



Oficina de Defensoría de los
Derechos de la Infancia a.c.

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Resilient migration

Tools for the emotional rescue
of migrant children and adolescents

UNICEF

CHRISTIAN SKOOG

UNICEF Representative for Mexico

ODI

MARGARITA GRIESBACH

Director of the Oficina de Defensoría de los
Derechos de la Infancia, A.C.**PREPARED BY**

Analía Castañer

Developed for UNICEF Mexico

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REVIEW AND EDITING

Karla Gallo

Alejandra Castillo

Lourdes Rosas Aguilar

Martha Ramírez Reyes

UNICEF - Mexico

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INTRODUCTION

All experiences leave a mark on the lives of children and adolescents, and are perceived as good or bad, depending on the context in which they take place. The perception is different if, after experiencing a personally painful situation, children and adolescents are reprimanded, punished, rejected or despised for such actions, rather than if, after going through the same painful experience, they receive support and guidance. The first scenario leads them to believe they are a failure and that their own worth is belittled.

The second scenario involves a different cycle where, if given the right support, they are able to build a self-image based on their own skills and potential.

The message or behaviour other people convey to children and adolescents after they have gone through a painful experience is extremely important for their psychological and emotional stability.¹ What they see or hear from other people, and their reactions, has a direct impact on the identity and self-esteem of children and adolescents, because it becomes part of the way they perceive themselves.²



If, after children and adolescents have gone through a painful experience, the persons around identify them as brave, this “label” will now become part of the way they perceive themselves and their identity.

If, on the contrary, they identify themselves and their own behaviours as a failure, irresponsible or madness, their identity and self-esteem will become severely undermined.

The mark other people leave (as it becomes part of one’s perception, identity and self-esteem) can be devastating. It may add on to the despair and vulnerability of those going through a difficult experience. However, it can also turn into an authentic emotional rescue, a supporting experience that will help them appreciate their lives, worth and identity all over again, as well as start a resilience process.

This process implies that children and adolescents who endure situations of specific vulnerability should not only transit through and overcome the difficult moment, but also *grow stronger* as they step out of it. The response given by the adults they interact with (especially if these are authorities) may add to the chain of difficulties and frustrations they have already experienced or, on the contrary, initiate a process of reconstruction of the way in which they perceive what they do and who they are, until perceiving themselves as valuable persons and as right holders.

A resilience process may begin with the single intervention of an adult,³ even if it is brief and specific.

This publication summarizes the existing theory about resilience and proposes a way to build it with migrant children and adolescents. It is addressed to public servants, authorities, members of civil society or social welfare centres, and all the adults in contact with migrant children and adolescents at any stage of their migration process.

The proposed actions can be applied even in those cases where the adult does not have any further contact – beyond a brief interaction – with the child or adolescent. The aim is that different people initiate a “chain” of emotional rescue messages – at different stages – to foster resilience among migrant children and adolescents. In this way, it will be possible to offset the devastating effects of the situations in which their rights were violated throughout their lives and development.

Any adult in contact with migrant children and adolescents can:

- Be informed about the concept of resilience and the huge impact these types of interventions may have on the emotional reality, development and future of children and adolescents.

¹ Although the importance of other people’s perspectives of identity and self-esteem applies to human development in general, for the purposes of this document, the topic is addressed specifically regarding children and adolescents.

² Ronald Laing is a specialist and pioneer of studies about the impact of how the way in which others perceive people affects their own self-perception. According to the author, those others “are not simple objects in the world: they are reorientation centres towards the objective universe”. He defines identity as “the other whom I become to others” and “the other I assume I am to others”. For this author, a great part of our identity is structured from “my vision of the vision the other has of me” (Laing, R. et al, “Self and others” in *Interpersonal perception*, pg. 13-14).

³ Resilience processes are possible for any person who has gone through a painful experience and has to face the enormous challenge of having to keep on living with it as part of their history, whether they are an adult, a child or an adolescent. Nonetheless, since this document is addressed to a specific population, it limits itself to resilience processes during childhood and adolescence.

- Be able to determine at what stage of the child or adolescent's migration process they come in contact with her or him.
- Come up with examples and proposals to convey emotional rescue messages, or provide specific situations for migrant children and adolescents to allow them to initiate a resilience process.

This document contains a quick review of the concept of resilience and analyses the effects of painful situations on children and adolescents. Its objective is to demonstrate the applicability of the concept; it does not delve into theoretical information. Therefore, it is suggested to use the bibliographical references if further precision on the definitions and theories in support of this proposal is required.

Subsequently, the elements that foster resilience processes and the general characteristics of the situations experienced by migrant children and adolescents are also dealt with in order to finally formulate proposals to promote such processes.

The proposals on emotional rescue actions that favour resilience in this document are broken down into four sections:

- The first section is linked to general adjustments on how to perceive migrant children and adolescents, as the basis for appropriate interactions.
- The second section presents a list of emotional rescue interventions that may be useful at different moments of the migration process, just like a "toolbox".
- The third section describes these tools in further detail, including the justification and importance of each tool and when and how to use it.

- The fourth section describes emotional rescue actions that foster resilience in critical moments during the migration process.

The proposed emotional rescue messages to foster resilience do not address an institution, authority profile or specific type of adult in particular. Rather, they are intended to be useful for any adult in contact with unaccompanied migrant children and adolescents at any time during the migration process.

It should be emphasized that the proposal contained in this document does not seek to dismiss or undermine other urgent actions for the effective protection and restitution of migrant children's and adolescents' rights, whether at institutional, social or cultural level. It can be an add-on to many other necessary actions.

This publication is complemented by the *Handbook of activities that promote resilience in migrant and refugee children and adolescents housed in social assistance centres*, which sets out activities that staff working at the centres may carry out to create contexts where the children and adolescents can initiate resilience processes when they have been through diverse situations in which their rights were violated.

Both publications are intended to offer persons in contact with migrant children and adolescents practical tools flexible enough to be applied in one-time-only, brief or sustained interactions over a longer period of time. Since the situations of migrant children and adolescents vary a lot and, in many cases, it is impossible to know in advance for how long they will be able to continue interacting with them, these types of interventions provide a valuable alternative to protect the rights of migrant children and adolescents and their emotional recovery. Moreover, different people can use them during various moments of the migration process.



What is
resilience?

The concept of resilience in this document relates to the ability of children and adolescents⁴ to come out stronger after going through seriously stressful and cumulative situations, where their physical and emotional integrity have been at risk. The term refers to abilities beyond confronting and adapting to difficulties. It implies the ability to overcome, to be transformed by the circumstances (Grotberg, 1996)⁵ and rebuild.

“Human beings have proven they possess the potential capability to end up hurt but to emerge stronger from an annihilating experience.” (Scienza Psicologia magazine, 2000)⁶

The origin of the word resilience comes from mechanics and is linked to the extent to which materials are resistant to destruction. Applied to psychology, it is initially understood as something that “reveals an individual’s ability to successfully overcome adversity and the flexible strength she or he has to rebuild her/himself after an adverse condition” (Barba).⁷ This connotation refers to the internal and individual ability to protect our own integrity when under pressure.

To talk about resilience does not mean avoiding, removing, or preventing suffering. The logic is more comprehensive: it is not possible to erase problems, there is always a mark left by what has been lived, but it is possible to give it a more bearable meaning, sometimes even an entirely different sense, one of strength and humanity.

For Manciaux, Vanistendael, Lecomte and Cyrulnik,⁸ resilience “is a person or a group’s ability to grow well, to keep on projecting themselves into the future in spite of destabilizing events, difficult living conditions and sometimes, severe trauma”. Some authors, such as Poletti and Dobbs,⁹ add to the definition that it is also the ability to build, being able to create a dignified life, in spite of adverse circumstances.

In the most recent studies on resilience, it is conceived as a process.

Reconstruction is not only accomplished through an individual’s attributes or internal capabilities, it also implies combinations of personal traits and those related to her or his family, social and cultural environment.¹⁰ According to Rutter, resilience involves:

*... social and intrapsychic processes that lead to confronting adversity in a successful way; and it is not only about genetic or acquired characteristics, it entails a process that describes a complex social system at a certain moment of time, that also implies a successful combination between the child and adolescent and her or his environment... resilience-fostering scenario [that] may propitiate and provide (or not) the unfolding of [personal] protective factors.*¹¹

⁴ The term is applicable to every human being going through difficult situations. For the purposes of this document, we only refer to children and adolescents.

⁵ Kotliarenko, Ibid., pg. 166.

⁶ Kotliarenko, M.A. et al., “Factores psicosociales asociados con la resiliencia en niños colombianos víctimas de violencia intrafamiliar”, *Investigación & Desarrollo* 11 (1), July 2003, pg. 165, in: <<http://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=26811107>>.

⁷ Guzmán-Carrillo, K. et al., “Recursos psicológicos y percepción de la migración en menores con familiares migrantes”, *Revista Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales, Niñez y Juventud*, 13 (2), 2015, pg. 704.

⁸ Barudy, J. and M. Dantagnan, *Los buenos tratos a la infancia. Parentalidad, apego y resiliencia*, Barcelona: Gedisa Editorial, 2006, pg. 56.

⁹ Gianino Gadea, L. “La resiliencia en niños institucionalizados y no institucionalizados”, *Avances en Psicología, magazine of the Psychology and Humanities College at UNIFE*, 20 (2), August-December 2012, pg. 80, at <www.uni-fe.edu.pe/publicaciones/revistas/psicologia/2012/3/6_avan-ces_lgianino_8.pdf> .

¹⁰ “To speak about resilience in terms of an individual is a fundamental mistake. You are not more or less resilient... Resilience is a process, the path of a child that, having learned through acts and words, engraves her or his development in a certain environment and writes her/his story upon a culture... it is not necessarily the child who is resilient but her/his evolution and constructive process of her/his own story” (Cyrulnik, B., *Ugly ducklings. Resilience: an unhappy childhood does not determine life*, Barcelona: Gedisa Editorial, 2001, pg. 214),

¹¹ Gianino Gadea, L., Ibid., pg. 80.

For Barudy,¹² the concept of resilience “implies acknowledging the vital strength that allows us to fight back every time life and human rights are being threatened... it is an active and not passive phenomenon, the result of a social dynamic and not of individual traits”.

Erner¹³ claims that the most important source of true healing of the person that has been hurt is the belief that you are capable of confronting adversity; the past will not be erased, but it will be seen as bearable.

The key is to consider self-trust as built on trusting others. According to contemporary studies, the resilience process in children and adolescents is unleashed by the intervention of adults¹⁴ who carry out some specific action to build self-worth and to protect the child or adolescent.

This intervention may take place during a brief, single occasion, such as “meeting someone only once and it being so meaningful that lights up the flame of our way of being humans” (Cyrulnik), but it leaves a mark on the child or adolescent that allows her or him to start the reconstruction of her/his self-image¹⁵ as valuable, worthy of protection and capable of exercising her/his rights.



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The guiding principle of this document is this notion of interconnection between the resilience process that children and adolescents may initiate to emerge stronger from a painful situation and the self-image they recover through the adults with whom they interact.

In addition, a few other considerations about trauma, the intervention of adults and resilience are also included.

¹² Barudy, J., and M. Dantagnan, “La resiliencia parental secundaria en situaciones extremas”, in *Los desafíos invisibles de ser madre o padre*. Barcelona: Gedisa Editorial, 2010, pg. 265.

¹³ Vega-Vázquez, M. et al., “Recursos psicológicos y resiliencia en niños de 6, 8 y 10 años de edad”, *Revista de Educación y Desarrollo*, 17, April-June 2011, pg. 35, at <www.cucs.udg.mx/revistas/edu_desarrollo/anteriores/17/017_Vega.pdf>, reviewed on October 13, 2015

¹⁴ According to specialists, “... recognizing that a certain number of traumatized children endure the tests they have to live through, even sometimes using them to become more human, cannot be explained in terms of superman or invulnerability, but by associating the acquisition of affective internal resources and behaviour resources during the difficult years with the effective availability of external social and cultural resources” (Cyrulnik, B., *Ugly Ducklings...* Barcelona: Gedisa Editorial, 2001, pg. 36).

¹⁵ “It is no longer possible to believe that trauma provokes predictable effects. It is better to be willing to think that brutal events disrupt and deviate a personality’s path. Narrating such an event – cornerstone of their identity – will get to know different fates based on affective circuits, the circuits related to the story of those who have taken part of the event, and the institutional circuits provided by the social context around the wounded one” (Cyrulnik, B., *ibid.*, pg. 135).



The effects of painful experiences



Everyone, to a greater or lesser degree, has internal resources from the very first years of interactions with significant figures. Some authors state that our own personality, the most intimate concept of oneself, is built upon what the persons around us have conveyed. Hence, the “I” (what I think I am, have and can do) is erected upon what has been said about me by those who have surrounded me in my life.¹⁶

Boris Cyrulnik says “... there is no other way a person can grow rather than by weaving her or himself together with another. The attitude that will better contribute to make the wounded person resume her/his growth will be the one that makes the greater effort to discover the internal resources impregnating the individual and, in the same way, the one that analyses the external resources, those unfolded around them”.¹⁷

These personal traits explain the way in which a person feels and gives meaning to a “blow” or wound they suffer. This, once again according to Boris Cyrulnik, cannot yet be defined as trauma, because something that is awfully painful for one person may not be the same to another.

Two blows to install trauma¹⁸

According to Cyrulnik, two blows are required for actual trauma to set in. It will be the meaning acquired afterwards by the first blow – in the personal history and the family and social context – that will provide an explanation to the devastating effects of the second blow; that is what will end up causing trauma.¹⁹ If, instead of the possibility of giving meaning to what happened and receiving support and protection, you receive indifference or another violation of your rights, that is when trauma finally sets in.

Trauma is any event experienced by a person of a magnitude that exceeds her or his capacity to cope. Trauma is subjective, in other words, whatever is experienced as such by one child or adolescent may be different for another, but the definition lays out the fact that the individual's psychological reality is overtaken by an event she/he feels is beyond her/his control or ability to understand.

When trauma occurs, people have psychological defense mechanisms, their very own individual tools to try to cope with the pain caused by the event.

¹⁶ Ronald Laing, one of the most prominent figures in mental health in the interpersonal field, refers to the concepts of confirmation and disconfirmation using them to describe the way in which the messages we receive from others may encourage – or destroy – our emotional stability. He claims confirmation and disconfirmation assail the foundations of mental health: our own perceptions. (Laing, R. *El yo y los otros*. Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1974).

¹⁷ Cyrulnik, B., *Ugly Ducklings...*, pg. 36.

¹⁸ Trauma can be understood as a person's subjective experience, where their psychological integrity feels at risk. When something is “traumatic”, it is not an observable and external event; on the contrary, it is structured, developed and nested in each individual, in the face of a specific event that was able to strip them from their usual and functional defense tools. When certain individuals have to face the same event, some will have dissimilar subjective experiences. If something is experienced as traumatic, it will overrun the perception of control, of confronting what is happening; therefore, creating the feeling that integrity is in danger. It is not possible to anticipate or generalize what it is that each child or adolescent will experience as traumatic.

¹⁹ Cyrulnik, B., *Ugly Ducklings...*, pg. 27.

All children and adolescents have mechanisms to defend themselves psychologically from painful situations. These defense mechanisms are useful to maintain their sanity in the presence of an increased level of distress that may severely hurt and deconstruct their emotional stability. Such strategies are only helpful momentarily; however, if they are consistently established as the way in which conflict is dealt with, they will cause difficulties in the long term. Not all defense mechanisms for individual trauma handling are useful for the emotional stability and development of children and adolescents.

*Children that have to cope with trauma must be able to adapt. Nonetheless, adaptation is not always a benefit: the amputation, submission, relinquishing of ever becoming their own self, the search for intellectual indifference, affective glaciation, mistrust, the seduction of the aggressor, all these values are – without any doubt – adaptive, non-resilient defense... As children cannot grow in any place other than the environment that is hurting them, what will their adaptation strategies and resilience defenses be?*²⁰

Pain needs to be dealt with and processed beyond the immediate reactions implemented unconsciously and individually by the psychological reality. It is desirable for it to sort itself out in the individual's reality, that it is built together with other people.

Barudy agrees in defining resilience as a process that depends on its own resources (protective, to rally from adversity), added to interactions with other people, and describes it as "a capability that emerges from social interactions. This capability is, above all, the result of affective, cognitive, relational and ethical nutrients that children receive from their environment".²¹

Without the intervention of adults, children and adolescents process painful situations the best way they can. Under these conditions, as time goes by, it is highly likely

that the following defense mechanisms will prevail and may end up becoming harmful:

- **Denial:** "you shouldn't think I've suffered".²²
- **Omnipotence:** "I don't need help", "I can do it by myself".
- **Isolation:** "I remember what happened and I don't feel anything".²³
- **Rejection:** the complex mechanism through which, after experiencing rejection, they anticipate that they will be abandoned, and prefer not to count on anybody to avoid having to go through it again.
- **Hypervigilance:** "I'm constantly on the watch trying to prevent this feeling of anguish from taking over again".²⁴
- **Irrational ideas about themselves:**²⁵ "I am worthless", "I'm not capable of anything", "I'm a failure", "nobody cares about me".

With the assistance of adults who can convey emotional rescue messages, it is possible for children and adolescents to build a different self-image and initiate a process of resilience.

The above statements open a window of opportunity to act in the light of the difficult stories and extreme situations experienced by children and adolescents. In these scenarios, being in contact with an adult does not become a "second blow", it turns into an authentic emotional rescue that fosters the resilience process.

The reality that children and adolescents build while interacting with adults along their migratory journey can turn into one of two opposite situations: an experience that increases the noisome and painful effects, or one that drives them towards a transformation process. The difference between one scenario and the other is having counted on an adult at any point of the migratory journey (and it may have been just one) who conveyed emotional rescue messages.

²⁰ Cyrulnik, B., *Ugly Ducklings...*, pg. 141.

²¹ Barudy, J., *Los buenos tratos a la infancia*, pg. 58.

²² Cyrulnik, B., *Ibid.* pg. 31.

²³ *Idem.*

²⁴ *Idem.*

²⁵ Wekerle, C. et al., *Maltrato infantil*. Mexico: Manual Moderno, Mexico, 2007, pg. 54.

If children and adolescents do not receive both useful information and support to start the resilience process, they will face the painful situation by themselves; they will resort to the information they have (which may be inaccurate or not real) and to the mechanisms their psychological reality is able to trigger. If, instead, they are able to process what they think and how they feel about the painful situation with an adult, the latter may support them so that they can “explain to themselves” what happened, in such a way that they will rebuild and grow stronger. The adults around migrant children and adolescents can give them the emotional rescue that will allow them to “come back to the world after having been expelled from humanity”.²⁶



Adults, children and adolescents **weaving resilience together**

A difficult story can turn into a wound engraved in their history, not a destiny.²⁷

Cyrulnik indicates that resilience is woven with two types of wool: the children’s and adolescents’ personality that was built prior to the trauma and the support of resilience guides or monitors around the wounded children and adolescents after trauma.

As he explores deeper into what can be used to guide and to become an established resilience monitor, the author describes “meeting points” where conversations, artistic expressions, social and affective commit-

ment arise. In these “meeting points”, the cultural stereotypes and social perception of wounded children and adolescents can be reviewed.

Barudy agrees by highlighting the importance of altruism, solidarity and mutual support as traits of a “social fabric made up by transitional belonging”²⁸ which leads to change and evolution through communication, conversations, sharing stories and mutual support. The “social fabric” is literally the context through which we can constitute ourselves as human beings. In the course of our lives, we need a social framework that gives us a name, a place and takes care of us. This social fabric can be made up of the family, but also diverse kinds of groups in different periods of life. The adults and other children and adolescents they interact with during the migratory journey can become their social fabric. The effects these interactions have on the reality of migrant children and adolescents are broad and strong.

In this document, “meeting points” and “social fabric of belonging” can be any interaction between adults and unaccompanied migrant children and adolescents. Complex interventions are not a requirement for the resilient process seed to be planted. It is clear that, in the future, different actions may be added to restore every violated right of children and adolescents. However, every adult can convey, although it may only be in a brief or one-time interaction, emotional rescue messages that may assist them in starting their “reconstruction”.

Once the foundational concepts of this document are laid out, the ideas on how to promote resilience processes among migrant children and adolescents will be addressed.

²⁶ Cyrulnik, B., *Ugly Ducklings*, pg. 31.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pg. 35.

²⁸ Implementing a transitional space of the sort brings affection and representations together, they can be shared, dealt with and hence handled to bring the image of trauma to evolve (Barudy, *La resiliencia parental...*, pg. 264).



The “building blocks” of resilience

All migrant children and adolescents are survivors of the extreme situations entailed in the migration process; they therefore already have personal skills to cope with adversity. What do they need to receive from adults to transform their experience into resilience?

Vanistendael²⁹ describes the resilience process as building a house. Children and adolescents need to have a “ground” to build upon, a ground that represents their basic needs that have been met, and an “underground” made up by the network of relationships where they learned unconditional acceptance (family, friends, significant adults, authorities with whom they have been in contact).

Their “ground floor” needs the basic ability to find sense, coherence in life. Upon that, as a form of “first floor”, the resilient person has four “rooms”: self-esteem, competencies, aptitudes and humour.

The “attic” is represented by being open to other experiences, going beyond the self’s boundaries in a constructive relationship.

Therefore, in order to have or to build resilience among migrant children and adolescents, it is necessary to provide them with interactions where:

- Their basic needs are fulfilled (rest, food, shelter).
- They are able to identify and recover their history or, in their present life, find people who accept them unconditionally (and if they do not have such persons, find an adult who conveys respect and acceptance).
- They attach meaning to their story, their reality and life.

- Their own competencies and aptitudes are used and identified, and they can find help, from there, to rebuild their self-image and perception of their self-worth.
- They are capable of transcending pain by engaging with other people and re-connecting with creativity and a sense of humour.

According to Boris Cyrulnik, two things are needed to unleash a resilience process: 1) understanding, and 2) action. We can think of them as the two other key building blocks to lay the foundations of the resilience process.³⁰ *Understanding* is mandatory because adults need to think and be able to give meaning to the painful situation children and adolescents are experiencing. *Action* is also crucial to tackle the situation and metamorphose.



Understanding

To fully understand the situation unaccompanied migrant children and adolescents experience, they will need information and guidance from the adults who foster the resilience process. They will also need to get in touch with what they went through and be able to talk about it.

Action

Unaccompanied migrant children and adolescents will need adults to perceive them as capable and valuable.

²⁹ Vanistendael, S. and J. Leconte, *La felicidad es posible. Despertar en niños maltratados la confianza en sí mismos: construir la resiliencia*, Barcelona: Gedisa Editorial, 2000, pp. 56-57.

³⁰ “... It is necessary to think about disaster to be able to make some sense out of it, and it is equally necessary to move towards action by facing, fleeing or metamorphosing. Understanding and action are required to unwind a resilience process. When one of these two factors are missing, resilience is not woven and disorder is installed” (Cyrulnik, B., *Ugly Ducklings...*, pg. 165).

If there is no understanding or action, reality anchors itself in reliving³¹ every single day the pain that was suffered. This would systematically disrupt the child or adolescent's psychological reality, without giving her or him the chance to understand, without dominating the action or its representation. This permanent repetition feeds the sensation of helplessness; it revives anguish and obstructs the resilience process.

From the perspective of children's and adolescents' rights, it is paramount to consider that it is not about "telling" them how they should understand or act, or "asking" them what they have understood or learned and how they want to act. What must be done is to provide and build interactions together with them, so they can access knowledge, action and other elements to build resilience from their experiences with adults. In this sense, the rights focus is absolutely congruent with the idea of "weaving" together with the child or adolescent the resilience process already proposed by the specialists.

How do you build spaces and experiences that will bring migrant children and adolescents closer to gaining understanding and taking action based on the experiences they have gained? Dobbs and Poletti³² say that in order for children and adolescents to become resilient, the key is that they take part in "gatherings" where they have the

"chance to talk and act". The possibility of understanding is closely related to being able to talk (with other people), to find a meaning to what has happened. Talking also enables perception and the construction of alternatives to act upon.

Martínez³³ lays out a classification of six virtues broken down into 24 strengths to sustain resilient processes. Any of those virtues may be reinforced by the adult interacting with the unaccompanied migrant child or adolescent:

- **Wisdom and knowledge:** creativity, curiosity, open mind, love of knowledge and perspective.
- **Courage:** braveness, perseverance, vitality and authenticity.
- **Humanity:** kindness, social intelligence and love.
- **Justice:** being able to work as a team, equity and leadership.
- **Temperance:** self-regulation, prudence and modesty.
- **Transcendence:** appreciation of beauty, gratitude, hope, humour and spirituality.

³¹The repetition of traumatic events and the irruption thereof in a person's psychological reality are some of the symptoms that characterize post-traumatic stress disorder. When PTSD is installed it means the traumatic experience exceeded the person's ability to cope with adversity and has made her or him feel that her/his life or integrity are at risk; it sets in such a way that any event that may remind or allude to what happened unleashes a reaction equivalent to the event. In this sense, the person remains in a state of alert and hyper reaction in the face of any stimulus similar to the experience, which may severely unbalance her or his emotional stability. An outbreak of images of what happened also takes place automatically and disruptively interferes with the person's thoughts and daily activities. For further details on post-traumatic stress disorder, refer to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM IV)*, available at <http://www.eafit.edu.co/ninos/reddelaspreguntas/Documents/dsm-iv-manual-diagnostico-estadistico-trastornos-mentales.pdf>, accessed on July 30, 2015

³² In Gianino Gadea, L. *La resiliencia en niños...*, pg. 80.

³³ In Vega-Vázquez, M. et al. "Recursos psicológicos...", pg. 34.

There is an extra set of strategies laid out by Grotberg (2006), who breaks the resilience factors down into three categories:

- I have (referring to the person’s external support)
- I am (referring to intrapsychic strength)
- I can (referring to acquiring interpersonal and conflict-solving skills)

Based upon such categories, it is possible to identify which may be the potential “building blocks” that will start resilience processes in children and adolescents. Several authors³⁴ propose relational factors set out by different research studies as facilitators of the resilience process.

This means that adults can provide interactions or conversations where children and adolescents may detect or experience the factors – in their present life and throughout their history – linked to support networks, intrapsychic strength and the possibility of skills acquisition. These are the factors through which adults can actively contribute to build new interactions with migrant children or adolescents, giving them access to a new and rewarding perception of themselves when they have been through painful situations.

Although specific actions will be presented below, the following chart describes suggested general interactions that adults in contact with children and adolescents can foster during any exchange, chat or shared experience.

³⁴ Among them, Barudy, J. *Los buenos tratos..*, pg. 58; Grotberg, E. (in Gianino Gadea, L. *La resiliencia en niños*, pg. 80); M. A. and V. Dueñas (idem) and Brooker (in Woodhead, “El desarrollo de identidades positivas”, *La Primera Infancia en Perspectiva*, 3. United Kingdom: The Open University, pg. 48).

Resilience strategies and factors

Strategy	Adults could develop interactions where children and adolescents:
<p>I have</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify one or more persons around them whom they trust and respect unconditionally. • Identify persons who set limits (they provide accurate and concrete information about what is allowed and what is forbidden in order to regulate behaviours and identify any dangers or problems). • Identify persons who show them – through their own behaviour – different ways of acting that they would like to incorporate into their lives (good role-models). • Identify persons who appreciate the fact that they know how to fend for themselves and to be independent. • Identify persons who help them if they are sick or in danger. • Identify where they can perceive a stable environment (their own space and/or reliable persons who will give them useful information).
<p>I am</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perceive themselves as persons for whom others feel appreciation and affection (they are liked by people). • Can do something for others, show them affection and detect how it feels when they do it. • Respect themselves and other people. • Perceive themselves as people who can accomplish what they set out to do and have plans for the future. • Perceive themselves as people who feel empathy for others and worry about them. • Perceive themselves as being responsible for their own actions and who accept the consequences. • Perceive themselves as self-confident, optimistic, assured and as individuals with hopes and desires.
<p>I can</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perceive themselves as people capable of talking about the things they are afraid of or concerned by. • Perceive themselves as people capable of finding a way to solve their problems. • Perceive themselves as people capable of controlling themselves when they feel like doing something dangerous. • Perceive themselves as people capable of choosing the right time to talk to someone. • Perceive themselves as people capable of choosing the right time to act. • Perceive themselves as people capable of finding someone to help them when they need it. • Perceive themselves as people capable of generating new ideas or new paths to do other things. • Perceive themselves as people capable of carrying out a task until completing it. • Perceive themselves as people capable of finding humour in life and using it to reduce tension. • Perceive themselves as people capable of expressing concerns and feelings for others.

Any conversation or interaction can be used so that the child or adolescent can perceive some of the alternatives shown in the right-hand column of the chart, to promote the development of resilience strategies linked to the perception of their own internal strength. The same applies to building strategies related to the possibilities of acquiring skills and sorting out difficulties.

Since it is a process, there are no unique and stringent “recipes” to foster resilience. A variable is that in the specific situation of a migrant child or adolescent there is a protective factor which may turn into a risk factor in a different circumstance (Grotberg and Rutter).³⁵ It is necessary to associate the resilience process to each particular child and adolescent.

For that, it may be useful to have background information about the reality in which the children and adolescents live. Although the stories are different and the way they are experienced is personal and particular, some general ideas can serve as a guide for adults to build interactions and convey emotional rescue messages to foster resilience processes.



³⁵ In Gianino Gadea, L. *La resiliencia en niños...*, pg. 80.

IV

A look into the reality of migrant children and adolescents



This section describes a few of the situations that migrant children and adolescents often go through. Far from trying to be extensive or defining different “profiles”,³⁶ its purpose is to designate the psychological and emotional situation that comes with the reality they have experienced. It is important to identify this situation and then convey emotional rescue messages that foster resilience.

In order to develop interactions where migrant children and adolescents feel trust and acceptance, it is essential to understand what they have gone through to recognize³⁷ and comprehend emotions such as frustration, anger and despair, among others.

“The embarrassment of being a victim, the feeling of being less, of not being who you were anymore, of no longer being like everybody else, like those who have also changed during the period of time in which we no longer belonged to their world.”³⁸



Reading this document may lead to reflections such as: “the proposal may be right from the theoretical point of view, but it is impossible to apply it; the time during which authorities interact with a migrant child or adolescent is very short”.

It is important to take into account that interventions that foster emotional rescue and resilience can, in fact, be implemented, even if the contact with the migrant child or adolescent is quite brief. In most of the cases, the goal is to use appropriate words, and something like that can be done in seconds.

The different realities that unaccompanied migrant children and adolescents can experience –described below– are not unique nor exclusive. It is highly likely that they interrelate to each individual’s life.

³⁶ As a reference, you can review the World Vision publication (*Motivos de migración de la niñez y juventud en 27 municipios de El Salvador. Estudio Exploratorio*. El Salvador: World Vision, 2014.)

³⁷ Confirming an emotion is a technique widely used in psychology clinics. It means showing the person you are interacting with that what they feel is normal, that it is to be expected as a consequence of what they have gone through. When their emotions are recognized, listeners feel understood, in alignment with the other person who is accepting that what is happening to them is human and that it is to be expected. When you confirm somebody else’s emotions, you are not asking that person to “not be sad”, to “not be worried”, nor you are questioning their anger or despair by trying to “give solutions” to what they feel, because those types of actions do not convey alignment, on the contrary, they create the feeling of being judged in the person who is listening, or they increase the despair and powerlessness because they are asked to stop doing something they cannot avoid feeling.

³⁸ Cyrulnik, B., *Ugly Ducklings*, pg. 31

The different realities of unaccompanied migrant children and adolescents

	Description
Alienation	<p>Although the children or adolescents' project is to find better alternatives for their lives, it is likely that they will find themselves in a place where they do not know the customs, places, foods or codes.</p>
Playing the role of an adult	<p>Especially those adolescents who decided to migrate to find a job, and to assist their families, end up playing the role of the "adult of the family". In many cases, they are highly skilled teenagers, and it is possible for them to settle for this reality and get ahead. Nonetheless, this does not mean that the demands of playing the role of an adult can be endured by the teenager in a healthy way.³⁹</p> <p>On many occasions, they end up being labelled as those "responsible for saving their families," in conditions which make actually achieving something impossible.⁴⁰</p> <p>When adolescents are in charge of their siblings, they assume the role of the mother or the father.</p> <p>A concrete example of this situation is the enormous concern that repatriation represents for the adolescent when her or his family has invested all their money in her/his trip. In addition to the lack of alternatives provided by their reality to try to resolve the problem – which is completely real – experiencing such frustration in a formative stage has complex effects.</p>
Omnipotent magical thinking	<p>The developmental stage of adolescence is marked by a way of thinking in which omnipotence prevails (they feel they can accomplish everything, that they know it all, etc.) and fantasies and emotions burst in. Adolescents who undertake a migratory project were possibly sure they could actually make it, from the perspective of their omnipotent magical thinking. When they see their project truncated, it puts their personal stability and self-perception as valuable and resourceful persons at risk.</p> <p>It is not easy for them to understand the threats and perils involved in the journey with objectivity (independent from their own self and personal skills) because they are certain that "they can do anything" and their critical judgment is not yet completely functional;⁴³ therefore, the explanation they will build around the situation will possibly revolve around their own identity: "I wasn't able to make it"; "I'm stupid"; "Others were able to make it and I wasn't", "I'm a failure". These are all irrational thoughts that must not be reinforced in any way; adults should help them reject these kinds of self-dialogue.</p>

Effects that must be taken into account

- Fear (and attempts to conceal it)
- Confusion
- Sense of helplessness
- Anguish
- Sadness and nostalgia

- Preoccupation and fear
- Responsibilities that exceed their problem-solving possibilities
- Frustration
- Impact on their identity⁴¹ and self-perception
- Belittling
- Fear of retaliation
- Blame and shame
- Rejection⁴²
- Isolation, lack of support and protective reactions from the people around them
- Excess of responsibilities

- Anger
- Impulsiveness
- Frustration
- A hard time asking for help
- Belittling
- They perceive themselves as “faulted” or as a “failure” and they have a hard time admitting it
- Irrational ideas about themselves and what they are capable of
- Guilt and shame

³⁹ According to the *Protocol for psychological and social care for unaccompanied migrant children and adolescent shelters* of the Ministry of Social Welfare of Guatemala, 2014, pg. 16, “children and adolescents who make, or are forced to make, the decision to migrate have found themselves in the vital need of jumping towards adulthood by assuming family-related responsibilities, such as taking care of and supporting entire families. We are talking about girls and boys for whom these responsibilities are a heavy load. They feel it is in their power to do something to change their family’s situation and, when the migration project fails, they end up deeply troubled about the debt incurred to pay for their trip to the United States or Mexico”.

⁴⁰ They face conditions of poverty or extreme poverty, lack of education and employment opportunities, they do not have access to rest and spare time, among other hurdles they will never be able to overcome by themselves.

⁴¹ Adolescence is a development period where identity is restructured. Teenagers embody the frustration and sense of failure, which affect the way they perceive themselves, who they are, what they can do and their own value as persons.

⁴² According to the abovementioned *Protocol for psychological and social care for unaccompanied migrant children and adolescent*, it is not at all rare for them to be rejected or reviled when they return to their home town or go back to their house because people hold them responsible for the failure of their trip.

⁴³ The frontal lobe is not yet fully functional (until 23 years of age); for this reason, it is not easy for them to use their critical judgment. This is the skill that allows us to think with objectivity, without emotions bursting in, and to take the mid- and long-term effects of our decisions into account.

The different realities of unaccompanied migrant children and adolescents

	Description
Lack of alternatives	Experiencing a lack of alternatives creates tremendous despair when their project is truncated. What they perceived as the only alternative in their lives disappears; this loss becomes devastating.
Uncertainty	When the desired objective is frustrated, migrant children and adolescents may feel great uncertainty about what will happen next.
Depersonalization ⁴⁴	<p>If the reality of a child or adolescent when she/he was deciding to migrate was one of poverty, abandonment, social and domestic abuse, lack of alternatives, discrimination, marginalization, social exclusion, violence, all this sustained over and over again, it is highly likely that she/he has not even reached the point of perceiving her/himself as a person in terms of psychological development.</p> <p>If the only choice conceived by a child or adolescent to “become a person”, to be looked at, appreciated and supported, was the project of migrating, her/his failure has very serious repercussions on her/his psychological and emotional stability.</p>
High level of frustration and despair	<p>When they manage to reach the country of destination Migrant children and adolescents who were actually able to reach their country of destination (generally the United States), and were detained there, have the feeling that they made it but that they are not welcome. The reality they had perceived was indicating to them that “they had made it”,⁴⁵ they may even have spent some time in shelters with an education programme, been at a court of law in front of a judge and waited for an answer. The final ruling determines that they are not allowed to stay, and cancels out the reality in which they were living. This can be very difficult to accept and process in emotional terms.</p>

Effects that must be taken into account

- Desperation
- Rage

- Desperation for having access to information
- Nervousness
- Impulsiveness

- Desperation
- Impairment of the ultimate sense of “being a person”
- They are not capable of considering themselves worthy
- They cannot perceive they exist and that they are important for other people
- They do not know they have rights and that, depending on their age, they must be protected in a special way

- Frustration
- Hopelessness
- Confusion
- Anger
- Guilt and shame
- Labelling

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⁴⁴ Depersonalization is defined as “a state in which individuals feel changed as compared to their previous state. This change has an impact both on the self and the external world, and it leads individuals to acknowledge themselves as lacking a personality. Their actions seem automatic, they see themselves from the perspective of spectators. The external world seems estranged and has lost its condition of reality”. The feeling creates unease, estrangement (Rogelio Luque et al., “Despersonalización: aspectos históricos, conceptuales y clínicos”, *Revista de la Asociación Española de Neuropsiquiatría*, XV (54), 1995, pg. 446, at <http://documentacion.aen.es/pdf/revista-aen/1995/revista-54/05-despersonalizacion_aspec-tos_historico_conceptuales.pdf>).

⁴⁵ According to the *Protocol for psychological and social care in unaccompanied migrant children and adolescent shelters* of the Ministry of Social Welfare of Guatemala (2014, pg. 91), “The journey to Mexico or the United States was taken under very difficult conditions where their rights were harmed and violated. In consequence, they suffered a series of psychological and social impacts such as fear, rage, powerlessness, frustration, being labelled and rejected or feeling guilty for not reaching their objective, in addition to financial debt to cover for travel expenses”.

The different realities of unaccompanied migrant children and adolescents

	Description
High level of frustration and despair	<p>When they are seeking family reunification Realizing that their journey is now truncated can create very painful effects. This is one of the heaviest burdens for the child or adolescent's migration because she/he has now become part of the already existing migratory cycles made up by her/his parents, grandparents and siblings who migrated earlier and live in the United States. To reunite with her/his mother, father or siblings who grew up in a different country is seen and expected as a new opportunity in life.</p> <p>Such complex realities create contexts in which the migration process is – often – built with joy and wishes of reuniting with the family, but it also entails anger and sadness for being “abandoned” by her/his father or mother. In some cases, the family structure has changed.</p>
	<p>When detained in transit countries Children and adolescents who are detained in transit countries live under very difficult conditions after their detention. They can face difficulties in understanding their protection options in a context where they feel guilty. They do not have support from a family member waiting for them or to welcome them in the transit country; they have to remain under State protection and these processes can take days or months. Depending on the circumstances, they can live in conditions of overcrowding, precarious medical care, inadequate nutrition, lack of resources and infrastructure, etc.</p>
	<p>When they perform temporary work in the border area Children and adolescents who perform temporary work in the border area (“chicleros” or natural gum-making farm labourers or house workers) aim to contribute to their family's economy for short periods of time and then go back to their communities. This strategy to improve their economy has been used by families for decades.⁴⁶</p>
	<p>When they flee from contextual violence Detention and repatriation when they flee from violent contexts where their integrity and freedom are at risk may have devastating effects. They have potentially fled from forced recruitment or harassment to join gangs or provide sexual services (to become a gang member's girl or boyfriend), they probably escaped from criminality and violent contexts in the region, from the violence of organized crime, from threats to their own safety or that of their families, from being rejected in their own country because of their sexual- or gender identity (homosexuals, transgender and transsexual), and from the contextual violence caused by extreme poverty.⁴⁷</p>

Effects that must be taken into account

- Hopelessness
- Abandonment
- Belittling
- Sensation of failure
- Guilt and shame
- Confusion
- Ambivalence
- Uncertainty

- Bewilderment
- Desperation at remaining in detention
- Confusion
- Aggressiveness (it reactivates when facing the situations they have experienced)
- Fear
- Rejection

- Confusion
- Bewilderment
- Lack of the sense of repatriation or security

- Terror
- Fear for their own integrity or that of their loved ones
- Certainty of the lack of choices
- Desperation
- Hopelessness
- Fear of retaliation

⁴⁶ They may have experienced situations of labour rights violations or labour exploitation as part of the human trafficking network.

⁴⁷ Contextual violence may propitiate economic motivations for migration. Poverty in the family, lack of work, unemployment or underemployment, are conditions that plant in children and adolescents the desire to do better and to help their family; hence, it becomes a motivation to migrate.

The different realities of unaccompanied migrant children and adolescents

	Description
High level of frustration and despair	<p>When they flee from assault within the family Repeatedly suffering from sexual, physical or emotional violence within the family severely disrupts the children’s and adolescents’ self-perception. Overcoming such effects and making the decision to migrate requires a massive amount of energy and courage, it gambles on being able to seek a better life, where they can be appreciated as persons and live in peace and freedom. When they find out that their life project – which included finding a job, going to school and gaining access to personal and family growth opportunities – is truncated, the repercussions can be very negative on their psychological reality.⁴⁸</p>
	<p>When they get the news that they will be returned to their country of origin It is likely that this will be the moment when frustration and desperation sink in with a higher impact on migrant children and adolescents, especially when they made it to the northern border, and they will have to go back from there.⁴⁹ In most cases, the news will be perceived as devastating. Possibly, before they were detained, they even had the feeling that they were “almost” fulfilling their dream, their life project. Migrant children and adolescents take the news of their assisted return or repatriation as a harsh reality, indicating their dream has come to an end; something which, in many cases, was the only thing that gave meaning to their lives.</p> <p>The news, in such cases, may involve authentic grief that will extend beyond the trip. If the migrant children and adolescents had staked all of their value in this accomplishment and perceived it as the only possible alternative to live, it will become extremely difficult to find other options in life.</p> <p>In addition, the news of their return can be received after spending time at a shelter in the northern border during a period of time in which significant bonds have been made with other teenagers or the staff with whom they have interacted. This goodbye can turn out to be very painful and add to the effects of losing their alternative life project.</p>

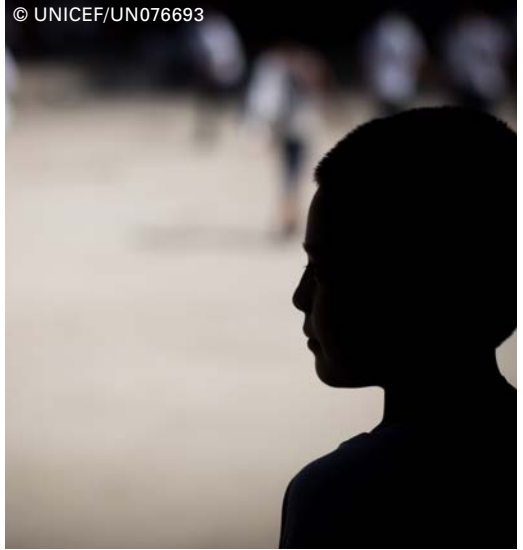
Considering all the information reviewed about resilience and the reality migrant children and adolescents often experience, specific activities are set out below to provide emotional rescue actions and messages that will allow them to initiate resilience processes.

Effects that must be taken into account

- Belittling
- Extreme confusion
- Feelings of defenselessness
- Paralysis
- Cognitive development is stalled
- Fear of retaliation

- Emotional devastation
- Sense of lack of alternatives
- Sense of defenselessness (there is nothing I can do to make my life better)
- Belittling
- Depression
- Anguish
- Extreme nervousness or passivity
- Impulsiveness

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⁴⁸ According to the Guatemala Protocol, “in the cases where they flee from domestic violence or juvenile gangs, or general violence and situations of insecurity, in addition to pursuing their integral development, they were looking for the chance to live in a violence-free environment and to live in peace and freedom... They are children and adolescents with great worth and strength who want to get a job, go to school and have a chance at personal and family growth” (Ministry of Social Welfare of the Presidency of Guatemala, *Protocol for psychological and social care...*, pg. 17).

⁴⁹ It must be clarified that the news of their return usually creates frustration and exhaustion among migrant children and adolescents who are detained at the southern border, but it has fewer devastating effects than when they were about to make their dream come true. The news of having to go back to their country received at the southern border is usually taken in with a connotation of “hurry” to give it another try in the near future. Although this might be the case, it is important that the persons in contact with migrant children and adolescents have information about the potential effects and the need to empathize and recognize the emotions caused by the news.



**How to foster
resilience
processes in
migrant children
and adolescents**

Without any doubt, migrant children and adolescents go through difficult situations that can be harmful to their psychological and social development, due to experiences of adversity; nonetheless, that same life in a situation of adversity can enable experiences that foster development (Llobet).⁵⁰

Any context in which adults interact with children and adolescents who live in vulnerable situations is an opportunity to convey key messages and to carry out specific actions to rebuild their self-perception, skills and self-worth. The migratory context and each one of their interactions with adults from different institutions can be seen as windows of opportunity to encourage the resilience process.

“[If we accept] simply having a few places to create words and social learning, we would be surprised to observe how a large number of hurt persons will be able to metamorphose their feelings and fulfil, in spite of it all, a human work.”⁵¹

Every interaction with migrant children and adolescents is an opportunity to plant an experience that will contrast with their previous ones.⁵² Emotional rescue messages can be conveyed throughout the migration process. Regardless of the adult, authority or institution, or member of a civil society organization who is in contact with the child

or adolescent – and although it may be brief – the interaction will potentially have a significant effect.⁵³ Bonding with another person puts unaccompanied migrant children and adolescents in a place of relevance and worth and humanizes them.

Below, you will find a description of several suggestions as to how the adults in contact with unaccompanied migrant children and adolescents can, throughout the migration process, establish an interaction that, albeit brief and on a single occasion, may help them initiate a resilience process. The first proposal involves “general adjustments” on which the adults can work to improve their interactions with migrant children and adolescents.

Subsequently, you will find a chart with suggestions for interactions that depend on the stage of the migration process. This chart can be used as a reference by the adults in contact with migrant children and adolescents, to quickly find the types of interventions they may require, depending on the migration process phase.

Following the indicative chart, you will find a list of suggested interactions with a description indicating the importance of the suggestion. The way in which the different actions can bring unaccompanied migrant children and adolescents to start the resilience process is also specified.

⁵⁰ In Gianino Gadea, L., *La resiliencia en niños...*, pg. 81

⁵¹ Cyrulnik, B., *Ugly Ducklings...*, pg. 27.

⁵² According to Guadalupe Barba (“Migración y resiliencia: los esfuerzos cotidianos de los jóvenes migrantes”, *Revista Iberoamericana sobre Niñez y Juventud en Lucha por sus Derechos* 6, 2012, pp. 204-212), developing resilience in migration processes provides the opportunity to build a significant life that gives them the opportunity to grow towards something new, a place where they acknowledge themselves in a situation of vulnerability but where the existent protection factors are also encouraged and related to the traits and resources all individuals possess.

⁵³ “One of the essential factors for a resilience process to take place is meeting a significant person. Sometimes it is just one, only one phrase that gives hope back to a child. One that was able to give body to the simple meaning: it is possible to succeed gracefully” (Cyrulnik, B., *Ibid.* pg. 214).

a

Adjust our own perception to foster resilience

Cyrulnik states: "... if temperament has been unsettled by a home in which the parents are unhappy, if a culture silences the victims and adds yet another aggression, and if society abandons the creatures it considers wasted, then those who have suffered trauma will know a fate without any hope".⁵⁴

Those who interact with migrant children and adolescents can find different ways of perceiving them:

- Myths about migrant children and adolescents installed in our culture.
- A posture of welfarism where they are perceived as subjects of protection (not as subjects of rights).
- Blaming migrant children and adolescents for being in that situation.
- Perceiving migrant children and adolescents beyond the situation they live in, as persons with resources, dreams and projects. In other words, as subjects of rights.

The lens of myths

As part of a specific culture and society, we involuntarily believe claims that are actually social constructions without any basis in reality, as if they were true. Those myths respond to our own stereotypes, fears or pains (among other psychological phenomena) imposed on others; they seek to minimize the pain or to "make up" an explanation when reality is too harsh to be accepted. Every person who is a member of society has – in one way or another – incorporated diverse myths, and migrant children and adolescents are no exception.

It is helpful to detect the myths circulating in our culture (and those we are part of) that may hinder the possibility of providing emotional rescue and fostering a resilience process among migrant children and adolescents; only when the myths are identified and contrasted with real information will it be possible to properly approach an unaccompanied migrant child or adolescent.

The left-hand column of the chart on the next page describes some of the myths circulating in our culture with regard to migrant children and adolescents; in the right-hand column, you will see the information that is not necessarily circulating in the cultural context, but is still the reality in which most of them live. To tear down the wrong ideas and stereotypes inside the myths and to fight them, we must incorporate our personal view of the information in the right-hand column when analyzing the reality of children and adolescents, instead of simply believing what the myths claim and maintain.

⁵⁴ Cyrulnik, B., *Ugly Ducklings...*, pg. 28.

Myths and realities about migrant children and adolescents

Myth	Reality
Migrant children and adolescents are lazy, and they migrate because they do not want to get a job or go to school in their place of origin.	Children and adolescents migrate because they want better opportunities to work and grow up, or because they cannot find any alternative in their place of origin. Most of them have been victims of rights violations and they have lacked proper care to fulfil their essential needs.
The children and adolescents who migrate are only those with few skills because they cannot manage to go to school and get a job in their place of origin. If they were skilled, they would have projects in their place of origin.	Several contexts expel children and adolescents from their place of origin (violence, persecution, abandonment, harassment, among others). Migration addresses the desire of having an opportunity and making their own life and/or their families' lives better; it does not have anything to do with being less skilled. In any case, it takes tremendous courage to go out and search for better opportunities.
Migrant children and adolescents do not know how to make decisions; that is why they take the risk.	They decide to migrate to have better opportunities. They suffer from a lack of opportunities and/or violence on a daily basis. In many cases it is a decision made by the family; in those cases, the children and adolescents' opinion is never taken into account.
They always come from irresponsible families that "allow them" to put themselves at risk in such a way, or from lazy families who want to be rescued by their daughters or sons.	Most of the times, the families decide to back the child's migration for the same reason already described (lack of opportunities, the desire to thrive). In the rest of the situations, the families are immersed in poverty, thus it is not at all easy for them to raise their children properly and foster their education. In several contexts, migrating is the only option to give their children a better future.
Migrant children and adolescents do not want to listen to the warnings from adults and choose to put themselves in danger. It is their own responsibility to expose themselves to any risk.	Children and adolescents are motivated by despair, the lack of alternatives and the desire for a better life. They grow up with the wish of reuniting with their families, in any way possible.

Myths and realities about migrant children and adolescents

Myth	Reality
<p>Migrant children and adolescents are “twisted” and dangerous. They have committed crimes and they are very likely to do it again. “They are criminals” and they cannot be sheltered or cared for. If they actually wanted to, they could seek other alternatives.</p>	<p>Most of them are looking for better opportunities in life. And, although due to the lack of alternatives they may have been recruited by gangs or networks, they are looking for options and are in need of protection.</p>
<p>Migrant children and adolescents perfectly understand what is happening; they are liars and they do not want to give out information on purpose.</p>	<p>They often do not give information due to their fear of potential retaliation, because they cannot trust other people, or they do not understand the administrative processes and alternatives they are offered.</p>
<p>If they are not asking for help, it is because they do not need it.</p>	<p>Frequently, it is not easy for them to admit their vulnerability or fragility. They use mechanisms to defend themselves from the fear they build around omnipotence (“I can do it all”, “I don’t need you”). This is nothing but another indicator of the vulnerable situation in which they live and their need to be protected both by adults and the State. They are in need of support and protection, although they may not ask for it.</p>
<p>All children and adolescents want to go to the United States.</p>	<p>In many cases, reaching the United States is the goal of migrant children and adolescents. However, Mexico has also become a destination country. Many children and adolescents are running away from violence and are simply looking for protection in Mexico, or in any other country that may provide it. We must perceive and understand the particular reality of every migrant child and adolescent.</p>

The view of unaccompanied migrant children and adolescents as subjects of protection

Migrant children and adolescents are often perceived as vulnerable or in need of protection. And yes, they do need to be protected because it is their right, but not from the welfarist approach. This view has nothing to do with the children and adolescents' rights approach and, therefore, it may lead to somewhat unhelpful or even detrimental actions because it confines the actions to a welfarist vision (giving them what I believe they "do not have"). This does not allow visualizing with objectivity the resources and strengths they already have.

This somewhat unhelpful view can be countered with specialized information that gives us the chance to see "the other side of the same coin". Some authors, like Llobet,⁵⁵ have identified development areas where there is evidence of risk or vulnerability, but also strategies to adapt. This means that there are indeed areas in which the rights of migrant children and adolescents are violated, but there are also areas where their skills have allowed them to survive many adversities.

The chart below is a guide for those who are in contact with migrant children and adolescents so they can refrain from perceiving the children or adolescents only from the perspective of what "they do not have" or from their "encumbrances" (central column), but from what that situation of vulnerability has provided them with in terms of acquired resources to survive (right-hand column). It is possible to see how the rights of the migrant children and adolescents have been violated, putting them in a situation of vulnerability (central column); but the same realities they have experienced offer them a scenario where – if they have an adult to interact with, someone who gives them the opportunity to identify that scenario – they will be able to recognize the resources they already have and initiate resilient processes (skills and situations in the right column).



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⁵⁵ Gianino Gadea, L., *La resiliencia en niños*, pg. 81

Areas of vulnerability and resilience strategies

Area	Vulnerability factor	Indications of resilience strategies
Social development	Exclusion and stereotypes used by society to build the image of migrant children and adolescents. Difficulties in building a social identity for themselves. Opportunism (to survive) and instability in their social relations.	Search for opportunities and desire for living a better life. Creation of bonds, mutual care, reciprocity.
Cognitive development	Effects of domestic and/or contextual violence, interruption of cognitive development; encumbrances due to substance abuse-related diseases; attention difficulties, concentration, temporality, memory. Problems due to poor schooling.	Diffuse attention with a visual-spatial amplitude that enables recording diverse stimuli simultaneously. They are “street smart” which helps them out in handling money, calculating, learning music and computing. Skills that are highly related to creativity.
Emotional development	Loss of a stable connection with the family and community.	Substitution by bonding with relevant groups or models, adaptive strategies.
	Absence of stable care and a protection-based relationship with an adult.	Autonomy and freedom developed in compensation
Physical development	Lack of shelter, exposure to tough weather, accidents and violence, there is no assurance they will be able to eat, untreated diseases, vulnerability to sexual aggression.	Ingenuity, opportunism, group protection.

The view that blames or holds migrant children and adolescents liable

It is a common psychological phenomenon that if something is painful it must be denied. Denial is a defense mechanism that “makes people believe” that a tremendously severe and harmful event is not happening, and that it is not their responsibility. In consequence, “guilt” is forced on the person who has the problem.

Interventions whose backdrop is a perception that blames or holds the children or adolescents accountable “for being migrants” are usually imprinted with ideas linked to the fact that they “violated the law” or “did something wrong by entering the country”, which easily cross-references to the logic of punishment or scolding. Messages based on these ideas take a severe toll on migrant children’s and adolescents’ emotional stability; hence, it is extremely important to avoid saying things such as:

- “You should learn to behave”
- “When you go back home you should be a good girl/boy”
- “Now you better stay in your country”
- “Don’t worry, you’re going to be O.K. now”
- Any phrase sustaining the idea that they “did it because they wanted to” and they “have to stop doing it” y entonces “tienen que dejar de hacerlo”

The view of migrant children and adolescents as holders of rights

From the standpoint of children and adolescents’ rights, adults do not play the role of “helping” those in difficult or irregular conditions. It should be recalled that migrant children and adolescents are holders of rights, which are inherent; therefore, the role of adults is to guard those rights. Their job is to provide the appropriate conditions so that migrant children and adolescents can have access to all inalienable rights.

Parting from a human rights approach means that actions adults consider as appropriate or necessary for the children and adolescents may affect them in a different and undesirable way. The actions taken must involve the restitution of their entire sphere of human rights. The decisions on what to do and how to do it are not arbitrary; they must abide by their rights and, in particular, the best interests of the child or adolescent.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ For more information on the principle of the best interest of the child and its practical applications refer to: Castañer, A. and M. Griesbach, *Guía práctica para la protección y restitución de derechos de niñas, niños y adolescentes: Procedimiento y Caja de herramientas*, Mexico: The United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and Sistema Nacional para el Desarrollo Integral de la Familia (DIF), 2016, in: <https://www.unicef.org/mexico/informes/guia-de-proteccion-especial-de-niñas-niños-y-adolescentes>

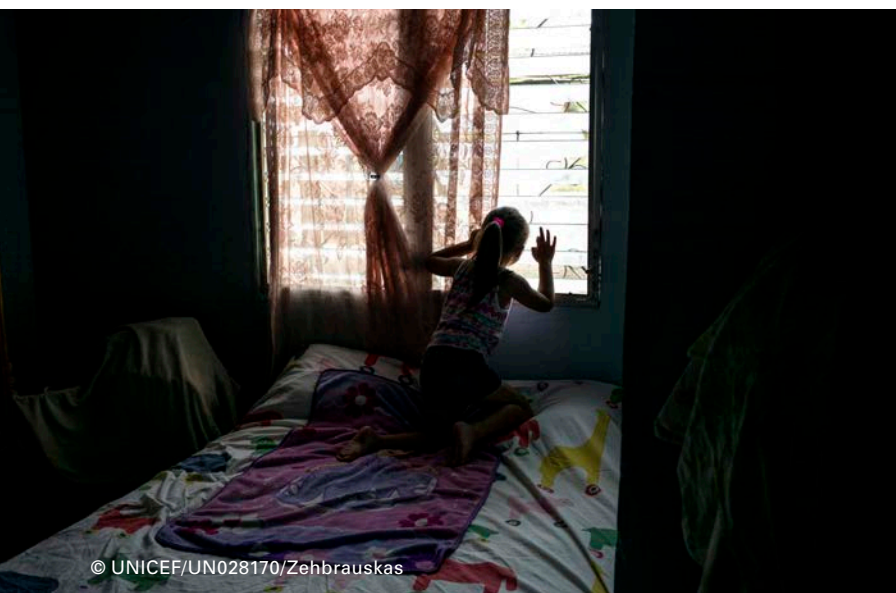
Conveying emotional rescue messages capable of promoting resilient processes is one of the actions aimed at unaccompanied migrant children and adolescents – among many other actions – to help them reconnect with their potential strengths, identity and plans.

The gateway towards a paradigm shift in this regard is to perceive migrant children and adolescents as persons with resources, great value, desires and capable of making their lives better (that is, as holders of rights, with personal drive and able to decide and wish for a better life). This also ties directly to the outcomes of the study carried out by Vega-Vázquez,⁵⁷ where it was determined that:

Children do not only consider they have both internal and external resources to address the difficulties that may arise along the road, but that they can use them depending on what they need. In addition, the authors highlight that children are generally capable of finding solutions to their problems, whether by using their internal resources or resorting to external ones -their parents, teachers or friends.

The Guatemala Protocol⁵⁸ is clear in expressing that:

Migrant children and adolescents are brave persons who also have a strong desire to change their own and their family's economic situation, and to access improved living conditions. They are persons who come from contexts of poverty, violence, rejection for having chosen a different sexual option, or who were not able to grow up with the support of their parents... The recommendation is that the work performed with children and adolescents take into account all of their strengths, their value as human beings entitled to search for better life options, and highly capable and tenacious; and not to perceive them as weak persons without any criteria to decide what to do and how to do it.



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⁵⁷ Quoted by Barba in: Guzmán-Carrillo, K et al. "Recursos psicológicos...", pg. 711.

⁵⁸ Ministry of Social Welfare of the Presidency of Guatemala, *Protocol for psychological and social care...*, pg. 91.

b

Tools to offer emotional rescue and foster resilience processes according to the stage of the migration process

This section summarizes the different moments during the migration process that migrant children and adolescents may experience. The section includes moments lived both by Mexicans and Central Americans. We recall that the objective of this document is not to devise procedures for the protection and integral restitution of rights, but to set out interactions that will foster resilience among all unaccompanied migrant children and adolescents in contact with adults throughout their migratory journey.

A general description of the moment and psychological and social reality they are likely to experience is shown below. This part of the document will serve as a guide; it is not comprehensive. In addition, this segment offers proposals for emotional rescue actions as well as each of their objectives. Subsequently, we provide a thorough description of those emotional rescue actions. At this point, the idea is that the adults in contact with unaccompanied migrant children and adolescents know what actions can be realized during their interaction to promote the resilience process. The emotional rescue actions are shown in the boxes under the title “What to do?” Each proposal contains a number corresponding to the specific tool described in the following section.

Any adult in contact with migrant children and adolescents can: detect the moment throughout the process when they establish contact, determine the proposed tool to foster resilience, and find what to do in the following section.

Moment

Unaccompanied migrant children and adolescents’ first contact

Unaccompanied migrant children and adolescents arrive at migration stations, shelters or are assisted by *Grupos Beta*⁵⁹ at a health centre or hospital, or at a prosecutor’s office. They often arrive with physical ailments: extreme fatigue, injuries, starvation, dehydration, hurt and beaten, confined and sleep-deprived, with respiratory difficulties, severe injuries to their feet, accidents, suffocation, among other things.

What to do?

Tool 1. Identify unmet basic needs

Tool 3. Establish yourself as a “warrantor of resilience”

Tool 4. Open up a space of trust to foster engagement

Tool 6. Channel them through appropriate listening spaces

Tool 18. Convey messages that value and appreciate their cultural identity

⁵⁹ Grupos Beta are part of the National Institute of Migration of Mexico and they essentially play an assistance and informative role.

Moment

Interception of children and adolescents

Unaccompanied children and adolescents are intercepted at any point of the domestic territory. If their legal right to stay cannot be proved, they are detained and moved to a migrant station where they are interviewed to verify their status: separated, accompanied or unaccompanied. To this reality, we must add the fear caused by the detention, the confusion (they generally do not know where they are) and uncertainty (what will happen next?).

What to do?

Tool 1. Identify unmet basic needs

Tool 3. Establish yourself as a “warrantor of resilience”

Tool 4. Open up a space of trust to foster engagement

Tool 6. Channel them through appropriate listening spaces

Tool 9. Confirm their motivation to travel as part of a lifelong and valuable project

Tool 11. Reinforce self-care actions

Tool 18. Convey messages that value and appreciate their cultural identity

Moment

Child Protection Authorities are notified

Child Protection Authorities carry out the interview at migratory stations or in DIF (National System for Integral Family Development of Mexico) shelters. Children and adolescents are often afraid and disoriented; they are afraid of giving information and/or afraid of detention and confinement; they are frustrated and angry because they were not able to reach their goal; they are extremely worried.

What to do?

Tool 1. Identify unmet basic needs

Tool 2. Offer the children and adolescents personal spaces or objects

Tool 3. Establish yourself as a “warrantor of resilience”

Tool 4. Open up a space of trust to foster engagement

Tool 5. Be tolerant of their narration of trauma

Tool 11. Reinforce self-care actions

Tool 18. Convey messages that value and appreciate their cultural identity



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Moment

Transfer

Unaccompanied migrant children and adolescents are transferred to a shelter. If assistance is required, they are moved to a hospital or clinic before that.

What to do?

Tool 2. Offer the children and adolescents personal spaces or objects

Tool 3. Establish yourself as a “warrantor of resilience”

Tool 4. Open up a space of trust to foster engagement

Tool 6. Channel them through appropriate listening spaces

Tool 9. Recognize their motivation to travel as part of a lifelong and valuable project

Tool 11. Reinforce self-care actions

Tool 13. Resume social bonds

Tool 15. Provide spaces for games and humour

Tool 18. Convey messages that value and appreciate their cultural identity

Moment

Children and adolescents in shelters

Unaccompanied migrant children and adolescents arrive at public or private social assistance centres.

What to do?

Tool 2. Offer the children and adolescents personal spaces or objects

Tool 3. Establish yourself as a “warrantor of resilience”

Tool 4. Open up a space of trust to foster engagement

Tool 5. Be tolerant of their narration of trauma

Tool 7. Ask them to tell stories

Tool 8. Offer them spaces to express themselves

Tool 9. Recognize their motivation to travel as part of a lifelong and valuable project

Tool 10. Add concrete projects (current ones)

Tool 11. Reinforce self-care actions

Tool 12. Encourage self-knowledge

Tool 13. Resume social bonds

Tool 14. Ask them for help and provide spaces where they can help others

Tool 15. Provide spaces for games and humour

Tool 16. Show them that they are capable of making decisions (projected into the future)

Tool 17. Academic and occupational guidance

Tool 18. Convey messages that value and appreciate their cultural identity



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Moment

Consular intervention

Migrant children and adolescents from Central America have to await a consular interview to file for their national identification card. If the consular personnel arrive soon, the necessary paperwork is started. If the consular personnel take time to interview the child or adolescent and to file the necessary paperwork, she or he will remain at the transit or migrants shelter. They normally feel desperate because they want to continue their journey and they are afraid of being locked in or sent back to their country of origin.

What to do?

- Tool 3.** Establish yourself as a “warrantor of resilience”
- Tool 4.** Open up a space of trust to foster engagement
- Tool 5.** Be tolerant of their narration of trauma
- Tool 9.** Recognize their motivation to travel as part of a lifelong and valuable project
- Tool 18.** Convey messages that value and appreciate their cultural identity

Moment

Intervention of DIF and COMAR personnel

Personnel from the DIF (the National Institute of Migration of Mexico (INM), the Child Protection Authorities or a shelter) will interview the child or adolescent to identify the need for international protection. On the other hand, personnel from the Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance (COMAR) will determine if the child or adolescent has to start the process to acquire a refugee status: children and adolescents recognized as refugees / children and adolescents not recognized as refugees. Children and adolescents become desperate to leave the migratory station or shelter to continue their journey or because they are afraid of having to go back to their country of origin.

What to do?

- Tool 3.** Establish yourself as a “warrantor of resilience”
- Tool 4.** Open up a space of trust to foster engagement
- Tool 5.** Be tolerant of their narration of trauma
- Tool 9.** Recognize their motivation to travel as part of a lifelong and valuable project
- Tool 18.** Convey messages that value and appreciate their cultural identity

Moment

Information about their assisted return (to Central America) or repatriation (to Mexico)

Throughout the process, children and adolescents are accompanied by an authority from each country at certain moments.

Migrant children and adolescents have an urgent need to know where they will arrive, what is going to happen, how long will the trip take, if they will see their family, what it is like in the shelter, etc.

What to do?

Tool 2. Offer the children and adolescents personal spaces or objects

Tool 3. Establish yourself as a “warrantor of resilience”

Tool 4. Open up a space of trust to foster engagement

Tool 5. Be tolerant of their narration of trauma

Tool 8. Offer them spaces to express themselves

Tool 9. Recognize their motivation to travel as part of a lifelong and valuable project

Tool 10. Add concrete projects (current ones)

Tool 11. Reinforce self-care actions

Tool 16. Show them that they are capable of making decisions (projected into the future)

Tool 18. Convey messages that value and appreciate their cultural identity

Once adults have identified the type of emotional rescue actions they can provide the children and adolescents, they can explore the following list which contains further details of how to understand these actions and their purpose, in other words, what the impact on the lives of migrant children and adolescents will be when the resilience process is fostered.

Moment

Reception at the place of origin

Children and adolescents are accommodated at a shelter while they await the arrival of the members of their family who will pick them up.

What to do?

Tool 2. Offer the children and adolescents personal spaces or objects

Tool 3. Establish yourself as a “warrantor of resilience”

Tool 4. Open up a space of trust to foster engagement

Tool 5. Be tolerant of their narration of trauma

Tool 7. Ask them to tell stories

Tool 8. Offer them spaces to express themselves

Tool 9. Recognize their motivation to travel as part of a lifelong and valuable project

Tool 10. Add concrete projects (current ones)

Tool 11. Reinforce self-care actions

Tool 12. Encourage self-knowledge

Tool 13. Resume social bonds

Tool 14. Ask them for help and provide spaces where they can help others

Tool 15. Provide spaces for games and humour

Tool 16. Show them that they are capable of making decisions (projected into the future)

Tool 17. Academic and occupational guidance

Tool 18. Convey messages that value and appreciate their cultural identity

C

Description and explanation of the different emotional rescue tools that foster resilience processes

After setting out the general guidelines of the potential emotional rescue actions at each moment of the migratory stage, the specific proposals for execution are described below.

If the adults in contact with children and adolescents, following the guidance in the above chart, have already been able to determine the migratory phase in which they are actually meeting the child or adolescent, and the tools to be used to foster the resilience process, they will find in this section a description of the tools, suggestions for application and useful emotional rescue messages to foster resilience. These messages or suggestions can be used at any time they deem appropriate. These are not messages or ideas from which an immediate response or reaction from the children or adolescents may be expected. The only point is to convey the message or to offer the interaction. Doing so will make them feel noticed, understood, with a place in the world, even though it is only transitory. Such moments are the ones that initiate resilience processes in migrant children and adolescents. Perhaps their positive impact is not really noticeable, but it is certain that instead of feeling violated, unworthy or insignificant, they will start to rebuild their self-perception as valuable persons, worthy of care and protection and with resources to keep on with their lives.

Tool

1

Identify unmet basic needs

2

Offer the children and adolescents personal spaces or objects

Interactions that foster resilience

Description	Specific suggestion
<p>If we go back to the metaphor of considering the resilience process as if we were building a house. First and foremost, the house needs foundations and a floor, that is, the basic needs have to be covered. It will be essential to restore the children’s and adolescents’ rights by providing them with food, shelter and rest, and thereby start building the emotional rescue that will foster resilience.</p> <p>These first basic actions can be exploited by including emotional rescue messages; by letting them know that being able to rest, eat and drink are rights they are entitled to as human beings, who deserve care and respect. Having access to food is a way of reconnecting with their own dignity and vitality. It means they are alive, and they are valuable.</p>	<p>“It is very important that you eat properly so you can remain just as strong.”</p> <p>“You managed to make it here. You’re going to need a lot of energy to decide where you want to get in your life.”</p> <p>“You need food to keep on making decisions about what you want and need in order to live a better life.”</p>
<p>Having room for their belongings can reinforce the identity of migrant children and adolescents.</p> <p>Their past experiences involve uncertainty about themselves and their future. Having their own space or objects is a touchstone so they can start to rebuild themselves. If their name can be written on that space, and somehow elevated, the worth of their roots and identity will be reinforced. During these activities, the adult must be explicit in telling them they can write their name or decide the way in which they wish to be called. It is not at all useful that the adult interacting with the child or adolescent proposes writing the name they know is on her/his birth certificate or official documents. Preferably, the child or adolescent should get in contact with the identity she/he wants. Hence it is key that she/he expresses the name she/he wants to be called by. In particular, in dealing with transgender children and adolescents, the name she or he chooses must be respected and used without criticism, question or recommendation.</p>	<p>They get to keep their lockers, drawers, boxes, backpacks or bags.</p> <p>Activities where they can paint, engrave or sew their name in their personal space or object.</p> <p>Objects or options so they can decorate their space or name the way they want.</p>

Interactions that foster resilience

Tool

Description

3

Establish yourself as a “warrantor of resilience”

Just as we explained when comparing the resilience process to building a house, all unaccompanied migrant children and adolescents, in order to initiate their resilience process, will need to interact with adults they consider “warrantors of resilience”, that is, persons who unconditionally offer respect and, just like mirrors, reinforce their capabilities and resources to initiate resilience processes.

In general terms, establishing oneself as a warrantor of resilience means the person will provide support. This does not entail uttering words of encouragement. It implies understanding the situation they are going through, especially their own devaluation and desperation, without losing sight of their resources and skills, their human rights and conditions, beyond the situation they are currently experiencing.

As warrantors of resilience, it is also important to actively convey emotional rescue messages. Adults usually assume that children and adolescents understand the function or role they play, especially if they are civil servants. Children’s and adolescents’ thinking process is constantly invaded by fears, fantasies and explanations that are not always accurate and objective. Since it is not possible to know how children and adolescents comprehend a situation, it becomes more useful to active and directly convey clear messages about the adult’s position and their role.

4

Open up a space of trust to foster engagement

Adults in contact with migrant children and adolescents may - at any time they consider appropriate - open up spaces where the migrants can express, in their own words, their opinion about what they want and how they want it, their criteria, opinions and beliefs about any subject. It is in these spaces that unaccompanied migrant children and adolescents can clarify their desires and needs in order to build or put their life plan in place.

Specific suggestion

Adults should convey emotional rescue messages whenever they deem appropriate. For instance: “you deserve respect, regardless of what you went through”, “you are not responsible for anything that has happened to you”, “I am not going to judge or reprimand you”, “if you need to talk, I know that everything you say is very important”.

Provide clear information to help them understand what is going on and what will happen immediately next.

Let them know they can ask whatever they want and answer their questions by sticking to reality and the truth (without promising them things that will not happen or creating false expectations, but do not depict fatalistic or hopeless scenarios either).

Show yourself open.



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“You have made brave decisions to have a better life.”

“It is very interesting to hear how you think and all the things you know.”

“I am going to listen and respect everything you say.”

Interactions that foster resilience

Tool

Description

5

Be tolerant of their narration of trauma

It is not useful to force unaccompanied migrant children and adolescents to share what has happened to them if they do not want to. Nevertheless, it is very important that, if they do want to share their experiences, they find someone who will listen. Sharing an experience by telling a story is only useful if it has a meaning for the person or for the process.⁶¹

Finding a person who can listen to what they have been through allows unaccompanied migrant children and adolescents to draw a distinction between their experience and their value as a person. What happened to them can be terrible, but it is not their essence. It is useful, when starting resilience processes, if the person they are interacting with conveys that she/he “can listen to the horror you experienced and connect with the person you are”. Without an adult to help them establish this difference, children and adolescents see their perceptions about the world and themselves completely disrupted, they construct themselves as having little value, being a failure, damaged, etc.

Listening spaces are not meant for investigating or judging whether what the unaccompanied migrant child or adolescent is saying is the truth or fantasy.⁶² The purpose of such spaces is not to “calm them down” neither is it to deny the pain and uncertainty in which they are living. Comments such as “don’t worry” or “don’t be sad” are not useful. The purpose is to take their feelings into consideration and to listen.

Specific suggestion

Do not interrupt the story.

Show interest through gestures of attention and nodding.

Do not allow interruptions while the child or adolescent is telling her or his story.

Do not show gestures of surprise or discomfort during the story.

Do not cross your arms or legs, do not put a table or a desk between the child or adolescent and the person who is talking to her/him.

Keep track of what the migrant child or adolescent is saying.



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⁶¹ Ministry of Social Welfare of the Presidency Guatemala, *Protocol for psychological and social care...*, pg. 53. The fact of sharing or not the testimony is not “revictimizing” per se. What does create new damage is when it does not make sense to render the testimony or when the person does not feel listened to or understood.

⁶² “When adults silence a wounded child by punishing her/him instead of providing comfort, by expressing disbelief or scepticism, a ‘deathly silence’ is created and it splits the child’s personality in two: one that is socially accepted and another that is secret, that escapes.” (Cyrułnik, B., *Ugly Ducklings...*, pg. 183).

Interactions that foster resilience

Tool

Description

6

Channel them through appropriate listening spaces

It is crucial not to silence the unaccompanied migrant children and adolescents when they are sharing their stories.⁶³ If they start to tell their story in an inappropriate place, it is important to send the explicit message of how important it is to listen to them, but in a better place. Propose when and where to keep talking and, of course, it must be followed through.

If the adult interacting with the child or adolescent who is starting to tell a story about her or his experiences does not have the listening skills to provide support, the child or adolescent must be channelled to another person and a more suitable place.

Generally speaking, the painful experiences, anguish and fear endured by children and adolescents prevent them from sharing information easily. They do not dare to open themselves up and share personal information that would make them look weak or vulnerable. This is the reason why it is even more important – whenever they start to talk about everything that has happened to them, what they think or how they feel – to have proper listening spaces.⁶⁴

In the middle of resilience processes, such listening spaces convey attention and show that everything the child or adolescent has to say is important. The listener “receives” information and also shares the emotions stemming from a story, building a space that the unaccompanied migrant child or adolescent will experience as being “in tune”, of “not being alone” and going through emotional situations that other people have been through and are able to understand, initiating a humanizing process.

Specific suggestion

"I want to listen to you, but I need to do it at a time when we can both be calm. There are too many people (or too much noise, depending on the situation) here. What if we go and talk at the... (place and time to continue)?"

"Everything you are telling me is very important, and I thank you for sharing this. I think it would be good if you shared it with... (the person in charge of social work, follow-up, psychology, etc. depending on the moment the child or adolescent is going through)."

63 "The resilient process allows wounded children to transform their wound into a 'self-organizer' mechanism, provided that there is a relationship around them that allows them to metamorphose. When children are by themselves, and they are silenced, they see their disgrace as a litany. That is when that moment becomes a prisoner of their memory, fascinated by the luminous precision of the traumatic recall. Nevertheless, from the moment they are granted a chance to speak, to write or a stage where they can express themselves, they learn to decentre from themselves to master the image they are trying to produce. Then, they work on modification by adapting their memories, making them interesting, joyful or beautiful to make them acceptable. This work of rebuilding their past, re-socializes them, especially if they were expelled from a group that could not stand to hear such horror.... Their pain will be transformed into a work of art." (Cyrulnik, B. *Ugly Ducklings...*, pg. 205).

64 "If their myth were not fabricated, these children would remain depersonalized by trauma. After being forced to a silent narration to acquire a personality, children are forced to socialize their narrations to prevent themselves from becoming delirious. However, the neighbour is not always capable of listening to the myth of origins. If the culture does not provide a possibility of expression around the wounded child, logical delirium and the move towards action will provide momentary appeasement: intellectual extremism, political criminality or psychopathic impulses are regularly expressed when these children are forced to remain prisoners of their past. Nevertheless, as soon as they are offered a chance of expression, we see how a marginalized person is born with great creative capacity. As a matter of fact, all creators are compulsorily marginalized, because they place on to culture something that was not present before they got there." (Ibid., pg. 144-145).

Interactions that foster resilience

Tool

Description

7

Ask them to tell stories

According to Cyrulnik,⁶⁵ stories are a representation of what is real, where the words and anecdotes to be told can be chosen, as well as what people have been able to build by themselves.

All these actions allow individuals to bear the representation of the wound.

By sharing an experience, people are able to identify adversity, to give it a name and thus feel they have more control over the experience. Giving a name to adversity and being able to define it is helpful because, very often, people are not sure what adversity is about; they have irrational ideas about it and have not thought about the causes and risks.

If children and adolescents include fantasies or information in the story they tell, and the adult they are interacting with deems it to be impossible or unreal, it is not helpful to correct them. The objective is not to “take a deposition” or “to clarify” what the children or adolescents went through; the point is that they have the chance to represent their pain through the words they decide to say and, in doing so, assume new control over their representation of their past.⁶⁶

Opening up spaces so they can share their stories gives them a chance to work on their own history, to modify the representation of the tragedy in order to bear the intimate narrations. “Sometimes the traumatic story can even be socially accepted when the wounded person has the talent to turn it into a diary, put on a theatrical representation or engage in a relationship, something that helps other people to find their story useful.”⁶⁷

Specific suggestion

Open up spaces so they can tell or write stories (any story, with any character).

Open up spaces so, if they so choose, they can tell or write down the story of what happened to them.⁶⁸

Open up spaces so they can write different chapters of their story and then organize them the way they want.

Encourage them to talk, suggesting that what they went through was something painful that will require a solution (not silence or denial).



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⁶⁵ According to Cyrulnik, children and adolescents “discover very soon that the simple fact of talking invites them to choose their words to describe the event. Then, as soon as they become capable of composing a story, they look for the images and emotions inside their memory so as to include them in their verbal representation.” Cyrulnik, B., *Ugly Ducklings...*, pg. 152.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, pg. 154.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, pg. 158.

⁶⁸ “We can ask ourselves why narrating aggression is so effective. As a matter of fact, the wounded feels rehabilitated when she or he looks at the person that is listening. When that person expresses gestures of discomfort, desperation or disbelief, the wound is transformed into trauma. But, when the emotion is shared, the victim is socialized again because the nonverbal meaning is conveyed as follows: ‘you retain my appreciation, my affection, and I am trying to understand what is happening to you’.” *Ibid.*, pg. 178.

Interactions that foster resilience

Tool

Description

8

Offer them spaces to express themselves

In addition to using words, it is necessary to encourage them to express what they have been through and how they feel through arts and games. Once they have made a drawing or played a game, it becomes possible to talk about it, if appropriate.

According to specialists, children and adolescents who have been through difficult situations are not able to construct things because they immediately destroy their work.⁶⁹ They need support from other people to feel they can construct anything. They feel relieved when they understand, in the eyes of other people, that it is still possible for others to believe in them.

Games, arts and fantasy can be useful for their representation of trauma. The idea is to “separate” it from themselves (what happened to me is awful, but it is not my essence) and “to do something” with it (showing myself that I have the skills required to face horror). Creating and repeating in the context of games and arts allows to start a resilience process.^{70, 71}

9

Acknowledge their motivation to travel as part of a lifelong and valuable project

The intention of protecting migrant children and adolescents is often translated into messages such as “you should know it was a bad decision”, “don’t do that again”, “it’s dangerous”. These types of messages may be well-intentioned, but they do not acknowledge the reasons why children and adolescents migrate. Their reasons are real and absolutely⁷² valid projects, authentic tokens of their self-protection resources and the desire to make their lives better. In order to foster a resilience process, children and adolescents need to hear these kinds of messages.

Beyond having made it or not, they must understand that they are capable of projecting and choosing their goals in life. Planning the trip and having completed a part thereof shows how capable they are of having projects and doing what is necessary to go after what they want. This is a resource they can use all over again as many times as they like and for whatever purpose they want to accomplish in life.

Specific suggestion

Open up spaces with activities of any kind that encourage them to create, build and assemble.

Suggest writing scripts and creating plays.

Practise role-play, make up different endings.

It is useful to provide scenarios or scripts with a clear structure. "Suppressed" spontaneity may flourish earlier in the process if there is a guide for acting.



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"The teenagers I have met decided to travel to search for better things in life: a job, family, peace, freedom. I believe for sure you are also looking for better things for your life."

"You decided/planned to start this trip, and that proves you want better things for your life."

"You decided/planned to start this trip, and that proves you know how to handle things to accomplish what you want."

⁶⁹ "Often, when they are drawing a picture or modelling with clay, they all of a sudden destroy their work and show themselves desperate. You get the impression that the behavioural argument is trying to say: "anything that comes from me is worthless. It doesn't deserve anybody looking at it because it is the testimony of my mediocrity". Cyrulnik, B., *Ugly Ducklings*, pg. 171.

⁷⁰ Cyrulnik explains it with clarity in the following paragraphs: "The repetitive aspect of artistic reproductions is like training, a sort of learning that allows integrating trauma, digesting misfortune and turning it into something familiar and even pleasant once it has been metamorphosed. Reproducing an event that, before becoming a fantasy, was nothing else than horror that could not be represented, turns into something beautiful, useful and interesting. Fantasy is the most valuable internal resource of resilience. Providing the child with a few pieces of paper, some pencils, a stand, ears and hands to clap, suffice to see the alchemy of fantasy in motion." *Ibid.*, pg. 139.

⁷¹ "A smile, a gesture or an imaginary presence are enough when you are completely alone. This is a situation in which you create intimate movies that you subsequently play deep down inside when reality becomes too cruel." *Ibid.*, pg. 174.

⁷² If we go back to the metaphor of the resilience process as building a house, the ground floor of the house is obtained by having concrete plans. Those who interact with migrant children and adolescents will deal with persons who had a very specific project and wanted to fulfil it to make their lives better: migrating to have access to better opportunities, to flee from violence or to reunite with your family requires tremendous courage. The emotional rescue to foster resilience will bear these scenarios in mind and "give back" such recognition to un-accompanied migrant children and adolescents as a lifelong and valuable project.

Interactions that foster resilience

Tool

Description

10

Add concrete projects (current ones)

It can be useful to offer children and adolescents concrete projects with a meaning, value, care or anything else they consider important. The purpose of connecting them with concrete projects is not to “keep them busy” – it is about opening spaces so their skills, likes, motivations can flourish by doing something that can be reinforced by adults. It is around the perception of these that their self-esteem is reconstructed. Unhelpful ideas such as “I didn’t make it”, “I can’t do anything right”, among others, are addressed.

These types of concrete activities are also useful because they provide information to unaccompanied migrant children and adolescents about their skills, so they can “go beyond themselves” and be part of constructive relations with other persons.⁷³ This counters the undivided attention they give to the failure of their project.

The key objective is to convey the idea that failing in one specific project does not make them less skilled, less capable or less of a person with ideas and desires. The fact that a project did not work out does not mean they are less valuable or that they have lost the skills they had.

11

Reinforce self-care actions

Allowing them any action involving personal care and hygiene is important so they can rebuild self-care and self-esteem (self-love).

As regards hygiene and personal care, it is important that unaccompanied migrant children and adolescents feel free to do it the way they please. Interactions where they are criticized, corrected or bullied because of the way they decide to groom themselves are extremely counterproductive. This is especially important when dealing with LGBTTI children and adolescents.⁷⁴ Their freedom to decide on their personal appearance must be explained frankly and with respect.

Being able to overcome adversity does not mean you are going to do it at your own expense (or anybody else’s).

Specific suggestion

They should be given responsibility for keeping a plant alive or taking care of an animal, assisting adults or their peers in a particular task while they are at the shelter.

Adults will emphasize any skills developed by the children and adolescents in those tasks.



Spaces and objects for personal hygiene.

Small mirrors, combs, creams, perfumes they can keep.

Encourage self-respect.

Actively teach them to take care of themselves.

⁷³ Vanistendael, S. and J. Lecomte, *La felicidad...*, pg. 176

⁷⁴ This acronym includes the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transvestite, transsexual and intersexual community.

Interactions that foster resilience

Tool

Description

12

Encourage self-knowledge

They should have access to interactions and experiences that provide improved knowledge of themselves (strengths and weaknesses) and also stimulate and boost their potential.

Life skills and resources to survive. Required skills to cope with everyday challenges in their personal, family, social lives and spare time. Reinforce their positive self-perception.

Provide spaces where they can explore and consolidate their own values: Who am I? What do I want? Where am I heading? Peer interaction allows them to find answers to these questions.

Provide spaces that give meaning to their own experiences (a safe and trustworthy space, where there is a collaboration between peers).

13

Resume social bonds

Anything capable of re-establishing the damaged child's or adolescent's social connection and participation⁷⁵ in culture and re-organizing her or his self-image (I'm bad, I'm incompetent). This will counter what Cyrulnik describes as a lack of drive to play games, loss of vitality, finding it hard to enjoy the good things in life and withdrawing from relationships as a consequence of experiencing distressing situations.⁷⁶

It may be helpful to suggest sticking to a daily routine in order for children and adolescents to reconnect with having a "regular daily routine", and then move on towards the social aspect.

Nurture their self-esteem and positive emotions.⁷⁷

Specific suggestion

Any activity that allows them to raise awareness of their personal skills: capabilities, aptitudes, abilities, skills, self-image, self-esteem, lifestyle, education and work-related experiences, interests, motivation, values.

Who am I? What do I want?

Strengthen them by restoring their image as brave people who have experienced a difficult situation in their lives.

Show children and adolescents that they have the skills they need to remain alert and to be self-sufficient.

Highlight the positive in their tendency to search for new experiences.

Draw, play, laugh, make other people laugh, any recreational activity involving other people.

Reinforce any cultural activity (music, regional food, dances).

Share news about the reality of their countries of origin.⁷⁸

Highlight the skills they possess to draw other people's positive attention.

Foster reassurance – Who can they count on for comfort and protection?



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⁷⁵ “So they no longer feel bad persons. In order to become that person through whom they can attain happiness, it is necessary to take part in culture, to be committed to culture, to become an actor and stop being just a spectator”. Cyrulnik, B., *Ugly Ducklings.*, pg. 215.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, pg. 171.

⁷⁷ According to expert reports, even in calamitous situations, a person can experience positive emotions. Experiencing positive affective states has the following effects: more indulgent judgment towards others and towards yourself, coding and decoding positive memories in a better way, more flexible and creative Thinking. It encourages broader behavioural repertoires, reduces doubt and fosters altruistic behaviours. (Vega-Vázquez, M. et al., *Recursos psicológicos...*, pg.34).

⁷⁸ Active reappraisal of roots. “When children are able to reach a complete level of development in their environment, resilience processes take place without any difficulties... on the contrary, when they are uprooted and separated from their environment, they do not even have the possibility of inventing a neo-culture.” (Cyrulnik, B., *Ugly Ducklings.*, pg. 140).

Interactions that foster resilience

Tool

Description

14

Ask them for help and provide spaces where they can help others

Since they have experienced horror, they cannot help but building a distorted self-perception; asking them for help can build their self-esteem through realizing their effectiveness. Along with listening, it lets them know that it is still possible for people to believe in them.

Different specialists agree that it is not helpful “to give them something”, but to open up spaces so they can be the ones who give.⁷⁹ The injured self-worth, the product of the damage they have suffered, is repaired by activating these processes. It also allows them to leave behind the guilt they commonly feel, as well as the role of victim, through actions that give them the opportunity “to be strong children and adolescents, who can do it”.⁸⁰ When they are capable of giving something real they manage to socialize.

Encourage reciprocity, in other words, encourage the spirit of collaboration by appreciating shared activities as well as contributions from their peers.

15

Provide spaces for games and humour

Humour and playing games are key forces in building resilience in many situations.⁸¹ By playing games, repeating their experiences over and over to find some sense in them, children and adolescents are able to take in painful situations. Humour and playing games are two fundamental elements in building a “re-reading” of life beyond the pain suffered, and to start resilience processes.

The spaces offered for a sense of humour to flourish must be carefully planned. It is important that whatever migrant children and adolescents build actually comes from themselves. Otherwise, they may see it as a way to make fun of them.

Playing games and humour are useful tools that give children and adolescents an optimistic view of their experiences.

Specific suggestion

Any action or activity in which they are asked to do something (anything).

They must be thanked for their actions, but it is not helpful to congratulate children and adolescents excessively after they have done something.

The goal is simply to give them the chance to do it, and thus perceive themselves as capable of doing something useful and helping out.



Spaces to design and to create cartoons with characters they met during their trip, or comics with stories they want to tell, where there are heroes and antiheroes.

Notebooks where they can write down and retain their jokes, along with those written by other children and adolescents.

Spaces to read those cartoons.



79 "Feeling binding guilt explains a specific affective strategy. They feel upset by any gift, and they get anxious because they feel they do not deserve it. Nothing should be gifted to guilty persons; it is not moral to reward them. These children will only feel compensated when they are the ones who give." (Cyrulnik, B, *Ugly Ducklings.*, pg. 147).

80 "Giving something to a child that is not loved, and hence to a deprived child, means overwhelming her/him even further. Allowing children to respond by giving something will restore the ties of equality and, especially, lead towards socialization by allowing children to define themselves: I am strong and generous because I am the one who is giving a gift." (Ibid., pg. 151).

81 According to studies, humour protects individuals from a type of suffering that is too heavy to bear, and also allows them to release energies, giving them another perspective about reality (Vanistendael, S. and J. Lecomte, *La felicidad.*, pg. 176).

Interactions that foster resilience

Tool

Description

16

Show them that they are capable of making decisions (projected into the future)

Open up spaces to analyse the lessons learned on the trip and to build improved strengths for their future.

Children and adolescents analyse the things they feel are useful (the things they would keep, what they would not do again). They assess the results in order to benefit from the experiences. What did they learn and what else can be learned? What were the successes and what were the failures? (All experiences have both). Successes can be used in the next adverse experience with improved confidence, and failures can be analysed to decide how to correct them.

The point is to offer them a space where they receive information that leads them to make new decisions, but now with more tools and experience. In those spaces where experiences can be analysed, new alternatives can also be perceived and built, and new lessons can be added.

The point is not to criticize the children and adolescents nor lecture them about the risks and dangers (this information will not be useful for them; they will not take it in); they should not be discouraged from travelling again either. The goal is to acknowledge them as persons capable of deciding about their lives every time they want (they have already proved it by getting to that point). Starting from that point, you can show them how the skills they have equip them to maintain a significant life (according to their own values and desires).

Encouragement and open spaces for different alternatives also let them build the idea of transition, of transformation. "This experience of yours transformed you; you get to decide where you are heading". Just as they made a great effort to get here, they can do it to accomplish anything else in life. They are very strong persons, very brave, they know how to choose, and they know how to say no.

Enable spaces where they are encouraged to move forward towards achieving their goals.

Foster ingenuity, the ability to identify the most important resources (including human resources) to sort out any difficulty, whether it is big or small, in any situation.

Specific suggestion

Give advice that delivers concrete information about alternatives and options.

Provide information about their immediate future; identify and share what they think their options are in different scenarios: if they go back to their communities or if they give the trip another try.

Inform them about their rights.

Reinforce messages that help reduce the sense of guilt: "what happened to you is not your fault", "it's not your fault that you didn't make it to where you were going". Connect them with strengths and desires: "What brings you here?... This is part of you, and you will always be able to use it again, for whatever you want."

Encourage them to keep on building chapters of their story: "This is what already happened, this is what is next," "What do you want to do in the future?" "What are your dreams?"

Help them plan how they are going to face adversity.

Practise an answer, talk about problems or show what will be done.

Interactions that foster resilience

Tool

Description

17

Academic and occupational guidance

Providing children and adolescents with education and occupational alternatives is part of the useful information adults can give. Make open spaces available so they can analyse their interests (studies, activities, occupation, etc.).

This information can be conveyed not only as an alternative for the future, but also for the present. For instance, while at the shelters, they can be offered remedial education or workshops on different activities and tasks.

18

Convey messages that value and appreciate their cultural identity

It is extremely important to take the principle of interculturality into account. A fairly large number of migrant children and adolescents belong to indigenous cultures; hence, it is likely they do not relate to Spanish and far less to colloquial Mexican words. At all times, it is vital that Spanish is spoken in the most neutral way possible, without using technical or colloquial words. In addition, attention must be paid to the right time to include expressions from the migrant child or adolescent's original culture. Conveying these types of message reinforces their sense of trust and acceptance, as well as valuing their origin and conditions.

It may be useful to reinforce certain everyday aspects that migrant children and adolescents may appreciate; for instance, their own regional food, which is generally associated with identity and protection.

It is also important to understand colloquial expressions used by children and adolescents to express their emotions, such as: "¡qué chivo!" (in El Salvador) means something is great or highly enjoyable; "puchica" or "puchis" (in Guatemala) is an expression of surprise or anger; "¡qué pinta!" (in Honduras) means "how pretty!".

Specific suggestion

Provide tools that fully develop their skills so they can live with dignity and improve their quality of life any way they want.

Reinforce the positive aspects of their original culture with positive comments about their food, for instance:

- “I’m sure you miss tortillas/the “paches” from “Guate”, they’re delicious!” (this can be said to children and adolescents from Guatemala).
- “When I visited your country, I ate “pupusas” and I loved them. I can’t wait to have them again” (this can be said to children and adolescents from El Salvador).
- “I love your country’s “baleadas”. What’s your favourite food?” (this can be said to children and adolescents from Honduras).



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Emotional rescue tools that foster resilience at critical times

Throughout the migration process – at any time and in front of any adult – unaccompanied migrant children and adolescents may reveal information about experiences of violence, or they might suffer a crisis for various reasons. In these specific situations, special tools are required to contain and provide concrete information. A few scenarios are mentioned below.

The child or adolescent reveals sexual assault or physical violence

They suffered traumatic experiences such as human trafficking, kidnapping, confinement, etc.

They witnessed a family member's death

They get out of control when talking to their family over the phone

They find themselves in a situation of statelessness

⁵² It is important to refrain from talking about punishing the person who hurt or assaulted the children or adolescents, or about sending the perpetrator to jail; meaning that should not be their reason to talk about it or file a complaint. In most cases, the perpetrator is someone significant to them, and the idea of causing her/him any harm makes them feel guilty, causes them pain and there usually is a tendency to retract.

Emotional rescue scenarios

Description	Useful tools
<p>Sexual assault generally takes place under conditions that leave children and adolescents trapped in silence and secrecy. If a child or adolescent dares to disclose a situation of sexual assault, it is very important to convey messages that will reduce, or eliminate and contain guilt.</p> <p>It is not helpful to ask questions or request details about what happened. Support means listening if the child or adolescent needs to tell her/his story about what happened; it does not mean interrogating her/him about it. After listening to the telling of the events, the case will have to be managed.</p>	<p>“You are very brave to tell me this.”</p> <p>“When something that bothers or hurts a child happens, it is never her or his fault.”</p> <p>“It is important that the persons who can help prevent it from happening again⁵² know about what has been done to you. I can take you to them.”</p>
<p>Children and adolescents are deeply affected by terror and confusion, which gives them huge difficulties in trusting other people. Under these conditions (which also apply to children and adolescents who have survived sexual violence or any other type of violence) it is not helpful to approach them with questions or force them to accept the adult’s closeness.</p>	<p>It is important for the adult to remain close, without trying to force the approach. It is useful and helpful when adults convey soothing messages (such as describing their role or telling them about the role they play; or by carrying out any activity near them) and just wait. What is really helpful is when the child or adolescent initiates the approach when she or he feels able to do so, which generally happens when she/he is sure there will be no assault.</p>
<p>In dealing with highly traumatic situations, children and adolescents may need to tell what happened over and over again or, on the contrary, remain silent. If either of the two scenarios are faced, the task is to contain both the narration and the emotions that will surface.</p> <p>Once they have told their story, children and adolescents will have to be referred to special care (whether medical, psychological or psychiatric).</p>	<p>It is important that adults remain present and near the children and adolescents, and stay calm in the face of emerging emotions. They do not necessarily need to say something; the main goal must be to keep them company. Unless they initiate the action, it is not appropriate to touch or hug them or insist in that they should not cry.</p>
<p>It is highly likely that if the children or adolescents have not been in contact with their families, listening to an adult over the phone will fill them with anguish and they will need to cry.</p> <p>Crying is a way of processing emotions and it is desirable if it happens.</p>	<p>Stay close to the child or adolescent, remain calm if she/he is sad or cries.</p> <p>Convey a message that acknowledges her/his emotions such as “it made you sad to listen to”</p>
<p>Once the factors linking identity to resilience processes are fully developed, it is necessary to remember that the children’s and adolescents’ situation (legal or administrative) cannot be linked to their (human) “being”.</p>	<p>It is not advisable to tell a child or adolescent “you are stateless”. The recommendation is simply to say “we are looking into your documents” and call her or him by the name they have asked to be called by.</p>



Actions that are
not so helpful

What do migrant children and adolescents **NOT** need to start a resilience process?

Give them advice about what they should do in the future or judge their decisions

The resilience process starts with the intervention of an adult who helps children and adolescents to perceive themselves as valuable, so they can rebuild their identity and self-esteem. In other words, adults provide the elements to trigger the metamorphosis process.

Offering children and adolescents interactions so they can start their resilience process is not the same as trying to convince them what they should do to protect themselves. As adults who are in contact with migrant children and adolescents, it is possible to experience fear and frustration at first-hand at not being able to “make them see” the dangers or options. These feelings lead to giving them advice that is not relevant to their reality at all. On the contrary, they experience the adult’s advice as a reproach, rebuke or disqualification, or it creates in them a great deal of guilt. Phrases like “didn’t you feel guilty for leaving your family?” are highly damaging.

Unaccompanied migrant children and adolescents need to establish a bond with an

adult who trusts them and their capacities: an adult who calls them by a name, who perceives them as somebody who deserves dignified and respectful treatment. Only if something like this is experienced in their interactions with adults will they be able to restore contact with that part of them they need to find and rescue. Then they will start to rebuild themselves from there.

When they are capable of seeing themselves as dignified, valuable and resourceful, they will be ready to receive information, they will have access to protection in the best way possible, rebuilding their dreams and future plans, and finding alternative ways of doing it.

Try to prevent emotions from impacting children’s and adolescents’ behaviour

When the current situation is difficult and adults have to deal with children and adolescents in distress or who prove to be challenging, the natural tendency is to try to “relieve” the tension of the moment. We often say: “don’t cry”, “don’t be sad”, “calm down”, when the truth is that if they are feeling such emotions, they cannot really hold them down. What they need – instead of adults asking them to stop feeling that way – is to deal with, express and process what is going on in the company of an adult who will provide support and help them understand that it is “O.K.” to express their emotions, showing a calm demeanour; it is the expected reaction for any human being who has suffered a distressing experience.

Lie to them in an attempt of “preventing them from suffering”

We often try to “isolate” children and adolescents from problems or “manufacture” a problem-free reality, although that reality is exactly what they are currently going through. At other times, they are falsely promised or provided incomplete information so they “won’t get worried quite yet” or because it is going to be too sad for them to hear the news, because it is not what they are expecting.

Such strategies momentarily relieve the tension of the adult who is interacting with the child or adolescent, but it is not helpful for her or him from any standpoint whatsoever. All children and adolescents have the right to understand the reality they are living in, to participate and express their opinion about what they want and how they want it, this is why they must be provided with information at the right time and in a way they can understand.



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The despair, concern and frustration of unaccompanied migrant children and adolescents will be contained if they clearly understand the steps to be followed throughout the process (where they are, where they will go, what comes next, why these steps are necessary, what are the implications of those steps, etc.). It is not useful to provide abstract and complex explanations about the administrative and legal procedures because doing so would only increase their distress; however, the next steps in the process should certainly be described in a concrete way.

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