

Teaching and Learning in Fragile Contexts (TLFC)

Policy Brief



Playful Parenting for Early Learning in Crisis Contexts:

Harnessing Policy Options from Uganda's Refugee Response

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Executive summary

Children in refugee and host communities experience difficulties in accessing early learning, largely due to a transient life and unstable household conditions. Schools operate with crowded classrooms, limited resources, insecure storage, including manpower, and irregular financing. Many caregivers have little formal education, coupled with limited guidance on early learning. These conditions reduce practice time for literacy, numeracy, school routines, and social skills. The Refugee Early Learning and Playful Parenting (RELAP) study tested a practical response in the Palabek Refugee Settlement and a neighboring host community in Lamwo District, Uganda. The intervention linked school activities with guided play at home. Parents attended ten weekly sessions led by six local facilitators. Sessions covered letters, sounds, counting, number recognition, storytelling, drawing, songs, movement, positive interaction, and simple home practice. Materials reflected local languages, objects, names, and family experiences.

The study enrolled 207 parent-child dyads at baseline and reached 145 at endline. Results support the feasibility of a structured, school-home, parent-led, *play-based early learning model*. For children aged 3 to 6 years, adjusted predicted emergent numeracy scores rose from 48.0% to 58.8%. Emergent literacy scores rose from 33.9% to 39.0%. Among older children, the median Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) composite score rose from 9.5% to 19%, although letter sounds, decoding, oral reading, and comprehension remained weak. The mean overall Early Grade Mathematics Assessment (EGMA) score rose from 60.96% to 160.37%. Number identification also improved significantly. Caregiver outcomes also improved, especially regarding learning-through-play attitudes, home learning activities, and play practices. Home learning activities recorded the largest relative gain. Caregiver education was not associated with emergent numeracy or literacy scores. This finding supports the use of demonstration-based approaches to enable parents with limited literacy to promote early learning through play at home. Participant accounts also described improved parent-child relationships, less fear, more communication, shared laughter, fun, and greater confidence among children.

The evidence also identifies limits. Thirty percent of enrolled dyads were lost to follow-up, mainly because of relocation and distant farm work. The intervention period was short and had no comparison group. Findings, therefore, show feasibility and promising change, rather than definitive proof of impact. Scale-up should maintain the low-cost, local, and practical model while strengthening teacher mentorship and coaching, integrated parental support, safe learning spaces, nutrition, regular financing, and longer-term evaluation.

Policy action should integrate guided play within early childhood education, refugee programming, and parental engagement plans. The Ministry of Education and Sports,

Office of the Prime Minister, districts, schools, and partners should support a minimum package including trained facilitators, parental education, short home-play activities, local-language demonstrations, inclusive/localized materials, feeding, safe space, and regular monitoring.

Policy message

A low-cost school-home model is feasible in refugee and host communities. Scale-up requires trained facilitators, practical parental support, inclusive/localized materials, safe space, nutrition, public financing, and stronger evaluation.

Context

The Palabek Refugee Settlement and surrounding host communities serve young children whose early learning is shaped by displacement, poverty, mobility, language diversity, and weak access to pre-primary education services. The report notes limited access to culturally relevant early learning materials and low levels of parent participation in early childhood education. At baseline, 46.9% of caregivers had primary education, and 34.3% had no formal education. The settlement school recorded a higher proportion of caregivers with no formal education than the host-community school. Families also faced food insecurity, seasonal farm work, illness, and relocation. Schools reported large numbers, small classrooms, limited preparation time, insecure storage, irregular funding, and material shortages. These pressures reduce regular attendance and limit individual support. Yet families hold practical knowledge, local materials, stories, songs, and daily routines that could support home-based learning. The RELAP study treated parents as learning partners. The model linked school instruction with short, guided activities at home and used familiar objects, local languages, play, movement, and positive interaction to encourage play-based learning.

Research methodology

The study used an action research design with quantitative and qualitative methods. Quantitative work combined baseline assessment with a pre-post quasi-experimental design. Baseline data collection took place from August to October 2025. The ten-session intervention ran from December 2025 to March 2026, with interruptions during Christmas and the election periods.

Endline data collection took place in April and May 2026. The study covered one Nursery and Primary School in the refugee settlement, one Nursery and Primary School in the host community, and nearby households. At baseline, 207 parent-child dyads enrolled. At endline, 145 dyads were reached, equal to 70% retention. Refugee mobility and distant farm work demands explained most attrition. Children aged 3 to 6 years completed an early childhood assessment covering emergent literacy, numeracy, socio-emotional skills, executive function, and motor skills. Older children (7+ years) completed the EGRA and EGMA. Caregivers completed surveys on learning-through-play attitudes, home learning activities, and play practices. Focus group discussions, interviews, and observations gathered views from parents, teachers, school leaders, community actors, and facilitators.

Quantitative analysis used descriptive statistics, paired tests, and mixed-effects regression adjusted for age, sex, school, caregiver education, and selected sensory difficulties. Qualitative data underwent thematic analysis. Ethical approval was provided by Makerere University School of Social Sciences Research and Ethics Committee and the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology.

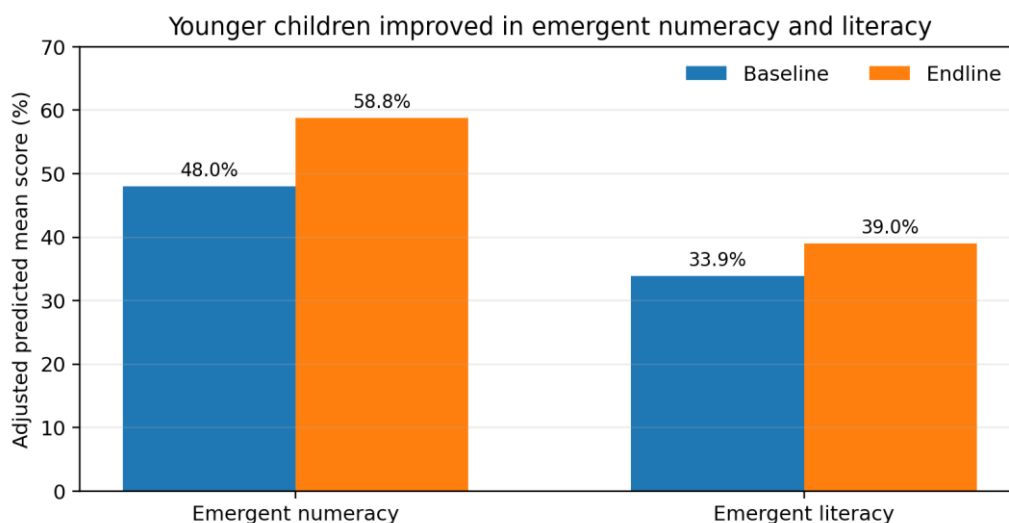
Key findings

The combined results show promising gains in early learning and caregiver engagement. The strongest pattern is repeated practice across school and home. Children met the same skills through movement, interactions, objects, stories, songs, drawing, sand writing, and short games, etc. Parents received demonstrations, practised with facilitators, and repeated activities with children at home.

1. Early numeracy showed the clearest gains

Learning gains were strongest in numeracy. Among younger children, the median emergent numeracy composite score rose from 14 to 18. Adjusted predicted mean scores rose by 10.8% percentage points, from 48.0% to 58.8%. Shape identification, sorting, one-to-one correspondence, number identification, and puzzle completion improved. Among older children, the mean overall mathematics score rose from 60.96% to 160.37%. Number identification improved significantly. These results fit participant accounts of counting while jumping, sorting household objects, and working with sticks, stones, bottle tops, and other local materials.

Figure 1. Adjusted predicted mean emergent numeracy and literacy scores for children aged 3 to 6 years



Source: RELAP endline report, 2026.

2. Literacy improved, but foundational reading gaps persisted

Literacy improved, although foundational gaps remained. The median emergent literacy composite score rose from 17% to 20%, while adjusted predicted means rose from 33.9% to 39.0%. Vocabulary, emergent writing, letter identification, and comprehension improved, but print awareness declined, and first-letter sound scores remained low. For older children, the reading composite average doubled from 9.5% to 19%, driven mainly by letter-name knowledge. Letter sounds, segmenting, decoding, oral reading, and comprehension remained near zero for many children. The short implementation period was insufficient for a full phonics sequence. Future delivery would require sustained phonological awareness, letter-sound instruction, decoding practice, and supported reading.

"The teachers told us to practise writing in the air, in the sand, or use the book. For my children and me, we practiced all, and it makes us laugh."
Parent focus group, mother

Table 1. Selected baseline and endline results for older children

Selected outcome for children aged 7+	Baseline	Endline	Interpretation
EGRA composite, median	9.5	19.0	Overall reading improved, mainly through letter-name knowledge
Letter-name knowledge, median	17.5	23.5	Clear gain in letter-name recognition
Overall EGMA score, mean	60.96	160.37	Significant improvement, $p < 0.001$
Number identification, mean	8.32	10.74	Significant improvement, $p = 0.028$

Source: RELAP endline report, 2026.

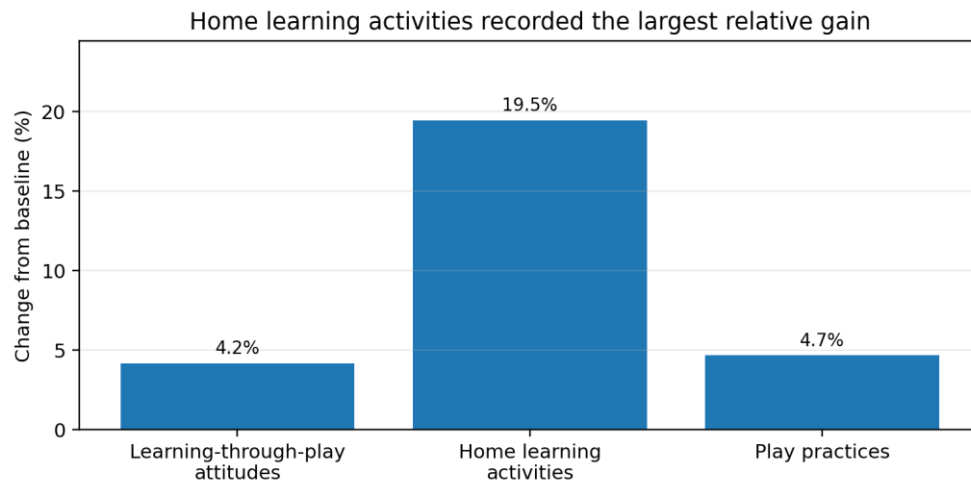
3. Parents increased learning activities at home

"We even learned how to count and tell the numbers together with my children. For me now, I check my child's book when he comes back home."
Parent focus group, father

Caregiver practice changed. Mean learning-through-play attitude scores rose from 64.7% to 67.4%. Home learning activities rose from 5.6% to 6.69%, the largest relative gain. Play practices rose from 25.7% to 26.9%. All three changes were statistically significant. Parents described writing in the sand and air, checking exercise books, counting with children, and using songs and stories. Adjusted models found no association between caregiver education and younger children's literacy or numeracy scores. Accessible demonstrations and low-reading-demand materials,

therefore, offer a workable route for families with limited formal education to support home-based learning through play.

Figure 2. Relative change in caregiver learning-through-play outcomes.



Source: Calculated from baseline and endline means reported in the RELAP endline report, 2026.

4. Shared play strengthened relationships and school readiness

Parents and educators reported social and relational gains. Shared play increased communication, affection, confidence, cooperation, sharing, and problem-solving among children. Parents described children becoming less fearful and more willing to speak and learn with adults. Teachers linked school readiness with predictable routines, including arrival, morning circle, toilet etiquette, outdoor play, snack time, free choice, clean-up, and transition to classwork. Direct evidence on resilience was limited, but participant accounts identified related dimensions such as persistence, help-seeking, confidence, and supportive adult relationships.

"They do not fear me anymore; we laugh and sing together. The programme should not stop."
Parent focus group, mother

5. Delivery conditions shaped results

Feasibility depended on system conditions. Enablers included trained facilitators, school-based coaching, parent sensitisation, local councils, school management committees, parent-teacher structures, local-language support, safe local materials, inclusive routines, and nutrition. Barriers included large learner numbers, small classrooms, teacher workload, insecure storage, irregular financing, household poverty, farming seasons, unsafe play materials collection sites, and frequent relocation (refugee mobility). Hearing and visual difficulties were associated with lower emergent literacy scores. Scale-up, therefore, needs disability-sensitive assessment, adapted materials, small-group support, feeding, attendance follow-up, and secure resources.

Table 2. Enabling conditions, barriers, and policy responses

System issue	Evidence from Palabek	Priority response
Teacher support	Training, coaching, joint planning, and supervision supported use of play.	Maintain school-based professional development, peer observation, and protected preparation time.
Parent participation	Farm work, food searches, illness, and community events reduced attendance.	Use short demonstrations, flexible schedules, telephone follow-up, and parent champions.
Materials and space	Local materials helped, but rooms were crowded and storage was insecure.	Provide safe material kits, learning stations, outdoor schedules, lockable storage, and inventories.
Inclusion	Local language and close support improved participation. Sensory difficulties reduced literacy scores.	Screen learning needs, adapt materials, use visual instructions, and organise small-group support.
Basic needs and financing	Food insecurity, delayed funding, and weak infrastructure affected attendance and delivery.	Link learning with feeding, attendance follow-up, safeguarding, and predictable public finance.

Source: RELAP endline report, 2026.

Evidence limits

The intervention lasted ten sessions, faced interruptions, and had no comparison group. Endline retention was 70%. Quantitative change and participant accounts support feasibility and promising outcomes, but do not establish long-term impact or causality.

Key recommendations

- 1. Embed school-home playful learning.** MoES, OPM, and districts should include guided play in early childhood and refugee education plans. Link classroom skills with short home activities using movement, songs, stories, and familiar objects, etc.
- 2. Equip parents through demonstration.** Schools and partners should provide local-language demonstrations and simple activity cards requiring little reading. Schedule sessions outside peak farming periods and repeat messages through meetings, telephone calls, and community structures.
- 3. Strengthen teacher and school support.** Provide regular mentorship and coaching, peer observation, planning time, rotating learning stations, inclusive adaptations, outdoor learning, reusable class kits, and lockable storage.
- 4. Fund a minimum early childhood package.** Public financing should cover trained caregivers, safe classrooms, adequate space, learning materials, feeding, supervision, and maintenance. Transition plans should leave resources and monitoring tools with schools and districts.
- 5. Track learning, equity, and implementation.** Monitor literacy, numeracy, attendance, home practice, material access, and participation. Disaggregate results by refugee status, sex, disability, language, age, and intervention exposure. Longer studies should include comparison groups.

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Download the full research report at: <https://code.ngo/tlfcresearch/>.

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