



**Promoting  
Adolescent  
Development  
in Latin America  
and the Caribbean**

**WHAT WORKS**



# Contents



- 5** **We Know What Works and What Needs to be Done.**
- 9** **I. The Possibilities of Adolescence**
- 13** **II. Adolescents in Latin America and the Caribbean**  
Different circumstances, challenges and needs
- 17** **III. Promote the Positive: What Adolescents Need to Thrive**  
Five strategies that work
  - 18** expanding CHILD-FRIENDLY SCHOOLS AND SPACES
  - 20** promoting SPORT FOR DEVELOPMENT
  - 21** focusing on SKILLS FOR LIFE AND CITIZENSHIP
  - 23** building a PROTECTIVE ENVIRONMENT
  - 25** encouraging POSITIVE AND “READY” FAMILY AND COMMUNITY SETTINGS
- 26** **Looking Ahead**





**T**oday, more than 100 million young people between 10 and 18 years of age live in Latin America and the Caribbean – 20 per cent of the region's total population. How effectively these young people navigate the uncharted years of adolescence will help determine how well societies weather challenges in the future. Focusing on adolescents is important for public health, for social and economic progress, and for the advancement of democratic societies.

For UNICEF, a focus on adolescents is first and foremost a matter of human rights. All countries in Latin America and the Caribbean have ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which protects adolescents' most fundamental human rights, including the right to information and skills; access to services, such as education, health, recreation and justice; a safe and supportive environment; and opportunities to have their voices heard and participate in the decisions that affect their lives. States protect these rights through legislation, policy and practises.

When adolescents' rights are protected, they learn, grow and thrive. Initiatives in the region that protect young people's rights, while promoting positive development, have demonstrated encouraging results, and today a vast majority of adolescents in countries throughout the region are well-informed and lead healthful lives. They are caring, compassionate and tolerant individuals, contributing members of families and communities, and responsible and productive citizens.

Over the past decade, field experience, monitoring and evaluation of programmes, advocacy and management, and the latest research on adolescents have all contributed to a deeper understanding of how to promote adolescent well-being, enabling UNICEF and its partners in Latin America and the Caribbean to help ensure young people have the skills and support they need to make healthy choices.

## *We know what works and what needs to be done.*

It all begins with a good start in life. Choices made and actions taken by parents and society in the earliest years of childhood have a powerful and long-lasting influence, laying the foundation for success in school and beyond. Studies show that investing in early childhood development raises academic achievement and reduces crime and dependency on social welfare.

The key is to keep children learning. More recently, we've discovered that early interventions with children have limited impact if they are not followed up through elementary and secondary school years. In fact, policies and programmes that build the skills and assets of children from birth through adolescence have cumulative effects and produce significant social and economic benefits. When support is consistent and ongoing, investment returns multiply.



UNICEF/Guatemala/Gergely Siményi



UNICEF/Ecuador/Cristobal Corral

We know that pre-adolescence and early adolescence, in particular, are strategically important as critical periods in which adolescents make choices that will impact the rest of their lives. Faced with physical, intellectual and emotional changes that can be both exciting and confusing, young teenagers (teens), or adolescents, require special nurturing and guidance to manage these critical years.

Our experience in the region has also taught us that we must never lose sight that all adolescents are not the same. Understanding their diverse experiences and the varying contexts in which they live is crucial to reaching them with targeted interventions and forms the foundation of an effective response.

Finally, we have learned how to better listen to the points of view expressed by adolescents as citizens who see their needs being neglected and who offer important insights on what can be done to improve their lives. Working with these young people has dramatically enriched our work, enabling us to see the promise of what is possible if we listen, and if we care – and what will be lost if we do not.

UNICEF and its partners have applied the lessons learned over the years in countries across the region, creating opportunities for adolescents to develop new skills and increase their self-confidence to make a difference. Last year in Jamaica, vulnerable teens learned conflict resolution skills from Ishmael Beah, former child soldier from Sierra Leone, while in Argentina, the Art and Citizenship programme expanded young people's access to spaces for creative expression and job opportunities. UNICEF in Chile tackled juvenile justice by inspecting detention centres, surveying children in conflict with the law, and implementing trainings for judges and prosecutors, leading to improved services and the development of strategic protection policies. The development of the National Childhood and Adolescence Strategy (ENIA) 2010-2030 in Uruguay helped to ensure that adolescents' needs and rights will be incorporated into public policies and that teens have opportunities to participate in the process.

These experiences and many more provide increasing evidence that after investing in early childhood, focusing on five areas in particular, helps to promote positive outcomes now and later in life: child and adolescent-friendly schools and spaces; sport for development; skills for life and citizenship skills; protective environments; and positive and “ready” family and community settings. Focusing on these areas together maximises their impact and provides a powerful framework to promote adolescent well-being.

Perhaps the most important task facing Latin America and the Caribbean in the years ahead is ensuring that all policies, programmes and services to support adolescents are available to all. The region is the most unequal in the world, and as a result, millions of adolescents live in poverty, are socially excluded and face discrimination in all aspects of their lives. Indigenous and Afro-descendent youth and adolescents with disabilities are often the poorest and most excluded. Without public policies and programmes to support them, they will continue to be denied opportunities and left behind.

UNICEF’s commitment to human rights calls on us to deal with the most vulnerable first. Governments have also begun to realise that investing in the most economically disadvantaged not only promotes fairness and social justice but also makes social and economic sense. At the 17th Ibero-American summit in 2007, 22 Latin American leaders committed to coordinating efforts to fight poverty and promote social cohesion. The meeting recognised that the future of the region depends upon integrating into mainstream society its poorest and most excluded members.

Three high-level meetings in 2008 put children and adolescents at the top of the regional policy agenda, highlighting the need to reach society’s youngest members: The Council for Human and Social Development (COHSOD) held in Guyana; the Ibero-American Summit held in El Salvador; and the General Assembly of the Organisation of American States held in Colombia. With strong adolescent

participation, policy-makers renewed commitments to invest in young people’s development and protection.

Only when societies recognise that everyone is different but equal and ensure that all citizens have access to the same opportunities can adolescents develop to their fullest potential. When they feel safe, respected, and supported by society, young people are able to make choices that benefit not only themselves, but also their families and communities.

UNICEF’s experience in the field and ongoing evaluations and analysis of policies and programmes will continue to deepen our knowledge of what works to ensure all adolescents are informed, healthy, productive and safe. When adolescents are supported to be capable and confident individuals, they rise to meet the challenges they face. They become compassionate, thoughtful and inspired to serve others. They can imagine the impossible and when given the chance, adolescents can change the world.



UNICEF/Nicaragua/Gonzalo Bell



ESTADOS UNIDOS MEXICANOS  
ESTADO DE CHIAPAS



ESTADO DE CHIAPAS  
MUNICIPIO DE SAN CRISTÓBAL DE LA JUA  
CANTÓN DE  
ACTA DE NACIMIENTO

AUTAR DE NACIMIENTO

EL NACIMIENTO DE LA NIÑA (NOMBRE) EN EL MUNICIPIO DE SAN CRISTÓBAL DE LA JUA, CANTÓN DE, ESTADO DE CHIAPAS, MÉXICO, EL DÍA DE MES DE AÑO, EN EL PUEBLO DE, CON LA PARTICIPACIÓN DE LOS PADRES, QUIENES PRESENTAN AL REGISTRADO.

IDENTIFICACION DEL REGISTRADO: NOMBRE (NOMBRE) SEXO (MASCULINO) FECHA DE NACIMIENTO (DIA) (MES) (AÑO) LUGAR DE NACIMIENTO (MUNICIPIO) (ESTADO) (PAIS)

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*Jesús*



REGISTRADOR GENERAL  
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# I. THE POSSIBILITIES OF ADOLESCENCE

Adolescence is a voyage of discovery, propelled by boundless energy and insatiable curiosity. As they explore unfamiliar horizons, young people form new connections with the outside world and ask thousands of questions in search of their own truth. Filled with awe and idealism, uncertainty and excitement, adolescents look for answers in their homes, communities and beyond. Their courage, imagination and sense of adventure can inspire hope among the greatest cynics. When adolescents are supported, every day is full of potential and the possibilities are infinite.

Adolescence is also a time when decisions matter. Teens develop many of the habits, patterns of behaviour, and relationships they will carry into their adult lives. Adolescence offers a unique opportunity to build on the developmental experiences of childhood and to lay a strong foundation for adulthood.

The physical, social and psychological changes that occur during these years can be both predictable and unexpected; gradual and rapid; subtle and dramatic. In fact no other developmental period, with the exception of infancy, is characterised by so many complex changes.

*Investing in younger adolescents offers a unique opportunity to build on the investments made in the early part of life and to shape enduring patterns of healthy behaviour.*

Under the right conditions, adolescents acquire new cognitive skills, develop a clearer sense of personal and sexual identity and become increasingly independent. While the search for identity can be a lifelong pursuit, it becomes a central goal of adolescence and answering the questions 'Who am I?' and 'Where am I going?' becomes an important part of the process of self-discovery.

The journey is not one to be taken alone. Adolescents continue to remain dependent on the actions of adults to provide advice, guidance and support and to keep them safe. Younger teens, in particular, need special nurturing and protection. As their capacities, roles and relationships evolve and they learn to manage new life experiences, adolescents still rely on adults to be good listeners, to ask questions and to guide them to make healthy choices. Giving adolescents room to grow and make mistakes, while setting boundaries and limits, can help young people learn how to be more aware of their choices, solve problems, handle mistakes and be prepared for future challenges.

While providing access to information, skills and services is important to promote healthy adolescent development, it is not enough. Adolescents must be motivated and have the personal conviction to use information they receive, practise the skills they are taught and take advantage of the services they are provided. Since every adolescent is an individual with a unique personality and special interests, likes and dislikes, motivating teens requires recognising their differences and supporting not only their needs, but also listening to their wishes and wants. Maintaining that delicate balance between responding to both the needs and desires of young people is an ongoing, but necessary challenge.

In general, nearly all adolescents face a series of developmental tasks between the ages of 10-18 and pass through different stages of development. The stages are fluid and overlap and teens pass through them at their own pace. Gender, class, culture, ethnicity, family factors and many other circumstances all influence adolescent development.

*Adolescents' needs and wants need to be taken into account when developing respectful health promoting interventions. – Youth Choices for Change, PAHO.*

Needs	Wants
Love, ongoing nurturing relationship	Autonomy
Acceptance	Social Interaction
Developmentally appropriate experiences and success	"Grown-up" experiences
Opportunities and guidance	Novelty
Expectation, limits, and values	Humor and fun
Safe and supportive environments at home, school, neighbourhoods	Hang out with friends at social places, parties, connected to media
Structures that provide healthy nutrition, physical activity, and sleep	Fast foods, sports, stay up late

Definitions of these stages vary; however, the classifications endorsed by Pan American Health Organisation add a new dimension to traditional categories by highlighting the importance of pre-adolescence and taking into account the developmental differences between girls and boys:

- Pre-Adolescence* (ages 9-12 girls; 10-13 boys)
- Early Adolescence* (ages 12-14 girls; 13-15 boys)
- Middle Adolescence* (ages 14-16 girls; 15-17 boys)
- Late Adolescence* (ages 16-18 girls; 17-18 boys)
- Youth* (ages 18-21 girls and boys)

### **A unique opportunity not to be missed**

The period between nine and fifteen years of age is a time of maximum change, vulnerability and opportunity. It is at this time that young people begin to make choices regarding sexual conduct, the use of tobacco, alcohol and other drugs, and eating habits that have important implications for their own health and the survival and development of their children.

The changes begin during *pre-adolescence*, when teens' bodies begin to grow in size and transform their shape. *Pre-adolescents* want to have fun on their own and with their friends. They crave new information and experiences to satisfy their intense curiosity.

During this stage, young people start to develop more concrete logical thinking and formal reasoning skills. Their emotions are intense and they start to think about how and why they feel the way they do, although many still have trouble recognising the link between their emotions and their behaviour.

As their bodies transform, pre-adolescents begin to explore masculine and feminine roles and a need for greater privacy develops. A same-sex best friend becomes important for having fun and sharing secrets. At this age, both girls and boys start to feel self-conscious and embarrassed. They begin to spend less time with their parents and to depend more on themselves than on their mother and father. Wanting to fit in makes them especially susceptible to peer pressure.

Physical changes become more intense during *early adolescence*, which young people experience with a mixture of pride and anxiety. With these changes come new preoccupations about body image and appearance and adolescents become more sexually aware and sexual arousal increases. Boys will typically show less control of their sexual feelings, which may often be encouraged by peers, by adults and by the images in the world around them. For boys and girls, new sexual feelings may raise questions about their own sexual identity, which can lead to feelings of confusion and even shame.

At this age, there is a shift towards abstract thinking, allowing teens to test different hypotheses, challenge ideas and concepts, and think about themselves in new ways.

The need for emotional autonomy from parents continues, as early adolescents begin to develop their own opinions and seek out independence. As parental supervision decreases, young people gradually begin to engage in more "adult" activities and spend more time with their peers. They become concerned about what they wear, how they look and how they are seen by their peers. For many young people at this age, there is a desperate need to fit in.

At this stage, experimentation becomes an important

part of learning, practising decision-making, and developing identity. They may try alcohol, cigarettes and other drugs out of curiosity, to feel more adult, or because they are pressured by their peers. Life skills become critically important during these years, providing adolescents the skills they need to help them analyse their choices, resist negative peer pressure, and assert their rights to say no.

Younger adolescents also need support to make healthy choices and research shows that having a connection to caring adults is one of the key factors that promotes healthy adolescent development. Healthy role models and adults who encourage independence and offer guidance and support, while establishing appropriate rules and boundaries, can help young people share their thoughts and clarify their values. With appropriate skills and guidance from caring adults, younger adolescents can still experiment, only in more positive ways.



UNICEF/Jamaica/Shehzad Noorani

## The Adolescent Brain: A work in progress

*The brain continues to develop during the adolescent years, and around the age of 11, there is tremendous growth in the prefrontal cortex as new neural connections are formed. This area is the control centre for critical functions like planning, organisation, impulse control and reasoning. It is also one of the last areas of the brain to fully develop, particularly among boys, which is why younger adolescents have an increased need for structure, mentoring, and guidance. It also explains why girls may appear more mature than boys of the same age.*

*As this area of the frontal lobe matures, through experience and practise, teens are able to reason better, develop more impulse control, and make better judgments. Adolescents who “exercise” their brains by learning to order their thoughts, understand abstract concepts, and control their impulses are laying the neural foundations that will serve them for the rest of their lives. Young people who participate in sports, academics, or music, positively reinforce these connections as the circuits mature.*



## II. ADOLESCENTS IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

As they grapple with predictable physical and emotional changes, today's adolescents must also cope with growing up in circumstances that limit their potential, compromise their health, impair their sense of self, and generally restrict their chances to lead successful lives.

Building resilience is key to protecting adolescents from the risks of poverty, violence and other social stressors. Serving as a type of “emotional armour,” resilience helps teens cope with challenging circumstances and buffers the trauma they may experience. It allows vulnerable adolescents, in particular, to develop an overall sense of well-being and pursue a healthy life path and plan, in spite of the challenges and stress they confront each day.

Social and economic inequality thrives in Latin America and the Caribbean, making it the most unequal region of the world. The disparities particularly affect indigenous and Afro-descendent families, adolescents working in the informal economy, those living in rural or border areas, people not accounted for in official statistics (including migrant populations) and the disabled. The two-tiered structure of “haves and have-nots” is especially striking in large urban centres, where populations are growing faster than infrastructures can adapt, forcing increasing numbers of young people to live in slums with few social services and high levels of crime.

The high levels of inequality and growing concentrations of deprivation also make the region one of the most violent parts of the world with six million children and adolescents suffering severe abuse, including abandonment, each year. Close to 220 children and adolescents under 18 years of age die every day from domestic violence – about 80,000 children a year. The Caribbean, in particular, ranks first, globally, when it comes to murder rates and claims the highest rates of homicides among young

people aged 15–17. Boys are six times more likely to be victims than girls.

*Ever since I was young, my family told me that I wouldn't amount to much. They said people like me don't get ahead, since we were poor and Afro-descendent. But I have dreams, and no matter what I will struggle to make them come true.*



UNICEF/Brazil/Claudio Versani

Many adolescents in the region are pressured into sexual experimentation, placing them at high risk for unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections, including HIV. At the same time, adolescent girls often see early motherhood as their only option for affirming their independence and finding meaning in life. The risks for teenage pregnancy become especially high when adolescents are denied information and access to specialised, confidential programmes and services that equip them with knowledge and skills to understand not only the consequences of unprotected sex but also the power to say no.

There are 10 million unemployed young people in the region, and 22 million young people (approximately 25 per cent of young people in Latin America and the Caribbean) who are unemployed AND out of school.

For many teens, overcoming these challenges while navigating adolescence can be daunting. And the stress can become too much to bear, prompting teens to make poor decisions that can put them at risk and leave them vulnerable to physical or psychological harm that can affect them for the rest of their lives.



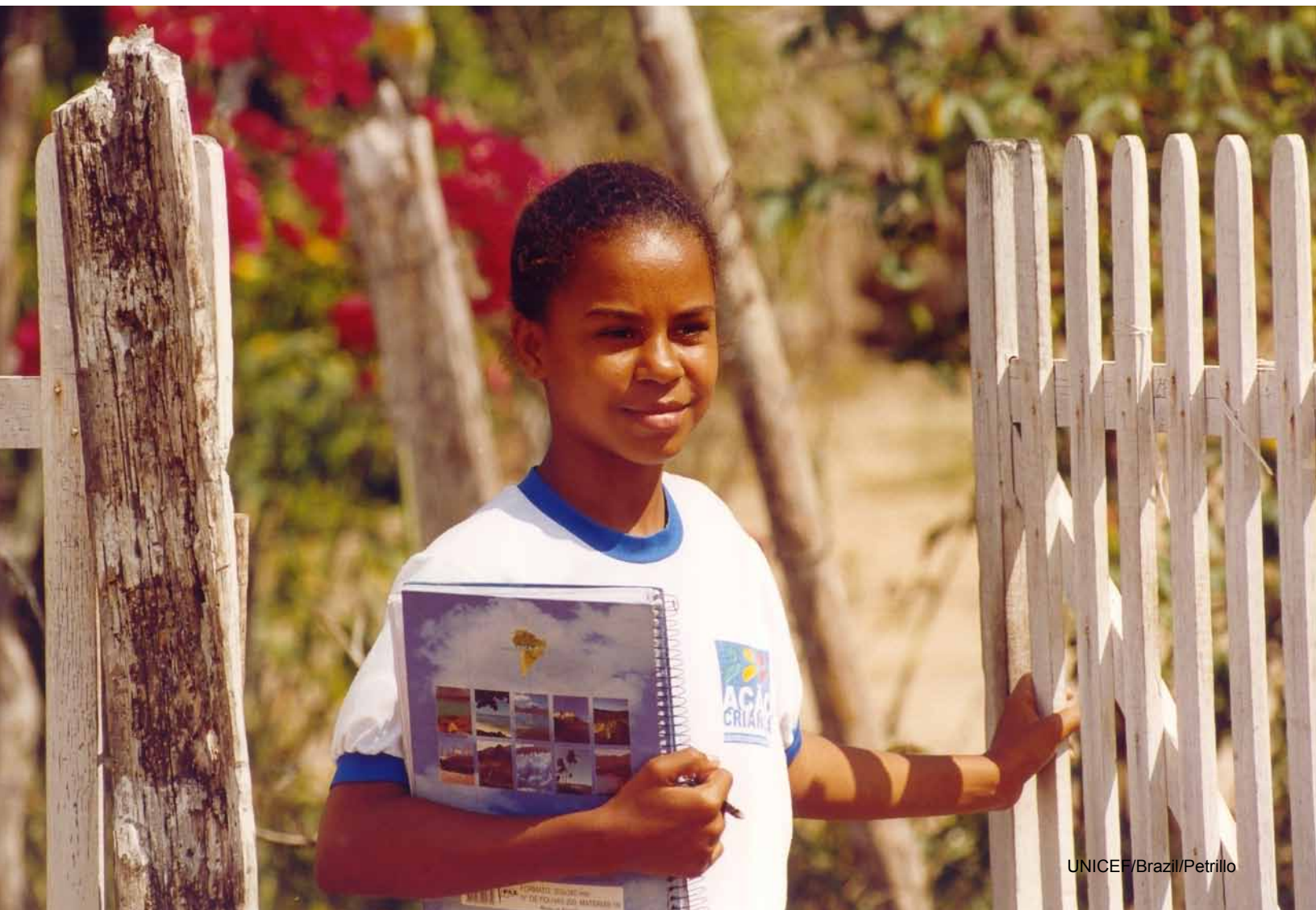
UNICEF/Brazil/Claudio Versani

## ***Different circumstances, challenges and needs***

Not all adolescents in Latin America and the Caribbean face the same risks: They live in different circumstances and have different needs. Adolescents living in urban centres face different risks than indigenous adolescents in the Amazon or adolescents living with HIV. Boys are exposed to different threats than girls; poor adolescents are vulnerable in different ways than wealthier ones; disabled young people face different challenges than teen mothers. The risks faced by ethnic minorities, particularly indigenous and Afro-descendent who are

socially, economically and culturally excluded are quite different than those faced by their non-ethnic adolescent peers.

A thorough understanding of the differing needs and conditions and of the particular and diverse risks faced by adolescents in Latin America and the Caribbean is essential to ensuring that interventions are tailored to best help protect them from different threats and provide them with the information and skills to meet their individual challenges.



UNICEF/Brazil/Petrillo





### III. PROMOTE THE POSITIVE: WHAT ADOLESCENTS NEED TO THRIVE

Positive adolescent development shifts the focus away from fixing adolescents' problems to *strengthening their capabilities, increasing their access to opportunities, and providing them with safe and supportive environments* that nurture the transition from childhood to adulthood. It encourages autonomy yet channels curiosity in a positive direction. It builds on the investments made during early childhood and beyond, seeking to ensure a continuous process of positive growth that develops capacities and skills needed for citizenship and adult life.

Instead of concentrating on a single aspect of adolescents' lives, a development approach looks at adolescents as whole people. It focuses on developing their physical, psychological, spiritual, social, emotional, cognitive and cultural capacities and on positive assets (developmental strengths) that constitute the essential building blocks for adolescent well-being. The research shows that the more assets adolescents have, the more likely they are to avoid risk-taking behaviour, rebound from setbacks, succeed in school, maintain good health, value tolerance and exercise leadership. These assets act as protective factors and include competence and achievement; positive relationships with adults and peers; clear structure; opportunities for self-definition, creative expression, recreation; and meaningful participation in family, school and community life. Focusing on these positive assets builds resilience so that adolescents can make better decisions under stressful and unsafe circumstances. It enhances young people's abilities to make positive choices that help them now, but prepares them for the more complex decisions they will face throughout their lives.

Key developmental assets that help young people grow up healthy, caring and responsible:\*

#### INTERNAL/INDIVIDUAL ASSETS

##### Physical

Healthy habits  
Avoiding risk behaviour  
Physical safety  
Physical abilities

##### Psychological

Self-esteem  
Resilience, flexibility  
Optimism  
Motivation, autonomy  
Good judgment  
Sense of purpose

##### Social

Caring, empathy  
Communication skills  
Social and cultural competence  
Conflict resolution skills  
Ability to adapt to different situations

##### Cognitive

Academic achievement  
Creativity  
Critical thinking  
Decision-making  
Problem-solving skills

##### Positive values

Equality and social justice  
Integrity  
Responsibility  
Spirituality or religion

#### EXTERNAL/ENVIRONMENTAL ASSETS

Secure attachment to parents  
Feeling connected to family and school  
Participation in community activities  
Boundaries and expectations  
Safety at home, school, and community  
Caring relationships with other adults  
Opportunities for creative expression

\* There is no definitive list of assets that promote adolescent well-being.

## Increasing opportunities to participate

A developmental approach to adolescence values and respects adolescents as rights-holders with potential to contribute to their own development and that of society. Adolescents can participate in different ways – taking part and influencing processes, decision-making and projects – and in a range of institutional settings, from the household and school to the municipal council and international conference.

When adolescents are involved in decision-making, they build skills and competence. They are exposed to different ways of thinking and learn to strategise and problem solve. When they see the results of their contributions, confidence and self-esteem grow. Being involved in decisions that affect their families, schools and communities also encourages adolescents to develop greater compassion and a stronger sense of responsibility towards others.

## Five strategies that work

UNICEF in Latin America and the Caribbean works with governments, lawmakers, the media, international organisations and civil society to ensure that children and adolescents are at the centre of national policy debates. A large part of our work involves advocating for policies, strategies and increased investments to help guarantee children's rights. Through our partners, we improve access to opportunities and services: we provide guidance and develop tools that enable governments, agencies and local organisations to more effectively implement programmes. Sharing our global knowledge and experiences to help others find local solutions is an important part of what we do.

In collaboration with our partners, **UNICEF in LAC** is focusing on five key areas, among others, to help ensure that adolescents are supported, challenged and surrounded by safe places and caring people so they can develop in healthy ways. The five strategies complement and reinforce one another to produce maximum results.

## expanding CHILD-FRIENDLY SCHOOLS AND SPACES

Child-friendly schools and spaces promote an expanded vision of education that nurtures children and adolescents before, on and beyond school years, both inside and outside the classroom. They support a *continuum of learning* – from the preschool years through primary and secondary school while *maximising opportunities for learning*. Ensuring adolescents continue their education at least through secondary school is particularly important in a region where 6 out of 10 adolescents who enter secondary school do not graduate. Most of these teenagers are from income-poor families, rural areas, and indigenous and migrant communities.

Child-friendly schools actively seek out excluded children and adolescents. They respect diversity and do not exclude, discriminate or stereotype on the basis of difference. They respond to each child's unique capacities, needs and circumstance, and ensure that all children and adolescents have access to quality learning, including working children, teen mothers, ethnic minorities, children affected by AIDS or with disabilities, teenage dropouts, exploited children, victims of violence, among others.

Preparing children and adolescents for life – so that they can integrate effectively into the world of work and society – is a central goal. Child-friendly schools have motivated teachers, relevant and meaningful curricula, information technology and good quality material and resources to stimulate children and teens to ask questions, think critically, and prepare them for higher education and future employment. They teach children what they need to learn, and more importantly, how to learn to become creative critical thinkers.

*Child-friendly schools are tailored to address local circumstances, yet all share these common elements:*

1. Quality-based
2. Healthy, Safe and Secure
3. Rights – based (inclusive)
4. Gender-sensitive
5. Participatory

Child-friendly schools care for the whole child by supporting not only cognitive development but also physical, social, emotional, moral and spiritual needs. These schools provide clean water, sanitation, playgrounds, school meals, health checks, and other services, depending upon the local circumstances. They support creativity, self-expression and participation in all aspects of school life and provide adolescents information on good nutrition, safety, reproductive health, HIV/AIDS and other vital health issues. They recognise that success in life means having the ability to make well-balanced decisions, to resolve conflicts in a non-violent manner, and to develop a healthy lifestyle and good social relationships. Most importantly, in these schools children and adolescents are taught to respect one another; harassment, punishment, and all forms of abuse are not tolerated.

How adolescents spend their time before they enter the classroom and after they leave plays a crucial role in their development. Child-friendly schools work closely with families and communities to create multiple spaces for learning where adolescents can enjoy supervised and productive activities, learn new skills, improve their academic achievement, participate in frank discussions on sexuality, HIV/AIDS and other sensitive issues, and develop positive relationships with adults, their peers and the community. Sports and recreational activities, journalism (print and radio), school tutoring, debate clubs, health education, job-skills training and community initiatives are just some examples of activities that can expand learning after school, during vacation periods and on weekends. Child-friendly learning spaces are safe environments that increase the number of hours each day adolescents spend being productive, reducing their chances of becoming victims of violence or engaging in risky behaviour, which is particularly important in communities affected by violence or conflict. When natural disasters strike, child-friendly schools and spaces can help heal trauma, restore normalcy and provide adolescents opportunities to participate in rebuilding and healing their communities.

**UNICEF in LAC** is working to incorporate child-friendly school standards into national education plans at basic education levels to ensure a continuum of quality learning for all children. Child-friendly schools and spaces have been established in countries throughout the region, including in Barbados, Bolivia, Belize, Brazil, Colombia, Guyana, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua and Panama among others.

*In Nicaragua, the Ministries of Education, Environment and Health and the National Water Enterprise are working together to ensure that schools are safe, welcoming environments and where children have access to quality learning. Schools who have joined the Healthy and Friendly Schools Initiative have hand-washing facilities, chlorinated water, and sanitary facilities adapted for different ages and for children with disabilities. Students are served a daily meal; learn about human rights, health, nutrition, sexuality and HIV prevention; and develop skills to stay healthy and manage risk. In these schools, gender discrimination is not tolerated and all forms of violence are banned. As of July 2009, 287 schools in Nicaragua had joined the Healthy and Friendly Schools Initiative.*



UNICEF/Nicaragua/Gonzalo Bell

## *promoting* **SPORT FOR DEVELOPMENT**

Sport is not a luxury, it is a human right. A child's right to engage in play and recreational activities is enshrined in Article 31 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and governments have a responsibility to promote and secure this right.

Sport is also one of the most powerful tools to promote good health and well-being. Sport is fun and young people love it. Participation in sport strengthens the body by building muscle and strong bones and improves motor skills and endurance. It can promote healthy eating habits and help control body weight. And studies show that involvement in sport during childhood and adolescence establishes healthy behaviour patterns and teaches valuable skills and lessons that will last a lifetime.

When adolescents participate in sport they learn to solve problems, exercise judgment, and use feedback and criticism constructively. Sport strengthens adolescents' communication, negotiation and leadership skills; tests and improves their abilities; provides opportunities for self-expression; enhances self-esteem and builds confidence. Sport also promotes the core values of working hard, discipline and perseverance. It teaches about teamwork, loyalty, honesty, fairness, trust and respect for others. It prepares adolescents to meet the challenges they will face and to take leadership roles within their communities. The confidence that sport can build is especially important for girls, who are often affected by gender stereotypes and socialised to have low self-esteem, and for adolescents who are socially excluded due to ethnicity or ability.

Sport programmes increase opportunities for adolescents to feel safe and to develop stable positive relationships with peers and adults. Team membership encourages adolescents to bond with one another and promotes a sense of belonging. Having a caring adult in an adolescent's life – the coach – who can provide guidance and support, and can also serve as a role model, expands an

adolescent's support system and the number of adults who can protect and advise the young person in a caring way.



UNICEF/Honduras/H. Espinal

The language of sport is universal, making it a powerful tool to bridge divides and promote peace and equality for all. On the sports field, speed, strength, skill, endurance and intelligence become the qualities that matter, and social and ethnic differences disappear. By fostering tolerance and social integration, sport can promote reconciliation between sharply divided communities, break down stereotypes and integrate excluded groups into society.

*For millions of adolescents living in Brazil's poorest communities, time spent after school is not wasted on the streets but is used to learn and have fun. Segundo Tempo (Second Half) promotes the social inclusion of children and adolescents from poor communities through sports and recreation. The programme, which operates in several Brazilian states through primary and secondary schools, provides young people opportunities to participate in a wide range of activities including, soccer, volleyball, basketball, team handball, swimming, track and field, [capoeira [an Afro-Brazilian form of martial arts], and dance. Teens can also get tutored in Portuguese and math. The activities, which last for four hours each day, improve their health and keep them safe and learning for longer periods of the day. The programme is on its way to achieving its goal to reach 39 million school-aged children and youth in Brazil by 2010.*

**UNICEF in LAC** is working with Ministries of Sport and Youth as well as with Ministries of Education to promote physical education and sport both in schools and through after-school activities. Partnership agreements, developed with the major global sports federations (CONCACAF, CONMEBOL, West Indies Cricket Board, Olympic Committee and others), have mobilised these organisations to not only highlight UNICEF messages and communications activities at their sports events, but also to work with us as programmatic partners in selected countries.

## **focusing on SKILLS FOR LIFE AND CITIZENSHIP**

When adolescents are properly equipped with information and skills, they are able to effectively manage their lives and control the negative factors of their surroundings. With life skills, adolescents can have better control of their circumstances and are able to contribute to their own development. Life skills help build confidence, coping mechanisms, and character. They equip adolescents with the tools they need to become responsible citizens and life-long learners. In addition, life skills help to protect adolescents, by empowering them to develop positive relationships and make healthy choices. They can improve academic performance, teach anger management, promote citizenship and prevent high-risk sexual behaviours.

**Social and interpersonal skills.** Developing positive social and emotional relationships with parents, peers and others requires the ability to cooperate and identify with another's feelings. Knowing how to be assertive, to negotiate and to say no are especially important for protecting oneself and managing conflict. Strong communication skills are vital to developing relationships and keeping them strong. Good communicators have the ability to express ideas, thoughts and feelings in appropriate ways. They know what to say and how to say it, and they know when and how to listen. They are able to stand up for themselves politely and know how to make their wishes known. Adolescents who can communicate well and have other key social and interpersonal skills feel in control of their lives and can participate more effectively in their families, schools and society than those who lack these skills. Research suggests that adolescents who do not develop social skills early in life are rejected by their peers and are more likely to adopt unhealthy behaviours.

**Cognitive skills.** Adolescents skilled in decision-making and critical thinking are able to explore alternatives, weigh pros and cons and make rational

decisions when solving problems and evaluating future consequences of their present actions and the actions of others. They have the capacity to determine alternative solutions and to analyse the influence of their own values and the values of those around them. Central to making informed decisions is having the ability to identify relevant information and information sources. When adolescents develop these skills they can analyse peer and media influences and their own perceptions of social norms and beliefs.

### **Communicating as active citizens**

*Adolescents throughout Latin America and the Caribbean are contributing to TV programmes, radio shows, newspapers, websites and other media projects. They are getting their voices heard and playing a powerful role in forming, influencing and changing public perceptions and opinions.*

- *During the 2008 Council for Human and Social Development meeting, youth journalists from Guyana, Trinidad, and Suriname produced and broadcasted a 15-minute news show and powerful one-minute videos on corporal punishment, child labour, access to quality education and other issues of concern to them. The youth journalists called on the ministers of member states to take action to improve young lives.*
- *In Brazil, through a partnership with British Telecom, adolescents are trained on how to use communication tools and techniques, including the internet, radio, blogs, photography and video to publicise campaigns to improve their schools, and to help shape public policies on health services, the environment, digital inclusion and other issues important to their communities.*
- *A global website called Media Activities and Good Ideas by, with and for Children (MAGIC) is inspiring adolescents around the region to undertake media projects that support their rights. The website provides young people information and examples of media projects that are making a positive impact on children. ([www.unicef.org/magic/](http://www.unicef.org/magic/))*

**Coping and self-management skills.** Self esteem, self-awareness, self-evaluation skills and the ability to set goals are all necessary for self-control. Having the skills to understand and manage emotions; to cope with grief, trauma, stress or anxiety, including knowing when to seek help, are all crucial for positive adolescent development.

**Citizenship skills.** Civic engagement teaches adolescents to use their potential for positive action. It can help prevent high-risk behaviours, and re-engage adolescents who are out of school, unemployed, or in conflict with the law. Yet for adolescents to be willing and able to actively participate in their communities, they need to first see themselves as active citizens, with civil rights, and feel a sense of social awareness and responsibility. Ensuring adolescents are aware of their rights and have opportunities for civic engagement through a variety of institutions promotes basic civic values, such as fairness, mutual respect and understanding, justice, tolerance, accountability for one's actions, fiscal responsibility and a general desire to work for the greater good.

*We are equal beings and we deserve the same opportunities in life. - 16-year old from Quetzaltenango, Guatemala speaking on indigenous rights.*

**UNICEF in LAC** has formed partnerships with Ministries of Education and other government and non-governmental organisations to ensure schools, churches and after school clubs are providing adolescents with crucial information and skills to address such issues as HIV/AIDS, sexual health, substance abuse, the environment, safety and nutrition. One notable partnership agreement between CARICOM (Caribbean Community and Common Market) Secretariat, UN Agencies including the UNICEF Caribbean Area Office, and the University of the West Indies is institutionalising Health and Family Life Education (HFLE) in all schools throughout the Caribbean.

## building a **PROTECTIVE ENVIRONMENT**

A protective environment is one where everyone – from adolescents to governments and the private sector – live up to their responsibilities to ensure that children and adolescents are protected from abuse, violence and exploitation. It emphasises prevention as well as accountability by all actors to ensure laws, services, behaviours and practises minimise adolescents' vulnerability, address known risk factors, and strengthen adolescents' own resilience. It targets adolescents who are uniquely vulnerable or have been exposed to exploitation and abuse. It uses legislative action to remove major obstacles that prevent adolescents from realising their rights.

Keeping adolescents safe is complex and there are many factors that work individually and collectively to strengthen protection and reduce vulnerability.

### **Institutional systems**

States bear ultimate responsibility for protecting adolescents' rights. Laws, policies, regulations and services must be in place across all social sectors — especially social welfare, education, health, security and justice — to support prevention and respond to protection related risks. Strengthening systems usually requires reforming policies, improving institutional capacity, planning, budgeting, monitoring and development of information and referral systems. Enforcement of laws and policies already in place is crucial.

When adolescents do come in contact with the law as victims, witnesses and offenders, justice systems must not only protect them but also ensure that adolescents are provided with opportunities to continue their development. Adolescent criminal offenders are entitled to access a criminal justice system designed for juveniles – one that combines delinquency prevention with restorative justice and reintegration into society. It should guarantee access to social services, meaningful activities, and contact with family members. Putting children behind bars should always be a last resort, limited to exceptional cases and for the shortest amount of time possible.

*The Support System for Protected Adolescents, developed by the judicial system in Buenos Aires, Argentina focuses on deinstitutionalising adolescents and reintegrating them into society. Eligible children and adolescents include those who have been victimised by their parents or other guardians and have been institutionalised as a result, and adolescents under 18 years of age who have come in conflict with the law. Only adolescents who commit to pursuing education or vocational training of their choice are allowed to participate in the programme. Participants are assigned a caseworker and a “contract of shared responsibilities” is signed by both parties that establishes each party’s rights and obligations. Meetings take place on a weekly or bi-weekly basis to help the young person manage his/her new life and find a place in society. Adolescents receive a monthly stipend (about \$90 US) to cover their living expenses as they attend school or classes. It usually takes a minimum of one year and an average of three years for most young people to get accustomed to living outside of an institution. Most adolescents who enter the programme are 17 years of age, although in some cases, 15 and 16 year-olds have applied and been accepted under the condition that they live with a responsible adult (godfather, godmother, grandparents). The Support System works with an average of 200 adolescents per year who have spent an average of 11 years of their life in protection or penal institutions.*



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### Social environments

Only when abusive practises become socially unacceptable will adolescents enjoy a protective environment. The fact that many forms of violence, exploitation, abuse and discrimination are widely tolerated is a profound obstacle to securing protection. Severe physical punishment of children; harsh sentences for youth offenders; gender-based violence, including sexual violence, sexual exploitation and domestic violence are all routine in Latin America and the Caribbean. Some practises, including corporal punishment, are viewed as beneficial and are inflicted by loving parents and concerned communities. Others, like gender-based violence, are silently condoned and perpetuate discrimination against women and a cycle of impunity. Creating a sea change in attitudes and beliefs can be the single greatest challenge in establishing a protective environment.

Building a protective environment requires breaking the silence around taboo topics such as sexual exploitation and abuse. It involves promoting open discussion by both media and society and ensuring adolescents have access to hotlines, social workers, shelters and youth clubs so they can talk about these topics and seek respite from violence, exploitation, abuse and discrimination that occur within the family or community.

In a protective environment adolescents are supported to protect themselves through life skills and opportunities to participate in civic life. They have access to safe schools, adolescent-friendly health services and are protected by laws and policies that support their positive development. They are surrounded by health workers, teachers, police, local authorities and community leaders and other adults at all levels of society who are able to recognise, prevent and respond to protection abuses.

UNICEF in LAC is promoting the establishment and enforcement of legislation; addressing harmful attitudes, customs and practises; and encouraging open discussion of child protection issues in countries across the region. Taking part in the development of juvenile justice systems; training specialised police units, judges and lawyers to apply new principles and standards for children in conflict with the law; protecting institutionalised youth; searching for possibilities of deinstitutionalisation; promoting services for rehabilitation; and establishing and implementing ongoing and effective monitoring, and reporting systems have been important components of UNICEF's work in the region.

Reaching children when they are young and before trouble starts is still crucial. UNICEF believes that the best investment is made at an early age to ensure that the circumstances exist to guide children and adolescents along a path that leads to positive developmental outcomes. Investing in children from the time they are born through early adolescence is far more likely to result in reduced juvenile delinquency in the region --- by preventing it from happening in the first place than waiting until the later teenage years.



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## encouraging POSITIVE AND “READY” FAMILY AND COMMUNITY SETTINGS

By action and by example, parents shape the lives of their children from birth through adulthood. Close family relationships, healthy open communication and perceived parental support are central to positive adolescent development. Families that provide teens love and safety, nurture their skills, and treat boys and girls equally without pressuring them to take on social roles that limit their opportunities, offer the best protection against harm.

The most nurturing families communicate respect, interest, warmth, and affection, so that teens feel acceptance and approval, while also allowing for increased privacy, autonomy, and difference of opinion. Teens themselves acknowledge the influence of parents, reporting that they remain critically important as guides, mentors, sounding boards, and advocates. When adolescents do not feel connected to their families, they may spend increasing amount of time away from home and in many cases, on the streets. In urban centres in particular, when young people lack this connection, they may be drawn to joining street gangs who offer the promise of love, attention, respect and belonging.

Families often need support to develop more positive family environments and healthy relationships with their children, especially when they are poor or socially excluded. The support must begin even before a child is born, with access to prenatal care to ensure a newborn has the best start in life. During early childhood, when stimulation and adequate nutrition lay the foundation for healthy development, information and education are key. As children get older, programmes that increase communication between parents and adolescents, improve the quality of their relationships, encourage healthy behaviours for all family members, promote social inclusion, and improve access to community services can all positively influence adolescent social development.

### Community support

After the family, the community plays a vital role in adolescent well-being. Adolescents need services, need to feel support from adults outside their homes,

*In Bolivia, the Ministry of Health and Sports uses the Family Health and Intercultural Community Model to promote healthy habits in families and communities and addresses the significant disparities in rural and indigenous communities. The programme is not only providing teens at the municipal level access to skills and services to protect their health, it is also helping to reduce maternal, infant and child mortality, reduce malnutrition and improve education outcomes.*

and need to feel safe. They also need to be able to build and practise new skills, venues and facilities for leisure activities and to be creative, and meaningful opportunities to influence and improve their communities.

The most supportive communities guarantee equal opportunities for all its citizens. Bridging the social divide between excluded groups and mainstream services and opportunities builds social solidarity and citizenship. Teens who have choices and feel a sense of belonging to their communities and to positive social networks (at school, at home, in their neighbourhood) are far more willing to actively engage in civic life and make positive contributions to their communities than teens who feel excluded and denied.

Family activities, in which parents and children participate jointly, including sports, should be encouraged to strengthen both adolescent relationships with their families and parents' and adolescents' connectedness with the community. When communities partner with families and schools, a powerful protective alliance is formed.

Community also extends to cyberspace. Social networking sites, and other Internet sharing sites connect adolescents to other young people facing similar situations and circumstances. Digital connectivity enables adolescents to access information and support quickly and easily, can provide a platform for expression and creativity, and can encourage participation in social movements and

active citizenship. Online communication between young people from different income and ethnic groups can also reduce gaps, build bridges and facilitate social cohesion among young people themselves.

**UNICEF in LAC** is promoting Child Friendly Communities and Cities where the voices, needs, priorities and rights of children are an integral part of

public policies, programmes and decisions. UNICEF also supports programmes and policies that educate and support families to care for their children from infancy through adolescence. Creating partnerships between schools, private sector, civil society organisations and families is an important part of our work to ensure adolescents are supported in all areas of their lives.

*A ground-breaking programme in Mexico, launched by the Ministry of Education, named Construye T ([www.construye-t.sems.gob.mx](http://www.construye-t.sems.gob.mx)), helps keep high-risk teens in school by strengthening their life skills and abilities to cope with challenging situations. The initiative, an alliance between the Ministry of Education, UNICEF, UNDP and a network of Mexican civil society organisations, including world renowned writers, promotes inclusion, equity, democratic participation and non-violence. Since the project was launched in 2008, Construye T has been implemented in over one thousand schools nationwide, reaching more than 750,000 high school students.*

*In El Salvador, Casas de Encuentro, youth centres, provide vulnerable teens opportunities to participate in leisure and cultural activities, including basketball, soccer, table tennis, chess, arts and crafts, music and film. All the centres have libraries that promote reading and creative writing. Teens are provided with the training and material to develop their own projects with the ultimate goal of having the young people themselves manage the spaces.*

*In São Paulo, Brazil, squares, alleys, cinemas, cafes, cultural centres and theatres have been transformed into learning spaces as part of Aprendiz, the 'Neighbourhood as School' project. Children and adolescents participate in a variety of activities that build skills and enhance opportunities for physical and creative expression. A wide range of activities, such as IT courses, mosaics, theatre, guitar, skateboarding, English lessons and others, nurture young people's creativity and increase self-esteem. The key to the project's success is the partnerships that have been developed among schools, families, public authorities, entrepreneurs, associations, craftspeople, nongovernmental organisations and volunteers. In this community, everybody teaches; everybody learns.*

## LOOKING AHEAD

In the coming years, **UNICEF in LAC** will need to focus more closely on the situation of adolescents in large urban centres, including Sao Paulo, Buenos Aires, Mexico City, Lima and other major cities, as well as young people in deprived areas of small island states. Inequality; deprivation; changing family patterns; social exclusion based on ethnicity; and a lack of challenges, supports and opportunities have fuelled high-levels of violence in rapidly growing urban slums throughout the region, creating millions of young people with few skills and little hope.

Working more closely with families and communities to reduce both the structural causes of violence as well as risk factors that perpetuate it, UNICEF will work with its implementing partners in LAC to focus on developing coherent strategic, integrated, multilevel and multicultural responses to address this emerging challenge. In particular, we will use experience gained in applying all these five key strategies: *expanding child-friendly schools and spaces, promoting sport for development, focusing on skills for life and citizenship, building a protective environment, and encouraging positive and "ready" family and community settings* to help ensure that all adolescents are safe and have choices, opportunities and the skills they need to feel good, make healthy decisions, and reach their fullest potential.



