

"[Life skills training] has helped us know how to talk to people."

Liberia EPAG trainee
from Doe Community

Life Skills: What are they, Why do they matter, and How are they taught?

What Are Life Skills?

Life skills programs are designed to teach a broad set of social and behavioral skills—also referred to as “soft” or “non-cognitive” skills—that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands of everyday life. Programs can build on any or all of the following skills:

- decision-making (e.g. critical and creative thinking, and problem solving);
- community living (e.g. effective communication, resisting peer pressure, building healthy relationships, and conflict resolution);
- personal awareness and management (self-awareness, self-esteem, managing emotions, assertiveness, stress management, and sexual and reproductive health behaviors and attitudes).

Life skills programs can empower and guide learners to think critically about how gender norms and human rights govern their interactions with others and affect their behaviors, which is a feature of the Adolescent Girls Initiative (AGI) Pilots.

These skills can be particularly important during adolescence, which is filled with new feelings, physical and emotional changes, excitement, questions,

and difficult decisions. It is also a time when the differences between young men and women become more pronounced and gender norms take a stronger hold in governing young people’s aspirations and behaviors. As they move through adolescence, life skills can help young people overcome the challenges of growing up and improve the quality of their young adult lives. Unfortunately, not much is known about how malleable these skills are at different ages or if there are important differences across the sexes. However, it is generally acknowledged that these skills can be augmented at least up until the end of the teenage years¹, and that they are important for both young men and women.

Life skills programs move beyond providing information. Although it is important to deliver information and to reinforce such knowledge periodically, this alone is rarely enough to motivate people to change behavior. Life skills programs aim to develop young peoples’ abilities and motivations to make use of all types of information. The approach should be interactive, using role plays, games, puzzles, group discussions, and a variety of other teaching techniques to keep the participant wholly involved in the sessions.

Why Do Life Skills Matter?

LIFE SKILLS MATTER FOR HEALTH OUTCOMES

Econometric analysis shows that non-cognitive abilities (e.g. self-control, sociability, and so forth) explain a variety of correlated risky behaviors and outcomes such as teenage pregnancy and marriage, drug use, and participation in illegal activities.² The

public health literature finds that young people with gender equitable attitudes have better sexual health outcomes than their peers, and the converse is also true. For example, young people who believe that males should be “tough” and more powerful than females are less likely to use condoms or contraception, more likely to have multiple sex partners,



and more likely to be in intimate relationships that involve violence.³

LIFE SKILLS MATTER FOR EDUCATION AND LABOR MARKET OUTCOMES

Econometric and psychology studies in developed countries suggest that non-cognitive skills can affect both education and labor market outcomes in developed countries.^{4,5,6,7} However, much less is known about how to develop these skills and about the impacts of comprehensive (vocational/technical and life skill) training programs.

Comprehensive interventions to improve youth employability and human capital were first introduced in developing countries in the early to mid-1990s with the *Jóvenes* programs in Chile, Venezuela, Argentina, Paraguay, and Peru, and later replicated throughout Latin America. Experience from these youth training programs suggests that life skills are a key complement to increase the effectiveness of vocational skills.⁸ There have been a number of rigorous evaluations of comprehensive interventions, however the evaluation designs have focused on measuring the impact of the total program package on non-cognitive, behavioral, and employment outcomes, rather than the stand-alone impact of the life skills component.^{9,10,11}

The Jordan AGI measured the direct impact of training in a sub-set of life skills focused on employability among community college graduates (see Table 1 for more program details). A rigorous impact evaluation of the intervention found that the life skills training had no average impact on employment (1 year later), although there is a weakly significant impact outside the capital city.¹² The life skills training did improve positive thinking and mental health among the beneficiaries. It is not known why the life skills training did not work in Jordan, although it is thought that structural issues in the labor market interfered with the effectiveness of the project.

More research is needed to understand both the direct and indirect effects of life skills programs. Life skills programs might matter on their own, and they may have an interaction effect for vocational/technical skill training programs to be effective. This evidence is particularly important for policymaking given that life skills programs can be implemented for approximately one-half to one-third of the cost of a full vocational course.¹³ More research is also needed to understand the mechanisms through which life skills training can improve youth labor outcomes and to improve the instruments used to measure such skills.¹⁴

"I've never taken a class like this before—it is so useful—now I know the real skills you need for life."

Nepal AGI trainee from outside Kathmandu

How Does the AGI Teach Life Skills?

There are many different models for implementing life skills programs—whether formally through schools, informally through community organizations, or—as in the AGI—in the context of a program designed for another purpose (e.g., livelihoods, vocational training).¹⁵ Life skills programs—or in the case of Lao PDR and Jordan, a subset of these skills focused on employability—are incorporated

into all of the AGI pilots. Typical duration of programs within AGI pilots is approximately 40 hours over the course of several months. For each of the AGI pilots, Table 1 summarizes (i) the key steps in the curriculum development; (ii) the training content; and (iii) the implementation model.¹⁶ This section synthesizes key lessons learned from the AGI pilots on *how* to design and implement a life skills program.

Lesson Learned: Adapt life skills programs for local lives.

An assessment of the community and the target audience should be conducted to help tailor the life skills program to specific local needs. If a vulnerability study was conducted to inform the project design, this analysis can also help identify key issues to include in the life skills curriculum. Other organizations that may also be teaching life skills should be consulted to see if locally-adapted curriculums already exist. If not, international best

practices can be drawn on to develop the program content, but then adapt sessions to make them more appropriate to the local culture.¹⁷ This may entail translating the curriculum into local languages, changing names or situations in role plays, and adding or discarding certain modules. The curriculum may need to be updated on a regular basis to remain relevant. Remember to think carefully about the age and literacy levels of the beneficiaries. Curriculums

Table 1: Life Skills in the AGI Pilots

	Development	Content	Implementation
Haiti	- Curriculum developed by the Bank task team based on international experience. - Informed by consultations with adolescent girls. - Local consultant hired to adapt the curriculum. - Vetted among Government Ministries.	- Psychosocial education - Civic engagement and leadership - Sex, gender and violence - Sexual and reproductive health - Preparing for work - Reducing risks related to natural disasters - Financial literacy	Implemented by CBO's and technical training providers.
Jordan	- Curriculum developed by Business Development Center (BDC), a Jordanian NGO. - Informed by consultations with employers.	- Effective communication and business writing skills - Team-building and team work skills - Time management - Positive thinking - Customer service - CV and interview skills	- Implemented by BDC. 45 hours over a 9 day period (5 hours per day), with a maximum of 30 participants per group. - Sessions held during daylight hours at locally known and trusted institutions such as the Chambers of Industry and local universities.
Liberia	- Curriculum developed by service providers with EPAG coordination team. - Informed by "Girls Vulnerability Assessment" conducted prior to project implementation. - Adapted from several resources, both in-country and international.	- Preparing for the world of work - Sexual and reproductive health - Family skills - Healthy living - Preventing and responding to SGBV - Communication, self-esteem, and leadership - Know your rights - Community service	- Implemented by EPAG service providers (a mix of Liberian and international NGOs). - Classroom training phase runs for six months. Training tracks vary: 3–4 hours per day, 3–4 days per week. - All classes held during daylight hours at training venues in communities where trainees reside.
Nepal	- Curriculum developed by the Centre for Development and Population Activities (CEDPA). - Consultant hired to tailor the curriculum for the target group of the AGEI and field test with the T&E providers.	- Negotiation skills - Dealing with discrimination - Workers' rights education - Sexual and reproductive health - Business development skills and financial management	- Classroom training is 40 hours over 5 days following the technical training. - The T&E providers subcontract specialized trainers to deliver the life skills training. - Trainers trained via a training of trainers (ToT) model, with a refresher course.
South Sudan	Curriculum developed by BRAC based on a similar AGI project in Uganda, and adapted to the South Sudan environment.	- Skills of making effective decisions - Skills of knowing and living with others - Skills of knowing and living with oneself - Sexual and reproductive health (menstruation, early pregnancy, STI/ HIV prevention, family planning, etc.) - Leadership - Gender and bride price - Rape (meaning, prevention strategies, responding and coping)	- Course is conducted over 5 months (20 hourly sessions) within the Girls Club premises. - Adolescent Girl Leaders trained by BRAC to deliver the life skills via a training of trainers (ToT) model, with a mid-way refresher course.
Lao PDR	- Local firm hired to provide certified training on counseling and soft skills to career counselors. - Training session and materials were then developed by the counselors, informed by a needs assessment among students.	- Team work skills - Negotiation skills - Problem solving - CV and interview skills	1–2 day training with co-ed classes. - Implemented by career counselors at the National University of Laos and Pakpasak Technical College.

should incorporate pictures and images to deliver information to less literate audiences. The life skills

curriculum should be piloted in various settings to ensure that it is appropriate for the target group.

Lesson Learned: Nurture a supportive community environment where beneficiaries can exercise their life skills.

Most life skills curriculums deal with sensitive issues like sexual and reproductive health. They also deal with aspects of community life, seeking to influence gender norms and create awareness around the responsibilities and rights of living in a community. The project should help to build a supportive environment in which beneficiaries can effectively exercise their new skills. If the project is

working with younger beneficiaries, it is important to familiarize parents with the project and to get their buy-in and consent. Projects can engage families and communities through community events, workshops and meetings. In Liberia, AGI beneficiaries have held community performances demonstrating some of their life skills through role-plays.

"Before the training I would never stand in front of a group and speak but that now I am comfortable to do it."

**Nepal AGI trainee
from Birgunj**

Lesson Learned: Designate safe spaces that are conducive to learning life skills.

Life skills programs should be delivered in spaces that are suited to the sensitive processes of building social and behavioral skills. This means that the space should be physically safe for beneficiaries to gather in and travel to and from. It should also be a comfortable place for beneficiaries to explore life skills topics in a confidential manner. In South Sudan, life skills are delivered in adolescent girl clubs in project

communities—reports from project beneficiaries and staff indicate that these safe spaces are critical for implementing the project activities. The timing of classes matters too—in Haiti, community-based organizations administer the classes on weekends in community safe spaces to minimize interference with girls' work schedules and household duties.





Lesson Learned: Carefully select life skills trainers.

The local context will affect the characteristics of who is needed to implement the program (age, sex, experience, etc.). It may be appropriate to have all female trainers—as in South Sudan—or to require that all male trainers are paired with a female trainer—as in Nepal. Projects should establish codes of conduct (professionalism, respectfulness, etc.) for trainers, and enforce them through diligent monitoring. In Liberia, the training delivery is guided by the principle of “Do No Harm,” meaning that trainers should only train on topics that they know

very well. Service providers should ensure that facilitators are well-versed on topics in which they train. If the curriculum is addressing very specific or sensitive topics, it may be important to work with local organizations to implement certain modules of the curriculum or to participate as expert guest speakers. In Liberia, several organizations provided volunteer guest speakers on life skills topics, and guest speakers were also recruited from the project’s Private Sector Working Groups.

Lesson Learned: Strengthen the capacity of trainers throughout the program.

The project should familiarize the recruited trainers with the content of the curriculum and practice interactive teaching techniques. In South Sudan and Nepal, the AGI built a cadre of life skills trainers through a “training of trainers” system. This model of cascade training is often an efficient and cost-effective way to transfer knowledge and skills to

newly recruited trainers. Several of the AGI pilots offer refresher courses mid-way through implementation. Peer educators may or may not be appropriate, depending on the context and the program content. Projects should ensure there will be adequate support for peer educators before embarking on such a program.

Lesson Learned: Life skills are built, not taught.

Life skills need to be practiced in order to be learned. Delivery of life skills programs is based on active participation and cooperative learning as opposed to lectures. The AGI pilots use innovative teaching techniques, such as:

- Guest speakers
- Group work and discussions
- Role plays and theatre
- Educational games

- Story-telling
- Debates
- Arts and music
- Field trips
- Community service projects
- Sporting events

A good life skills program will foster social cohesion among the beneficiaries and empower them to take charge of their own learning.

Lesson Learned: Help spread the spill-over benefits of a life skills program.

A locally-adapted life skills curriculum can be a useful public good. Projects should disseminate and share the curriculum with government stakeholders and other development partners. If the community gets energized, leaders may even start programs

within their own groups—in churches, women's organizations, etc. Likewise, a cadre of specialized life skills trainers can be of value to other programs with similar goals.

Summary Checklist for Designing and Implementing a Life Skills Program

- ✓ Has the program perform an assessment of the community and the target audience to help tailor the life skills program to specific local needs?
- ✓ Has the program consulted with other local organizations and referred to international best practices to develop the program content?
- ✓ Has the life skills curriculum been piloted in various settings to ensure that it is appropriate for the target group and the context?
- ✓ If the program is working with youth, has the program informed parents and guardians about the program content and gained their informed consent?
- ✓ Is the content and length of the curriculum realistic to implement?
- ✓ Has the program designated safe spaces where the life skills program will be implemented?
- ✓ If the program is working with males and females, is it appropriate to hold same-sex sessions for all or portions of the program?
- ✓ Who is needed to implement the program (consider age, sex, experience, etc.)?
- ✓ Will the program conduct trainings for the trainers and also consider offering periodic refresher courses for trainers?
- ✓ How will the program support trainers to implement programs in an interactive fashion and fully engage learners in the program?
- ✓ Will the program disseminate and share the curriculum with government stakeholders and other development partners?
- ✓ Can the program evaluate the impact of the life skills program? Scant evidence—particularly rigorous evidence—is available on the impact of life skills (for labor market, health and various behavioral outcomes), delivery mechanisms for teaching life skills, and cost-benefit analysis of programs.

Endnotes

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14. Ibarraran, P., et al., 2012.
15. See http://www.unicef.org/lifeskills/index_resources.html for life skills implementation models.
16. The Afghanistan and Rwanda AGIs will include life skills but the program design is not yet determined.
17. Examples include: Advocates for Youth's Life Planning Education Manual; PATH's Adolescent Reproductive Health and Life Skills Curriculum; Population Council's It's All One Curriculum; CEDPA's Choose a Future: A Sourcebook of Participatory Learning Activities; HDN and Ipas's Gender or Sex: Who Cares?; and Peace Corps' Life Skills Manual.



THE WORLD BANK

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