



Review article

Creating an Enabling Environment for Adolescent Sexual and Reproductive Health: A Framework and Promising Approaches

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A B S T R A C T

This article provides a conceptual framework and points out the key elements for creating enabling environments for adolescent sexual and reproductive health (ASRH). An ecological framework is applied to organize the key elements of enabling environments for ASRH. At the individual level, strategies that are being implemented and seem promising are those that empower girls, build their individual assets, and create safe spaces. At the relationship level, strategies that are being implemented and seem promising include efforts to build parental support and communication as well as peer support networks. At the community level, strategies to engage men and boys and the wider community to transform gender and other social norms are being tested and may hold promise. Finally, at the broadest societal level, efforts to promote laws and policies that protect and promote human rights and address societal awareness about ASRH issues, including through mass media approaches, need to be considered.

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IMPLICATIONS AND CONTRIBUTION

Creating enabling environments to empower young people to realize their sexual and reproductive health and their human rights is an emerging field, although the evidence base is not well established. A conceptual framework offers promising ideas and interventions for further testing in different settings.

After decades of programming to improve adolescent sexual and reproductive health (ASRH), it has become increasingly clear that strengthening access to, and the quality of, services does not alone suffice to improve health outcomes. The sexual and reproductive health (SRH) of adolescents is strongly influenced by a range of social, cultural, political, and economic factors and inequalities. These factors increase adolescents' vulnerability to SRH risks (e.g., unsafe sex, sexual coercion, early pregnancy) and

pose barriers to their access to SRH information and services. Addressing these underlying determinants by working with various stakeholders such as parents, community members, and policy makers, is essential for adolescents to realize their SRH and human rights. Such an approach is commonly referred to as building an enabling environment.

Building enabling environments so that adolescents realize their SRH and human rights requires interventions that work at multiple levels—with adolescents, with families, with communities, and at the societal level. Such interventions tend to be complex and can be challenging to evaluate. As a result, there are few rigorously evaluated interventions in this area, and these have not been widely replicated beyond one or two settings. The evidence base for such interventions is still in the initial stages of being established. Therefore, it is premature to definitively identify what works. Rather, those involved in designing and implementing ASRH programs can benefit from a conceptual clarity on the key

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elements they must address, helped by some promising practices that they can draw upon. Therefore, this article offers a conceptual framework and describes the key elements of approaches that work to create an enabling environment to improve SRH and help adolescents realize their human rights. It provides illustrative examples of promising approaches that can contribute to creating enabling environments for ASRH. This article, however, is not meant to be a systematic or comprehensive review of the literature on the effectiveness of interventions to create enabling environments and their impact on ASRH outcomes.

Applying the ecological framework to adolescent sexual and reproductive health

An enabling environment reflects a set of interrelated conditions—legal, political, social, and cultural, among others—that affect the capacity of young people to lead healthy lives and access relevant and necessary services, information, and products [1]. Creating an enabling environment requires addressing broad structural factors beyond the individual that are key to shaping ASRH outcomes as well as other aspects of health and development [2].

We propose to apply the ecological framework to describe the key elements of enabling environments for ASRH. The ecological model provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the multiple and interacting determinants of the SRH behaviors and outcomes for adolescents [3,4]. This model is widely applied in understanding determinants of a wide range of health behaviors and outcomes.

The ecological framework has four guiding principles. First, it recognizes the multiple influences on health behaviors and outcomes including factors that operate at the intrapersonal, interpersonal, organizational, community, and public policy levels. Second, it posits that these influences interact across these different levels. Third, it requires a focus on specific health behaviors and outcomes, identifying which factors are most likely to influence the specific behavior or outcome at each level of the framework. Last, the framework suggests that interventions that address factors at multiple levels may be more effective than those that address only one level (Figure 1).

Applying this framework to different SRH outcomes for adolescents means that

1. At the individual level, there is a need to focus on empowering adolescents including through efforts such as those that build the economic and social assets as well as the resources of adolescents.
2. At the relationship level, there is a need to build relationships that support and reinforce positive health behaviors of adolescents. This may include interventions that target those close

relationships which influence the sexual and reproductive experiences of adolescents, such as parents, intimate and other sexual partners, and peers.

3. At the community level, there is a need to create positive social norms and community support for adolescents to practice safer behaviors and access SRH information and services. This involves interventions aimed at broader community members and institutions outside the family—in neighborhoods, schools, and workplaces.
4. At the societal level, there is a need to promote laws and policies related to the health, social, economic, and educational spheres and to build broad societal norms in support of SRH and helping adolescents realize their human rights.

This article is written with several caveats and conceptual considerations. First, in describing elements and intervention examples of enabling environments, the indicators and variables that measure whether an enabling environment has been created are in a pathway where they can be both, outcomes of interest as well as independent variables or determinants of SRH outcomes. For example, interventions to improve girls education or agency and decision making with respect to sex are both considered to be enablers for better SRH outcomes as well as desirable outcomes in their own right. Many of the program examples highlighted in this article, where evaluated, have largely measured impact largely on enabling environment as important outcomes in their own right. A few have attempted to assess whether they have also led to better ASRH outcomes. Not only is this a gap in the evidence but also reflects the nature of “upstream” or “structural” interventions more generally that operate through indirect and complex pathways in influencing health behaviors and outcomes.

Second, the article deliberately considers a broad range of ASRH outcomes including knowledge about SRH and HIV, use of services, behaviors such as contraceptive use, and health outcomes such as rates of sexually transmitted infection (STI) and unwanted pregnancy. This is in part because the upstream nature of enabling environments interventions can potentially influence a range of SRH outcomes and also because the article attempts to identify different elements of enabling environments for ASRH rather than trying to establish their effectiveness on specific outcomes.

Key elements for creating enabling environments

Individual-level interventions

Economic empowerment of girls. Poverty and a lack of resources for key needs and expenses are linked to greater vulnerability to poor SRH outcomes of adolescents, especially girls, for a variety of reasons. For example, a large body of evidence from sub-Saharan Africa shows that young women (15–24 years) are at increased risk of STIs, HIV, and unwanted pregnancies, in part, because they exchange sex (transactional sex) for money, basic necessities, school fees, and other items (e.g., mobile phones) [6–8]. Therefore, several interventions have focused on economic empowerment and poverty reduction as a way of reducing adolescent girls' and young women's vulnerability to SRH issues and HIV. Their premise is that they can bolster the status of girls and young women in the families, improve access to education, and reduce the need for girls and young women to engage in transactional sex.

Economic empowerment interventions have looked at two main types of approaches. First, some programs (e.g., Shaping the

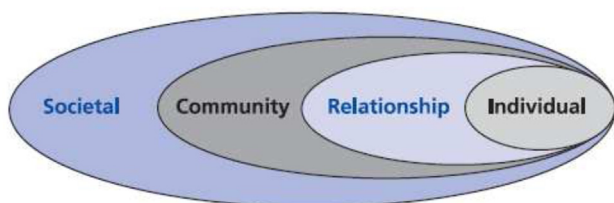


Figure 1. Ecological model for an enabling environment for shaping adolescent sexual and reproductive health [5].

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