

# BIT Partners Win \$100 Million Grant from MacArthur Foundation

We are delighted to announce that our partners at the International Rescue Committee (IRC) and Sesame Workshop have been selected as the winners of the [MacArthur Foundation's 100&Change Challenge](#), a groundbreaking award providing \$100 million to fund a critical problem facing the world today.

IRC and Sesame Workshop have teamed up to develop the [winning proposal](#), a program that will deliver new *Sesame Street* content to 9.4 million Syrian refugee children in Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, and Syria, bolstering the early childhood development of millions of children caught in the greatest humanitarian crisis of our time. This audacious new project will be the largest early childhood intervention in the history of humanitarian response.

The Behavioral Insights Team (BIT) is joining the team to help address some of the last-mile challenges in adapting early childhood development materials and implementing them through innovative channels. We [wrote more about BIT's role](#) in this exciting partnership earlier this year.



*Sesame Workshop/Ryan Heffernan*

## Supporting millions of Syrian refugee children through early learning and nurturing care

This new initiative will use early childhood education content and socioemotional learning to begin to heal the wounds of a generation of Syrian refugee children torn apart by conflict, persecution, and civil unrest. Many of these children are at risk of exposure to the negative effects of “toxic stress”, a biological condition caused by extreme stressors like exposure to violence, war, and displacement, which disrupts normal child brain development.

For the nearly 3.7 million Syrian children born since this humanitarian conflict began almost 7 years ago, the effects of toxic stress on the developing brain can have lifelong ramifications, such as poorer mental and physical health outcomes, fewer job prospects, and lower life expectancy as adults. These consequences would pose a critical problem for any nation, but one especially devastating for a country ravaged by war that will one day be looking to rebuild on the fragile shoulders of its youngest generation.

Promisingly, research shows that interventions that support and nurture a child, such as early learning

This remarkable project combines IRC's nearly 85-year history of helping refugee communities with Sesame Workshop's decades of evidence-based educational content. Sesame Workshop plans to make 200 episodes of a new local version of *Sesame Street* in both Arabic and Iraqi Kurdish to introduce their developmentally-appropriate content—along with their beloved Muppets—to over 9 million children in Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, and Syria, as well as millions of caregivers who will watch alongside their children.

This early childhood education content will be delivered through mass media channels, such as television and mobile technologies, and through new channels supported by IRC's strong network of schools, community centers, and health clinics. These direct services will target 1.5 million of the most vulnerable Syrian refugee children through home visits and structured curricula.

The program also aims to train 12,000 new home visitors and 6,000 facilitators to deliver high-quality early learning content in these centers, supporting parents to provide nurturing care, giving children a comforting routine through schools and clinics, and allowing children the opportunity to learn through play. These resources combine the broad reach afforded by television and mass media and a depth of impact derived from direct service provision to deliver the highest possible returns on social programming.

Sesame Workshop and the IRC have worked extensively to combine the most cutting-edge research on toxic stress and positive child development with delivery mechanisms that are both intense enough to be impactful and low-cost enough to be scalable. Making such an ambitious program of work a reality will require extensive effort to adapt child development materials to the local context and overcome last-mile challenges in the delivery of new content, including questions relating to human behavior.

This inspiring project has the power to change the lives of millions of Syrian refugee children through early learning materials and play. As the Muppets of *Sesame Street* move into refugee camps and host communities across the Middle East, and into the hearts of young children whose lives up until now have been marred by catastrophe and war, they bring with them an opportunity for education, for friendship, and for healing. And with that, comes hope for a new generation.

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