


- ▶ Many young children from Myanmar's Rohingya community are displaced in Bangladesh.
- ▶ BRAC's Humanitarian Play Lab model promotes healing through culturally rooted play.
- ▶ The Humanitarian Play Lab model could be scaled in other humanitarian contexts.





BRAC

Humanitarian Play Lab: when playing becomes healing

Erum Mariam

Executive Director

Syeda Sazia Zaman

Senior Research Fellow

Sakila Yesmin

Senior Lecturer

Sadaf Huq

Early Childhood

Development Specialist

Sarwat Sarah Sarwar

Advocacy Lead

BRAC Institute
of Educational
Development, Dhaka,
Bangladesh

In August 2017, members of the Rohingya community in Myanmar began to take refuge in the neighbouring country of Bangladesh, fleeing unrest and uncertainty. UNHCR now estimates that 906,572 refugees are in the Bangladeshi town of Cox's Bazar, just over the border from Myanmar, and around 55% are under the age of 18 – including accompanied and unaccompanied children, and many young pregnant women. Severely marginalised, then displaced from their home country, many among this population have faced distress, violence, trauma and sexual abuse.

Immediate reaction to this large-scale humanitarian crisis has been to provide emergency support to meet basic physical needs: food and water, hygiene and sanitation. But the children of this community also face serious issues related to psychological distress, vulnerability and trauma. It is critical to protect their fundamental rights. Child-friendly spaces were created within the camps, where children could feel protected and activities incorporating elements of play and healing could be implemented.

Fostering healing through play

Within these spaces, BRAC has implemented its Humanitarian Play Lab (HPL) model. BRAC has been collaborating with the LEGO Foundation since 2015 to promote play as a learning tool in Bangladesh through the development of this model. Play is integral to children meeting their key developmental milestones in their early years. The BRAC Play Lab model incorporates play-based learning in all aspects of its curriculum and is implemented in more than 300 play spaces across the capital city of Dhaka.

‘The model incorporates play-based learning in all aspects of its curriculum.’

The BRAC HPL model is a contextualised adaptation of the BRAC Play Lab model, designed to ensure that vulnerable children aged 2–6 years are provided with a safe platform for healing through play. Play therapy is a curative tool to address children’s behavioural and psychological issues. Play is the way children learn, develop and understand the world around them. It is therapeutic because it helps children express their feelings. Play is instrumental in keeping children engaged, providing stimulation for cognitive and social-emotional development, developing self-regulation and building resilience.

This is especially important for children in fragile settings, where they are exposed to violence and poverty. Play helps such children better manage possible trauma caused by their experiences. By adapting the model to the highly contextualised settings in the Rohingya community, BRAC seeks to provide healing through play for Rohingya children, in a way that improves on traditional approaches to early childhood development, child protection and psychosocial well-being in humanitarian settings. The HPL model is designed to:

- build resilience in children in fragile settings through a focus on early childhood stimulus and the development of self-regulation
- nurture spontaneity through engagement in a culturally relevant play-based curriculum that encourages language, cognitive, motor, and socio-emotional development
- foster a sense of community among displaced peoples by creating a supportive environment for mothers and children, using traditional games, rhymes and activities.

In addition to the HPL model, BRAC has been testing out a home-based early stimulation model for pregnant women and mothers with children aged up to 2 years. Mothers are counselled on various issues related to childcare, maternal mental health, play, and parent–child relationships.

The HPL integrates culture with play

Initial surveys and focus group discussions within the camps revealed that traditions and cultural norms played a strong role in the everyday lives of Rohingya community members. These conversations became a journey of cultural discoveries. Through extensive research, it was discovered that the community believed in collectivism, with practices, stories and rhymes being intergenerational. Three major cultural aspects were identified that could play a great part in healing:

- Folk rhymes (*Kabbiya*) of the Rohingya people play an essential role in children's lives. Community members feel that the words tap into the primal core of the children, and they respond enthusiastically to the rhythm.
- Traditional games and physical play activities brought out the element of spontaneity and joyfulness within the children. These games are usually very detailed, each with its own set of rules and regulations.
- Arts and crafts brought an element of nostalgia for the old home. Culturally significant artwork, floral patterns and motifs gave these displaced children the feeling that home is never far away.

As retaining their identity is a crucial aspect of healing for the Rohingya community, it was essential to integrate cultural and traditional practices in the HPL model through tailored activities and spaces.

The BRAC Humanitarian Play Lab Model is an iterative process, and steps are currently being taken to mould the model further according to community and societal needs. A core BRAC HPL team has been created to oversee all aspects of the project. The curriculum team identifies and incorporates cultural elements that address the key components of healing and play. The research and monitoring group focuses on conducting evaluative research and monitoring in order to assess the impact of the model on displaced children of the Rohingya community.

The research team has validated and implemented evaluative tools to test psychological distress (CORE 10), as well as a Child and Youth Resilience Measure (CYRM-12). With regard to CYRM-12, the tool has completed its evaluation of adolescents, and evaluative studies will soon be conducted on children. As for socio-emotional development, the project is using the Ages and Stages Questionnaires ASQ-3 and ASQ: SE on an ongoing basis. A playfulness scale is also being used to assess the playfulness level of children, and the Fidelity Tool (a Play Lab observation checklist) is being used to assess the quality of the outreach workers.

Currently, the research and monitoring team is taking steps to validate and implement the WIPPSI (Wechsler Preschool and Primary Scale of Intelligence), KAP (Knowledge, Attitude and Practices) and Bayley tools for impact evaluation on beneficiaries. It is clear, from initial positive results with the children involved in the HPL model, as well as from the increasing focus on the model by large-scale donor organisations, that the model has the potential to be contextualised and scaled in different humanitarian contexts.

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