

From little ripples to big waves: comprehensive early childhood programming for young refugee children

- ▷ *Adaptable programme for young children in emergencies or forgotten crises.*
- ▷ *Little Ripples curriculum incorporates play-based learning and mindfulness.*
- ▷ *Assessments show improved learning outcomes and social-emotional development.*

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Levels of displacement are the highest on record: as of February 2019, 68.5 million people worldwide have been forcibly displaced, of whom 25.4 million hold refugee status – over half of them under the age of 18 (UNHCR, online). An estimated 87 million children under age 7 have spent their entire lives in conflict zones (Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies, 2018). Yet humanitarian funding for education – and, especially, early childhood programming – remains alarmingly low. iACT developed the Little Ripples programme to address the needs of young children affected by humanitarian emergencies and forgotten crises.

The history of Little Ripples begins with iACT's work in eastern Chad to support Darfuri refugees, documenting life in the refugee camps to help spur global action. The iACT team asked the Darfuri refugee communities what services they needed and wanted most – the answer was services for young children. As a result, over the next three years, iACT worked with experts and practitioners in the areas of child development, early learning, trauma recovery and mindfulness to develop the Little Ripples curriculum.

To pilot the Little Ripples curriculum, iACT partnered with Jesuit Refugee Service, which provides primary education to Darfuri refugees in Chad. In 2013, iACT identified and trained 14 Darfuri refugee women, and worked with refugee families to set up spaces in their homes to save on the cost of constructing new centres. These in-home centres came to be known as 'ponds'. One pond hosts 45 children living in nearby homes and is supported by two teachers. iACT provided teaching and learning materials and helped to set up a meals programme to provide participating children with nutritional support.

One year after launching the Little Ripples pilot in eastern Chad, iACT conducted an impact assessment developed with the University of Wisconsin Survey Center. Child and caregiver questions were designed to measure the children's learning outcomes and social-emotional development. It was found that children made strong improvements in educational milestones (such as naming colours, counting, identifying animals and reciting the alphabet); children were reported to be less violent with their peers and adults (for example, decrease in kicking, biting and hitting); they exhibited more positive

emotional behaviours (being happier and calmer); and were more likely to wash hands before and after meals. Caregivers also reported that, at home, their child was singing, talking about their activities at the Little Ripples programme and showing an eagerness to return each day.

Based on these findings, iACT was able to refine and strengthen the Little Ripples curriculum and seek funding to continue and expand the programme.

An adaptable, play-based and mindful approach

The Little Ripples curriculum is intentionally designed for use in challenging and resource-poor contexts with children, aged 3 to 5, affected by trauma, displacement and other complex issues. It guides early childhood teachers and caregivers – at any level of education and experience – to deliver play-based learning activities that foster social-emotional development, while using positive behaviour management techniques. It is designed to be integrated with any existing academic or pre-primary curricula and adapted to any context; teachers are encouraged to deliver the curriculum using activities, stories, music and games that are relevant to their culture, language and context.

[‘The Little Ripples curriculum guides early childhood teachers and caregivers to deliver play-based learning activities.’](#)

Play-based learning is key, as growing evidence shows a relationship between play and development in areas including: language, executive functions, mathematics, spatial skills, scientific thinking and social and emotional development (Hassinger-Das *et al.*, 2017). In many cultures, play-based learning is not regarded as an acceptable form of pedagogy. However, Little Ripples teacher training aims to improve understanding of the positive impact it can have on child development and future learning.

The curriculum incorporates mindfulness – a state of mind that can be developed through practices such as: meditation, slow breathing, intentional movement or body scans to support young refugees to:

- 1 find stability and comfort amid the chaos of displacement
- 2 nurture internal peace as a coping mechanism and form of resilience
- 3 build executive functioning and self-regulation skills, and
- 4 learn practices that they can carry with them into adolescence and adulthood.

In a Little Ripples classroom, mindfulness is not practised as a standalone activity; rather, mindfulness exercises are an integral part of daily activities. Teachers guide their students in practising mindfulness techniques in daily ‘welcome’ and ‘goodbye’ circles and lead ‘mindful moments’ throughout the day if they feel their students may benefit from a calming exercise.

Positive impact

In late 2018, iACT’s implementing partner in Tanzania, Plan International, conducted an impact evaluation including individual student learning assessments, surveys and focus group discussions with students, parents and

teachers. After participating for four months, approximately 90% of Little Ripples students passed their academic assessment. Parents and teachers reported positive changes in student behaviour, attitudes and cognitive skills, inside and outside the classroom. Students reported feeling safe in their classrooms and happy to participate in lessons. They particularly enjoyed the mindfulness activities, which teachers reported to be helpful for classroom management.

Impacts from assessments in eastern Chad over the last two years have produced similar results, with a clear positive impact on the Darfuri refugee teachers and students. Most caregivers reported an increase in their child's ability to be independent, share toys and get along with others. One teacher observed:

The new method we were trained on to deal with children in a positive way has changed the students. It is something we had not learned before. [Before,] they [students] did not say my name; they did not like me or listen to me. From training we learned to speak with children and be at their level and speak with them peacefully. Now, they see me outside of school and excitedly call me by name; they listen to me and are more excited each day for school.



Looking forward

Over the last five years, Little Ripples has expanded into four refugee camps in eastern Chad, reaching 3000 Darfuri refugee children and training 97 refugee teachers. Little Ripples has been adapted and implemented with Central African refugees in Cameroon and Burundian refugees in Tanzania – training 51 teachers and reaching more than 7000 children. In 2019, iACT is launching Little Ripples in Greece and, moving forward, iACT will explore new partnerships in other crisis contexts.

iACT will continue to work with experts in early learning to ensure the Little Ripples curriculum incorporates the most up-to-date approaches, and will continue documenting its positive impact to demonstrate to donors, humanitarian agencies and field practitioners the need to support, test and document further innovative early learning initiatives with young children in emergency and protracted refugee contexts.

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