

Tool: Talking about sensitive topics



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Provide
structure
and support

An Adolescent Circle is a space where adolescents can discuss and explore topics that interest them. These could include any topics, from sports and entertainment to current events to academic subjects. Adolescents may also raise topics that can be sensitive in some contexts, such as:

- ▶ Romantic relationships, dating and marriage;
- ▶ Gender roles, relations or identities;
- ▶ Sexuality, homosexuality, bisexuality and other sexual identities;
- ▶ Sexual and reproductive health, pregnancy, safe sexual activity, contraception, HIV/AIDS, and other sexually transmitted diseases;
- ▶ Personal experiences of violence, rape, sexual violence and violence associated with armed conflict;
- ▶ Political and social issues, including conflict dynamics and peacebuilding;
- ▶ Religion, ethnicity or other group identities.

It is important that adolescents have a chance to engage in constructive, open discussions about subjects that they wish to raise, even those that may be considered sensitive, inappropriate or uncomfortable in their context.

Programme coordinators should take the following steps to ensure that adolescents can talk about these topics safely and with the support that they need for a constructive, helpful, open discussion that supports their learning and development.

Recognize that adolescents have a right to information about matters that concern them, and ensure that facilitators, programme coordinators, and others in the community understand your shared responsibility to uphold these rights. Article 13 of the CRC states that: The child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice.

Facilitators and programme coordinators should:

- ▶ Highlight children's right to expression with adolescents, steering committees representatives and other community members;
- ▶ Include sessions for adolescents on their right to expression and information, and share information regarding the CRC.

Agree on topics to discuss with adolescents. Work with adolescents, facilitators and steering committee representatives and other community members to agree on the topics that will be explored during sessions, and how they will be addressed.

- ▶ Establish a written agreement with the steering committee that outlines the session topics, and how they will be explored with adolescents
- ▶ Maintain open communication with programme stakeholders and program coordinators about topics discussed during sessions once they are underway (in line with privacy agreements and with adolescents' permission). Maintaining transparency can help to prevent any suspicion or misunderstanding.
- ▶ Organize a constructive conversation between adolescents and adults if they have different views about topics that should be discussed (and how they should be discussed). See the Community dialogue activity for guidance.

Programme coordinators and facilitators together should:

Establish clear guidelines and procedures regarding adolescents' privacy, confidentiality and mandated reporting. Communicate these with programme stakeholders and the wider community.

- ▶ Consider establishing a privacy agreement with adolescents that outlines how (if at all) information discussed during sessions is shared with others. Take into account:
 - Whether adolescents feel that privacy is important, relevant or helpful for their work and activities;
 - Whether adolescents will feel more comfortable raising issues, asking questions, sharing experiences, or exploring new topics if there is some type of privacy agreement;

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- How privacy can be integrated within the group rules that adolescents establish for working together respectfully and supportively; (See Agreeing to group rules for guidance.)
 - Adolescents' ability to understand and social maturity levels; For example, younger adolescents (e.g. those ages 10-14) may not be mature enough to maintain privacy agreements;
 - Cultural norms in relation to privacy.
- ▶ Make sure that confidentiality standards and mandated reporting procedures reflect inter-agency standards, particularly in the areas of child protection, HIV/AIDS and reproductive health, as well as local regulations and policies.
- ▶ Share guidelines, procedures and privacy agreements with adolescents, and make sure they know if, and how, anything they discuss during sessions is shared with others.

Facilitators should:

Be ready to respond if adolescents raise challenging topics. Promote constructive, open discussion of challenging topics that adolescents raise. Be ready to support them, and to discuss their feelings and responses.

Be ready to:

- ▶ Recognize and manage any discomfort;
- ▶ Avoid lecturing or preaching (as it is not conducive to discussion of sensitive topics);
- ▶ Take steps if adolescents' disclose that they have been affected by violence;
- ▶ Ask for support if you need help responding to particular issues.

Provide adolescents with access to accurate information about topics that interest them.

Identify where and how adolescents can connect with useful information.

- ▶ Do share accurate information and promote constructive discussion of challenging topics.
- ▶ Don't withhold information, spread wrong information or express views that do not promote equality for all adolescents.
- ▶ Always keep the **10 Key Approaches** in mind.