
CREATING AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT FOR ADOLESCENT SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH: WHAT WE KNOW

WHAT IS AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT?

After decades of efforts to improve adolescent sexual and reproductive health (SRH), it has become increasingly clear that strengthening health services alone is not enough. A range of social, cultural, political, and economic factors increase adolescents’ vulnerability to sexual and reproductive health problems. Addressing these underlying determinants is essential for adolescents to realize their fundamental human rights and protect their health. Such an approach is commonly referred to as “building an enabling environment” and includes working with various stakeholders, such as parents, community members, and policy makers.

A true enabling environment reflects a set of interrelated conditions that affect the ability of young people to access relevant and necessary health services, information, and products. Currently implemented interventions span four categories: empowering individuals (e.g., educating girls, building their assets, and creating safe spaces), building healthy relationships (e.g., enhancing parental communication and peer networks), engaging communities (e.g., working with men and boys to change harmful gender norms), and transforming societies (e.g., promoting laws and policies that protect human rights).
Key Elements of an Enabling Environment

The following interventions have shown sufficient promise and should be scaled up and further evaluated:

Economically Empowering Girls: Poverty and lack of resources are tied to poor sexual and reproductive health, especially for girls. Several interventions have focused on economic empowerment and poverty reduction to reduce this vulnerability, taking either a microcredit or cash transfer approach.

Creating Safe Spaces for Adolescent Girls: A culture of silence and the scarcity of safe, judgment-free spaces can be barriers to girls obtaining SRH information and services. Several programs have been shown to help develop girls’ agency by providing a safe space where girls can meet regularly, access mentors, and receive life skills and/or vocational skills training along with socialization and recreation.

Keeping Adolescents in School: Education, especially secondary, has repeatedly been found to be associated with improved SRH practices and outcomes: contraceptive use, age of marriage, number of births, and use of health services. A review from eastern, southern, and central Africa found that secondary education is strongly associated with decreased HIV rates and the reduction of risky sexual behavior.

Engaging Parents: Communication about sexuality with adolescents is hindered by parents’ lack of knowledge, reliance on teachers, and the perception that talking about sexuality encourages sex. Some studies suggest that when parents are given support, they can and will communicate with their children about sexuality.

Mentoring and Providing Positive Role Modeling: Adolescent girls benefit from being supported by a female adult role model who demonstrates leadership qualities, and from seeing other girls within their community taking leadership roles. However, research suggests that girls tend to have less opportunity than boys to interact with peers and mentors.

While the previous interventions have been implemented and assessed to some degree, less is known about interventions at the community and societal levels. Further evaluation is needed on the following:

Working with Men and Boys: A growing number of programs are engaging men and boys to challenge socialized views of “masculinity” and “femininity” and promote behaviors in intimate relationships that involve mutual respect and equitable decision-making. Only programs that combine group education with men and boys, mass media, and community mobilization have demonstrated promising results in improving SRH outcomes, reducing gender-based violence, and promoting gender-equitable norms and behaviors.

Changing Laws and Policies: Many countries still do not have laws that protect adolescents from sexual violence or enable adolescent girls to access safe abortion. Laws grounded in human rights are essential, but not always sufficient, in improving sexual and reproductive health. Even where good laws exist, they are not always implemented. For example, most countries have laws prohibiting marriage before the age of 18, but enforcement is weak and the laws are routinely violated without sanctions.

Running Media and Large-scale Communications Campaigns: Mass media and other large-scale communication programs can raise awareness and inspire discussion on SRH issues. In some settings, mass media programs combined with other community activities (e.g., educational materials, linkages to health services) have contributed to changing HIV behavior and social norms among young people.

Next Steps

Creating an enabling environment requires long-term programming across multiple levels to strengthen adolescents’ agency, promote supportive relationships, and change harmful gender and social norms. Laws and policies that protect and promote adolescent SRH need to be in place and implemented.

Programs such as Berhane Hewan (safe spaces for girls, Ethiopia) and Yaari-Dosti (positive models of masculinity, India) have shown that work directly with adolescents must be complemented by engagement with their communities.
POLICY FRAMEWORK

GOVERNMENTS AT THE UNITED NATIONS HAVE MADE A SERIES OF COMMITMENTS TO FOSTER AN ENVIRONMENT THAT ENABLES ADOLESCENTS TO REALIZE THEIR SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH AND RIGHTS:

ICPD POA (1994) para 7.48: Programmes should involve and train all who are in a position to provide guidance to adolescents concerning responsible sexual and reproductive behaviour, particularly parents and families, and also communities, religious institutions, schools, the mass media and peer groups. Governments and non-governmental organizations should promote programmes directed to the education of parents, with the objective of improving the interaction of parents and children to enable parents to comply better with their educational duties to support the process of maturation of their children, particularly in the areas of sexual behaviour and reproductive health.

Beijing PFA (1995) para 107(e): Prepare and disseminate accessible information, through public health campaigns, the media, reliable counselling and the education system, designed to ensure that women and men, particularly young people, can acquire knowledge about their health, especially information on sexuality and reproduction, taking into account the rights of the child to access to information, privacy, confidentiality, respect and informed consent, as well as the responsibilities, rights and duties of parents and legal guardians to provide, in a manner consistent with the evolving capacities of the child, appropriate direction and guidance in the exercise by the child of the rights recognized in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and in conformity with the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women; ensure that in all actions concerning children, the best interests of the child are a primary consideration.

ICPD +5 (1999) para 73(c): Develop at national and other levels, as appropriate, action plans for adolescents and youth, based on gender equity and equality, that cover education, professional and vocational training and income-generating opportunities. Such programmes should include support mechanisms for the education and counselling of adolescents in the areas of gender relations and equality, violence against adolescents, responsible sexual behaviour, responsible family planning practices, family life, reproductive health, sexually transmitted diseases, HIV infection and AIDS prevention (Programme of Action, para. 7.47). Adolescents and youth themselves should be fully involved in the design and implementation of such information and services, with proper regard for parental guidance and responsibilities. Special attention should be devoted to vulnerable and disadvantaged youth.

CSW 2007 para 14.3(f): Encourage the active participation of boys, from an early age, in the elimination of discrimination and violence against girls, including through the promotion of gender sensitive socialization processes, targeted programmes and creation of spaces and environments where boys and girls can be guided in challenging gender stereotypes and negative attitudes towards girls.

UNGASS (2011) para 53: Pledge to eliminate gender inequalities and gender-based abuse and violence, increase the capacity of women and adolescent girls to protect themselves from the risk of HIV infection, principally through the provision of health care and services, including, inter alia, sexual and reproductive health, as well as full access to comprehensive information and education, ensure that women can exercise their right to have control over, and decide freely and responsibly on, matters related to their sexuality in order to increase their ability to protect themselves from HIV infection, including their sexual and reproductive health, free

Long-term investment in an enabling environment produces better outcomes. The Stepping Stones program in South Africa found that young men who participated for 24 months committed significantly fewer acts of violence than those who were engaged for only 12 months.
of coercion, discrimination and violence, and take all necessary measures to create an enabling environment for the empowerment of women and strengthen their economic independence, and, in this context, reiterate the importance of the role of men and boys in achieving gender equality.

CSW 2013 para (cc): Accelerate efforts to prevent and eliminate all forms of discrimination against women and girls and ensure their equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the right to education and to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health; ensure that all children, particularly girls, have equal access to, and complete, free and compulsory primary education of good quality, and renew their efforts to improve and expand girls’ education at all levels, including the secondary and higher levels, in all academic areas; and increase girls’ ability to attend school and extra-curricular activities by investing in public infrastructure projects and accessible quality public services and providing a safe environment.

CSW 2014 para 26 (j) bis bis.: Adopt targeted measures to ensure girls’ safety and an environment free from sexual harassment in the school and in the commute to school including by improving transportation, strengthening infrastructure by providing separate and adequate sanitation facilities, improved lighting, playgrounds and other safe environments, conducting violence prevention activities in schools and communities; establishing and enforcing penalties for all forms of violence and harassment against girls.