

Please Remember Us: iACT's Little Ripples helping refugee families during the pandemic

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During the unprecedented global crisis created by the spread of the COVID-19 virus, people across the world have been coming together to help children understand the many questions that emerged during self-isolation. Children question why they can't play with their friends, why they can't visit with family, why they can't play in their neighborhood park, and why they can't go to school. These "Why can't I" questions are difficult to address with children, and adults struggle to find child-friendly ways to explain the need to live indoors and remain physically isolated from others and from the outside world.

Many organizations (including ECDAN, INEE, UNESCO, and UNICEF) are doing amazing work to compile resources for adults to draw upon to support their children's learning at home, lead indoor activities, and explain COVID-19 to children. In addition, apps are available that allow family and friends to socialize while still maintaining the important physical distancing that health officials recommend to prevent the spread of highly contagious diseases like COVID-19.

This pandemic also illuminated the inequities between and among communities. One such affected community includes the camps and detention centers that house millions of refugee and displaced persons. Refugee communities are some of the most vulnerable communities to a virus outbreak, especially those in protracted emergency settings and isolated regions of the world. While we struggle to come to terms with what is happening in our own communities, these vulnerable communities have been virtually forgotten as they are not being included in mainstream messaging and responses.

Before the global pandemic, children and their families living in refugee camps were already living in precarious circumstances due to limited safety networks, major challenges with food security and access to clean water, and unforeseen eruptions of violence. COVID-19 placed additional stresses on refugee communities, best exemplified by slow and uncoordinated communication with them; thus, children and their families are further isolated within a sphere of an already isolated vulnerable group.

iACT's Reponse

Children have a right to access information, "especially those aimed at the promotion of his or her social, spiritual and moral well-being and physical and

Educators Responding to the COVID-19 Pandemic

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mental health.”¹ Thus, as refugees (both children and adults) struggle to make sense of this pandemic with very few to no resources, iACT, an international nonprofit organization that provides humanitarian action to aid, empower, and extend hope to those affected by mass atrocities, is working with refugee leaders, other humanitarian organizations, and volunteers to provide the necessary resources to help refugee children and families stay safe and healthy.

UNESCO² outlines a number of detrimental outcomes as a result of school closures, which include, but are not limited to, “interrupted learning, [loss of] nutrition, parents unprepared for distance and home schooling, and social isolation.” While the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated suspension of iACT’s innovative and cutting-edge early childhood education program Little Ripples (LR), iACT is nevertheless honoring LR’s core values of peace, helping, and sharing by working with refugee and displaced community leaders living in Chad, Tanzania, Cameroon, and Greece to mitigate the consequences of program closures. Together, they are preparing and distributing accessible learning-at-home resource sheets for families, as well as the larger refugee community.

In partnership with community leaders and experts in public health, epidemiology, and community organizations, they have co-created resources that build on iACT’s LR teacher training and children’s programming. The resource sheet, “Coronavirus (COVID-19) Stay Safe at Home,” available in Arabic, Burmese, English, French, Farsi, Karenic, Kirundi, Kurmanji, Sorani, and Swahili languages, outlines how families can extend and build on what children have learned and experienced in their LR early learning program in the home environment. It is an especially useful resource for isolated and

disconnected families who do not have the ability to connect to the abundance of digital resources that are available online.

During the LR teacher training, the primary responsibilities of the teacher are continuously emphasized through one simple reminder—provide an emotionally and physically safe environment and have fun. If these fundamentals are in place, the children will learn. In creating a guide for parents and caregivers to support their children at home during a global pandemic, iACT emphasized these principles—be safe, laugh, and play, and your children will learn what they need to at this time.

The LR program is planned and implemented by teachers and cooks and supported by a camp coordinator and an education director. All program staff received essential health and hygiene training, which has always included hand washing and coughing and sneezing into the elbow or sleeve. The LR training and extended health, hygiene, and food safety training for project coordinators and cooks have positioned these women and men as leaders in a community-based response to COVID-19. These refugee community members, in collaboration with the coaches from iACT’s Refugees United Soccer Academy, distribute important information to the children and families, as well as other community members.

The LR children’s program is based on four fundamental program components:

- Establishing a routine
- Building inner peace and outer peace within the learning environment
- Storytelling
- Health and well-being.



The aim was to create a COVID-19 resource sheet for families outlining home-based activities that relate to these components—thus, ensuring familiarity with the suggestions. The following describes how LR’s fundamental programming ideas connect with home learning and well-being activities.

Establishing a Routine

The importance of maintaining a routine for children is well established in the research and is stressed in the LR teacher training program. iACT outlines an example of a routine that children in LR programs are familiar with and encourages families to maintain such a routine at home:

To make a safe and happy home environment, create a daily routine that includes:

- **Repeated Activities:** Start and end your day with the same activity, like a song or mindfulness activity.
- **Singing:** Sing songs that are fun for children and adults. Add dance or music to your song.
- **Storytelling:** Different household members can share stories. Ask the children to tell you a story, real or imagined.
- **Learning:** Ask children to teach you something they have learned at school in the past. Have young children help you count and name objects in the home. Ask them the colors of things. Talk, talk, talk with them. Children learn from listening to and participating in conversations.
- **Play:** Encourage them to laugh and have fun within the home environment.
- **Mindfulness:** Practice fun mindfulness activities.



Inner and Outer Peace

During times of uncertainty, children and their families are under extreme levels of stress. Children can connect with their feelings and learn wellness strategies for managing stress by engaging in mindfulness practices and mindful movements (based on yoga practice). Through learning and practicing mindful movements in the LR program, children acknowledge and regulate their reactions when overwhelmed by emotions. Families are encouraged to engage in these practices to continue to foster both children’s (and their own) inner peace and to create outer peace in their home environments. Falling Rain is an example of a mindful activity shared with families.

Falling Rain

- Sit in a comfortable upright position.
- Lift your hands up into the air and then using hands/fingers to show raindrops falling slowly to the ground, pat your legs or the ground.
- Practice:
What slow, light rain feels/sounds like.
What heavy rain feels like/sounds like.
- Let the sounds rise and fall as a group and then slow it to a “pat, pat, pat” sound, eventually stopping.
- Sit quietly and notice how you feel.

Storytelling

To promote a home literacy environment, families are encouraged to engage in oral storytelling with their children. Sharing of traditions and stories across generations help realize a child’s right to their cultural identity, language, and values. Families are asked to encourage their children’s participation by sharing stories, whether real or imagined.

Health and Well-Being

Children in the LR program are aware of and come to understand the practice of proper hand washing. Families are reminded to ensure that their children wash their hands regularly and to think of songs they can sing during this task. Continued support for hand washing is provided by iACT through the purchase and/or manufacturing of soap and water containers so that the community can protect themselves from viruses, such as COVID-19. In class, children also come to learn the importance of coughing and sneezing into their bent elbow. Parents are reminded of this practice and urged to ensure that children continue to practice this health strategy. To encourage physical distancing, iACT has recommended placing a hand over one’s heart in place of a hug or handshake. This symbolic gesture has been taken up by the children.

Nutrition is key to a child’s healthy development.

Unfortunately, food rations have been severely affected by the pandemic. For various reasons, refugees in eastern Chad have reported that some of the camps have not received food rations for anywhere between 2 and 10 months. Children in the LR program receive a daily healthy meal, which, for some, is their only source of nutrition. In fact, approximately 700 meals per week are served in the LR program. During the pandemic,



Jean-Baptiste, a member of the Tanzania team, shared the following message:

“Hello everyone. How are y’all doing there? I want to thank every one of you for the best work that you’re doing for your communities. Here in Nduta refugee camp, today has been another very busy day. We successfully visited more than one hundred homes and taught more than seven hundred people according to the family size of each household. The community is continuing to be grateful to iACT for the unselfish support that you’re providing for them. One hundred and fifty copies of iACT fact sheets were distributed to more than one hundred homes and other copies were established on the bulletin boards in the camp. I want to [thank] again coach Daniel for the good work that we’ve done today for our lovely community.”

The LR early learning program has provided children with a safe space for learning through play and for developing tools that promote well-being, which are especially important for children living in emergency contexts. Little Ripples has provided children and their families with a sense of hope for a brighter future. We are reminded by the refugee community members that, with the support of humanitarian organizations such as iACT, they will overcome the COVID-19 crisis.

Notes:

¹ UN General Assembly. (1989). Convention on the Rights of the Child, 20 November 1989, United Nations, Treaty Series, vol. 1577, p. 3. Retrieved from www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6b38f0.html

² UNESCO. (2019). *Adverse consequences of school closures*. Retrieved from <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse/consequences>

iACT continues to provide funding for essential program materials, such as ingredients for daily meals. During the COVID-19 emergency, the local iACT community staff has the decision-making power to use the funds in a way that is right for their local camp. Given the rates of malnourishment among the children, these meals are key for helping them to stay healthy, alert, and motivated to continue practicing what they have learned in their LR program.

We Will Remember: Ongoing Collaborative Efforts to Overcome the COVID-19 Crisis

iACT is committed to supporting community-led efforts to prepare for and respond to emergency situations such as the COVID-19 pandemic in refugee camps and sites around the world. iACT continues to provide monthly salaries for all refugee camp-based staff, even though programs have been suspended. Additionally, iACT is supporting the efforts of LR teachers and soccer academy coaches to share iACT’s COVID-19 resource guides with their community. The organization is raising and sending additional funds for: (1) phone credits so iACT and community leaders can continue to communicate, (2) soap or raw materials to make soap, (3) printing and distributing copies of iACT resources, and (4) any other materials that the local iACT community staff feel are necessary to protect and prepare their community to stay healthy (e.g., cloth face masks).



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