

Case study

PALS: Adolescent Life Skills and Parenting in Uganda

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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.

Photos: Plan International

PALS in Uganda

Overview

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“The session on managing stress was a turning point for me. I learned how to control my emotions in a way which I never thought was possible.”

- Adolescent girl aged 15-19

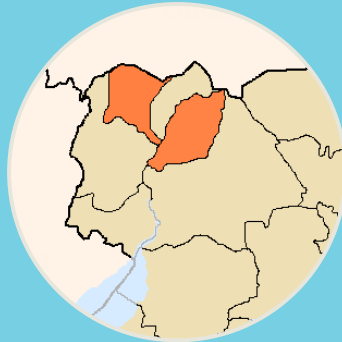
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PALS programme goal: To promote the psychosocial well-being, health and safety of adolescents aged 10-19 in crisis settings.

Steps towards implementation



PALS is embedded in multi-year and multi-sectoral adolescent girls in crisis projects



Locations: Adjumani and Yumbe refugee settlements in Uganda



Formation of PALS adolescent and parent groups



Delivery of 13-week life skills and 10-week parenting programmes using creative and participatory methods

Impact

- 500 adolescent girls and young mothers (248 girls aged 10-14 and 252 girls aged 15-19, including 200 young mothers) and 400 parents/caregivers (320 female and 80 male caregivers) completed the PALS programme.
- Adolescents reported improvement in confidence and positive coping, communication skills and their relationships with intimate partners, parents/caregivers and peers.

Recommendations:

- Consult participants in the planning of the PALS programme to ensure that it does not interfere with school or childcare responsibilities.
- Allocate more time to sessions related to sexual and reproductive health, stress management and personal goal-setting.
- Link PALS participants, particularly older adolescent girls and young mothers, to livelihoods and entrepreneurship opportunities.
- Support the formation of peer groups which function beyond the PALS programme.
- Engage professional health workers in delivering specific PALS sessions.
- Include boys in the PALS programme for better mutual learning and support.

Challenges

- Regular attendance was a challenge as some PALS sessions were scheduled during exam periods, and some girls had childcare responsibilities or home chores.
- Boys participated in a separate programme, limiting opportunities for mutual learning and support.
- Lack of water in the session venue delayed sessions as participants and facilitators had to fetch water from elsewhere before starting the session.

SUMMARY

This case study examines the implementation of the Parenting and Adolescent Life Skills (PALS) programme by Plan International in Uganda's refugee settlements of Adjumani and Yumbe. The study focusses on the programme's design, implementation and outcomes, aiming to provide insights into how PALS addressed the unique needs of adolescents and their caregivers in Uganda.

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 of programme participants.

Results in Uganda

Awareness of local services and confidence to access support:

Following the PALS programme in Adjumani and Yumbe, 87% of adolescents knew where and how to access local services as a result of the programme, while 98% of parents and caregivers knew where to access local services. One of the adolescent girl participants in Yumbe, a young mother, said: "We used to feel shy visiting the health centre asking for contraceptive services even though nurses informed us about the services (...) we ended up getting pregnant before we were ready. The PALS sessions helped us to stop feeling shy".

Socio-emotional learning and communication skills:

Adolescents in Yumbe shared that by training them on different skills and ways of managing their feelings they now share their problems with peers or close relatives. A parent in Adjumani on the other hand shared: "I used to be harsh with my children, but the sessions taught me to have more patience and communicate better with my children. Now, we solve problems peacefully".

Strengthened confidence and social relations:

Participants reported improved relations with their parents, caregivers and peers. The formation of "Peer Educators" groups strengthened peer relations and provided a support network for adolescents beyond the PALS programme.

Challenges and areas for improvement: Training times were not favourable for some participants, especially those attending schools and girls with childcare responsibilities. One of the adolescent participants stated that "Sessions conducted during school time when we are doing exams, mid-term and at the beginning of term, makes us miss some sessions."





BACKGROUND

South Sudan refugee response in Uganda

Uganda is Africa's largest host country for refugees. By June 2024, it had over 1.7 million refugees and asylum seekers, the highest number in Africa. The refugee settlements in Adjumani and Yumbe Districts are among the largest in the country, the majority women and children.

In January 2022, the Adjumani refugee settlements had 209,260 residents, and Yumbe's Bidi Bidi refugee settlement housed 190,828, mostly from South Sudan (UNHCR, 2022)¹. Despite Uganda's progressive refugee policies, local resources and services in Adjumani and Yumbe are stretched, affecting young people, particularly adolescents, in a vulnerable place.

Impact on South Sudanese refugee adolescents

Adolescents in the refugee settlements are facing significant risks such as disrupted education, forced displacement and exposure to violence and exploitation. Girls face increased risks of gender-based violence, early marriage, and early pregnancy, which are exacerbated by the breakdown of family and community structures during uncertainties.

The absence of safe spaces, limited access to education and inadequate support systems further contribute to their vulnerability, leading to negative coping mechanisms such as survival sex and early marriage. Adolescents also suffer

from psychological stress due to the daily stress experienced during displacement and the uncertainties of their future.

19-year-old Joyce² shared how she and her family face severe food shortages, inadequate shelter and limited access to education upon their arrival in Uganda: "When my family and I got to the reception centre in Elegu, life was hard because the food was little, and they would cook beans and *posho* for the whole family. It also rained on us since there was not enough sleeping space or bedding. My father had no job, we had no money and the food ratio was small. We were given carpets for shelter and rain would sometimes enter our houses."

SETTING UP PALS

Multi-sectoral adolescent girl projects

In response to the urgent humanitarian needs of adolescents and girls, Plan International Uganda, with technical support from Plan's Centre of Excellence for Girls in Displacement Settings, designed multi-year and multi-sectoral projects to address the needs of adolescents and young people, particularly adolescent girls and young mothers (10-24 years). The PALS programme was implemented alongside livelihoods, community-based child protection and sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) activities.

Adolescent groups

The PALS programme targeted 500 adolescent girls and young mothers (248 girls aged 10-14 and 252 girls aged 15-19, including 200 young mothers) in the Pagirinya and Boroli refugee settlements in Adjumani District, and the Bidi Bidi settlement in Yumbe District.

¹ UNHCR Portal June 2024

² To maintain the confidentiality of participants in this case study, all names used are fictional. Actual names have been withheld to protect the privacy and anonymity of the individuals involved.

Case study: PALS in Uganda

The PALS Life Skills sessions had adolescent girls participate in two age groups, young adolescents (aged 10-14) and older adolescents (aged 15-19). This was done to address the different developmental needs of these age groups.

Adolescent boys were also part of the projects, but they participated in a different life skills programme called Champions of Change, which emphasises positive masculinities and gender equality.

Each PALS group consisted of 15 to 20 participants. The adolescent girls were identified and mobilised by mentors (community-based volunteers) and community leaders. Participants generally felt that the process was fair and inclusive.

Parent groups

A total of 400 parents/caregivers (320 females and 80 males) were invited to take part in the PALS Parenting programme in the Pagirinya and Boroli refugee settlements in Adjumani District, and the Bidi Bidi settlement in Yumbe District. Male and female parents and caregivers participated in mixed parenting groups.

Programme preparation

All Life Skills and Parenting sessions on the PALS curriculum were implemented, including all 10 Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) tools. Some sessions were lightly adapted to the local context, considering cultural sensitivities. For example, to ensure that content related to sexual and reproductive health was discussed in a manner which was accessible and respectful to participants, local health workers were invited to assist in SRHR-related sessions. They provided professional guidance on technical topics like puberty, menstruation and safe sex practices to ensure accuracy and depth of information.

Facilitators received comprehensive training, including on how to manage sensitive topics effectively and protocols for receiving safeguarding concerns and safe response to disclosures of violence.

Disability inclusion

At the start of the programme, some adaptations were made for girls with disabilities, such as conducting sessions closer to their locations and training facilitators to communicate effectively with participants with disabilities. This was effective, as 67% of adolescents with disabilities completed the programme (10 or more sessions), similar to the completion rate of participants without disabilities. One of the male facilitators said that "participation [of participants with disabilities] was satisfactory; they attended most sessions. As facilitators, we received training on how to effectively communicate with and address the needs of participants with disabilities."

IMPLEMENTING PALS

Programme orientation

Participants were informed about the objectives and activities of the PALS programme primarily through mentors who played an active role in communicating the programme's goals and next sessions. For example, Jana*, a 16-year-old participant said "The project mentor always tells us the programme's objective. Every time we attend a session, the mentors write on the flipchart the session we are going to learn about in detail."

This helped participants understand what to expect from the programme, which fostered a sense of anticipation and readiness. Participants expressed different motivations for joining the programme, specific sessions (stress management, communication and menstruation) standing out based on their personal needs and challenges.

Programme relevance

Participants felt that the PALS programme was relevant for them. For many girls, the sessions on menstruation, puberty and safe sex were their favourite.

"Menstruation & puberty are my favourite sessions because in my culture, it is taboo to discuss a topic which also means no support from home and, being the first-born girl of the family, I had to either learn from school or my peers." - adolescent girl (10-14 years)

Another participant highlighted the importance of the session on menstruation and puberty:

"Menstruation and puberty were the most successful because, in my culture, it is taboo to discuss these topics. But they helped me learn how to manage my menstruation and understand my body." - adolescent girl (10-14 years)

Another popular session was on coping with stress. Facilitators noted that both adolescents and caregivers were eager to discuss this topic and often these sessions were extended. As one girl noted:

"The session on managing stress was a turning point for me. I learned how to control my emotions in a way that I never thought was possible." - adolescent girl (15-19 years)

A 19-year-old young mother from Pagirinya expressed the impact of the stress management session: "Practising breathing exercises helped me recover from panic attacks, allowing me to focus on my daily life." A caregiver participant shared: "I used to be harsh with my children, but the sessions taught me patience and how to communicate better. Now, we solve problems peacefully."

Participant feedback

During the programme, participants were regularly asked for feedback on the sessions they attended. One adolescent girl shared how mentors would ask for feedback to ensure that the sessions were meeting participants' needs: "The feedback has always been about the specific topic of the day, especially what went well, what did not go well and the way forward."

19-year-old Joyce* mentioned that participants including herself also gave feedback on time management, as many participants came to sessions late, which would affect the end time.

Although the feedback was mainly related to the day's session rather than broader curriculum changes, it was an important aspect of ensuring the programme remained responsive to participants' needs.

One participant said "Yes, the feedback was not about the topics in the programme, but what can be done to improve the life skills programme, for example, time management."

RESULTS

Overall, the PALS programme in Uganda achieved positive outcomes related to the programme goals, which were measured through PALS M&E tools, including pre-post surveys, as well as an external evaluation which covered additional focus group discussions and interviews with participants.

Adolescent girls and young mothers highlighted several changes made as a result of their participation in PALS, such as improved communication, emotional resilience and a stronger sense of agency.

Managing stress

About 63% of adolescent girls demonstrated using positive coping mechanisms when dealing with stress, such as maintaining social connections and engaging in regular exercise. However, some girls still found it difficult to choose positive ways to manage stress over negative coping mechanisms. About 91% of caregivers described using positive ways to manage stress.

Social support

The programme also strengthened social support networks for both adolescents and caregivers. Approximately 96% of adolescents and 100% of all parents and caregivers reported feeling more supported by their friends, family and community.

This sense of improved social cohesion also played a critical role in helping participants manage the stresses related to their displacement and the ongoing conflict in South Sudan.

An interesting finding was the strong sense of community and peer support which developed among participants. Many girls were surprised at how quickly they formed bonds with others who were going through similar experiences.

One participant noted that “strengthening social connections through group work was surprising; everyone cares for each other and is concerned about one another.”

Family relationships

Participants highlighted clear improvements in relations with their partners and family members. As one girl noted: “[The programme] has helped my relationship with my family, especially my parents, because I have learnt how to listen to them more.”

Joyce shared how, following the programme, she and her mother have been able to sit down with her father and talk about his alcohol consumption: “At home, my mother and father would quarrel because of my father’s alcoholism. (...) my mother would get upset and say that she would leave home. With the skills I learnt, I sat her down and talked to her slowly and she improved.” Joyce notes that her father is now listening more to her and her mother and providing for the family at home.

Healthy relationships

Joyce highlighted how the life skills sessions also helped her manage conflicts with her husband: “I didn’t know how to manage stress, and I would quarrel a lot [with my husband]. We used to have many misunderstandings, and we would often not talking to each other. When I reached the session one day, the topic was stress management, its causes and ways of managing stress. I went back home after the session and called my husband; we talked for a long time; he even asked me to go to Juba and visit him.”

Peer relations

Participants reported that they had become more confident in managing stress and navigating interpersonal relations. For instance, one participant shared: “I am a confident girl now because of life skills. For instance, at the moment, I am a peer educator.”

“The sessions helped me overcome my fear of speaking in front of others, allowing me to advocate for the needs of my peers.” - adolescent girl (15-19 years)

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Child protection and gender-based violence

The programme has increased girls' awareness of how to stay safe from risky behaviours and make the right decisions. 97% of adolescent girls reported knowing how to stay safe and protected from violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation. 97% of older adolescent girls aged 15-19 could demonstrate how and where to report violence and other (child) protection concerns.

One girl mentioned, "The sessions on safety and violence opened my eyes. I used to attend disco nights and meet my boyfriend, which led to my pregnancy. But now I know how to protect myself and avoid risky behaviour."

Sexual and reproductive health and rights

71% of participating girls could describe how to maintain their health including sexual and reproductive health. An unexpected outcome was that the PALS programme helped break cultural taboos. For example, discussing menstruation, safe sex and puberty openly was a new and surprising experience for many girls. One girl notes that "Menstruation and puberty sessions were the most successful because, in my culture, it is taboo to discuss these topics. But they helped me learn how to manage my menstruation and understand my body."

Unintended outcomes

One of the most impactful and unintended outcomes of PALS was the re-enrolment of adolescents in school. Motivated by the life skills programme, 13 adolescent girls who had dropped out of school due to pregnancy, for example, re-enrolled in school, highlighting the programme's role in restoring hope and direction in their lives. As one adolescent participant said: "the PALS programme gave me the courage to go back to school and pursue my dreams. I know now that I have the support I need to succeed."

These 13 students formed a "Buddy Peer Educators" group, fostering peer-to-peer learning and providing a supportive environment which extended beyond the PALS sessions. This group reinforced the programme's impact by creating a sustainable network of mutual support among adolescents. The "Buddy Groups" meet once every week.

CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNT

Scheduling conflicts

One of the main challenges participants faced was that some PALS sessions were scheduled by Plan International during exam periods and other critical school activities. As a result of this conflict in scheduling, school-age adolescents missed some PALS sessions. PALS implementing guidelines promote adolescents' education and recommend scheduling PALS in consultation with adolescents and parents/caregivers to prevent scheduling conflicts.

Some participants arrived at the sessions late because they were taking care of their child before the sessions, taking the child for immunisation at the hospital, breastfeeding the child or doing home chores.

To catch up on missed sessions, adolescents relied on peer support by consulting classmates who had attended the PALS sessions. For girls who missed sessions, mentors organised recap sessions before the next session. This helped girls to maintain continuity in their learning despite the scheduling conflicts. One of the adolescents said "When I joined the project, my friends and I participated in the life skills programme. I would try my level best not to miss the sessions even if I'm too occupied with school activities. I will make an effort if I miss to ask my classmates what they learned in my absence. Also, I go early to consult the mentors before the next session as I wait for recap. Due to my commitment, when the opportunity for project peer educators arose, for the project, I was picked to be one of them and now, I take my peers through interactive sessions on various topics including life skills."



Inclusion of boys

The PALS programme only targeted adolescent girls and young mothers, whilst boys attended the Champions of Change programme. Speaking of things to improve in the future, one of the adolescent participants said: “I would add boys to the programme to learn together with the girls because there are some boys who are good to me and they help me from time to time with school work.”

Trust building

At the beginning of the programme, participants found it challenging to make friends and connect with other participants. This made it difficult to fully engage in group activities and discussions. However, over time, as the sessions progressed, participants spent more time together and gradually became more comfortable with her peers. One adolescent participant said: “In the beginning, making friends was difficult, but with time I got used to everyone and some made friends with me.”

Lack of water on site

However, the sessions started late because the centre had no water, and they would first go to fetch water for drinking during the sessions. Joyce shared that the learning centre did not have water most of the time which participants needed because they needed water to drink. This prompted the participants and the mentors to go and fetch water at a nearby water source, which delayed the session start time and end times. Joyce said “The water taps would not be there sometimes if they had not pumped water. This is a problem, because when you learn, you need to drink water.”

Lack of play materials

Participants also noted lack of play materials and engaging visual aids, which could have made the sessions more interactive and enjoyable. One of the participants said that “It would be more enjoyable if we could have play materials besides the laughter and play manual. For instance, printed coloured visual aid materials and balls.”

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Consult with adolescents and parents/caregivers in planning the PALS programme

- Involve adolescents and their parents/caregivers in the planning process to align sessions with school calendars, ensuring optimal attendance.
- Gather insights from participants on how to ensure full participation, such as offering water/refreshments during sessions and issuing certificates of completion as incentives for engagement and future opportunities.

2. Ensure that PALS does not conflict with girls' school and childcare responsibilities

- Align the timing of PALS sessions with girls' school schedules so that girls do not have to choose and ensure their full attendance and participation.
- Similarly, find ways to support girls who have children, by offering childcare or flexible options to attend sessions.

3. Allocate more time to PALS implementation

- Allocate more time for sessions covering more sensitive or new topics like sexual and reproductive health and rights, stress management, menstruation and personal goal-setting. This will allow girls to fully comprehend and internalise these topics.
- In protracted crisis settings like the refugee settlements in Uganda, consider implementing PALS sessions over a longer period (e.g., six months) to provide participants with adequate time for reflection and discussion.

4. Link adolescent girls and young mothers who participate in PALS to livelihoods and entrepreneurship opportunities

- Link PALS to hands-on skills training in entrepreneurship and livelihoods to address participants' economic needs. This could increase engagement and provide participants with practical skills to improve their economic resilience.

5. Support the formation of peer support groups among adolescent girls and young mothers

- Encourage the formation of peer support groups among participants to foster a sense of community and provide ongoing support beyond the formal sessions.
- Formalise these groups within the longer-term programme structure to enhance sustainability.

6. Engage professional health workers in delivering PALS sessions

- Involve health professionals in delivering sessions on topics like puberty, menstruation and safe sex practices to ensure accuracy and depth of information.

7. Include both girls and boys in PALS

- Include adolescent boys in the PALS sessions to enhance mutual understanding and co-operation between adolescent girls and boys. This could help adolescents learn to support each other and address gender-specific issues more effectively.

8. Introduce more games and participatory materials

- Include printed, coloured visual aids, and play materials like boards or interactive games to make learning and sessions more enjoyable for younger participants.

9. Ensure consistent data collection and analysis throughout PALS

- Improve the consistency and timeliness of data collection and analysis by ensuring that dedicated M&E staff are retained throughout the programme duration. This will allow more effective monitoring and timely adjustments to the programme.

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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Plan International

Global Hub
Dukes Court, Duke Street, Woking,
Surrey GU21 5BH, United Kingdom

Tel: +44 (0) 1483 755155

Fax: +44 (0) 1483 756505

E-mail: info@plan-international.org



plan-international.org



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