play experiences. Children need routine access (a high dosage) to a variety of toys and play experiences for the ECD kit interventions to observe developmental outcomes and impacts. The evaluation found that the UNICEF standard of 1 kit for every 50 children was often not met during surge conditions.

If children do not have routine exposure to a variety of toys - due to large class sizes, few caregivers, and an insufficient number of toys - children may fight each other over toys. The resulting conflicts can create psychosocial stress that is harmful to children's learning and well-being.

Children's access and engagement with the toys can be substantially increased through local toymaking. The quality of children's play experiences improves when culturally relevant play opportunities are provided.

Reach frontline caregivers through an enhanced ECD kit intervention. Training did not take place in 25 percent of the reporting UNICEF Country Offices with the kits, and the train-the-trainer approach was often not effective for reaching frontline ECD kit users. Challenges associated with capacity building in emergencies (such as high caregiver turnover rates and limited professional development time) contributed to mixed results. Many questions remain on the most effective and feasible training approaches with the kits in emergency contexts.

The evaluation found that an enhanced ECD kit intervention yielded added value for the investments made. The enhanced intervention had a greater impact on preschool teachers ensuring

children’s participation in class in Senegal, and in caregiver transformations from rote teaching to play-based facilitation in Uganda.

The enhanced ECD kit intervention consists of: (1) an increase in training dosage for frontline ECD kit users – from one-off trainings lasting a couple of days to longer-term trainings and on-site mentoring in alignment with national ECD capacity development strategies and approaches; (2) using evidence from the neurosciences, the integration of storytelling and graphic materials into ECD kit programming to help caregivers and parents understand the rationale behind the

use of the toys (3) the incorporation of a local toymaking innovation or adaptations of the kits using local materials.

Evaluation Best Practices

The Uganda ECD kit evaluation case study examined the process and outcomes of two ECD kit interventions. The enhanced ECD kit intervention yielded important changes in caregiver capacities and child outcomes for the investments made. UNICEF Country Offices should consider ways of implementing the enhanced intervention to ensure results for children.

Foundational ECD Kit Intervention	Enhanced ECD Kit Intervention
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ECD Kits + Activity Guide • Rapid Training by NGO, specific to NGO program goals (such as family reunification, psycho-social support to parents, peacebuilding, etc.) • No specific training on the kits 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ECD Kits + Activity Guide + Local Toys • Extended National ECD Training by Ministry of Education and Sports • Specialized Training on Adapting the ECD Kit for Local Context • On-Site Mentoring • Integration of Neuroscience Evidence Messages • Parenting Programme • Home Visits
<p>ACCESS TO TOYS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Insufficient toys for high demand • The toys are stored outside of the classroom; caregivers control toy access 	<p>ACCESS TO TOYS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sufficient toys for all children (ECD kit toys + traditional toys) • Toys are integrated into classrooms where children can access them
<p>CAREGIVER CAPACITIES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rote teaching with toys • Singing with toys • Dependent upon intuition and experience of caregivers 	<p>CAREGIVER CAPACITIES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guided play-based facilitation • Wider range of play experiences offered, especially free play • Deeper understanding of play
<p>PARENT ENGAGEMENT</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited to none • Specific to NGO goals 	<p>PARENT ENGAGEMENT</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased participation in play activities with children at home and at ECD centres
<p>CHILD OUTCOMES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited range of outcomes • Reduction in stress levels • Cognitive skills (vocabulary, counting) 	<p>CHILD OUTCOMES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wider range of outcomes, especially social emotional skills (sharing, making friends, etc.), cognitive skills and small motor skills







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