MOVING MINDS ALLIANCE

Building Resilience Through Play: Evidence-Based Approaches for Children in Crisis Settings

Omar shows his hip-hop dance moves during a session facilitated by Camps Breakerz in Gaza strip. Camps Breakerz, offer dance classes to children and young people, providing a creative outlet and a way to cope with the challenges of living in a conflict zone.

OVERVIEW

Play is a vital yet often overlooked component of response for children affected by emergencies and protracted crises, supporting healing, learning, resilience, and psychosocial well-being. Competing priorities within humanitarian responses often sideline play, hindering its integration into emergency programming.

Despite growing recognition of its value, systematic evidence and frameworks for play-based interventions—especially for children with disabilities—remain limited. This brief provides examples of effective play-based models from crisis and low-resource settings, highlighting strategies to advance play in humanitarian contexts through cross-sector collaboration and evidence-based approaches for lasting impact.

INTRODUCTION

Emergencies disrupt children's access to safe and meaningful play, compounding trauma and hindering development. Although Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child affirms play as a universal right, it is often deprioritised in crisis settings where immediate survival needs dominate. Even where it is prioritised, there may be numerous barriers to overcome, including:

- **Environmental Hazards**: Unsafe environments, such as unexploded ordnance in Somalia, lead-contaminated soil in Kabwe, Zambia, restrict outdoor play and can be life threatening for children.

- **Lack of Safe Spaces**: Overcrowded classrooms (e.g., up to 150 students per teacher in Adjumani, Uganda) and a shortage of child-friendly spaces undermine protection and play opportunities.

- **Discrimination:** Gender-based restrictions in countries like Afghanistan and Sudan disproportionately affect girls.

Other gaps include, but are not limited to:

- **Funding:** despite growing needs, humanitarian appeals remain significantly underfunded, forcing agencies to cut essential services like play-based interventions.

- **Resource and Logistical Constraints:** Crisis settings are marked by scarcity of toys, learning materials and trained personnel. Lack of infrastructure further restricts the implementation of quality play programmes.

Limited Empirical Evidence and Evaluation: While play is increasingly recognised as valuable in emergencies, there is a lack of robust data to assess its impact at scale.

Importance of Play and Examples of Implementation in Humanitarian Settings

(c) Dev Raj | Pexels

In humanitarian crises—whether caused by conflict, displacement, or natural disasters—children are among the most vulnerable. With routines disrupted and their sense of safety lost, play emerges as a critical necessity that supports children's healing, learning, and development, even in the most challenging environments. As well as being a fundamental right, there is a growing evidence base about the importance of play as a tool to support children's healing and psychosocial wellbeing, learning and inclusion. Some successful models are outlined below:

1. Play as a Tool for Healing and Psychosocial Support
Play offers a natural, culturally adaptable way for children to process trauma. It enables emotional expression and regulation, reduces stress, and restores a sense of normalcy. Examples include:

- Mindful Way Curriculum by Learn to Play which integrates play-based techniques into everyday settings enabling caregivers and educators to support children's mental health and safety. The package includes daily 15-minutes mindfulness practices including calming activities, storytelling and connection-building activities - all contextualised to the local culture.

- Humanitarian Play Lab (HPL) in Rohingya Camps, Bangladesh, by BRAC. This model was designed to address Rohingya children's needs, by integrating play and psychosocial support. The evaluation of the model proved the impact of HPL on children's socio-emotional skills.

- Plan International's Playful Futures project in Uganda supports local teachers in adopting gender-responsive practices, fostering positive interactions, and promoting inclusive play to ensure equal participation for children aged 3-6. The intervention is developed using a human-centred design approach and is suitable for low-resource settings.

2. Play-Based Learning and Educational Continuity

Play-based learning bridges gaps in disrupted education systems, fostering cognitive, social, and emotional development. Notable examples include:

- PlayMatters in East Africa: A teacher professional development programme integrating Learning through Play (LtP) into education policies, reaching nearly 1 million children in Uganda, Tanzania, and Ethiopia while also partnering with local education actors to deliver the PlayMatters' Core Package. The PlayMatters Learning through Play in Emergencies (LtPiE) Package offers adaptable materials for formal and non-formal settings which is already used in South Sudan, DRC, and Northwest Syria.

- In Colombia, aeioTU, promotes play-based learning and educational continuity through Mobile play spaces such as aeioTU in the park, aeioTU in the forest, or aeioTU in the beach; bringing play to public and natural spaces without requiring fixed infrastructure. The Red aeioTU digital platform provides open-access games, micro-courses, and resources to empower caregivers and educators in their settings with pedagogical tools designed with locally available materials. Additionally, aeioTU supports digital communities via WhatsApp groups, where families and caregivers receive practical, play-focused content to enrich everyday routines with joyful and meaningful interactions.
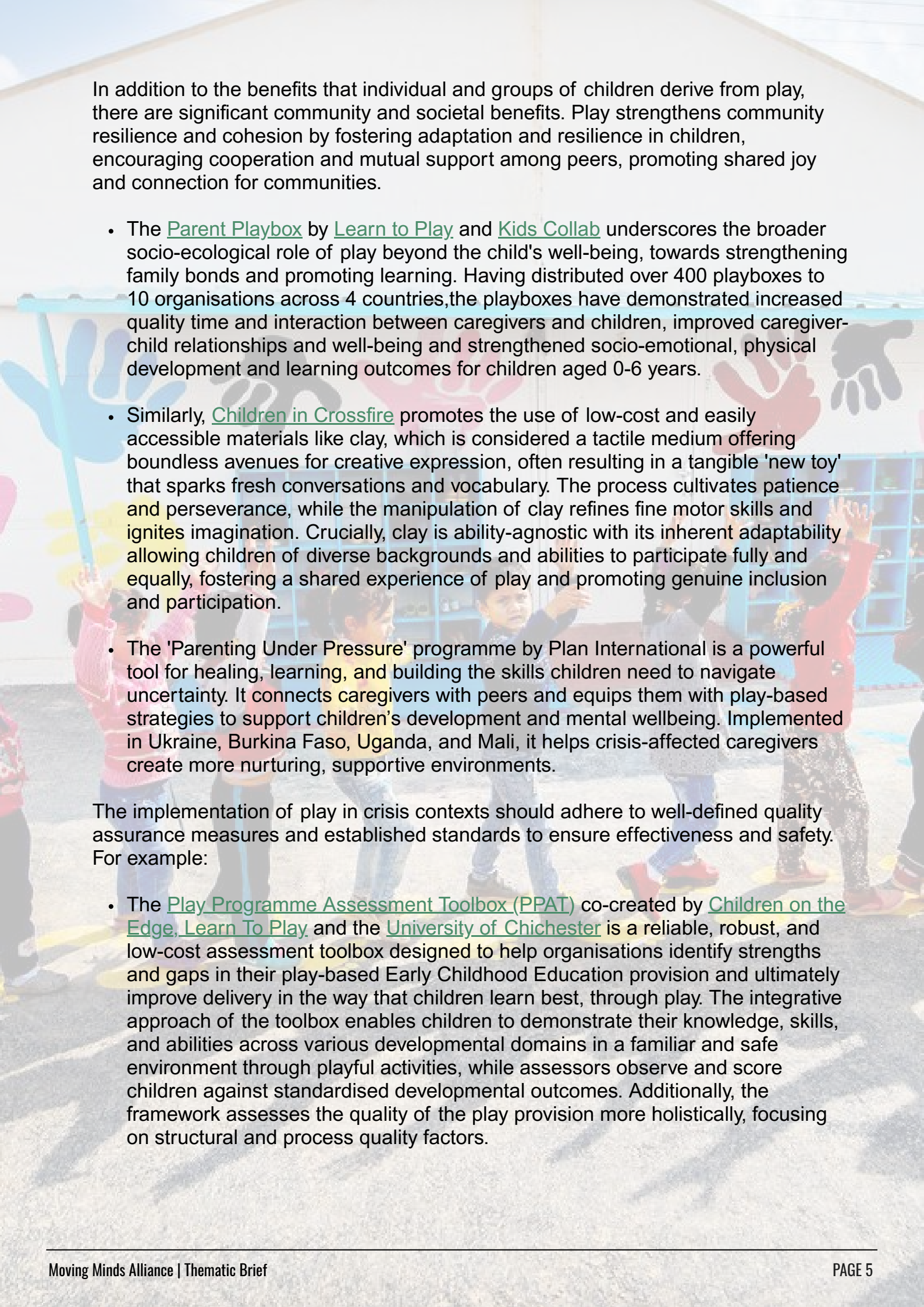
3. Inclusion of Vulnerable and Marginalised Groups

Children with disabilities are often disproportionately affected in emergencies, facing barriers to participation and support. Inclusive play interventions co-created with the community can help address these inequities.

- The Cluster Learning Programme, developed by Children on the Edge with Congolese communities in Uganda's Kyaka II Refugee Settlement, is a great example of an inclusive, low-cost, sustainable model for home-based, informal early childhood education in crisis settings. The new play-based curriculum, integrates the Ugandan framework with familiar cultural elements, including stories, songs, and play resources.

  True community ownership has led to a reduced reliance on unsustainable international funding cycles, ensuring the programme's long-term impact. With 20 Congolese teacher trainers empowering 235 parent educators to teach through play, the programme has reached over 5,000 children. By 2024, cluster learning met over 70% of early learning needs in the settlement, up from 13% in 2019, with 81% of children reaching standardised developmental milestones in 2024. Despite these benefits, a critical gap remains in research and programming focused on inclusive play in humanitarian contexts.

In addition to the benefits that individual and groups of children derive from play, there are significant community and societal benefits. Play strengthens community resilience and cohesion by fostering adaptation and resilience in children, encouraging cooperation and mutual support among peers, promoting shared joy and connection for communities.

- The Parent Playbox by Learn to Play and Kids Collab underscores the broader socio-ecological role of play beyond the child's well-being, towards strengthening family bonds and promoting learning. Having distributed over 400 playboxes to 10 organisations across 4 countries,the playboxes have demonstrated increased quality time and interaction between caregivers and children, improved caregiver-child relationships and well-being and strengthened socio-emotional, physical development and learning outcomes for children aged 0-6 years.

- Similarly, Children in Crossfire promotes the use of low-cost and easily accessible materials like clay, which is considered a tactile medium offering boundless avenues for creative expression, often resulting in a tangible 'new toy' that sparks fresh conversations and vocabulary. The process cultivates patience and perseverance, while the manipulation of clay refines fine motor skills and ignites imagination. Crucially, clay is ability-agnostic with its inherent adaptability allowing children of diverse backgrounds and abilities to participate fully and equally, fostering a shared experience of play and promoting genuine inclusion and participation.

- The 'Parenting Under Pressure' programme by Plan International is a powerful tool for healing, learning, and building the skills children need to navigate uncertainty. It connects caregivers with peers and equips them with play-based strategies to support children's development and mental wellbeing. Implemented in Ukraine, Burkina Faso, Uganda, and Mali, it helps crisis-affected caregivers create more nurturing, supportive environments.

The implementation of play in crisis contexts should adhere to well-defined quality assurance measures and established standards to ensure effectiveness and safety. For example:

- The Play Programme Assessment Toolbox (PPAT) co-created by Children on the Edge, Learn To Play and the University of Chichester is a reliable, robust, and low-cost assessment toolbox designed to help organisations identify strengths and gaps in their play-based Early Childhood Education provision and ultimately improve delivery in the way that children learn best, through play. The integrative approach of the toolbox enables children to demonstrate their knowledge, skills, and abilities across various developmental domains in a familiar and safe environment through playful activities, while assessors observe and score children against standardised developmental outcomes. Additionally, the framework assesses the quality of the play provision more holistically, focusing on structural and process quality factors.

ADVANCING PLAY IN CRISIS CONTEXTS

To effectively promote play in humanitarian contexts, actors should consider the following strategic actions:

1. Strengthen the Evidence Base

Invest in rigorous, longitudinal research to evaluate the long-term impact of play-based interventions on children's development, learning, and psychosocial well-being in emergencies.

Prioritise inclusive research that captures the experiences of children with disabilities and other marginalised groups.

Develop culturally sensitive assessment tools and adaptable play models that reflect **diverse** crisis settings.

2. Integrate Play Across Humanitarian Sectors

Systematically **embed play** into education, child protection, and psychosocial support programming as a core component—not an optional add-on.

Align play-based approaches with national and international humanitarian frameworks, including disaster risk reduction and early childhood development (ECD) strategies.

Ensure play is **recognised** as both a fundamental developmental **right** and a protective mechanism in emergency response planning.

3. Promote Inclusive and Community-Led Approaches

Design play interventions that are **accessible** to all children, including girls, children with disabilities, and those from marginalised communities.

Engage local communities and leaders in co-creating culturally relevant play activities, fostering ownership and **sustainability.**

Address cultural and social **barriers** that may limit children's participation in play, especially in conservative or resource-constrained environments.

4. Build Infrastructure and Capacity

Establish **safe**, child-friendly spaces that enable structured and unstructured play, particularly in displacement settings.

Distribute play materials and kits that are portable, durable, inclusive and **context-appropriate.**

Train caregivers, teachers, and frontline workers in play-based methodologies to support children's emotional recovery and learning.

Ensure existing play resource databases, such as the GSF play resource database are **accessible** to organisations in low resource settings.

5. Enhance Advocacy and Policy Engagement

Use evidence-based advocacy to **elevate** the role of play in humanitarian discourse and funding priorities.

Mobilise partnerships among NGOs, UN agencies, donors, and affected communities to amplify the importance of play in crisis response.

Advocate for sustained investment in play-based programmes beyond the emergency phase to support long-term recovery, resilience, and social cohesion.

Integrate play indicators into humanitarian monitoring and evaluation systems to track access, quality, and impact.

CONCLUSION

Children making their toys at
Kakuma Vocational Centre, Kenya

Embedding play into emergency response is not only a fundamental right but also a transformative tool for nurturing children's resilience, learning, and emotional well-being during crises. When thoughtfully implemented, play-based interventions can provide children with a sense of normalcy, safety, and joy amidst volatility and chaos. Community-based participatory approaches ensure that these interventions are culturally relevant and socially cohesive, while integrating play into education in emergencies (EiE) empowers children with critical life skills and psychosocial support. Portable play kits and adaptable materials allow for rapid deployment in resource-constrained settings, and multi-sectoral collaboration ensures that play is linked with health, protection, and mental health services for a holistic response.

To be truly effective, play spaces must be safe, inclusive, and accessible to all children, including those with disabilities. Where possible, the design of such spaces should be informed by the perspectives of children themselves. Play space design should be hazard-free environments, and should remove social and physical barriers. Building the capacity of caregivers, educators, and community members is essential to sustaining trauma-informed, supportive play environments. Moreover, community-led advocacy and culturally sensitive programming foster local ownership and long-term sustainability. Inclusive strategies that prioritise the needs of girls, children with disabilities, and marginalised groups are vital to ensuring equity. Ongoing monitoring and evaluation help maintain programme quality and responsiveness to the evolving needs of children in crisis.

Ultimately, recognising and resourcing play as a core element of emergency planning is a moral and strategic imperative. Despite its proven benefits, play is often overlooked due to competing priorities and systemic gaps. By embracing cross-sector collaboration and evidence-based, inclusive programming, humanitarian actors can uphold every child's right to play—even in the most challenging contexts. This is not merely an investment in child development; it is a commitment to the resilience, dignity, and future of communities affected by crisis.

REFERENCES

- BRAC. Humanitarian Play Lab Model: Promoting Healing, Learning and Development for Displaced Rohingya Children

- BRAC. Humanitarian Play Labs: Play Sparks Learning and Healing in Refugee Settings

- Human Rights Watch. Let's Put Play on the Agenda

- International Rescue Committee. PlayMatters. Learning through Play in Emergency Response: Promising Practices and Policy Implications

- IGI Global. An Update Proposal for Article 31 of the UN Convention: Play Is a Human Right in All Life Settings

- International Play Association. Access to Play for Children in Situations of Crisis

- National Library of Medicine. Knowledge-Based Crisis and Emergency Management

- Mabel Giraldo. Children with and without Disabilities in Disasters. A Narrative Overview of Play-based Interventions into Humanitarian Programmes and Research

- National Library of Medicine. Introduction: Evidence-based Action in Humanitarian Crises

- Play Matters.What is the role of Learning through Play in Acute Humanitarian Response? Synthesising Evidence

- Playworks. Play Contributes to Safe and Healthy Communities

- Play Action International. The Need for Community-Based Play

- Right to Play. Examining The Evidence Base for Play and Psychosocial Well-being in Crisis Contexts: A Literature Review.

- SBCC For Emergency Preparedness. Examples of Barriers and Facilitators of Behavior Change for Emergency Communication Response

- Sesame Workshop.The Power of Play

- Sweta Shah. Learning and Healing Through Play in Humanitarian Crisis

Moving Minds Alliance is multi-stakeholder alliance advocating for early childhood development in every crisis response, leveraging the strengths of diverse actors from the local to the global.