



GLOBAL CENTER
for the Development of *the Whole Child*

SUPPORTING FUTURE GENERATIONS

The Science Behind
Investing in Adolescents



Summary Report



About Us

Creating pathways out of adversity...

The Global Center for the Development of the Whole Child is based at the University of Notre Dame and works in more than 25 countries around the world to support a holistic approach to adolescent and child development in adversity. We work to advance academic achievement in safe, supportive, and equitable family, school, and community environments.

What We Do

Working with research partners, practitioners and policymakers, we develop and test whole child development approaches, translating evidence into impactful programs. We focus on the relationships and settings that are most important in the lives of children and youth (home, community and school), aligning knowledge, attitudes, practices, and policies within and across these settings to foster resilience in and improve the lives of children.



Translate: In collaboration with our partners, we translate research into concrete whole child development programs.

Evaluate: We adapt assessment tools to local needs, building capacity to measure, evaluate and improve whole child development programs.

Activate: We activate and align the diverse support systems (home, community, school) that champion children's development and learning in adversity.

Communicate: We gather and exchange best practices from around the world on learning in fragile, low-resource contexts and advance policies which improve the lives and outcomes of children.

This brief is based on research conducted by the following ND faculty and research staff:

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Introduction

Photo by Shadow Puppet

There are 1.2 billion adolescents aged 10–19 in the world today and nearly 90 percent of these girls and boys live in low- and middle-income countries. Realizing the rights of these adolescents, and investing in their development, contributes to the full participation of adolescents and young people in a nation’s life, a competitive labor force, sustained economic growth, improved governance, and vibrant civil societies, accelerating progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (UNICEF, 2018).

While whole child development consistently refers to “child and youth,” adolescent development is virtually absent from the literature of evaluated programs. Whole child development requires attention to the life course, bridging early childhood development with adolescence and beyond.

What do we know about adolescent development that can inform whole child development? How might these insights contribute to the whole adolescent development approach?

Investing in **adolescents** builds strong economies, inclusive communities and vibrant societies.

SUPPORTING FUTURE GENERATIONS

The Science Behind Investing in Adolescents

GC-DWC's Supporting Future Generations Adolescent Research Project focuses and builds on research across **THREE AREAS** of adolescent development in adversity as follows:



1. SUPPORTING ADOLESCENT MOTHERS AND THEIR CHILDREN

The first study, *Two-generation Programs for mothers and their children*, sets out to evaluate evidence on programs that prioritize the health and wellbeing of both mothers and their children, whose development outcomes are inextricably linked.



2. ADVOCATING FLEXIBLE LEARNING APPROACHES

The second study, *Flexible Learning Programs & Pathways Back to Education*, focuses on flexible learning programs within low- and middle-income countries for out-of-school adolescents that contribute to learning and social-emotional needs while also linking to formal and informal education systems.



3. ADDRESSING MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

The third, *Adolescent mental health and psychosocial support in the context of adversity, and the implications for education*, reviews programs that address the gap in youth mental health and psychosocial treatment, including the shortage of mental health professionals and the lack of evidence-based support, policies, strategies, and funding.

The ultimate objective is to promote more effective, impactful programs that foster resilience for adolescents facing adversity (such as poverty, displacement, humanitarian emergencies, conflict situations), using a whole child development lens.

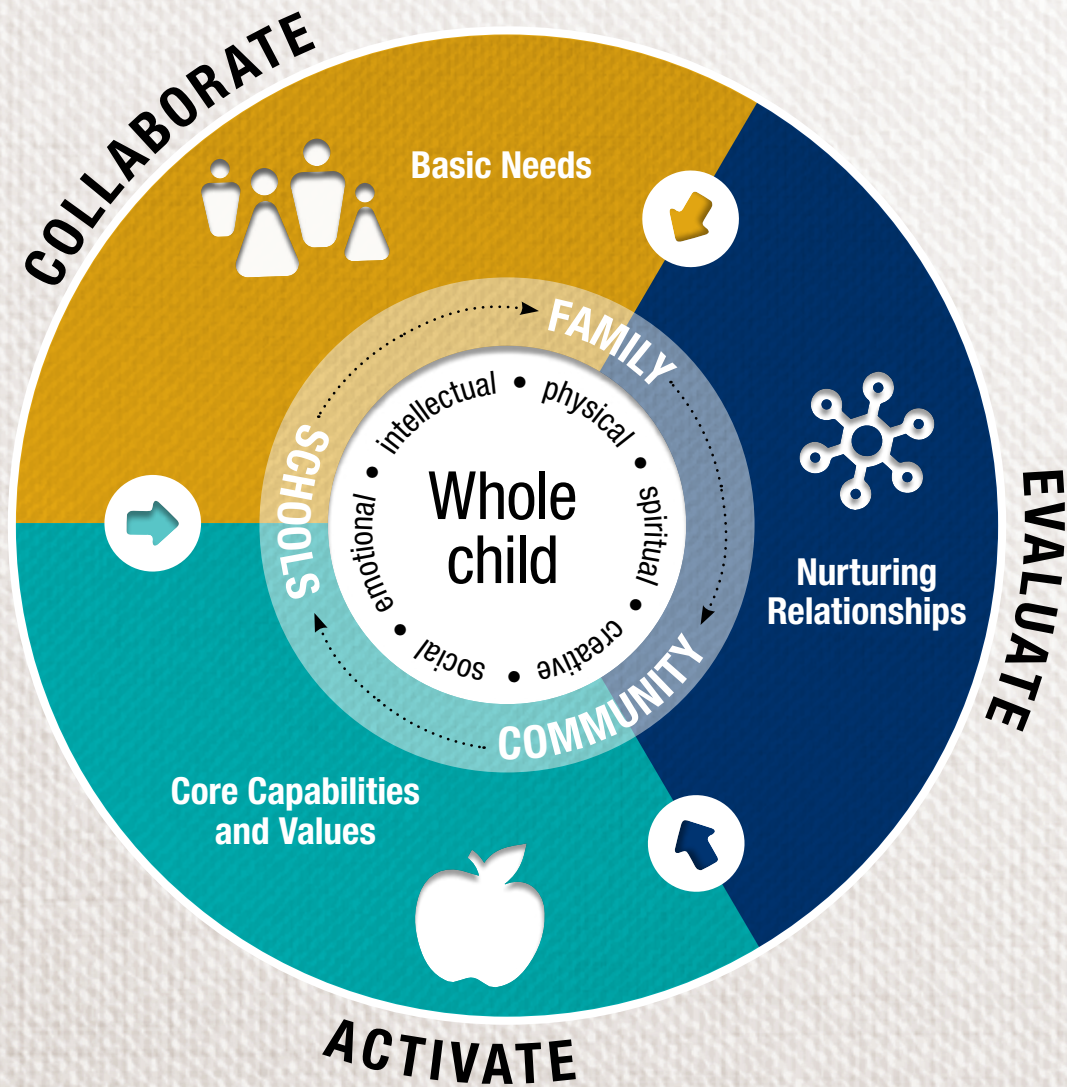
This project summary highlights the key findings and emerging themes of the Adolescent Research Project. It also provides a snapshot of good practices and lessons from the field.

What is Whole Child Development?

Whole Child Development (WCD) is a holistic development approach with the goal to educate the whole child, physically, socially, emotionally, and academically, with the active engagement and support of the community.

The WCD approach recognizes that all children, particularly those facing extreme adversity, require a range of knowledge, skills, experiences, and core values that will enable them to engage as productive and ethical citizens.

See Porticus' [Measuring What Matters](#)



Adolescent Development

at-a-glance



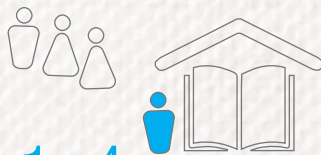
Adolescents are particularly sensitive to their social and physical environments; a sensitivity that shapes their behavior and worldviews as they transition into adulthood.

(See [Adolescents in Adversity](#))

Defined by the United Nations as those **between the ages of 10 and 19**, **adolescents experience a transition period between childhood and adulthood** and with it, significant growth and development. Adolescents who have a history of adverse experiences may report a lower quality of life, maintain fewer social relationships, and have difficulty with emotion regulation.



Photo by EC/ECHO/Wim Fransen



1 in **4** of the **poorest adolescents** has never attended school, and more than **200 million adolescents of secondary school** age are out of school (UNICEF).



Adolescent pregnancy and **forced marriage** are major drivers of school dropout; over

1 million adolescent girls in Africa

became pregnant during the 2020 school closures (World Vision).



Every year, nearly **75 million** children and youth **experience education disruptions** due to natural disasters, conflict, and disease outbreaks (UNICEF).

Although **online learning programs** are accessible to



90% of **stay-at-home learners in the US**,

they currently serve less than



30% in **low-income countries** (UNESCO).



Photo by Chetan Karkhanis

6 key characteristics

01 Adolescence is a critical time for identity development.

02 The adolescent brain develops at a rate second only to early childhood, making adolescent girls and boys hypersensitive to influences in their environments.

03 Adolescents are drawn to experimentation and innovation, but this inclination can also leave them vulnerable.

04 Peers are one of the most important influences in an adolescent's life. Yet adolescents often want guidance from trusted adults.

05 Context is critical, shaping adolescent environment, experience and opportunities.

06 Adolescents in adverse environments face complex, interconnected and fundamentally systemic challenges.

Photo: World Bank Photo Collection





Photo by Shadow Puppet

Emerging Themes

Adolescent Development Programs

-  Whole **Adolescent** Development initiatives are just beginning.

Whole adolescent development is virtually absent from the literature of evaluated programs. A greater understanding of the relationship between adolescence and the early years is needed to better address the specific needs of adolescents facing extreme adversity and to identify where and how opportunities for impact could be supported.

-  Whole Child Development is gaining momentum as a concept, but programming is still lagging.

Whole Child Development (WCD) programs that do exist are often poorly funded and not well supported across different government sectors, such as health, education, and social services. More flexible, cross-sector and innovative funding models are needed—models that showcase collaborative processes, country-level approaches, faith-based education providers, and adolescent in adversity programming (such as in humanitarian emergencies).

The critical role of gender is missing.

A gender informed WCD approach acknowledges the critical role of gender norms as an enabler or constraint in girls' ability to thrive. Continued analysis of the "why" behind gender gaps in education, employment, and recreation is key to recognize and address patriarchal structures and values that devalue girls. Gender-transformative education contributes to opportunities for both boys and girls to consider a more gender-equitable future for themselves and their families.

Gender-transformative education

Starting from birth, children are socialized by parents, carers, and peers about different behavioral gendered expectations. Deeply held patriarchal norms that devalue girls are perpetuated in family practices and choices. When the environment expands to include the educational system, these norms are reinforced – unless there is a deliberate choice to interrupt and challenge those norms through gender-transformative education.

Flexible learning can contribute to out-of-school adolescents' learning and social emotional needs.

The mass school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic forced education systems to re-think distance learning (see [State of the Global Education Crisis, 2021](#)). Using a mix of approaches, resources and technology such as radio, TV, mobile phones, or online learning to support out-of-school youth, flexible learning programs aim to continue learning outside the class and/or provide pathways back to formal education. Evidence is lacking, however, on how to effectively promote flexible education programs while also linking to formal and informal education systems to ensure education becomes more equitable and inclusive, and better equipped to serve the needs of communities.

Program learning, evaluation, and WCD investment decision-making could be strengthened through:

- **Randomized controlled trials** (RCTs). Though complex and time consuming, RCTs are evaluation's gold standard. They provide a rigorous tool to examine cause-effect relationships between an intervention and an outcome.

- **Rapid Program Feedback Loops.** Rapid Evaluation, Assessment and Learning Mechanisms (REALM) provide continuous, evidence-based learning and iteration in time sensitive and resource-scarce contexts where efficiency is key.
- **Systems Thinking** - Systems thinking helps to identify and understand critical linkages, synergies, and trade-offs between systemic issues generally treated separately which threaten adolescents' futures in the face of adversity. It enables donors to assess and manage risks and to decide how and where to intervene through selected, targeted policies.

 Local knowledge and experience must be incorporated from the outset.

Community engagement in defining the issue and identifying its solution can transform existing power dynamics. Along with participatory grant making, it can empower local decision-making and uptake.



African Mental Health Research Initiative

is a mental health research capacity-building consortium of four African universities in Ethiopia, Malawi, South Africa and Zimbabwe working to build an Africa-led network of future leaders in mental, neurological and substance use research on the African continent.



African Population and Health Research Center

Transforming lives in Africa through research.

African Population Health Research

Center is a unique African research institute in Nairobi, Kenya generating an Africa-led and Africa-owned body of evidence to inform decision-making on some of the most critical challenges on the continent.



Photo by Wilfred Wachiru

Whole child development requires attention to the full life course, bridging early childhood development with **adolescence** and beyond.

Investing in Future Generations... Lessons from the Field



1. SUPPORTING ADOLESCENT MOTHERS AND THEIR CHILDREN

Successful two-generation programs build bridges across systems, such as early childhood development, adult mental health, and workforce training.

In **Chile**, the government's "Chile crece contigo" (Chile grows with you) program starts in pregnancy and continues after childbirth, with cash transfers for families and early childhood education for children. It shows that two-generation programs can be scaled across public systems when there is strong political will and financial support.

In **Trinidad and Tobago**, Servol Centers provide both early childhood and adolescent education. The Ministry of Education pays teachers' salaries while the NGO Servol runs the schools and trains the teachers.

In **Kenya**, the Kidogo-run campus baby care program partnered with the Kisumu County government to establish early childhood care centers on the premises of 26 government-run Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) centers in the county.

The Sibling Support to Adolescent Girls (SSAGE) program, implemented by Mercy Corps, engages adolescent girls alongside their parents and siblings, working to end violence against girls in **humanitarian contexts**. The program includes a life-skills curriculum and centers on gender-based violence and gender norms.



Photo by Wilfred Wachiru



2. ADVOCATING FLEXIBLE LEARNING APPROACHES

The COVID 19 pandemic provided an opportunity to learn from and adopt flexible learning approaches, using new and traditional technologies. While flexible education is still largely focused on literacy and numeracy, there have been some promising whole child development approaches.

In **the Philippines**, the Alternative Learning System (ALS) set up an online extension to their regular in-person or television-delivered program. Their website provided ALS learners and teachers with access to remote learning opportunities, including webinars, courses, and tutorials.

CorStone's flexible learning programs target adolescents who are at risk for school dropout and early/forced marriage in **India, Rwanda, and Kenya**. They focus more broadly on adolescent wellbeing than explicitly on education, particularly during the global pandemic, incorporating the use of interactive voice response (IVR), podcasts, psychological support hotline, and radio programming for home-bound student learners.

In **South Sudan** and **Uganda**, accelerated education programs incorporated a "Girls Corner" to provide a space for girls to rest, breastfeed, access sanitary supplies, and wash in a safe and private environment. They recruit female teachers so adolescent girls can be mentored by and learn from role models.

CorStone's Girls First program strives to build resilience in adolescent girls, as well as target social drivers that inhibit girls' education. In **India**, for example, the program uses a whole child school community approach to shift thinking, teaching girls and their families that it is equally important for them to attend school as it is for boys.



3. ADDRESSING MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

The most effective programs in this study had scalable strategies, promoting task shifting and training for health and social welfare personnel, as well as mindfulness, social, and emotional skills within schools, flexible education programs, and youth programs.

In **Sierra Leone**, the Youth Readiness Intervention targets psychological distress among war-affected youth, focusing on concepts such as psychoeducation about trauma, cognitive restructuring, behavioral activation, problem solving, interpersonal skills, and relaxation techniques. Participants reported significant improvements in emotion regulation, prosocial attitudes/behaviors, and social support.

In **Gaza**, the *Promoting Positive Family Futures Program* is a promising family-based approach to care, where parents and adolescents participate together. Program findings indicated positive improvements in paternal and maternal depression, cognitive reappraisal, family-wide emotional security and adolescent adjustment.

In the **Democratic Republic of the Congo**, cognitive behavioral therapy programs addressing post-traumatic stress symptoms were administered to war-affected youth who witnessed or experienced sexual violence. They revealed significant improvement in participant trauma, depression, anxiety, and conduct symptoms, as well as significantly greater prosocial behavior.

In **Kenya**, the INSPIRE program works with adolescents suffering from perinatal depression. Using task-shifting, trained health workers in maternal and child health clinics focus on psychoeducation about depression, processing interpersonal difficulties, problem-solving, communication skills, and birth preparation. INSPIRE improves access to mental health care for a particularly vulnerable population and promotes a strong start for new mothers and their children.



Photo by Wilfred Wachiru

The Way Forward

A holistic approach to **adolescent development** has the potential to produce a triple dividend on investment, yielding benefits to adolescents in the short term, across their lifespan and for the next generation.



Photo by Shadow Puppet

Adolescence is a critical time in the course of a life. It is a unique opportunity for investment in adolescent health and well-being, quality education, and skills development for productive employment.

Building on investments made in early childhood and/or making up for what was not yet built can foster adolescent resilience to positively shape the world around them.

However, many adolescents in low- and middle-income countries are not able to finish school and are ill-equipped for productive labor in a modern society. Adolescent sexuality, pregnancy, and childbearing continue to be major health issues, and the consequences of gang and domestic violence are severe.

The Supporting Future Generations Adolescent Research Project reveals how important it is for effective development programs to begin early in children's lives. Working holistically and comprehensively to address the needs and aspirations of adolescents, these programs must adopt a whole child development approach that includes family, school, peers and neighborhoods.

Clearly articulating the distinct needs of adolescents within the broader whole child development initiative is a key first step. A whole adolescent development program must also be gender-transformative, draw upon local knowledge and solutions, and be tied to national programs, systems, and policy outcomes. Furthermore, linking early childhood development and adolescent development portfolios together via two-generation approaches will add a life course perspective to the program, helping to build a brighter future for adolescents, their families, and their communities.

A Whole Child Development Approach for Adolescent Wellbeing

A WCD approach incorporates all aspects of an adolescent's wellbeing—social, emotional, physical, intellectual, spiritual, and creative—to enable out of school adolescents to catch-up on missed education and/or return to formal schooling.

Investing in adolescents' holistic wellbeing is a proven pathway out of adversity, and using a WCD approach is a cost-effective investment to ensure the health and prosperity of children and adolescents.



Photo by GC-DWC



GLOBAL CENTER
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