

TOOL 1: PRINCIPLES AND GUIDELINES FOR DISABILITY INCLUSION IN PSS PROGRAMMING

The following principles are proposed to foster the participation of children and youth with disabilities, and those affected by disability, in PSS programs, strengthening their peer networks, emotional well-being and mental health across different life stages.

Principle 1: Children with disabilities have a right to participation and inclusion in PSS programs

The *United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)* requires states parties to ensure that persons with disabilities are protected in situations of risk, and “that protection services are age-, gender- and disability-sensitive.”¹ Exclusion of children and youth with disabilities from existing activities and programs, whether inadvertent or purposeful, is a form of discrimination.² Children with disabilities are a vulnerable group for prioritization in Community-Based PSS activities, with at-risk children with disabilities being identified for focused interventions that develop their coping skills and emotional supports, and strengthen peer networks that foster their emotional and mental health wellbeing. Including children with disabilities is a core component of PSS programming – not something “special” or separate.

Principle 2: See the girl or boy first, not their disability

Children with disabilities have life experiences, dreams and goals like other children, and, when asked, may identify simply as friends, daughters, sons, sisters, brothers, and so forth. They are exposed to the same stigma, discrimination and inequality based on age and gender as other girls and boys their age. Yet, these factors are often overlooked, as program staff, families and communities prioritize the disability-related needs of this group.

Principle 3: Do not make assumptions

Program staff often make assumptions about what children with disabilities can and cannot do, or what activities would be most suitable for them. Consulting with them, exploring their interests and providing them with opportunities allows children with disabilities to be recognized as the experts on their situations and enables them to provide insights into how to adapt our activities.

Principle 4: Identify and value all contributions

Participation will look different for every individual, and vary according to their personal preferences, the type of activity and how familiar they are with program staff and peers. Program staff should take the time to watch, listen, talk and interact with individuals to learn more about them, what their preferences are, and their skills and capacities. It is also important to avoid setting rigid standards for “participation.” Everyone has something to contribute – this may be a picture, a gesture or a detailed discussion – all of which should be valued and recognized in efforts to engage meaningfully with children with disabilities in PSS activities.

Principle 5: Work with families and caregivers

PSS staff should seek to understand the concerns, priorities and goals not only of girls and boys with disabilities, but also of those who may be taking on care-giving roles for persons with disabilities, as they may also be excluded from community activities and opportunities. It is critically important to engage caregivers of children and youth with more profound disabilities, including parents and siblings. By engaging wider family units, we can both support and strengthen healthy relationships and balanced power dynamics among caregivers, children and youth with disabilities and other family members. This is particularly important when working with girls and young women with disabilities who are likely to have less power and status in society due to age, gender and disability norms.

Guidelines for PSS Staff

Following are practical steps that PSS staff can take to support implementation of the above principles, and to ensure that existing PSS activities are accessible to and inclusive of children with disabilities.

1. Profile diversity among children with disabilities in the community

Children with disabilities are a diverse group, with varying needs, concerns and capacities. PSS staff can better understand this diversity by collecting and analyzing population data that is disaggregated by sex, age and disability, and conducting assessments to identify the profiles of girls and boys with disabilities in a community. This should include vulnerability factors, such as living with both parents, just one parent or alone; being in or out of school; and different types of disability, including of those who have new disabilities, multiple disabilities, and / or are isolated in their homes.

2. Outreach is critical

Children with disabilities, and often their siblings, may be isolated and hidden within their communities. They may lack confidence and social networks, and their mobility and access to public spaces may be restricted, particularly if they are female, due to a variety of attitudinal and environmental barriers, including security. Assessments and evaluations should therefore include an outreach component to engage children with disabilities and their caregivers who are isolated in their homes. Home visits are essential to provide information to children with disabilities and their parents about available activities, establish communication preferences, build trust and develop strategies to address barriers to participation.

3. Put children and youth, including those with disabilities, at the center of program decision-making

Involving children, including those with disabilities, in PSS program design and evaluation is critical to accurately identifying barriers to their participation in programs, developing effective strategies to improve their participation, and understanding what changes matter the most to them. Participatory approaches, such as ranking exercises, photo elicitation and story-telling are examples of ways, in addition to more traditional qualitative methods (e.g., focus group discussions and one-on-one interviews), to effectively explore the concerns and ideas of individuals who have different communication needs. Children with and without disabilities can be encouraged to work together to identify recommendations for our PSS activities, and can help us to reach more isolated children in the

community. This gives them ownership over the programs and activities that affect them, fosters protective peer networks and supports the development of important life and leadership skills.

4. *Make safe spaces “safe” for ALL children*

PSS staff managing safe spaces can support children’s groups to reflect on what makes that space “safe” for them. They can establish their own ground rules about keeping activities open and welcoming to children with different types of disabilities, thereby reducing the risk of stigmatization and discrimination. Establishing safe spaces where adolescent girls and boys can meet separately, connect with peer and social networks, learn skills and safely access information and services, can help to reach those who are socially isolated, lack confidence and / or fear for their safety outside of their homes (due to social norms relating to both age and gender).

5. *Identify mentors with disabilities*

Creating a network of strong, young leaders with disabilities in a community will improve the status of children with disabilities, by challenging social norms, and highlighting the skills and capacities of persons with disabilities. Children with disabilities want to be seen as leaders, friends, and community members; people who can make valuable contributions to their community. Program staff should recruit young women and men with disabilities as volunteers and staff in all types of programs, including PSS programs. Program staff can also invite women and men with different types of disabilities to share their own experiences with all children.

¹ The United Nations (2006) Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.
<https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities.html>

² UNHCR. (2011). Working with persons with disabilities in forced displacement.
<http://www.unhcr.org/publications/manuals/4ec3c81c9/working-persons-disabilities-forced-displacement.html>