



**Wilton  
Park**



**Report: Building resilient societies: the impact of  
adversity, violence or traumatic experiences on  
adolescent brain, mental health and  
psychosocial development**

**Monday 26 – Wednesday 28 February 2024**

**In partnership with**

the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, UNICEF  
and Save the Children

# **Report: Building resilient societies: the impact of adversity, violence or traumatic experiences on adolescent brain, mental health and psychosocial development**

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In the pursuit of development, global peace and security, achieving healthier and more resilient societies is crucial. Findings from neuroscientific research on the development of the adolescent brain provide important insights into how young people can thrive as constructive citizens and meaningful contributors to society.

However, this scientific knowledge from research is often overlooked. In regions where insecurity prevails, due to conflict, prevalence of crime and violence, this is even more so the case: the effect of adversity, violence and traumatic situations can have extensive impacts on the development of the adolescent brain and young people's psychosocial development and mental health. The prevalence of conflict, violence, and exposure to traumatic situations makes implementing effective and responsive cross-sectoral interventions that support adolescents critical. And it is equally essential that these interventions prioritise rehabilitation, recovery, and reintegration.

This conference convened experts, practitioners and policymakers to discuss how scientific evidence can be better integrated into policy development to achieve the most effective approaches for supporting adolescents and aiding the recovery of young people impacted by adversity, violence or traumatic situations.

## Goals and objectives

The purpose of this conference was to promote a paradigm shift in how adolescents affected by adversity, violence and traumatic experiences are perceived and dealt with in the context of rehabilitation, recovery and reintegration processes, moving from risk-based approaches that may marginalise and victimise these young people, towards ensuring a developmentally responsive and rights-based approach that focuses on their wellbeing, guided by our understanding of adolescent brain and behavioural development.

The objectives of the conference included to:

- Disseminate scientific knowledge about how life events impact adolescent brain and behaviour.
- Outline key areas for policy action and systems change to better serve and protect adolescents.
- Discuss evidence-based practices within education, health, social welfare, child protection services and justice systems that promote healthy development in the treatment of children and adolescents, including the role of mental health professionals and support systems in facilitating community-based rehabilitation, recovery and reintegration processes.
- Gather expert input to inform a Policy Paper that promotes reforms acknowledging the relationship between adversity, violence and/or traumatic experiences, neurodevelopment, and behaviour in adolescents.

## Context

Advancements in neuroscience have greatly expanded our comprehension of adolescence, a critical developmental phase spanning ages 10 to 19<sup>1</sup> This period is not only crucial for personal growth but also an important opportunity for adolescents to uniquely drive positive change and meaningfully contribute to society in the immediate and long term. Despite the abundance of literature and emerging evidence, there remains a gap in integrating knowledge about the reciprocal relationship between life events and adolescent development, especially adverse experiences, into policy and programmes.

Governmental interventions often resort to punitive approaches when addressing adolescent behaviours which are deemed problematic, disregarding insights from neurodevelopmental research and failing to address root causes.

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<sup>1</sup> Singh, J. A., Siddiqi, M., Parameshwar, P., & Chandra-Mouli, V. (2019). World Health Organisation guidance on ethical considerations in planning and reviewing research studies on sexual and reproductive health in adolescents. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 64(4), 427-429.

To promote constructive societal contributions and ensure long-term development, peace and security, it is essential to adopt a scientific, evidence-based approach and advocate for interventions aimed at preventing adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) as well as community-led interventions aimed at adolescent recovery, rehabilitation and reintegration.

To bridge the divide between scientific understanding and practical application, a range of experts from across health, education, social protection and justice sectors came together for the meeting 'Building resilient societies: the impact of adversity, violence or traumatic experiences on adolescent brain, mental health and psychosocial development' at Wilton Park.

This report, which is preceded by a Scientific Paper and will be followed by a Policy Paper, aims to summarise the overarching outcomes of this meeting, which sought to translate scientific insights into actionable policy and programme recommendations in the areas of adversity, violence, traumatic situations and adolescents' wellbeing.

## **Key themes**

### **What the problem is**

[Understanding the complexities of adolescence, the impact of trauma and gender-based vulnerabilities](#)

- 1 In today's world, adolescents face a myriad of challenges as they navigate the complexities of modern society. Adolescence is a period defined by physiological, psychological and social changes. This period presents a unique phase: situations of vulnerabilities, particularly gendered ones, overlap with societal and cultural norms, where adolescents, particularly adolescent girls, face a range of heightened risks. Individuals exposed to traumatic events early in life face additional risks and challenges, as trauma can disrupt neurobiological systems that play a key role in social interaction and in the ability to seek support. Adolescents often replay cycles of violence they have experienced when younger when starting to form their own relationships.
- 2 The impact of adversity, violence or traumatic experiences on young people is not only immediate but also has long-term implications for development. Trauma has various physiological and psychological impacts that can alter developmental pathways. For instance, it can change the way adolescents construct autobiographical memory, altering how they use past experiences to navigate present challenges and circumstances. Moreover, adversity, violence and trauma can alter the ability to think critically and may affect the brain's ability to navigate social interactions, sometimes impacting the way adolescents relate to others.

3 Gender also plays a key role both in influencing the likelihood of exposure to different types of violence and traumatic situations and in the correlated consequences. For example, boys' early exposure to violence directly or indirectly increases their risk of perpetrating violence later in life. Girls exposed to similar forms of violence show an increased risk of additional exposure to violence as victims later in life.

### Navigating crises and trauma within a modern society

- 4 In a world currently facing multiple crises, adolescents find themselves experiencing not only the challenges associated with adolescence but also significant concerns surrounding geopolitical crises, such as climate change, conflict and instability. In addition, numerous reports are highlighting the significant risks that adolescents are facing online.
- 5 Alarming statistics reveal the staggering impact of violence and conflict, with one in six children living near conflict zones globally<sup>2</sup>, and an adolescent experiencing violence every seven minutes<sup>3</sup>.
- 6 Furthermore, the threat of climate change exacerbates the strains adolescents face, with impacts on both physical and mental health. Extreme heat has also been associated with an increase in mental health issues, including depression and post-traumatic stress disorder in adolescents. Many of these effects are also gendered. For instance, lack of water and sanitation facilities due to increasingly harsh climate conditions disproportionately affects adolescent girls who are not able to meet their personal needs and who often are primarily responsible for household chores such as cleaning and cooking<sup>4</sup>.
- 7 In today's interconnected society, young people also experience a unique set of challenges related to the omnipresence of digital devices and smartphones. Although technology offers connectivity, paradoxically, young people often find themselves feeling disconnected despite being continuously plugged in. Indeed, the allure of social media and digital platforms can lead to a sense of isolation from real-life connections and interactions, as many adolescents primarily communicate virtually, rather than face to face. Pressures associated with social media may amplify feelings of social comparison, exacerbating feelings of inadequacy and insecurity among adolescents.

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<sup>2</sup> Save the Children (2023) "Stop the War on Children: Let Children Live in Peace":

<https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/document/stop-the-war-on-children-let-children-live-in-peace/>.

<sup>3</sup> UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) "A Familiar Face: Violence in the Lives of Children and Adolescents" November 2017: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/5a0b00e34.html>

<sup>4</sup> UNICEF (2023) "The climate-changed child: A children's climate risk index supplement" <https://www.unicef.org/media/147931/file/The-climate-changed-child-Report-in-English.pdf>

- 8 Another major area of concern with social media includes technology-facilitated violence including gender-based violence, which also carries its own set of risks and dangers, many of which are to date, under researched. In addition, many harmful norms that exist offline are amplified online with adolescents increasingly learning online about relationships, gender norms and sex.
- 9 Balancing safe digital engagement with offline interactions is a major challenge for adolescents, underscoring the need for strategies to facilitate healthy technology use and promote authentic, in-person connections in our ever-present digital age.

## **Barriers faced when supporting adolescents exposed to adversity, violence or traumatic experiences**

### Challenges of addressing complex behaviours

- 10 In the past, approaches to addressing issues experienced by adolescents, such as violence, crime and challenging behaviours, have often been punitive, focusing more on the behaviour rather than the individual.
- 11 Therefore, historically responses have often leaned towards containment, viewing the behaviours as issues that need to be managed, rather than considering how the person may need support. Adopting this approach overlooks the nuanced experiences of adolescents and does not address the root causes of the challenges they face.
- 12 In a similar way, considering adolescents' needs only when they are in trouble also means that young people are often invisible across multiple sectors until a significant problem arises that necessitates urgent action. This responsive approach not only overlooks the power of preventive measures but also means that many adolescents who are struggling may fall between the cracks, particularly in instances where symptoms are internalised rather than externalised often via self-harm and other destructive behaviours, a characteristic that is also frequently gendered.
- 13 The limitation of this approach which disregards the individual and only focuses on challenging behaviours, lies in the failure to acknowledge adolescents as individuals in need of understanding and support, which ultimately often ends up perpetuating stigma and overlooks the complexities of adolescents' experiences.

### Consideration of individual paths, unique needs and gender dynamics

- 14 Another major barrier is neglecting to consider the 'bigger picture'. While discussions about adolescents often focus on overarching aspects of development, it is important to recognise the individual paths that adolescents follow.

- 15 Gender plays a major role and overlooking it may exacerbate existing issues, particularly in the context of violence and trauma but also in terms of independence and personal freedom. Moreover, the unique needs and paths of adolescents with disabilities, refugees and asylum-seekers, young mothers and youth with caring responsibilities are also important to take into account.
- 16 Similarly, it is also crucial to acknowledge that adversity, violence and trauma are constructs that vary widely across regions and socio-cultural contexts. These differences make it challenging to develop universal interventions, given that contexts might require contextual adaptations, which are both time and resource intensive. It also presents challenges with implementing interventions where there may be tensions surrounding certain gender and social norms.
- 17 Adolescents may also commit acts of violence against others, and this also requires a response that recognises their potential dual role as victims and perpetrators.

#### Lack of comprehensive support systems

- 18 The lack of comprehensive support systems is another major barrier to adolescents' wellbeing. Given the importance of social support and connections to mitigating the consequences of adversity, violence and traumatic experiences, inadequate support systems pose a major threat to adolescents' development. Having access to a combination of mental health services, educational programmes, sexual and reproductive health services, community initiatives, and peer and parental support can provide adolescents with the support and tools they need to thrive.
- 19 Without access to these resources in an age-appropriate way, adolescents may not be able to develop coping mechanisms and resilience necessary for their wellbeing. Also, when faced with challenges, adolescents may turn to coping behaviours that may adversely affect not only their wellbeing and safety but community development, peace and safety more broadly.
- 20 However, providing comprehensive support systems requires funding, time and resources, and, particularly in contexts of insecurity due to the prevalence of conflict and crime, these may not always be available.
- 21 Moreover, beyond resource constraints, it is also important to acknowledge that this approach also requires a political environment that favours offering support, rather than enacting punishment. In the absence of a political climate that adopts this perspective, implementing comprehensive support systems, even with resources at hand, may lead to obstacles and may prevent sustainable change.

## Implementation of prevention strategies

22 Another significant barrier lies in the lack of prevention strategies and reliance on responsive/punitive measures when it comes to addressing adversity, violence and traumatic experiences faced by adolescents. Often social interventions and policies focus on responding to immediate crises faced by adolescents, rather than preventing them from occurring in the first place. This reactive approach limits the effectiveness of efforts towards enhancing adolescent wellbeing. Moreover, when reactive responses are prioritised over preventive measures, not only are opportunities to intervene early missed but so are opportunities to address the root causes that underlie many of the challenges.

## Meaningful participation of adolescents

23 When designing interventions and formulating policies, adolescents are frequently excluded from decision-making processes regarding policies and interventions that directly impact them. This overlooks the unique insights and experiences that adolescents bring, often resulting in initiatives that may not adequately meet their needs and rights. Without meaningful involvement of adolescents, policies and interventions may fail to address their needs, leading to missed opportunities for genuine empowerment and sustainable change.

24 While there may be barriers to involving adolescents, such as a lack of knowledge on how to engage adolescents, it is pivotal to ensure that they are actively included when developing research agendas, designing policy and identifying interventions, in order to achieve meaningful and sustainable change.

## Language and terminology as barriers

25 When discussing the impact that adversity, violence and traumatic situations have on adolescents, certain challenges arise in terms of the language and terminology that is used. Many of the difficulties that adolescents face, extend beyond social, cultural and geographical boundaries.

26 However, notably much of the existing literature and research on trauma relies on Western-centric definitions and terminology<sup>5</sup>. Heavily medicalised terminology and Western-centric diagnostic criteria pose several challenges, particularly in terms of accessibility, cultural relevance and inclusivity when addressing diverse experiences of trauma and adversity across contexts.

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<sup>5</sup> Patel, A. R., & Hall, B. J. (2021) "Beyond the DSM-5 diagnoses: a cross-cultural approach to assessing trauma reactions". *Focus*, 19(2), 197-203.



- 27 A reliance on medicalised language and diagnostic categories may in some cases also create barriers to accessibility for individuals who may not identify with or fit into specific predetermined diagnostic criteria. As such, it is vital to broaden the discourse and language used surrounding adversity, violence and trauma, and to adopt culturally relevant frameworks that prioritise inclusivity and accessibility.

## **Recommendations**

### **Short-term recommendations**

#### Communication and social networks

- 28 Given research findings that show the importance of community and social networks in supporting adolescent resilience and wellbeing, providing young people with skills to navigate their social worlds is key. Indeed, empowering adolescents through interventions and education programmes that focus on equipping them with key skills and knowledge to navigate their social digital and non-digital lives effectively can help mitigate many of the adverse effects of violence and trauma. As such, enhancing skills amongst young people to navigate their social and emotional worlds as a foundational pillar of health can help making sure adolescents can articulate their needs and access support systems. Equally there is a clear need to educate parents and caregivers on adolescent brain development and trauma responses.

#### Cross-sectoral collaboration

- 29 To address the wide range of challenges experienced by adolescents, short-term efforts should also focus on increasing collaboration across sectors. This includes the need to adopt a common understanding of adolescence and the opportunity it offers, as well as a common understanding of sustainable interventions to prevent and effectively respond to adversity, violence and trauma. This also includes convening stakeholders across the health, education, social welfare and justice systems to design coordinated strategies, policies and interventions.
- 30 Developing inter- and cross-sectoral partnerships in this way also provides opportunities for sectors to share knowledge, data, resource and best practices to increase the impact, efficacy and sustainability of outcomes. Barriers to cross-sectoral collaboration were also identified such as territoriality, lack of common understanding and scarce resources. Such challenges need to be addressed.

## Promoting meaningful adolescent engagement and participation

- 31 Short-term strategies should also focus on empowering adolescents to actively take part in decision-making processes that impact their lives. This includes providing opportunities for adolescents to contribute ideas, voice their opinions and shape interventions designed to meet their rights and their participation needs. Creating child-friendly mechanisms and platforms that allow adolescents to engage in policies and interventions that directly impact them can help ensure their perspectives are integrated throughout the policy formulation and intervention development process.
- 32 Moreover, providing ecosystems within families, communities, educational programmes and healthcare, where adolescents feel seen and valued, and where their participation is encouraged, is therefore also pivotal.

## Medium-term recommendations

### Strengthening policies to support adolescents

- 33 In the medium term, it is vital that efforts are focused on advocating for policy change that prioritises adolescents' wellbeing and development. This entails advocating for evidence-based policies that draw on neuroscientific research applicable to adolescents to ensure that the unique needs of young people are not only taken into consideration but are at the centre of policy formulating processes. This includes ensuring that adolescents receive relevant help to articulate their needs and access support systems effectively. Again, this also includes educating parents and caregivers and communities on adolescent brain development and trauma responses.

### Implement adolescent-centric approaches

- 34 Adolescents need to be at the centre of policies and interventions that are about them. Adolescents bring valuable lived experiences of the challenges they face, insights into the type of support they require and often also bring perspectives that may not even have been considered by adults. As such, policies and interventions need to centre around the unique needs and capabilities of adolescents, in order to empower them to actively shape their own social environments and make informed decisions about their own wellbeing.
- 35 Furthermore, ensuring that support systems and services are adolescent-friendly to make sure adolescents feel comfortable seeking help and guidance, is also essential.

## Long-term recommendations

### Investing in efforts across the socio-economic ecosystem of adolescents<sup>67</sup>

- 36 Adolescence is a period of heightened vulnerability but also a period of opportunity for development. As such, investments should focus on programmes that promote positive youth development, such as parenting programmes that support caregivers of adolescents and comprehensive school health programmes. Indeed, empirical evidence has found that both parenting and school programmes can have a positive impact on a wide range of wellbeing outcomes for adolescents and immediate family members.
- 37 Given the intergenerational aspects of violence and trauma, investing in interventions that address multiple levels of the socio-economic ecosystem surrounding the adolescent model is crucial for breaking cycles of violence and fostering long-term healing in communities. Interventions and policies targeting harmful social and gender norms and other risk factors associated with violence also play a vital role in creating safe and peaceful environments for adolescents that are conducive to healthy development.

### Advocating for long-term political and financial investments

- 38 Long-term efforts should also aim to advocate for sustained commitment and investment in adolescent health and wellbeing. Historically, adolescents have often been overlooked, as they are often not considered children, nor are they considered adults. Adolescence is a critical period of development with far-reaching implications for future health and social outcomes, both on an individual and societal level.
- 39 By integrating adolescents' mental health and wellbeing into broader policy agendas at national, regional and global levels, the unique needs of adolescents can be prioritised and addressed more comprehensively.
- 40 Moreover, by securing dedicated funding streams that are earmarked for adolescents' mental health and development initiatives, targeted programmes, research and interventions specifically catering to the unique needs of adolescents can be ensured. Ultimately, this will help promote the wellbeing of adolescents which will unlock their full potential for the benefit of society as a whole.

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<sup>6</sup> The socio-ecological model examines behaviours of individuals within the context of their social and physical environment. The framework is made up of nested layers, ranging from a microsystem, which is closest to an individual, to the macrosystem which is the larger cultural context surrounding an individual.

<sup>7</sup> Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design*. Harvard university press.

## Research priorities

The conference also served as an opportunity to highlight research priorities that are essential for better understanding the impact that adversity, violence and traumatic experiences have on adolescents, and for improving prevention, recovery and response efforts.

Three key areas that were highlighted as research priorities include:

### Integrating neuroscientific research into policy

- 41 Understanding how the adolescent brain responds to adversity, violence and traumatic experiences is crucial for informing effective policy. Therefore, research priorities in this area include uncovering how neurobiological processes impact not only behaviour but also resilience in adolescents, in order to understand how to more effectively support recovery, rehabilitation and reintegration.
- 42 By increasing research in this area, study findings can help refine interventions so that they better address the needs of adolescents, strengthening prevention strategies and provide more targeted support systems.

### The impact of digital technology on adolescents

- 43 In a world where digital technology is increasingly present in adolescents' lives, there is a need for more targeted research on the role that digital devices can play, particularly, in relation to recovery and support following adversity, violence and traumatic experiences.
- 44 Equally, there is also an urgent need for more research surrounding the potential dangers associated with technology and violence, including gender-based violence. Tech-facilitated violence encompasses a wide range of phenomena, including online harassment, cyberbullying and online crimes against children such as child sexual exploitation and abuse, all of which require further research to better understand how prevention efforts can be tailored to safeguard adolescents.

### Effective child and youth participation

- 45 Despite the increasing understanding of the importance of youth participation in policy development and intervention design, further research is needed to better understand how to put this into practice.
- 46 Ensuring that adolescents' participation is not tokenistic but rather leads to tangible change, and that is not only sustainable but also fosters a sense of ownership and empowerment among adolescents remains a major challenge.

47 Accordingly, research which seeks to refine strategies for more meaningful child and youth engagement that leads to lasting and impactful change is vital.

## **Conclusion**

This conference served as a unique opportunity for cross-sectoral discussions on understanding how adolescents are affected by adversity, violence and traumatic experiences, and how best to approach recovery, response, and reintegration. The conference was instrumental in shedding light on the scientific evidence surrounding trauma, neuroscience and adolescents' development and how to best integrate this knowledge into policy and practice.

Insights shared by experts, practitioners and policymakers helped underscore the importance of adopting a rights-based approach to address the multifaceted issues adolescents encounter when dealing with adversity and violence. By drawing upon the latest findings from neuroscientific research when formulating policy and intervention strategies, discussions underscored that it is possible to better support the prevention, recovery and reintegration processes of adolescents.

Going forward, it is imperative that scientific evidence is drawn upon, whilst also ensuring that the lived experiences of adolescents themselves are included when designing policies and interventions.

Moreover, when advocating for policy reforms and implementing evidence-based practices, it is vital that this is done using an inter- and cross-sectoral approach. Indeed, collaborating across the health, education, social welfare, child protection and justice systems is pivotal to creating more inclusive and supportive environments that prioritise the wellbeing and development of all adolescents, irrespective of their circumstances.

**Moa Schafer and Alessandra Guedes**

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