

# Adolescents in Jordan: psychosocial well-being

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Psychosocial well-being, including emotional resilience and support from adults and peers, is central to adolescents' healthy transitions to adulthood. GAGE findings highlight the vulnerability of young people in Jordan and suggest there is considerable scope for government and humanitarian programming to do more to foster the good mental health that underpins young people's confidence and self-reliance and the social connections that foster appreciation for diversity and a sense of belonging.



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## GAGE research findings

Our findings suggest that most adolescents in Jordan are relatively emotionally resilient, can talk to their parents about many topics, and have at least one friend that they trust (74% of the older cohort, aged 15–17 years, and 69% of the younger cohort, aged 10–12 years). Young people report more open relationships with their mothers than with their fathers and younger adolescents report closer relationships with their parents than their older peers. However, in line with several other recent studies<sup>1</sup>, one third of GAGE adolescents (32%) report symptoms of psychological distress<sup>2</sup>. Our qualitative work highlights that many young people are highly stressed—by violence, trauma and poverty—but keep their feelings to themselves because they do not want to burden their parents. As the mother of a 12-year-old boy living in Zaatari camp explained:

*Sometimes I see my son cry. He tells me ... he is remembering our house and our country ... Sometimes he wants to buy a pair of trousers but he is too embarrassed to ask his father as he knows there isn't the money and he doesn't want to upset him.*

While gender differences were insignificant for our younger cohort, we found that older girls are 11% more likely to suffer from psychological distress than older boys. Our qualitative work suggests this is primarily driven by older girls' greater social isolation and their fears about and experiences of child marriage. A 15-year-old married Syrian girl reported that a 13-year-old acquaintance, forced to marry, 'stands by the window and thinks of suicide.' Palestinian girls are the least likely to have a friend that they trust (59% versus 70% for Syrians and 72% for Jordanians). Palestinian adolescents (predominantly ex-Gazans from Jerash camp) also report more concern about peer pressure. Of older adolescents, 88% of Palestinians agree that peer pressure is a concern for boys, compared to 81% for Jordanians and 80% for Syrians. Figures for girls are 82%, 77% and 74% respectively.

<sup>1</sup> Dardas et al. (2018) report that 41% of adolescent girls and 26% of adolescent boys report symptoms indicative of depression and Malak and Khalifeh (2018) report that 42% of adolescents experience anxiety and 74% experience depression.

<sup>2</sup> Psychological distress was measured using the General Health Questionnaire-12, which has been validated in Arabic (Daradkeh et al., 2001) and used in Jordan, with young adults, with the same threshold for 'distress' (a score of 3 out of 12) (Abu-Ghazaleh et al., 2011).



## Makani programme effects

UNICEF Jordan's integrated Makani programme is having positive impacts on adolescents' psychosocial well-being by providing access to caring adults, time to socialise with friends, and a child-centred curriculum that builds emotional resilience. A younger girl in Zaatari camp explained that she can talk to her teachers about anything: *'You can talk to her if you have any problem and she helps you to solve it'*. A 16-year-old girl from an informal tented settlement near Irbid added:

***'Everyone in the centre is smiling ... because they have the opportunity to leave home and see one another'.***

Adolescents and parents also noted that Makani classes help young people have *'stronger and more confident'* personalities (mother, host community) and improve family relationships. Our survey found that older adolescent participants score 21% higher in terms of discussing important topics with their fathers, compared to non-participants. Our qualitative work suggests that this is because Makani supports adolescents to talk about their feelings – and encourages parents to listen. Girls who attend Makani are also more likely to have a friend they trust (17% for older girls and 15% for younger girls).

Our qualitative findings also highlight room for improvement. Older adolescents want classes just for their own age group (not with younger adolescents, as currently happens in ITS) and more age-appropriate recreational opportunities. *'Males and females at age 14 don't like to mix with children age 10, they get shy,'* explained a Makani facilitator from an ITS. Makani also staff emphasised the importance of training on *'how to deal with adolescents and how to contribute to their personal growth'*.

## Programme recommendations

**Roll out the newly developed parenting manual for young children and adolescents and deliver parent support groups and education classes for parents of adolescents (as opposed to younger children), to foster better parent-child communication and shift gender norms that leave girls socially isolated and at risk of child marriage.**



**Expand opportunities for adolescents—especially girls—to spend time with peers in safe spaces by developing more age-tailored programming for older adolescents, including Social Innovation Labs, which combine problem-solving and teamwork with community volunteering.**

**Continue expanding the Ministry of Education's Nashatati Programme into more schools in order to reach more adolescents with opportunities to develop confidence, express their thoughts and feelings, and collaborate with one another to solve problems.**

**Expand coverage of courses on psychosocial first aid and hotlines for young people with mental ill-health, especially given the high levels of trauma that many refugee adolescents have encountered. Our findings underscore that while many refugees have now been in Jordan for a considerable period of time, support is still required, not least because of adolescents' exposure to ongoing age- and gender-based violence.**

