Ahlan Simsim Program Models

For more than five million Syrian children,[1] the most formative years of their lives have been marked by displacement, chaos and violence. Conflict and displacement can negatively impact children's intellectual and social-emotional development and threaten long-term economic prosperity, health and well-being. Due solely to the circumstances of their birth, these children are at high-risk for failing to reach their full developmental potential. Ahlan Simsim aims to prepare a generation of children affected by conflict in the Syrian response region for successful futures. The program's approach is informed by evidence-based design and an understanding that young children in crisis contexts often lack the holistic services they need to ensure their healthy development.

Safe, nurturing and enriching relationships with consistent caregivers and trusted adults are essential for mitigating the negative effects of crisis and conflict. To ensure that children receive these experiences, Ahlan Simsim offers a range of direct service program models. These models draw from global evidence articulated in the 2016 Lancet Series on Early Childhood Development, align with the Nurturing Care Framework, and

were designed with an understanding of the specific needs, contextual factors and constraints of humanitarian settings.[2] IRC currently implements four ECD program models that fall under two target categories: programs targeting families and programs targeting children. Within that, both target groups have two program models that are differentiated by the number of contact hours the targets interact with the developed content.

Across all of our services, all caregivers and children are welcomed and supported, regardless of gender, nationality, religion, ethnic identity, economic status, or interests. Our approach to inclusion aims to ensure participation, representation and empowerment to provide meaningful access and combat and transform harmful social norms. At the same time, the approach recognizes that crisis and displacement affect the physical, emotional, social, cognitive, and spiritual development, of both children and their family members and increase the risk of abuse and exploitation.

Our family-focused models target specific skills and outcomes for caregivers that we know, if achieved, will better set the child on track for improved cognitive and socio-emotional outcomes:

Reach Up and Learn

Reach Up and Learn (RUL) is a play-based home visiting model typically conducted weekly for up to two years, targeting children from six months to three and a half years of age. Home visits are conducted by para-professionals who are provided training and on-the-job coaching by mentor para-professionals. Based on a detailed, but simple curriculum, home visitors guide mother and child in play activities using scaffolding techniques, and provide 3-4 activities each week from their rotating library of toys made from recycled and low-cost materials as well as contextualized picture books and puzzles. The trusting relationship of the home visitor and the mother, empowerment of the mother to play with and nurture her children, adjusting of each activity to the developmental ability of the child, and praise of both mother and child are some of the central tenants of the program. Families engaging with RUL are expected to receive at least 12 total hours of regularly scheduled home visits over the course of a year.

Flexible and Modular Responsive Care Interventions

To reach families in less stable, mobile environments, or in settings where RUL is not feasible or practical, we offer group-based parenting programs, based on an adaptation of IRC's evidence-based Families Make the Difference program. We are also in the process of adapting RUL group sessions for groups of caregivers and children to play and learn together. At the same time, we are developing digital methods to reach caregivers through text message, videos and social media. We are also developing content for one-on-one counseling and other caregiver-focused content for those who travel to different preexisting centers, health clinics or other direct service settings. This model is still evolving as we determine the most effective ways to reach out target caregivers. The anticipation is to reach caregivers for a minimum of six hours over the course of six months.

Our models targeting children focus on improved cognitive and socio-emotional outcomes and include:

Preschool Healing Classrooms

Preschool Healing Classrooms (PHCs) offer children a safe, predictable place to learn and cope with the consequences of conflict. Every PHC is designed around five key elements: play-based learning, sense of belonging, sense of pride, sense of control, and positive social relationships. Each of these elements is equally important in supporting the learning of young children who have been exposed to violence, poverty, neglect, or other risk factors. In a PHC, children learn basic literacy and numeracy skills, to express their needs, play cooperatively, follow rules, and manage their feelings. These skills are developed through consistent, nurturing interactions with adult caregivers that provide children with a sense of comfort, security and confidence. Every child enrolled in a PHC is expected to receive at least 100 hours of classroom time over a six-month period.

Play and Learning Spaces

Play and Learning Spaces take an inclusive approach to education and can be created in any space that is safe and accessible for children, even when children do not have access to more formal preschool spaces or for children who are younger or older than the target preschool age. For these spaces, we create content and activity guides for less structured play to make it possible for learning spaces to be implemented within community centers, health centers, home daycares, and other childcare settings. The anticipation is to reach children for a minimum of six hours over the course of six months, but this can be significantly higher depending on how content is implemented.

For more information, contact Emma.Kane@rescue.org.

[1] UNICEF. 2019. "Syrian Arab Republic; Humanitarian Action for Children." <https://www.unicef.org/appeals/syria.html>

[2] World Health Organization. "Nurturing care for early childhood development: Linking survive and thrive to transform health and human potential. <https://www.who.int/maternal_child_adolescent/child/nurturing-care-framework/en/>

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