

AWYAD's Community-Led Early Childhood Education Approach Transforms Learning for Young Refugee Children

Introduction

Early Childhood Education (ECE) plays a crucial role in laying the foundation for a child's cognitive, social, and emotional development. In refugee contexts, access to quality early learning is often limited, leaving young children at a disadvantage before they even begin primary school. According to recent data, only 42% of refugee children in Uganda have access to ECE, compared to 80% of non-refugee children. Recognizing this gap, African Women and Youth Action for Development (AWYAD) has implemented a Community-Led Early Childhood Education Approach to ensure that refugee children receive the necessary learning opportunities from an early age. This approach has proven to be a transformative model that empowers communities, strengthens local ownership, and fosters inclusive and sustainable education for young children.



Children of Byabakora ECD Centre playing Snakes and ladders as they learn numeracy

Challenges of Early Childhood Education in Refugee Settlements in Uganda
Refugee children face significant barriers to early education, including limited learning facilities, a shortage of trained ECE facilitators and caregivers, financial hardships among parents, language and cultural barriers. Studies show that 65% of refugee households cannot afford early education fees, and 70% of refugee children do not have access to structured preprimary education. To address these challenges, AWYAD's Community-Led Early Childhood

Education Approach provides a locally-driven model that ensures young refugee children access quality education while engaging caregivers, parents, and communities in the learning process. This inclusive approach fosters trained educators, financial support, and culturally responsive learning environments, helping children build strong educational foundations for a brighter future.

The Community-Led Early Childhood Education Approach

AWYAD's approach is centered on community participation, sustainable solutions, and contextually relevant learning. The key components of this approach include:

1. Community-Based Learning Centers

Instead of relying on formal pre-primary schools, AWYAD supports the establishment of community-based learning centers in refugee settlements. As of 2024, AWYAD has supported the creation of 30 such centers, benefiting over 6,000 refugee children. These centers are built using locally available materials, making them cost-effective and sustainable. Community members are actively involved in setting up and maintaining these centers, fostering a sense of ownership and responsibility.

2. Training and Capacity

Building for Caregivers and Volunteer Teachers

AWYAD addresses the shortage of trained early childhood educators by through training of ECE facilitators on various ECE learning approaches.

To date AWYAD has equipped more than 800 (Female-320, Male-480) caregivers and volunteers with essential teaching skills including training on child-centred methodologies, play-based learning, social-emotional development, basic literacy and numeracy, and creating safe, inclusive environments. This ensures that even in resource-limited settings, young children receive quality early education. A case in point is Anna-Mary, a mother of one and a resident of Kyaka II Refugee Settlement, who had no prior experience in teaching but had a deep passion for helping children in her community.

Before AWYAD's intervention, she saw wanted to help but had no skills and feared to help. However, when AWYAD introduced its caregiver training program, Anna-Mary eagerly enrolled, despite initial hesitations about her ability to teach.



Anna-Mary a dedicated ECD Caregiver

Through AWYAD's training sessions, Anna-Mary learned essential early childhood education strategies, including play-based learning techniques, child-friendly teaching methodologies, and the importance of social-emotional development. She quickly gained confidence and began assisting at her local community-led learning centre. After the training Anna-Mary was recruited as an ECE Facilitator at Pivot ECE centre in Sweswe Zone, Kyaka refugee settlement.

Since Anna-Mary started working as an ECE facilitator, her transformation has been remarkable.

Anna-Mary is now a lead facilitator at the centre, overseeing more than 30 children daily. Parents noticed the positive impact of her teaching, as children started recognizing letters, numbers, and improving their social skills. Encouraged by her success, Uweka Anna-Mary now Anna-Mary a dedicated ECD Care Giver/ Facilitator mentors' other caregivers and advocates for increased early childhood education support within the settlement



Children of Pivot ECD Centre enjoying play time at the swings established by AWYAD

3. Culturally Responsive and Inclusive Curriculum

AWYAD's curriculum embraces cultural diversity, ensuring all children feel included and respected in their learning journey. It incorporates mother-tongue instruction to ease the transition into formal education, traditional stories, songs, and games that reflect children's cultural backgrounds, and gender-sensitive teaching practices that promote equal participation.

This culturally responsive approach boosts children's confidence, motivation, and sense of belonging, making learning more engaging and meaningful. By honouring diverse identities, AWYAD fosters an inclusive educational environment where every child, regardless of background or gender, has the opportunity to thrive.

4. Parent and Community Engagement

AWYAD actively involves parents and community members in decision-making, curriculum design, and classroom activities. Regular community meetings, workshops, and parent-child interactive sessions create a collaborative learning atmosphere that reinforces the importance of early education. A total of 5,500 (Female-3,300 Male-2,200) parents have participated in AWYAD's parenting workshops, which emphasize the importance of early education and home-based learning support. More than 80% of parents involved in the program report a Children of Pivot ECD Centre enjoying play time at the swings established by AWYAD better understanding of early childhood education and are now actively supporting their children's learning at home.

5. Use of innovative learning approaches

AWYAD's innovative learning approaches have significantly enhanced primary school readiness for Early Childhood Education (ECE) learners, ensuring they develop the foundational skills necessary for lifelong learning.

Competency-Based Learning (CBL) focuses on skill mastery rather than time spent in class, allowing children to progress at their own pace and ensuring they fully grasp concepts before moving forward. This approach aligns with realworld applications, preparing children for future academic success. Play-Based and Experiential Learning fosters hands-on experiences through role-playing, project-based learning, and STEM activities, enhancing problem-solving, creativity, and teamwork skills.

These engaging methods make learning enjoyable and relatable, helping children retain knowledge effectively. To support children's emotional well-being, Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) is integrated, promoting resilience, communication, and conflict resolution. By nurturing emotional intelligence and empathy, learners gain essential interpersonal skills that ease their transition into formal schooling.

Inquiry-Based and Problem-Based Learning encourages curiosity and independent thinking, enabling young learners to explore real-world problems. This builds critical thinking and research skills, which are crucial for adapting to structured learning environments. AWYAD also champions Inclusive and Accessible Learning, ensuring that all children, including those with disabilities, have equal opportunities through Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles and assistive technology. Furthermore, Sustainability and Green Education introduces environmental responsibility, teaching young learners about climate action and sustainable living, while Collaborative and Peer Learning enhances teamwork, leadership, and adaptability through group projects and knowledge-sharing activities. These holistic, child-centered approaches provide ECE learners with a strong academic and social foundation, ensuring they enter primary school with confidence, essential skills, and a passion for learning.



An ECD Facilitator/Care Giver in Buliti ECD Centre facilitating a playful learning session with children.

Impact of AWYAD's Community-Led Early Childhood Education Approach

1. Increased Enrolment and Attendance

Before the intervention, many refugee children had no access to structured learning before primary school. The establishment of community-led learning centers has resulted in a 70% increase in early childhood education enrolment. Parents are now more willing to send their children to these centers, knowing that they are safe, culturally inclusive, and free of charge. A case in point is Pivot Early Childhood Education (ECE) Centre, a community led ECE centre located in Kyaka II refugee settlement in Sweswe zone, faced significant challenges in providing quality early education. With only 34 children enrolled, the centre struggled with a lack of trained educators, inadequate learning materials, and limited community awareness about the importance of early childhood education. Many families prioritized survival needs over education, and cultural barriers further discouraged enrolment, particularly for girls. To address these challenges, AWYAD introduced a comprehensive early childhood education support program, focusing on; training of parents, caregivers, and community volunteers in child-centered teaching methodologies, play-based learning, social-emotional development, and inclusive education. This significantly improved the quality of teaching at the centre.

Additionally, community sensitization and awareness campaigns to advocate for the importance of early childhood education, addressing cultural misconceptions and financial concerns. The centre also received essential learning resources, instructional materials, and play materials, creating a safe and stimulating environment for children. As a result of AWYAD's interventions, enrolment at Pivot ECE Centre skyrocketed from 34 to 252 children (Boy-144, Girls-108), demonstrating the community's growing confidence in early childhood education.

Parents saw tangible improvements in their children’s learning and social skills, leading to a sustained demand for early education. The number of girls attending also increased, reflecting AWYAD’s success in promoting gender equity in education.



An ECD Facilitator/Care Giver in Buliti ECD Centre facilitating a playful learning session with children.

2. Improved School Readiness and Learning Outcomes

Young children who participate in AWYAD’s early childhood programs develop foundational literacy and numeracy skills, making their transition to primary school smoother. Teachers report that 85% of children from AWYAD-supported centers enter primary school with strong pre-reading and numeracy skills, compared to 45% from non-supported communities. A case in point is Bienverance Kahindo, an eight-year-old girl in Kyaka II Refugee Settlement who had never been exposed to formal learning before AWYAD’s intervention. Her parents, PIVOT Early Childhood Education and Development Centre in Sweswe Zone in Kyaka II refugee settlement struggling with financial hardship had thought their daughter being disabled had no future in education and did not consider early education as a priority for her. When AWYAD introduced the community-led learning centre in her neighbourhood and conducted enrolment campaigns for children left out of school, Kahindo’s mother decided to enrol her. Within few months, Kahindo showed remarkable improvement in her communication skills, social interactions, and basic numeracy.



Bienverance Kahindo of Baby Angel ECD center in the zone of Byabakora reading using the learning and instructional material

She began speaking confidently in both her native language and the local instruction language used in the centre. Her enthusiasm for learning became evident, and her parents, witnessing her transformation, became strong advocates for early education within their community. Today, Kahindo is ready to transition to primary school with a solid foundation that will help her excel in her studies. Her story represents the many children whose futures have been transformed through AWYAD's community-led early childhood education approach.

3. Empowerment of Local Communities

Over the last 3 years AWYAD has trained over 300 caregivers, and centre management committees (Female- 180, Male-120). By training parents, caregivers, and volunteer teachers, AWYAD has empowered communities to take charge of their children's education. Over 75% of AWYAD-trained volunteer teachers continue to engage in ECE activities, creating a sustainable model for education beyond external support.

4. Sustainability and Future Prospects

AWYAD aims to expand this initiative to other refugee settlements in Uganda, scaling up its impact. Future plans include: expanding teacher training programs to reach an additional 1,000 caregivers by 2030; establishing 20 new community-based learning centers, reaching an additional 4,000 children; strengthening partnerships with education stakeholders to integrate community-led early childhood education into national policies; investing in child-friendly infrastructure and learning materials to improve the learning environment.