

# Insights from two norm-shifting interventions to support very young adolescents

## Introduction

The period of early adolescence (ages 10-14) is a time of rapid change—physical, cognitive, social, and emotional.<sup>1,2</sup> While very young adolescents (VYAs) navigate these changes, gendered expectations about their roles, relationships, and behaviors shift rapidly.<sup>3</sup> This makes early adolescence a window of opportunity to promote equitable gender attitudes, norms, and behaviors as well as protective health behaviors that will have lifelong impacts.<sup>3,4</sup> Improving health and gender equity among VYAs involves more than improving VYA knowledge, skills, assets, and access. In the Passages Project's (Box 1) [theory of change](#), achieving such outcomes also require shifting the social norms—the beliefs about which behaviors are appropriate or typical within a given group—that restrict their health, well-being, and gender equality.<sup>4</sup> Few VYA initiatives have intentionally taken a social norms-shifting approach to program design, implementation, and measurement.<sup>5</sup>

This brief looks across two interventions that intentionally seek to shift social and gender norms to improve VYA gender and health outcomes: **Growing Up GREAT!** in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and **Girls Holistic Development** in Senegal. This brief examines the design, norms-shifting attributes, and scale-up strategies of each intervention, and highlights implications for the implementation and scale-up of norms-shifting interventions with VYAs.

### What is the Passages Project?

Passages is an implementation research project that aims to address a broad range of social norms, at scale, to achieve sustained improvements in violence prevention, gender equality, family planning, and reproductive health. The project uses norms-shifting approaches to build the evidence base and contribute to the capacity of the global community to understand and shift norms to strengthen reproductive health environments. Passages capitalizes on formative life course transitions—very young adolescents, newly married youth, and first-time parents—to test and scale up interventions that promote collective change and foster an enabling environment for voluntary family planning, especially healthy timing and spacing of pregnancies. In its efforts, Passages seeks to create and enable learning environments for its programs.

# Overview of the norm-shifting interventions

**TABLE 1:** The Growing Up GREAT! and Girls Holistic Development Interventions—An Overview

Growing Up GREAT!	Girls Holistic Development
<b>Intervention Background</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Implemented in urban Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo since 2015</li> <li>Co-funded by the Bill &amp; Melinda Gates Foundation and USAID through the Passages Project.</li> <li>Implemented by Save the Children, the DRC Ministries of Education and Health, and eight local civil society organizations.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Implemented in Southern Senegal since 2008</li> <li>Developed by Grandmother Project - Change through Culture, an American and Senegalese NGO that promotes sustained change in families and communities through cultural values, roles, and hierarchies.</li> <li>Passages conducted the evaluation of the intervention implemented in rural Némataba Commune in Senegal (2016-2018).</li> <li>Implemented in partnership with local Ministry of Education officials and teachers.</li> </ul>
<b>Intervention Outcomes</b>	
<p><b>Short-term</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Increase knowledge of puberty and sexuality development among VYAs;</li> <li>Increase communication and expression of gender-equitable behaviors among VYAs and caregivers;</li> <li>Increase community discussion and support for addressing VYAs' reproductive health (RH) needs.</li> </ol> <p><b>Long-term</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Increase use of family planning (FP)/RH care</li> <li>Reduce gender-based violence (GBV)</li> <li>Reduce adolescent pregnancy</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Increase community capacity to promote girls' holistic development</li> <li>Reduce child marriage</li> <li>Reduce adolescent pregnancy</li> <li>Reduce Female Genital Mutilations/Cutting (FGM/C)</li> <li>Increase VYA girls' school retention</li> </ol>
<b>Norms the Intervention Seeks to Shift</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>It is unacceptable to discuss puberty, sexuality, or other topics related to reproductive health with VYAs, particularly between adults and adolescents.</li> <li>VYAs who seek health information or care have engaged in 'bad' behavior.</li> <li>Boys' education should be prioritized over girls' education.</li> <li>Girls should do housework, but boys can enjoy leisure time.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Men are expected to be the sole family decision-makers related to girls' wellbeing.</li> <li>Adults do not think that adolescents should contribute to family discussions.</li> <li>Boys' education should be prioritized over girls' education.</li> <li>Early marriage of girls is a family strategy to avoid pregnancy before marriage.</li> </ul>
<b>Primary Reference Groups*</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Caregivers/parents</li> <li>Teachers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Grandmothers and aunts</li> <li>Community elders</li> </ul>
<b>Primary Groups Engaged in Intervention Activities</b> (in order of intensity of involvement)	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Very young adolescent girls and boys (ages 10-14), including those in and out of school</li> <li>Parents/caregivers</li> <li>Community members</li> <li>Health providers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Grandmother leaders</li> <li>Grandmother peer groups</li> <li>Adolescent girls (ages 10-16)</li> <li>Mothers of adolescent girls</li> <li>Teachers</li> <li>Religious leaders</li> <li>Community health workers</li> </ul>

\* Reference groups are the people with whom a person identifies and to whom they compare themselves. These are the people whose opinion or behavior matters to an individual for a particular behavior, belief, or norm within a certain context.

**Growing Up GREAT!** adapts and scales existing social-norm shifting interventions, [GREAT](#) from Northern Uganda and [Voices](#) from Nepal, and builds on work with early adolescents in Rwanda. Implemented over nine months, **Growing Up GREAT!** aims to shift priority norms through activities that engage very young adolescents and their families, communities, and health systems:

1. In- and out-of-school VYAs participate in weekly small group discussions and activities using an interactive, gender-transformational toolkit. In-school VYAs facilitate their own groups with supervision from a teacher, while out-of-school VYA groups are led by community facilitators working with local organizations.
2. Elements of the **Growing Up GREAT!** toolkit are also part of the national Family Life Education curriculum delivered by teachers in the classroom.
3. To shift norms among reference groups, parents and other adult caregivers participate in six sessions during which they watch video testimonials featuring parents and VYAs from local communities and engage in facilitated discussion.
4. Community members take part in separate discussion sessions that use video and interactive games to generate discussion and reflection on gender and VYA health.
5. **Growing Up GREAT!** creates linkages to the formal health system by inviting facility-based health workers trained in adolescent-friendly health services to deliver a lesson to VYA small groups, and by giving VYAs an opportunity to visit the local health center.



Girls Holistic Development Participants.  
Photo credit: IRH

**Girls Holistic Development** aims to increase the capacity of the community to support girls' development by increasing family support for girls' education and reducing marriage before age 18, adolescent pregnancies, and female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C). **Girls Holistic Development** takes a phased approach to implementation over a three-year period. The first step involves building close relationships between Grandmother Project staff, community leaders, and teachers, and assessing community priorities for girls.

These results informed **Girls Holistic Development's** intergenerational and inclusive approach in this community, involving community actors, traditional and religious leaders, teachers, and health workers. **Girls Holistic Development** leverages the power, openness, and commitment of grandmother

leaders to promoting girls' wellbeing. Working through local leaders and strengthening communication between three generations and both sexes is the basis for community-wide consensus building for normative change. Grandmother Project staff and teachers facilitate a series of activities—each with facilitation guides using simple and culturally-suited tools like stories, songs, and drawings—in intervention communities. The activities aim to catalyze dialogue on existing norms and challenge community actors to identify actions to promote change for girls. Activities include:

- Intergenerational forums;
- All-women forums with three generations of women and girls;
- Grandmother-teacher workshops;
- Under-the-tree participatory learning sessions with girls, mothers, and grandmothers;
- Days of praise of Grandmothers;
- Grandmother leadership training.



**Growing Up GREAT!** and **Girls Holistic Development** have been evaluated through mixed methods studies,<sup>†</sup> and both demonstrated shifts in priority norms.

The **Growing Up GREAT!** quantitative evaluation was conducted with in- and out-of-school VYAs by the Global Early Adolescent Study as part of the Passages Project, and was complemented by qualitative studies led by the Institute of Reproductive Health. Comparing baseline and follow-up surveys among intervention and control groups, **Growing Up GREAT!** improved gender-equal sharing of household chores, communication about sexual relationships and contraception, as well as out-of-school adolescent girls' perceptions of their ability to participate in daily life decisions, make their voices heard, and freedom of movement. The quantitative evaluation did not show any intervention effect on three measures that assessed VYAs' agreement with specific unequal gender norms related to stereotypical male and female characteristics and roles and romantic relationships.



Young adolescents participating in Growing Up GREAT! activities.  
Photo credit: IRH

The Passages Project conducted **Girls Holistic Development's** evaluation using a mixed-methods, cross-sectional post-test in intervention sites and purposively selected comparison sites. The results indicate shifts in priority norms and improved intergenerational relationships and communication in interventions sites versus comparison sites. Respondents in the intervention sites reported increased behaviors in support of girls staying in school and actions to prevent child marriage and early pregnancy. Respondents in intervention sites also reported decreased acceptability of FGM/C among caregivers and grandmothers, and strengthened relationships with and influence of grandmothers on VYAs' self-confidence and parents'/caregivers' decisions supporting VYA. However, the quantitative evaluation did not show any intervention effect on either descriptive or injunctive norms related to delaying marriage and keeping girls in school among caregivers of VYA girls.

## Differences in applying norm-shifting attributes

**Growing Up GREAT!** and **Girls Holistic Development** serve as examples of how VYA interventions can intentionally and systematically assess, target, and address social and gender norms, and see measurable improvements in priority norms that influence VYA health and gender outcomes. Both interventions targeted norms that contribute to the outcomes they were seeking to address, a fundamental step in designing norm-shifting interventions. However, the projects used different strategies to identify specific norms and reference groups.

**Girls Holistic Development** used a ten-year period of action research to identify the roles, social networks, and influence of community actors with the status and power to change harmful norms and promote positive ones. The **Growing Up GREAT!** team identified norms several months prior to the intervention beginning using the [Social Norms Exploration Tool](#), a participatory tool developed by the Passages Project. The Social Norms Exploration Tool involves a series of focus groups with adolescents and reference groups using participatory learning and action exercises such as vignettes, “my social networks,” and problem trees, to

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<sup>†</sup> For more information on the evaluations of the two interventions, please visit [Passages Project \(irh.org\)](https://passagesproject.org/).



Girls Holistic Development Participants. Photo credit: IRH

elucidate both the key reference groups as well as the specific norms that are most prominent in driving the behaviors the intervention seeks to change. As application of social norm theory in VYA programs is relatively nascent, understanding how the two interventions took similar and different approaches to shifting norms can provide valuable insight to others considering embedding norm-shifting interventions in VYA initiatives. This section describes how the interventions differentially applied two of

the nine [attributes of community-based norm-shifting interventions that were identified](#) in a 2017 Learning Collaborative working paper.

**Engages a wide range of community actors:** A common attribute of norm-shifting interventions is that they engage different actors: the target population as well as their reference groups. Both **Growing Up GREAT!** and **Girls Holistic Development** engage with a wide range of actors—with VYAs themselves, parents/caregivers, community leaders, teachers, and education and health system actors. However, the engagement of different population groups differs between the interventions in four key ways:

- *Which VYAs the intervention engages:* Recognizing that gender inequitable attitudes, behaviors, and norms cement in early adolescence for both boys and girls, and that gender-equitable boys are essential for shifting gender norms, **Growing Up GREAT!** intentionally implements participatory activities for both girls and boys in mixed sex groups. Given that girls are more vulnerable to child marriage, adolescent pregnancy, school dropout than boys, **Girls Holistic Development** focuses intervention efforts on VYA girls and engages boys to a lesser extent in the community-wide intergenerational activities.
- *Level of intervention intensity with elder family members and caregivers:* **Girls Holistic Development** focuses significant intervention efforts on grandmothers and mothers of VYAs, given their influential role in the lives of VYA girls. In contrast, **Growing Up GREAT!** places more emphasis on engaging with VYAs through weekly sessions, with a relatively lighter intervention with caregivers through six video-based reflection sessions.
- *Emphasis on intergenerational dialogue:* **Girls Holistic Development** prioritizes strengthening intergenerational communication and relationships; activities involving three generations are an essential aspect of the program. While **Growing Up GREAT!** engages caregivers and VYAs and promotes caregiver-child communication as a desired outcome, intergenerational activities are not part of the design.
- *Engagement with formal and informal community leaders:* Both **Growing Up GREAT!** and **Girls Holistic Development** engage teachers and school administrators as reference groups, and both interventions include activities targeting community members to catalyze community-wide change. However, **Girls Holistic Development** has a more targeted strategy, which engages multiple generations of male and female, formal and informal community leaders as key reference groups for the priority norms. **Growing Up GREAT!** has a stronger emphasis on engaging at subnational and national levels of the health and education system to promote institutionalization of program approaches.

**Creates safe spaces for critical reflection by community members:** Both interventions are highly dependent on critical reflection and discussion as a primary mechanism for shifting social norms. **Girls Holistic Development** uses well-trained, paid local facilitators with secondary school education to guide critical reflection between different community actors over a three-year period. In an effort to be lower cost and improve scalability, **Growing Up GREAT!** in-school VYA groups are facilitated by VYAs who receive one day of orientation, with support from teachers (with five days of training) and community-based organizations. Out-of-school VYA groups and parent and community groups are facilitated by trained community-based facilitators affiliated with local organizations, who receive four days of training. The reflection and dialogue activities under **Growing Up GREAT!** take place across nine months. Reflections from the intervention's implementation learning suggest that the quality of facilitation under **Girls Holistic Development** was high, and the post-test evaluation demonstrated impact on the priority norms. It's likely the longer duration of programming and the strong and trusting relationships between **Girls Holistic Development** facilitators and community members were important to the shifts in norms that occurred. The **Growing Up GREAT!** quantitative evaluation suggested limited change in several norms for in-school adolescents; this may be due in part to the shorter duration of programming and the reliance on VYA facilitation for the in-school VYA groups. Out-of-school adolescents, where greater impact was seen, are facilitated by the trained adult community-based facilitators.

## Scale-up strategies

The intent to develop scalable approaches influenced the design of both **Growing Up GREAT!** and **Girls Holistic Development**. However, the two interventions developed different scale-up strategies.

**Growing Up GREAT!** adapted existing effective interventions with a focus on achieving change at scale in a densely populated urban setting. To enhance scalability, **Growing Up GREAT!** staff made decisions to keep the approach simple and low-cost. For example, the total implementation period is kept to one school year (nine months), facilitators of the in-school VYA sessions are VYAs themselves, community sessions are led by volunteer community facilitators affiliated with local organizations, and the duration of training for VYA facilitators, teachers, and community facilitators was kept intentionally short.

**Growing Up GREAT!**'s scale-up strategy included both expansion and institutionalization. The intervention expanded to new geographic areas in DRC with support from additional donors. Simultaneously, **Growing Up GREAT!** took steps to institutionalize **Growing Up GREAT!** processes and tools into the Ministry of Education policies and practices and (to a lesser extent) the Ministry of Health. There was a particular emphasis on aligning **Growing Up GREAT!** tools with, and to complement, the Ministry of Education's family life education curriculum.

**Girls Holistic Development**'s scale-up strategy prioritizes training other non-governmental organizations to adopt and adapt the approach to address various health-related issues in non-western contexts where cultural roles, including that of elders and intergenerational support to girls, are highly valued. **Girls Holistic Development**'s scale-up strategy emphasizes a process with deep community engagement and norms-shifting that can be taken up by organizations with integration into schools or other institutions. Given this emphasis, **Girls Holistic Development** does not strive to simplify for government adoption. For example, the program model requires paid, high-quality facilitators who engage communities in multiple round of dialogues over a three-year period.

## Conclusion

Intervening early in adolescence to systematically address the norms that underpin health and gender outcomes is important to improve current and future health and gender well-being. Both **Girls Holistic Development** and **Growing Up GREAT!** are notable for their systematic inclusion of norm-shifting approaches. However, the ways each intervention approach norm-shifting differed in meaningful ways. The interventions took different routes to identifying priority norms and reference groups; placed different level of emphasis on the engagement of VYAs, caregivers, elders, local leaders, and systems; and facilitated critical reflection through different mechanisms. The scale-up strategies for each intervention led to different design decisions, particularly related to intensity of activities, program duration, and institutionalization. Looking across the two interventions it is clear that there is not one right way to implement norm-shifting interventions for VYAs. Rather, a careful assessment of context, organizational and institutional parameters, and opportunities for scale-up are needed to inform decision-making on how norm-shifting interventions are implemented and scaled in future VYA programs.

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