



Project Report

Safe Start: Community-Based Learning Hubs for Children Affected by Conflict in Northern Uganda

Pilot Implementation Report – Lira District, Uganda

Reporting Period: January – June 2025

Prepared by: Purewish Foundation Uganda.

1. Executive Summary

This report presents the findings and outcomes of a 6-month pilot of the *Safe Start* model in two sub-counties in **Lira District, Northern Uganda**. The model provides **trauma-informed, play-based early childhood learning hubs** to support vulnerable children aged 2–12 affected by conflict, while also strengthening their caregivers and community-based support systems.

Over the pilot period, *Safe Start* reached **300 children** and **100 caregivers**, demonstrating measurable improvement in early learning engagement, emotional and social well-being, and caregiver-child interaction. These results indicate that the model is both impactful and scalable.

2. Background and Rationale

Northern Uganda experienced over two decades of brutal conflict due to the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) insurgency. This left deep scars on families, disrupted community structures, and contributed to cycles of poverty, trauma, and limited access to education—particularly for young children.

The **Safe Start** model was developed in response to critical gaps in **Early Childhood Development in Emergencies (ECDiE)**, especially in areas where formal preschool education is non-existent or inaccessible. The intervention aimed to create safe, supportive environments where children can **learn, play, and heal**, while empowering their caregivers and local youth to participate in the developmental process.

3. Objectives of the Pilot

The primary objectives of the pilot were to:

1. Establish and test **community-based learning hubs** offering trauma-informed, play-based learning.
2. Improve early learning engagement among children aged 2–12.
3. Strengthen caregiver-child interaction through biweekly parenting support sessions.
4. Assess changes in emotional and social well-being among participating children.
5. Test community acceptance, youth-led facilitation, and potential for scale.

4. Project Design and Implementation

4.1 Location and Population Reached

- **Location:** Two sub-counties in Lira District
- **Children Reached:** 300 (ages 2–12)
- **Caregivers Reached:** 100
- **Youth Facilitators Trained:** 10 (7 female, 3 male)

4.2 Program Components

- **Daily Play-Based Sessions:** Held 5 days a week, focusing on cognitive development, social skills, emotional expression, and group interaction.
- **Caregiver Sessions:** Biweekly workshops on positive parenting, play-based learning at home, and child protection.
- **Youth Capacity Building:** Local youth trained in basic ECD facilitation, trauma-sensitive caregiving, and community mobilization.

5. Monitoring and Evaluation

5.1 Methodology

The pilot used both qualitative and quantitative methods to assess progress on three core outcome areas:

1. **Early Learning Engagement**
2. **Caregiver-Child Interaction**
3. **Social and Emotional Well-Being of Children**

5.2 Measurement Tools

- **Pre- and Post-Intervention Surveys** (administered to caregivers)
- **Facilitator Observation Checklists** (adapted from IDELA)
- **Simplified Emotional Behavior Scale** (weekly)
- **Focus Group Discussions** (with caregivers and youth)
- **Attendance Logs** (for consistency and engagement)

6. Results and Outcomes

6.1 Priority Outcome 1: Improved Early Learning Engagement

- 70% of children demonstrated improved focus, language use, and participation in group activities.
- Facilitators reported significant growth in curiosity, creativity, and play-based learning behaviors.

6.2 Priority Outcome 2: Strengthened Caregiver-Child Interaction

- 84% of caregivers reported **greater confidence** in parenting, better communication with their children, and increased use of play at home.
- Caregivers also reported reduced frustration and greater understanding of child development.

6.3 Priority Outcome 3: Enhanced Emotional and Social Well-Being

- Children showed improvements in **emotional expression** (naming feelings, resolving conflicts during play) and **social behavior** (sharing, cooperative play).
- Weekly facilitator logs showed reduction in signs of withdrawal or aggression.

7. Community Feedback and Demand

- The project received **positive feedback** from local leaders, parents, and religious elders.
- As a result, **three additional parishes formally requested** to host future learning hubs.
- Caregivers requested longer sessions and more support materials to use at home.

8. Challenges Encountered

- **Limited space** in some hubs led to overcrowding on certain days.
- Initial **community skepticism** about youth facilitators was overcome with sensitization.
- Logistical issues such as **transport for caregivers** reduced consistent attendance in some areas.

9. Lessons Learned

- **Play-based learning** is effective and well-received even in low-literacy, post-conflict settings.
- **Caregiver inclusion** greatly enhances the impact of early childhood interventions.
- **Youth-led facilitation** builds community trust and generates livelihood opportunities.
- Embedding services in **existing community structures** supports sustainability.

10. Next Steps and Recommendations

1. **Scale to 10 hubs** across three districts over the next 18 months.
2. Introduce a **refined facilitator training manual** and parenting toolkit.
3. Strengthen **referral pathways** to mental health and protection services.
4. Launch a **rigorous external evaluation** to measure long-term learning and wellbeing outcomes.
5. Engage with **local government and district education offices** for potential co-financing.

11. Conclusion

The *Safe Start* pilot has demonstrated clear improvements in early childhood learning, emotional development, and caregiver capacity in Northern Uganda's post-conflict context. Strong community interest, measurable outcomes, and a replicable model position this innovation for wider scale and long-term impact in fragile settings.