

Case study

PALS: Adolescent Life Skills and Parenting in Nigeria

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Plan International strives to advance children's rights and equality for girls all over the world. We recognise the power and potential of every single child. But this is often suppressed by poverty, violence, exclusion and discrimination. And it is girls who are most affected.

As an independent development and humanitarian organisation, we work alongside children, young people, our supporters and partners to tackle the root causes of the challenges facing girls and all vulnerable children.

We support children's rights from birth until they reach adulthood and help children to prepare for and respond to crises and adversity. We drive changes in practices and policy at local, national and global level through our reach, experience and knowledge. For over 75 years, we have been building powerful partnerships for children, and we are active in over 70 countries.

Cover photo: Plan International

PALS in Adamawa and Borno States, Nigeria

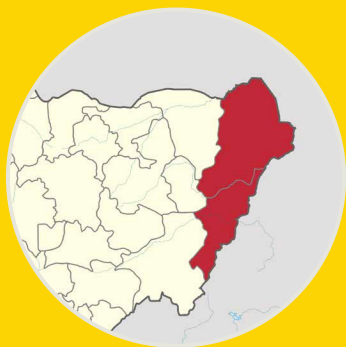
Overview

"I have learned to be more mature. In the past, I would take justice into my own hands if someone fought with me or my siblings. After many PALS sessions, I now understand the proper channels to report issues and seek solutions"

- Sarah (17), adolescent girl PALS Life Skills participant

PALS programme goal: To promote the psychosocial well-being, health and safety of adolescents aged 10-19 in crisis settings.

Steps towards implementation



Locations:
Adamawa and Borno
States, Nigeria



Plan International Nigeria partnered with the Hope and Rural Aid Foundation (HARAF), leveraging HARAF's local experience in adolescent programming and humanitarian response.



The PALS programme was implemented with adolescent girls and boys who were out-of-school, adolescent mothers and adolescents with disabilities.



The PALS curriculum was informally adapted to the local context using local terminologies, relevant examples, and culturally appropriate tools like storytelling and games.

Impact

- Improved psychosocial well-being and life Skills: Adolescents reported enhanced communication, emotional regulation and conflict resolution skills. Many gained confidence to express concerns to parents and peers and learned to manage stress, build support networks and handle puberty and relationships more positively.
- Strengthened parent-child relationships: Parenting sessions improved caregivers' understanding of positive parenting techniques, reducing the use of harsh discipline and fostering stronger, more respectful relationships with their children.
- Broad reach and high satisfaction among Participants: The programme reached 300 participants across Borno and Adamawa States, 150 adolescents (90F, 60M) and 150 parents/caregivers. 90% of participants reported that the PALS sessions impacted their relationships and decision-making positively, particularly in areas like sexual and reproductive health and hygiene.

Recommendations:

- Conduct a formal curriculum contextualisation workshop: To ensure cultural and linguistic relevance, organise structured workshops with facilitators and community members to adapt the curriculum to local norms and expressions.
- Strengthen community engagement and sensitisation: Enhance awareness campaigns involving local leaders to promote the importance of life skills and parenting sessions, improving participation and community ownership.
- Introduce follow-up and peer support mechanisms: Establish follow-up sessions and peer-support groups to help participants to reinforce and sustain the skills learnt beyond the programme duration.
- Integrate PALS with livelihood skills projects: Incorporate vocational training to meet adolescents' expressed interest in practical, income-generating activities and boost resilience.

Challenges and lessons learnt

- Irregular attendance due to competing responsibilities: Many adolescents and caregivers missed sessions due to household chores or livelihood activities. Regular community sensitisation and flexible scheduling helped to improve attendance and retention.
- Low participation in feedback: Some participants, especially adolescents, were shy or hesitant to provide feedback. Creating a more open, youth-friendly feedback environment and using anonymous tools helped gather more honest input.
- Limited formal curriculum contextualisation: While facilitators adapted content informally, the lack of a structured contextualisation workshop limited alignment with local norms.

CASE STUDY

PALS: Parenting and Adolescent Life Skills

SUMMARY

This case study explores the implementation of the Parenting and Adolescent Life Skills (PALS) programme in Kaleri, Simari, Shuwari and Alkaleri Local Government Areas (LGAs) in Borno State, as well as Girei, Jabbi-lamba, Malabu, Ribadu and Gurin LGAs in Adamawa State, Nigeria. It highlights how the programme was adapted to the humanitarian needs of adolescents amidst ongoing challenges of violent insurgency and economic hardship. The case study examines the implementation of PALS with at-risk adolescents and their parents in 2024, including successes, challenges and lessons learnt for future implementation.

About PALS

Plan International's Parenting and Adolescent Life Skills (PALS) programme promotes the psychosocial well-being, health and safety of adolescents aged 10 to 19 in crisis settings.

The PALS programme uses four strategies:

- Providing life-saving **information** to adolescents and their families
- Strengthening the **life skills** of adolescents and positive **parenting practices** of their parents and caregivers
- Promoting positive and supportive **parent-child relations**
- Linking adolescents and their families to locally available **services and support**

PALS is a three-month programme with weekly Life Skills sessions for adolescents and Parenting sessions for their parents/caregivers.

PALS Life Skills and Parenting groups run separately but in parallel to one another. This helps to reinforce mutual learning, increase families' access to services and promote supportive parent-child relations.

PALS Life Skills sessions engage adolescents in participatory ways to learn, share and practise skills which support adolescent well-being, health and protection. Through creative play and arts such as games, music and drama, adolescents can express themselves, build confidence, learn and connect with peers. Play-based methods have been developed in partnership with Clowns without Borders.

PALS Parenting sessions are discussion- and activity-based and aim to support parents to access essential information, skills and services which support their own well-being and that of their adolescents.

This case study was developed based on conversations with PALS implementing teams and individual participants, as well as analysis of M&E data and project documentation including project reports. All information was collected using informed consent in line with ethical data collection and safeguarding measures. The case study does not include real names or other identifiable information on programme participants.

Key Learnings in Nigeria

Relevance and community need: The PALS programme addressed a critical gap in mental health and psychosocial support for adolescents in conflict-affected areas.

High participation rates and positive feedback from both adolescents and parents reaffirmed the programme's importance in these communities.





Contextual adaptation: The programme was tailored to local needs by integrating culturally appropriate activities, including relevant games and energisers, to enhance engagement and participation. The programme also adopted local translation for some sensitive terminologies in the manual.

Parental engagement is crucial but challenging: Involving parents proved more challenging than mobilising adolescents due to farming and other livelihood commitments. However, when parents participated, adolescents showed more motivation and engagement.

Flexible approach: Facilitators adapted delivery methods by incorporating storytelling, real-life examples and interactive demonstrations. Special attention was given to children with specific needs, ensuring inclusivity and programme continuity.

Holistic impact: The programme has contributed significantly to adolescents' psychosocial well-being, communication skills, conflict resolution abilities, peer relationships and interactions with adults. By providing a safe and supportive environment, it fosters personal growth and learning.

Impact of the crisis on adolescents and specific needs of girls

Adolescents in North-east Nigeria face immense challenges as a result of violence, displacement and lack of access to basic needs. Adolescents are affected by food insecurity and a general lack of services including education, health, including sexual and reproductive health and youth livelihood opportunities. Many adolescents have been separated from their families or lost family members. Adolescents continue to experience distress due to the ongoing insecurity and hardships in everyday life. Many adolescents have been exposed to violence, including physical violence and abduction by armed groups, child labour and exploitation. Adolescent girls face high risks of sexual and gender-based violence, both within communities and in armed groups, whilst response services and community support for child survivors are largely absent.

SETTING UP PALS

Local partnerships

Plan International started working in Nigeria in 2014 and provides humanitarian assistance focussed on child protection, education, nutrition and livelihood assistance for children, adolescents and their families. Programmes implemented with adolescents include a strong focus on mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) to help adolescents cope with psychosocial distress, create safe spaces for social interaction and emotional well-being and build resilience of displaced and out-of-school adolescents.

The PALS programme is implemented by Plan International's local partner, the Hope and Rural Aid Foundation (HARAF). HARAF is a non-profit, non-governmental humanitarian organisation founded in 2011. The organisation has been

BACKGROUND

Humanitarian context Northeast Nigeria

The humanitarian crisis in North-east Nigeria is one of the most severe globally, caused by ongoing conflict, insurgent violence and insecurity for more than fifteen years. An estimated 7.8 million people require humanitarian assistance in 2025 including 4.6 million people in need of food assistance. Borno, Adamawa and Yobe States remain the areas most affected by displacement, food insecurity, disrupted livelihoods and limited access to essential services.

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operating primarily in North-east Nigeria, with plans to expand to other Nigerian states and neighbouring Cameroon. The organisation's key areas of intervention include education for vulnerable populations, adolescent and youth programming, community engagement and livelihood support.

Formation of Life Skills groups

The PALS programme targeted adolescents aged 10 to 17 and their parents/caregivers, prioritising those in vulnerable situations, including out-of-school adolescents, adolescents with disabilities, adolescent-headed households, survivors of gender-based violence (GBV), pregnant girls and young mothers. Life Skills groups were formed with younger adolescents (10-14) and older adolescents (15-17). Each group consisted of 15-20 participants, ensuring a balanced and inclusive learning environment. Adolescents were identified and mobilised through community leaders and outreach efforts by community mobilisers.

Formation of Parenting groups

Parents and caregivers of participating adolescents were invited to take part in the PALS Parenting programme, particularly those facing socio-economic vulnerabilities. Community leaders and community mobilisers reached out jointly to parents and caregivers. The parenting groups were structured similarly to adolescent groups, with separate groups for male and female and male caregivers. The caregivers were mostly aged 30 and over, with a higher proportion of female caregivers.

"I was selected as a representative of the women's group to help disseminate information throughout the community. The selection process was fair and inclusive".

- Female caregiver, PALS Parenting group

Adaptation of the Curriculum to the local context

The full PALS curriculum was implemented in both Borno and Adamawa. Whilst the curriculum was not formally contextualised, a number of local adaptations were made to ensure cultural relevance. The PALS curriculum was adapted to reflect the local context, by integrating real-life examples and scenarios which resonated with participants' lived experiences. Local terms and concepts were included to make the session themes and key messages contextually relevant and appropriate. This approach enhanced participant engagement and practical application of the knowledge and skills practised in the sessions.

Training of PALS facilitators

A total of 11 facilitators (5 female, 6 male) working across 9 LGAs received five-day training on PALS programme implementation. The training equipped facilitators with essential skills in psychosocial support, communication, conflict resolution and child protection.

IMPLEMENTING PALS

Health centres as referral partners

Primary Health Centres in the local communities were involved in the delivery of the PALS programme and as key referral partners. The health centres played a role in offering technical support to PALS facilitators during the sessions, especially in providing adolescent-friendly information on sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). The involvement of the health centres also helped to facilitate access to essential services for PALS participants. HARAF, in conjunction with Plan International, facilitated referrals for both adolescents and their parents/caregivers to health services. Most referrals for adolescents were for individual health counselling and adolescent SRH services.

Monitoring and evaluating PALS

All PALS Monitoring and Evaluation tools were used during the programme implementation. To track output such as enrolment and attendance, the PALS registration forms for parents and adolescents and attendance trackers were used. To measure change in knowledge and skills, the PALS pre- and post-surveys were used. The results from these tools indicated improvements in participants' psycho-emotional well-being, communication skills, conflict resolution abilities, peer relationships, and interactions with adults. The personal goal tool allowed participants to set a personal learning goal for the programme as a personal indicator of success. Upon completion of the programme, participants reflected on their goal and assessed to what extent they had achieved their goal.

The module evaluations after each module gave participants with a chance to provide feedback on the sessions, although in the beginning, most participants were not used to sharing feedback or felt shy to do so. However, during the course of the programme this changed, and as one of the unexpected outcomes of the programme, the bond between the participants and the facilitators became so strong that by the end of the programme, participants felt safe to provide feedback, express concerns or make suggestions during the sessions.

The facilitator session reports were completed by facilitators at the end of each session and highlighted high levels of engagement and overall satisfaction with the programme. This information was used to track programme effectiveness and participant progress.

RESULTS

Between January and October 2024, the PALS programme reached a total of 150 adolescents (90 girls and 60 boys) and 15 parents/caregivers. The PALS programme had positive results, the strongest results for adolescents.

The PALS programme resulted in significant improvements in the following areas for adolescents:

- **Parent-child relationships:** increase from 16 to 96% of adolescents who report positive communication and relations with their parents and caregivers

- **Sense of social support:** increase from 31 to 82%
- **Knowledge related to safety and protection:** increase from 22 to 91%
- **Knowledge related to SRHR:** increase from 15 to 86%
- **Access to services:** increase from 27 to 93%

Parents and caregivers reported the following changes:

- **Parent-child relationships:** increase from 26 to 50% of parents and caregivers who report positive communication and relations with their children
- **Sense of social support:** increase from 35 to 50%
- **Knowledge related to adolescent development and supporting adolescents in stressful times:** increase from 35 to 50%
- **Access to services:** increase from 32 to 50%

The lower scores for parents and caregivers may indicate little knowledge retention. One possible explanation for this difference is that adult learning is different from adolescent learning. Adults forget information more easily, need more time to practise new skills or may require different learning approaches to adolescents in order to achieve the same outcomes. This is an area to be assessed and explored further in future programming.

Besides changes in knowledge, skills and practices, one key success of the PALS programme was the high level of participant engagement, largely attributed to the effective facilitation by trained programme facilitators, who created a supportive and interactive learning environment.

Parent-child relationships

Among both adolescents and parents/caregivers, the vast majority (90%) of participants reported that PALS had affected how they interact with each other positively.

"I have learnt how to talk to my parents about my concerns without fear. I feel more understood and supported".

- Jane, PALS Life Skills participant

Parents who attended the parenting sessions reported increased confidence in communicating with their children and handling family conflicts more effectively. A female caregiver shared: "I have observed significant improvements in my communication and problem-solving skills, both within my family and in the community. I used to discipline my children harshly, but after attending the parenting sessions, I learnt more effective and non-violent methods of discipline". Another female caregiver noted that: "What particularly caught my attention was the focus on supporting adolescents during stressful times and learning how to build strong, positive relationships with my children. I feel confident and positive about how the skills I've learned have helped me enhance my life".

Sexual and reproductive health and rights

Adolescents and caregivers both appreciated the SRHR sessions, which empowered them to make informed



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decisions about their sexual and reproductive health and rights. Both adolescents and the caregivers indicated that sessions on personal hygiene were critical for them. Mary (15) from Girei expressed how learning about puberty has made her feel more comfortable with the changes in her body, stating that she no longer dislikes these changes as she did before attending the sessions. One caregiver noted: "The sessions on personal hygiene and positive parenting were the most beneficial for me personally, as they broadened my knowledge and helped me build much stronger relationships with my children".

Social support

Sarah (17) from Simari is the eldest sibling in her family and a secondary school student. She participated actively in all PALS sessions. Reflecting on her learning during the programme, she shared, "I have learned to be more mature. In the past, I would take justice into my own hands if someone fought with me or my siblings. After many PALS sessions, I now understand the proper channels to report issues and seek solutions". Mary (15) from Girei noted that she has developed better peer relationships and conflict resolution skills among her classmates. One of the adolescent boys who regularly attended the life skills sessions shared that he caught his friend stealing from a shop and advised him to stop, stating that it was a bad practice. According to him, this advice was a direct result of the sessions he had been attending.

One of the unexpected positive outcomes of the programme was the increased support for the programme from the wider community as a result of community awareness activities.

"I suggested that our [PALS] group work on sensitising community members about positive parenting, believing it would significantly improve community behaviour. This suggestion was well received and quickly put into action by both the facilitators and group members".

- Female caregiver, PALS parenting group

According to participants and the implementing team, this wider community engagement contributed significantly to the programme's overall success, reinforcing the importance of shared responsibility in adolescent development and well-being.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. Promote participation and attendance:** Consult participants and their families to ensure that session timings and duration align with household responsibilities. Strengthen community engagement and awareness on the PALS programme to promote better attendance and participation.
- 2. Enhance the PALS programme:** Expand the use of participatory approaches such as roleplay, peer-led discussions and integrate multimedia tools to deepen participant engagement. Insiders forming adolescent peer groups where adolescents can continue to meet and support one another once they have completed PALS.
- 3. Integrate adult learning strategies:** To improve the knowledge and skill retention among parents and caregivers, assessing, adapting or integrating new adult learning strategies in the PALS parenting curriculum is recommended.
- 4. Develop a contextualised PALS curriculum:** As the adaptations of the curriculum were made informally, a recommendation is to organise a contextualisation workshop to support the full adaptation of the programme, to ensure that all materials fully align with the cultural and social realities of each target community.
- 5. Strengthen community capacities for sustainability:** Train community volunteers and integrate PALS into schools and community spaces to scale up the programme. Engage with local and religious leaders to sustain the support for adolescents beyond the programme duration and achieve longer-term impact.
- 6. Combine PALS with skill-building and economic opportunities:** Some adolescents expressed an interest in acquiring livelihood skills such as tailoring. In future projects, PALS could be combined with skill-building opportunities such as vocational training to enhance adolescent development and promote economic self-reliance.

CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNT

Challenges and lessons learnt

Whilst the PALS programme implementation was successful overall, there were also challenges. The main challenge was the fact that some participants would arrive late to the sessions or attend erratically. To address this, facilitators would call participants and their parents ahead of the sessions. An adolescent girl shared: "The main challenge I faced while participating in PALS was time management, as my mother often asked me to do household chores or stay at home. I always made sure I completed my domestic tasks before attending the PALS sessions. Additionally, the facilitator conducted sensitisation on the importance of life skills sessions, which helped reinforce my commitment". To enhance attendance, adolescents also recommended reviewing the session scheduled to better accommodate participants' needs and other responsibilities.

Participants also recommended integrating more interactive activities to increase engagement, as well as additional activities after completion of the programme. An adolescent participant noted, "I would like to see the inclusion of follow-up sessions to provide ongoing support after the programme concludes". About 10% of the adolescents indicated an interest in more skill-building and income-generating activities such as tailoring.

For sustainability of PALS, participants recommended involving community and religious leaders to help facilitate the sessions and taking PALS to school. They would like Plan International to emphasise the importance of life skills during community sensitisation efforts so that everyone is encouraged to attend.

The implementation team recommended recruiting and training community volunteers to assist with PALS to create a larger pool of PALS facilitators within communities. The team also recommended conducting a contextualisation workshop as a standardised approach to the local adaptations.

About Plan International

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For over 85 years, we have rallied other determined optimists to transform the lives of all children in more than 80 countries.

We won't stop until we are all equal.

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