



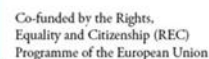
# Life skills, Leadership, Limitless Potential: Supporting children and young people affected by sexual violence in Europe by strengthening and facilitating participatory practice (LEAP)

## Literature review:

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What do we know about life skills and leadership training for vulnerable children and young people?

Kate D’Arcy



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## Introduction

This review was formed part of the Life Skills, Leadership and Limitless Potential project (LEAP) project. The LEAP project ran from November 2015 to November 2017 and was coordinated by the International Centre: Researching child sexual exploitation, violence and trafficking at the University of Bedfordshire in the UK. It was implemented in partnership with Barnardo's Sexual Exploitation Children's Outreach Service (UK), Terre des Hommes (Romania), PULSE Foundation (Bulgaria), Stichting Alexander (Netherlands) and Terre des Hommes Regional Office for South East Europe and in association with EuroChild.

LEAP sought to improve knowledge and develop skills and an understanding of the importance of a children's rights focus on safe and ethical participatory practice. A central aim of the project was to develop confidence amongst practitioners, and strengthen commitments to participatory practice when supporting children and young people who are affected by sexual violence. The project has helped to develop the evidence base on how to support and involve practitioners and young people in advocacy, through research and evaluation. It has also facilitated a European knowledge exchange through the dissemination of freely accessible tools and resources via the International Centre's website.<sup>1</sup>This literature review focusses on the nature and scope of life skills and leadership training for vulnerable children and young people, and informed plans for participatory and creative workshops to develop the LELP programme toolkit.

## Aims and scope

### The aims of this literature review were:

- To review the global literature<sup>2</sup> on life skills and leadership initiatives for vulnerable and/or hard to reach children and young people, including relevant projects that aim to prevent sexual violence and take a participatory or peer-led approach within their work.
- To collate existing information about the value of life skills and leadership projects and programmes in order to inform the plans for participatory and creative workshops to develop the LEAP LLLP toolkit.
- To provide case studies illustrating what we know about life skills and leadership training for vulnerable children and young people.

### Research questions

- How does the literature define life skills and leadership?
- Does the literature tell us about the value of participatory and/or peer-led programmes?
- What does the literature tell us about the content and outcomes of these programmes?

## Method

The review did not follow a systematic process, but is better described as a scoping review. Searches of the literature were completed using academic databases, journals and e-books and Google Scholar (see Appendix 1 for detailed information on searches, results and bibliography).

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.beds.ac.uk/ic>

<sup>2</sup> In English language only



## 1. How does the literature define life skills and leadership?

The most commonly used definition of 'life skills' comes from the World Health Organization. *"Life skills are abilities for adaptive and positive behaviour that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life."* (WHO, 1995)

Life skills are a group of psychosocial competencies and interpersonal skills that help people make informed decisions, solve problems, think critically and creatively, communicate effectively, build healthy relationships, empathise with others, and cope with and manage their lives in a healthy and productive manner. Life skills may be directed toward personal actions or actions toward others, as well as toward actions to change the surrounding environment to make it conducive to health (WHO Health Report 2013).

In the context of vulnerable children and young people, such as those affected by sexual violence, life skills are used to enable children and young people to facilitate new learning, increase skills and improve self-esteem. There is no consensus on the scope of life skills and life skills education in the literature. The range of competencies is so broad as to render the concept somewhat generic. These include, for example: communication and listening skills; negotiation and refusal skills; decision-making and problem-solving skills; and coping and self-management skills. Life Skills education programmes therefore vary and might contain:

- ▶ interpersonal skills – dealing with other people
- ▶ listening skills – empathy and understanding others
- ▶ communication skills
- ▶ negotiation skills – being assertive, avoiding conflict or arguments
- ▶ problem solving
- ▶ decision making
- ▶ skills to cope with emotions such as anger and stress
- ▶ basic literacy and numeracy skills
- ▶ relationships skills.

Thus "Life skills programmes are those that seek to build the capacity of individuals to make decisions and take actions that positively influence their lives and the lives of those around them. A primary goal is to promote psychological as well as physical well-being." (UN Women, 2012)

Boler and Aggleton (2005) analyse the background to the current enthusiasm for life skills work. They note the origins of these ideas in the treatment of mental health problems and in management training and also the speed with which they have been taken up and transferred to other fields such as HIV and AIDS, and sexual health.

Yankah and Aggleton (2008), suggest that life skills are presented as a panacea for many of life's problems, enabling economic and political participation, ameliorating gender inequalities, enhancing the quality of parenting, and reducing antisocial behaviour and crime. In countries such as the United States, life skills-based programmes have been used to reduce alcohol and tobacco use, reduce substance use, and contribute to reductions in gang crime and reoffending. More generally, in relation to HIV, life skills have facilitated the negotiation of risk and reduced vulnerability. Yankah and Aggleton (2008), report that these programmes enable people to communicate openly and freely about sex and drugs, indicating their preferences and what they wish to avoid. They result in clear thinking, having the right attitudes and staying safe. There are many different ways in which the term is used and applied, and while the optimism

associated with it makes the idea of life skills attractive, this also suggests the need for more precise definition and use.

The effectiveness of life skills based interventions remains uncertain due to the range and lack of clarity about the conceptualisation of life skills; they encompass matters as diverse as knowledge acquisition, attitude development, and mental and physical skills. Moreover there have only been a limited number of rigorous reviews of the outcomes of life skills-based work. According to (WHO, 1997:1) *“Skills that can be said to be life skills are innumerable, and the nature and definition of life skills are likely to differ across cultural settings”*.

Nevertheless, Yankah and Aggleton (2008), suggest that studies employing the life skills approach achieve important gains in improved knowledge and changed attitudes. Life skills training only works in combination with other social and education approaches. Ideally, life skills programmes for young people should be designed incorporating the perspectives and needs of young people and allowing them equal participation in the learning process (Casey and Lindhorst, 2009). However, not all skills-based approaches are life skills approaches and neither are all participatory approaches life skills approaches. Teachers and educators may be unfamiliar with participatory approaches. Programmes that aim to combine participation and life skills teaching or training need to consider who will deliver the training and their understanding of participation and young people’s input from the start. Humphreys et al. (2008) suggest that whoever delivers a programme for children and young people experiencing domestic abuse must be well trained and highly skilled in order to approach the subject sensitively and appropriately. They should also have the confidence and skills to manage disclosures and create safe spaces for young people to explore issues. This point is supported in the literature regarding the value and process of life skills education.

#### **Key points for LEAP:**

- *The ‘staying safe’ element is important in the context of the LEAP project due to the backgrounds of the young people involved. It is therefore important that anyone embarking on the delivery of ‘life skills’ programmes considers how the individual is kept safe in the context of their lives.*
- *Boler and Aggleton (2005), highlight the manner in which many skills-based approaches construct young people as ‘deficit systems’ and as lacking in competence. Meanwhile, adults are normally assumed to live risk-free lives and know all the answers. These assumptions are common issues identified within the participation and rights-based literature and highlight how stigma still affects young people generally, even without the the additional stigma of being a victim of sexual violence.*

## **2. Does the literature tell us about the value of participatory or peer-led programmes?**

There is little ongoing monitoring and evaluation of life skills programmes. Most evaluations tend to be short-term, so there is a gap in understanding of the long-term effectiveness of these programmes. Existing evaluations have shown that levels of awareness and knowledge of the issues and learning about help identifying and seeking healthy relationships have increased, but the difficulty of conducting evaluations means it is hard to tell what works and what the long-term results of these programmes or interventions are. Weisz and Black (2009), also noted that the literature that sees peer education and leadership as favourable is based on theory and opinions rather than empirical evaluation. It is therefore important that

programmes are evaluated for continuous improvement in order to strengthen the evidence base of this work.

There is evidence to suggest that a needs analysis and a programme of work tailored to the group of children and young people to which it is delivered is important and produces the best results, but this step is often missing.

Amongst the evidence surrounding the value of peer education and mentoring, the following key themes emerge:

### **Peer education**

In the literature, peers emerge as effective role models who can be an important source of support to increase the knowledge and skills of other young people (AFRCV, 1999; Strategic Partners Ltd., 2000; Berelowitz et al, 2013). However peer facilitation is not necessarily viewed by adults as more effective than having adult facilitators (Weisz and Black, 2009).

Rawsthorne and Hoffmann (2007), reported on the specific outcomes for young women in a peer educator programme where participants were chosen to be representative of the culturally diverse local area. This was seen to enable a greater number of participants to feel included and benefit from participation. Young women were more confident to offer advice and support to friends and families. They felt it increased their career opportunities, they felt more passionate about women's safety and developed stronger ideas about what they wanted in relationships.

In terms of sexual violence specifically, peer educators may serve as positive role models in sexual assault prevention training and be more able to create a culture that counters pervasive attitudes that are accepting of rape, by modelling non-abusive attitudes and behaviours (Turner and Shepherd, 1999). By addressing these issues outside of the classroom and showing a commitment to them, peer educators are in a position to open up more frequent and forthright interactive communication in the broader school environment and community, which can discourage pro-assault attitudes and behaviours.

### **Participation**

Stanley et al (2015a) stated that the involvement of children and young people in the design and implementation of life skills programmes has the potential to increase the programmes' authenticity and this emerged as important to young people themselves. Those who will be both delivering and receiving the programme should contribute to content, delivery and subsequent developments. The authors added that such programmes might include participative learning activities such as drama and training and involving children and young people as peer mentors or facilitators (Stanley et al., 2015b).

Attempts to raise children and young people's self-esteem (Tutty and Bradshaw, 2004) and to 'empower' children (Wolfe et al, 1997; RESOLVE Alberta, 2002) are common features of life skills programmes. Weisz and Black (2009) highlight the way that young people find appropriate ways to voice their concerns and thoughts when offered opportunities to do so. They noted the reluctance amongst some professionals in involving young people in management, planning or leadership, but that adults ultimately realised that involving young people in making decisions meant better results than adult-only initiatives.

Allnock (2015) discusses the importance of disseminating information directly to all young people about how they can sensitively respond to their peers who might be experiencing abuse, violence or other adversity. This requires training young people to listen effectively and sensitively, communicate and respond, as well as signposting where they can go to receive advice and help on behalf of their peers. This finding offers useful tips for those receiving the training as well as those delivering it.

### **Training and support**

In regards to training and support, Weisz and Black (2009) propose that whoever delivers the programme must be well trained and highly skilled in order to approach the subject sensitively and appropriately. The ability to manage disclosures and create safe spaces for children and young people to explore issues relating to violence and abuse is essential. Peer educators need training and support to be able to best advise others and include peer-counselling components into life skills programmes. Sufficient resources are required to conduct peer education and it is important to provide adequate time, assistance, training and support. Weisz and Black also note that where the time for training was short, peer educators were less able to manage sensitive discussions or to challenge peers.

### **Course content**

The values commonly put forward in life skills programmes include equality, acceptance of difference, respect for self and others, caring, justice, responsibility and self-control (Gamache and Snapp, 1995; Thurston et al, 1999; RESOLVE Alberta, 2002).

Rights and responsibilities in relationships was a theme in around a third of domestic violence prevention programmes in England (Ellis, 2006). In these programmes, there was a focus on the right to be safe, mostly in the family, and this was linked to being respected and respectful. Effective education, in the form of learning to identify and express emotions in non-violent ways, is also often included (Gamache and Snapp, 1995; Wolfe and Jaffe, 2001; RESOLVE Alberta, 2002; Ellis, 2004). Despite this, few programmes in England included activities that made an explicit link between power and violence to enable children to explore power in their own relationships (Ellis, 2006).

### **Diversity**

Peer educators should represent those who they are working with. Research from Stanley et al. (2015a) makes clear that students with personal experience of domestic violence are less likely to engage fully with prevention programmes. Thus the selection of peer educators should be based on their ability to perform confidently, and to be able to act as peer educators following the conclusion of the project. Clear guidance should be given to any adult facilitators working with such students.

Tutty and Bradshaw (2004:129), suggest that “gender-neutral programs are more easily marketed to the school system and are more comfortable for teachers and students to accept” (p.48). A few programmes in Australia (Indermaur et al, 1998), Canada (AFRVC, 1999) and England (Ellis, 2004) took account of diversity and paid attention to addressing the complexities and issues for girls and women marginalised through race or ethnicity, class, sexuality or disability or for those who are refugees or sexually exploited through the sex industry.



Prevention programmes are often delivered in school settings and are short-term, although longer-term programmes are more effective (Humphreys et al. 2008).

Kernsmith and Hernandez-Jozefowicz (2011), highlight that programmes need to include those in school but also those disengaged or missing education. The literature suggests that at-risk groups, such as those who are likely to drop out of education, are disproportionately susceptible to becoming either perpetrators or victims of sexual assault, so it is additionally important to reach these groups.

### **Key points for LEAP:**

- *Having peer educators is beneficial to other young people – raising awareness of issues around sexual violence also has advantages for peer educators themselves.*
- *Training is essential in relation to safeguarding, assessing risk and dealing with disclosures.*
- *Learning about and having space to discuss power relations is crucial in ending sexual violence.*
- *It is important to include local information and needs analysis to inform training from the start.*
- *There is a need to work with young people in school and those out of school.*
- *Evaluation is important and necessary and still represents a significant gap in the evidence base.*
- *It is important to match peer educators to local demography, to represent local communities and young people.*
- *Practically the key points above involve resources and it is therefore important to think about resourcing, evaluation and sustainability of work if programmes are under-funded.*

### **3. What does the literature tell us about the content and outcomes of these sorts of projects?**

As suggested previously, there is limited literature on ‘life skills and leadership’ specifically but there are many projects which deliver life skills education. This section includes some case-study examples and focuses on the curricular content of these courses, together with key lessons regarding implementation and, where available, evidence from evaluation.

- 1) **A life skills-based education programme in Pakistan** (Svanemyr et al., 2015) with eleven lessons on life skills. The curriculum included core topics including *self-awareness; puberty; averting risks and peer pressure; decision-making; reproductive health; marriage and pregnancy; menstruation; and sexual and gender-based violence*. The economic empowerment of girls was also included as it had a direct impact on their age of marriage. One of the main challenges to reaching young people in Pakistan with information is that many lack access to education. An estimated 30% of children never attend school and there are consistently high drop-out rates between primary and secondary school, particularly for girls (Durrant, 2000). This programme has, over time, included elements to reach out-of-school children, using board games and other tools, but there was recognition that more needed to be done for those children who have never been to school or have been taken out of school early.
- 2) **FIERCE<sup>3</sup>** is a membership-based organisation building the leadership and power of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) youth of colour in New York City. They offer an ‘Education

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.fiercenyc.org/about>

for Liberation Project' which is a paid leadership development programme that provides comprehensive community organising, political education, and anti-oppression training to new and active members of FIERCE. The aim of their programme is to offer a systematic process for LGBTQ youth to gather the self-esteem, skills, and knowledge required to effectively advocate transforming institutions that impact their lives.

The programme combines interactive workshops and practical hands-on experience in organising. Ultimately, it strives to help develop a new generation of community organisers dedicated to social justice work in historically underserved communities. Curriculum content includes sessions on *housing, criminalisation, policing, immigration and safety and violence (including bias violence, school-based violence and intimate sexual violence*. FIERCE (2013) state that they offer political education and internships and have trained 350 young people who have gone on to be leaders and organisers in other social justice organisations across the country.

3) **The SAGE LIFESKILLS programme** is one of two CSE intervention programs which the Sage Project Inc., a non-profit organisation in San Francisco, delivers. Both operate from the philosophical approach of harm reduction, which emphasises peer education and skills development. Participants in LIFESKILLS are under 18 and are either involved in CSE or considered at high risk of sexual exploitation. The LIFESKILLS programme was evaluated by Cohen et al (2011). They describe the content and methods, which included case management, support groups, and referral services. The content included a programme that had 12 modules: *orientation, learning about sexual exploitation – the basics and global context; guest survivor speakers sharing their experiences; fun outing/movie night – to support group bonding; healthy female relationships; reproductive health and sex education; domestic violence; pimping tactics and dating older men; an educational outing – poetry, dance or theatre performances; , anger management; job readiness skills – resumé writing and mock interviewing; substance use and harm reduction; [and] developing healthy boundaries and a healthy life*. Of the participants, 90% felt that SAGE had helped them. The results of the programme included:

- reduced contact with the criminal justice system
- reduced incidents of sexual assault
- better educational aspirations
- better attitude to employment
- better able to complete tasks.

4) **The 'Power Girls' life skills for personal strength and social confidence'** (The Asia Foundation, 2006). The aim of this life skills curriculum was to “empower the young, the abused and the disadvantaged with self-awareness, internal resources and problem-solving skills with which they can positively assert themselves against the challenges of their society. Its purpose is to strengthen the resiliency that female survivors in South Asia need in order to keep surviving. The goal of this curriculum is to start the girl or woman on the path to being a 'Power Girl': a self-confident person who is moving towards realistic goals, who is realistic about the challenges, and who has the internal strength to address those challenges” (p.4). The curriculum contained nine modules: *Knowing myself; communicating with others – non-verbal communication, active listening; helping others – problem solving; I feel bad, I feel good – relaxation, stress reduction, trust, working with negative emotions; being a friend – positive group reinforcement, peer pressure; my gender and my society – role models, strong women, gender inequity, assertiveness; men in my life – male*

*attitudes, skills to address sexual coercion; my family – family roles, family conflicts; planning for my future – goal setting.* Reported outcomes from ‘Power Girls’ suggested very subjective results: Feelings of confidence and inner strength; ability to communicate, be assertive and able to make decisions. Searches were not able to locate a formal evaluation of this work.

## **5) Barnardo’s Life Skills Training**

Barnardo’s project ‘Realising Ambition’, which delivered life skills training, was an evidence-based early intervention and prevention programme to reduce risk-taking behaviour. This training had three core components: *self-management skills, which help children with problem solving, decision making and how to regulate emotions; social competence, where students learn how to communicate clearly, make friends and develop healthy relationships; and drug resistance, to help children develop strategies for resisting peer pressure (Barnardo’s, 2015:1).*

The training is a *“universal, multi-component enhancement-based substance abuse and violence prevention programme that is implemented using a personal and social skills training model. Life Skills Training consists of 15 sessions of 45 minutes each and includes a student and a facilitator manual that covers personal self-management, general social skills and violence and drug resistance skills. The sessions can take place weekly, or two to three times a week, but not more frequently. They are followed by two sets of booster sessions to increase protective factors and skill retention. These booster sessions should be at least three months apart, but there can be up to one year between each series” (Barnardo’s, 2015).*

Outcomes showed that 71% of 11- to 12-year-olds who received the ‘Advanced’ component of the training showed stability or improvements in behaviour. Barnardo’s also provide an evaluation of the project.

The analysis of 1160 children completing the primary school ‘Essentials’ component of the training between September 2013 and July 2015 showed *“statistically significant improvements in knowledge, attitudes and life skills. It also found that the 502 young people that took part in a following ‘booster’ set of sessions showed further improvements, indicating that a greater ‘dosage’ of the service can bring a greater change in outcomes. Preliminary analysis of the indicators from the Realising Ambition framework, focused on 245 young people aged 11 and 12 receiving the ‘Advanced’ component of the training in secondary schools, provides a cautious indication that changes in knowledge, attitudes and life skills may also be accompanied by modest improvement in behaviour. 71% of young people showed stability or improvements in behaviour (45% improving), and the proportion of young people meeting the ‘high need’ threshold on the Strengths and Difficulties questionnaire fell from 17% before delivery of LST to 13% after” (Barnardo’s, 2015).*

## **Summary**

The process and content of these life skills programmes is important and interesting: they begin by looking inward, at the self, before considering wider social influences. Thus the education and support process begins by helping participants address issues of personal safety, boundaries and relationships (such as self-awareness, healthy relationships and the grooming process) before introducing wider skills and education (regarding health, wellbeing and finance, for example) and how to move beyond violence and abuse. These examples indicate how life skills programmes can work to decrease or eliminate barriers traditionally encountered by marginalised populations, including discrimination, alienation, stigma and victim-blaming. Individuals are afforded the opportunity to heal, create safety and financial independence, build

community, and expand their choices. A desired result of the programme is that participants are more able to contribute to their own lives, as well as to the lives of their families and to society as a whole. Whilst these messages are positive there is clearly a need for more robust exploration of the experiences of those who organise or receive these programmes, and evaluation that assesses their outcomes.

## **Conclusion**

The findings from this review suggest that the development of life skills and leadership skills can be important in empowering young people who have experienced sexual violence, and potentially also in preventing sexual violence. However, with little consensus in the field as to the nature of life skills, a more precise definition and evaluation of life skills programmes is required in order to develop the evidence base and substantiate this claim.

The literature recognises the importance of peer education as a model for life skills education. It also emphasises that the effectiveness of life skills training is largely related to the process through which it takes place, namely who delivers it and how it is developed and sustained. The curriculum content should focus on individual needs but also look to include information about wider socio-economic and political influences that may marginalise or disempower the individual.

Enabling peers to deliver or co-deliver programmes is empowering and can offer an effective intervention and support that is not only helpful but is necessary for those with histories of exploitation and violence. Nevertheless, care must be taken to support peer educators themselves to ensure they will benefit and have the training and support they need to undertake and learn from the work.

## **Footnote**

These key messages have informed the development and delivery of the life skills training for young facilitators and young people as part of the LEAP project.

LEAP produced a life skills programme with a range of tools, session plans and resources used to train youth facilitators in the UK, the Netherlands, Romania and Bulgaria specifically in raising awareness and prevention of sexual violence with other young people. The programme included practical curriculum content with a personal development focus, covering self-awareness, communication skills and leadership skills as well as explaining what participation is, defining sexual violence and the rights of the child, and providing a participatory programme of activities which youth facilitators could undertake themselves as part of their training and eventually share with other young people.

## **Appendix 1 – Search terms and bibliography**

Search terms included combinations of the following: young people; leadership; life skills; and sexual violence. Literature was found to be very scarce. For example, a simple database search returned 35 documents. Most focussed on mental health, family planning, HIV and personal, social, health and economic education, and delivery of life skills by adults rather than young people, and none were directly relevant. Hence searches using just one specific term were used to identify documents and some were gathered via emails to relevant groups and making contact with academics who were working in the areas of young people's participation and sexual violence.

Initially, 14 relevant documents were found, all of which were used to form the body of this review. As the project developed, additional documents were added, for example, from another literature review conducted by the International Centre focussed upon domestic and sexual violence.

Inclusion/exclusion criteria were as follows:

Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
English language	Not in English
Post 2005 – due to time constraints and to ensure research is most up to date	Literature published prior to 2005 – often cited in more recent studies anyway
Literature worldwide	Research on young people’s participation that is not strongly related to prevention of either sexual or domestic violence
Studies relating to children and young people under the age of 25 and those which involve sexual violence	Research specifically looking at life skills for adults
Projects specifically looking at related fields preventing sexual and domestic violence	

During the search process it became apparent that the literature was divided between some academic literature and many practical reports on different types of life skills education or programmes. The bibliography is therefore structured to reflect those different literatures.

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