



Psychosocial support for children and young adults affected by poverty and conflict: Vivamos Mejor's PSS concept

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Cover image: Playful learning activities – such as those in this CEIBI kindergarten in Guatemala – promote trusting relationships between children and their caregivers.

1 Objective and rationale for this PSS concept

Vivamos Mejor is an evidence-based organisation and assesses the impact of its interventions through independent studies conducted by Swiss and local universities. As a knowledge-driven organisation, we also aspire to learn from our experiences, share them with others and continuously develop our approaches.

This document summarises the experiences and working methodology of Vivamos Mejor and its partners in the field of psychosocial support and formulates relevant recommendations. The first part of the document examines why psychosocial support (hereafter referred to as PSS) is important for our projects. The second part outlines how Vivamos Mejor implements the PSS approach in practice and which lessons have been extracted for future interventions.

Our aim is to make our learnings and examples available to other educational stakeholders and to encourage them to strategically anchor PSS in their work.

Our PSS approach is based on the practical experience of our partners, complemented by theoretical concepts. It draws on evaluated interviews with former project participants, as well as with project coordinators and psychologists from partner organisations.



Across all its projects, Vivamos Mejor actively involves children's and young people's primary caregivers and promotes positive parent-child relationships. In Bogotá, for example, this is achieved through afternoon play sessions with parents and children.

2 Adverse conditions for children and young adults affected by poverty

Since 1981, Vivamos Mejor has been supporting children and young adults affected by poverty and conflict through educational projects in various Latin American countries. To this end, we collaborate with competent local partner organisations. Our experience has shown that contextually and culturally adapted psychosocial support is a cornerstone for achieving positive impact and change. The following examples describe the conditions in our intervention regions.

2.1 Colombia

In the outskirts of Bogotá, where three quarters of the population are internally displaced persons, youth unemployment is high and public security is fragile. **At 58%, the unemployment rate among young displaced persons is well above the national average of 23%.¹** The majority of adolescents scrape by with precarious casual jobs. Only a few have the opportunity of vocational training or a stable employment. These precarious prospects for the future, combined with experiences of violence related to internal conflict, fuel gang violence in the project area. Patterns of violent conflict resolution also arise within families due to multiple burdens.

2.2 Guatemala

Mayan children in the Guatemalan department of Sololá face difficult conditions from early childhood. **With an indigenous population of over 90%, it is the second largest department in the country. 85% of the families live in poverty² and 20% in extreme poverty.³** Two thirds of the children are chronically malnourished and

many suffer from diarrhoeal and respiratory diseases due to poor hygiene conditions. In addition, harsh child-rearing practices and the use of violence are widespread. Due to a lack of early childhood support and pre-school education, many children start school with delays in cognitive development.

2.3 Honduras

According to UNICEF, many children in Honduras were already exposed to violence before the pandemic. This is not unexpected, considering that the country ranks among the most violent in the world. **Exposure to violence directly correlates with school absenteeism, a factor that frequently contributes to dropping out of school: 24% of girls and 14% of boys aged 13 to 17 missed school because of physical violence they had endured.** According to a UNICEF household survey during the pandemic, 50% of respondents reported a heightened incidence of domestic conflict during quarantine. With schools no longer serving as a refuge, children lacked opportunities to safely process their experiences of violence.

2.4 Common challenges

Alongside high rates of poverty and violence, these three contexts are also characterised by precarious educational conditions and limited access to state services. Educational programmes of adequate quality are lacking in all the countries where we operate. As a result, many children and adolescents either do not attend school at all or only for a few years.

The challenging circumstances under which children grow up cause stress, developmental delays, low self-confidence, reduced self-efficacy, and dysfunctional conflict resolution strategies. As young adults, they often feel excluded from society and usually have no long-term prospects due to a lack of orientation and opportunities.

To address these realities, Vivamos Mejor emphasises psychosocial support and resilience-building across all projects within the "Bridge to School" and "Bridge to Working Life" programmes.

¹ <https://www.larepublica.co/economia/el-desempleo-juvenil-se-ubico-en-239-en-el-primer-trimestre-segun-cifras-del-dane-3169209>

² living on less than 4 US\$ per day

³ living on less than 1.8 US\$ per day

⁴ <https://gdc.unicef.org/resource/violence-against-children-and-gender-based-violence-honduras-case-study>

3 Why PSS matters

3.1 Chronic stress prevents successful learning

As a result of the circumstances outlined earlier, the children and young people participating in our projects often find themselves in crisis situations⁵ that lead to acute and chronic stress. "Stress generally refers to an imbalance between the strains that a person is faced with and the available coping mechanisms (resources)".⁶ In stressful situations, people are less flexible, connected thinking is impaired, and they may no longer be able to access what they have already learned. At the same time, the situation triggering the stress becomes more deeply ingrained in memory.⁷ As long as stress only occurs for a limited period of time, it is usually unproblematic. It can even release energies. **However, if the imbalance persists for a longer period of time, it has a direct negative impact on children's development, as their learning and recollection capacity is impaired.**



Poverty, unemployment, teenage pregnancies and gang crime are part of the daily lives of many young people on the outskirts of Bogotá.

Various studies have shown that prolonged "chronic stress" leads to alterations in the brain. It disrupts the development of brain circuits, which leads to less deliberate and rational actions. **People who are exposed to continuous stressful situations demonstrate emotional outbursts and struggle with controlling impulsive behaviour. Another typical consequence of chronic stress in childhood is a reduced attention span.⁸**

As Vivamos Mejor's ability to influence the contextual, stress-inducing living conditions of children and adolescents is limited, our PSS interventions focus on **strengthening their personal protective factors and social resources in order to enhance their coping mechanisms.** We base our PSS interventions on the resilience model by Brüstle (2015).

BY STRENGTHENING THEIR PERSONAL PROTECTIVE FACTORS AND SOCIAL RESOURCES, CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS IMPROVE THEIR ABILITY TO COPE WITH STRESS.

3.2 The resilience model

According to Brüstle⁹, resilience can be understood as "mental health despite risk exposure" and "the ability to overcome crises by resorting to personally and socially drawn resources and using them as an opportunity for development."

This resilience model therefore focuses not only on the individual's cognitive and intrapsychic capacities to cope with hardship, but also takes into account the social and material resources available within their environment.

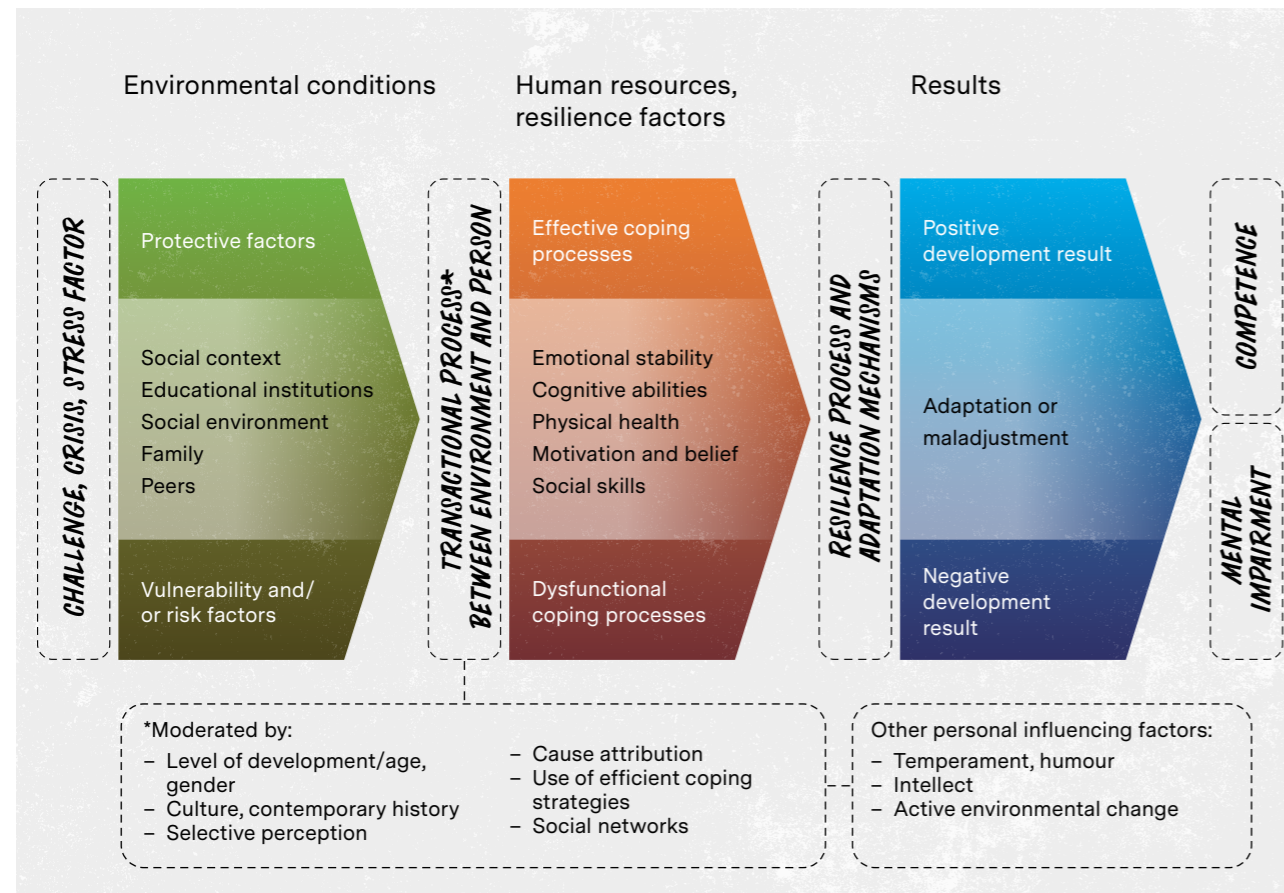
⁵ By the term "crisis" we mean "any sudden interruption of the normal course of events in the life of an individual or a society that makes re-evaluation of modes of action and thought necessary. A general sense of loss of the normal foundations of day-to-day activities." (IFRC, 2009)

⁶ Job Stress Index, 2020, p. 2

⁷ cf. Wolf, 2018

⁸ Costandi, 2015 and INEE, 2016

⁹ 2015, p. 3



Adapted by Brüstle, p. 5; *According to Kumpfer 1999, modified by Wurstmann 2004

3.3 Strengthening resources for an improved balance

Successfully coping with a crisis or stressful situation requires access to a range of personal and social resources or, in other words, "protective factors". Figuratively, this can be understood as a **resilience scale**. Ideally, **burdens and protective factors are in balance**.

For many children and young people in our projects, this balance is disrupted, as burdens outweigh protective factors. **By systematically strengthening their personal and social resources, Vivamos Mejor supports them in restoring this balance, even in the face of crises and chronic stress caused by multiple stressors.**

The resilience scale



THE AIM OF ANY PSYCHO-SOCIAL INTERVENTION IS TO PROVIDE COGNITIVE, SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL SUPPORT TO A PERSON AS WELL AS TO STRENGTHEN THEIR SOCIAL NETWORK.

"Psychosocial support helps a person to overcome a conflict situation, taking into account their life experiences, environment and interpersonal relationships, by offering them the tools and opportunities to find the best path for themselves." (I. F., psychologist in a Vocational Education and Training project run by Vivamos Mejor in Colombia)

Vivamos Mejor places particular emphasis on developing skills that **empower** children and young people **in their actions**.

These include:

- **Social skills:** taking responsibility, forming positive relationships, collaborating, developing empathy, communicating effectively, respecting diversity, setting goals, making decisions
- **Emotional competencies:** developing self-efficacy and self-confidence, managing emotions, fostering a sense of belonging, overcoming challenges, seeking creative solutions

3.4 Our five core PSS elements

The psychosocial approach through which we strengthen the social and emotional resources of children and adolescents cannot be described as therapy or as a single activity. Rather, we understand it as an interplay of different intervention elements.¹⁰

Based on the "Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Guidelines" of UNICEF (2019) and the "International Network for Education in Emergencies" (INEE, 2016), Vivamos Mejor focuses on the following **five core PSS elements**:

Interventions that focus on children and young people and empower them directly:

- 1 Building emotional and social skills
- 2 Strengthening relationships and networks

Interventions in which children and adolescents take an active part and adults have responsibilities:

- 3 Creating a safe environment
- 4 Establishing structure and routine
- 5 Organising leisure time and creating moments of relaxation

All these activities aim to **provide children and young people with security, stability and hope**. They strengthen their resilience and develop the skills needed to better cope with stress. **Effective learning is only possible when the resilience scale is in balance**. In such conditions, children and young people are better able to engage in school and improve their prospects and career opportunities.

¹⁰ "Psychosocial support refers to the actions that address both the psychological and social needs of individuals" (IFRC, 2009).

4

How Vivamos Mejor implements the five PSS elements

The primary goal of Vivamos Mejor is to empower children and young people to develop **emotional and social skills**. Through individual and group activities, we help them recognise their abilities and build self-confidence. Using playful exercises, children and young people learn to perceive, identify and express their emotions, as well as to develop empathy and build relationships. In order to look to the future with hope despite challenging conditions, young people in our vocational training programme develop personal life plans and set themselves short, medium and long-term goals to guide them.

Project staff also inform children and young people about their rights and responsibilities, fostering their sense of autonomy and their capacity to lead self-determined lives.

EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT WITH PSS IN COLOMBIA

In an early childhood development project in Colombia, nursery carers tell children the story of the “monster of emotions”, who is overwhelmed by emotional chaos. By assigning each emotion to a colour, the children help the monster recognise and name its different emotions. The story invites children to explore their own emotional world and understand it as something natural – neither good nor bad, but part of being human. At the same time, they learn to put themselves in others' shoes and develop empathy.

4.1 Systemic work

Vivamos Mejor implements the psychosocial approach as a **systemic method** across all its projects. This means strengthening not only the resilience of individual children and young people, but also their role within their personal **networks**.

Bridge to School

In parent groups and through home visits, social workers and psychologists raise awareness among **caregivers** of key aspects of child development, such as nurturing care, early childhood education, hygiene, health and balanced nutrition.

“We try to promote the bond between parents and their child during pregnancy and encourage mothers and fathers to treat their babies with respect from birth. We make caregivers aware of how important affection and tenderness are for early childhood development and encourage them to support their children in an age-appropriate way, without exerting pressure.” (B. R., Project Coordinator Education and Social Affairs, Asociación Vivamos Mejor Guatemala)



Is the monster angry or content today? The children at nursery schools in Colombia engage with different emotions through stories.



As affection and tenderness are essential for early childhood development, we promote parent-child bonding in Guatemala already during pregnancy.

Bridge to Working Life

Family engagement is also a key component of our vocational training programme. Due to the precarious financial situation of their families, many young people are under pressure to discontinue their training in order to earn money quickly. Our project teams therefore work with family members to raise awareness of the importance and long-term value of vocational training.

“At family events, we actively encourage family members and friends to support young people in completing their education, thereby significantly improving their employment and income prospects. These events also give families the opportunity to connect and share positive moments of relaxation together.” (A. P., Vocational Trainer, Volver a la Gente, Colombia).

4.2 Psychological safety and safe spaces

Vivamos Mejor places great value on **psychological safety** when working with children and young people. By this, we mean that each individual trusts that the group will not laugh at, reject or punish anyone who speaks up.¹¹ It is the responsibility of caregivers to create a trusting atmosphere in which everyone feels comfortable. By creating spaces and moments in which children and young people feel supported and can express their thoughts freely, we foster stability, a sense of security and self-confidence.

Such safe spaces can be created in various settings:

- in **preschools or nurseries** through child-friendly environments, positive and trusting relationships between children and caregivers, and playful, stimulating learning activities
- in **vocational training** through open and respectful interaction between trainers and young people, as well as creative group activities that promote personal development
- in **community centres** through playful and creative extracurricular programmes for children and adolescents
- in **the home** by strengthening parent-child relationships and promoting nurturing parenting practices

Our aim is for children, young people and their caregivers to feel more accepted, valued and empowered, and to recognise their strengths and resources.



Group sports activities form part of the soft skills workshops for young people in our vocational training programme.

4.3 Creating structures and routines

Children and young people need **structure** and **daily routines** in order to find their footing. Regular attendance at kindergarten, school or vocational college, with structured lessons, daily rituals, regular breaks and moments of calm, provides orientation and stability.

Meaningful leisure activities are also important for the holistic development of children and young people. In a range of projects, we organise theatre and dance activities, reading circles and community events with playful elements. We also celebrate important life transitions, such as the move from kindergarten to primary school or the successful completion of vocational training.

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE NEED STRUCTURES AND DAILY ROUTINES IN ORDER TO FIND THEIR FOOTING.

A TYPICAL DAY IN A CEIBI KINDERGARTEN IN GUATEMALA

CEIBI kindergarten teachers in Guatemala follow a structured daily routine. They welcome the children between 8 and 8.30 a.m., during which time the children can play freely. The day then begins with a welcome song, followed by a small snack. At 9 a.m., a thematic session starts, during which children explore everyday topics through playful activities. Before and after lunch, they practise basic hygiene habits such as washing their hands and brushing their teeth through songs and rhymes. The children then tidy up together. After lunch, the session closes with a farewell song.

WEEKLY ROUTINE IN A VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING PROJECT IN COLOMBIA

Three times a week, young people attend vocational training classes in the mornings from 8 a.m. to 12 p.m. After class, they clean their classroom and either return home or prepare lunch together. Once a week, they take part in a full-day soft skills workshop. Through creative physical activities, such as movement and dance exercises or role play, they learn to express themselves freely. They also work on their “life project”, in which they set short-, medium- and long-term goals they wish to achieve. In peace education sessions, they reflect on socio-political issues and on respectful ways of interacting with others.

4.4 Playful approach

Vivamos Mejor adopts a playful approach across all areas, as play is a natural and essential part of children’s lives. Through play, children explore the world, learn social skills, develop their imagination and creativity, and express their emotions. “Play allows them to learn through experience, to experience success and failure in a safe way, and to build relationships with others.” (K. C., Regional Coordinator, Fundación Apoyar, Colombia)

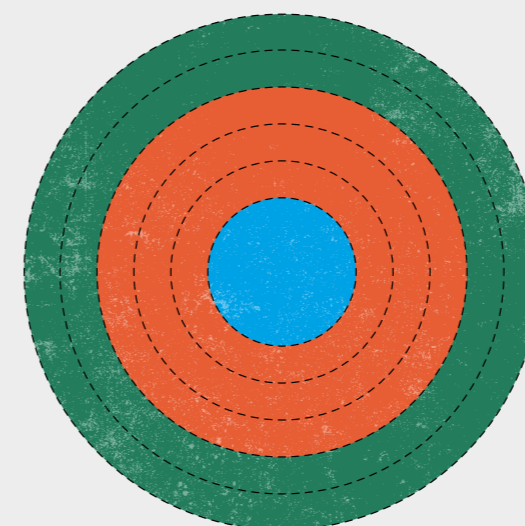
Through role play as well as free play, children try out different courses of action, put themselves in others’ positions, and thereby gain new perspectives. They are encouraged to take initiative and explore the unfamiliar. Playful activities are also well suited to discovering and developing their own interests. **Through play, children experience self-efficacy, strengthen their judgement, and build confidence in their ability to make decisions.** Ultimately, play-based activities also help to anchor learning experiences in a positive way and retain them over the long term.

LEARNING THROUGH PLAY IN HONDURAS

In our project “Pre-school education against educational gaps” in Honduras, kindergarten teachers allow children to choose how they would like to be greeted each day – whether with a warm embrace, a firm handshake, a foot-to-foot greeting or a casual wave. Depending on their mood, the children decide what feels right for them. If they wish, they can try a different form of greeting the following day. This small daily ritual strengthens their sense of autonomy, helps them to recognise and express their emotional state, and at the same time stimulates their creativity.

If our PSS interventions are not sufficient in specific situations to reduce the stress levels of children and adolescents or to help them cope with difficult experiences, such as acute trauma, they are referred to specialised psychological services.

Summarised examples of the basic PSS elements



Children and young people

Developing social and emotional skills: Activities to strengthen self-confidence, awareness of one’s rights and responsibilities, developing a life project, organising activities independently, taking on leadership tasks

Family and community

Strengthening relationships: Parent groups, home visits, parenting classes, intergenerational visiting days, chat groups, support with registration for school and health authorities

Establishing structures and routines: Consistent daily routine (welcome ritual, regular snack), structured teaching sessions with set tasks for young people, regular parenting classes (e.g. positive parenting training)

Organising leisure time and creating moments of relaxation: Theatre and dance performances, sports events, excursions, community events, celebrations and important life events

Society

Creating a safe environment: Building trust between children and caregivers, using playful and creative learning methods, creating a safe and child-friendly environment at school, at home and in the community, activities to prevent conflict and violence

From the protected environment of the school to society: Actively supporting young people in their transition to working life, developing skills and professional profiles

4.5 Gender equality

Recognising and addressing gender-specific needs while ensuring equal opportunities is central to our PSS approach. In our programmes, we ensure that girls and boys have equal opportunities and the confidence to express their views and ideas and to participate in activities.

In our work with families, we also promote **shared parental responsibility** and seek to challenge role divisions shaped by unequal and harmful power structures. We raise awareness among parents that a strong relationship between children and their fathers is just as important as that with their mothers. In particular, we encourage male caregivers to show affection and to actively support their children's development.

4.6 Intercultural understanding

In our projects, we promote social, emotional and cognitive learning through culturally relevant references, while critically reflecting on traditional practices. Children, young people, families, teachers and communities are supported in understanding and valuing their identities.

CULTURALLY ADAPTED PRE-SCHOOL EDUCATION FOR MAYAN CHILDREN IN GUATEMALA

In our pre-school project in Guatemala, Indigenous children attend a bilingual kindergarten, where they are introduced to the Spanish language in a playful way while developing key cognitive, motor and social skills. This helps them to be better prepared for the transition to primary school. They are taught by Indigenous teachers who are trained in bilingual methodology and apply it in their daily practice. CEIBI kindergartens also offer dedicated play areas that enable children to engage with their culture and foster their creativity.



Above: Positive parent-child experiences in Colombia strengthen the bond.
Below: Playful perception training in a CEIBI kindergarten in Guatemala.

5 Lessons learned

5.1 Challenges of our PSS approach

Working with families remains a challenge. It is not always possible to motivate parents to engage or to raise their interest in their children's pre-school and vocational education. This may be because they are overburdened by the pressures of daily survival, find it difficult to participate actively in community activities, or have had little or no formal schooling themselves and therefore attach limited importance to education. Due to financial hardship, some families continue to put pressure on young people in vocational training to discontinue their training to start earning immediately.

5.2 PSS and family work are essential

Respectful and supportive relationships with primary caregivers play a key role in improving the living conditions of children and young people and in supporting their academic success. Parent and family engagement is therefore a core component of every project.

OUR RCT IMPACT STUDY FROM COLOMBIA PROVIDES SCIENTIFIC EVIDENCE THAT PSS INTERVENTIONS ARE EFFECTIVE IN REDUCING STRESS LEVELS AMONG CHILDREN AND YOUNG ADULTS.

5.3 Cost-effective, group-based interventions are effective

Due to limited resources and financial constraints, it is rarely possible in development cooperation to offer individual psychological therapy to all participants. Our RCT impact study from Colombia¹² provides scientific evidence that group-based, playful PSS interventions are effective in reducing stress levels, improving well-being and strengthening resilience among children and adolescents.

5.4 Scientifically proven impact of PSS

As an evidence-based and learning organisation, we regularly commission independent studies from renowned universities to assess the impact of our interventions. An RCT study completed in 2022 **provides robust evidence of the positive effects of PSS on young people affected by poverty in Colombia, particularly in their ability to cope with challenging life circumstances.** The findings show that young people in vocational training who received psychosocial support during the pandemic were significantly better able to cope with the crisis than those who participated in vocational training alone. After two years, those receiving psychosocial support also earned higher incomes than those in the control group.



More information on the impact study can be found on our website: www.vivamosmejor.ch/en/impact

5.5 Institutionalising PSS

This document consolidates our experience with psychosocial support in educational programmes and aims to offer concrete recommendations to practitioners and stakeholders alike.

On this basis, Vivamos Mejor will strengthen the exchange of experience and knowledge among partner organisations in the coming years and encourages all actors in the education sector to integrate PSS as a core element of their programmes.

6 Conclusion

Psychosocial support is a key element in sustainably improving the well-being, learning conditions and the full development potential of children and young people affected by poverty. **Relatively low-cost, group-based, structured and playful interventions are both feasible and demonstrably effective.**

Effective interventions must address not only children and young people directly, but also their close caregivers. The development and implementation of psychosocial interventions require qualified staff who model and promote respectful and supportive interactions.

In our projects, experienced specialists in early childhood development, psychology and social work support children and young people through resource-oriented workshops that strengthen their ability to cope with everyday stress as well as traumatic experiences. Through playful, creative and stimulating activities, we foster positive cognitive, social and emotional experiences, thereby promoting mental health and resilience.



We provide young people with safe spaces to strengthen their social skills and build resilience alongside their vocational training. These skills help them to gain a foothold in working life over the long term.

Alongside this, our interventions also influence the school and family environments of children and young people, contributing to more supportive conditions. We provide structured daily routines that offer orientation and stability, enabling them to address their individual challenges. They develop social skills, explore different courses of action, and find moments of calm through intentionally created opportunities for relaxation.

Open and empathetic support from social workers, together with **the creation of safe spaces, helps children and young people strengthen their psychological safety.** By involving families, we also strengthen the capacities of their primary caregivers. We raise awareness of non-violent parenting practices and support children and young people in strengthening their social networks.

Only when children have developed sufficient confidence in their socio-emotional abilities and their social support networks can they fully engage in school and learning processes. We are convinced that this is essential to enabling a successful and independent future.

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In this kindergarten in Honduras, children start the day with a singing circle.

List of interviewees

- A.C. PSS project coordinator, Fundación Apoyar, Colombia
- M.P. Participant in a vocational education and training project with Fundación Apoyar, Colombia
- M.B. Participant in a vocational education and training project with Volver a la Gente, Colombia
- J.G. Psychologist, FEREMA, Honduras
- D.L. Pre-school teacher, from project with Instituto de Promoción Humana Somoto, Nicaragua
- J.C. Project coordinator, Fundación Apoyar, Colombia
- N.S. Project coordinator, Fundación Apoyar, Colombia
- J.G. Nursery manager from a project with Fundación Apoyar, Colombia
- K.L. Education and early care specialist, FEREMA, Honduras
- L.M. Project coordinator, Asociación Vivamos Mejor Guatemala, Guatemala
- J.M. Sub-coordinator of educational projects, Asociación Vivamos Mejor Guatemala, Guatemala
- K.C. Project coordinator, Fundación Apoyar, Colombia
- M.P. Pre-School teacher from a project with Asociación Vivamos Mejor Guatemala, Guatemala
- Y.M. Nursery director from a project with Fundación Apoyar, Colombia
- A.D. Participant in a vocational education and training project with Volver a la Gente, Colombia
- L.S. Participant in a vocational education and training project with Fundación Apoyar, Colombia
- A.P. Vocational trainer, Volver a la Gente, Colombia
- B.R. Head of department Educational Projects, Asociación Vivamos Mejor Guatemala, Guatemala
- E.R. Vocational trainer, Volver a la Gente, Colombia
- K.S. Participant in a vocational education and training project with Volver a la Gente, Colombia
- N.A. Participant in a vocational education and training project with Fundación Apoyar, Colombia
- M.I. Pre-school teacher from a project with Asociación Vivamos Mejor Guatemala, Guatemala
- A.G. Project coordinator, Instituto de Promoción Humana Somoto, Nicaragua



Supporting their primary caregivers is crucial for enhancing the living conditions and academic success of children and young people impacted by poverty.

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Vivamos Mejor supports disadvantaged communities in breaking the cycle of poverty through time-limited “help for self-help”. The Swiss non-profit foundation focuses on education, water and food. It prepares young children for schooling, supports young people in entering the workforce and helps smallholder families to manage water and soil sustainably.

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