

BEING WITH YOUTH

Part One of this book provides information to help you understand youth. Whatever your sector or your role, it is intended to offer you the current thinking and best practices for being with the young people in your community. The process of learning takes time and is ongoing. You will not wait until you know it all before you begin to act. Rather, you are encouraged to take thoughtful action based on knowledge, relationships, opportunities, and agreement and consultation with your Counterpart.

WORKING WITH YOUTH IN DIFFERENT CIRCUMSTANCES

The first step in working with youth is to find them. Some young men and women may seek you out, curious and eager to get to know someone from outside their community and culture. It is also easy to find young people by spending time in schools. Your primary project may put you in touch with a specific population of young people. These are good places to start. We also urge you to reach out broadly and get to know a diverse group of young people. Look for youth in intergenerational contexts such as family and religious gatherings and community organizations. Also, be sure to look for youth who may be less visible. To find some young women and men, you may need to go through youth homes or camps, soup kitchens, health clinics, or NGOs that do outreach to specific populations.

To begin this section we share with you introductory information about some of the groups of youth you may encounter and the challenges they face; we offer ideas for activities that might benefit them. This is by no means a com-

In the youth project in Belize, a Volunteer formed peer education programs in secondary schools, where young people were trained in providing support to their peers in matters related to sexuality, HIV/AIDS, and other youth issues.

plete list, nor does it reflect the variety within each group. It is gleaned from the work of other Volunteers and youth development professionals to help you get started.

A. IN-SCHOOL YOUTH

As Volunteers, many of you work in or in association with schools. By reaching out to youth in schools, you will quickly find a “captive audience.” You may also find, as others have, that young people in school are generally very willing to take direction and tend to have positive relationships with adults. On nearly a daily basis, in-school youth see teachers, principals, headmasters, school counselors, and other students who may play supportive roles in their lives. In-school youth represent a range of academic and achievement abilities and motivations, including children with learning disabilities. The spectrum ranges from children who are on a track to higher education to those who may leave school before graduation for academic, social, or economic reasons. An important characteristic of the day for all in-school youth is that they have structured time in a learning environment.

Another category of in-school youth is those who are in alternative learning institutions, such as vocational schools and apprenticeship programs. While these youth in particular share many of the above characteristics with their academic peers, the types of support and encouragement that they receive focus on acquiring skills and readying themselves for the world of work.

If you are a Volunteer who works primarily as a teacher, we hope that you will consult this manual for ideas about how to broaden your experiences with young people in informal, out-of-classroom settings and that you will encourage your colleagues to do the same.

One project I enjoyed was a community forestry project with an elementary school. After months of giving classes on how to maintain tree nurseries and the importance of reforestation, the teacher organized a planting day. Going house to house in their rural village, the group of students read a few sentences to the owners of houses asking them to come for their new tree. Seeing the kids talk about the importance of trees, with some of the groups led by the normally shy kids, made me feel I made a small contribution to their learning.

— Environment Volunteer,
Honduras

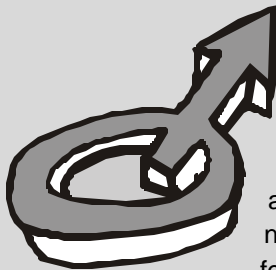


Gender Analysis¹

Whether a young person is male or female will have a significant impact on the messages he or she receives, community and family expectations, the resources available to him or her, and his or her participation in the traditions and activities of the community. Asking the questions below will help you find out more about the gender environment in your host community:



- **Gender Roles** — What does this community see as appropriate roles, responsibilities, behavior, and dress for men, women, boys, and girls?
- **Division of Labor** — How does gender affect who does what in the household, the community, and the workplace?
- **Access** — Do men, women, boys, and girls have the same access to opportunities, facilities, organizations, information, benefits, and other resources?
- **Power Relationships** — How does gender influence who has power over, power with, power to, and power within? Who has decision-making power?
- **Gender Needs** — Given answers to the above questions, what are the practical and strategic gender needs in this community? Addressing **practical gender needs** makes one's gender role easier. For example, providing water sources closer to the home eases the workload of women and girls. Addressing **strategic gender needs** can alter gender roles. Increasing access to education for girls postpones their marriage age and the age at which they have their first child.
- Does social class, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, or religion change any of the above?



As you learn more about gender roles in your community be attuned to any information about how *you* should relate to young men and women in your community. Find out, for example, if it is acceptable for a male Volunteer to meet alone with a young woman, even if they are discussing business. How might adults in the community feel if a female Volunteer invited a young man to join her in visiting a project in another town? Take guidance from Peace Corps staff, your Counterparts, and other local adults on these topics.

*The Youth at Risk
project in Jamaica
addressed male
marginalization by
focusing more on
adolescent reproductive
health and educational
opportunities for boys
and young men.*



A youth Volunteer in Ecuador noticed that a foundation's effort to provide opportunities for working children to play sports resulted in fields filled with young boys playing soccer and basketball. There was not one girl on the field. The Volunteer found an employee of the foundation to work together to recruit coaches for a new girls' team. They went house-to-house to recruit the girls and found the parents very hesitant, explaining that the girls had lots of work in the house and many of them had jobs as well. The Volunteer and Counterpart kept explaining the benefits of sports and kept the effort up. Little by little girls would start showing up. In addition to recruiting, the Volunteers organized fundraisers and received donations of shoes, balls, and uniforms. Thirty-five primarily working girls got involved. They also participated in communications, self-esteem, and sex education workshops and many received scholarships to continue their schooling. The parents' attitudes changed. Instead of pushing the girls to work, the girls are pushed to play. On top of it, the parents participated in some of the same workshops their daughters attended.

B. OUT-OF-SCHOOL YOUTH

Increasingly, Volunteers may find themselves working with youth who are not attending school. There is a wide spectrum of out-of-school and out-of-work youth. They may be primarily at home helping out with the daily tasks of the household. They may use the house as a sleeping location and spend their days visiting friends, playing games or sports, talking, and socializing. They may do small low-skilled jobs for immediate cash needs or find someone to teach them a skill in exchange for their labor.

Other groupings of out-of-school youth include youth who are considered to be living in difficult circumstances. They include youth with disabilities and youth who work long hours in factories or as domestic workers. They may have lived through war, other violent conflict, or serious economic hardship and may be working and/or living on the streets with little or no contact with their families or other regular sources of support. They may have fled their homes and may be living in a camp for refugees or displaced people. They may be living with HIV or may have lost family members to AIDS. These groups are described in the following pages.

Out-of-school youth differ from the in-school youth in several ways. Differences include: more unstructured time, fewer adults providing support and encouragement in a learning environment, more vulnerability to physical and emotional abuse, and more exposure to daily pressures of meeting basic human needs.



In some situations, it is important to create programs specifically for out-of-school, out-of-work youth and those youth who are living in difficult circumstances. It is equally crucial to look for ways to include them in activities and projects designed for all young people in their communities. Though specialized services may sometimes be required, Volunteers supporting youth in difficult circumstances should look for ways to integrate them into youth activities in the wider community whenever possible.

Reactions to Difficult Circumstances

Young people who face difficult circumstances, whether it is a physical challenge, social marginalization, displacement, or a traumatic experience, have a variety of behavioral responses. They may experience depression and sadness. Some feel constantly afraid. Many find themselves unable to get violent and traumatic experiences out of their thoughts and dreams. Others become ill or tired and lose their appetites. They may experience restlessness and difficulty concentrating. They may be easily angered, and may lose their trust in others and their confidence in themselves.² They may treat other youth or adults with hostility or even violence.³

Children and young people can also show tremendous resilience in the face of violence, trauma, severe economic hardship, and disability. Some may be strong by nature. Others may gain strength when, encouraged by social and cultural expectations, they take on caretaker and provider roles when adults can't. Adults working with youth in difficult circumstances can help them develop resiliency by highlighting their strengths and supporting them as they seek to meet the challenges in their lives. There is evidence to suggest that youth who use critical thinking skills and try actively to overcome adversity by attempting to solve problems, regulate their emotions, protect their self-esteem, and manage their relationships fare better in the end than those who don't, even when faced with very challenging situations.

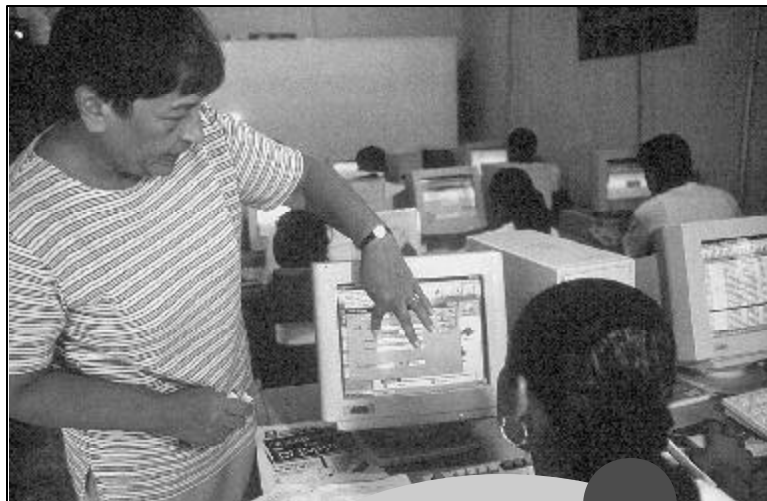
Working with youth in difficult circumstances requires honoring their strengths and looking for ways to build healthy one-on-one relationships between them and other members of their communities. Many young men and women show great resilience in meeting the challenges they face. It is vital to recognize their capacities by providing them with appropriate space and opportunity to take charge of their lives and develop healthy coping skills for their present and future.^{4,5}

Drawn from the work and comments of
Naomi Richman, Diana Pereira, Mark Lorey, Jo Boyden, and Jay Boll.



C. DIFFERENTLY ABLED YOUTH

One need not be an expert on disability to work with youth with disabilities. In fact, they should be included alongside other young men and women in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of any activity for youth. The biggest challenges to working with people with disabilities can be one's own fears and the attitudes of the surrounding community.



Volunteers in St. Lucia who worked with students with disabilities developed an assessment-screening tool to identify kindergarten and grade one level students with learning difficulties.

PC/Jamaica Volunteers' work with challenged and special populations included improving the quality of early education for hearing-impaired students and strengthening a sports program for athletes using wheelchairs. PC/Jamaica and PC/Belize included efforts to assist their national Special Olympics teams. A PC/Micronesia project also reached people with disabilities with stretching, weight training, and tennis. In Tonga, a Volunteer's introduction of sign language helped a family communicate with a young person in the family for the first time ever. In Grenada, Volunteers regularly brought special needs youth to a village shop for a snack and to hang out ("lime") and interact with members of the community so as to give exposure and raise awareness.



Including Deaf Girls and Women in “Take Our Daughters to Work Day”

In September 2000, Peace Corps/Kenya included deaf girls and deaf host mothers in “Take Our Daughters to Work Day” for the first time. Deaf Volunteers and other Volunteers in the deaf education sector nominated deaf girls from their schools. They invited them to submit application essays to the Gender and Development Committee. Four of them qualified, and we matched them up with four deaf host mothers. Fortunately, I am a sign language interpreter and we identified one more to help interpret proceedings during the event. The deaf students and deaf host mothers participated equally in the activities because they had equal access to information in their natural language, which is Kenya Sign Language.



The results of this event were eye-opening. Because deafness is considered a taboo or curse, the deaf students from the villages were surprised to learn that their deaf host moms had white-collar careers and successful families. In sharing their plans after the event, the students expressed a desire to be just as successful. They realized they have alternative career options that can make their services both valuable and marketable.

Many hearing participants in the event were exposed to deaf people and their language for the first time. They learned that there is no international sign language and there are as many sign languages as there are spoken languages. They were taught basic signs by playing the “broken telephone” game in which a message was passed using signs from one participant to the other. Participants were shocked to learn that less than five percent of the deaf population in Kenya has attained secondary education and the majority of deaf men and women are semiliterate. They strongly expressed the need for revision of the curriculum of deaf students to enable all to achieve their full potential. One hearing host mom, a court magistrate by profession, was interested to learn that there are interpreters in Kenya who can help break the communication barrier between the deaf and the hearing. As a result, she requested information on how to get in touch with interpreters to assist deaf people in court.

— Peace Corps Program Assistant, Kenya

Special Olympics

NGO Volunteers in Lithuania designed and delivered training seminars on fundraising, grant proposal writing, working with Volunteers, and better communication for Special Olympics staff and Volunteers in Vilnius. In addition, Volunteers assisted with preparation of the Annual Special Olympics Games in Lithuania through press releases, marketing materials, fundraising, and help during competitions. More than 1,000 mentally handicapped athletes participated in the games in one year.

You may need to look hard to find youth with physical or cognitive disabilities because they are often a source of shame for their families. Many don't attend school and are hidden away in their homes. They may also live or work in the street and share some characteristics with able-bodied young people in these groups. Outreach efforts can include asking one person with a disability about the location of others as well as inquiring at local health centers and community-based rehabilitation programs, where available.⁶

People with disabilities are the best experts on what they need. Ask them what will encourage them to participate. Adaptations will vary with the disability. For example, anyone involved in building schools, health or community centers, and playgrounds should be sure to make these facilities accessible to those with impaired mobility. (It takes the same amount of cement to build steps as it does to build a ramp!) To participate in meetings and activities some youth may need to bring a companion who can facilitate communication with them or help them to participate in other ways.⁷

In Costa Rica, Volunteers engaged foster parents in parenting workshops. Significant gains were reported in new efforts to broaden and systemize the Program for Street Children. The children received educational mentoring, recreational opportunities, vocational training, and mental health and legal child advocacy services.

D. STREET CHILDREN AND YOUTH

In many cities children and young men and women work regularly in the street, usually selling small items, delivering packages, watching cars, collecting cans, bottles, and rags, shining shoes, begging or stealing, or exchanging sex for money, material goods, or protection. The risk of contracting HIV is particularly high for this population, especially for young women.

Many of these children are still connected with families whose economic survival depends, in part, on the money they earn. In other cases, family ties have been severed by illness, death, abuse, violent conflicts, or severe economic hardship or abandonment. It is important to look for ways to integrate them into the community by helping them to reestablish or strengthen their connections to their biological families (when possible and appropriate) or to others in their communities.

A significant challenge in working with street youth lies in addressing the negative attitudes toward them. They are often a source of embarrassment and fear because of their negative coping mechanisms. In communities torn apart by violence, AIDS, or overpopulation, people may take out their frus-



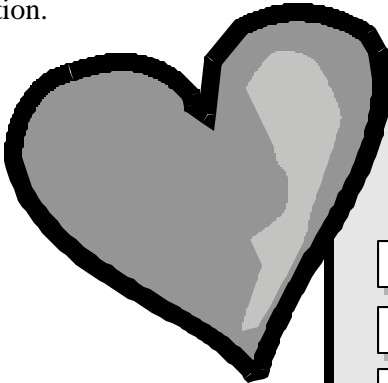
trations on street children. They may not know how to begin addressing their serious issues and may ignore, avoid, or isolate them out of prejudice, fear, or ignorance, or they may just see them as “part of the problem.” Much of the work you do with street youth may be informal. It may be in the respectful way you relate to them as you walk through the neighborhood that helps them feel better about themselves. It may be in the role modeling you do for others in the community.

Street youth have highly developed survival skills. They can be receptive to and benefit greatly from small-scale income generation activities designed to teach basic business practices⁸ and skills for independent living. Non-formal and peer education activities work well with this population given that the youth often resist participation in formal schooling. They may be embarrassed by their lack of education and may not have been welcome in schools in the past. Volunteer efforts can help street children and youth develop basic literacy and numeracy skills and provide them with essential health education.

*Sometimes the
Volunteers need to
start work with
existing youth groups
in a community; only
after gaining better
skills are they then
able to begin
outreach activities
aimed at more
'at-risk' youth.
Volunteer language
skills need to be very
good to understand
the difficult
circumstances and
the subculture where
they live.*

— Youth APCD, Paraguay



*West Russia Volunteers,
in collaboration with a
NGO, organized
homeless children to
produce blankets for
homeless elderly people.
Over 700 blankets and
300 scarves were made
and distributed over
a two-year period.*



Ways to Show Kids You Care...⁹

- Acknowledge them
- Learn their names
- Ask them about themselves
- Listen to them
- Play with them

Street youth may be slow to trust adults and will test those who offer health, education, and social services. Some may treat other youth or adults with hostility or even violence. Developing respectful relationships will take time. Successful interventions have been made in some places to begin changing attitudes of the police and the public about street children and youth.¹⁰ If you decide to work with street children and youth, it is critical to work with Counterparts and other local adults who know the culture well and will be around for the youth after you leave your post.


Ecuador Volunteers worked with the National Institute for the Child and Family to improve planning and budgeting for their Working Children Project. The project also included a substantive outreach effort to parents about children's rights and the negative effects of child labor. Volunteers also built contacts with national and international organizations to ensure donations of books, clothing, and funding for a foster home program.


E. WORKING YOUTH

In many countries, families facing economic hardship may send young family members to earn income by working full time in factories or in private homes as domestic workers.¹¹ These young people are contributing to their family's current needs; however, forgoing formal education or skills training translates into fewer economic options and higher risks that are associated with marginal literacy in most parts of the world. In addition, the young people are usually poorly paid and often work in dangerous and unsanitary conditions.

Young men and women working in the formal or informal economy can benefit from recreational and non-formal education activities that are geared to their schedules, locations, and needs. These may be located at drop-in centers that also provide health and social services to youth and their families.¹² Including young people and their parents or guardians, when possible, in the planning and ongoing evaluation of these activities and services will ensure that Volunteer efforts are truly helpful and appropriate.

F. REFUGEES AND INTERNALLY DISPLACED YOUTH

Whether they have moved within their own countries or crossed national borders, young men and women fleeing conflict or severe economic hardship may end up in a camp that is supported by local or international relief agencies. (When no family support or organized services exist, they may become street youth.)

Refugee and internally displaced youth in camps are often, at least initially, very receptive to education and recreation activities provided in these settings. In addition to building skills, these activities help normalize life, promote social integration, encourage a sense of hope, help promote recovery from psychosocial distress, and provide an alternative to worrying about family and friends.



Giving youth in camps meaningful roles in designing and implementing activities and programs will increase the likelihood that these programs meet their needs. Young people are thus more likely to remain committed to the activities instead of leaving the camp or turning to negative coping mechanisms such as unhealthy relationships, drinking, or drug use.¹³

G. ORPHANED YOUTH

Extended family members or other community members may care for a child whose parents or guardians have died. Some orphaned children may live and work in city streets. Others may live in institutions. In some countries, institutions known as “orphanages” also serve as homes for children whose parents are alive but temporarily or permanently unable to care for them. The adult-to-youth ratios in these institutions are often high and overworked staff may have little or no time to provide individualized attention to those who live there. These facilities are expensive and ineffective ways of addressing poverty because they tend to create dependence and isolate children from their community, their culture, their traditions, and other opportunities to develop basic life skills.¹⁴



Volunteers in communities that have orphanages have worked to create activities that connect orphaned children to their communities. They have created “buddy” programs, camps, and clubs that include both the children in the institutions and those in the community. These kinds of activities can help dispel myths and stereotypes about orphaned children and help provide much needed one-on-one contact.

The AIDS epidemic has increased the number of orphaned children and youth worldwide. In areas where infection rates are high, and where extended family structures that have traditionally taken in orphaned children are collapsing, these children and young people are vulnerable to infection themselves. They may be subject to sexual abuse or be forced to trade sex to meet their basic needs for food, clothing, and shelter. It is particularly important for outreach and prevention efforts to target this population.

In communities where many adults have died from AIDS, war, or other causes, youth can play a crucial role in helping those left behind. As a Volunteer in such an area, you can look for ways to help youth contribute through service and leadership. Young men and women can assist with the care of vulnerable children in their own families or those of neighbors. They can tutor and mentor younger children, assist teachers in local primary schools, and help organize and lead recreation activities for children in the community. They can assist with the home-based care of ill adults and help vulnerable families with basic household tasks.¹⁵

Volunteers in Costa Rica worked in an environment where refugees from different parts of Central America were settled. Costa Rica and Nicaragua Volunteers jointly organized workshops on post-traumatic stress for their counterparts and professionals working with youth who have experienced traumatic situations.

These activities can help youth gain valuable skills and help address the high adult death rates in AIDS-affected areas. Equally important, they can improve their sense of self-esteem and control over their lives. By acting to assist others, they can also overcome feelings of powerlessness and victimization. In AIDS-affected areas, involvement with people living with AIDS or the children they leave behind can be a powerful way for youth to learn firsthand about the consequences of unsafe behaviors. Involvement can also help build the understanding and solidarity needed to overcome the stigma associated with AIDS.¹⁶

*Peace Corps/Ecuador
Volunteers observed that
because of their life
skills program
“orphaned girls
practiced better hygiene
and demonstrated
behavior improvements
doing activities such as
cooking, art projects,
and other activities in
small groups.”*

A Malawi Volunteer helped his community create a system whereby schools will be taking care of the AIDS orphans in their communities. Community-based child care schools are now established by the orphan team and more areas have been identified. The social welfare office trains three volunteer teachers from each school.

Memory Boxes

In some areas, young people have helped terminally ill parents prepare “memory boxes” or “memory books” for their children. They have assisted these parents in recording family history for their children using stories, poems, drawings, and other items. The boxes/books give parents a way to discuss their approaching death with their children, as well as give children a lasting legacy from their parents.

