

FieldNotes

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Reaching Out to Youth in High-risk Environments

Life skills programs can play a valuable role in addressing the needs of young people growing up in high-risk environments — increasing their resilience to negative influences in their lives and their ability to contribute to their communities.

According to Mark Mannes, PhD, Director of Applied Research at the Search Institute, “Resilience is best understood as young people’s successful adaptation to adversity in their lives.” To the extent that life skills programs strengthen the “protective factors” in a young person’s life, such programs can profoundly impact a young person’s ability to overcome risk factors in their environment, says Mannes.

Investments in life skills development among at-risk youth have also been found to produce more extensive positive outcomes than programs targeting youth in more mainstream settings.

According to a study of 13 life skills programs supported through a global youth development initiative of Nokia and the International Youth Foundation (IYF), those young people characterized as “at risk” were found to experience the greatest increases in life skills development. As a result, the study’s Brandeis University research team urged that life skills interventions target those youth most in need of help.

Presented here are the reflections of three IYF partner organizations — in Mexico, Peru, and the United Kingdom — who have developed programs to respond to the needs of youth in high-risk environments. Their experiences range from targeting low-income youth in schools to addressing the needs of out-of-school youth living in poor rural communities and urban slums. Each partner offers frank assessments of the challenges and rewards of reaching out to young people relegated to the margins of their societies.

TIPS FOR BUILDING TRUST

Many youth growing up in high-risk environments have experienced few, if any, positive relationships with adults. IYF partners offer the following advice for building trust:

- **Tell the truth.** Always do what you say you are going to do. Don't make promises you can't keep.
- **Listen to young people's ideas.** Acknowledge and value their opinions.
- **Be a good role model.** At-risk youth tend to have few positive role models. It's important to model behavior such youth may not have experienced in their lives.
- **Be authentic.** Go the extra mile to show you are genuine.
- **Encourage participating youth to express themselves and develop their own ideas.** Most have had little encouragement in their lives and lack a sense of inner worth based on positive accomplishments.
- **Ensure consistency.** Strive to be a predictable and steady force in young people's lives. Adhere to scheduled times and places for activities to occur.
- **Emphasize group activities.** Demonstrate the power of working together to achieve common goals. Working collectively strengthens teamwork and communication skills and prepares young people to assume active roles as citizens.
- **Engage young people in decision-making.** Explore ways of involving youth in the design and delivery of program activities.
- **Set clear boundaries.** At-risk youth often grow up in chaotic environments. Involve youth in establishing rules (e.g., no bullying or harassment) and make sure such rules are clearly articulated.

Deciding Where and How to Reach Youth in High-risk Environments

IYF partners pursue various strategies in reaching youth in high-risk environments. In the UK, the Life Routes¹ program developed a life skills curriculum that was introduced in schools in 2001.

Four years later, the program adapted its approach and materials to reach vulnerable youth outside mainstream school settings (e.g., youth clubs and community learning centers). Currently, the

¹ Known as Make a Connection from 2001-2005.

program reaches 250 out-of-school youth annually in ten locations throughout the country. While this is a relatively small number compared to the thousands of young people the program reaches in schools, its impact on individuals has proven greater. According to a recent study conducted by the National Children's Bureau (NCB), which is implementing the program, over 80 percent of youth targeted showed significant improvements in five life skills (e.g., teamwork, respect for others, listening, critical thinking, and decision making). "We are able to make the greatest difference in the lives of vulnerable youth," says Sophie Wood, NCB's Principal Officer for Life Routes.

In Mexico, the *Cámara! Ahí Nos Vemos* program coaches young adults to work with children in producing short documentary films in which they reflect on life in their communities. In Mexico City, the program initially sought to reach out-of-school youth in poor neighborhoods. Such youth, however, proved difficult to find and engage in program activities. "Young people in Mexico don't have anyplace to go," explains Luz Elena Aranda Arroyo, Program Coordinator at *Rostros y Voces*, the national NGO responsible for implementing the program. "They hang out on the street or play basketball or football in the park. We had trouble finding a big group of them." As a result, *Cámara* shifted its strategy and now works with middle school students in low-income neighborhoods.

In Peru, the Information and Education Center for the Prevention of Drug Abuse (CEDRO) pursues what it calls a "chameleon strategy" in implementing the *De Calle a Calle* program in slum communities in Lima and Pisco. The program, launched in 2003, engages low-income youth, ages 16 to 20, in volunteer activities benefiting children, ages 6 to 12. In the process, they develop their self-confidence and acquire communication, teamwork, and citizenship skills.

"The idea is to get inside high-risk communities with the help of people inside the community — be it a school principal or church leader who has the respect of the community," explains Julio Moscoso, CEDRO's Outreach and Transition Manager. By relying on such individuals and organizations to open doors, CEDRO develops relationships over time and avoids being perceived as an "outsider" imposing its will on the community.

Over the past three years, that strategy has proven its effectiveness. An outcomes measurement study of the program conducted by Brandeis University in 2006 found that 97 percent of those youth surveyed had increased scores across 12 life skills. Seventy one percent of program graduates now volunteer an average of seven

“The most important thing is to gain trust from the people in the community. You have to take care of this precious gift. I’ve seen programs that have been kicked out of a community because people have lost faith.”

— Julio Moscoso, Outreach and Transition Manager, CEDRO, Peru

hours a month; 74 percent were working harder in school; and 64 percent said they were more actively involved in services and leadership development.

Developing Programs That Engage and Educate At-Risk Youth

IYF partners emphasize the importance of developing activities that are of interest and relevant to the needs of young people in high-risk environments. In Peru, CEDRO interviews community, NGO, and youth leaders in communities being targeted to look at the risk factors affecting youth (e.g., prevalence of gangs, drug use, lack of family and/or community supports) and existing resources to meet those needs. It then tailors its approach to fill gaps in services and to appeal to local youth.

In adapting Life Routes to meet the needs of out-of-school youth in the UK, Wood and NCB's local implementing partners looked at how to make program activities fun and engaging. For example, teaching young people about the importance of healthy behaviors might involve decorating a refrigerator with health tips; whereas learning about tolerance and conflict resolution could involve making peace flags.

In Mexico, *Rostros y Voces* also designed the *Cámara* program to captivate the interest and imagination of its target population. Through researching issues in their communities and making videos, participants are able to express themselves and use technology in creative ways.

Creating Safe Spaces and Identifying the Right Staff

It is important that program activities be carried out in spaces where young people feel safe and that have a positive reputation among those youth targeted. Such spaces may include community



In Peru, the De Calle a Calle program develops the life and leadership skills of disadvantaged youth living in high-risk communities in Lima and Pisco. Here, program participants celebrate the installation of three computers donated by Nokia staff.

centers, churches, health care facilities, or libraries. In some cases, it may be necessary for young people to participate in the program anonymously, particularly those who fear being labeled or shamed by their peers for being different.

Also important is assigning staff with the appropriate background and credentials to work with at-risk youth. "To go into high-risk areas you have to have a special profile," says Moscoso. "You have to be proactive, to have good interpersonal and communication skills, to be trustworthy, and someone who tells the truth." Working in high-risk communities can also be dangerous, warns Moscoso, pointing out that CEDRO staff have occasionally been robbed.

Aranda agrees, identifying the right staff is essential. *Cámara*'s teachers and facilitators are all young people in their 20s. "The

REACHING AT-RISK YOUTH: QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

In developing programs to reach young people living in high-environments, consider the following:

- *How will you go about researching the needs of youth within your target community(ies)?* IYF partners have accessed existing research, consulted with local organizations, conducted focus groups with youth, and carried out surveys of youth and community leaders.
- *Do you have relationships with local organizations in the areas you are targeting?* If not, how will you go about engaging important local stakeholders? IYF partners spend considerable time identifying and developing relationships with community groups — e.g., police, church leaders, local schools, and businesses — in assessing needs and developing program activities.
- *How do you plan to engage youth in designing and carrying out your program?* Approach youth groups not as beneficiaries, but as partners.
- *How will you plan/implement activities so that they are engaging for youth?* At the same time, how will you balance the need for fun activities with developing those life skills identified during the assessment phase?
- *How will you formally acknowledge young people's participation in the program?* Providing youth with some form of accreditation gives them a goal to work toward and can improve their future prospects at school and in getting, or creating, jobs.
- *Do you have a plan for engaging alumni in program activities?* Thirty percent of *Cámara* graduates remain involved in the program as mentors and tutors.

“ I have witnessed first-hand the energy and creativity of those youth engaged in the *De Calle a Calle* program. Despite their circumstances, they demonstrate a remarkable optimism and resilience when given the chance to realize their potential. These young people have vital roles to play in transforming their communities for the better. ”

— Juan de Salas, Country Manager, Nokia, Peru

teachers and the young people have a very horizontal relationship,” she explains. “They share the same way of dressing and talking. They identify with one another.”

Addressing the Challenge of Program Dropouts

A significant challenge cited by IYF partners in working with at-risk youth is the possibility that they will drop out before completing the program. Such young people face a myriad of obstacles, including the competing demands of work, conflicts at home and within their communities, poor time management skills, transient family lives, and a lack of commitment to follow-through.

In Peru, *De Calle a Calle*, for example, has a dropout rate of 38 percent, although many youth drop out and return again, says Moscoso. To address high drop out rates — and accommodate returning youth — CEDRO trains younger program participants to take on increasing responsibilities so they are able to work with newcomers and returning dropouts later on. Also important is finding ways to engage program alumni. In Mexico, for example, 30 percent of Cámara participants who “graduate” from the program remain involved as mentors and tutors.

“Programs need to recognize the chaotic lives these young people often lead and provide support to make it as likely as possible that they will stay,” affirms Life Routes’ Cresswell. “Instead of viewing young people as failing by leaving, we should look at how we are failing to provide what they need.”

Lessons Learned

IYF partners cite the following “lessons learned” in working with youth in high risk environments:

- **Addressing the needs of at-risk youth can be more time consuming than working with mainstream youth and can result in a higher cost per beneficiary.** NCB’s Wood, for example, devotes the majority of her time to managing Life Routes activities directed at vulnerable youth.
- **To adequately address the needs of young people in high-risk environments, it’s important to collaborate with other social service agencies in order to create a holistic network of support.** In Peru, for example, *De Calle a Calle* took care to build upon the efforts of an existing network comprised of health centers, local schools, community leaders, churches, parents, and municipalities.

- **Working with schools can make the job of accessing at-risk youth easier, but also takes time.** IYF partners emphasize the importance of building positive relationships with school staff who can advocate for the importance and relevance of the services you are providing. Demonstrate how your program can make their job easier (e.g., reducing school violence through enhancing young people’s cooperation and conflict resolution skills.)
- **Keep it positive.** NCB’s Wood emphasizes the importance of maintaining a positive program experience for youth, acknowledging young people for “every bit of progress they make,” and setting targets that are achievable. Moscoso agrees that positive approaches are essential, “especially in countries like Peru, where the system is often more interested in punishing youth for their bad deeds.”

Additional Resources

Forum for Youth Investment (www.forumforyouthinvestment.org)

Information and Education Center for the Prevention of Drug Abuse (www.cedro.org.pe)

National Children’s Bureau (www.ncb.org.uk)

Search Institute (www.search-institute.org)

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