

Advancements in Children and Adolescent Mental Health: Strengthening Policies and Building Professional Capacities



Early years and adolescence – a time of rapid changes

THE ADOLESCENT BRAIN A SECOND WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY

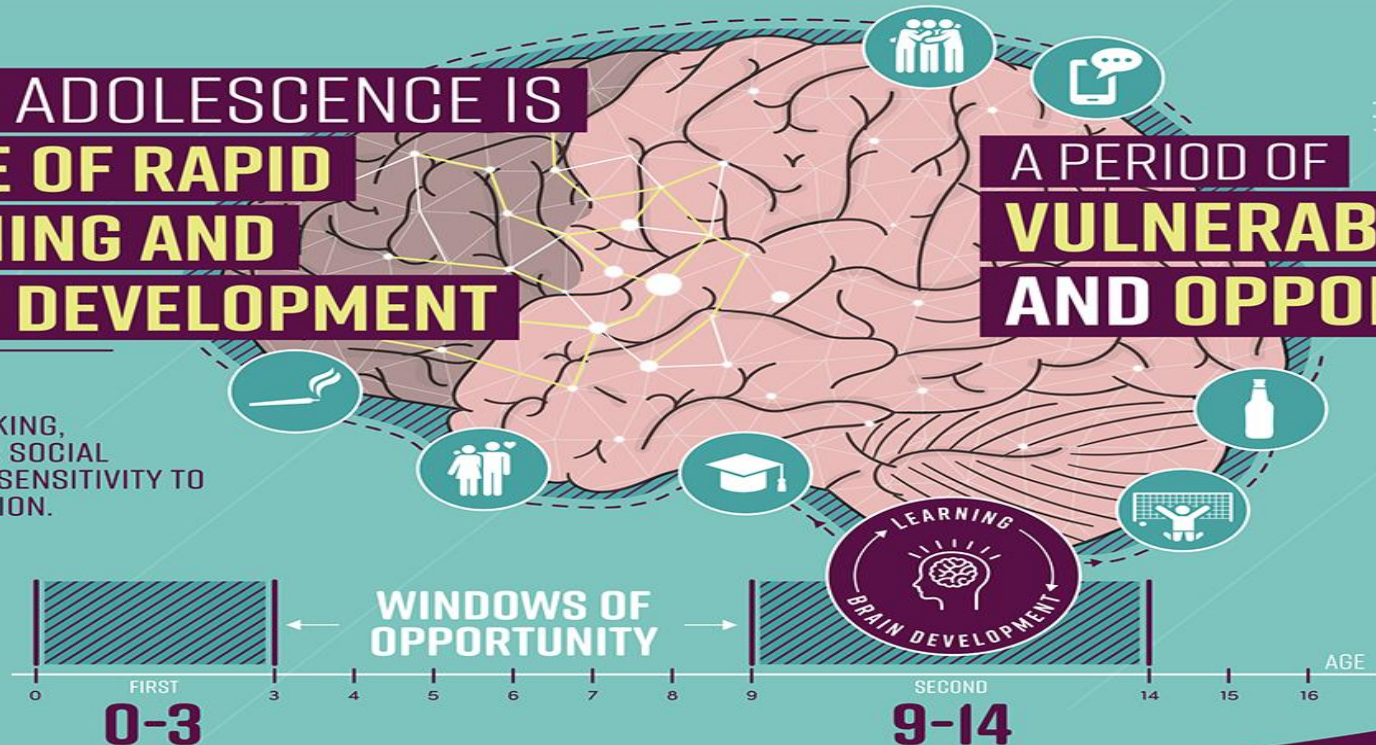
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EARLY ADOLESCENCE IS
**A TIME OF RAPID
LEARNING AND
BRAIN DEVELOPMENT**

THESE INCLUDE
INCREASES IN
SENSATION-SEEKING,
MOTIVATION FOR SOCIAL
RELATIONS AND SENSITIVITY TO
SOCIAL EVALUATION.

A PERIOD OF
**VULNERABILITY
AND OPPORTUNITY**

PUBERTY INITIATES INTENSE
LEARNING & BRAIN
DEVELOPMENT, WHICH LEAD TO
STRUCTURAL REMODELING AND
NEURAL RE-CONFIGURATION OF
KEY BRAIN SYSTEMS. IT'S A
CRUCIAL TIME TO INVEST IN
ADOLESCENTS.

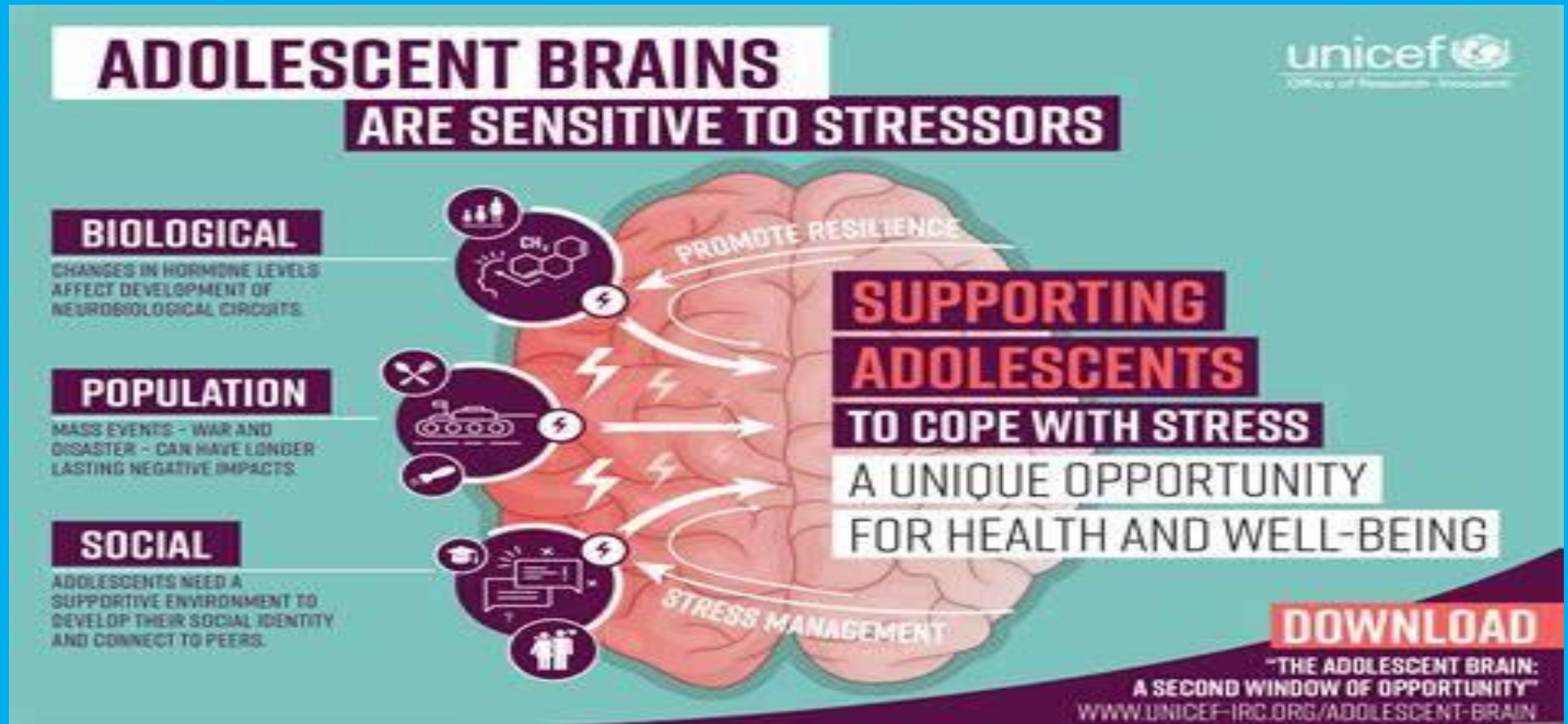


DOWNLOAD

"THE ADOLESCENT BRAIN:
A SECOND WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY"

WWW.UNICEF-IRC.ORG/ADOLESCENT-BRAIN

Sensitive to stressors

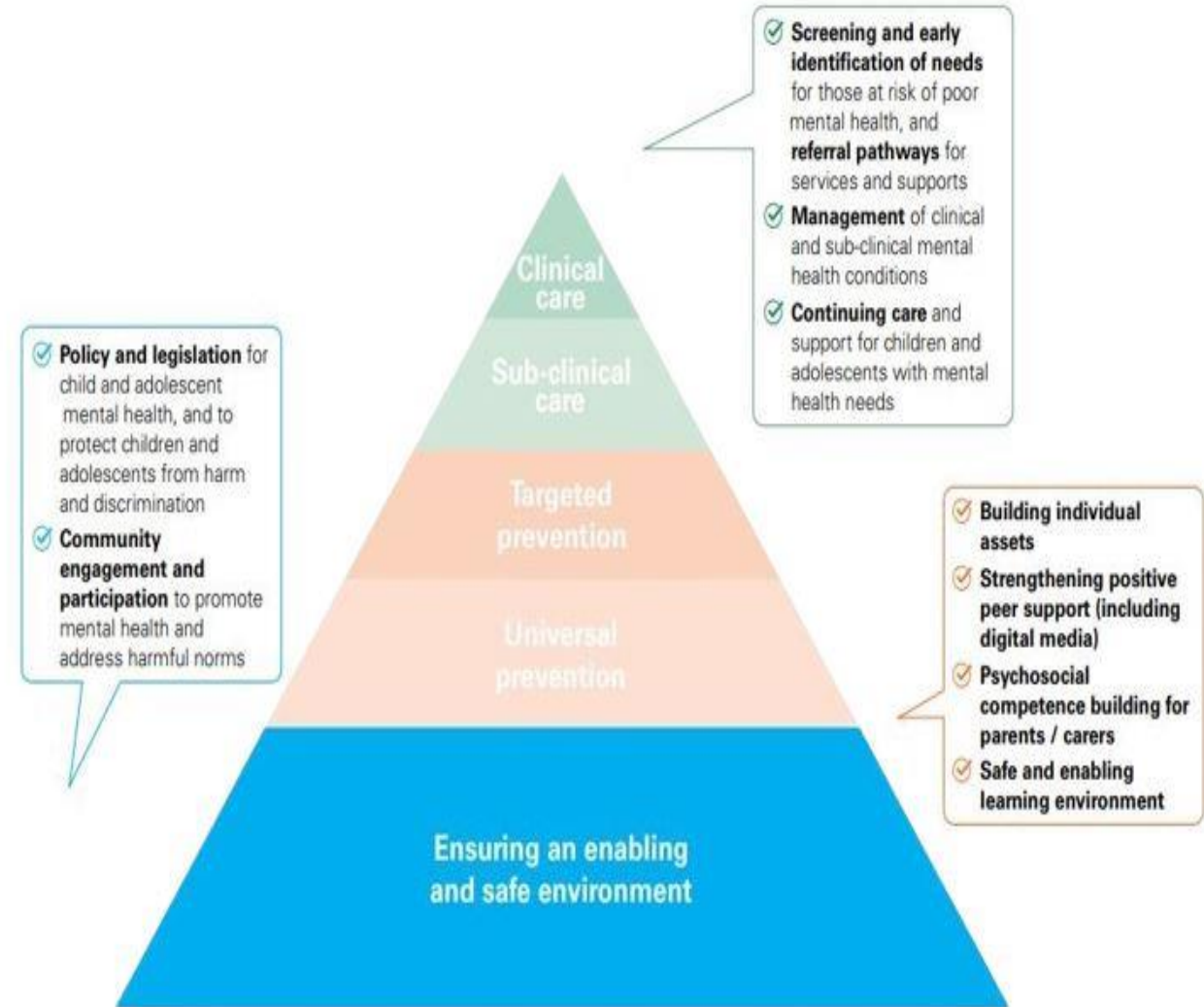


The MHPSS Programme

The UNICEF Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) Programme aims to ensure:

- Non-stigmatizing mental health service delivery
- Accessible and available mental health services
- High-quality mental health support
- Removal of stigma associated with mental health issues
- Encouragement for adolescents and young people to understand that mental health concerns are common and treatable
- Awareness among youth about where to seek help for mental health concerns

[Campaign: How are you? Really](#)



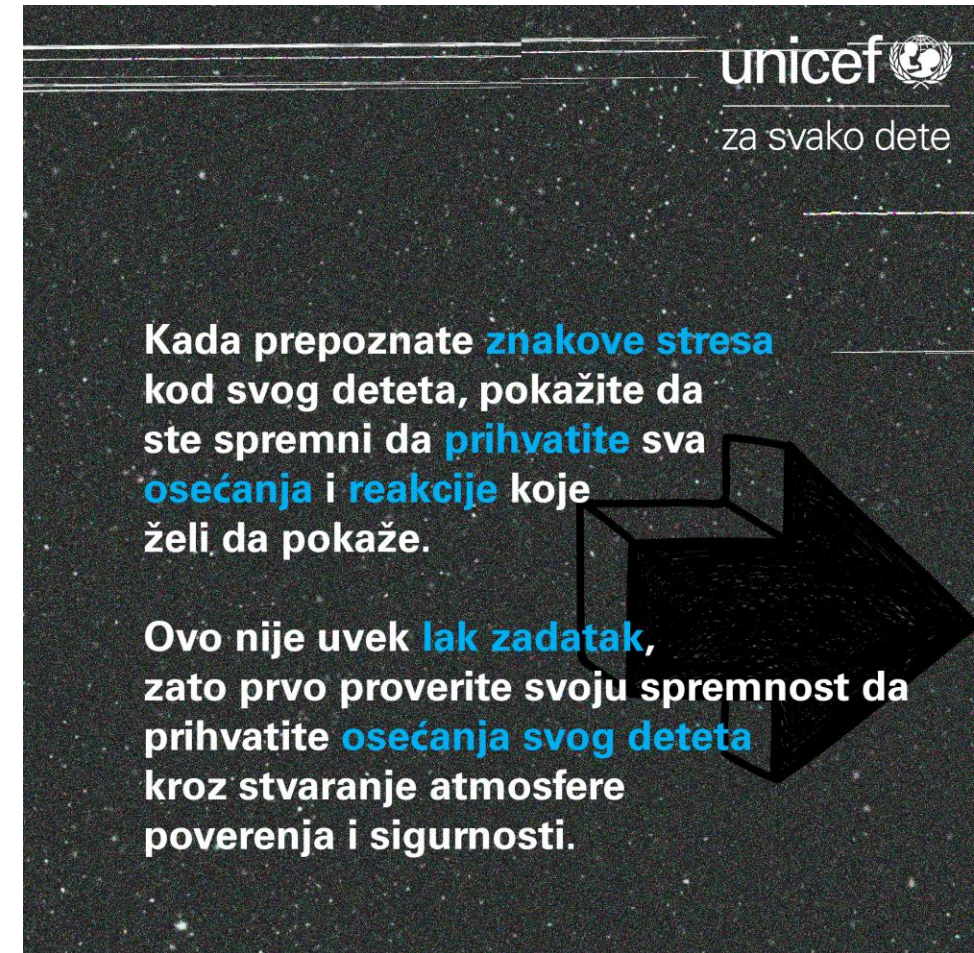
Mental health needs for children and adolescents in Serbia

- Approx. **16% of adolescents in Serbia are vulnerable in terms of mental health**, while 18% experienced mental health deterioration during COVID-19. *(UNICEF Serbia. (2019). Situation Analysis of Children and Adolescents in Serbia)*
- **Adolescent brain** - <https://youtu.be/-1FRco3Bjyk>
- Among youth aged 18 to 25, the most prevalent current disorders are **anxiety disorders (26.2%), mood disorders (5.7%), and substance use disorders (19.1%)**. *(Institute of Mental Health)*
- **COVID-19 pandemic** and a **mass shooting in a school** in May 2023 claiming the lives of 11 children and 7 youth, leading to a rise in **anxiety, mood disorders, and substance use**.
- **Stigma** : 47% of young people believe that young people do not ask for help because it is a sign of weakness *(Unicef U report)*
- **Limited services and intersectoral collaboration**: Only 47 child and adolescent psychiatrists in Serbia *(UNICEF mapping)*. Only 123 psychologists are available in primary health care - less than two psychologists for every 100,000 inhabitants. Additionally, 60% of psychologists assess that they do not have all the necessary conditions to provide the service *(Ministry of health Report)*
- **Limited awareness on services**: Only 12 percent of young people are aware about counselling services in their communities *(National Youth Council of Serbia – Alternative report on the position and needs of youth)*



Main Achievements - crises response

- Established coordination mechanism at national level - a **Government's Working Group for Youth Mental Health and Security**
- Developed a **policy brief to reduce the age of criminal responsibility from 14 to 12 age** with a comparative analysis of European countries (CP&CRM)
- **8 types of psychoeducational material for parents and children** developed - Ministry of Health and Ministry of Education and distributed to all affected schools, wider public, media and youth (EDU, Health, COMMS)
- **Supported provision of direct support to children, families and professionals affected by tragedy** – Institute of Mental Health and Ministry of Education (Health, EDU and CP)
- Mobilized to provide **support and guidance to the media**, ensuring responsible reporting and addressing the psychosocial needs of affected children and communities (COMMS)
- Organized the **webinars in cooperation with Ministry of Education and Faculty of Philosophy** - 2815 professionals from education took part, 976 principals, 1,728 from expert service dedicated to pupils and 111 educational advisors (EDU)
- **Mobilized more than 150.000 dollars** (Private Sector Fundraising) during this period for direct support within svejeok platform (PSFR)





Improving enabling environment

- A Memorandum of Understanding and the accompanying Action Plan were signed between six ministries.
- The Ministry of Health then formed an MHPSS Working Group with 6 ministries and UNICEF
- Communication from the EU Commission on Mental Health

Community

- Support, influence, promote a more systemic integration of MHPSS services in all social services at local level:
- the Youth Minimum Service Package (YMSP) - which has shown a reduction in anxiety and depression rates and an increase in the functionality of the youth participating in the program.
- Telehealth services
- Youth centers as community based serves including peer to peer support
- Crisis response

Improved mental health of caregiver

- Support for parents through the Care for Caregivers model connection with ECD

Wellbeing of child and adolescent

- Development of self-help skills and mental health literacy through SBC activities and the Svejeok website reaching more than 300.000visitors.
- UNICEF raised public awareness through the three campaigns reaching over 3 million people and engaging over 15,000 youth in creating campaign content.

UNICEF and partners provided support to over 4,000 young people out of 1 150 000 total number of youth and trained over 210 health, education, social services frontline workers out of approx, 6,000 employed.

Advancing the MHPSS agenda in Serbia

unicef 
for every child



Three innovative models

**The Youth MHPSS
Minimum Service
Package (YMSP)**

MHPSS telehealth
service

Community-based
programs with youth
organizations,
[I Support My Friends |
UNICEF](#)

Development of the YMSP Model



The Youth MHPSS Minimum Service Package (YMSP)

The Youth MHPSS Minimum Service Package (YMSP) is an innovative model – a set of intersectoral interventions for MHPSS professionals from three sectors (education, social and health sector) aimed at providing direct MHPSS support to children and youth at the local level.

The set of intersectoral services is grouped into 3 core components:

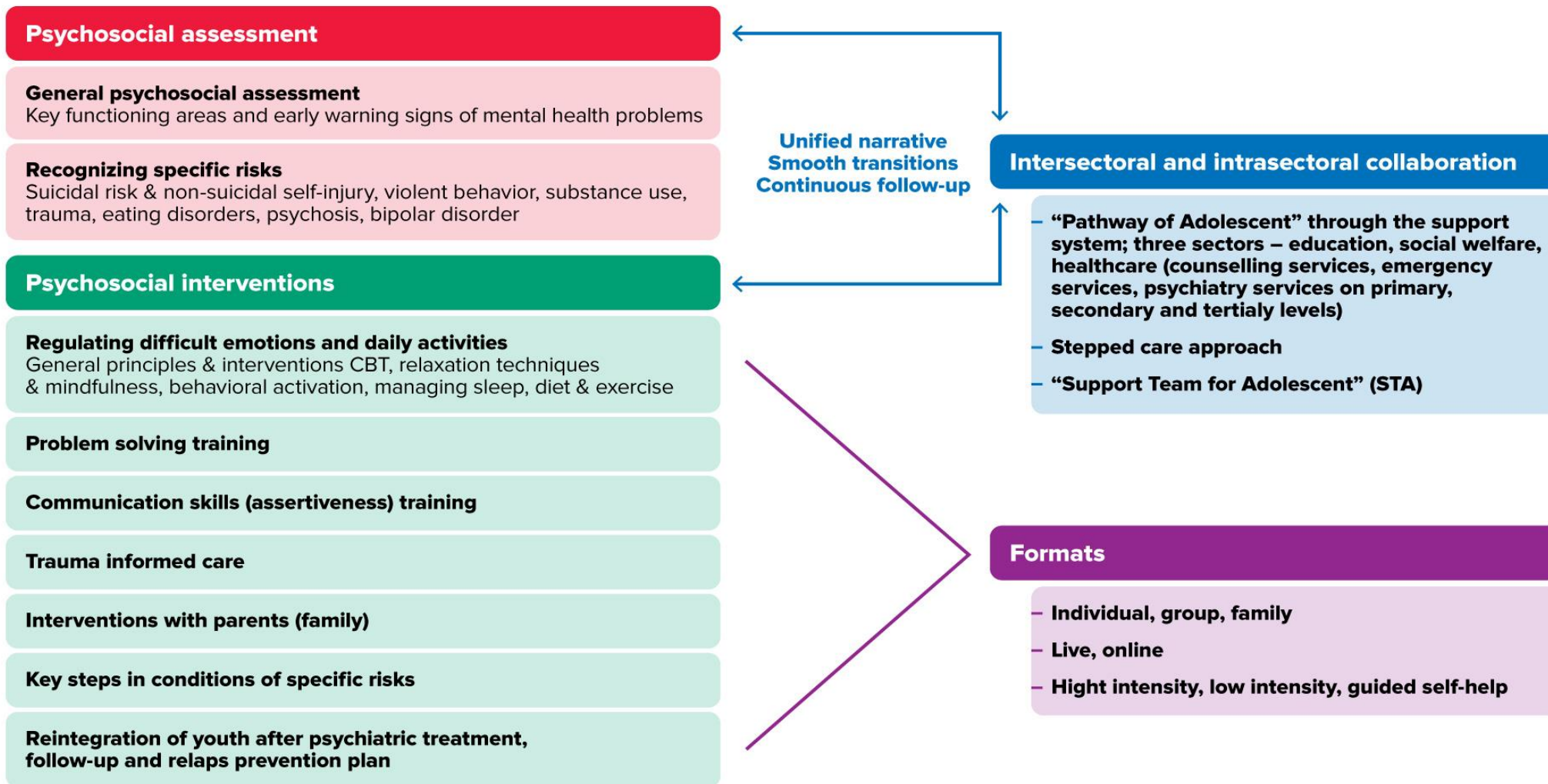
1. Psycho-Social Assessment
2. Psycho-Social Interventions
3. Intersectoral collaboration and referral pathways for professionals across sectors in Serbia

The YMSP focuses on providing MHPSS interventions for adolescents and young people **aged 12 to 25 years** who are facing mental health challenges at local level.

The YMSP is implemented by MHPSS professionals from the **education, social welfare, health, and youth sectors**.

This ensures the most effective utilization of limited resources in local communities while also guaranteeing that adolescents or young people receive consistent support regardless of which local institution they turn to for assistance (such as schools, health centers, social welfare institutions, or youth organizations).

YMSP core components:



Evaluation of the piloted YMSP

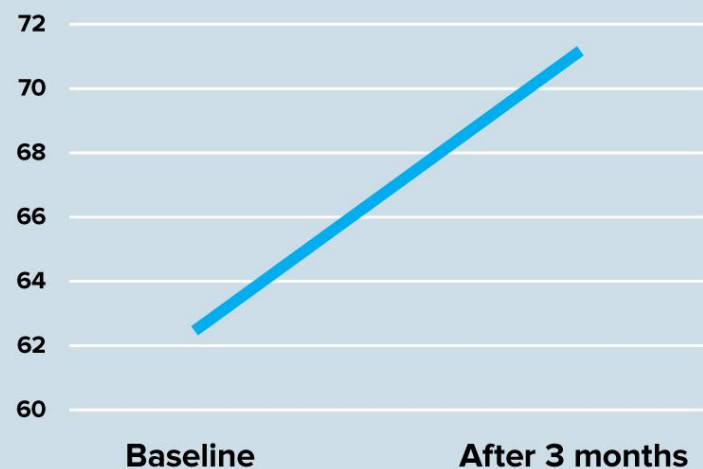
- The evaluation encompassed monitoring adolescents' anxiety and depression symptoms and functionality, assessing intervention characteristics and mentors' ratings on the key process variable, as well as gathering feedback from both youth and professionals involved in providing interventions.
- **90% of MHPSS professionals** concurred or strongly concurred that the intervention elicited positive responses from young people and demonstrated visible progress.
- Youth they appreciated the ability to receive help that is **free, accessible, and continuous**
- Piloting the YMSP model has shown that some young people faced barriers to seeking help for mental health problems, with **fear of stigma** being the most common obstacle, followed by doubts about the **effectiveness of expert** help and uncertainty about **how, where, or whom to seek help from**.



The evaluation results indicated an increase in social and occupational functionality and a decrease in depression and anxiety symptoms from the first to the last session

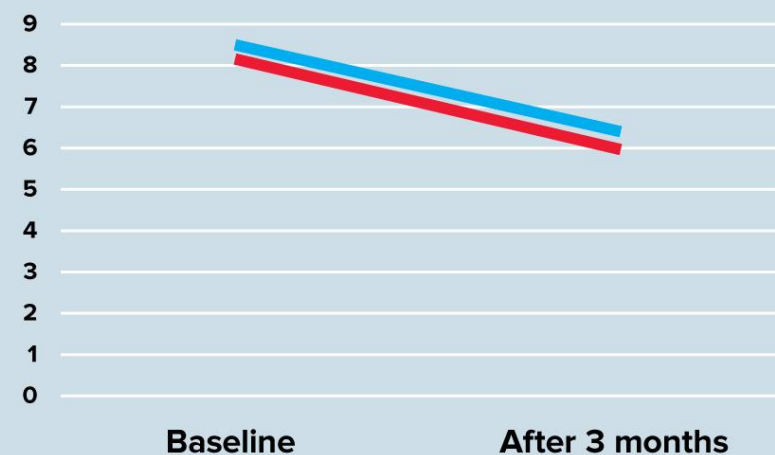
Quantitative Results

Functionality (SOFAS)



$t=11,216$ $p=0,000$

Depression and Anxiety (PHQ-9, GAD-7)



● Depression (PHQ-9)
● Anxiety (GAD-7)

$t=7,960$; $p=0,000$
 $t=8,205$; $p=0,000$

ACTION FORWARD – SCALING THE YMSP ACROSS SERBIA

UNICEF will work with government and partners to achieve the following improvements:

- **Improved quality data and evidence** from the government to inform multisectoral actions and policies for mental health and psychosocial wellbeing and development of children and adolescents.
- **Increased recognition and financing of MHPSS** by the Government, incl financing the implementation of Action plan for the full implementation of the MOU signed in 2023 by 6 ministries
- **Improved access to quality care services** (across health, education and social services/child protection services and online), **with a focus on the most vulnerable children and adolescents** with mental health conditions, and their caregivers – through the scaling up of Youth Minimum Service Package, Youth clubs within Youth Centers and telehealth services
- **Increased Mental Health literacy** of young people to support their demand for services [Sve je OK - Zajedno ka boljem mentalnom zdravlju](#)
- **Integrate SBC approaches** into public campaigning and service delivery to reduce the stigma around mental health



Treća međunarodna konferencija o mentalnom zdravlju i dobrobiti dece i mladih

ZAJEDNO NA ISTOJ SMO STRANI

unicef
20. oktobra 2023.



Ministarstvo obrazovanja, nauke i tehnološkog razvoja
Republike Srbije

Dr. Zvezdana Radošević

Dr. Slavica Đukić
Dejanović

Milica Đurđević
Stamenković

Sladana Merković
Đukanović

Ivana Antonijević

a o mentalnom zdravlju i dobrobiti dece i mladih u Srbiji

ZAJEDNO
NA ISTOJ SMO STRANI

The foundation for a strengthened enabling environment for MHPSS services has been established through the Action Plan.

This ensures an **adequate legislative and financial framework, intersectoral support and referral systems, the training of MHPSS professionals, and access to relevant MHPSS research and data.**

Nearly **1,000,000 dollars** have been allocated within the Action Plan, covering 14 strategic and legislative regulations and over 70 activities.



Policy,
legislation and
financing



Multisectoral
systems and
referral pathways



Workforce
development
and capacity



Research,
evidence and
data

ECARO

- As part of the EU4Health Programme for 2021-2027, **the European Commission and UNICEF Regional Office partnered to launch an initiative on ‘Promoting a Comprehensive, Prevention-Oriented Approach to Children’s Health.’**
- **UNICEF will produce a Toolkit for Child and Adolescent Health and Mental Wellbeing Promotion,** designed as a comprehensive resource for policymakers in 27 EU Member States, Iceland, and Norway.
- UNICEF is committed to working with decision-makers to ensure **that more evidence is generated and shared to educate the** public on how the internet and social media contribute to poor mental health, raising awareness among children, adolescents, and their caregivers and influencing relevant policy changes.
- **WHO Regional Office for Europe, in partnership with UNICEF Europe and Central Asia,** is developing a comprehensive strategy to ensure equitable access to essential health services for all children and adolescents across Member States. The final strategy will be presented for endorsement at the 75th session of the WHO Regional Committee in October 2025.

U Support

uSupport - an innovative on-demand digital mental health platform which has been designed to help reduce a significant gap in access to MHPSS care for young people.

It builds a bridge between existing MH resources and connects them to adolescents (target group 16-24) in need of help by digitizing service delivery (text, audio, video consultation options).

Country-level implementation of **uSupport** is managed by UNICEF country teams in partnership with national authorities, selected implementation partners, such as the national mental health centers, academia, MH professional associations, CSOs, youth.

Poland has started adaptation of the uSupport platform with the focus on Ukrainian refugees, as well as Polish adolescents and youth with the expected roll out in 2025.

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Thank you

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