



Case study

PALS: Adolescent Life Skills and Parenting in Ukraine

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Plan International

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: Voices of Children

PALS in Ukraine

Overview

"I have learned to express myself and understand others better. My relationship with my parents has improved (...). I can now talk to my parents about things which bother me without feeling scared."

- Olena* (10), PALS participant

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



PALS is embedded in humanitarian child protection and education projects with local implementing partners



Locations: Cherkasy, Dnepropetrovsk, Kharkiv, Kropyvnytskyi, Sumy, Vinnytsia and Zaporizhzhia.



Formation of PALS adolescent and parent groups



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



After implementation and following feedback from participants, additional sessions were developed on (cyber-) bullying, online safety and career guidance for adolescents.

Impact

- 409 adolescents (227 girls, 182 boys) and 173 parents/caregivers completed the programme in the first year of implementation.
- Adolescents report improvement in communication and relationship with parents, stress management, peer relations and conflict resolution.

Challenges

- Disruptions due to air raid sirens and attacks
- Delivery partially online due to security risks in some areas
- Engaging male caregivers

Recommendations:

- Adapt PALS to participants with disabilities
- Adapt pals for online delivery
- Add more participatory and creative methods.
- Create additional content on violence prevention and sex education.
- Invite guest speakers to talk about topics related to nutrition, health and legal rights.
- Facilitate PALS with girls and boys separately.
- Increase the involvement of parents and caregivers, especially male caregivers.

* 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.

SUMMARY

This case study examines the implementation of the PALS programme in Ukraine, detailing its adaptation to local needs amidst the ongoing conflict, its impact on adolescents' and parents' well-being, the challenges faced and the key lessons learned to improve future programming.

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 relationships**
- 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 relationships.

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.

Lessons learnt

Relevance: the PALS programme was seen as relevant as there is a significant need for structured MHPSS programmes for adolescents in Ukraine. The PALS programme has high participation rates and positive feedback from participants, indicating the programme's relevance and necessity.

Contextualisation: the programme was adapted to meet local needs, including the exclusion of sessions on marriage and the addition of topics like bullying, cyberbullying, and online safety.

Parental engagement: engaging parents proved challenging compared to mobilising adolescents, highlighting the need for targeted strategies to motivate and involve them in the programme. For example, training parents as the facilitators, an approach used in a different parenting programme, helped to increase the attendance of parents and caregivers.

Flexible approach: facilitators demonstrated flexibility in delivery methods, including online sessions and working with children with special needs, ensuring the programme's continuity.

Holistic impact: feedback from staff and participants indicates that the programme enhanced adolescents' psychosocial well-being, peer relations and reflective skills, providing a safe environment for learning and personal growth.

Areas for improvement: identified areas for improvement include the need for more creative exercises and games, additional content for parenting sessions, and more structured information on topics which are sensitive in Ukraine such as sex education and violence prevention.





Photo: Plan International

BACKGROUND

War in Ukraine

On 24 February 2022, Russia launched a large-scale invasion of Ukraine, marking a major escalation in the Russo-Ukrainian War which began in 2014. As of August 2024, the largest European conflict since World War II, the conflict continues to have a devastating impact on children, who face daily risks and violation of their rights amidst persistent violence, displacement and worsening socio-economic conditions.

Over 14.6 million people, including 3.2 million children, urgently need humanitarian aid including food aid, shelter, financial support, protection and education (Ukraine Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan 2024, OCHA).

Impact on adolescents

Adolescents in Ukraine face significant physical and emotional dangers due to the prolonged conflict and continued attacks. Many have witnessed or experienced violence, displacement, family separation, loss of parents/caregivers, disrupted education and limited access to social services and peer interactions.

Adolescents experience high levels of emotional distress, especially in the most affected regions along the front lines and near the Russian border. According to UNICEF and World Vision, 1.5 million children and adolescents are at risk of mental health problems such as depression.

Programmatic priorities for adolescents include psychosocial support and mental health services, providing safe environments for social interaction with peers and ensuring access to education.

SETTING UP PALS

Partners and projects

Plan International Ukraine implements its projects through partners. The PALS programme is embedded in multiple projects with different local partners, mostly as part of 2- and 3-year humanitarian projects which promote education, child protection and MHPSS outcomes for children and adolescents. Local partners include Slavic Heart, Voices of Children and Equilibrium. The PALS programme is implemented in schools, child-friendly spaces and as part of activities implemented by mobile teams.

Geographical areas

PALS is implemented in multiple affected regions of Ukraine: Cherkasy, Dnepropetrovsk, Kharkiv, Kropyvnytskyi, Sumy, Vinnytsia and Zaporizhzhia Oblast.

Adolescent groups

The PALS adolescent groups consist of 12-15 participants, occasionally up to 18 persons. Participants are typically placed in one of two groups based on their age: 10-14 or 15-19. PALS groups are generally mixed in terms of gender.

Participants usually include adolescents who have previously visited the spaces and who were referred by social workers. For example, adolescent who are separated from their families or who belong to excluded groups. Groups are open only during the first three sessions before transitioning to a closed format to maintain a safe space.

Mobilising participants is not a challenge; there is a very high demand for the programme; even some long-term projects are unable to meet all requests, particularly for school-based PALS sessions.

Parent groups

The PALS parent groups are significantly fewer in number than adolescent groups. Mobilising the parents and caregivers of selected adolescent participants has been particularly challenging. Unlike adolescents, who are often eager to attend sessions, motivating parents requires more effort. The experience gained from the Parenting under Pressure (PUP) programme (Plan International's ECD parenting for parents and caregivers of children aged 0 to 8) and the parent-facilitator format have proven to be a useful approach to attract more parents and caregivers.

Parent groups average about 8 participants and are usually mixed gender, though there are fewer male participants. Sometimes, both parents attend the sessions. Besides parents and caregivers of PALS participants, there have also been instances where social workers have asked Plan International to include parents and caregivers deprived of parental rights in the sessions.

Contextualisation

The PALS curriculum was reviewed and contextualised with implementing partners. All sessions are being implemented except sessions about 'child marriage' as that is not a priority child protection concern in Ukraine.

Based on the feedback from adolescents and implementing partners, three new sessions were developed and added to the curriculum. One session on "Career Guidance for Adolescents", one on "Bullying and Cyberbullying" and one on "Online Safety". The latter topic is particularly relevant given the current online and hybrid learning conditions for children in Ukraine.

Bullying is a priority concern for adolescents in Ukraine; they are both the ones who bully and who experience it. According to a UNICEF study, 67% of children in Ukraine aged 11 to 17 have experienced bullying, and 24% have been seriously affected by it. Alarming, 48% of children have not told anyone about their experiences of bullying.

In addition, 44% of students have witnessed bullying but ignored it out of fear for their own safety. Most children are bullied for looking, speaking, or thinking differently to others. Last year, the majority of those held accountable for bullying were teenagers aged 14 to 16. There were also cases of bullying committed by groups or repeatedly by teenagers of the same age.

PALS Training of Facilitators

3-day PALS training sessions were provided to facilitators; by the end of 2024 a total of 82 (71F, 11M) PALS facilitators have been trained. This training equips facilitators to implement the PALS sessions and ensure effective programme delivery.

IMPLEMENTING PALS

Programme duration

In almost all regions (Oblast), PALS facilitators are able to implement the full PALS programme. In Zaporizhzhia, one of the most war-torn regions bordering the frontline regions, facilitators shortened the programme, conducting a minimum package of five mandatory sessions. This was because many adolescents were on the move to safer regions and only staying in the region for a short period of time. As the region forms a transit point, the number of PALS sessions was reduced to 5.

Programme relevance

Among partner organisations, participants and other stakeholders alike, the interest in PALS was high. Adolescents have shown particular interest in the lessons on puberty and safer sex, often expressing their gratitude to the facilitators for teaching them how to use a condom. This topic is highly relevant in Ukraine and was especially appreciated by school principals in rural areas, where teenage pregnancy is common. Parents and caregivers, who often struggle to discuss these topics with their teenagers, have also expressed their appreciation for these sessions.

Other topics in which adolescents expressed interest were mental health and career guidance. In Cherkasy, adolescents were interested in learning more about: "nutrition and bad habits". This topic generated significant interest among the PALS participants, so a nutritionist was brought in to lead an extra session on this topic.

There were also areas for improvement. Facilitators recommend expanding the number of exercises and games in the Laughter and Play manual. In addition, in their sessions with parents, facilitators felt there was insufficient theory in the parenting sessions, requiring them to spend extra time preparing and searching for further information.

Service providers

In some locations, doctors were invited to reinforce lessons related to sexual and reproductive health, enhancing their impact and credibility. In the Vinnytsia region, facilitators involve the juvenile police in conducting sessions on safety and violence.

Referrals

For the referral of adolescents in need of case management or more specialised mental health services, the partners had a map of local services. However, in practice, referrals through PALS were usually directed to an on-site psychologist. Other referrals were made to the counsellor of the National Psychological Association Line, the National Hotline for Children and Youth from La Strada, the Voices of Children Foundation, the international humanitarian organisation "People in Need," social support centres, and if necessary, the Co-ordination Centre for Legal Aid.

ADAPTATIONS

Disability inclusion

Recently, the Cherkasy centre received a request to implement the PALS programme for adolescents with special needs in institutional care, specifically for those with visual impairment and intellectual disabilities. We developed general guidelines for conducting the PALS sessions with participants with special needs, and the facilitators have successfully completed the adapted PALS programme.

Online delivery

In Ukraine, not all schools have been able to start operating due to the continuing insecurity and the lack of shelters in schools. Therefore, some schools are working in a blended format with online and offline classes.

In the Vinnytsia region, many PALS participants are part of this blended learning system. Therefore, PALS facilitators also have to work online with PALS participants. This is presenting a unique challenge: local adaptations were made to deliver the

programme online. It is also appropriate to adapt PALS to an online format. The online format was adopted for adolescents who were in a blended learning system.

Schools often request the implementation of programmes for teenagers as such online format is often the most convenient option, allowing them to reach the audience according to needs. The number of sessions remained the same, but the duration was reduced to one hour.

IMPACT

Positive results

The PALS programme has resulted in positive outcomes for adolescents and their parents/caregivers, as demonstrated by the PALS programme monitoring and evaluation (M&E) tools. Between 2023 and 2024, a total 409 adolescents aged 10-19 has been reached. This includes 227 girls and 182 boys. Of the girls, 103 are aged 10-14 and 124 -19. Among the boys, 108 are aged 10-14, and 74 15-19. There are no adolescents recorded in the “other gender” category. Overall, there are 211 younger adolescents (aged 10-14) and 198 older adolescents (aged 15-19). A total of 173 (160 female, 13 male) parents and caregivers participated in the PALS parenting programme.

Pre-post surveys for both adolescents and parents indicated substantial improvements in psycho-emotional well-being, social activity and life skills. Adolescents reported increased confidence in managing communications, conflicts and relationships with their peers and parents.

Interviews with PALS participants highlighted that PALS has increased social activity among adolescents and improved their emotional and social skills.

Denys* (18) found the sessions on communication particularly insightful, stating that, *“the topics were informative, and I learned new ways of interacting with peers and resolving conflicts”*.

Anna* (16) shared how the programme helped her manage stressful situations and improve relationships, saying, *“I learned to express myself and understand others better. My relationship with my parents has improved...I can now talk to my parents about things that bother me without feeling scared.”*

Adolescents also highlighted that the sessions helped them to adopt healthier communication styles with their parents and discuss topics of real concern to them.

Kateryna* (14) also noted she improved peer relationships and conflict resolution skills among her classmates after attending the sessions.

Finally, the personal goal tool revealed that participants achieved and reflected on their personal development objectives, while the module evaluations and facilitator session reports highlighted high levels of engagement and satisfaction.

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Challenges

With 173 parents and caregivers (160 female, 13 male) participating in the PALS programme, parents' attendance was lower than that of adolescents. Male caregivers and parents also recorded very low attendance compared to female caregivers and parents, mainly because men who are 18 years or older are all recruited by the army to help in the war with Russia. Women have raised concerns around the burden of having

to raise and take care of the children alone.

Additionally, the programme faced challenges during air raid interruptions and frequent power outages and when dealing with sensitive topics, such as violence, which occasionally triggered strong emotional reactions from some participants. This showed the need to further contextualise the programme to better meet the needs of both adolescents and their parents and caregivers.

In terms of content, PALS implementation teams highlighted that there was a need for more creative exercises and games as well as more themed content, especially related to violence prevention and sex education.

During the session on puberty, facilitators often encountered questions from parents about the appropriate age to start sex education. While they provided professional answers, the personal values and norms of facilitators also play a role in how confidently and comfortably they can respond to questions. In particular, the team highlighted the need for a unified position on and information about abortion, the beginning of sexual activity and the role of sex. The team felt that presenting these topics correctly to adolescents was crucial due to their sensitivity and potential impact on future life choices.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The PALS implementation team made several recommendations to make the programme even more adapted to the local context and identified needs:

- provide a more targeted approach by holding separate sessions for girls and boys, occasionally involving parents.
- incorporate more quizzes, team games and simple exercises to enhance participant engagement.
- include more theory and clear information on the violence prevention topic such as the *Karpman* triangle and strategies for improving communication.
- include more theory and clear information about sex education in the facilitator guide, in particular about on abortion, the beginning of sexual activity and the role of sex.
- fully adapt PALS for adolescents with disabilities.
- fully adapt PALS for hybrid online learning environments.
- involve specialists like nutritionists, juvenile justice specialists and health workers in delivering relevant sessions.
- Develop a strategy to engage more male caregivers and parents.

Key terms and definitions

Facilitators: individuals who guide and support participants through the PALS programme sessions.

Psychosocial wellbeing: the interrelationship between social factors and individual thought and behaviour, influencing mental health and overall well-being.

Child-Friendly Spaces: safe spaces set up in emergencies to help support and protect children and adolescents aged 0-17.

Social workers: professionals who provide support and services to individuals and families in need.

Juvenile police: law enforcement officers specialising in dealing with juveniles and youth-related issues.

Karpman Triangle: a model of human interaction which maps a type of destructive interaction which can occur among people in conflict

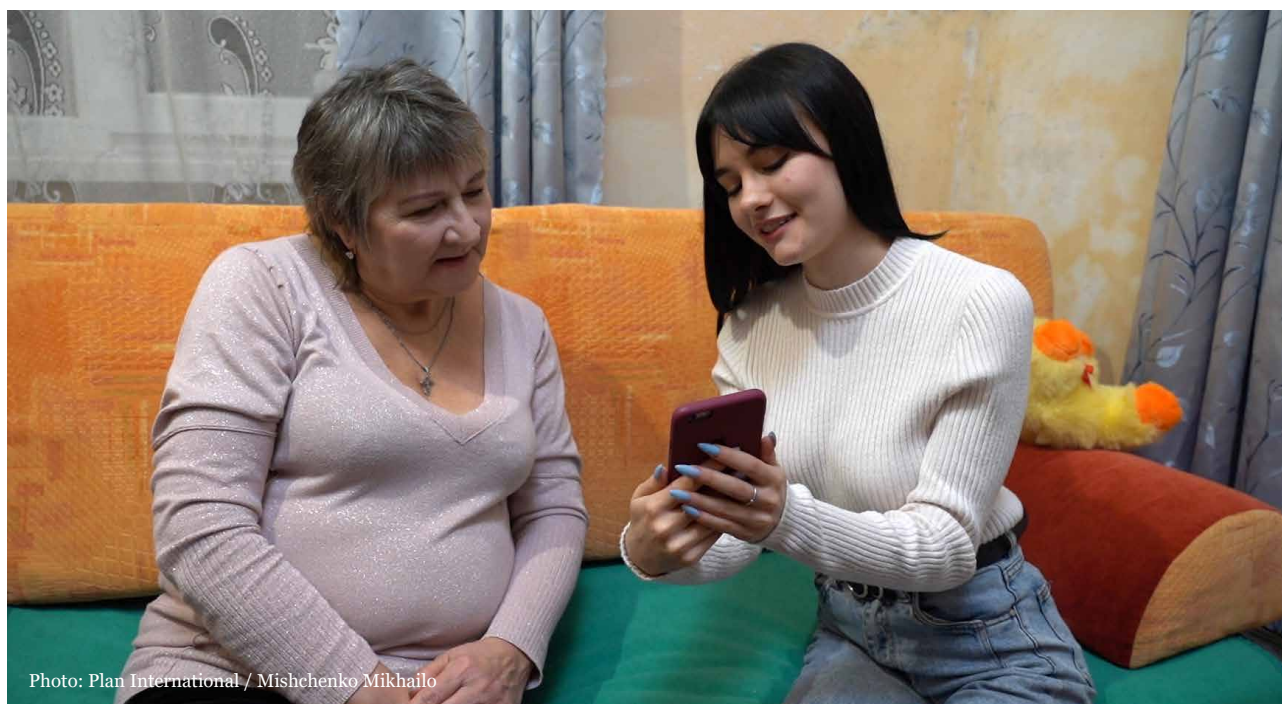


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About Plan International

Plan International is an independent development and humanitarian organisation that advances children's rights and equality for girls.

We believe in the power and potential of every child but know this is often suppressed by poverty, violence, exclusion and discrimination. And it is girls who are most affected.

Working together with children, young people, supporters and partners, we strive for a just world, tackling the root causes of the challenges girls and vulnerable children face. We support children's rights from birth until they reach adulthood and we enable children to prepare for and respond to crises and adversity. We drive changes in practice and policy at local, national and global levels using our reach, experience and knowledge.

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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