

Adolescents and psychosocial support ¹

The activities, tools and guidance in the Adolescent Kit support adolescents to improve their psychosocial wellbeing and to cope with the challenges of humanitarian situations.

Adolescents' psychosocial wellbeing in humanitarian situations

One of the foundations of psychosocial wellbeing is access to basic needs (food, shelter, livelihood, healthcare, education services) together with a sense of security that comes from living in a safe and supportive environment.² Unfortunately this wellbeing is often disrupted in humanitarian crises, causing severe impact to adolescents' psychological and social development.

The disruption, uncertainty and violence associated with humanitarian crises can put considerable psychological and social strain on adolescents. Adolescents may have to cope with the breakdown of their families and communities, take on adult responsibilities before they are ready, and face risks such as recruitment into fighting forces, trafficking, exploitative labour and sexual violence.

While adolescents react to challenging circumstances in different ways, nearly all adolescent girls and boys are likely to demonstrate some initial changes in their behaviour, emotions, thoughts and social relations during a humanitarian crisis. Common responses can include grief, pain, depression, hopelessness, fear, anxiety, worry and guilt. Some adolescents may have trouble concentrating and may feel a sense of detachment, while others may engage in risky behaviours. **This is normal.**

It is important to remember that with some support, most adolescents can recover their psychosocial health and overcome difficult experiences. While some adolescents may have trouble functioning and may require specialized mental health support, most adolescent girls and boys have the ability to cope or 'bounce back' from stressful experiences.

Supporting adolescents' psychosocial wellbeing through the Adolescent Kit

The Adolescent Kit aims to improve adolescents' psychosocial wellbeing in humanitarian situations,

Psychosocial: Refers to the close connection between a person's mind, thoughts, emotions, feelings and behaviours, and their social world - e.g. relationships with family, friends and community.

Psychosocial support refers to actions that address adolescents' psychological and social needs and promote their wellbeing.²

by providing girls and boys with a safe and positive space to learn and have fun, express themselves creatively, and take a break from difficult circumstances. This involves helping adolescents to develop key competencies – knowledge, attitudes and skills, which are critical to addressing their psychosocial needs, and helping them to cope with crisis.

The Adolescent Kit supports adolescents' psychosocial wellbeing by:

- ▶ Helping to establish a sense of structure, routine and support through regular activities;
- ▶ Creating an environment where adolescents feel free to talk about their ideas, interests and concerns, without being pressured to relive difficult experiences or discuss sensitive issues;
- ▶ Helping adolescents to find positive ways to cope with challenges in their lives, solve problems and manage their stress;
- ▶ Encouraging adolescents to support and respect each other, and to make friends, through teambuilding and group activities;
- ▶ Supporting adolescents to build or strengthen positive relationships in their lives, particularly with family and friends;
- ▶ Giving adolescents space to express themselves through art, drawing, singing, dancing, writing, story telling, sports and drama; and
- ▶ Providing adolescents with opportunities to contribute to their communities and take positive actions for themselves and others - for example, through rebuilding homes or supporting humanitarian response efforts.

When working with adolescents in difficult circumstances, it is important to create a positive and welcoming atmosphere where they feel comfortable,

¹ Sources: Actions for the Rights of Children, ARC Resource Pack, Critical Issue Module 7: Psychosocial Support, The International Rescue Committee, Save the Children, Terre des Hommes, The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, UNICEF, New York, 2009; UNICEF, The Psychosocial Care and Protection of Children in Emergencies: Teacher training manual, UNICEF, New York, 2009. UNICEF, Inter-Agency Guide to the Evaluation of Psychosocial Programming in Humanitarian Crises, UNICEF, New York, 2011

² Source: Actions for the Rights of Children, ARC Resource Pack, Critical Issue Module 7: Psychosocial Support, ARC, New York, 2009

and can speak openly about their lives, interests and relationships. However, adolescents should **never** be pushed to discuss painful experiences or sensitive topics if they don't want to. Adolescents' decisions about what they want to share (or not share) should be respected, and discussions and activities should be guided in a **structured** way that protects them (and others) from unnecessary distress or harm.

It is also important to avoid the assumption that adolescents are traumatized – which is a clinical condition that only affects some adolescent girls and boys in humanitarian situations (and is a label that risks stigmatizing them).³

At the same time, adolescents should be observed carefully and referred to specialized support if they show persistent signs of distress or worrying behaviour.

Ultimately, supporting adolescents' psychosocial wellbeing with the Adolescent Kit is about fostering a stable, positive (and fun!) environment where adolescent girls and boys can take part in activities that build their resilience and help them to cope with difficulties in their lives. Encouraging adolescents to engage positively with their families and communities, and to care for themselves and others, are important parts of this effort.

Link to the **Psychosocial support section of Resources** for more information and support in this area.

³ Trauma is a clinical condition that should be diagnosed by a qualified mental health professional. There is debate around the prevalence of trauma in crisis situations; however, it is only thought to affect a percentage of the population. Inter-Agency Standing Committee, Guidelines on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Emergency Settings, IASC, 2007.