PROMOTING PSYCHOSOCIAL WELLBEING THROUGH THE POWER OF PLAY

UNLOCKING CHILDREN’S FULL POTENTIAL FOR LEARNING AND LIFE
SUMMARY

Children are affected by historic levels of adversity due to the increased duration and frequency of crises such as communicable diseases, climate-related events, and conflict. For them, crisis is the new normal. The effects of crisis on children and their caregivers are extremely harmful for brain development, wellbeing, and learning.

The human brain develops in a sequence that starts with safety, movement, connection, and emotional regulation. Only after these needs are met can children access their thinking brain (e.g., cortex level), including the parts of the brain that are activated for literacy and numeracy.

Play is one of the most effective ways to support children’s psychosocial wellbeing and learning, as it allows them to express themselves and connect with others in ways that go beyond what they can say with words. Through play, children learn to regulate themselves and relate to others, providing a crucial foundation for learning and wellbeing.

Psychosocial wellbeing and social and emotional learning (SEL) underpin the quality of education for all children, but this is especially true for refugee, internally displaced and host community children. Through initiatives such as MA’AN/TOGETHER and Build Back Better, Right To Play International has developed and implemented a set of projects and resources that demonstrate how play-based psychosocial support (PSS) works to improve children’s psychosocial wellbeing, relationships, and learning.

Despite its significance to wellbeing and learning, the current level of donor funding does not reflect the importance of PSS and SEL. There is an urgent need for all stakeholders to increase financial and political commitments to mainstream play-based PSS into all education investments, including education in emergencies.
THE CONTEXT

It is an incredibly challenging time to be a child. By the end of 2022, a record 43.3 million children were forcibly displaced, a figure that has doubled over the past decade.¹ An estimated 449 million children worldwide (1 in 6) live in a conflict zone,² and nearly 1 billion children—53% of children worldwide—live in contexts that are highly vulnerable to the extreme impacts of climate change.³ The COVID-19 pandemic created the largest disruption to education and health systems in modern history, disproportionately affecting children’s learning and wellbeing.

Instability greatly impacts children’s psychosocial wellbeing. Children affected by crisis are more vulnerable to abuse, separation from family, neglect, violence, exploitation, forced marriage, human trafficking, and recruitment by armed groups.⁴ All of these experiences increase stress levels for children and their families. In some cases, social norms amongst teachers, parents, and community members perpetuate cycles of violence.⁵ A 2016 global study found that half of all children ages 2–17 had experienced some form of physical, emotional, or sexual violence over the course of the previous year.⁶

Support systems struggle to keep children safe, healthy, and learning. The people and systems that support children are highly vulnerable in conflict and crisis situations. Displacement forces families to resettle and adapt to new environments and communities. Caregivers and educators are often coping with the loss of family members and struggling to meet the basic needs of their families due to limited availability of work, often in environments that are hostile to newcomers.⁷ Many face overlapping barriers to access to social services, including health and education. These adversities are compounded by poverty, inequality, and marginalization, leading to generational patterns of violence and trauma. While policymakers are starting to acknowledge the importance of psychosocial wellbeing and SEL, under-resourced education systems still struggle to provide children with the supports they need to learn and reach their full potential.

Despite these historical challenges, we are in a moment of opportunity. The right of children to have a playful and safe childhood⁸ is increasingly recognized by governments and donors. Advances in neuroscience confirm what educators have known for decades—providing a foundation of psychosocial support is critical to wellbeing and learning. For more than 20 years, Right To Play International has delivered programs with impact in both development and humanitarian contexts, harnessing play to support children’s education and wellbeing in some of the most challenging contexts in the world. The latest scientific evidence on brain development, combined with examples of Right To Play’s approach to promoting psychosocial wellbeing through play can inform donors, national and host country governments to increase political and financial commitments for PSS as part of their education programming across the development–humanitarian continuum.
While the majority of brain development happens in the first five years of life, the brain continues to develop until a person is in their twenties. Experiences in childhood and adolescence can shape a person's ability to learn and thrive well into adulthood. Over the past two decades, researchers have pinpointed adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) as having harmful effects on child brain development, along with an increased likelihood of physical and mental health struggles. ACEs include domestic violence and abuse, living in an unsafe community, poverty, and experiences of discrimination and oppression due to racial and cultural identities, and status. One or more of these adverse childhood experiences can greatly impact a child's development and wellbeing. Children in low- and middle-income countries are impacted by adverse experiences at higher rates than their peers in high-income countries. This is especially true for refugee and internally displaced children.

Refugee and internally displaced children face elevated symptoms of anxiety, depression, and an inability to concentrate and regulate their emotions. When children do not have access to safety, food, water, and adequate housing, it not only impacts their development and psychosocial wellbeing, but also their ability to learn. The increased severity, duration, and frequency of crises brought on by communicable diseases, conflict, and climate-induced disasters also have a significant impact on the caregiver-child relationship and parental mental health. This can contribute to toxic stress, which is the child's experience of intense and chronic adversity without adequate support from a caregiver. Chronic stress negatively impacts brain development.

“When entire communities experience the same traumas for generations, the very mechanisms that helped them to cope become destroyed in the process. The whole group becomes frozen in time and the collective narratives become post-traumatic.”

Elizabeth Fast, Ph.D., Associate Professor—Concordia University & Delphine Collin-Vézina, Ph.D., Professor—McGill University
The brain develops in a bottom up, tiered fashion, starting with the brainstem, then midbrain, limbic system, and lastly the cortex. The brainstem is responsible for meeting basic safety needs (e.g., pulling your hand away when you touch a hot stove). The midbrain directs coordination, balance, and movement. The limbic system is where emotional engagement and regulation happens. The highest level is the cortex, which houses language development, learning and abstract thought, as shown in Figure 1.

“Before PACT, we were always angry. But we learned about the brain zones... so whenever we are angry we perform breathing exercises and relax ourselves.”

Student Participant, PACT

Before a child can access their thinking brain (e.g., cortex level)—they must first have their physical and emotional needs met through safe and supportive relationships with at least one trusted adult.

When a child experiences an adverse event, the different parts of the brain work together to make sense of what happened. The brain and body go into survival mode. This means the higher order functions, such as emotional management and learning go off-line. The most effective remedy is to provide safe, consistent, and predictable relationships and environments that allow children to move up in the sequence of the brain to access the cortex. Unfortunately, most children are not given this opportunity, impacting their learning and social and emotional development.

Adapted from: McCaleb, M & Milaere-Wallis, N. Relationship-shaping: Teacher consistency and implications for brain development. The First Years/Ngā Tau Tuatahu: New Zealand Infant and Toddler Education 7(2), 21-25
ADVERSE EXPERIENCES AND LEARNING

Children who experience adversity often struggle in the classroom due to the impact of toxic stress on brain development. Their brains and bodies are in a constant state of stress, which results in them entering a “fight, flight, or freeze” response. Children in fight or flight response, often struggle to build positive relationships with teachers and peers and engage in disruptive behaviours, such as arguing or fighting. Children in the freeze response may become anxious, have difficulty engaging with learning activities or shut down. In classrooms with high teacher-student ratios (1:40+), increased noise and activity can create additional difficulties for a child whose brain is already overstimulated. Figure 2 shows how traumatic experiences can affect a student’s ability to learn.

FIGURE 2: Traumatic experiences affect the potential to learn

Antecedents and effects of trauma which can affect learner’s wellbeing and academic achievement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Traumatic Experiences</th>
<th>Disruptive Effect On Learning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Death/Loss</td>
<td>Physical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stomach Aches</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Headaches</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Vomiting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violence</td>
<td>Emotional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Separation</td>
<td>Anxiety/Fear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insecurity</td>
<td>Lack of Emotional Control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sadness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violence</td>
<td>Cognitive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Separation</td>
<td>Difficulty Paying Attention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insecurity</td>
<td>Inability to Process Information</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: GEM Report team

When caregivers and educators do not have the knowledge or tools to identify children’s responses to stress and adversity, they may view these behaviours as disrespectful and disruptive, and thus administer punishment. This may include yelling or physical discipline, which activates the child’s flight or flight response further. These reactions further separate students from their educational environments and interrupt their ability to learn.

Conversely, with the right training and resources in place, teachers, coaches, and parents can be better equipped to assist children in coping with adversity to facilitate learning. This includes compassionate communication, as well as helping students to identify and manage their emotions, facilitating learning through play, art, music, and sport to express feelings and build social cohesion. Importantly, teachers can be trained to recognize signs of abuse and distress, as well as the impacts of adversity on child behaviour and learning.
Children are born to learn through play. Play is one of the most transformative forces in a child’s life. Play is not just fun: it’s how children understand the world, how they articulate their hopes and dreams, how they learn to communicate with and interact with others, and how they develop and grow into adulthood. Children who have been affected by crisis and conflict can process stressful and adverse experiences through play. Learning through play is increasingly recognized as an important strategy to promote the acquisition of life skills, student engagement, and inclusion in schools. Right To Play International has demonstrated the benefits of play-based activities to increase children’s psychosocial wellbeing, in both development and humanitarian contexts, shown in Figure 3.

**FIGURE 3: How play benefits children’s psychosocial wellbeing**

- **Physical activity** allows children to release energy
- **Organized recreational activities** create a sense of safety, normalcy, and stability
- **Allows children to control their environment**
- **Can allow children to focus on the present**
- **Promote a sense of belonging and allow children to work together**
- **Promote a sense of competence**
- **Express emotions verbally and non-verbally**
- **Overcome emotional pain and regain control over their lives**
- **Creative challenges to expand the ways of thinking and solving problems**
- **Restore a sense of identity, personal value, and self-worth**
- **Make meaning**
- **Different types of play like sports, arts, games and music can help children engage in creativity and joy**
- **Develop adaptive life skills to support psychosocial wellbeing**

For play-based activities to increase psychosocial wellbeing in children, it is critical to have the engagement of parents, caregivers, coaches, teachers, and community members who are safe, stable, predictable, and consistent. While adverse childhood experiences will vary across countries and communities, it is universally accepted that healthy, attuned, and nurturing relationships with adults buffer the negative impacts of adversity. The foundation of learning is safety and emotional support, facilitated by trusted adults through play. Literacy and numeracy are higher-order skills, made possible through the crucial but often-ignored foundation of psychosocial wellbeing established through psychosocial support.
PLAY-BASED PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT IS THE MISSING PIECE IN MANY EDUCATION INTERVENTIONS

“A very dysregulated kid who is afraid is not going to be able to engage successfully. If you cannot engage them to be with you in the moment, they are certainly not going to be able to learn anything.”

Bruce Perry, M.D., Ph.D., Professor—Feinberg School of Medicine at Northwestern University

Every child has the right to be protected, educated, and empowered. Similarly, every child has the right to play. Increasingly, global and national policy makers are looking more carefully at the need to support the psychosocial wellbeing of children in and around the school community. At the 2022 Transforming Education Summit, over half of governments recognized the need to support the mental health and wellbeing of both teachers and students. Similarly, the 2023 G7 Education Ministers’ Declaration, commits to ensure that “schools and colleges are safe and supportive learning environments which promote and support mental wellbeing.” Finally, the recently adopted UN General Assembly Resolution on mental health and sustainable development also contains a recommendation to Member States to integrate “mental health services and psychosocial support in schools, including through social and emotional life and skills programs.”

Effective integration of PSS in schools is not a luxury, it is crucial to ensure that children are given the best chance to learn and thrive. One of the most effective ways to support the psychosocial needs of children who have experienced adversity is through play-based PSS activities, facilitated by trusted teachers, parents, coaches, and community members. School success is largely dependent on children’s ability to interact positively with their peers and adults.

In school settings, play-based PSS and SEL are widely used and overlapping approaches to supporting psychosocial wellbeing. School-based SEL has a strong global evidence base, contributing to a range of student outcomes such as improved pro-social behaviours and positive peer relationships, as well as decreased undesirable behaviours (e.g., acting out) and emotional distress. For children to access their higher order brain functions—such as learning—play-based PSS along with SEL can be critical enablers. However, many low- and middle-income countries lack capacity to deliver PSS and SEL in the classroom. By building capacity and eliminating barriers to play-based learning, teachers can simultaneously support psychosocial wellbeing and learning outcomes.

1. **Play-based learning (PBL)** is child-centered, experiential, active and harnesses the developmental benefits of play to enhance the teaching and learning process.
2. **Psychosocial Support (PSS)** are interventions that address the psychological and social needs of individuals, families, and communities, with the ultimate goal of facilitating recovery from crisis and adverse events.
3. **Social Emotional Learning (SEL)** is the process through which individuals learn and apply a set of social, emotional, cognitive, and related skills, attitudes, behaviors, and values that help direct their thoughts, feelings, and actions in ways that enable them to succeed in school, work, and life.

**DEFINITIONS**

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RIGHT TO PLAY’S EXPERIENCE IN DELIVERING PLAY-BASED PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT

Right To Play International protects, educates, and empowers children to rise above adversity using the power of play. For more than 20 years, the organization has reached millions of children, and has delivered programs with impact in both development and humanitarian contexts.

Right To Play has developed a vast resource library, which contains over 100 training manuals and play-based activities manuals for a wide variety of subject areas, including PSS. The training package, *Psychosocial Wellbeing Through Play*, offers training for teachers and coaches to effectively use play-based approaches for psychosocial support. It also includes training on the theoretical understandings of psychosocial wellbeing, the crucial role of the teacher or coach in ensuring the wellbeing of children and youth, creating safe, supportive, and playful learning environments, mapping support services and referral systems, working with parents and caregivers, and practicing self-care.

So far, Right To Play has trained over 70,000 teachers and volunteer coaches in play-based PSS.

Right To Play supports the important adults around the child, including teachers, school counselors, parents, and caregivers, to unlock their potential through joyful, play-based learning environments. Right To Play’s interventions are designed to promote gender equality and inclusion, including children living with disabilities. Community partnerships ensure that games, songs, lessons, and training content are contextually and locally relevant, so that they become woven into the cultural fabric and persist long after Right To Play’s support to the project ends. The promotion of locally-available materials and low- to no-resource activities ensure that children, and their families can use these resources anytime and anywhere.

A 2017 study of Right To Play’s Education in Emergency Programs examined the relationship between play, children’s meaningful participation and PSS. The study found Right To Play’s play-based PSS programming contributed positively to psychosocial wellbeing, critical reflection, communication skills, self-efficacy, and feelings of joy and hope.

“All children need playful engagement and psychosocial support for their learning and as they do that, they acquire the skills to communicate how they are feeling, to share, and to empathize with others who are feeling differently.”

Brijpal Patel, Director—Global Program Development, Right To Play International
MA’AN/TOGETHER is a five-year project (2019–2024), funded by the Government of Canada through Global Affairs Canada, working toward safe, supportive and gender-responsive education for girls and boys (Grade 1–9) in every United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) school in the West Bank and Gaza. Right To Play in the Palestinian Territories provides primary teachers, physical education teachers, and school counsellors with the knowledge and skills they need to engage students using gender-responsive, play-based PSS strategies designed to promote resilience, healing, and healthy relationships. Right To Play also trains teachers on how to identify and refer children in need of additional support to trained mental health care workers and social workers.

**Key PSS Results:**

- Within the first three years of the project, the percentage of students with feelings of social connectedness increased by 19%. Similarly, the percentage of students reporting an overall improvement in their psychosocial wellbeing increased by 14%;
- School counsellors demonstrating play-based learning methodologies in their PSS activities for students increased by 72%; and
- Physical education teachers who demonstrated play-based learning methodologies in their psychosocial support activities for students increased by 39%.

Teachers report that MA’AN/TOGETHER is helping to instill values and skills like respect, accepting others, forgiveness, and imagination which, in turn, helps address behavioural issues. For example, it was reported that bullying and violence were common in schools. The MA’AN/TOGETHER project gave teachers the tools and training they needed to address this issue. This included the use of educational pamphlets, drama, and role-play, which were effective in reducing bullying by 80%.

RIGHT TO PLAY | PROMOTING PSYCHOSOCIAL WELLBEING THROUGH THE POWER OF PLAY
Build Back Better is a 26-month program (October 2021 – December 2023), implemented by Right To Play with support from the LEGO Foundation, working to support children’s psychosocial wellbeing and education outcomes across six countries, Ethiopia, Lebanon, Pakistan, Tanzania, Uganda, and Sierra Leone. The program is comprised of five different pilot interventions:

1. **P.O.W.E.R.**
   A collection of 120 gender-responsive, PSS focused games to foster collaborative play, available in 16 languages.

   **Key PSS Results:** Teachers in Ethiopia and Pakistan reported increased confidence in facilitating play-based approaches. As a result of play-based learning, students were observed to have improved their sense of agency (63% in Ethiopia, 78% in Pakistan), as well as improved decision-making skills (75% in Ethiopia, 78% in Pakistan).

2. **Play and Care Together (PACT)**
   A child-centered, play-based resource to promote psychosocial wellbeing among children affected by adversity, focused on peer attachment.

   **Key PSS Results:** Children who participated in the pilot, as well as the peer supporters, reported improvements in communication, empathy, sense of belonging, self-confidence, managing emotions and knowing how to support each other.

3. **Music for Emergencies (M4E)**
   A package of games to teach children technical music skills to enhance social and emotional development and leadership skills

   **Key PSS Results:** Noticeable changes in children’s life skills targeted by the project (e.g., self-expression, communication, and managing emotions)

4. **Move to Improve (M2I)**
   A resource that focuses on the link between cognitive processes and psychomotor skills through the use of play.

   **Key PSS Results:** Children are increasingly able to identify positive and negative emotions, and use play as a positive coping mechanism for managing their emotions.

5. **Play to Grow**
   A resource that supports caregivers to deliver at home learning and PSS for pre-primary school aged children through the use of play.

   **Key PSS Results:** Caregivers reported improvement in children’s positive social and emotional skills and behaviour (from 39% to 64% in Tanzania and from 21% to 46% in Uganda). Children were better able to identify and name emotions as a result of improved communication with caregivers. The use of corporal punishment in the home was reported to have decreased by 39% in Uganda and 59% in Tanzania.

“There was a father in Adjumani who used to yell at the children all the time, often using physical punishment, and never used to play with them because of cultural beliefs. His wife was stressed by the way he was behaving. He joined the parenting sessions, and after some time he changed completely. He started playing with his children and started making play materials. He started playing with them all the time. Play to Grow created an impact, and at the end of the program and he asked if they were coming back.”

Emily Kyohewre, Project Officer—Right To Play Uganda
HOW MUCH BILATERAL AID TO EDUCATION GOES TO PSS?

The OECD’s Development Assistance Committee (DAC) provides public data on aid flows through their Creditor Reporting System (CRS). An analysis of the top 10 bilateral education donors in 2021 finds that PSS (including SEL) receives a very small proportion of funding compared to overall education aid disbursements. Canada financed the largest amount of PSS projects, both in total dollars (US$27.2 million) and percentage of gross disbursements (10.4%), followed by the United States (US$22.6 million, 2.0%), the United Kingdom (US$20.4 million, 4.2%) and Germany (US$18.5 million, 1.4%). PSS is completely absent in education aid flow data for primary and secondary education from three donors: France, Japan and Austria.

### TABLE 1: PSS in Bilateral Aid Flows to Education (2021)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Total PSS (in USD, millions)</th>
<th>Total Aid (Primary, Secondary &amp; Unspecified)</th>
<th>Percentage of Aid Toward Projects with PSS (Primary, Secondary &amp; Unspecified)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>27.232892</td>
<td>262.229</td>
<td>10.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US</td>
<td>22.63778</td>
<td>1132.462</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK</td>
<td>20.391737</td>
<td>483.118</td>
<td>4.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>18.465707</td>
<td>1273.968</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>0.893604</td>
<td>134.803</td>
<td>0.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norway</td>
<td>0.695493</td>
<td>331.554</td>
<td>0.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>0.385436</td>
<td>94.092</td>
<td>0.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>523.329</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>295.246</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Austria</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>26.853</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Children’s psychosocial wellbeing is largely overlooked and remains one of the most underfunded areas of humanitarian assistance—next to education. Given the importance of PSS and SEL to academic outcomes, there is an urgent need to increase funding and make these interventions a central component of education financing. PSS and SEL investments must be part of our collective global efforts to mobilize new and additional financing for education, particularly education in emergencies.

“We have learned that nothing is impossible and every child has the capacity to learn, especially through play. The opportunities that we have missed in our time in school, we want our children to have those.”

Teacher, P.O.W.E.R. Pilot—Pakistan
AN URGENT NEED TO INCREASE PLAY-BASED PSS, ESPECIALLY IN CONFLICT AND CRISIS SETTINGS

The increased severity, duration, and frequency of crises brought on by communicable diseases, conflict, and climate-induced disasters are having a significant impact on children. It is unlikely that any child today will be untouched by one or more overlapping crises in their lifetime. Psychosocial wellbeing and social and emotional learning (SEL) underpin the quality of education for all children, but this is especially true for refugee, internally displaced, and host community children.

The effects of the adverse childhood experiences have shown to be harmful for brain development and learning. By using a bottom-up approach that starts with safety, movement, connection, and emotional regulation, children can use the parts of their thinking brain (e.g., cortex level), that are activated for literacy and numeracy. Play is one of the most effective ways to deliver PSS to children, as it allows them to express themselves and connect with others in ways that go beyond what they can say with words. Through play, children learn to regulate themselves and relate to others, and this provides a crucial foundation for learning and wellbeing.

Through initiatives such as MA’AN/TOGETHER (Palestine) and Build Back Better (Ethiopia, Lebanon, Pakistan, Sierra Leone, Tanzania, and Uganda), Right To Play International has developed and implemented a set of projects and resources that demonstrate how play-based psychosocial support (PSS) works to improve psychosocial wellbeing, relationships, and learning. Despite its significance to wellbeing and learning, the current level of donor funding does not reflect the importance of PSS and SEL interventions. It is incumbent on all stakeholders—donors, national and host country governments alike—to recognize and respond to the psychosocial wellbeing needs of children. This includes increased financial and political commitments to play-based PSS in all education investments, including education in emergencies.

As such, Right To Play International is proposing the following recommendations:

1. **Donors should mainstream play-based PSS and SEL as part of their investments in global education. This includes:**
   - Working in partnership with multilateral institutions, national and host country governments to reform education sector plans to embed play-based PSS and SEL interventions into national education curriculum, teacher training, and budgets, starting from early childhood education through to secondary and post-secondary education;
   - Ensuring that teachers are trained and supported to deliver play-based psychosocial support and social and emotional learning;
   - Requiring partners to describe how education projects and programs will address the psychosocial wellbeing and social and emotional development of children in every funding proposal.
Donors and Ministries of Education should increase funding for programs that explicitly support the delivery of play-based PSS and SEL interventions across the education system. This includes:

- Investing in the training of teaching staff, school administrators and those involved in the care and support of learners in school to enhance their capacity to deliver play-based PSS and SEL interventions;
- Embedding play-based PSS and SEL interventions into national pre-service and in-service teacher training and professional development opportunities;
- Supporting policies and programs that promote and protect the mental health and psychosocial wellbeing of teaching staff and school administrators.

Donors, national and host country governments should invest in community-led, equitable, and inclusive PSS and SEL programming. This includes:

- Financing the design and delivery of play-based PSS and SEL interventions that promote equity and inclusion, with specific consideration to the needs of the most marginalized members of the community. This includes very young children and their caregivers, girls, refugees, internally displaced and host community children, LGBTQI+ children, and those living with disabilities;
- Investing in school- and community-based awareness raising campaigns to address the stigma and discrimination associated with mental health and psychosocial wellbeing;
- Investing in programs that promote children’s agency through peer-to-peer PSS support.

Donors, national and host country governments should increase the level of long-term investments to collect data and generate evidence. This includes:

- Using evidence to better design, target, and measure the delivery of play-based PSS and SEL interventions;
- Committing to multi-year investments that allow for innovation, iteration, and longitudinal research.

Donors, national and host country governments should integrate PPS supports across the education, health, and child protection sectors. This includes:

- Ensuring that every school (including formal and informal) has a well-defined process to identify individuals in need and then link teachers and students to locally available mental health and PSS services (including in-person or tele-health);
- Collaborating across sectors to ensure that there is capacity to provide and manage referrals to community-based services and specialized care, delivered by trained professionals (e.g., health and mental health providers, social workers), so that teachers are not expected to take on the role of trained mental health care providers.

In sum, PSS interventions are key to enabling safe and inclusive learning environments. These interventions can help address barriers to learning while simultaneously nurturing student’s healthy development and critical social and emotional competencies. This gives children the skills they need to overcome adversity and sets them on a path for a more equitable, peaceful, and prosperous future.
ENDNOTES

1. UNICEF, 2023. This figure includes refugees and internally displaced children.

2. Save the Children, 2022

3. UNICEF, 2021

4. UNHCR, 2022; Kadir, Shenoda, & Goldhagen, 2019

5. Gershoff, 2017

6. Hillis et al., 2016

7. Right To Play, 2018b


9. NIH National Institute of Mental Health, 2023

10. Perry & Hambrick, 2008; Gaskill & Perry, 2014

11. Felitti et al., 1998; Cronholm et al., 2015

12. Felitti et al., 1998

13. Cronholm et al., 2015

14. Hughes & Tucker, 2018

15. Bernard, Smith & Lanier, 2022

16. Olff et al., 2020; Schnyder et al., 2017

17. Frounfelker et al., 2020


20. Perry & Hambrick, 2008

21. Perry & Hambrick, 2008; Perry, 2009

22. Perry & Hambrick, 2008

23. Perry & Hambrick, 2008; Perry, 2009


26. van der Kolk, 2003

27. UNESCO 2019

28. Lansford & Deater-Deckard, 2012; Gershoff, 2017

29. Davis et al., 2018

30. Cavanaugh, 2016; Davis et al., 2018

31. Cavanaugh, 2016; Davis et al., 2018

32. Zosh et al., 2017

33. Bruner, 1972

34. Landreth, 2012, Cook, 2017

35. Parker, Thomsen & Berry, 2022

36. Right To Play, 2017

37. Harvard Center on the Developing Child, 2015; Perry, 2008

38. United Nations, 1989

39. UNESCO, 2022

40. G7 Education Ministers’ Meeting, 2023


42. Cipriano et al., 2021


44. Right To Play, 2018a

45. Right To Play, 2018a

46. proteknôn, Center for Development Studies, and Birzeit University, 2023.

47. Right To Play is piloting a strategic technical assistance model in partnership with the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education (MBSSE) in Sierra Leone, focusing on integrating learning through play in lower primary levels, to address foundational learning.

48. Method: Microdata for all education sector aid flows (gross disbursements) were downloaded from CRS for 2021, and then filtered by education level (post-secondary education was excluded as it is not a focus of this brief), donor country, and whether the long project description contained psychosocial, social-emotional, socio-emotional (with variations on hyphens), or the equivalent in French.
A reference list is shown here. Each reference is rich with information on the impact of trauma and related fields. For instance, Adubasim and Ugwu explore the effects of trauma on neurodevelopment and learning. Bernard, Smith, and Lanier discuss how racial discrimination and adverse childhood experiences contribute to mental health concerns in Black youth. Cipriano et al. detail the evidence for social and emotional learning through universal school-based SEL interventions. Cook's work on the neurobiological power of play highlights its significance in psychosocial well-being. Cronholm et al. look into the adverse childhood experiences that expand the concept of adversity. Davis et al. address the impact of trauma on learning and academic success in urban settings. Fast and Collin-Vézina review historical trauma and resilience in indigenous peoples. Felitti et al. examine the relationship between childhood abuse, household dysfunction, and death in adults. Frounfelker et al. focus on the mental health of refugee children and youth, including epidemiology, interventions, and future directions. Gershoff's analysis of school corporal punishment provides a nuanced perspective. Government of Canada outlines its feminist international assistance policy. Hart and Rubia study neuroimaging of child abuse, offering a critical review.

**References**


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