Play and Early Learning during COVID-19

Right To Play’s response to COVID-19 builds on twenty years of experience demonstrating how learning through play is a powerful, scalable and effective approach to ensure children’s healthy development, wellbeing, and learning. This is especially true in crisis. Play can support the holistic skills development and resilience children need to thrive in a complex, constantly changing world.\(^1\) But it is the one strategy that is often overlooked.

School closure, physical distancing requirements and home confinement as a result of COVID-19 have dramatically reduced young children’s access to early learning and play opportunities, appropriate care and wellbeing, and negatively impacted the ability parents and caregivers to provide this critical care. The stressors on parents, compounded by threats to critical income and livelihoods and risks of increased violence in the home, are well known. Research also shows that intense, prolonged or repeated exposure to adversity can have a toxic effect on children’s developing brain architecture and can disrupt the foundations of learning, behavior, and health, with long-term consequences on children’s development.\(^2\) This is especially concerning for the youngest children whose brains are 90% developed by the time they are five years old.\(^3\)

This makes play more vital and urgent that ever. Right To Play program evaluations shows that play, when effectively facilitated, can support children’s healthy development, wellbeing, skills development and their ability to learn.\(^4\) Crucially, research from neuroscience and child psychology fields show children manage their stress through play and express their emotions through play where they lack the words.\(^5\) Right To Play’s long experience training teachers and supporting parents to deliver learning through play also demonstrates the profound healing effect of play on adults as they gain confidence in their ability to care for and support their children’s learning, and build closer relationships with them. Since 2006, Right To Play has supported the integration of play-based approaches into early learning through curriculum development, teacher training, and parental engagement, in its technical assistance to government partners and direct implementation.

Responding through Play to COVID-19

During the first weeks of March, COVID-19 prompted school closures in 14 of the 15 countries where Right To Play operates. Right To Play acted quickly to adapt the content and engagement modalities of its traditional programming to reach young children and parents with life-saving health, safety and wellbeing messages, games and activities.

- **“Play at Home” COVID-19 games package** drawing from Right To Play’s database of 1000+ games targets cognitive, social, emotional and physical skill building and imparts critical, child-friendly awareness messages around health, safety and psychosocial wellbeing

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\(^1\) Right To Play, Psychosocial Support Through Play Research Brief (2018).
\(^2\) Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University (2007).
\(^3\) Courchesne, et al. (2000).
\(^4\) Right To Play, Literacy and Numeracy Through Play Research Brief (2017); Play-based Learning Literature Review (2019).
\(^5\) Rushton (2011).
“Playful Learning at Home Kits” distributed to facilitate parent-child play sessions containing activity cards, play materials, hygiene materials, tip sheets, and safety information, designed to offer continuity of learning and support the health and wellbeing of children in home confinement.

Parents and families supported to facilitate play at home through home visits and small group facilitation by teachers, and reached through messages and games converted for radio, television, mobile phone, print and social media platforms (e.g. Facebook, WhatsApp).

Partnering with Ministries of Education to integrate playful content and approaches in distance learning to enhance the quality of radio and television education, prepare teachers to design and facilitate play-based distance learning, and guide parents’ ability to support children’s learning, to enhance children’s engagement and ultimately their learning, wellbeing and development.

Recommendations for Action

2. Expand training and continuous support for teachers and ECE practitioners to facilitate remote early learning and continuity of services through play-based approaches.
3. Empower parents and caregivers with confidence and skills to facilitate learning through play and encourage free unstructured play.
4. Maintain and scale up innovative, play-based wellbeing support for parents, caregivers and teachers and ECE practitioners.
5. Invest and scale up play-based remote and distance learning options for the early years.

Teacher facilitated early learning – Right To Play Thailand

When COVID-19 resulted in the closure of early childhood centres in Thai refugee camps, on the border with Myanmar, early childhood teachers were eager to be part of the response. In partnership with the Karen Refugee Education Entity (KREE), Right To Play supported teachers trained in its play-based learning approach to conduct daily home visits and lead playful learning sessions. Teachers led health and psychosocial wellbeing games with children and parents, coaching parents on how to use play to support children’s learning. Gradually games for early literacy and numeracy were introduced into the one hour sessions. Teachers also facilitated small group sessions at schools for children who had challenges learning at home, delivering up to three sessions per day.

Play-based television education – Right To Play Mozambique

The COVID-19 outbreak led to the immediate closure of schools in Mozambique in March 2020. Right To Play partnered with Ministry of Education and Human Development to develop a television education package for early grades (1-3) and enhance the quality of teaching and learning through play, including coaching and mentoring of teachers in play-based approaches and supporting them to prepare playful lesson content. These efforts have resulted in television education that is playful, engaging and enjoyable. Subsequently Right To Play designed and launched a bilingual television school program in Gaza province implemented by teachers trained in learning through play by Right To Play. In order to actively engage parents and caregivers Right To Play shares messages and guidance through Whatsapp messages and raises awareness about the program over loudspeakers announcing the start of the television lesson.