UNICEF and WHO joint programme on mental health and psychosocial well-being and development of children and adolescents
The issue

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the extent and severity of the global mental health crisis affecting children, adolescents, and their caregivers, while opening up an entry point for more open discussions around mental health and for innovations in service delivery. Mental health and psychosocial well-being and development are essential for fulfilling the human potential and the rights of children and adolescents everywhere. Nevertheless, every year and in every country the lives of millions of children, adolescents, and their caregivers are limited by poor mental health and well-being. For instance, depression, anxiety, and behavioural disorders are among the leading causes of illness and disability among adolescents, and suicide is the fourth leading cause of death among 15-19-year-olds. Addressing child and adolescent mental health is a significant priority for both UNICEF and WHO. It is integral to realizing both agencies’ commitments to protecting the human rights of children and achieving the goals set forth in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the WHO Comprehensive Mental Health Action Plan 2013-2030, and UNICEF’s strategic plan for 2022-2025.
The joint programme vision and strategies

The UNICEF and WHO Joint Programme on Mental Health and Psychosocial Well-being and Development of Children and Adolescents (the “Joint Programme”) has a bold vision:

**By 2030, children and adolescents living in countries targeted under the Joint Programme will experience reduced suffering and improved mental health and psychosocial well-being and development.**

The Joint Programme aims to achieve this by strengthening the capacity of countries to implement evidence-informed and human-rights based multisectoral strategies to deliver opportunities, support and services for children, adolescents and their caregivers. The Joint Programme will also advance visibility, awareness and investment at the national and global level through joint action.

In pursuit of its vision, the UNICEF and WHO Joint Programme establishes mutual commitments, a shared framework and a coordinated strategy to transform laws, policies, services, and family and community environments for improved mental health and psychosocial well-being and development trajectories for the next generation.
Guiding principles emphasize a child-centred and human-rights focused approach grounded in equitable, community-based, contextualized and sustainable solutions, and supporting whole-of-government and whole-of-society actions across the humanitarian-development continuum, including in emergencies. The meaningful engagement of service users will be a priority.

In a phased implementation over 10 years, four core strategies will expand capacity to accelerate actions at all levels and generate and have real impact on children and adolescents’ well-being:

1. strengthening effective leadership, governance and advocacy in mental health and psychosocial support
2. strengthening mental health and psychosocial service delivery and care systems
3. implementing approaches for promotion and prevention in mental health
4. strengthening information systems, evidence and research on mental health and psychosocial well-being.

While committed to advancing agendas for child and adolescent development, well-being and mental health at all levels, the Joint Programme has a specific focus on scaling up intersectoral and multistakeholder actions in countries.

The Joint Programme will adopt these four core, complementary strategies to provide support to national governments that are ready to step up for children, adolescents, and caregivers’ mental health and psychosocial well-being. Several countries have already been identified for targeted support under the Joint Programme, and are in the process of developing country-specific priorities and activities.
The joint programme’s added value

Joint Programmes contribute to accelerating results for countries, increasing the quality, quantity and stability of provision. This Joint Programme aligns with countries’ national priorities and whole-of-government strategies, and takes into account other initiatives which improve transparency and accountability in support of UN Reform. If COVID-19 has taught us anything, it is that multi-stakeholder solutions and the effectiveness of cross-sectoral efforts have the potential to increase domestic resources with equitable and impact-driven action.

Until recently, child and adolescent mental health has had many advocates but commitment and funding for sustained implementation and scale-up of services has remained limited. Now change is afoot. Increased global awareness and momentum around child and adolescent mental health and family well-being have produced strategic opportunities.

The global community has a historic opportunity to position the agenda for global child and adolescent mental health and psychosocial well-being and development in the broader framing of both the child and adolescent health agenda, and the mental health and psychosocial support agenda in emergency settings, as well as highlighting mental health as an essential element of the SDGs. This will enable leveraging of commitments and resources, and the integration of mental health and psychosocial support and development into government systems and services across sectors.

The Joint Programme recognizes this critical juncture and seeks to build on that momentum to expand partnerships at global, regional and country levels to drive strategic joint action, with potentially transformational results.
Expected outcomes

Under the Joint Programme, we want to see the following outcomes:

Core programme strategies and outcomes

Strengthen leadership, governance and advocacy

An increased number of countries implement multi-sectoral and multi-stakeholder strategies and actions for mental health and psychosocial well-being for children and adolescents.

Strengthen service delivery and care systems

An increased number of countries are able to offer improved access to quality care services (across health, education and social services / child protection services) for children and adolescents with mental health conditions, and their caregivers.

Promotion and prevention in mental health

An increased number of countries are able to offer nurturing, supportive environments for children and adolescents and opportunities for them to strengthen cognitive and socioemotional skills.

Strengthen information systems, evidence and research

An increased number of countries are able to generate and use quality data and evidence to inform multi-sectoral actions and policies for mental health and psychosocial well-being and development of children and adolescents.

Country-specific outcomes, activities and strategies to achieve those outcomes will further be determined after country-level consultations.
Resource requirements

The Joint Programme is estimating its financial requirement at US$ 50 million over the next five years. Contributions will be managed by HQ and allocated to individual countries and regions, based on the advancement of joint regional workplans and readiness of country cases for support for implementation.