

Playful Parenting during COVID-19: Expanding playful learning strategies in Brazil, Ethiopia, Honduras, and Uganda

Overview

ChildFund International (ChildFund), supported by the LEGO Foundation, implemented a multi-country project in Brazil, Ethiopia, Honduras and Uganda from March 2022 to August 2023. The four countries delivered remote and in-person strategies and activities aiming to strengthen playful parenting practices (including a focus on socioemotional learning) and COVID-19 prevention and management. The project is based on ChildFund Guatemala's successfully completed Come Play with Me project implemented in 2020.

The main activity implemented by each country was the radio theater series “We Play and Learn as a Family”, an intervention designed in Guatemala in 2020 to bring playful parenting messages to caregivers during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. The series consists of 30 three-minute-long “spots”, where three families interact and provide practical advice on how to engage in a playful way with their children while doing household chores and daily activities. The 30 spots are divided into six groups of five with specific messages for Covid-19 (spots 1-5), nurturing care (spots 6-10), cognitive learning (spots 11-15), motor skills (spots 16-20), language (spots 21 – 25) and socioemotional development (spots 26 - 30).

Each country complemented the spots with different activities according to their own context. These activities include:

Brazil	Ethiopia	Honduras	Uganda
85 printed and digital materials were produced including comics, puzzles, children’s books, GIFs and web cards.	30 flashcards with key images related to the spots’ key messages; five child-friendly spaces available for emergency assistance for internal displaced people in Northern Ethiopia.	26 storybooks for ages 0-6 years, 11 audio storybooks turned into songs, three how-to-read videos, booklets on home games and COVID-19 prevention and response, and four testimonial videos.	Play and learning materials including educative short stories, action songs, puzzles, and riddles for children 3-8 years.

The radio spots were broadcast three times a week for three months, through commercial and local radio stations, megaphones, listenership sessions, WhatsApp, YouTube and Spotify, depending on the context in each country.

Buy In

Thirty local organizations in the four countries adopted the intervention and exhibited commitment by allocating funds and incorporating project activities into their ongoing early childhood development programs. These kinds of engagement with government institutions and departments enabled local support and ownership of the project.

In Brazil, the project supported a positive parenting and right-to-play law, which was approved by the Chamber of Deputies and is waiting for the final approval by the Senate. This law will provide the legal backing for state governments to officially adopt the resources created by the project.

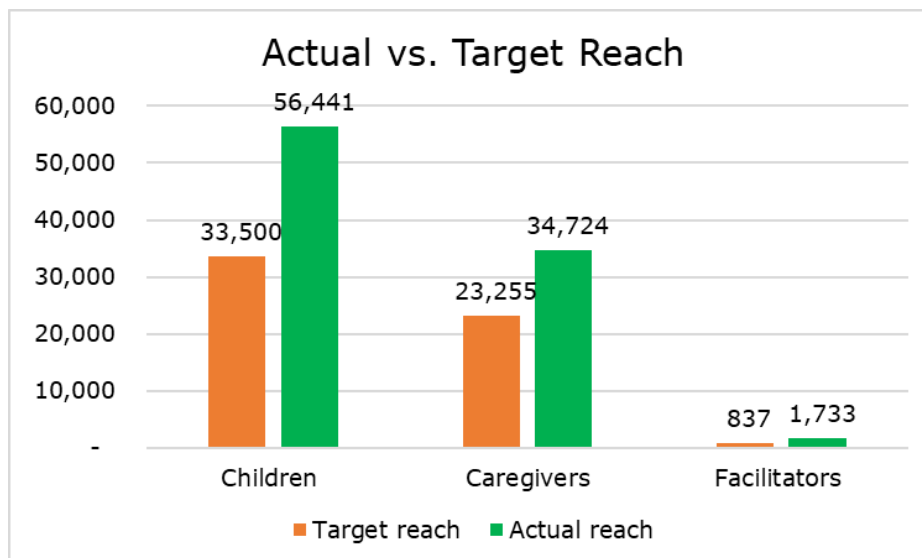
The intervention in Honduras is supported by the government to be used in remote communities under the signature of a Memorandum of Understanding, which is under final review.

ChildFund Ethiopia gained the support of the State Minister of the Ministry of Women and Social Affairs, regional representatives, local partners and media companies. This allowed local implementing partners to raise additional project funds (USD 20,000) and to negotiate for reduced airtime costs for broadcasting on the radio.

In Uganda, the local partner worked with the National Curriculum Development Centre to develop several play and learning materials like educative short stories, action songs, puzzles, and riddles for children 3-8 years. The project also worked with the Education Department from the three project districts to review and contextualize the 25 original radio theatre spots.

Project Reach

Estimating the overall reach of the program through the radio spots is difficult since many of the radio stations do not accurately track their listenership. However, the program was able to measure the following in terms of participants:



ChildFund and its local implementing partners in each country conducted baseline and endline data collection for the outcome evaluation. This high-level summary includes a sample of the project outcomes for caregivers reached through the radio spots. These include descriptive, 12-week changes over time (between baseline and endline) in the caregivers’ knowledge, attitudes and practices on key outcomes.

Brazil	Ethiopia	Honduras	Uganda
10% growth in the understanding that children learn best through play.	30% growth in the understanding that children learn best through play.	20% growth in the understanding that children learn best through play.	13% growth in the understanding that children learn best through play.
10% increase in the understanding that children start to learn before birth.	50% growth in the understanding that children start to learn before birth.	50% growth in the understanding that children start to learn before birth.	26% growth in the understanding that children start to learn before birth.
10% increase in the understanding that children who are spanked and disciplined do <u>not</u> grow up to be more obedient (than those who are not).	Twofold increase in the number of early stimulation (playful parenting activities) they engaged in with their child.	6% increase in the understanding that children who are spanked and disciplined do <u>not</u> grow up to be more obedient (than those who are not).	Twofold increase in the number of early stimulation (playful parenting activities) they engaged in with their child.

Challenges and Lessons Learned

Partnerships

Involving government ministries, departments, and officials at national and regional levels at the beginning of the project created a strong relationship and linkage with other partner organizations, and with structures to share project learnings, advocate for better government support, avoid duplication of activities and complement project activities and needs.

ChildFund country offices partnered with active and experienced local implementing partners who had knowledge about the community contexts, had linkages with leadership and community structures, and had established offices and trained staff to implement the project effectively.

Delivery

Country offices faced various challenges during the project's implementation. Operating in a post-COVID-19 environment, budget restraints, limited capacity for data collection and rural radio station access were just a few that had to be confronted.

The cost of production for flashcards was slightly higher than estimated, and country offices had to identify ways to save on other project activities to make up for the cost.

The project was implemented post-COVID with many people and children going back to their previous routines, i.e., work or school, leaving limited time to sit down and listen to the radio. In other cases, such as in Brazil, participation in face-to-face activities, especially in suburban locations, was very low. Other locations in Brazil that were remote and distant, or in the mountains, had poor radio frequency access. According to the Conatal, a national telecommunications company in Honduras, only 21% of population there even listen to the radio. Television broadcasting and social media platforms have the largest audience and coverage. In Uganda, it was harder to implement the remote modality because many caregivers did not have access to radio devices, and in some locations the radio frequency was very poor.

Ethiopia experienced further challenges including broadcasting delays due to power disruptions and fluctuating prices, and security concerns in some locations that affected monitoring activities. Renovating child-friendly spaces was also difficult in some cases because construction materials were scarce in the market.

Monitoring

In each country context, some radio stations had limited capacity to collect broadcasting data, making it hard to monitor listenership and calculate reach. In Brazil, the project did not have a budget to support routine monitoring of project activities and personnel, which increased the workload for staff (both ChildFund and Partners) who could barely afford to conduct the numerous data quality checks on the databases prior to reporting. ChildFund Brazil and its implementing partners solicited support from part-time volunteers and interns to conduct data entry at the field level.

Learning Hubs

The International Office coordinated four learning webinars on key thematic areas including adaptation and contextualization of the radio spots' scripts; M&E for remote interventions; advocacy strategies promoting playful parenting through remote modalities; and sharing evidence, challenges and opportunities. The four webinars were held in June, September, and December 2022, and May 2023. The last webinar was organized together with the ECD Action Network (ECDAN) and the Global Initiative to Support Parents (GISP).

The webinars attracted participation of external presenters from Global Parenting Initiatives from the United Kingdom, GC Genera Consulting Firm in Mexico, Fana Broadcasting Corporate in Ethiopia, ECDAN network in the United States, The LEGO Foundation, Results for Development in the United States, and the World Bank. A total of 441 people attended the webinars including representatives from ChildFund national offices, the ChildFund Alliance organization, local implementing partners, civil society and non-government organizations, donor agencies (like UNICEF and World Bank) among others. The webinars were used as an avenue to share project results, experiences, and learnings amongst different stakeholders.