positive adolescent development in Latin America and the Caribbean
What is Positive Adolescent Development?

Adolescence is one of the most complex and intense stages in the life of every individual - an identity building stage. During adolescence, people undergo important physical, moral, cognitive, social and emotional changes. Adolescence is a time of transformation, vulnerability and opportunity within the life cycle.

The World Health Organization defines ‘adolescents’ as individuals between the ages of 10 and 19 years-old. However, it is worth noticing that the international Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) identifies all people under the age of 18 years-old as ‘children’, granting them the legal protection provided by this international instrument. At the same time, they can also be classified as ‘young people’: the United Nations defines ‘youth’ as ranging from 15 to 24 years-old. Consequently, adolescents can be targeted by national youth policies whilst also being their subject of children’s rights.

In many countries of Latin America and the Caribbean, adolescents are stigmatised, being perceived as problematic and difficult individuals who are frequently seen as the protagonist of social conflict. But this should not be the case: these young people must be seen as agents of change, vital resources and participants in national development. These are individuals with enormous potential who can contribute to society. A positive approach to adolescent development is needed in order to change the perspective on and approach to adolescents, enabling them to be perceived as subjects of rights instead of the source of problems.

Adolescent development builds on a positive approach of an integrated and holistic development, seeking to ensure a continuous process in which adolescents can develop skills that will allow them to grow and meet the challenges they will face in life. This is achieved through access to quality education, to adolescent-friendly health services, to information, to recreation, to justice, and to a safe, protective and stimulating environment. Developing the capacities and skills of adolescents and providing opportunities for them to participate and express their opinions are key factors of a positive adolescent development.

The adolescent population in the region needs the protection and care of their families, of social groups, of their communities and of society in general whilst they progressively seek their independence. In this way, can be guaranteed the right of adolescents to a full and positive development.
Essential elements for a positive view of adolescence

The following are essential elements for a positive view of adolescents:

- Adolescents must be perceived, valued and respected as rights-holders with potential to contribute to their own development and that of society.
- Much of the problematic behaviour of adolescents can be attributed to their lack of emotional “literacy”, linked to shortcomings in their immediate surroundings (family, school, community) and the macro-environment.
- Adolescents know their needs and priorities and they must be allowed active participation in decision-making and the various stages of public policy.
- Adolescent welfare depends upon relationships with their immediate surroundings (families, schools and communities), and the treatment they receive from others.
- Adolescents need recognition, guidance and support from their parents and teachers.
- Adolescents must develop self-esteem, self-knowledge and a sense of belonging.


What is the situation of adolescents in Latin America and the Caribbean?

Adolescence is the beginning of youth, and youth indicators therefore reflect the situation of adolescents and young people in Latin America and the Caribbean.

At present, there are more than 158 million young people aged between 10 and 24 years-old in Latin America and the Caribbean - the greatest number in the history of the region - representing 30% of the total population. 107 million adolescents aged between 10 and 19 years-old make up 20% of the total population and 80% of them live in urban areas.

It is estimated that between 25% and 32% of the youth population aged 12 to 24 years-old suffer from the consequences of at least one type of risky behaviour: These young people have dropped out of school, are young parents, are not employed, are addicted to drugs, or have been arrested.
In the Caribbean, 40% of girls and 54% of boys aged between 12 and 18 years-old drink alcohol. Approximately 25% of adolescents between 13 and 15 years-old in Latin America smoke.

The rate of enrollment in the lower cycle of secondary education has increased significantly in the last decade, covering in most countries adolescents aged from 11 to 13 years-old. However, the rate falls for the enrollment of young people aged between 14 and 18 years-old, the higher secondary education period, where only 50% are accessing education. The net rate of secondary enrollment in the region has risen from 20% in 1970 to 68% in 2005.

22 million young people in the region neither work nor study.

In 2003, the youth mortality rate for all those aged 15 to 24 years-old was 130 per 100,000. The main causes of death were: 1) external causes, such as accidents, suicides, homicides, and; 2) communicable diseases including HIV/AIDS.

An estimated 80,000 boys, girls and adolescents die each year as a result of parental abuse - which corresponds to almost 220 children each day.

Latin America and the Caribbean have the highest rate of homicide amongst adolescents aged 15 to 17 years-old, with an average of 22 homicides (37.7 young men and 6.5 young women) for each 100,000 inhabitants.

A study in four countries of the region found that children represent only around 1% of all perpetrators of armed crime.

It is estimated that more than 2 million boys, girls and adolescents experience sexual exploitation in Latin America each year.

Every year, 6 million boys, girls and adolescents in the region suffer severe abuse, including abandonment.

In the Caribbean, the age of criminal responsibility ranges from seven years-old (Trinidad and Tobago, Grenada) to 12 years-old (Jamaica, Dominica), although there is an opportunity to prove the individual was not aware of the criminality of their actions up to the age of 14 years-old. In Latin America, the age of criminal responsibility ranges from 12 to 13 years-old, although cases are handled by a special criminal justice system from this age up until 16 or 18 years-old (depending on the country).

Rates of institutionalisation are high in certain countries of the region including: Brazil (24,000), Colombia (24,300), Bolivia (15,600) and Chile (11,600).

This quick overview of the social indicators for adolescents makes it clear that the situation of adolescents in the region is a matter of concern. In a UNICEF survey, a third of children and adolescents said they rarely felt happy.
What are the main obstacles to positive adolescent development?

Poverty and exclusion

Poverty affects adolescents and young people disproportionately, impacting on average 39% of all people aged between 15 and 24 years-old in Latin America. Nearly 15 million adolescents aged between 10 and 18 years-old in this region live on less than one dollar a day. Economic poverty prevents families from exercising their rights, diminishing their access to basic services and reducing the number of opportunities for their children. Therefore, many young people face the challenges particular to the transition stage of adolescence whilst also confronting the obstacles and risks associated with poverty and inequity in the access to basic services.

These precarious economic conditions limit their chances of breaking out of the poverty cycle. Many adolescents are forced out to work in order to help cover the cost of the family, or to help care for other members of their family, preventing them from completing their studies. In Mexico, for example, one study showed that the probability of leaving school after the lower cycle of secondary education increased significantly as the socio-economic situation worsened in the neighbourhoods. This means adolescents have less opportunities to enter the labour market and improve their living conditions.

The inequality and exclusion of indigenous and afro-descendant communities go hand-in-hand with high levels of poverty, constituting a double burden for adolescents in these communities. In Bolivia, the impact of extreme poverty affects 49.2% of indigenous people, compared with 24.1% of non-indigenous people. Moreover, the analysis of the situation of young women has revealed that the ethnic gap is further compounded by the gender gap. In Guatemala, for example, 43% of indigenous boys finish primary school compared with only 30% of indigenous girls.
The situation is even worse for adolescents living in extremely vulnerable conditions, like those living in the streets and migrants. Their situation of marginalization makes them invisible in the eyes of their communities and the authorities, remaining beyond the coverage of statistics and the development plans in their countries.

**Stigmatisation and negative messages**

As violence, gangs or *maras* and teenage pregnancy have become the center of attention of the media and the public opinion, adolescents have increasingly been viewed as ‘a problem to be solved’\(^2\). In fact, when adolescents are asked why they join gangs, most say they did it to take control, to be noticed and to feel accepted\(^2^3\). Adolescents are more often the victims of violent acts than the perpetrators and most gang members are actually adults\(^1^3\).

Growing up in a society where being an adolescent is perceived as negative and dangerous constitutes an enormous barrier to active participation and development in society as well as the enjoyment of a decent and positive life. In Ecuador, one study analysed the treatment given to youth related issues by a newspaper, noting that the words most commonly used to describe adolescents were: ‘gang members’, ‘violent’, ‘criminals’, and ‘at risk’\(^2^4\).

Adolescents are also the target of harmful messages from the media that impact negatively on their development, including the ‘bombardment’ of tobacco and alcohol advertising aimed at the youth market - reaching 90% of young people in Argentina, Bolivia, Costa Rica, Mexico and Uruguay\(^7\).

**Low investment and limited access to services**

The lack of data on the situation of adolescents in Latin America and the Caribbean further complicates attempts to provide evidence on the situation. It also prevents the issue from being properly monitored and visible so that governments fail to adequately respond to the situation. Investment directed towards this age group is consequently negatively affected.

Most children and adolescents feel they are of middling or no importance to those who govern them\(^1^7\).
Many adolescents in the region do not have the access to affordable, relevant and quality services. Meanwhile, the services that are available do not tend to take into account the needs of this particular age group, making them unfriendly and inadequate for young people. Reproductive health services are a case in point. For example, complications with pregnancy, birth and the puerperal period are the main cause of death amongst women aged between 15 - 24 years-old in Honduras and Paraguay, and this particular cause of death also ranks amongst the top five for this age group in several other countries of the region.

Family breakdown and reduced protection

The family is the first environment where the child and adolescent learn to participate, to know their rights and to respect the rights of others. It is also within the nuclear family that feminine and masculine identities are built. Unfortunately, the family can often change from being a protective environment to becoming the scene of violence witnessed or suffered by adolescents. This can become a trigger that pushes adolescents into the streets and toward aggressive behaviours. In Peru, 73% of children and adolescents living in the streets are there as a result of domestic violence and abuse. Once they are without a home, many of them rapidly become accustomed to risky survival behaviour.

The family often fails in its protective role. Adolescent boys find themselves at high risk of being beaten at home or at school, while adolescent girls have higher probabilities of suffering sexual harassment and abuse from an adult within the family environment, school or workplace.

This situation of vulnerability is even worse for disabled adolescents as their families need special support for the development and care of their children. In Jamaica, 65% of boys and girls and adolescents with physical or developmental disabilities live in homes exclusively for children with special needs.

Social Investment for the adolescent population of Latin America and the Caribbean

Since the budgets of the region’s countries do not itemize social spending targeting adolescents, it is difficult to determine exactly how much public spending actually benefits them. However it is clear that public spending directly benefiting the adolescents - most of which corresponds to secondary education and sexual and reproductive health - tends to be low and insufficient for dealing with the needs of this population group.

Similarly, many of the specific programs aimed at adolescents have no legal status and tend to be temporary and their cyclical repetition depends on unstable budgetary resources.

How to ensure positive adolescent development?

If we want to guarantee the development of our societies we need to promote the well-being and protect the rights of adolescents. In order to accomplish this, their needs and aspirations must be approached in a holistic manner from the various environments in which they develop. Several elements are needed if they are to fully develop their capacities and ensure their rights, and these are listed below.

National Policies for Adolescent development

All States in Latin America and the Caribbean ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child and are in the process of aligning their legislative framework to the commitments made. It is important that they promote holistic and cross-sectorial social policies responding to the needs and rights of adolescents from a positive perspective that allows their rights to be realized. These policies must incorporate a holistic outlook, placing the adolescent at the centre of State efforts as a full subject of rights, aiming to prevent a whole group of risk factors. This type of wide-focus intervention would be far more efficient than simply implementing a group of specific isolated programmes aimed at resolving each individual problem.

Migration also has a great impact on the lives of adolescents - especially when it occurs in irregular circumstances. Whether children migrate with their parents or the parents migrate alone leaving their children behind, this situation considerably increases the vulnerability of adolescents to various forms of exploitation, including sexual, commercial and labour exploitation. Half a million Mexicans migrate to the United States each year, and a third of them are children and adolescents. Anecdotal evidence suggests that increasing numbers of adolescents migrate alone.
If we are to have an accurate picture of the situation of adolescents in the region, investment must be made in indicators and information systems that are disaggregated by sex and age. These will allow for a more precise monitoring of the situation, the evaluation of the advances made and provide information on social policy. This monitoring system for the rights of adolescents also strengthens government accountability processes and adolescents’ capacity to claim their rights.

The countries of Latin America and the Caribbean need to increase investment in adolescents. Greater investment in adolescent development is needed in order to give this population the skills, tools and opportunities they need to achieve positive development. It is crucial that countries incorporate the adolescent development component into social spending in their national budgets.

Investing in adolescents is a State obligation, but it also makes economic sense (inadequate and untimely investment in adolescent health and education carries with it high costs in both human and economic terms) and constitutes a strategic tool to break the poverty cycle and to reduce inequality. This makes it a valuable a tool for the consolidation of democracy on the continent.

Early adolescence: a forgotten stage

The population aged between 10 and 14 years-old has not been a priority in public policy and public implementation has, on occasion, overlooked their specific needs. It is precisely during these years of early adolescence that individuals are beginning to experience accelerated physical and sociological changes and when they require more support and guidance. Adolescents between the ages of 10-14 are vulnerable because they are more likely to become the victims of abuse and exploitation, and to demonstrate high risk behaviour. However, given the receptiveness of young adolescents, this stage also offers a great opportunity to encourage healthy habits in order to protect them from high-risk situations in the future.

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Investment in pre-adolescents and adolescents between 10 and 14 years-old is fundamental to guarantee sustainability and continuity of results from investments made during early childhood and in preventing the emergence of problems that have high cost for society - such as early pregnancy, drug consumption, sexually transmitted diseases and violence, among others.


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Adolescent participation

Some important points need to be taken into account when considering promoting adolescent participation:

- discussing and establishing rules prior to initiating any process for participation;
- evaluating each participatory process to highlight the mystifying and manipulative elements;
- setting priorities in the design and promotion of public policy for adolescents that includes all young people;
- analyzing the effectiveness of national and local institutions and systems established to protect the rights of adolescents;
- encouraging adolescents to take part in public policy design and implementation at national and local level;
- enhancing the mass media’s awareness of the rights of adolescents as a strategy to counter the stigma and negative view of adolescence;


Create spaces for adolescent participation

Participation is a right, whereby it is crucial to ensure the participation of adolescents in decisions that affect their lives. This implies the development of institutional mechanisms that allow them to exercise their rights as citizens, stating opinions and becoming involved in questions related to their own development. Strengthening the participation of adolescents in the formulation and implementation of development plans and programmes ensures their pertinence.

Learning participation starts in the family and in school, the every day environments of children and adolescents. Adolescent participation in the school environment helps to strengthen their self esteem, democratic values and the exercising of citizenship. Participation and involvement in the community give them a sense of belonging with the people around them, and constitute important protective factors.

Universal secondary education

Ensuring a quality primary and secondary education for all is one of the pillars of adolescent development. Holistic development programmes need to be articulated from early childhood straight through until the last stages of adolescence. Continual investment, in accordance with the stages in the life cycle, achieves a sustainable and progressive impact. From a rights perspective, the educational approach needs to be made through the articulation of formal and non-formal access mechanisms and second-chance modalities.
In order to function as a learning environment, schools must also be seen as a recreational space that encourages the participation of all adolescents. The institution must encourage a culture of peace and work for mediation and conflict resolution. Transmitting lifeskills is also the role of every school in a context of diversity.

The content of the curriculum must be strongly linked to the labour market, allowing students to develop a series of capacities that will serve them in their future professional lives. In particular, the school must offer opportunities for vocational training.

Culture of Peace

Adolescents have a right to a life free of violence. Violence is a vicious cycle, and in order to prevent involvement in violent acts in the future, we must first ensure that adolescents do not become the victims of violence themselves.

The construction of a culture of peace is a cross-sectorial issue, which assumes investment in the various elements of adolescent and human development. It arises from a fairer and more tolerant society. Violence prevention programs must go far beyond the symptoms to treat the causes of the problem. The approach therefore calls for the development of social services and access to opportunities including economic support for families, support for parenting, lifeskills training for adolescents, community support centres and rehabilitation programmes.

All actors must contribute to justice and social inclusion in order to generate a virtuous cycle to escape from violence. A citizen culture of respect for the rules of living together and of conflict prevention builds on the assumption of a society that is supportive and respectful of human rights. In this sense, adolescents can be positive agents in building a culture of peace, and investing in their development can ensure a fairer and less violent society.

Promotion of adolescent-friendly services

Health policies for adolescents must be holistic, taking into account their needs in terms of mental, reproductive and nutritional health, amongst others. A healthy adolescent needs appropriate eating habits, physical activity, health and mental well-being and a responsible attitude towards sexuality. Health promotion and healthy development must be an objective pursued not only by the health institutions, but also by other sectors including education and the community. A holistic adolescent health policy requires information, promotion, prevention and care elements.
Sexual and reproductive health is also in need of attention. Sex education programmes are required, along with broadened coverage and access to health services for adolescents, young men and young women, with health professionals specially trained to attend to this age group. These services must not only be accessible (including to rural and marginal urban populations) and affordable but also, friendly and confidential. Respect and relevant information are fundamental building blocks that will ensure the use of these services.

Protection and access to justice

The protection system must act in a preventive manner. It must deal with the underlying causes of problems and contribute to the creation of a protective environment for adolescents. Consequently, the judicial system must respond to the needs of adolescents as victims, perpetrators and witnesses. As most perpetrators of violent crimes were victims themselves in their childhood, a national protection system and its judicial component must be implemented to ensure the prevention of abuse and victim rehabilitation to mitigate trauma.

Specific adolescent support programmes are needed for adolescents in highly vulnerable situations. Institutionalised adolescents, teenage parents and other such groups present specific needs that require special attention in order to guarantee their development.

According to the CRC, all countries are obliged to develop a juvenile justice system built on the premise of the use of alternative restorative measures and diversion mechanisms, ensuring that the privation of liberty is always the last resort. Police officers, judges, social workers and other actors should be capacitated in the adolescent rights and development approach in order to contribute to institutional reforms and improvements to the system that would guarantee the protection of the rights of adolescents in conflict with the law.
“… the first thing adults have to do is to start thinking like us and that way, some day, they will understand the situation we’re really living in”

Luis, 19 years-old
Voices of Youth
Discussion section

Even though the interests of society must be protected in the short term, the juvenile justice system must also respond to its human development project in the long-term. Ensuring the rights of adolescents in conflict with the law to health, education, protection, security, food, psychological care and development will allow for their reinsertion and future contribution to society.

Support for families

Social policies must promote and protect families in order to support the development of adolescents, as the family is the best mechanism to prevent the social vulnerability of adolescents.

Such policies must consider the economic strengthening of families, providing training to help parents understand and attend to the needs of their adolescent children. This nuclear unit can also promote changes to cultural models and practices so as to counteract stereotypes and encourage gender non-discrimination.

The family can play this protective role only if it is an environment free of violence. Therefore, laws against domestic violence must be enforced, along with the implementation of measures established to eradicate social practices of child abuse and violence prevention programs.
Stimulation of cultural and artistic expression and recreation

It is important to promote adolescents’ own cultural expressions, and to this end public policies must encourage creativity and cultural, sporting and artistic activities. Support for adolescent cultural groups and projects is just as important as activities aimed at the recognition of heritage and cultural diversity. Sport and healthy entertainment initiatives can provide positive inspiration for young people.

These activities can be developed in association with the construction of public spaces for adolescents: safe locations that allow adolescents to participate in sport, develop artistic aptitudes and promote their physical, psychological, spiritual, social, emotional, cognitive and cultural development.

The Media

Increased media awareness of adolescent rights can be used as a strategy to confront the stigma and correct the negative view of adolescence commonly held by the public. The media can be key allies in broadcasting messages on the situation of adolescents and the challenges they face. It can also provide adolescents with a useful tool for learning and the transmission of knowledge.

Adolescents themselves have called for awareness-raising amongst communicators in order for them to offer better handling of news and information produced about and for children and adolescents such that 1) they avoid the dissemination of stereotypes, associating children and adolescents with consumption and behaviour patterns alien to their reality, or criminality and violence; and 2) images of children and adolescents are not used in a shameful or discriminating manner. 

“If there is violence in your family, talk to your friends.”

Adolescent boys, rural area, Paraguay
Voices of children and adolescents on violence
Regional and international frameworks

The rights of adolescents are recognized and guaranteed internationally by the Convention on the Rights of the Child, as by other conventions and frameworks for action (Ibero-American Convention on Youth Rights, United Nations World Programme of Action for Youth, among others). Hence, the Committee on the Rights of the Child plays a central role in promoting adolescent development, raising awareness, guiding and supporting member States.

Regional alliances allow for the exchange of practice and experience on positive adolescent development, in order to improve national capacities for the protection of adolescent rights. Advocacy within regional bodies can be used as an instrument to keep State commitments high on their agenda and remind them of their duties toward adolescents.

As the countries of the region ensure fulfilment of the rights of adolescents and make them part of their own development, they will find in them important allies, enthusiastic agents for change in the construction of fairer, supportive, democratic and productive societies. The economic and social development of Latin America and the Caribbean depends to a large extent on the priority given to them today.
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A lo largo de este texto, las referencias a “los adolescentes” incluyen a los adolescentes de ambos sexos. En la mayor parte del texto se omite el uso de “los y las adolescentes” para hacer la lectura más fluida.