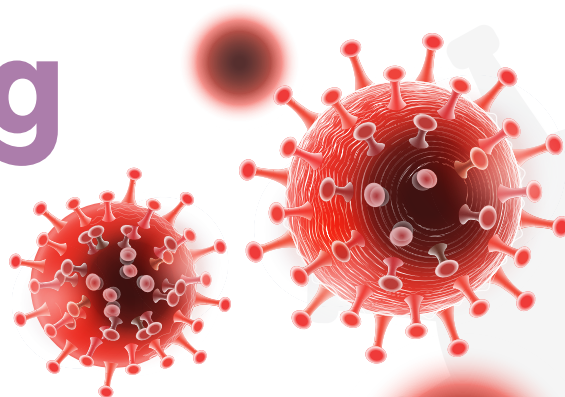


Building Back Better

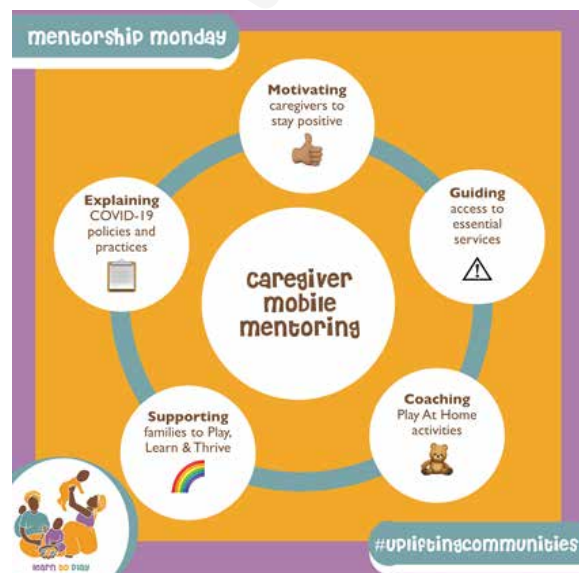


Stories of Hope & Resilience

Keeping children's development on track through play

Inequalities and school readiness gaps are exacerbated by the prolonged closure of early childhood development centres around the world because of COVID-19. While they are not the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, children of all ages, are affected, especially socio-economically, with the most severe impact being felt by the most vulnerable. Supporting and equipping parents and community workers to stimulate playful learning at home can help to keep children's early development on track. It can also contribute to building back better as the knowledge and skills to sustain these positive parent-child interactions remains, even when centres reopen.

In an attempt to curb the spread of the COVID-19 virus Botswana like many countries around the world faced several weeks of hard lockdown. This included the closure of preschools and playgroups across the country.



Since then, some restrictions have been eased and private preschools and early years services allowed to resume provided they are compliant with set COVID-19 protocols. However, government pre-primary programmes and community ECD centres are only set to re-open in August at the earliest.

Learn To Play (Ithute Go Tshameka) an organization based in Botswana serving children in hard to reach communities, used their community based Mamapreneur programme to unlock the potential of home-based support. Recognising the psychosocial challenges facing the families and children, their team quickly jumped into action, "working harder than ever before to meet the needs of the children they serve by adapting their Mamapreneur programme," says founding CEO Priyanka Handa Ram.

Their existing Mamapreneurs programme was modified to include a home-based programme facilitated through a mobile mentoring platform. Through the platform, community workers were able to continue inspiring caregivers and families to engage in playful learning and stimulation to ensure that despite the national lockdown children continued to thrive. The five components of the programme include:

1. Motivate family members and caregivers to stay positive. COVID-19 has disrupted life significantly. Lockdowns and stay-at-home orders that impact on employment, earnings, food security and access to basic services can be overwhelming and stressful. To assist parents with navigating these circumstances, Play to Learn focused on keeping happiness levels high and anxiety low.

2. Guide access to essential services. Empty streets can mean empty plates for many. Before lockdown, Play to Learn made sure their Mamapreneurs replanted their vegetable gardens for winter. Thanks to this advanced planning, they



harvested enough to feed their own families and to share with others in their community. In addition, to boost health and hygiene, the programme included the distribution of essential toiletries, basic household cleaners and assistance with the installation of tippy taps.

This intervention expanded the reach of the government's food hamper scheme that did not include every family.

3. Support families to play, learn and thrive. Through the programme, each family receives a unique play-at-home kit covering the 6 key areas of child development: social and emotional development, fine motor skills, gross motor skills, language and literacy, cognitive and numeracy, fantasy and creative play.

4. Coaching play at home activities. The Play to Learn Mamapreneurs stay in touch with parents of children enrolled in the programme. In their interaction, they coach caregivers on simple play at home ideas helping them to make the best use of the resources shared through the kits to strengthen learning at home. Nearly 200 families around the country benefit from weekly support calls.

5. Explain COVID-19 policies and practices. Accurate, reliable Information on COVID-19 is important to keeping children and families safe. Learn to Play supported the translation and dissemination of parenting support posters for COVID 19 developed by The University of Oxford and University of Cape Town into Setswana. These materials are distributed via their WhatsApp platform to the parenting group.

The development of young children cannot be put on hold until the COVID-19 pandemic is over. We have to find ways of ensuring that no matter what circumstances we face young children receive the nurture and care they need to thrive. Evidence shows that home-based interventions, like the Right to Play's Mamapreneur programme, are associated with promising child outcomes and positive parental behaviour. Together with civil society service providers, government policies and laws such as income support, universal healthcare and cash transfers can provide a pathway to child wellbeing and a resilient early childhood sector.

