

Little Ripples: Community-based refugee-led preschool in Chad

Case Study

May 2019*

Little Ripples not only delivers preschool in home-based settings in the community, but also employs refugee women to manage in-home preschools and improve the social-emotional, cognitive, and physical development of refugee children.



Credit: iACT

* Adapted from the Little Ripples case study in Kolleen Bouchane, Hirokazu Yoshikawa, Katie Maeve Murphy, and Joan Lombardi, 2018, “[Early Childhood Development and Early Learning for Children in Crisis and Conflict](#).” Paper commissioned for the 2019 Global Education Monitoring Report, Migration, displacement and education: Building bridges, not walls, UNESCO, Paris. Available at bitly.com/2019gemreport.

Responding to a Call for Education

In Chad, more than 8 million people (nearly two-thirds of the population) are acutely or chronically vulnerable to food insecurity, health emergencies, and other aspects of poor development and climate change. More than 4.4 million people are in need of emergency humanitarian assistance — including more than 634,000 displaced people — 57% of whom are children. Since 2003, 320,000 Sudanese refugees displaced by violence and genocide — without any immediate prospects for return — have been surviving in Chad.¹

In May 2013, iACT, which works to ‘provide humanitarian action to aid, empower, and extend hope to those affected by mass atrocities,’ began implementing ‘Little Ripples,’ a refugee-led, home-based early childhood education program. iACT asked refugee communities in Goz Amer and Djabal, in eastern Chad what they needed most. The answer? Preschool. Besides some care for acute illnesses, there are no other programs for children in the camp. The communities saw education ‘as a way out’ and they wanted to begin as early as possible.²

Although the community was clear what they wanted, at the time neither the community nor iACT had the expertise needed. iACT recruited experts in early childhood development and trauma recovery and worked to build the kind of curriculum the community was demanding. The program they created — Little Ripples — not only delivers preschool in home-based settings in the community, but also employs refugee women to manage in-home preschools and improve the social-emotional, cognitive, and physical development of refugee children.³ Officially, the preschool works with children ages 3-5 years old, but sometimes gets the younger children that come ‘on the hips’ of their older siblings.



Finding a Home

To select a home for the preschool, iACT assesses a number of parameters, including nearby children who are in the right age group, whether the house is big enough, has some shade, and has an escape route in case of an emergency. These spaces are called ‘Ponds,’ and iACT supports the household to make minor improvements in order to host the school. This includes engaging the community to build a small outdoor area with an awning — creating a dedicated space where classes take place and where children play outside nearby.

iACT reports that not having a dedicated preschool ‘building’ reduces a lot of upfront costs and logistics, and builds on the existing community practice where children are often at their neighbors’ houses. Now, rather than just visiting or being ‘watched’ while parents are away, the community model has been turned into a ‘more structured preschool learning model.’⁴

Training Refugee Women as Teachers

To recruit women, iACT's international staff works with key leaders and stakeholders in each refugee camp over several days to identify a group of women for training. The women then complete an initial week of participatory teacher training in the foundations of early childhood development (ECD) and in the Little Ripples curriculum and structure. Following the first training, each woman is awarded a certificate, and women from the group are selected as teachers.

Over the course of a year, employed women receive a total of three trainings from iACT and gradually manage all aspects of the program, including future trainings.⁵ Trainings include play-based learning, positive behavioral management, and many other topics.⁶ Some women are employed as education directors and oversee program monitoring, serve as substitute teachers when needed, and send quarterly reports. Education directors collect weekly attendance, observe each Pond monthly to monitor safety standards, teaching, and educational materials, and conduct structured interviews with families to assess program impact. Education directors also lead weekly Little Ripples staff meetings to discuss the curriculum, challenges and successes.⁷



As its name implies, the impact of the program has 'rippled' out to the community in unexpected ways. The training on human rights and empowerment called 'LEAD with EMPATHY' — 30 lessons with homework — was so well received that women have begun teaching it to other women in the community, and iACT is now working to develop a youth version of the curriculum.⁸ Additionally, a translator who supported early teacher trainings and was also a primary school teacher, began taking some of the teachings — including learning through play — to his son's primary school.⁹

In 2017, Little Ripples expanded the refugee-led preschool programming to two camps in Northern Chad — Mile and Kounoungou — and in total have employed 84 refugee women and reached 3,450 children ages 3-5. Little Ripples is expanding rapidly. The program has reached nearly 10,000 children and trained more than 230 teachers and education personnel in 5 countries, including Darfuri refugees in Chad, Burundian refugees in Tanzania, Central African refugees in Cameroon, and refugee and displaced community members in Greece and the Central African Republic.

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iACT only recruits female teachers for their teaching roles, and in early 2018 as they worked to expand to Mile and Kounoungou, they invited two refugee teachers with them but found out after they arrived and met the teachers that although women were not allowed to travel outside of the camp, the teachers had — using some of what they learned in the program — advocated for themselves, and were able to travel to conduct the training. The preschool program has also given women greater status in the community and enabled them to advocate for themselves in such situations more effectively — creating another 'little ripple'.¹⁰

Managing Increased Demand

Despite progress and growth, iACT notes that one of its key challenges has been managing community expectations because of high and increased demand for preschool services. Little Ripples is the only ECD solution providing ECD training for teachers, incorporating play-based and social-emotional learning, and offering a daily nutritious meal. iACT notes that it is a struggle to help the community understand why they cannot take more children more quickly, and must focus on quality and monitoring, but notes that once the refugee employees explain the reason of the quality over quantity model, the community is behind it. Moreover, helping communities understand the importance of monitoring and reporting is a learning curve in which iACT continues to refine what and how often they request monitoring information.

Monitoring Impact

To monitor the program, iACT uses a baseline assessment of children including such topics as counting, identifying animals and colors, and asking parents questions about food security and how often their children bite or kick. A unique feature of the Little Ripples curriculum is the mindfulness component, designed to support young refugee children (as well as their teachers) to ‘find refuge’ and peace from the instability of camp life.^{11 12}

The entire refugee-led process is documented, including the identification of key stakeholders, conversations with families, the locations of Ponds, and teacher trainings. In partnership with the University Wisconsin Survey Center and a trained all-refugee assessment team, iACT conducts baseline and follow-up surveys to measure the impact of the social-emotional, cognitive, and physical development of children attending Little Ripples.¹³

Comprehensive data analysis on impact supported by the University of Wisconsin Survey Center will be available in July 2019. In the interim, surveys conducted with 134 Little Ripples students and their caregivers, at baseline and one-year follow-up, show the following promising results:

- The number of students able to name colors **increased from 27% to 51%**.
- The number of students able to count to five or higher **increased from 43% to 73%**.
- The number of students able to identify four or more animals from pictures **increased from 21% to 63%**.
- The number of students able to recite at least the first ten letters of the alphabet with no mistakes **increased from 45% to 83%**.

iACT is continually working to better address children who are developmentally or physically challenged. At the moment there is no process to refer children who enter the program with developmental delays, as there is nowhere to refer them.

To learn more about iACT, visit www.iact.ngo.

Endnotes

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- ² Bouchane, K., and F. Lee. (15 May 2018). Interview. iACT's Little Ripples Program in Chad.
- ³ Dallain, Sara-Christine, and Katie-Jay Scott. (2017). LITTLE RIPPLES: Refugee-led early childhood education. Available: https://static1.squarespace.com/static/583af1fb44fb5b3977b6f89/t/59bdb9c703596e9e8b02d5b8/1505606090047/6_PromisingPractices_iACT_WEB.pdf [Accessed 15 May 2018]. pp. 3
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- ⁵ Dallain, Sara-Christine, and Katie-Jay Scott. (2017). LITTLE RIPPLES: Refugee-led early childhood education. Available: https://static1.squarespace.com/static/583af1fb414fb5b3977b6f89/t/59bdb9c703596e9e8b02d5b8/1505606090047/6_PromisingPractices_iACT_WEB.pdf [Accessed 15 May 2018]. pp. 6
- ⁶ Bouchane, K., and F. Lee. (15 May 2018). Interview. iACT's Little Ripples Program in Chad.
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- ⁸ Bouchane, K., and F. Lee. (15 May 2018). Interview. iACT's Little Ripples Program in Chad.
- ⁹ Ibid.
- ¹⁰ Ibid.
- ¹¹ iACT. Mindfulness Overview. pp. 7
- ¹² Little Ripples Teacher Training: Mindfulness. Available: <https://vimeo.com/219133046>. [Accessed: 26 May 2018].
- ¹³ Dallain, Sara-Christine, and Katie-Jay Scott. (2017). LITTLE RIPPLES: Refugee-led early childhood education. Available: https://static1.squarespace.com/static/583af1fb414fb5b3977b6f89/t/59bdb9c703596e9e8b02d5b8/1505606090047/6_PromisingPractices_iACT_WEB.pdf [Accessed 15 May 2018]. pp. 7