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Technology-Enabled Psychosocial Support Interventions for Education in Emergencies

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Abbreviations and acronyms

ECD	Early childhood development
ECE	Early childhood education
EiE	Education in Emergencies
ICT	Information communications technology
INEE	Interagency Network for Education in Emergencies
IRC	International Rescue Committee
HIC	High-income country
LMIC	Low- and middle-income country
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
MHPSS	Mental health and psychosocial support
NRC	Norwegian Refugee Council
PSS	Psychosocial support
SEL	Social and emotional learning
UNHCR	United Nations Higher Commissioner for Refugees

Executive summary

This report explores how technology-enabled psychosocial support (PSS) and social and emotional learning (SEL) interventions are being designed and implemented in education in emergencies (EiE) settings. Its purpose is to equip EiE practitioners, policymakers, and donors with:

- An overview of current evidence on technology use to promote psychosocial well-being among crisis-affected children.;
- Practical insights from three diverse case studies from the Middle East, Latin America, and sub-Saharan Africa.
- A curated list of tools and resources to guide programme design and evaluation.

The report focuses on low- and middle-income country (LMIC) contexts, where displacement, trauma, and disrupted learning create acute needs but where robust research on tech-enabled PSS and SEL remains limited.

Key evidence and trends

While technology shows good potential to expand access to psychosocial support programming, most interventions lack rigorous evaluation and long-term outcome tracking. There are, however, a number of emergent trends in the literature:

- Tech-enabled PSS and SEL programmes offer promise to improve access, particularly for those who prefer to avoid face-to-face interventions, live in hard-to-reach places, and belong to marginalised groups, including children with disabilities.
- Combining digital delivery with in-person facilitation and teacher and caregiver support can increase engagement and relevance of PSS and SEL programmes.
- Safeguarding and child online safety require dedicated attention.
- Cultural and contextual fit is critical. PSS and SEL programmes that embed local socialisation norms, languages, and characters resonate more deeply and foster trust.

- PSS and SEL programming are increasingly integrated into early childhood and literacy/numeracy programmes, although consistent measurement of psychosocial outcomes is still evolving.

Key takeaways from the case studies

Three case studies were chosen as representative of current EiE sector practice, providing insights from diverse regions.

Case Study 1: Ahlan Simsim, Middle East

Ahlan Simsim is an early childhood development (ECD) initiative for EiE settings launched in 2017 by Sesame Workshop and the International Rescue Committee (IRC) (↑Sesame Workshop, 2024). Designed to support children and families displaced and affected by the Syrian conflict, Ahlan Simsim integrates mass media, digital platforms, and direct services to strengthen ECD, early childhood education (ECE), and PSS programmes (↑Kohn et al., 2021; ↑Sesame Workshop, 2023). Ahlan Simsim aims to build resilience, emotional regulation, and cognitive skills in young children affected by emergencies across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.

Ahlan Simsim is supported by a comprehensive research agenda (↑Sesame Workshop, 2024). Key takeaways from evidence generated to date are:

- Participatory content development increases cultural relevance and PSS programme engagement, resulting in improved outcomes for children.
- Caregiver-mediated, low-tech solutions (e.g., WhatsApp coaching, phone-based early learning) can increase access and results in hard-to-reach areas.
- Iterative testing, feedback loops, and adaptation are essential, including attention to dosage, design refinements, and cultural norms.

Case Study 2: La Aldea, Latin America

La Aldea is a tech-enabled initiative designed to promote psychosocial well-being for children and families in Colombia, Mexico, and Venezuela. La Aldea is derived from the Spanish phrase meaning ‘the small village’. By

utilising a mix of remote learning, radio programming, digital stories, mindfulness practices, and family engagement, combined with in-depth tech-enabled support for teachers, La Aldea provides a holistic and accessible framework for educational, PSS, and citizenship support. To date, La Aldea has reached more than 150,000 students and 5,000 teachers in Colombia (↑Restrepo-Sáenz & Chateauneuf, 2023; ↑UNICEF, 2020).

Although formal PSS outcome evaluations are lacking, La Aldea's large-scale reach and ability to provide rapid response in crisis situations warrant its inclusion in this report. Key takeaways from reflections and documentation from La Aldea, its programme staff, and partners include:

- A multi-format approach, offering, for example, books, radio, mobile, and video, supports flexibility, allowing space for family- and teacher-driven learning communities to emerge in response to the needs of diverse learner groups.
- Tech-enabled learning tools can rapidly scale in response to crises, particularly when combined with print and broadcast materials.
- Engaging, relatable characters can help normalise discussion of emotional well-being.

Case Study 3: Ideas Box, Burundi

Ideas Box is a portable multimedia pop-up centre developed by Libraries Without Borders (also known as Bibliothèques Sans Frontières), an organisation committed to "strengthening the agency of vulnerable populations through access to education and access to information" (↑Lachal & Peich, 2017, p. 2). Ideas Box provides vulnerable populations with a library of resources that can be used to support their own educational, protection, PSS, and other learning goals (↑Lachal & Peich, 2017). In Burundi, Ideas Box was first deployed in early 2014 to support Congolese refugees living in camps (↑Lachal & Peich, 2017).

Qualitative research has linked the use of Ideas Boxes to reduced stress for participating learners and community members, improved resilience, and community cohesion (↑Lachal, 2015). A quantitative study also reported learning gains in literacy and numeracy (↑Lachal & Peich, 2017). Key takeaways from evidence generated to date include:

- The importance of community ownership and youth leadership sustains impact and cultural relevance.
- The provision of safe and welcoming spaces in which appropriate digital resources can be creatively and flexibly applied can provide an environment conducive to improved psychosocial well-being outcomes.
- Training local facilitators reduces dependency on external aid and support and fosters resilience.

This report concludes with a curated list of key resources, including toolkits and policy guidance. These provide a useful introduction to principles and good practice for designing and implementing PSS programmes in EiE settings.

1. Introduction

Of the 122.6 million displaced and stateless persons worldwide, approximately 47 million are children (↑UNHCR, 2024). Displacement can severely disrupt children's development due to family separation, loss of community, and exposure to traumatic events (↑Bernhardt et al., 2024). These experiences result in long-term challenges for mental health, learning, and overall well-being. In addition, social and emotional trauma can negatively impact academic progress and socioemotional development (↑Hazer & Gredebäck, 2023).

Psychosocial support (PSS) and social and emotional learning (SEL) interventions play a critical role in building coping mechanisms and resilience for children affected by trauma. While there is a growing recognition of their importance in emergency and crisis settings, existing interventions are often not tailored to low- and middle-income country (LMIC) contexts (↑Brown et al., 2024); ↑Kohn et al., 2021; ↑Raftree, 2023). Evidence on how to effectively design tech-enabled PSS and SEL interventions in these settings remains limited (↑Rafla et al., 2024; ↑UNICEF, 2022). Recognising both the increased interest and the limited evidence available, this report supports education in emergencies (EiE) practitioners by providing an overview of current evidence and uses three case studies to highlight promising tech-enabled PSS and SEL interventions. Each case study includes key takeaways for future efforts to advance the EiE sector's support of children's well-being. The report concludes with a curated list of additional resources, including toolkits.

1.1. Aim of the report

The purpose of this report is to:

- Provide an overview of current evidence on the use of technology to support PSS and SEL in EiE settings. This includes a summary of several assessment tools used to measure changes in psychosocial well-being.
- Document three case studies of PSS and SEL interventions that show promise in EiE settings. The report does not provide a comprehensive systematic review of evidence, instead it offers examples of interventions to illustrate the promise and complexity of integrating PSS and SEL interventions in EiE responses.

- Provide EiE practitioners with a list of additional resources to support their exploration of the use of tech-enabled PSS and SEL interventions in EiE settings.

1.2. Scope and key definitions

Below are the key definitions relevant to this report.

Mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) refers to any type of local or outside support that aims to protect or promote psychosocial well-being or prevent or treat mental health conditions. MHPSS is not confined to a single sector but requires a multi-sectoral approach with involvement of partners in health, education, and protection (community-based protection, child protection and gender-based violence (GBV) (↑UNHCR, 2024).

Psychosocial support (PSS) refers to the activities and approaches that foster overall well-being within a person's social environment. It includes support provided by family and friends. PSS can also be described as "the process of facilitating resilience within individuals, families and communities. PSS aims to help individuals recover after a crisis has disrupted their lives and to enhance their ability to return to normality after experiencing adverse events" (↑INEE, 2018, p. 14).

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is defined as the process of developing core competencies like managing emotions, building relationships, and making responsible decisions, encompassing qualities such as self-awareness, empathy, and resilience. As a vital component under the psychosocial support (PSS) umbrella, SEL is a pedagogical practice crucial for educators to foster children's and youth's well-being, social cohesion, and improved learning outcomes in all educational settings (↑INEE, 2018). While we recognise that there is debate about the inclusion of SEL as a component of MHPSS (see, for example, ↑Dalrymple, 2023), for the purposes of this report, we will henceforth include SEL under the abbreviation PSS. Exceptions are made where a research study has explicitly used the terms SEL in its research area of enquiry.

Education in Emergencies (EiE): We have adapted the Interagency Network for Education in Emergencies' (NEE) definition of education in emergencies and define it as the quality of current and future learning opportunities for children and adults in situations of crisis, including non-formal education. As stated in the INEE glossary, "Common situations

of crisis in which EiE is essential include conflicts, protracted crises, situations of violence, forced displacement, disasters, and public health emergencies" (↑INEE, 2024), p. 9).

Educational technology (EdTech): Educational technology refers to the hardware, software, products, services, infrastructure, applications and interfaces, as well as the projects, programmes, processes, structures, values, knowledge systems, and philosophies that they are situated in (Hennessy et al., 2021). Our understanding of technology tools includes both low-tech (e.g., radio, TV, and phone-based SMS, etc.) and high-tech (e.g., digital media, virtual environments, augmented reality, etc.) (↑UNICEF, 2022).

1.3. Report structure

This section provides an overview of the report's structure. Section 2 outlines the methodology, including the inclusion and exclusion criteria for the reviewed articles, as well as the rationale behind the selection of the case studies reported on. Section 3 presents a brief outline of the evidence base, including characteristics of promising tech-enabled PSS interventions, thematic insights, and challenges. Section 3 also includes a brief discussion of assessment tools used in EiE to measure psychosocial well-being and SEL outcomes. Sections 4, 5, and 6 then each provide in-depth case studies of three interventions respectively: Ahlan Simsim (Section 4), La Aldea (Section 5), and the Ideas Box (Section 6). Each case study is structured with an overview of the intervention design, a discussion of the evidence base and takeaways for the EiE sector. Section 7 provides additional resources to support EiE practitioners when designing and implementing PSS programmes.

2. Methodology

In this section, we outline the selection criteria for the articles included in our desk review of literature, as well as the rationale behind choosing the selected case studies.

The literature search was based on predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria (see Table 1). The primary sources of the literature search were Google Scholar and the research database EBSCOhost. We also consulted the EdTech Hub's Evidence Library[1] and explored forward citations using a snowballing technique (see Annex 1 for search strings and Boolean operators).

Table 1. *Inclusion and exclusion criteria*

Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
EiE, emergency, conflict, crisis, fragile, refugee, displacement, disaster; searches including specific crises were also conducted as defined by the ↑Disasters Emergency Commitee (DEC) (2025) and the ↑International Rescue Committee (IRC) (2024)).	General education context
Low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) OR developing countries	Studies conducted exclusively in high-income settings
PSS AND/OR SEL AND/OR preventative mental health	Studies targeting the diagnosis, treatment, or management of mental health conditions (e.g., depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), schizophrenia). Interventions solely focused on mental health without a link to education or learning.

[1] See https://docs.edtechhub.org/lib/. Retrieved 8 October 2025.

Technology-based or information and communication technology (ICT) OR distance interventions	Non-tech-based interventions
In-school OR out of school OR school-going OR early childhood	Studies focused on adults

In selecting the case studies presented in this report, a key methodological decision was to align the selection criteria with a comprehensive review report, ↑UNICEF's (2022) *Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Education: A global review of remote and blended learning interventions*. The report focused on MHPSS interventions, remote modalities (non-tech-based, such as paper, and tech-based, including radio, TV, or digital media) in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) and high-income countries (HICs). According to ↑UNICEF (2022), promising MPHSS interventions share these characteristics:

- Evidence-based and tested in real-world settings
- Inclusive and culturally appropriate for all learners
- Provide training and support for educators and caregivers
- Engage learners with relevant, appealing activities
- Facilitate safe, positive, and high-quality relationships
- Accessible in terms of cost, technology, and logistics (↑UNICEF, 2022, pp. 27–8).

We used the characteristics above to inform the selection of the three case studies within our more restricted focus of tech-enabled PSS interventions in EiE programmes. The final selection of the three case studies in this report balances multiple factors, which can be summarised as follows:

- Case studies from the pool of inclusion criteria for the general literature review of this report, listed in Table 1 above.

AND

- Triangulated evidence (including grey literature) from multiple sources for every case study.

- Geographic diversity/balance (across all chosen cases).
- In school/out of school balance (across all chosen cases.)
- Was informed by the characteristics of promising MHPSS initiatives in ↑UNICEF (2022).

3. Overview of the literature

This section provides an overview of the current literature pertaining to tech-enabled PSS interventions in EiE settings, with a focus on LMICs. As outlined Section 2 above, the overview is not the result of a comprehensive systematic evidence review, but rather a focused desk review of literature to scan available evidence and spotlight the detailed case studies presented later in this report.

The literature highlights the scarcity of robust evidence on non-tech and tech-enabled PSS in EIE settings, as well as for LMICs more broadly (↑Brown et al., 2023; ↑UNICEF, 2022). An evidence review by ↑Armijos et al. (2023) acknowledges gaps in evidence quality, reliance on descriptive or non-evaluated interventions, and limited data on younger children or those with disabilities. Few studies used robust evaluation frameworks or assessed long-term outcomes. However, available evidence indicates that designing effective PSS interventions necessitates combining culturally responsive design with methodologically rigorous approaches ↑Temko et al. (2023) in their review of 46 systematic reviews of MHPSS programmes from LMICs found that, while there is a strong evidence base on the use of MHPSS in education settings in high-income contexts, there is limited research in humanitarian and low-income ones.

This overview delves into the emergent patterns and existing gaps in these interventions, examines the characteristics that define promising tech-enabled approaches, and outlines various measures commonly employed to assess their impact. While acknowledging the potential of technology to expand crucial support, this overview also critically examines the significant challenges and considerations that temper an overly optimistic outlook, identifying areas where rigorous evidence remains nascent or absent.

3.1 Early indications of the potential of tech-enabled PSS interventions

More general reviews of PSS programmes highlight the potential of technology to increase access to psychosocial well-being support for children. The reviews also highlight how digital connectivity can support the coping strategies of affected populations. These aspects are discussed briefly below. Discussion of specific PSS programmes are included in Sections 3.4 and 4 below.

Facilitating access via tech-enabled PSS interventions

Our desk review of the literature highlighted that, although evidence generation is still nascent, research to date suggests that tech-enabled PSS interventions have the potential to reduce cost and stigma-related access barriers and support the development of coping strategies. Specifically, tech-enabled interventions have shown potential to improve access, especially for individuals who prefer to avoid face-to-face interventions, those in hard-to-reach areas and marginalised groups, including children with disabilities (↑Mabil-Atem et al., 2024; ↑UNICEF, 2022). A report commissioned by UNHCR highlights the possibility of technology supporting scaling of mental health services for displaced children through reducing travel time and expenses for specialists (↑Raftree, 2023). The desk review identified school-based interventions as promising, offering a low-cost and scalable entry point for accessing affected children and supporting their psychosocial well-being(↑UNICEF, 2022).

Digital connectivity as a support for psychosocial well-being

In its report *Turn the Tide: Refugee Education in Crisis*, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (↑UNHCR, 2019) highlights that digital connectivity offers significant psychosocial value for refugee students combating isolation by enabling peer support and family contact through online tools like WhatsApp groups. The report emphasises that blended learning models, which combine online resources with in-person facilitation, are more effective for motivation and emotional engagement than standalone digital programmes, underscoring that technology in EiE should complement human interaction and support structures, (↑UNHCR, 2019). In their review of MHPSS and SEL programmes in EiE, ↑Boyd-McMillan & DeMarinis (2020) found that mobile phones played a crucial role in supporting the emotional well-being of refugees by enabling them to stay connected with their families and other support networks.

Before turning to trends in PSS programmes in EiE settings in Section 3.4, Section 3.2. below outlines some challenges identified in our desk review of the emerging evidence base.

3.2 Challenges identified in the emerging evidence base

Despite the potential benefits of the use of tech-enabled PSS interventions (discussed in Sections 3.1, 3.3, 3.4 and 4), the emerging evidence base also points to important barriers to successful implementation. These include, affordability, accessibility, exacerbating inequality, contextualisation, online safety, and further isolation (↑Butnaru et al., 2021; ↑Shah et al., 2019; ↑Tauson & Stannard, 2018; ↑UNICEF, 2022). Studies further identify limited technical literacy, access to the internet, device access, and concerns around acceptability, credibility, and difficulty in maintaining child engagement and gender disparities in access as key hurdles to effective implementation (↑Armijos et al., 2023; ↑Burchert et al., 2019).

Protection and safeguarding of children engaged in tech-enabled PSS interventions

Safeguarding and the protection of children who are accessing online content is essential. ↑Armijos et al. (2023) and ↑Gautier & Ciriello (2024) highlight the challenges associated with the dissemination of technologies used for displaced populations, such as ethical issues, data privacy, overreliance on technology, and excessive surveillance in abusive environments. Factors such as online bullying, grooming, and harassment are also highlighted (↑Raftree, 2023).

Limitations of tech-only interventions

The emerging literature also identifies that PSS interventions often demonstrate greater potential when implemented within a blended approach that combines technology and in-person support, rather than as a stand-alone digital solution. Studies highlight that purely digital solutions are insufficient. ↑Tauson & Stannard (2018) highlight that successful programmes for tech-enabled EiE, including for PSS, prioritise local curricula, offline functionality, and active learning over 'high-tech' solutions. Teacher and facilitator training is repeatedly identified as critical for EdTech success in EiE to mediate technology, implicitly supporting PSS needs through engagement and connection. Similarly, in their rapid evidence review of remote teaching and learning, ↑Pacitto et al. (2025) highlight the added value of supporting learners' well-being through supportive teacher presence and caregiver involvement. Some sources added concerns around children's overall well-being by increasing isolation through a lack

of face-to-face interactions (↑Brown et al., 2023; ↑Butnaru et al., 2021; ↑Shah et al., 2019).

3.3 Characteristics of promising tech-enabled PSS programmes

While the evidence in this field is nascent, there are nonetheless examples of guidance on the use of tech-enabled or remote modalities for PSS programmes in EiE. Several characteristics are discussed below.

In its review of the role of remote modalities in MHPSS programmes in LMIC education ↑UNICEF (2022), analysed 46 systematic reviews, complemented by a review of grey literature and stakeholder interviews, to identify promising practices and interventions. The report suggested that tech-enabled MHPSS programmes should be evidence-based, accessible, easy to use, affordable, cost-effective, and include engaging content designed for specific contexts. Additionally, MHPSS programmes should be co-designed with the communities they are intended for and include training for educators and caregivers.

Supporting engagement through accessible design

The literature reviewed includes suggestions for utilising user-centred design to aid accessibility. ↑Raftree (2023) promotes the "5 As of Accessibility" as listed below.

1. Availability (ensuring users can access services when needed).
2. Accessibility (ensuring services can be used by all regardless of literacy, disability, or language).
3. Affordability (minimising costs for users).
4. Acceptability (ensuring cultural and contextual relevance).
5. Awareness (ensuring users know about and can trust the services)(↑Raftree, 2023, p. 86).

↑Armijos et al. (2023) signal the importance of using a multi-modal combination of non-tech (e.g., paper-based and printed materials); low- to mid-tech (e.g., radio, TV, phone-based methods, including SMS and home visits) and/or high-tech (e.g., online/digital tools including apps, websites, virtual reality, and social media) to maximise access and reach.

Importance of culturally relevant and participatory design

Culturally relevant content, community empowerment, and including children's voices in the development are noted in the reviewed literature (see, for example, ↑Armijos et al., 2023; ↑Raftree, 2023; ↑UNICEF, 2022). Further discussion of these elements is included in case studies in Section 4.

An important addition to the literature is ↑Dalrymple's (2023) qualitative study which provides a call to critically review the principles, understanding, and approaches underpinning SEL programmes for refugees in East Africa. The study drew on "in-depth structured interviews with 20 EiE practitioners across 16 international and national [non-governmental organisations] NGOs and one donor government in Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, Sudan, South Sudan, Tanzania, and Uganda" (↑Dalrymple, 2023, p. 13). The study identified inconsistencies in SEL definitions and implementation approaches, coordination challenges, utilisation of Western SEL frameworks and materials with neither re-conceptualisation for East African contexts or even adequate contextualisation, and a lack of refugees' participation and voices in programme design processes (↑Dalrymple, 2023). Consistent with other literature reviewed, Dalrymple points to a lack of evidence of what works and why as hindering effective programme design (↑Dalrymple, 2023).

Although Dalrymple's work focuses on SEL, the arguments have implications for how digital interventions are conceptualised and implemented. Dalrymple challenges EiE practitioners to acknowledge these tensions as a first step towards meaningfully supporting refugee children to reach their full potential (↑Dalrymple, 2023).

3.4 PSS interventions are increasingly included in EiE programmes, including ECD and ECE

The desk review highlighted the increased prevalence of both EiE programmes which incorporate components targeting psychosocial well-being outcomes, and PSS interventions which use schools as entry points for service provision (↑Brown et al., 2023; ↑Forsberg & Schultz, 2023; ↑Gautier & Ciriello, 2024; ↑Woodward et al., 2023). While not explicitly included in all the reviewed literature, a number of references also refer to a growing use of tech-enabled PSS (↑Brown et al., 2023; ↑Gautier & Ciriello, 2024; ↑Woodward et al., 2023). The literature also points to the use of PSS outcomes as a secondary objective of academic (e.g., basic literacy and

numeracy) outcome-focused programmes. PSS programmes within early childhood development (ECD) interventions are also featured in the literature. As PSS programmes have gained prominence, a number of organisations have also developed guidance materials to support EiE and other humanitarian aid practitioners.

To illustrate the observations above, the discussion below provides examples of PSS programmes and guidance for EiE settings. These examples complement the in-depth case studies.

Example of PSS programme in school settings

The Better Learning Programme (BLP), developed by the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), is an evidence-based PSS programme for children affected by conflict that has been implemented in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. BLP has two components:

1. BLP 1 is a classroom-based intervention aimed at fostering students' psychosocial well-being by:
    - providing explanations to students experiencing non-clinical reactions to crises;
    - teaching them relaxation methods to reinforce their coping mechanisms. BLP 1 is informed by education, crisis psychology and traumatic stress research and is implemented by trained teachers.
2. BLP 2 is a structured, counsellor-led intervention to support students experiencing sleep disturbances, including nightmares. BLP 2 offers group and individual sessions to provide affected students with self-calming and emotional regulation strategies (↑Shah, 2017, p. 10).

Both BLP1 and BLP2 aim: "(1) to establish a sense of stability and safety; (2) to promote calming and a capacity for self-regulation; (3) to increase community and self-efficacy, including where to find support and how to give and receive support; and (4) to promote mastery and hope" *(*↑Shah, 2017, p. 10). BLP's theory of change hypothesises that these PSS activities will lead to improved student learning capacity (↑Shah, 2017).

Following a series of evaluations (see, for example, ↑Shah, 2017), NRC commissioned a randomised controlled trial (RCT) to study the effects of BL2 in schools compared to waitlisted, control-group schools not receiving either BLP1 or BLP2. The research study focused on students' improved

school functioning and stress-related symptoms (immediate term) and academic performance (longer term). The study found significant impacts for self-reported well-being, self-regulation, self-efficacy, executive functions, including study skills, hope, stress-related symptoms, academic functioning, and academic performance (↑Forsberg & Schultz, 2023, p. 155). Arabic and maths grades improved relative to national grade averages for those participating in BL2 compared to the control groups (↑Forsberg & Schultz, 2023).

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the BLP classroom and community-based programme added digital components to ensure that their resources were available online. The BLP (Better Learning Programme) App[2] was launched by the NRC to provide guided learning through animated videos. It enables teachers and caregivers, through evidence-based exercises, to understand the effects of trauma on children and to foster safe, positive environments and stronger relationships for children at home and school. Its key features include offline access, adjustable content quality for varying connectivity, multi-language support, and easy, independent access to psychosocial support modules. The BLP App will be evaluated in collaboration with NRC's research partner, Arctic University of Norway (↑Right to wellbeing, 2025).

PSS focus within early childhood development (ECD) programmes

A proportion of the evidence focused on early childhood development (ECD), examples include Ahlan Simsim[3] and the BRAC Play Lab[4] model. The BRAC Play Lab model, operational in Uganda, Tanzania, and Bangladesh, is designed to equip parents and caregivers with tools to support their children's education, particularly focusing on literacy, numeracy, and psychosocial well-being (↑Mariam et al., 2021). BRAC's Humanitarian Play Lab (HPL) model, adapted from the BRAC Play Lab model, is designed to address the needs of the Rohingya refugee community in Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh (↑Mariam et al., 2021). The Play Lab and HPL models are currently being evaluated as part of BRAC's participation in the LEGO Foundation-funded Play to Learn project in collaboration with Sesame Workshop, IRC, and Global TIES for Children

[2] See https://www.righttowellbeing.org/blp-app. Retrieved 12 October 2025.

[3] See https://www.ahlansimsim.org/. Retrieved on 13 October 2025.

[4] See https://bracied.com/brac-play-lab-a-creative-space-for-childrens-development/. Retrieved 13 October 2025.

(NYU-TIES) (↑Global TIES for Children, 2019). Forthcoming effectiveness research studies include a randomised control trial of father engagement in HPLs in Cox's Bazar. Ahlan Simsim supports children in the MENA region in early learning through using TV shows and mobile apps to promote psychosocial well-being, mental well-being, numeracy, and literacy (↑Foulds et al., 2024). For a detailed discussion of Ahlan Simsim, see the case study in Section 4.

Examples of integration of PSS components within literacy and numeracy programmes

Another noticeable pattern is that tech-enabled education interventions in EiE contexts often include elements of PSS content alongside literacy and numeracy programmes. Can't Wait to Learn,[5] a game-based digital personalised learning intervention focused on improving literacy, numeracy, and psychosocial well-being, is an example. ↑Turner et al. (2022) conducted a proof-of-concept study for Can't Wait to Learn numeracy and psychosocial well-being outcomes for out-of-school children in Lebanon. The study found improved numeracy outcomes and increased perceived self-esteem, motivation, and engagement at the endline compared to the baseline measurement. The study provided important implementation data related to engagement, learning facilitators' roles, session timing, community engagement, and learning application design. ↑Brown et al. (2020) conducted a quasi-experimental study to test the Can't Wait to Learn application on learning outcomes for out-of-school children in Sudan. The main outcomes assessed were numeracy and Arabic literacy, with psychological well-being a secondary outcome. While there were statistically significant improvements in Arabic literacy and numeracy, the results on psychosocial well-being were mixed. Findings in the study show that children improved in their psychosocial well-being, but the intervention had no significant effect on hope and self-esteem. The mixed findings were also attributed to the internal reliability of tools used to measure hope and self-esteem (↑Brown et al., 2020). A quasi-experimental study in primary schools in Jordan also found no statistical improvement in self-esteem (↑de Hoop et al., 2019). These research studies highlight the challenges to consistently achieving PSS outcomes across different EiE settings.

In 2016, the EduApp4Syria project launched an innovation competition, funded by the Norwegian government, to facilitate open-source digital

[5] See https://www.warchild.net/intervention-cwtl/. Retrieved 12 October 2025.

learning game development aimed at improving basic Arabic literacy skills and psychosocial well-being for Syrian refugee children (↑Comings, 2018; ↑Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2017). In March 2017, EduApp4Syria selected two open beta version games for research. The resulting quasi-experimental study conducted with Syrian refugee children aged 5–10 with little or no schooling living in Azraq refugee camp compared improvements in Arabic literacy acquisition and psychosocial well-being between control and treatment groups (↑Koval-Saifi & Plass, 2018). While the research did not find statistically significant impacts for literacy attainment, ↑Koval-Saifi & Plass (2018) found positive learning outcomes, particularly in foundational literacy (letters and syllables). In presenting pre- and post-measurements for psychosocial well-being, the researchers concluded that the game "appears to have supported positive social outcomes" (↑Koval-Saifi & Plass, 2018, p. 4).

EiE practitioner guidance

In response to the increased demand for PSS-focused interventions, a number of organisations have stepped in to provide guidance to EiE and other humanitarian sector practitioners. For example, the Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) has developed a guidance note on psychosocial support (↑INEE, 2018) and an online toolbox specifically focused on PSS and SEL in EiE education (↑INEE, no date). While the toolbox does not explicitly cover tech-enabled PSS and SEL intervention design, it provides technical and operational support that is relevant to both tech and non-tech interventions (↑Temko et al., 2023). Another example is the Responsible Innovation in Technology for Children (RITEC) project, co-founded by the LEGO Group and UNICEF, which provides practical guidance on integrating child well-being considerations into digital play, based on an eight-component framework. The eight components of well-being used in the RITEC project are: competence, emotional regulation, self–actualisation, empowerment, social connection, creativity, safety and security, plus diversity, equity and inclusion (↑UNICEF, 2022).

While this report highlights some emerging trends in evidence for PSS programmes, it is important to recognise that this research field remains underdeveloped. Meta reviews highlight that little research exists, as well as methodological issues with the research that does exist. For example, meta reviews point to poorly articulated intervention design descriptions, incomplete or absent study designs, and research results that hamper knowledge and evidence generation efforts (↑Forsberg & Schultz, 2023).

3.5 Measurement tools to assess PSS and SEL outcomes

With the increased prevalence of PSS and SEL-focused interventions, there is a need for measurement tools which have been validated across diverse populations, are culturally relevant, and easy to administer in EiE contexts (↑Torrente et al., 2019). The following tools have been administered across diverse contexts:

- **The Stirling Children's Wellbeing Scale** (↑Liddle & Carter, 2015) is a measure used to evaluate emotional and psychological well-being for children between the ages of 8 and 15 years. This tool is commonly used to evaluate the effectiveness of interventions targeted at promoting emotional and psychosocial well-being. The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) (↑Goodman, 1997) is a behavioural screening tool that is designed to assess emotional behaviour, peer relationships, and social relationships. The tool is applicable in various humanitarian contexts and is favoured for its ease of use.
- **The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale** (↑Rosenberg, 2011) is used to measure self-esteem and confidence. The tool may be suitable for programmes that are aimed at building confidence and empowering displaced children.
- **The Social Emotional Assets and Resilience Scales (SEARS**) (↑Nese et al., 2012) are used to measure social and emotional resilience in childhood and adolescence. This tool is appropriate for evaluating the effectiveness of SEL interventions in both educational and community settings.
- **The Children's Hope Scale** (↑Snyder et al., 1997) has been validated with children between the ages of 8 and 16 years and used to measure hope and motivation. This tool is applicable across various contexts and languages.
- Other useful resources that aid assessment in emergency contexts include the **PSS-SEL toolbox developed by the INEE,** which provides holistic measures to assess PSS and SEL outcomes, as well as comprehensive guidance on developing SEL curricula and frameworks (↑Temko et al., 2023).

While these tools have been previously used for in-person and paper-based formats, a growing number of assessments have been adapted into tech-enabled assessment platforms. For example, the digital version of the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire can be administered via computers, smartphones, and tablets, offering greater efficiency in data collection, storage, and management compared to paper-based formats (↑Patalay et al., 2016). Similarly, the ↑KoboToolbox (2025) enables practitioners to collect and store PSS and SEL assessment data digitally in EiE settings.

The tools discussed above are only examples and do not represent an exhaustive list of what can be incorporated into programmes to evaluate the impact of PSS interventions. In addition, a multi-tool approach can be adopted to capture responses to interventions for children with diverse needs.

Case studies

To further illustrate the potential of tech-enabled PSS programmes in EiE settings in LMICs and draw practical lessons, Sections 4, 5, and 6 below present three in-depth case studies, offering unique insights from the MENA region, Latin America, and sub-Saharan Africa. Each of the case studies is structured with an overview of the intervention design, learning for the EiE sector, and key recommendations.

4. Case study 1: Ahlan Simsim, Middle East

4.1. Overview

Ahlan Simsim is an early childhood development (ECD) initiative for EiE settings launched in 2017 by Sesame Workshop and the International Rescue Committee (IRC) (↑Sesame Workshop, 2024). Designed to support children and families displaced and affected by the Syrian conflict,[6] Ahlan Simsim integrates mass media, digital platforms, and direct services to strengthen ECD, early childhood education (ECE) and PSS programmes (↑Kohn et al., 2021; ↑Sesame Workshop, 2023). Ahlan Simsim specifically aims to build resilience, emotional regulation, and cognitive skills in young children affected by emergencies across the MENA region. By combining technology-enabled solutions with direct support, the initiative has established a model for leveraging media and digital tools to enhance psychosocial well-being (↑Foulds, 2022; ↑INEE, 2024; ↑Kohn et al., 2021). Since its launch, Ahlan Simsim has reached more than 3.5 million children and caregivers with direct services and over 29 million children indirectly with the Ahlan SimSim television show (↑IRC, n.d.). Ahlan Simsim addresses a major gap in ECE services, which, despite the growing evidence that early interventions yield long-term educational and emotional benefits, are often neglected in humanitarian responses (↑Sesame Workshop, 2024; ↑Schwartz et al., 2024).

In addition to the well-known media programme above, Ahlan Simsin includes several additional sub-programme components (see the Ahlan Simsim Impact Report for the full list (↑Sesame Workshop, 2024). The Ahlan SimSim sub-programmes featured in this report are listed below.

[6] The Syrian conflict, which began in 2011, is often described as having subsided in intensity, yet instability and humanitarian crises persist. Ahlan Simsim, launched in 2018, was developed to respond to the continuing needs of children and families affected by displacement and conflict in the region (↑Kohn et al., 2021; ↑Sesame Workshop, 2023).

- **Remote Early Learning Programme (RELP)** is a short (e.g., implemented over 11 weeks in Lebanon) ECE programme which was developed during the Covid-19 pandemic. RELP supports caregivers in implementing ECE curriculum for their children by providing remote coaching via WhatsApp, rolling out interactive digital tools, and distributing physical teaching and learning kits. In Lebanon, the programme was communicated as an ECE remote school with caregivers engaged as implementers (↑Schwartz et al., 2024).
- **Reach Up and Learn (RUL)** is a parenting programme, first developed in Jamaica in 1986–7, which provided caregivers with home visit support to undertake play-based ECD activities with children. Research on RUL in Jamaica found a significant impact on cognitive outcomes in the first RCT and in subsequent follow-up measurements at ages 7–8, 11, 17, 22, and 31 years old (↑Rafla et al., 2024). In 2016, the RUL home visit approach was adapted for Syrian refugees and host communities in Lebanon, Jordan, and Syria. In 2020, RUL was further adapted as an audio-only phone-delivered intervention (↑Rafla et al., 2024).
- **Ahlan Simsim Families (ASF)** is a remote parental support programme developed during the Covid-19 pandemic for caregivers in Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, and Iraq. ASF outcome areas are responsive relationships, early learning, security and safety, and the importance of ECD (↑Schwartz et al., 2024).

In addition to their use in non-governmental humanitarian response, Ahlan Simsim programme approaches have been integrated into formal and non-formal education settings through partnerships with ministries of education in Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, and Syria (↑Global TIES for Children, 2023a).

4.2. Ahlan Simsim's research agenda and evidence to date

Ahlan Simsim implementation is supported by a comprehensive research agenda, led by the research centre, Global TIES for Children (↑Sesame Workshop, 2024), which aims to measure programme effectiveness and provide data necessary for continuous improvement. The results of the studies provide important input into the improvement of Ahlan Simsim's ongoing programme implementation. Studies to date illustrate both the potential and challenges in implementing PSS and SEL programmes in

EiE settings. The research also contributes to addressing global evidence gaps related to:

- Children's use of media as a coping strategy during times of trauma and adversity (↑Foulds et al., 2024);
- Remote caregiver-mediated PSS programmes (↑Foulds et al., 2024; ↑Schwartz et al., 2024).
- Caregiver well-being outcomes of caregiver-supported ECE and ECD programmes (↑Global TIES for Children, 2023b; ↑Rafla et al., 2024)
- Effects of ECE programmes of limited duration (↑Schwartz et al., 2024).

A selection of research study findings is discussed below. While cost-effectiveness studies are referenced in the three research briefs prepared by Global TIES for children (↑Global TIES for Children, 2023a; ↑Global TIES for Children, 2023b; ↑Global TIES for Children, 2023c), these studies are not currently available online. A discussion of the cost-effectiveness of the Ahlan Simsim programme is, thus, not included in this document.

Evaluation of Ahlan Simsim in pre-primary classrooms in Jordan

A cluster RCT (CRCT), conducted in 2021–2022, compared the impact of exposure to the Ahlan Simsim intervention with exposure to the standard pre-primary curriculum in Jordan alone(↑Global TIES for Children, 2023a). Children's emotional knowledge and emotion regulation were explored as intervention outcomes, with Ahlan Simsim character recognition included as an implementation test. The RCT study findings identified positive improvements for emotional knowledge and expressive emotion regulation, but not for receptive emotion regulation. Of the four emotional regulation strategies tested, the study found positive effects for the breathing exercises. No significant effects were found on developmental milestones and problem behaviours. The study also included a cost-effectiveness study undertaken by the University of Pennsylvania and IRC. Overall, the study found that integrating SEL-focused media content into pre-primary classrooms has the potential to support children's emotional knowledge and expressive emotion regulation capacities. The study recommendations highlighted the opportunity to support SEL improvements by integrating Ahlan Simsim in school and family contexts

and further reinforcing efforts to understand the use of emotion words and concepts in Arabic in the Levant region (↑Global TIES for Children, 2023a).

Evaluation of RUL in Jordan

A cluster RCT, conducted in 2021, evaluated the impact of the phone-based Reach Up and Learn (RUL) programme targeting Syrian and host-community caregiver well-being and caregiving behaviours (intermediate outcomes) in Jordan in order to improve parent-reported child learning and development (longer-term outcomes) (↑Global TIES for Children, 2023b; ↑Rafla et al., 2024). The study measured the effect of providing health and nutritional content only (control) to caregivers compared to providing health, nutritional, parenting and caregiving content, including content adapted from the RUL model (treatment) (↑Rafla et al., 2024). This study specifically addressed three important evidence gaps, namely:

- The impact of audio-only remote caregiver programmes;
- The effects of parenting programmes in Arabic-speaking contexts more generally;
- The impact on caregivers' mental health and well-being of involvement in parenting programmes aimed at supporting child developmental outcomes (↑Rafla et al., 2024).

The study measured the impact of RUL on caregiver well-being (e.g., on depressive and anxiety symptoms) and parenting (e.g., parenting stress, parenting self-efficacy, caregiver-to-child learning activities, caregiver responsiveness, and disciplinary practices). The RCT found a statistically significant, small reduction in caregiver depressive symptoms. The study did not observe any effects on caregiver anxiety or the five parenting outcome areas (↑Rafla et al., 2024). Longer-term outcomes related to parent reported child behaviour and development were also not observed (↑Global TIES for Children, 2023b; ↑Rafla et al., 2024). Importantly, the study provided useful recommendations for design improvements related to increased dosage, considering blended and video-enabled interventions and integrating culturally specific factors to ensure culturally relevant socialisation practices (↑Global TIES for Children, 2023b).

Evaluation of remote ECD programmes utilising caregivers in Lebanon

A third RCT (↑Global TIES for Children, 2023c; ↑Schwartz et al., 2024), conducted in 2022, studied the effects of Ahlan Simsim remote learning and parenting support programmes for hard-to-access 5–6-year-old Syrian refugees in Lebanon. The study compared the use of RELP, a remote learning programme, alone and in combination with ASF, a parenting support programme, against each other and a waitlisted control group. The study measured six target outcomes: overall child development, emerging literacy, emerging numeracy, motor skills, social and emotional skills, and child play. When RELP was used alone, significant impact compared to the control group was found for all six target outcomes. For RELP plus ASF, a significant effect compared to the control group was found for overall child development, emerging literacy and numeracy, and child play.

The research team hypothesised that the strong results were due to a design informed by good practice in ECE programmes, which supported continued parental engagement, teacher training in remote programmes and provision of supplementary physical and multimedia resources for caregiver use with children. Framing the programmes as educational rather than about improving parenting, allowing for changes in implementation based on local needs, and recruiting teachers with at least one year of prior ECE experience were all factors identified by the research team as supporting success. The research team also highlighted the commitment shown by caregivers to supporting children's learning (↑Schwartz et al., 2024).

This RCT also explored a set of parenting outcomes, including increased early learning interactions between caregivers or other family members and the children; beliefs about play and SEL, and parenting stress or self-efficacy. Statistically significant results for RELP and RELP plus ASF were only found for increased caregiver-reported early learning interactions between caregivers, other family members, and children. The study also measured the impact on caregiver well-being. No statistically significant impacts were found for either RELP or RELP plus ASF on caregiver depression or anxiety symptoms compared to the control group. A cost-effectiveness study, which found that the RELP intervention alone had comparable costs to other ECE programmes inLMICs, was also conducted as part of this study (see ↑Global TIES for Children, 2023c for

further details). Overall, the study did not conclude that adding a parenting support programme (ASF) increased the impact, except for reducing the prevalence of spanking as reported by parents (↑Schwartz et al., 2024).

The research study team concludes that remote ECE programmes can be effective, including in low-resource and crisis-affected situations where caregivers have limited formal education, low literacy, and low socio-economic status. The researchers suggest that this opens opportunities to broaden ECE to a significant number of children globally, currently unable to access services (↑Schwartz et al., 2024).

Below, we provide a set of key takeaways from the Ahlan Simsim programme documents, including research reports, briefs, programme impact materials, and partner communications,

4.3 Key takeaways

As an example of how technology-enabled education can support children's social and emotional well-being and cognitive development in emergency contexts, Ahlan Simsim offers a number of key takeaways for EiE practitioners:

The importance of culturally relevant and participatory PSS programme design

Ahlan Simsim built and continues to refine its PSS programme approach from the ground up using participatory, community-based approaches (↑Foulds et al., 2024; ↑Kohn et al., 2021). The programme is co-created with local educators, caregivers, and child development experts across the MENA region to ensure cultural relevance and accessibility. The participatory design process consistently highlighted the importance of developing culturally relevant interventions rather than importing Western psychological approaches. For example, by including regional child-support norms such as strategies for asking for community help (↑Foulds et al., 2024) or by ensuring the integration of culturally aligned socialisation strategies (↑Global TIES for Children, 2023b).

Ahlan SimSim programme evaluations further stress the importance of incorporating feedback loops from children and families to guide content, delivery platforms, and character design—such as the inclusive character Ameera, an Ahlan Simsim character in a wheelchair. Ahlan Simsim promotes shared learning through caregiver co-viewing and is grounded

in ongoing community engagement to inform ongoing quality assurance (↑Foulds et al., 2024; ↑Kohn et al., 2021).

Caregiver-mediated tech-enabled remote PSS programming can provide an effective approach for children currently unable to access ECD and ECE programming

Broadcasting ECE and ECD content via television, radio, and mobile phones has allowed Ahlan Simsim to reach children beyond the constraints of in-person programme support (↑Kohn et al., 2021; ↑Sesame Workshop, 2024). The RCT in Jordan found significant improvement in children's emotional knowledge and receptive emotion regulation, supported by co-viewing with caregivers, ↑Global TIES for Children (2023c). Research conducted on the RELP sub-programme has demonstrated that low-tech, phone-based caregiver-mediated ECE programmes can be effective in low-resource and hard-to-access areas (↑Global TIES for Children, 2023c; ↑Schwartz et al., 2024). This research, thus, supports the argument that caregiver-mediated ECE and ECD programmes can offer a viable alternative when in-person teachers are not available (↑Global TIES for Children, 2023c; ↑Schwartz et al., 2024).

Designing and implementing PSS programmes in EiE contexts is complex, requiring ongoing iteration based on targeted research and reflection processes

The promise of tech-enabled PSS programmes, identified through the Ahlan Simsim research agenda, is tempered by challenges identified through the studies. A key example is difficulties experienced in achieving programme outcome goals related to caregiver well-being. As discussed above, the research studies (↑Rafla et al., 2024; ↑Schwartz et al., 2024) and accompanying research briefs prepared by Global TIES for Children (↑Global TIES for Children, 2023a; ↑Global TIES for Children, 2023b; ↑Global TIES for Children, 2023c) do not shy away from the complexities, but rather provide nuanced reflections on programme design useful for EiE practitioners.

5. Case Study 2: La Aldea, Latin America

5.1. Overview

In Venezuela, a significant portion of the population is displaced, and many have fled to Colombia because of political and economic instability (↑Thompson et al., 2023). Concurrently, children in Colombia are affected by adverse weather conditions and rising levels of violent conflict. This situation has contributed to widespread trauma, necessitating the provision of PSS and SEL support for children and adults in the region (↑UNESCO, 2022; ↑UNICEF, 2024).

La Aldea is a tech-enabled initiative designed to promote psychosocial well-being for children and families in Colombia and Mexico. La Aldea is derived from the Spanish phrase meaning 'the small village'. By utilising a mix of remote learning, radio programmes, digital stories, mindfulness practices, and family engagement combined with in-depth tech-enabled support for teachers, La Aldea provides a holistic and accessible framework for educational and PSS support and citizenship (↑Restrepo-Sáenz & Chateauneuf, 2023; ↑UNICEF, 2020).

La Aldea focuses on learning through play by incorporating radio stories, songs, print books, and games. The approach uses local imagery and sounds that are familiar to the community to develop learning materials (↑La Aldea, no date; ↑Restrepo-Sáenz & Chateauneuf, 2023). The aim of the approach is to integrate real-life themes with the mainstream curriculum through playful, engaging storytelling. La Aldea is centred on flexible play-based learning approaches for children to learn about conflict and social relations using metaphors.

First developed by the Colombian non-governmental organisation Click Arte as a Covid-19 pandemic response, by 2022, La Aldea had reached 87,667 Venezuelan migrants aged between 6 and 14 years attending Colombian schools. La Aldea has provided online training support to 4,220 teachers in Colombia (↑Restrepo-Sáenz & Chateauneuf, 2023). In September 2025, the La Aldea website stated that La Aldea had reached more than 150,00 students and 5,000 teachers in over 500 educational institutions in Mexico and Colombia (↑La Aldea, no date).

5.2. La Aldea's evidence to date

While La Aldea's approach has been scaled across various South American contexts and supported by organisations such as UNICEF Colombia, Save the Children, the IRC, World Vision, the LEGO Foundation, and the World Bank (↑UNESCO, 2022), there is no evidence of evaluations assessing the programme's effectiveness in improving PSS outcomes. The information for this case study, including the takeaways below, is drawn from one journal article, written by individuals working on the Le Aldea programme (↑Restrepo-Sáenz & Chateauneuf, 2023). Their insights are complemented by additional information gathered from the La Aldea and partner websites.

La Aldea was included in the case study selection as a high user reach tech-enabled PSS programme implemented in the South American region. In the absence of evaluation data, the programme was also included due to its recognition by the Academic's Choice Award, Latino Book Awards, CREA Digital, HundrED, and the International-American Development Bank (IRB) (↑La Aldea, no date).[7]

5.3 Key takeaways from La Aldea

La Aldea's experience highlights several design approaches that EiE practitioners could consider when developing PSS programmes in EiE settings. In their reflections on La Aldea's reach and performance, ↑Restrepo-Sáenz & Chateauneuf (2023) highlight the learning listed below.

Providing a forum where learners, teachers and families can foster connection and collaboration

The La Aldea platform is flexible, allowing learners, teachers, and their families to create their own learning and teaching communities, interact with La Aldea content, and combine it in a way that suits their needs. La Aldea provides content in multiple formats, such as books, radio, television, mobile and video to facilitate this collaboration (↑La Aldea, no date). La Aldea particularly emphasises the broad content offering as providing families and teachers with additional tools to support meaningful conversations on topics related to psychosocial well-being (↑Restrepo-Sáenz & Chateauneuf, 2023).

[7] For details of awards and recognition, please see: https://laaldea.co/en/what-is-la-aldea/.

Tech-enabled learning content can be an effective EiE rapid response mechanism during an emergency

↑Restrepo-Sáenz & Chateauneuf (2023) highlight how La Aldea was able to distribute more than 130,000 La Aldea books to learners and teachers in 17 regions of Colombia. Radio broadcasting extended programme reach even further (↑Restrepo-Sáenz & Chateauneuf, 2023).

Developing fun, interactive, and engaging learning content is recommended

When reflecting on La Aldea, ↑Restrepo-Sáenz & Chateauneuf (2023) conclude that much of their success is linked to the use of digital media using familiar and attractive characters. For example, the radio programme 'On the air with Harry' focuses on the migration process, addressing the emotional and cognitive needs of children, migrant families, and host communities. The radio programme also incorporates learning on socio-emotional challenges and provides messages on self-care. The stories use fictional animal characters available within the local context to address challenges in dealing with emotions (↑La Aldea, no date).

While programme evaluations are not yet available, the significant reach indicates the relevance of the La Aldea programme to its users and contextual appropriateness.

6. Ideas Box in Burundi

6.1. Overview

Ideas Box is a portable multimedia pop-up centre developed by ↑Libraries Without Borders[8] (also known as Bibliothèques Sans Frontières), an organisation committed to "strengthening the agency of vulnerable populations through access to education and access to information" (↑Lachal & Peich, 2017, p. 2). Ideas Box is a mechanism to provide vulnerable populations with a library of resources which can be used to support their own educational, protection, PSS, and other learning goals (↑Lachal & Peich, 2017). In Burundi, Ideas Box was first deployed in early 2014 to support Congolese refugees living in camps (↑Lachal & Peich, 2017).

In Burundi, three Ideas Boxes were set up in partnership with UNHCR in the refugee camps of Musasa, Kavumu, and Bwagiriza (↑Libraries Without Borders, 2020). The Ideas Box is a pop-up digital library and learning space, even in off-grid, resource-constrained environments. One camp had no electricity and low literacy levels, yet the Ideas Box provided access to technology and content. Each Ideas Box fits on two pallets and contains an integrated low-energy generator and equipment such as 15 tablets, 4 laptops (with satellite internet), e-readers preloaded with thousands of books, a cinema module, cameras, board and video games, and art supplies (↑Lachal, 2015). The target audience is broad. Children and adolescents comprise the majority of users (e.g., 90% of users in Musasa camp are children), but Ideas Box also engages adults with libraries, information sessions, and creative activities (↑Libraries Without Borders, 2020).

Each Ideas Box is managed in collaboration with the community. In Burundi, local refugee youth were trained as facilitators, librarians, and mediators to run activities and maintain the 'Box'. This community-led model means the space is open daily for anyone to drop in, read, play, use a tablet, watch educational videos, or participate in workshops. Notably, the Ideas Box can serve as both an educational hub and a safe space for PSS. The rationale behind Ideas Boxes is to provide safe, play-based environments that increase access to information, education, and psychosocial support activities while strengthening community ownership and resilience (↑Libraries Without Borders, 2016). Ideas Boxes offer a friendly

[8] See https://www.bibliosansfrontieres.org/outil/ideas-box/. Retrieved on 13 October 2025.

environment where children can continue learning informally when schools are disrupted, and where all ages can socialise and momentarily escape the stresses of camp life (↑Libraries Without Borders, 2020).

The digital learning tools, which include offline access to Khan Academy and Wikipedia, for example, as well as internet connectivity, enable users to access information and stay connected with the wider world, countering the isolation of displacement.

In the first year of their use, Ideas Boxes saw a strong uptake in the Burundi camps. Over 5,500 refugees registered as users across two camps, and in just a three-month period (April–July 2015), the Boxes recorded 21,686 visits (14,032 in Kavumu and 7,654 in Bwagiriza), indicating frequent usage in communities of only a few thousand people. Six years later, staff reported nearly 100 children lining up each morning to enter the Musasa camp Ideas Box when it opened (↑Libraries Without Borders, 2020).

Below is a discussion of the two research studies on Ideas Box, identified through the literature review.

6.1.1. Evaluations of Ideas Box

The literature review identified two publicly available studies of Ideas Box. The first, a qualitative study, examined how the Ideas Box programme contributes to reducing stress, promoting resilience, and improving the psychosocial environment (↑Lachal, 2015). The second, an impact study, assessed the educational impact of Ideas Box for students in Bwagiriza camp (↑Peich, 2016).

Qualitative study: Ideas Box — an innovative psychosocial tool for emergency situations

The qualitative study, led by a psychiatrist, was conducted in 2015 in Kavumu and Bwagiriza camps. The study used a combination of focus groups and key informant interviews. In addition, a sample of babies and small children with their mothers was selected for an examination (↑Lachal, 2015). ↑Lachal (2015) concluded that by offering a safe space for creativity, community socialisation, and personal expression, the Ideas Box, "meets a number of the criteria to facilitate the process of resistance'" (↑Lachal, 2015, p. 28). The study also identified that by providing an alternative space for entertainment and communication activities, Ideas Box contributed to peace building in the camps (↑Lachal, 2015). ↑Lachal (2015) also concluded that, as means of accessing information, Ideas Box "appears as an effective

instrument to fight against rumors and the risk of misinformation" (↑Lachal, 2015, p. 30). Recommendations for improvement or programme extension included greater provision of materials in languages all community members can understand to complement English and French language offerings; increased numbers of speech, writing, drawing and film-making groups as a PSS activity; and exploration of the use of Ideas Box in parenting interventions and outreach programmes (↑Lachal, 2015).

Impact study: Educational impact of education in emergency situations

The study aimed to assess the impact on French and maths learning attainment of students in formal schools who attended some of their lessons with Ideas Box (treatment group) compared to those who attended lessons without (control group). The study was conducted in 2014–2015 with children in the fourth year of primary school and the second year of secondary school in Bwagiriza camp (↑Peich, 2016). Interestingly, in both the treatment and control groups, teachers used the Ideas Box to prepare the lessons. It was only in the case of the treatment group, however, that students held some of their classes within the Ideas Box. Abridged versions of Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) and Early Grade Math Assessment (EGMA) were used to measure academic performance in French and maths. The study reported that students in the treatment groups improved their performance in both French and maths. For example, 24th grade students in the test group improved their performance in French by 31%, while students in the control group improved by 9.4%" (↑Peich, 2016, p. 7). The study's report does not indicate if any of the quantitative results observed were statistically significant (↑Peich, 2016).

6.2 Learnings for the EiE sector

The Ideas Box in Burundi offers practical insights into how multimedia interventions, when embedded within a community-managed programming approach, can offer opportunities to support education, psychosocial support, access to information, and even community-building or peace-building outcomes. While evaluations are limited, there are some interesting points of learning to consider. These are listed below.

Fostering connection, information access, and community ownership can support resilience, empowerment, and long-term sustainability

In refugee camps in Burundi, the Ideas Box programme offered children and families access to a variety of educational and cultural resources, such as books, films, tablets, computers, and internet connectivity. Local facilitators also ran workshops, literacy activities, and training for school-aged children. These initiatives helped support learning, protect children, and strengthen community ties, improving the psychosocial well-being of displaced populations (↑Lachal, 2015; ↑Libraries Without Borders, 2016).

Embed community ownership and participation from the beginning to ensure sustainability and relevance

A critical takeaway is the power of community involvement. In Burundi, refugee youth and community members were not just beneficiaries but became facilitators, co-managing the Ideas Box daily. This local ownership led to high acceptance, cultural relevance, and continuity of the programme (↑Libraries Without Borders, 2020).

Unlike a top-down programme, the Ideas Box in Burundi was co-run by refugees themselves, which has proved crucial for its success and sustainability. The local community adapted the Box to their own needs, for instance, organising story hours, forming clubs, and even finding ways to resolve conflict. According to one staff member, the communities have learned to use the Ideas Box in ways that differ from the original design, allowing it to operate sustainably without external involvement. (↑Libraries Without Borders, 2020).

Ideas Box is a good example of the importance of training and capacity building. Libraries without Borders' training of youth facilitators created local expertise that kept the project going long after the initial deployment (↑Futurum, 2024). In EiE settings, this addresses the problem of dependency; by empowering users to take charge, the Ideas Box becomes a community asset rather than an external service.

Integrate a holistic mix of educational, psychosocial, and creative content in a safe environment

The Ideas Box combines educational resources with recreational and creative materials, from maths apps and dictionaries to toys and art supplies (↑Libraries Without Borders, 2014). This mixed content approach provides opportunities to address cognitive, social, and emotional needs together, resulting in multifaceted outcomes (↑Lachal, 2015; ↑Peich, 2016). Such integration aligns with global evidence that PSS and academic success are interlinked, especially in trauma-affected populations (↑Durlak et al., 2011; ↑Libraries Without Borders, 2015).

Create a child-friendly physical environment that feels safe and inviting

According to Lachal's study, the Ideas Box's success was largely due to it being a welcoming haven where children could play and learn without fear (↑Lachal, 2015). The study findings concludes that the Ideas Box programme approach provides the basic requirements for supporting resilience and improving psychosocial well-being (↑Lachal, 2015. Perhaps what is most interesting about this study is its emphasis on prioritising the emotional climate fostered by a programme, not just the content delivered.

In summary, the Ideas Box in Burundi exemplifies how tech-enabled, community-led interventions have the potential to address multiple humanitarian sector challenges, while fostering longer-term sustainability. Perhaps this case study's relevance to the broader PSS discourse lies in showing that creative, hybrid models (library, maker space, digital café) can encourage learners and communities' creative solution skills, offering them opportunities to design their own programmes, suited to their needs.

7. Additional resources

Below is a selection of key resources, including toolkits and policy guidance. These provide a useful first introduction to principles and good practice when designing and implementing PSS programmes in EiE settings.

Toolkits and practical resources

1. **International Rescue Committee (IRC). Safe Healing and Learning Spaces (SHLS) Toolkit**
   Practical toolkit for setting up safe spaces with SEL and PSS integration for children in emergency settings.
   https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/document/safe-healing-and-learning-spaces-toolkit/

2. **International Rescue Committee (IRC) & LEGO Foundation. PlayMatters SEL Cards and Facilitator Resources**
   Activity-based SEL resources for educators and caregivers in refugee and host communities.
   https://www.playmatters.org/en/play-library

3. **MHPSS and EiE Toolkit-mhpss.net.**
   A repository of practical tools, templates, and resources to implement mental health and PSS in EiE.
   https://www.mhpss.net/toolkit/mhpss-and-eie
4. **Norwegian Refugee Council. Better Learning Programme (BLP) Toolkit**
   School-based PSS programme addressing trauma and improving academic performance in crisis-affected settings.
   https://www.hhri.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/BLP-1-Edittion-III-Handbook-2019.pdf

5. **UNICEF. Adolescent Kit for Expression and Innovation**
   Interactive toolkit with SEL and psychosocial activities to support adolescent well-being, adapted for Covid-19 and emergency contexts.
   https://www.adolescentkit.org/

Training and capacity building

1. **Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE). PSS and Wellbeing SMS Guide and Training**
   Practical guide and training resource for using SMS messaging to support the psychosocial well-being of teachers and education personnel in crisis-affected settings.
   https://inee.org/resources/psychosocial-support-pss-and-wellbeing-sms-guide-and-training

2. **Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies, INEE-PSS Collaborative. Training Webinar**
   Training video introducing practical strategies and tools for strengthening PSS in emergency education programmes.

   https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F8j9TEOyN6k

Policy guidance and notes

1. **EdTech Hub. EdTech for Education in Emergencies: A Review of Guidance and Minimum Standards**
   Synthesises existing policy and implementation guidance on EdTech use in EiE contexts.
   https://docs.edtechhub.org/lib/FFBCJSSJ

2. **Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE). Guidance Note on PSS and SEL (2018)**
   Comprehensive guide for integrating PSS and SEL in education in emergency programmes.
   https://inee.org/resources/inee-guidance-note-psychosocial-support

3. **UNICEF. Designing Safe Digital Mental Health and Psycho–Social Support (MHPSS)**
   Checklist and guidance for designing digital MHPSS interventions.

   https://mhpsshub.org/resource/designing-safe-digital-mental-health-and-psycho-social-support-for-displaced-and-stateless-adolescents

4. **UNICEF. Remote Modalities for MHPSS in Education**
   UNICEF study identifying promising practices for delivering remote PSS and SEL through radio, SMS, and digital tools.
   https://research.acer.edu.au/well_being/21/

5. **United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Refugee Education 2030**
   Strategic framework prioritising SEL and PSS integration in refugee education systems.
   https://www.unhcr.org/media/education-2030-strategy-refugee-education
6. **Save the Children. EdTech for Learning in Emergencies and Displaced Settings**
   Practical recommendations and evidence on EdTech integration for refugee and displaced children's learning and well-being.

   https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/edtech-learning.pdf

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Annex 1

Boolean search terms

The literature search was based on predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. The sources of the literature search were:

1. Google Scholar
2. EBSCO host search
3. EdTech Evidence Hub library

We used the following boolean operators for the search:

(Education OR Learning)

AND

(in Emergencies OR conflict OR crisis OR fragile OR refugee OR displacement)

AND

(Psychosocial support OR social emotional learning OR preventative mental health OR MHPSS)

AND

(Technology-based OR ICT interventions OR Tech-enabled OR digital)

AND

(low and middle income countries or middle income countries or developing countries)

AND

(In-school OR out of school OR school going OR community** OR child*)

AND

(evaluation* OR Case study OR intervention)

NOT

(adults or adult or aged or elderly OR higher education OR universities)

NOT

(anxiety OR depression OR PTSD OR Mental health treatment)

Search strings

- Psychosocial support | social-emotional learning | low- and middle-income countries | Education in emergencies' settings | crisis, fragile, or conflict settings | in-school | out-of-school children
- ICT psychosocial support humanitarian contexts
- psychosocial support in education emergencies
- psychosocial EdTech for learning in emergencies
- technology-based psycho-social support (PSS) and social-emotional learning (SEL) in education during crises.
- Technology psychosocial EiE
- Technology SEL EiE
- Technology psychosocial Conflict
- Technology SEL Conflict
- Technology psychosocial Crisis
- Technology SEL Crisis
- Technology psychosocial fragile
- Technology SEL fragile
- technology-based psychosocial support in education emergencies
- technology-based SEL interventions in education emergencies
- digital social emotional learning for refugees
- digital psychosocial support for refugees in education
- digital social emotional learning for displaced children
- Digital psychosocial support for displaced children
- social emotional learning refugees technology interventions

- social-emotional learning in conflict education
- INEE technology psychosocial support education
- Brown 2020 Can't Wait to Learn psychosocial wellbeing Sudan
- tech-based MHPSS and SEL interventions
- psychosocial wellbeing and SEL Syrian refugee response
- phone-based CETA Syrian refugee children Lebanon study
- technology-based PSS/SEL interventions in low- and middle-income Settings, focusing on tech in emergencies
- mobile phone psychosocial support for refugees
- smartphone-delivered mental health care for refugees
- tech-based emergency responses for teachers and caregivers
- Journal on Education in Emergencies social emotional technology
- remote modalities in mental health support
- remote methods on education in tackling mental health and psychosocial challenge