Creating Connections

Sexual and reproductive health & gender rights education

Introduction and Facilitator Tips

Creating Connections is a parent and adolescent education program. This version of the program brings together activities that have been developed for a range of countries in the Asia Pacific region.
Welcome to Creating Connections

Education programs can help to promote sexual health, reduce violence, and build resilience in adolescents and young people. However, social and cultural conditions can work against open dialogue about sensitive issues. Creating Connections aims to address this challenge by using an evidence-based and theoretically-informed approach to provide participants with the confidence, knowledge and skills that they need to talk about social, mental, physical and sexual health issues.

Creating Connections is a comprehensive life-skills based education program targeted at adolescents and parents of adolescents. In the adolescent program, learning activities are designed to build knowledge and skills that enable adolescents to make well-informed, healthy and respectful choices about sexuality and relationships. It includes a focus on building personal resilience and also on providing support to peers. The adult program aims to ensure that parents are well-informed about sexual and reproductive health, and rights. It includes activities designed to build parents’ skills and confidence to talk to partners and children about gender and sexual and reproductive health.

Areas of focus include sexual and reproductive health, understanding gender and gender rights, respectful relationships, help-seeking, peer support, violence prevention, positive coping, and self-care. Each session builds on the next and all sessions involve a combination of knowledge building, critical thinking and skills practice. The theme of friendship and peer support is reinforced throughout.

The adolescent and parent programs can be run separately or simultaneously.

Creating Connections materials available for download:

- Creating Connections Introduction & Facilitator Tips
- Creating Connections for Adolescents (Core Sessions)
- Creating Connections for Adolescents (Optional Sessions)
- Creating Connections for Parents
- Creating Connections Joint Adolescent & Parent Session
A summary of the evidence base and theory of change informing the approach

Creating Connections takes an evidence-based approach to build participants’ knowledge and skills in the areas of sexual and reproductive health, gender and respectful relationships. An evidence-based program takes guidance from prior research into what works. The program designers look at research which identifies the key elements of effective programs as well as the features of ineffective programs. The designers then use this knowledge to avoid the mistakes or weaknesses identified and to take guidance from what has been shown to work.

What are some of the common features of successful sexuality education programs?

Successful prevention education programs have a number of features in common. It is these features that form the evidence base that can be used when developing or modifying programs.

Effective programs provide accurate and relevant information, and address the important skills of conversation, communication, negotiation, refusal and help-seeking. To do this they use participatory strategies, and provide applied exercises to help people to think about and practice dealing with the challenges that they may encounter in their lives. They also give participants a chance to talk about the ways in which social and cultural norms can lead to gendered pressures such as increased risk-taking for boys and decreased confidence to assert the rights to protection amongst girls, and amongst marginalised and stigmatised groups.

Additional evidence used to inform program design

As many sexuality education programs aim also to increase resilience and improve gender relations, the research about effective life-skills programs is also relevant. Sexual risk-taking is more likely when people are affected by drugs or alcohol; hence it is also relevant to include a focus on drug education within a sexuality education program. In this case it is also important to draw on the evidence base about effective drug education.

Creating Connections is a comprehensive program aiming to equip young people with knowledge, skills and confidence. Therefore, it draws on the evidence base from a range of interconnected fields, including social and emotional learning, drug and alcohol education and anti-violence education. Research in effective education programming in all of these areas shows similar things. Programs need to be participatory (not didactic), positive, include practical and relevant learning activities, include rehearsal of skills and be conducted in a safe and supportive environment.

What does the evidence base about sexuality education programs show?

Research shows that some sexuality education programs have no influence on behaviour. Participants may have gained more knowledge, but still fail to put this knowledge into practice in their lives. This is because in everyday life people are influenced by social and cultural norms which set expectations and exert pressure on behaviour. People are also affected by power relations as well as by personal, social and economic needs.

Successful programs are those which show a change in knowledge and attitudes and influence the up-take or continuance of positive behaviour. Positive choices may include people delaying sexual initiation, limiting numbers of partners, reducing or stopping risky sexual activity, increasing the use of protection, negotiating effectively with partners, treating others with respect, and using positive problem-solving, peer support and help-seeking strategies.

Research shows that for sexuality education programs to achieve their goals, they have to be able to influence attitudes, build capacity and motivation, create a sense of possibility, and provide social support to assist people to assert their choices. They also examine gender norms and equip people to address rights and needs in their relationships. It is not enough to just provide information.
They also need to challenge any glamorous or normalised images that may be associated with negative or risky behaviours.

**Changing social norms**

A range of social norms can influence people’s choices relating to sex and relationships. Feminine norms of passivity and acquiescence, together with masculine norms of entitlement and superiority can lead to women being forced into unwanted or unprotected sex. Norms around masculinity may include pressures to be knowledgeable and experienced in relation to sex, or peer pressure to engage in risk-taking behaviour involving alcohol or drugs. These norms may lead to young men seeking earlier sexual experiences or engaging in sex with multiple partners without using protective measures or without checking for consent. Effective sexuality education programs use participatory group activities to help participants to think critically and to understand the influence of these norms. The games and group-building exercises in the program help to build the sense of empowerment and social support that assist people to find the courage to resist harmful influences and to assert healthier choices in the face of these norms.

**Will sexuality education make young people more likely to become sexually active?**

It is common for parents to worry that if their children are educated about sex then they will be more likely to become sexually active. This fear leads to the practice of keeping children ignorant about sexual and reproductive health (SRH). Research shows however, that young people are not more likely to become sexually active as a result of being educated about sex. Rather, those who are well educated (particularly girls) are more likely to delay sexual initiation, have fewer partners and to use protective measures when they do become sexually active.

There is an association between viewing considerable amounts of pornography and boys becoming sexually active at an earlier age and engaging with more sexual partners. Therefore it is wise to provide effective sexuality education, rather than to leave it to young people to search for their own education, as this is when they...
may be more likely to encounter pornography or misinformation. Pornography also tends to normalise violence against women. It is therefore important that education programs include components about gender rights and respectful relationships. Other risk factors associated with earlier initiation of sex (outside of early marriage) include drug and alcohol use, early school leaving, family instability or polygamous families, and being a member of groups with permissive attitudes towards sex.

Key protective factors which are associated with later initiation into sexual activity include living with both parents, having the father present in the home, being literate, having high educational aspirations, continuing enrolment in school (females), and having refusal skills for unsafe sex. Effective SRH programs contribute to the development of refusal skills.

**Access to sexuality education and life skills programs for young married women**

Research investigating the experiences of married adolescent girls in India, Bangladesh and Pakistan shows that those more likely to use modern methods of contraception for family planning are those who have received education about SRH, are better educated and are wealthier. Thus poorer and less educated girls may not have sufficient information to understand how to use family planning methods or insufficient support to access services or assert their choices. This is a reminder that sexual health choices are also influenced by economic disadvantage and structural barriers such as lack of access to services and resources.

**Including attention to sexual and gender diversity**

Many sex education programs consider only the implications for those engaging in heterosexual sex and those who identify as being the gender that is presumed to match their biological sex. However, it is estimated that around 1 in 10 young people may be same sex preferred, bisexual or transgender. Therefore it is important that sexuality education programs also teach about sexual orientation and gender identity and include a focus on decision-making in relation to same-sex partnerships.
Facilitator tips

Setting up a safe space

It is important for facilitators to work with participants to set up a ‘safe space’ in which to deliver this program. This means establishing a friendly and respectful atmosphere in which everyone feels welcome and safe to share their views or questions without fear of judgement or silencing. It also means being clear about what is appropriate to share and/or disclose in the group space and what should be kept private or saved for disclosure in a more private setting (e.g. between the facilitator and the individual). The program does not require participants to disclose their own experiences, as this may not be appropriate in front of the group. Rather, it uses the notion of protective distancing, providing examples and scenarios as the focus for activities.

Building and maintaining positive group relationships

There are many things the facilitator can do to help build a friendly atmosphere and encourage people to mix.

The facilitator(s) can:

- Smile and greet individuals as they arrive
- Thank people for their contributions
- Use eye contact
- Observe the group and notice who participates
- Encourage people to join in
- Invite different people to speak
- Assist people to group as you set up the activities
- Show respect for people’s ideas
- Invite people to put forward contrary opinions
- Make sure no one is left out
- Make sure no one is ridiculed
- Avoid making judgemental comments about people’s answers
- Acknowledge that it takes courage to participate
- Organise the seating so everyone can feel part of the group
- Invite different people to give the feedback from the small groups
- Change the people in each group for new tasks
- Use mixing games to give people experience in mixing with others

Other methods for building a positive group environment include the use of games, mixing activities and participatory tasks which are designed as part of the curriculum. It is most important not to replace these with lecture-style presentations. These participatory activities give the group members a chance to build their relationships with each other and develop their social skills and confidence.

Setting rules and expectations

It is important to set the expectations that the group will work together, mix with each other, and encourage each other to participate. It is important to have rules explicitly stated so everybody is aware of expectations and standards. Ideally, the participants are involved in building these expectations and standards. The activity in the first session can be used to set up group expectations.

If you find that participants are not observing the rules, make a direct request. This might sound like:

*Can we have one person speak at a time during the feedback session please? It is important that we get to hear each other.*

*Let’s make sure we find a way to disagree whilst still respecting the other person.*

*Let’s not make negative race/gender/age-based comments. We should provide respect when referring to others.*

*Which of our rules do we need to remember here?*

*We made an agreement about respect. What was that agreement?*
Things you can do to make sure the group members build relationships with each other include:

- Use the start-up games to set a friendly mood
- Use the interactive activities to organise small groups
- Play an extra game or sing a song at the end of the session to build the group spirit
- Use paired conversations when you want to increase the interaction. This will help people to develop confidence and will get everyone involved.

When left to choose their own groups, people tend to work with the same people and thus do not improve their connections with others. Many people also face significant fear of social rejection when asked to form their own groups. To address this, play grouping games to establish groups. This also adds an element of fun. You can number the players or hand out cards and then ask players to group with those with the same number. Alternatively you can guide people into groups.

**Working in mixed or single sex groups**

In some settings it will be more appropriate to provide the program to single sex groups. In others it will be better to provide for mixed sex groups. If running mixed sex groups, there may be some times when it is preferable to split the sexes for certain activities such as for games involving significant physical contact or discussion of more sensitive scenarios.

**Managing the venue and the resources**

It is important to make sure the furniture is set up ready for each session. If possible, arrange the chairs in a circle or in a horseshoe shape to start. This will help to set an inclusive atmosphere.

Participants will need to be able to move their chairs to form small groups for the activities.

Read through the session plan carefully and use the resources checklist as a guide to ensure that you have all materials ready for the session. Some activities require you to make handouts or collect products. This can take some time, so it is best to prepare a few days ahead.

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**Making adjustments to the program**

Use your judgment to make adjustments to the program based on people’s needs. Make sure that your modifications fit with the purpose of the program. Refer to the objectives of the session to help with this.

Sometimes it will not be possible to cover all of the activities. Be aware that it can be tempting to avoid the role play activities if our confidence in ourselves or in the group is not high. However, if we leave out these activities, participants will not develop their skills. It is much easier to talk about things than to actually do them. It may be better to leave out one of the earlier activities if you are short of time.

**Managing time**

A suggested time allocation is provided with each activity (look for this symbol 🕒). This is an estimate only. Some groups will take a little shorter and some a little longer. Use your judgement to manage the pace.

Give a ‘one minute’ warning before you call an end to the task.

You may wish to consult participants about whether they need more time. Ask participants to put their hands up if they need more time. Then tell them how much time you will give them. Use your judgement in this. If an activity is working very well, you may wish to let it run longer. Alternatively, if it is not working, shorten it and move on to the next one.

**Personal comfort and embarrassment**

You may feel embarrassment when leading the conversation about some topics. If this is so, you can work on increasing your confidence to talk about these topics before the session. You can do this by preparing with another facilitator and talking about the topics together first, or by telling friends and family members what your session will be about, and getting some practice by talking with them.

Sometimes you may wish to tell the group that you are a little embarrassed but that you believe it is very important to have the courage to talk...
about these issues and so you will not let your embarrassment stop you. This provides a good model for them to apply their own courage. For example, you might say something like:

*I am a little shy to talk about contraception as this was never something that I heard talked about before I did this program. However, now I have learnt about it, and now I understand how important it is for people to be able to talk about it, I have realised I must learn to talk more openly. Today we will get to do this.*

**Protecting privacy**

It is important that the facilitators protect privacy when discussing sensitive issues. One way to do this is through providing scenarios to use as the basis for discussions. Another way to do this is to ask people to think about who else may be in the story they will share. If the material is a bit sensitive, they should protect the privacy of those other persons by not using their names or by telling the story in the third person.

Ask people to be sensitive to things like people’s private relationships and their sexual orientation or their health status. Draw this to the group’s attention:

*The purpose of these activities is to have people develop their skills and confidence to talk about sexuality and gender issues. While we do need to talk freely and openly, we also need to respect privacy. We ask people not to tell stories about other people. One way to do this when sharing is to say ‘Someone I know …’ Or ‘I have heard of a situation in which …’ rather than to use people’s names or titles.*

There may be times when the facilitator needs to remind people about privacy. If they think that someone is about to speak inappropriately about someone else, they may need to interrupt with a reminder. This is called protective interrupting. See the following example:

*I have a sense you are about to tell us a sensitive personal story. Can you find a way to tell us this without breaking privacy? You could put it in the third person and say something like – ‘I know of someone who…’*

The facilitator has the same right to privacy as the participants. They should choose thoughtfully the details of their personal lives that are appropriate to share. Their job is to get other people thinking and talking about the issues.

**Reflective listening skills**

Reflective listening is an important skill for the facilitator. When people share a story or idea, a ‘reflective listener’ tries to respond in a way that shows they have understood the contribution. This is preferable to making an evaluative comment (such as ‘good point’). The reflective comment can be a very brief summary (e.g. ‘You think that a girl will be too embarrassed to tell her mother’). Alternatively, if unsure what the point is, the facilitator can summarise and check back with the speaker (e.g. ‘It sounds like you are suggesting that the mother will stop the girl from speaking because the mother will be too embarrassed. Is that right?’).

**Dealing with difference in views**

It is important to set an atmosphere in which people can share different views. They should not feel they all have to agree with each other. The facilitator’s role is to open the questions for discussion, to summarise the different views expressed, and to ask participants to think about possible consequences for a range of actions. It is not the facilitator’s job to provide ‘correct’ information. This is different from giving an opinion.

**Dealing with gender and power issues**

The facilitator should not make sexist or racist comments. The facilitator should model a respectful approach. Patterns in gender relationships can be the hardest to change. Some of the participants will be exploring the issue of difference in power or status in their own relationships. The facilitator’s job is to ask questions, rather than to give advice.

For example, the facilitator can ask:

*What are all the different things someone could do in this situation?*

*What consequences might each of these actions*
bring?
What might this person be afraid of?
What might give them strength?
What knowledge or help might they need?
What might they be hoping for?
What might they advise a friend to do in a similar situation?

These questions will help people to think deeply about the situation.

Managing the knowledge components
It is important to revise the knowledge to be taught before each session. Fact sheets are provided to assist with basic information.

Collect participants’ questions ahead of time (via a ‘questions box’). This will provide time to prepare answers. When researching answers, use a trusted source of knowledge, such as a professional text or qualified person.

Working with participants with low literacy
Across and within groups, participants will have different reading and writing skills. It is important that regardless of literacy level, all participants feel included and are able to participate fully in activities. Use a literacy-free option if needed. These options include reading scenarios aloud to the group before allocating them to individual groups for discussion, and using pictures, rather than written words on handout materials.

If it is inappropriate to give out the fact sheets, ask participants to think of some take-home messages or information that they can pass on verbally to their friends and family. Alternatively, if they have someone at home who can read, they can take the sheets home to share with them.

Using inclusive language
It is important to create an environment that is inclusive of sexual diversity and gender diversity. This acknowledges that some of the young people in the group may identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex or queer (LGBTIQ). This means not always assuming that people are attracted to the opposite sex or identify with the gender that is assumed to match their biological sex. Provide examples of sexual diversity, gender diversity and diverse bodies (these are provided throughout the scenarios). This helps to signal that these forms of diversity are normal, natural and worthy of recognition. Use ‘they’ instead of ‘he’ or ‘she’ and talk about ‘persons’ or ‘people’ rather than men, women, boys and girls.
Running the joint parent-adolescent session

A ‘talking together’ session outline is provided to bring parents and young people together. It can also be used to bring single sex groups together. You may prefer to design your own agenda for this session, selecting from suitable activities in either of the programs. If you select your agenda, consider the advice below:

Ensure that the event provides opportunities for people to interact. Choose a range of activities such as knowledge-based and skills-based activities. Select interactive activities from the range provided in this resource. Avoid lecture-based formats.

A common temptation is to put too much in the agenda. This leaves little time for interaction amongst the participants and can end up working against your aims. Restrict yourself to a smaller number of activities.

Some of the activities can be led by the group participants. For example, you may have one activity led by the facilitator, one led by a pair from the parent group and one led by a pair from the adolescent group.

Collecting feedback along the way

It is important to get some feedback on the program. Feedback can be collected during the training to give you an idea of how much people are learning from and enjoying the different activities.

A flipchart at the back of the room can provide a space on which participants can write their questions and comments. There are several other ways that you can seek feedback in a participatory manner so that the feedback is heard by the group. They include:

- Quick Sketch Feedback
  Ask participants to draw a quick sketch on a piece of paper to symbolise or summarise some feedback that they want to give about the day. Use a ‘show and tell’ approach to share the feedback. Go around the circle and ask each person (or a selection of volunteers) to hold up their picture and speak to its meaning.

- One Word Feedback
  Ask participants to choose just one word to summarise the feedback they want to give about the day. After allowing time for people to think, have a quick whip around the room asking people to call out their one word.

- Hot Potato Feedback
  Have participants pass a ball around in a circle while music is playing. When the music stops, the participant with a ball shares one thing they learned/liked/want to know more about. You can have multiple balls going for greater participation.

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<th>Going well:</th>
<th>Needs improvement:</th>
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<th>Questions:</th>
<th>Ideas for improvement</th>
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## Facilitator skills checklist

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<th>Skills</th>
<th>Actions</th>
<th>What will help with this?</th>
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| **Communication:**  
*Getting the message across clearly and making sure people are understood* | ✓ Give clear instructions  
✓ Make sure you can be heard  
✓ Make sure others can be heard  
✓ Use reflective listening skills  
✓ Ask for clarification if you are not sure what someone else is saying | Use the explanations modelled in the session plans  
Apply your reflective listening skills  
Use the key messages provided to sum up each activity or game |
| **Participation:**  
*Making people feel included and helping them to join in* | ✓ Smile and welcome everyone  
✓ Set expectations of the way the group will work together  
✓ Observe the group and notice what people are doing  
✓ Encourage people to join in  
✓ Assist people to make groups  
✓ Show respect for people’s ideas  
✓ Invite difference of opinion  
✓ Make sure no one is excluded or ridiculed  
✓ Thank people for their contributions | Use the activity in the first session to set up group expectations. Revisit this later if needed  
Use the start up games to set a friendly mood  
Use the activities to organise what to talk about and to organise whose turn it is to talk |
| **Method and management of resources:**  
*Making the activity work* | ✓ Prepare materials well before the session  
✓ Set up the furniture in advance  
✓ Give clear instructions  
✓ Repeat instructions when necessary  
✓ Be clear about the difference between opinions and information  
✓ Schedule questions for a later time if this will work better for the program  
✓ If you don’t know the answer, just say so | Use the equipment checklist for each session as a guide  
Use the sample questions to help guide the discussion |
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<th>Skills</th>
<th>Actions</th>
<th>What will help with this?</th>
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<tr>
<td>Timing:</td>
<td>Keep track of time</td>
<td>If you are working with another facilitator, provide timekeeping assistance for each other</td>
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<tr>
<td>Keeping the energy and making sure the whole agenda works</td>
<td>Let people know how long they will have for the activity</td>
<td>Use a timer when you think it will add to the fun. You can always allow a few extra minutes after the bell</td>
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<td>Use your judgement to make adjustments to the program based on people's needs</td>
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<td>Make sure adjustments fit with the purpose of the program</td>
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<td>Inclusive language and approach:</td>
<td>Avoid presuming that all participants are solely heterosexual in orientation</td>
<td>Use ‘they’ instead of ‘he’ or ‘she’</td>
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<tr>
<td>Making minority groups feel respected and included</td>
<td>Be inclusive of people who identify as transgender, third gender or other diverse gender identities</td>
<td>Talk about persons or people rather than men, women, boys and girls</td>
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The first *Creating Connections* curriculum was developed for the Viet Nam Women's Union in 2006. It was funded by Ford Foundation and developed in partnership with staff from the WARC centre within the Women's Union. The original proposal for *Creating Connections* was developed with support from WHO Viet Nam and UNAIDS Viet Nam with the objective to improve the dialogue on sexuality, gender rights and HIV prevention for mothers and adolescent girls in the context of a changing social environment. The Viet Nam version of the program was subsequently expanded to include adolescent boys. The lead author of the Viet Nam materials is Associate Professor Helen Cahill, with contributions from Michelle Pose and Ian Seal and Dr Tu Anh Hoang, Director of the Centre for Creative Initiatives in Population and Health, Viet Nam.

Following promising evaluation results in Viet Nam, in 2010-2011 regional UNICEF and UNFPA offices invested in a refinement of the girls', boys' and mothers' program materials and expansion of the program into several countries. The materials were revised and updated by Associate Professor Helen Cahill and Sally Beadle. Technical advice was provided by Dr. Josephine Sauvarin (UNFPA Asia Pacific Regional Office), Justine Sass (UNESCO Bangkok) and Margaret Sheehan (UNICEF East Asia Pacific Regional Office). Input from Bangladesh, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Nepal and Indonesia has further enriched the programs for girls, boys and women, via country-based versions of the curriculum. The program was translated into Cambodian, Laotian, Nepalese, Bengali and Myanmar languages.

In 2012, with support from UNICEF Indonesia, *Creating Connections* was adapted by Helen Cahill and Sally Beadle for implementation in Papua Province as part of the Joint UN initiative *Combating violence against women and girls in Papua Province, Indonesia*. Programs were developed for adolescent girls, adolescent boys, mothers and fathers. The program was renamed *Membangun Masyarakat Tangguh* (*Building Strong Communities*) for this context. Technical advice for this adaptation was provided by Dwiutari Tamanbali (UNICEF), Adolfinne Krisifu (UNICEF), Gracia Augusta (UNICEF), Nancy Wompere (Cenderawasih University) and Andy Wally (Cenderawasih University).

In 2012, UNESCO supported the adaptation and implementation of *Creating Connections* in Myanmar and Cambodia.

In 2013, together with members of the Adolescent Cluster, UNICEF Bangladesh and partners supported a program adaptation, train the trainer and dissemination of the program in Bangladesh. Program adaptation and implementation support was provided by Helen Cahill and Sally Beadle. In 2014, UNICEF Bangladesh supported a similar adaptation for the boys' and fathers' programs. Revisions were made by Helen Cahill and Sally Beadle, with assistance from Sarah Natali Soysa and Rosie Yasmin. Technical advice and feedback on this adaptation was provided by Luna Shaila (UNICEF), Parveen Rashida (BRAC), the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs and members of the Adolescent Cluster.

In 2014, UNESCO China commissioned Helen Cahill to adapt and implement the *Creating Connections* for parents of adolescents. As of 2016, the program has been implemented in 12 provinces and cities across China. Technical advice on this adaptation was provided by Hongyan Li (UNESCO).

In 2014, UNICEF Philippines supported an adaptation of the program for adolescents (mixed groups). Rewriting, extension and implementation support was provided by Helen Cahill and Sally Beadle. Technical advice and feedback on this adaptation was provided by Emma Brathwaite (UNICEF), Ced Apilado (UNICEF), Jordan Chaffin (UNICEF), Aladin Borja (UNICEF), Arlene Aragones (UNICEF), Scheree Herrera (UNICEF) and representatives from the Department of Social Welfare and Development, the Department of Health and the Commission on Population.
References


