

Policy Brief No. 1

Program Y - Program for Healthy and Safe Growing Up of Youth



The Program Y policy brief offers basic information on key aspects of the development, implementation and integration of the science-based educational curriculum of Program Y into formal education in the Balkans.

Program Y is an evidence-based educational curriculum that contributes to the development of functional knowledge, attitudes and psychosocial skills of young people, which are an important predispositions¹ for their healthy and safer growing up. Based on modern pedagogical methods of work, which include collaborative and participatory learning, Program Y prepares young people to recognize and understand risks, to think critically about the consequences and it prepares them to make decisions that are in the best interest of their health and the health of their peers.

THREE PRINCIPLES TO REMEMBER

- 1 • Adolescents are a generally healthy population**, but their life habits, individually or collectively, are a key factor in the occurrence or prevention of chronic diseases in adulthood.
- 2 • Life skills-based education** contributes to the development of young people's capacity to make decisions that are in the best interest of preserving their health
- 3 • Program Y and Be a Man Clubs** are scientifically based and proven effective educational programs based on the development of life skills of high school students.

1 – World Health Organization. (2003). Skills for health: skills-based health education including life skills: an important component of a child-friendly/health-promoting school. World Health Organization. <<https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/42818>>

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Young Men Initiative

- a regional platform for inter-institutional cooperation in the field of health education

Young Men Initiative - YMI is a regional program of CARE International Balkans since 2006 which includes ministries of education, pedagogical institutes, schools, students, parents and NGOs in a partnership and proactive process of development, testing and improvement of educational programs, in order to create better educational and health opportunities for young people. The program is being successfully implemented in Serbia, Croatia, Kosovo*, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Albania and partly in Montenegro². Young Men Initiative is a platform for inter-institutional cooperation and development, with a special focus on creating sustainable programs that are important for population development and raising the health literacy³ of young people in the Balkans. With the direct participation of educational institutions, NGOs, local and international experts within the Young Men Initiative, the curriculum Program Y and the complementary (supportive) program Be a Man Club were created, which synergistically have an even stronger impact on young people's perception about the importance of health care and their ability to make decisions important for the preservation of health, which has been repeatedly confirmed by the research of international and regional experts.

The YMI project and its most important educational Program Y have been shown to be effective in reducing violence, eliminating harmful social factors, increasing the level of gender equality and developing healthy adolescent life habits in the diverse political, institutional, cultural and national contexts of the Balkans countries.

2 – A modified Program Y called the Kiwi Program is being implemented in Germany with the aim of facilitating the integration of immigrants from Asia and Africa into German society. Find more information at <https://www.care.de/care-hilfe/bildung-in-deutschland/integrationsprojekt-kiwi>

3 – World Health Organization. Regional Office for Europe. (2013). Health literacy: the solid facts. <https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/326432>

* This is without prejudice to the status of Kosovo and is in line with United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244 and the opinion of the International Court of Justice on Kosovo's Declaration of Independence.

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Social norms, adolescence and education

Socialization, interactions with peers and the environment essentially influence the attitudes and decisions of young people when it comes to health and healthy lifestyles. That is why modern education systems pay special attention to teaching young people to socialize in a way that is in the best interest of their health.

Susceptibility to social influences is individual and specific, so educational programs that place students at the center of learning have the potential to respond to individual needs, long before traditional approaches that send a uniform message one-way to all students as a homogeneous group.

Social norms, with an emphasis on gender norms and gender stereotypes, can encourage young people to behave that educational and health institutions want to prevent, but also discourage young people from using services that may be important to them in preserving health. Boys may feel that seeking help is a sign of weakness, girls that the first cigarette proves that they are mature, that violence against others is justified, that in case of exposure to violence they need to find a solution on their own, without interfering with authority. Behaviors, attitudes and values of boys and girls differ and are influenced by gender norms, so the gender sensitive approach seeks to respond in line with existing differences but with the same goal, creating additional opportunities for boys and girls to live better and healthier lives.

By changing the paradigm of health education, it is possible to influence the creation of a new generation of young people who believe in the correctness of decisions that are in the best interest of their health.

Needs and problems of young people

Numerous health problems (cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, cancers, mental health disorders, sexually transmitted infections) that some young people will experience in adulthood, have their beginning of development in adolescence⁴. Adolescents are a generally healthy population, but their life habits, individually or collectively, are a key factor in the occurrence or prevention of chronic diseases in adulthood.

4 — Bundy, D.A.P., N. de Silva, S. Horton, D.T. Jamison, and G.C. Patton, editors. Volume 8. (2017). Child and Adolescent Health and Development. Disease Control Priorities (third edition). World Bank. Washington, DC

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Research conducted in BiH, Croatia, Serbia, Kosovo* and Albania shows that young people face a number of challenges as they grow up^{5 6 7}: peer violence (verbal, digital and physical violence), educational related stress⁸, negative peer influences, use of tobacco, alcohol, drugs, impaired mental health, unhealthy eating habits, insufficient physical activity, early sexual intercourse and risky sexual behaviors.

Research proves a direct link between gender and social norms and unhealthy behaviors, as they encourage young people's susceptibility to negative peer influences and contribute to a lower level of seeking help when it is needed. On the other hand, gender norms can and often reduce the perception of violence as a harmful form of behavior, and in this sensitive period they can influence the attitudes of young people that they have to deal with the violence they are exposed to, because seeking help is often a sign of weakness in the eyes of young people.

Due to all the above, educational programs, in addition to information on health and the importance of healthy lifestyles, should enable young people to understand the available information, develop a higher degree of self-confidence in making decisions that may differ from "socially expected", and especially important resource in this context are life skills. By developing critical thinking, developing empathy, adopting interpersonal communication skills, problem-solving skills and decision-making skills, young people will acquire the necessary competencies to more effectively confront the social influences that exist in their environment and these principles are integrated in the scope of activity of CARE's program Young Men Initiative within which the curriculum Program Y and Be a Man Clubs were created.

5 – CARE International Balkans. (2016). Boys and men as allies in violence prevention and gender transformation in the Western Balkans – Young Men Initiative, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Kosovo*, Albania.

6 – CARE International Balkans. (2017). Promoting healthier lifestyles among youth in Bosnia and Herzegovina by challenging gender stereotypes, Bosnia and Herzegovina. <<https://careevaluations.org/evaluation/promoting-healthier-lifestyles-among-youth-in-bosnia-and-herzegovina-by-challenging-gender-stereotypes-ii-young-men-initiative-project-ii-yimi-ii/>>

7 – CARE International Balkans. (2020). Men and boys as partners in promoting gender equality and prevention of youth extremism and violence in the Balkans, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Kosovo*, Albania. <<http://www.careevaluations.org/wp-content/uploads/ENDLINE-REPORT-REGIONAL-YMI-II-FINAL.pdf>>

8 – Foundation Friedrich Ebert. (2019). Youth research in Croatia 2018/2019. <<http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/kroatien/15291.pdf>>

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Program with regional and international credibility

2010 - The best campaign to change social norms - Serbian Public Relations Association

2016 - 1st Ron Kovic Peace Prize at My Hero International Film Festival for the film "Post-War Machismo: Be a Man"

2017 - Winner of the Innovation Award – Global Education Network Europe

Cooperation with educational institutions and NGOs in the last 14 years, with the participation of domestic and international experts, has enabled CARE and partner organizations to test and further improve. By analyzing the effectiveness and impact of Program Y on youth, there is clear evidence that Program Y empowers young people to effectively counteract the harmful influences of peers, change attitudes about violence and health, in a way that affirms the practice of healthy lifestyles.

The evaluations confirmed that the participation of young people in Be a Man Clubs has an even stronger impact on them and their lives and that young people who have actively participated in activities of Be a Man Clubs not only become practitioners of healthy lifestyles but also become active participants in mobilizing their peers so that they too adopt attitudes and behaviors that are in the best interests of their health. prove the program at various stages of development, which is ultimately adapted to formal education in the Balkans.

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Why is a commitment to psychosocial skills important?

Global efforts by international health and education institutions have analyzed and identified new approaches in education, based on developing skills that enable young people to understand the information received in a way that motivates them to apply it in real life. In addition to traditional information and the provision of functional knowledge, young people need the following skills:

- Decision-making and problem-solving skills.
- Creative thinking and critical thinking skills.
- Communication and interpersonal skills.
- Self-awareness and empathy.
- Dealing with emotions and dealing with stress.

These skills are important for preserving the physical and mental health of young people, and the only place where young people can develop them are institutions and organizations for formal and non-formal education. The introduction of education based on the development of life skills in the formal education system enables states sustainable solutions that contribute to the overall population development and the elimination of individual factors of youth vulnerability in a safe and culturally acceptable institutional environment. Problems such as violence have a direct impact on academic performance¹ and the motivation of young people to set higher academic goals, which can ultimately have a negative impact on overall economic opportunities. Unhealthy lifestyles such as the use of alcohol, tobacco products and drugs are an important factor in the occurrence of non-communicable diseases and addictions, which can lead to chronic diseases that affect individuals, their families and communities, as well as burden the health care system. Therefore, many countries strive to introduce effective prevention programs based on life skills development as part of primary prevention.

9 – World Health Organization Geneva. Department of Mental Health. (1999). Partners in Life Skills Education, Conclusions from a United Nations Inter-Agency Meeting < https://www.who.int/mental_health/media/en/30.pdf>

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Program Y - Evidence-Based Learning and Teaching Styles

Program Y is a comprehensive four-year curriculum that places high school students (ages 15 to 19) at the center of the educational process. In schools, trained peer educators together with teachers lead sessions that are integrated into the regular class schedule of homeroom classes during the school year, with an emphasis on five key program areas:

- (1) gender equality;
- (2) nonviolence;
- (3) sexual and reproductive health;
- (4) prevention of alcohol and drug use and
- (5) responsible parenting.

By applying different styles of active learning and teaching, it involves students in research, discussions and problem-solving activities that they may encounter or encounter while growing up. The participatory basis of Program Y offers young people the opportunity to discuss various social and growing up issues from the perspective of their own feelings, attitudes and values and thus acquire new functional knowledge and skills that are a key factor in developing healthy individuals who have the capacity to deal effectively with the challenges of everyday life. More than 100,000 young people have acquired new knowledge and skills through direct participation in workshops conducted in cooperation with 131 high schools in Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo* and Albania in the past 5 years.

Thanks to the development and testing for more than ten years, the program is adapted to work in high schools of all specializations, and can be implemented by teachers, pedagogues and well-trained educators. More than 1600 teachers have adopted the competencies needed to implement a comprehensive and scientifically based model of development of psychosocial skills of young people based on the Model Y model in the past 5 years.

Be a Man Clubs and supplementary campaigns

Another important aspect of the YMI program is the "Be a Man" campaign, which aims to strengthen the key messages of the Young Men Initiative and encourage change at the school and community level. This campaign is accompanied by a variety of educational materials, social media and activities organized and performed by students, members of "Be a Man" Clubs (BMC).

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During adolescence, peers have a central place in the social, cognitive and emotional development of young people. In interaction with peers, the young person questions and develops their own individuality and identity, and feelings of belonging to and acceptance by the peer group have the potential to contribute positively to the overall process.

Be a Man Clubs are a supplement to the educational process based on the application of the Program Y methodology. Similar to school sections, through targeted activities and affirmation of youth participation in Be a Man Clubs, young people have more opportunities to practice skills, positive attitudes, values and behaviors in a safe and supportive environment, they are supported in rejecting risky habits, with the support of peers who are members of the same club. By applying the technique of positive peer pressure, young people more easily adopt healthy lifestyles and reject risky and potentially harmful habits and attitudes. Within the Be a Man Clubs, young people in schools and local communities run campaigns based on their direct participation in designing and implementation. Research shows that young people who participate in the activities of the Be a Man Club and the implementation of campaign activities, more easily and effectively adopt positive attitudes and values and the impact on their behavior is greater than in the case of young people who did not actively participate. The **React as Human** campaign affirms the role of young people in stopping the violence they witness and discouraging peers from risky behaviors. The **Are you OK?** campaign contributes to the prosocial behavior of young people in order to protect the mental health of their peers.



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Be a Man clubs are designed to offer young people a safe and affirmative space in which, led by experienced members, teachers and facilitators, they adopt positive attitudes and values, and form healthy friendships within clubs which is an important social and developmental resource available to them within the club. Be a Man Clubs, regardless of the name, are designed to offer equal opportunities to boys and girls.

More than 600,000 young people are covered by campaigns and activities of Be a Man Clubs in 120 local communities across the Balkans.

Based on 14 years of working with youth, schools and local communities, CARE Balkans and partner organizations have developed a set of recommendations for improving youth health, as well as for developing the capacity of schools to effectively respond to students' needs by applying modern evidence-based pedagogical approaches.



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RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Education policies should make life skills-based education programs more accessible.
- Policies on violence prevention and health promotion should also take into account the social aspects that influence the attitudes and behaviors of young people and be oriented towards their specific health and social needs, which correspond to the circumstances in which students live and grow up.
- Provide schools with easier access to non-formal education programs based on life skills development.
- Provide teachers with certification for the application of Program Y methodology through facilitated access to professional development programs and methodological trainings.
- Education policies should enable the implementation of gender transformative programs.
- By accrediting Program Y and institutional support for the implementation of the program in schools, schools can be encouraged to accept the methodology, ensure higher quality in implementation, and teaching staff can be motivated to more decisively cover all topics contained in the four-year curriculum.
- In format and with integrated learning outcomes, Program Y is compatible with formal education and should be a separate subject on health and healthy lifestyles or integrated into homeroom classes or in addition to Democracy and Civic Education subjects.
- Create an institutional basis for conducting trainings by Program Y model for teachers, educators, parents and students and protect and support teaching staff involved in the implementation of Program Y and emphasize their important role in protecting and preserving the health of young people.
- If the teaching staff does not feel comfortable in the implementation of certain topics, enable their realization through the engagement of youth workers, pedagogues or peer educators.
- Establish cooperation with local organizations, institutions, parents and coordinate school activities in parallel with activities in the local community and enable young people to suggest topics and activities that are complementary and can be implemented within the activities of the Be a Man Club.

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Program Y and the activities of the Be a Man Club were created in such a way that their implementation requires a minimum of funds that can be allocated from the budget available to schools or local communities. Contributions can be made by organizations that nurture a tradition of social entrepreneurship with a focus on the business sector that with minimal investment can have a significant positive impact on the health and well-being of young people.

Find more information at

<https://youngmeninitiative.net> and <http://www.program-y.org>.

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In the Balkan region, **CARE International** has over 25 years of experience in program implementation. During the '90-es wars and conflicts, CARE responded to the destruction, traumatization, displacement and inter-ethnic distrust with its massive humanitarian and life-saving work all over Balkans. From year 2000, CARE's orientation shifted to developmental work and its aim in the Balkans today is to ensure that social, economic and political rights of vulnerable and marginalized groups are recognized and fulfilled, contributing to sustainable peace in the region.

CARE Program Strategy is based on two pillars a) Socio-Economic Inclusion and b) Gender Equality of vulnerable and marginalized groups by promoting the values and practices of gender equality, diversity and non-violence, strengthening the capacities of local, national and regional human rights and social justice actors and creating opportunities for innovation, participation, learning, cooperation and advocacy. CARE nourishes partnerships with local civil society sector and governments dedicated to contributing positive changes in the societies.

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