

Children who are orphans or have been abandoned or neglected by their families are especially vulnerable to abuse. In Jordan, poverty is a main factor behind child abandonment. According to the 2002 Demographic and Family Health Survey of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, there are approximately 70,000 children in the country who are under 18 years with at least one parent dead.

In response to this fact, UNICEF's basic life skills project in Jordan helps children to protect themselves from harmful practices, such as smoking and drug abuse. It engages adolescents and professionals working with youth. In Jordan, UNICEF has been focusing on creating an enabling environment for young people who have been orphaned or abandoned by their caregivers. So far, the basic life skills project has benefited 9,000 youths and 6,000 service providers. One such example is the work done with the SOS Children's Villages Association of Jordan, a global non-governmental organisation focusing on the needs of orphaned children.

"We have learnt to accept who we are and not to feel ashamed, or that we are lacking, or incomplete," said 13-year-old Bashar, one of the project's participants at the SOS Villages. "We can now communicate our feelings better to other children and adults, and explain who we are and that we hurt just like others do."

"I have learnt to make people listen to me and understand me"

Bashar and adolescents like him often used to fear what others might say about them. "I did not like to listen to people because I was scared of what they were going to say," admits 15-year-old Ihsan. "But after coming to live at the SOS Village and after receiving training by SOS and UNICEF, I have now learnt how to listen, even to listen to things which I don't like to hear, and I have learnt to make people listen to me and understand me."

Through basic life skills, eighteen-year-old Mou'nis learnt how to exert self-control and how to stand up for himself. His teacher, he says, used to make him the class scapegoat whenever his classmates were rowdy. "My teacher thought that because I came from the SOS Village, it was okay to call me 'orphan'" Mou'nis says, adding "My teacher believed that I had no family to speak up for me or protect me."



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After learning about how important it is to speak out in a clear and thought-out manner, and how to negotiate for what you want and need, Mou'nis asked to speak to his teacher alone. "I made him look at me, really look at me, I made him see the human being that I was who had feelings. I told the teacher that I did not like being called names, and that I had a large family waiting for me at the SOS Village every time I went home after school," he says. "And it worked."

Mou'nis and Sana' have both been trained as youth facilitators in 10 basic life skills; they promote a peer

education approach of young people educating others their age. The idea is that when young people themselves speak, others their age, and even adults, will find the training more effective, convincing and will take note.

Sana', an 18-year-old with jet black hair pulled back from a face dominated with large brown and almond shaped eyes, says "I try to encourage my friends to think before they act, not to get angry or upset, and think of other ways of resolving conflicts."

Life skills have not only helped these children in solving problems they may face at school, but also in preparing them for their adult lives. For 16-year-old Wahid, who now trains at a five-star hotel in Jordan, his newly acquired skills have helped him to accept positive criticism from his boss, and know that what is being said is for his self-improvement and not against a stereotype image.

Sixteen-year-old Shadi believes that the 20 hours of training in basic life skills he received are not enough to fully empower him and his colleagues against a world he finds quite cruel at times. Pulling his woollen black hat even lower over his eyes, he shrugs and says, "I still act before I think sometimes. I still get angry when they call us orphan kids, or say that we are not equal to them. It

will take me time, but I try to explain that being an orphan does not mean that I am a bad person."

Knowing that others share the same concerns and that solutions can be reached by working together, was another skill these teenagers say they found useful. They learnt how to solve problems together through group work facilitated by friends their own age.

SOS "mothers" caring for children in the Villages have also participated in similar life skills workshops. Mama Hayat says that she was looking for particular guidance when dealing with her teenage boys. She explains, "Children come to us at different ages; we work hard to instill a sense of self and self-worth in them". She describes how important it is to empower these special youngsters with skills to protect and educate them about their rights and responsibilities. Mama Hayat says "I tell them that they have families just like other children and explain that there is nothing wrong with admitting to who they are."



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