



Play and Resilience

A China-Africa Collaboration Project for Building a Peaceful and Sustainable Future

Rationale

During the first years of life, the brain has the potential to develop at an astounding pace that is never repeated. Children's early experiences literally shape their brain architecture and influence a broad range of skills, attitudes and learning capacities. That's why early childhood care and education, provided in a nurturing and safe environment, sets the foundation for children's future well-being and productivity, particularly for disadvantaged children.

However, more children than ever are forced to live through natural disasters, socio-economic inequities, conflict or acts of terrorism today. While humanitarian response and risk reduction is essential, **resilience** development offers a promising way to help children and families bounce back – not only from emergencies but also from serious life challenges – and thrive on. Early childhood is an important window of time for building resilience by developing positive attitudes, competencies and skills, such as self-regulation, empathy, confidence and responsibility.

Ginsburg and Jablow (2015) call **play** as 'childhood's inborn tool to build resilience'¹. Play, particularly free and explorative play, allows children to try out new and diverse strategies to solve problems and to promote both physical and emotional flexibility through trial and error. The more children play, the more competent they become in controlling over themselves and their environment. In many parts of the world, however, children are not allowed to play freely due to different reasons ranging from inadequate environment to their highly scheduled 'free' time crammed with activities such as homework, sports, music, tutoring, etc. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds face particular obstacles that impede their right to play, and their parents may not have the knowledge, time and resources to engage their children in appropriate and stimulating play.



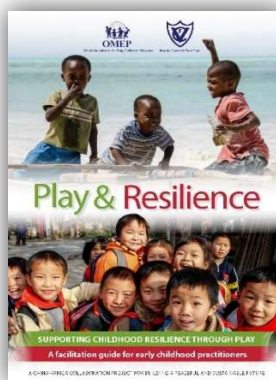
Project Goal and Objectives

Goal: To enhance young children's resilience and potential to contribute to a peaceful and sustainable future

Specific objectives:

- i) **Awareness:** To raise awareness among parents, families and communities as well as policy makers about the importance of early childhood care and education and the value of play in building children's resilience;
- ii) **Tools development:** To develop and disseminate practical and adaptable materials and tools to improve the quality of childcare and learning environment and processes;
- iii) **Capacity development:** To train preschool and nursery administrators, teachers and caregivers in developing and implementing effective curriculum on resilience building through play;
- iv) **Relationship:** To foster sustainable collaborative relationships for children among families, preschools and communities to continue this work beyond the project.

Supporting childhood resilience through play: A facilitation guide for early childhood practitioners



This publication (Pearson, Umayahara and Ndiujye, 2017), available in English and Chinese, provides:

- conceptual clarifications of 'play' and 'resilience' in early childhood.
- an evidence-based overview of current issues and important considerations in planning to incorporate a focus on resilience in play-based approaches.
- practical exercises to support reflection on and preparation for incorporating resilience into early childhood settings using play-based approaches.

¹ Ginsburg, K. R., and Jablow, M. M. (2015). Building resilience in children and teens: Giving kids roots and wings (3rd edition). Elk Grove Village, IL: American Academy of Pediatrics.

China

Context

With the rapid industrialisation and urbanisation, China's left-behind children in rural areas and migrant children in cities emerged as a major social concern. According to the *Research Report on Left-Behind Children and Migrant Children in Urban and Rural Areas of China* published by All China Women's Federation, there are more than 61 million left-behind children in rural China, accounting for 22% of the total number of children in China². Among them, the number of preschool-age children (0 to 5 years of age) reached over 23 million. Another 9.8 million preschool-age children are found in cities where their parents work and they move frequently between different places – they are called 'migrant children'.

Many risk factors such as neglect and inappropriate parenting, poverty or low socioeconomic status, and lack of access to public early childhood education challenge these children's personal safety and physical and psychological health. In recent years, personal safety incidents and suicides among left-behind children have attracted the attention of the Chinese government. A government document, *Opinion on Strengthening the Care and Protection Work for Rural Left-behind Children* has been issued by the State Council in 2016, which proposes to establish a social system for nurturing this group of children.

Focus on resilience provides an interactive conceptual framework for this social system, both by reducing the risk factors and by enhancing children's confidence, connection and control through play.

Target groups

The **city of Hechi in Guangxi province**, which has a high proportion of left-behind children aged 2 to 6 years who rose above the poverty line, is selected for the project. The project will involve some 120 to 160 left-behind children in four counties, two of which have central kindergartens and the other two have village kindergartens or play groups. One of the four counties will be populated mainly with ethnic minority groups.

We also chose an area which is highly populated by migrant workers in **Pudong New Area in Shanghai**. The project will involve about 150 to 200 children enrolled in one private kindergarten and one public kindergarten attended by a large number of migrant children.

The target groups also include the parents, kindergarten teachers, social workers and local educational authorities.

Specific objective

The present project aims at helping children who are experiencing significant stress or adversity, lift their capacity of confidence, connection and control through plays in early years; attracting more attention to children's socio-

emotional development among the guardians, educators, governmental and non-governmental organizations; and providing suggestions for establishing effective public care service system.



Left-behind children cared by grandparents in rural China

Approach

The project takes a quasi-experimental design by screening children's adversity (risk factors) and socio-emotional development and measuring the effect size of the project interventions, such as development of play materials, organization of play activities as well as awareness raising and training of parents, teachers, social workers, etc.

Progress

The baseline assessments were completed for left-behind children in Guangxi and migrant children in Shanghai, using the East Asia Pacific Early Childhood Development Scales and the Devereux Early Childhood Assessment for Preschoolers. They show these children's disadvantages in cognitive development, language and early literacy, and early mathematics as well as socio-emotional development, compared with their non-left-behind and non-migrant peers.

A play-based resilience building intervention programme, consisting of physical plays, drama plays and folk games, has been designed and piloted. A series of picture books and play materials for resilience building are being collected.



Implementation agency

OMEP Chinese National Committee with UNICEF China

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² All China Women's Federation. (2013). *Research Report on Left-Behind Children and Migrant Children in Urban and Rural Areas of China*. Retrieved from <http://acwf.people.com.cn/n/2013/0510/c99013-21437965.html>

Africa

Context

In rural Africa, many parents and families are unaware of the importance of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) and do not send their young children to ECCE centres. Even when they are aware of the benefits of ECCE, the prevailing economic hardships give them few options but leaving their young children with relatives or other adults in the communities. Building resilience in young children in these communities is important so that they can overcome the negative effects of poverty, conflicts, displacement and other calamities happening in their surroundings.

Moreover, the acute shortage of qualified ECCE teachers in schools particularly in rural areas and large classes particularly in urban areas—coupled with poor learning environment and materials—are the main challenges to the quality of ECCE. Strengthening the quality of ECCE teacher preparation is a vital step in promoting quality ECCE; and so are the synergies between schools and teacher education colleges in the development of competent ECCE teachers.



Target groups

The target groups for this project are the preschool teachers and school administrators, Ministry officials and policy makers responsible for ECCE as well as ECCE centres (children, teachers and caregivers, and the managers) and families in **10 selected communities in Nigeria, South Africa and Zimbabwe** that have a number of deprived, disadvantaged and vulnerable children of 0 to 8 years of age.

In **Nigeria**, Numan and Guyuk in Adamawa State and Ohaozara and Onicha in Ebonyi State were selected as a large number of internally displaced people live in some of their areas as a result of the Boko Haram insurgency as well as herdsman and community clashes. Most families are also struggling with poverty as a result of the economy recession in the country. These conditions yield negative impact on children's psychosocial and emotional development, particularly those from rural and conflict-affected areas.

In **South Africa**, the Vhembe District in Limpopo Province has been selected for the project. This province is predominantly rural and has inherited former apartheid homelands. In this province, 76% young children live in poverty. Vhembe is situated in the northern part of Limpopo Province, sharing borders with Zimbabwe in the north, Mozambique in the east and Botswana in the north west. Its population of approximately 1.4 million is the highest in all districts of the

province. It also has the second highest proportion of child-headed households (1.7%) after Mopani (1.8%) and the second highest proportion of female-headed households (52.6%) after Greater Sekhukhune (52.9%).

In **Zimbabwe**, Gokwe District in Midlands Province, Buhera District in Manicaland Province and Tsholoshu District in Matebelel North Province are selected where a high number of deprived, disadvantaged and vulnerable children live with particularly limited access to quality early childhood services.

Specific objective

The main objective of this project is to complement the existing efforts by government and non-government players in the region to help selected communities currently underserved with quality ECCE services by building their human resource capacity and supporting materials production.

Approach

UNESCO collaborates with relevant government offices at the national and local levels in the three countries, so as to complement their existing efforts through capacity development and material production. It will involve policy advocacy to increase awareness on the values of play in developing resilience in children and advocate for establishing safe play areas in communities and all ECCE centres. The project will also ensure knowledge and awareness building among parents, caregivers, child-minders and ECCE practitioners regarding the right to play and the importance of recreation and cultural activities for young children's learning and development.

Progress

The needs and baseline assessments as well as stakeholder sensitization workshops were conducted in the three countries, revealing the need to further raise awareness on the importance of ECCE and play to create a critical mass of trained personnel and families/communities in order to enhance the quality of ECCE. Training of teacher educators, administrators, early years teachers and parents are being conducted while video footage of play activities being collected for the production of a documentary.

Implementation agency

UNESCO International Institute for Capacity Building in Africa (IICBA) coordinates the project implementation in Africa.

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Global Expected Results of the Project

Impact: Young children in disadvantaged communities of rural China and sub-Saharan Africa are developing attitudes, competencies and skills relevant to resilience

Outcomes (behavioural changes)

- i) Parents and families, teachers and care givers as well as policy makers increased awareness and understanding to protect, care and educate their young children, particularly, the value of play on improving children's resilience
- ii) Parents, families, teachers and care givers have increased capacity to facilitate young children's resilience building through play
- iii) Sustainable collaborative relationships for children among families, preschools, communities, local government and non-governmental agencies

Global Strategy – Building the child's inner strengths and outside support

Resilience research points to the importance of building both the child's inner strengths (e.g. self-control, thinking skills, confidence, positive outlook, responsibility and participation) and outside support (e.g. caring relationships, positive role models in families and communities, family and community resources). Therefore, the project will encompass three levels and focus not only on children but also on the agents in their immediate and broader environment:

- The Child: building '7 Crucial Cs' of resilience (Ginsburg and Jablow, 2015) through play
- Micro level (the child's immediate environment): family and community outreach; early childhood teacher capacity development
- Macro level: policy-level advocacy

Dissemination and China-Africa exchange

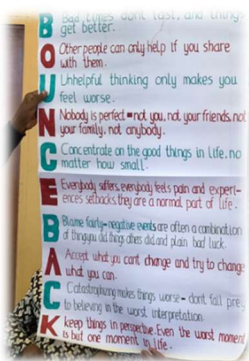
The dissemination of the project and the China-Africa exchange are promoted through OMEP's worldwide network of early childhood education practitioners as well as conferences and workshops, such as the OMEP World Conference, annual Play and Resilience Symposia, peer review meetings between the Chinese and African teams.



Play & Resilience Symposium 2017

In February 2018, UNESCO IICBA hosted a Peer Review Meeting in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, where the project teams from the three African countries and the Chinese team discussed the baseline assessments, the progress and lessons learnt of the project and shared good practices from their countries.

Peer Review Meeting, Addis Ababa



In May 2018, OMEP China hosted a study visit of kindergartens in Shanghai, Zhenjiang (Yangzhong and Jurong) and Anji for the delegates from African countries to observe the play curriculum practices in China and discuss play interventions for the project.



Study visit in China



Project Management

The Play and Resilience World Project was launched in 2016 by the World Organization for Early Childhood Education (OMEP). In 2017, the second phase of this project started with the pilot implementation in China by OMEP China and in Africa by UNESCO, respectively, with funding and overall management support of the Victoria Charitable Trust Fund.

Project management team

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Supported by:



<http://www.worldomep.org/play&resilience>