

Fostering Sustainable Life Skills: Assessing the Needs and Resilience of At-Risk Adolescents in Ukraine

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ABSTRACT:

New life challenges necessitate the search for methods to help adolescents adapt to society. Vulnerable children need to develop special skills during the pandemic and while forming their skills and outlook on life. The purpose of the study was to obtain information on the development of skills of adolescents belonging to vulnerable categories to assess their priority needs. The study used analysis and synthesis, induction and deduction, comparison, and a questionnaire that included a set of questions conducted among adolescents aged 15-16. The article highlights the attitudes of adolescents and their opinions on the main issues of society, such as social, communication and adaptation concepts. Attitudes towards gender equality, Internet communication and emotional background are substantiated and analyzed. It has been determined that children have the opportunity to achieve their goals faster through the prism of developing skills that are a priority for them. Skills that help build independence, resilience, and responsiveness are identified, as well as habits that help to overcome difficulties, develop leadership skills, and the ability to communicate in a team. The study pays considerable attention to soft skills that are in demand in modern society. It is proven that resilience helps a person build closer relationships, teaches self-development, and encourages striving for the best.

Keywords: habits, sociality, adaptability, resilience, adolescence, vulnerability

1. Introduction

In today's world, during pandemics and war, the problem of adaptation of children and adults is one of the most frequent complaints from psychologists. Particular attention should be paid to the development of children aged 15-16 due to an excessively high level of emotional, volitional, and mental state. The period of uncertainty, an integral part of adolescent culture, significantly impacts the formation of personal qualities and self-regulation skills in the younger generation. That is why it is important to search for

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mechanisms that will facilitate the successful adaptation of adolescents to society, and in turn, will allow them to overcome life's difficulties.

Adaptation is based on the ability of a person to withstand challenges and difficulties, which entails the development of resilience as a complex and multifaceted definition. The concepts of inclusions and challenges are at the heart of resilience development, as they show how much an adolescent adapts and interacts with the world around him or her. It allows adolescents to develop the ability to improve and develop themselves, to understand themselves and to identify their most developed qualities. It also helps to adapt to sudden and unexpected changes, the ability to quickly find a way out of a situation, and to respond quickly to social stimuli and internal fears and experiences.

Vulnerable adolescents are influenced by various vulnerability factors, which in some cases cause such behaviors as withdrawal, indifference, unkindness, conflict, open verbal aggression, violence, etc. Therefore, the prosocial behavior of a vulnerable adolescent is determined by the formed knowledge about the importance and necessity of prosocial behavior, aspirations and desires to perform prosocial actions, prosocial attitudes, and prosocial actions. In this context, socio-economic support systems have an active impact, in particular, mentoring and tutoring programs, psychological support and trusting relationships with others contribute to strengthening prosocial tendencies in adolescents. Youth resilience to difficult and crisis circumstances is determined by the level of resistance to emotional problems, and is determined by the ability of people to effectively cope with difficulties and regenerate as quickly as possible. At the same time, the ethics of care and responsibility should be positioned as central to building resilience.

Vulnerable groups in Ukraine include people with chronic diseases and disabilities, veterans, national minorities, victims of human trafficking, dysfunctional families, etc. The presence of habits that help overcome non-standard life situations, along with critical thinking, contributes to the development of adolescent life skills, which in turn help to form readiness for independent and transition to adulthood. That is why the development of adolescents' skills and needs that will help them better express themselves and overcome difficulties depends on the availability of the right educational environment.

2. 2. Literature review

Many Ukrainian and international researchers, educators, and psychologists have studied the problem of adaptation of adolescents belonging to vulnerable groups and considered ways to address this issue.

The key qualities that an adolescent must possess to overcome life's challenges are resilience and endurance. The concept of "endurance" as an indicator that transforms changes into opportunities often underlies the theory of a unique human quality. The concept of resilience, according to (Kondratiuk, 2022; Basenko, 2019; Prabhu, 2023; Pinto et al., 2021) protects a person from personality disorders, maintaining the inner state of mind and mental health, increasing a person's ability to work and preserving their life values, motives and goals. Also, Nechereda & Kyrychenko (2019), Predko (2020), Shcherban & Ternova (2016), Honchar et. al. (2021), Arkatova (2020) and others in their work pointed out that the best way to cope with stress in adolescents is a high level of mental health stability, preserving emotional experience in coexistence with the environment.

In the world literature, there is a theory of resilience that characterizes a unique personal quality - the ability to turn changes into opportunities. In particular, the definition of resilience as “a system of beliefs about oneself, the world, and relationships with the world that contains three relatively autonomous components: engagement, control, and risk taking” was analyzed by Ungar (2020) and Dray (2021). Additional information was provided by Anderson and Prieber (2021) and Voropayeva et. al. (2022), who proved that in the presence of resilient behavior, it is possible to avoid the occurrence of tension in stressful non-standard situations in the life of an adolescent.

All the habits that adolescents acquire during adaptation at the initial stage of development are characterized by the development of soft skills. It is these skills that allow you to realize yourself as a professional at work and in intercultural communication. Tang, Upadaya & Salmela-Aro (2021) believe that such skills develop in a person the greatest ability to adapt to all spheres of life, can influence the quality and state of life satisfaction, and can ensure mobility and self-employment.

In addition, according to Andreoni et al. (2020), soft skills reflect the combination of knowledge and abilities that determine a person's success. In particular, socio-psychological and socio-cognitive skills that help to communicate in society are significantly developing; organizational and managerial skills that are necessary in the professional sphere are developing.

The introduction of social services focuses modern socialization institutions on the development of adolescents' ability to make decisions and solve problems independently, to do their favorite things and to be able to respond flexibly to problematic situations. This is confirmed by numerous studies by modern scholars (Sagone et al., 2020).

However, there is no unanimous definition of the concept of “habit” and methods of their management, despite significant scientific work on assessing the needs of adolescents in the development of life skills, there is no single definition of these skills and features of environmental management, outlining the relevance of this topic.

Objectives. The objective of the study is to identify and develop life skills and life needs of adolescents belonging to the vulnerable population of Ukraine.

3. Materials and Methods

The methodologies used in the study were based on theoretical methodology, including prioritized analysis and synthesis based on a holistic approach. Induction and deduction methods were used to develop proposals and identify ways to improve the skills development system and meet needs. Comparison was used to highlight the main features of skills and ways to develop them in adolescents.

The study focuses on the specifics of the development of skills of adolescents belonging to vulnerable categories to assess their priority needs. Considerable attention is paid to the need for active external support for adolescents through mentoring and tutoring methods in order to increase resilience and stress resistance, and to master the potential for adaptation to normal life processes.

The study conducted a systematic and comprehensive analysis of scientific publications and industry statistics. We used relevant primary sources from publications indexed in leading scientometric databases. The works taken into account were mostly

published in the time interval of 2020-2025. The criteria for including and excluding publications were the spatial and temporal indicator and the level of information reliability. The keywords used for the search were “habits, sociality, adaptability, resilience, adolescence, vulnerability”. The limitations of the study include the lack of access to complete and up-to-date statistical data and the difficulty of experimentally testing theoretical conclusions.

The research methodology included analysis and synthesis, systematization, comparison, generalization, abstraction, and a questionnaire that included a block of several questions and was conducted among adolescents aged 15-16. These methods made it possible to summarize scientific, theoretical and research data, determine cause and effect relationships, define the main criteria and definitions, determine the most influential factors within the process under study, formulate generalized conclusions of the study and develop recommendations.

The study's conclusions were formulated using abstract-logical and dialectical methods of scientific research. They were used to identify and structure the main terms and concepts, as well as to systematize the conceptual apparatus. The tasks and functions were structured using the formalization method.

The Ansell-Casey Assessment methodology was used from October 10 to November 30, 2021, as an empirical study of life skills development in vulnerable adolescents aged 15-16. Adolescents were asked to complete a questionnaire that included several scales with 16 statements (the total number of all questions was 92). Each statement has four response categories “I agree”, “I agree more”, “I disagree more” and “I strongly disagree”. The survey itself was created and sent using the Google Forms platform. Educational institutions received the survey, which was mailed by the regional department of education and science and the Institute of Postgraduate Education. The survey was conducted among vulnerable adolescents, social workers, educators, and psychologists where children from the selected category study (Table 1, Appendix 1). The average duration of the study was 1 hour and 20 minutes.

The study used the Pearson correlation coefficient, which was calculated using the formula for assessing needs depending on the child's gender.

4. Results

The adolescent period is characterized by the identification of social values, active search for oneself, formation of worldview and popularization of behavior. Socialization of an adolescent takes place in conditions of social transitivity, in the presence of several variants of the social world and cultures, each of which affects the period of growing up, development of an adolescent and relationships.

Social, professional, and family development in adolescence is influenced by the availability and full development of life skills. In general, positive and negative factors have a decisive impact on the development of resilience. Positive factors include a harmonious relationship between parents and children, a positive view of the purpose of life, building confidence, and maintaining high standards. Negative factors include a lack of support from loved ones, alienation from significant adults, stress in early childhood, serious illness, financial difficulties, and parental divorce (Shcherban & Ternovai, 2016).

Modern society creates limits and restrictions with opportunities for adolescents to find groups of interest, and also allows them to expand the boundaries of self-determination through the desire and ability to manifest their favorite rights (Tang, Upadyaya & Salmela-Aro, 2021).

Children aged 15-16 who belong to the vulnerable category are better able to adapt to unfavorable environmental factors and the immediate social environment. This is where the difference is manifested through pronounced conflict, withdrawal, and detachment. Vulnerability is a state of family insecurity caused by internal and/or external risk factors or the emergence of new ones, which disrupt balance and negatively affect the fulfillment of a child's needs (Nechereda and Kyrychenko, 2019; Predko, 2020).

Developing the necessary habits involves helping them to understand what is happening to them and around them, and to process life experiences. Children aged 15-16 start life with an already low threshold of adaptive and integrative abilities (Ungar, 2020; Tang, Upadyaya & Salmela-Aro, 2021).

Increased variability in the choice of socialization groups is simultaneously associated with increased responsibility for the choice made. The uncertainty and variability of the current social situation lead to a decrease in adolescents' optimism about their future and a decrease in confidence in their ability to control and plan their lives.

The Ansell-Casey Life Skills Assessment (ACLSA) helps to measure the development of independent living skills among adolescents (Prabhu, 2023). This assessment can identify skills such as: career planning, communication, daily living, work and life skills, social skills, and the ability to communicate and interact with the world around them.

The survey was conducted among vulnerable adolescents (aged 15-16 years old with disabilities) in Zaporizhzhia and Luhansk oblasts, with a total of 215 respondents, including 115 girls (53.5%) and 150 boys (46.5%). 135 respondents in Zaporizhzhia region and 80 in Luhansk region (Annex 1, Table 1).

The results of the study allowed us to form graphical scales that show the most relevant trends in the formation of leading life skills related to the most common problems.

Many adolescents lack a confidant to discuss personal issues. This is due to both the cultural paradigm of social development and the specifics of the social and educational environment.

Obviously, an important factor in the development of a child's personality in the educational environment is not so much educational and developmental activities as the evaluative attitude of adults to the child's discipline, academic performance, and diligence. The essence of the process of social and psychological adaptation of adolescents is to provide proper psychological and pedagogical support. If effective correctional and developmental work is implemented within the framework of psychological and pedagogical support, it is quite possible to increase the level of communication skills of adolescents aged 15-16, social behavior skills and the general level of education. In this aspect, innovative adaptive teaching technologies are of particular importance, including the use of interactive and stimulating practices, multimedia materials, individualized technologies of educational and developmental activities, problem-based methods and feedback. In the process of organizing the educational process, it is necessary to maximize the consideration of typological and individual capabilities and needs of young people.

The development of an individual program of educational and correctional work requires cooperation and coordination of specialists, implementation of differentiated programs of correctional and psychological support, and ensuring the prerequisites for maximum social adaptation.

After analyzing the answers to the question about having a trusted person with whom they can discuss their sexual life, 43% indicated that they have such a trusted person, 26% know such a person, 20% cannot specify, and 11% do not have such a person. The analysis of answers shows the inability to have knowledge about comprehensive sexuality education and the inability to discuss these issues with trusted adults (Fig. 1).

According to the study, girls are more easily and better able to master and share information about sexuality, sexually transmitted diseases, and unplanned pregnancy than boys. Adolescents from special schools are more likely to find a trusted person to talk to about sexual relations and unplanned pregnancy. This suggests that adolescents with disabilities have closer relationships with parents and teachers and perhaps even hyper-parenting compared to adolescents in other educational settings. However, it remains to be seen to what extent this discussion applies to sex education.

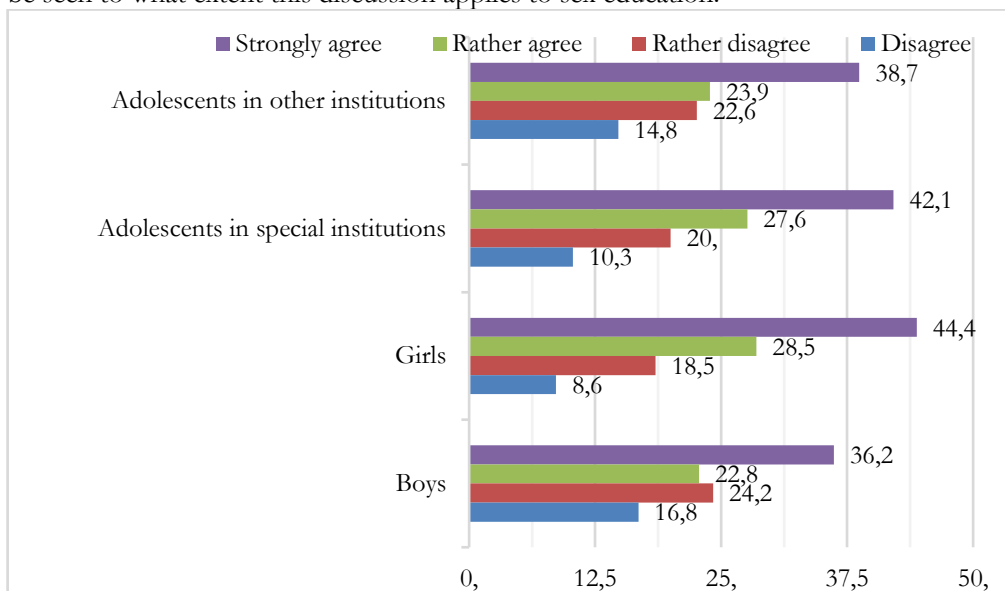


Figure 1. Answers to the question about the presence of a trusted person (authors' own development)

The issue of gender equality remains equally important. Thus, among the adolescents surveyed, 73% believe that a man is more important in the family than a woman, while 27% think otherwise. In addition, a significant number of children (85%) believe that girls and boys get along well with each other (Fig. 2).

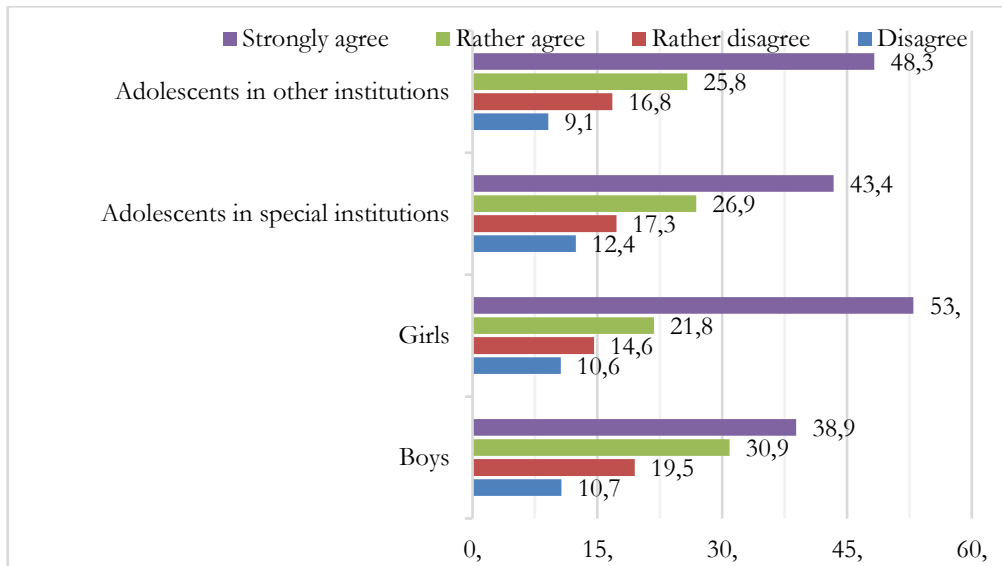


Figure 2. Answer to the question on gender equality (authors' own development)

55% of teenagers surveyed, answering questions related to social media, believe that online dating is necessary for communication and interaction with other people, while 45% believe that it harms live communication (Fig. 3).

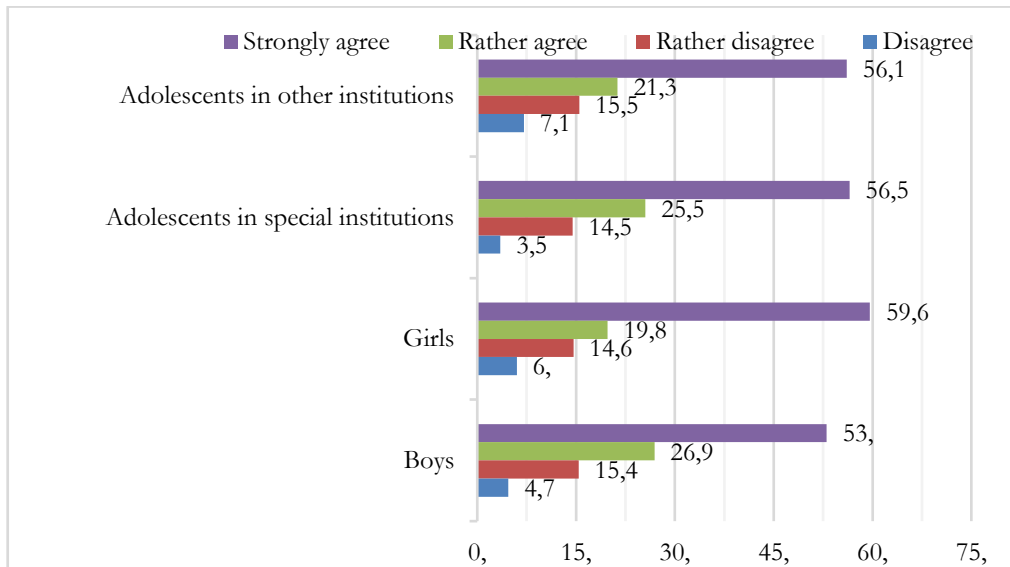


Figure 3. Answer to the question about safe communication on the Internet (authors' own development)

The next question was related to the feelings of adolescents, namely, what factors influence the formation of various emotional states (anger, frustration, admiration, joy, happiness, etc.) and the ability to explain them. The results of the study showed that 23%

of respondents are able to master and explain what causes their emotional state, 35% understand what causes mood to change and what affects it, and 42% do not understand what criteria can influence a variable emotional background (Fig. 4).

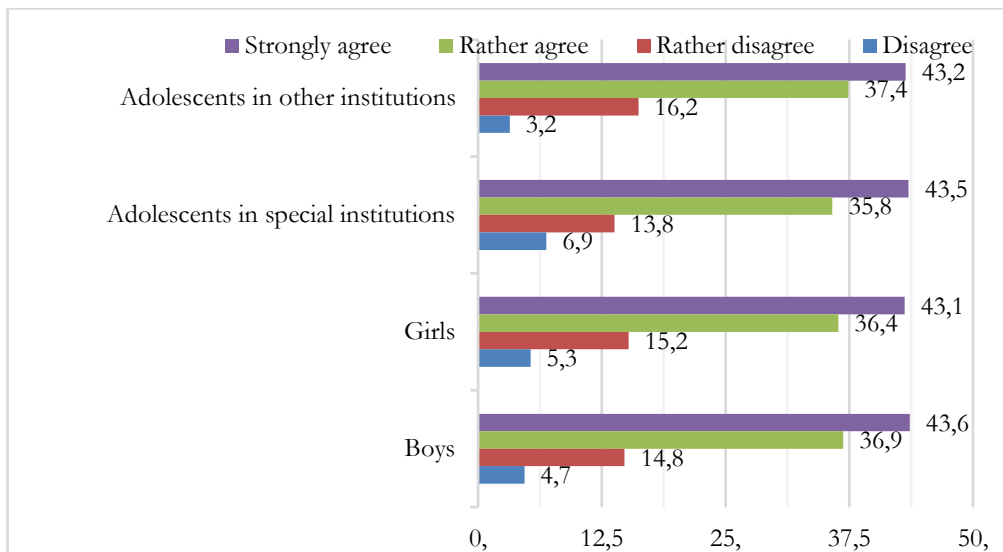


Fig. 4. Answer to the question about the ability to feel emotions (authors' own development)

Another set of questions was related to the ability to control one's emotions, in particular aggression, towards other interlocutors. The survey revealed that 32% of all respondents can control their aggression towards others, 35% of respondents indicated that they could not always do so, and 33% of adolescents cannot control their anger (Fig. 5).

According to the results of the research, boys better understand and can analyze their emotions, psychological state, etc. Children aged 15-16 who study in special educational institutions regulate their behavior, emotions, and mood less than children who study in general education institutions. Therefore, the availability of an appropriate educational environment is no less important.

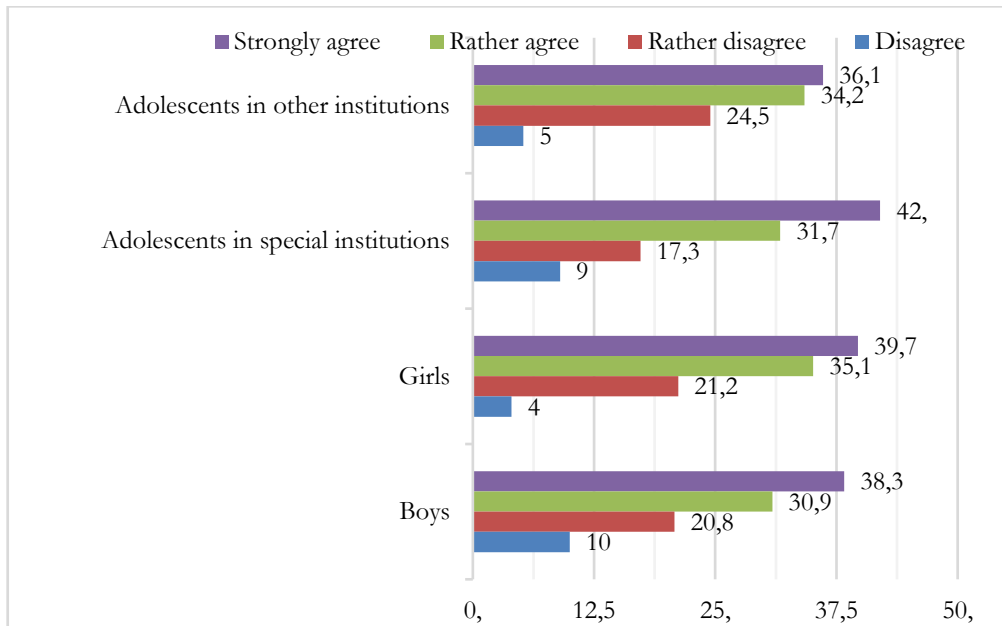


Fig. 5. Answer to the question about the ability to control emotions (authors' own development)

It is also worth noting the results of the survey of adolescents regarding the question about their future. 48% of all respondents indicated that they had plans for their future, 26% could not determine, and 26% did not plan or see their future (Fig. 6). This aspect of the study has limited reliability due to potential bias in adolescents' responses, which requires cross-checking with observation or interview methods to eliminate the risk of incorrect representation.

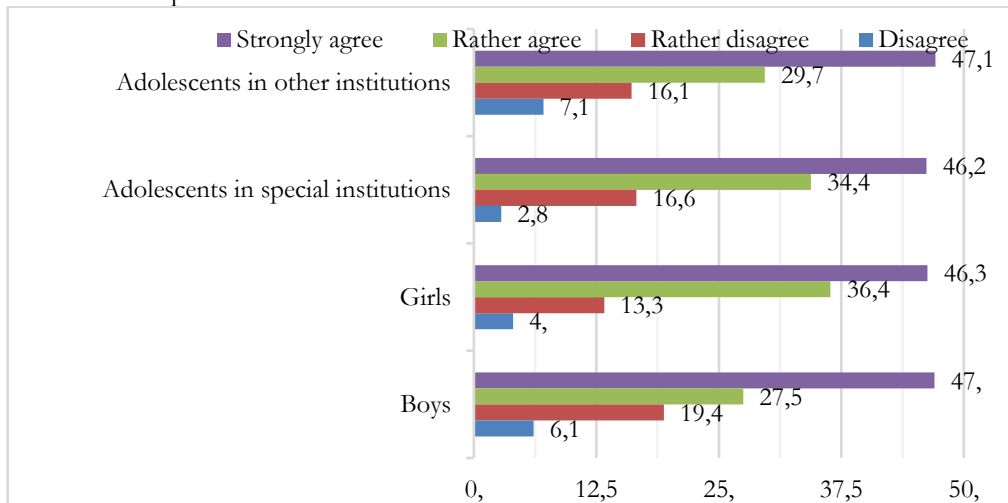


Figure 6. Answer to the question about the future (authors' own development)

The conceptual framework of the program, based on the results of the study. The goal of this program is to develop life skills in adolescents from vulnerable groups in Ukraine:

- The content of special programs should be based on the results of the diagnostic scales surveys;
- Introduce special programs into the work of schools and, accordingly, create the right educational environment, depending on the needs and problems;
- The development of life skills should be based on the concepts of comprehensive child development.

Taking into account the answers of the respondents, we can identify the abilities that adolescents want to develop: communication skills, partnership, responsibility, creativity, and passion. There are also skills that need to be developed: behavior management, the ability to solve non-standard problems and situations without stress.

Reflection on psychological and pedagogical research and analysis of educational practice have led to the conclusion that adolescent vulnerability is caused by the following factors: personal, among which are psychological (increased anxiety, excessive criticality, communicative incompetence (familiarity, arrogance, conceit, reclusiveness), increased aggression, avoidance of responsibility, etc.) and physiological (restructuring of all body systems, in particular, cardiovascular, digestive, respiratory, nervous, puberty), as well as social, among which, first of all, we note the significant influence of the immediate environment - school, teenage subculture, family.

Adolescents are one of the most vulnerable social groups in the population, requiring special attention from their immediate environment, society, and the state as a whole. Their upbringing is a complex, multifaceted process, which, in addition to family members, involves the psychological and pedagogical community of general secondary education institutions. Since adolescents spend most of their time at school, it is there that conditions should be created for the development of students' creative abilities, positive moral qualities, reflection, critical thinking, emotional intelligence and constructive communication skills, stimulation of adolescents' initiative and self-education both in and out of school, formation of key life competencies of the growing personality, and implementation of partnership pedagogy.

According to classroom teachers, practical psychologists and social educators, a significant number of vulnerable adolescents are characterized by increased suggestibility, uncritical imitation, underdeveloped ethical ideas, lack of reflection, poor value orientations, rudeness in relationships with peers and adults, a tendency to overdramatize, and depression. Quite often, these adolescents show egocentrism, anxiety, extreme self-esteem (either extremely positive or extremely negative), inability to find a way out of conflict situations, and the prevalence of defense mechanisms that regulate human behavior over others.

Vulnerability associated with a deficit of family relationships or high intra-family psycho-emotional and functional stress, and vulnerability caused by social political, economic and cultural mechanisms are the main causes of behavioral problems of the following types of adolescents orphans or from single-parent families, including families of soldiers killed in eastern Ukraine; adolescents from families of migrant workers; students from temporarily displaced families; adolescents from families of Chernobyl

victims; adolescents from families in difficult life circumstances (“DLC”), i.e. in need of socio-economic and socio-psychological support and assistance due to various factors, including parents' job loss, or the poor health of one or more family members; adolescents whose vulnerability is related to the type of professional activity of their parents (parents of risky professions, including military, rescue workers, firefighters, aviators, sailors, law enforcement officers).

5. Discussion

A full level of education and upbringing, support from teachers and psychologists are prerequisites for the development of the necessary competencies of adolescents, including vulnerable groups, during crisis periods of social development.

The influence of literature, recommendations of teachers and psychologists on the development of communication competence, critical thinking and tolerance affects the formation of skills, which increases the effectiveness of the achievements. Researchers (Wang & Kong, 2020; Ma et al., 2020) emphasize that special attention should be paid to the problems of developing resilience skills in adolescents.

The development of strategic management and its state, as well as the availability of appropriate practical tools for the educational process, plays an important role in the development of life skills in adolescents from vulnerable groups and is closely related to the strategic management of educational processes (Finklestein, Pagorek-Eshel & Laufer, 2022; Rachmawati et al., 2021).

Hatamizadeh et al. (2020), Zinn et. al (2020) investigate desirable habits in children aged 15-16 as complex multifunctional neoplasms that need constant development and improvement. This is done through the prism of understanding their strengths and hobbies.

6. Conclusion

Modern social life requires adolescents to adapt to a fast-paced rhythm with ups and downs while developing communication skills and emotional control. The development of skills and abilities that underlie the adaptation of children aged 15-16 is necessary to improve the process of children's adaptation. The concept of “resilience” remains key for adolescents, which contributes to a better understanding and finding oneself in society.

The formation of habits and skills takes place throughout life, during communication with peers and older people, where there is a direct exchange of experiences and opinions. Basic life skills are manifested in the ability to overcome difficulties, show personal initiative or leadership, communicate and work in a team, develop creativity and resilience.

Specific strategies for promoting adolescent resilience include the development of effective psychological support in convenient formats of coaching, tutoring, and mentoring; providing conditions for adolescents to practice communication skills in the educational environment; introducing interactive technologies that promote interpersonal communication, empathy, and mutual understanding among adolescents; developing

positive motivation and attitudes toward communication through discussion, situation analysis, and reflection aimed at understanding the importance of the importance of the situation. Individuals with significantly higher adaptability are characterized by ways of overcoming crises based on faith, a system of meanings, values and beliefs, the ability to think critically and assess the situation, learn, collect information, learn new ideas, plan, analyze problems and solve them rationally. This determines the directions for optimizing the educational environment to increase adolescents' resilience, stress resistance, and social adaptability.

Vulnerability associated with natural or social phenomena of a random or regular nature is typical for the following types of adolescents: those with congenital developmental disabilities or lifelong disabilities; those with developmental problems without a pronounced clinical and pathological characteristic; those with social diseases (tuberculosis, HIV, viral hepatitis). Such students often lack motivation for self-development and effective communication skills, and may be characterized by mood instability, passive stance, avoidance of contacts, skepticism, intolerance, distrust, negativism, emotional tension, and depression.

The results of the study show that for the full development of adolescents, there is a need to change the educational environment, which would take into account all the characteristics of the child. The level of trust in society, the availability of certain targeted psychological practices, and seminars for teachers are of great importance. Follow-up research should focus on practical intervention models that integrate resilience-building activities into school programs and communities to ensure that vulnerable youth are sustainably supported.

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Appendix 1

Table 1: List of surveyed educational institutions

Educational institutions of Luhansk region that participated in the survey (total number of adolescents - 80)	
1.	Sieverodonetsk regional sanatorium school
2.	Shchastya regional sanatorium school
3.	Rubizhne regional sanatorium school
4.	Svatovo Regional Specialized School
5.	Rubizhne regional special school
6.	Mountain regional special school
7.	Popasna school №21
8.	Rubizhne secondary school of I-III levels №3 Ru
9.	Nyzhnevilkhivske institution of Stanytsia Luhanska district
10.	Demyanivska gymnasium
11.	Starobilsk lyceum №2
12.	Stanytsia Luhanska school No. 1
13.	Kuryachivska secondary school of I-II degrees
14.	Markivka school No. 1
15.	Lysychansk school No. 4
Educational institutions of Zaporizhzhia region that participated in the survey (total number of adolescents - 135)	
1.	Zaporizhzhia specialized boarding school of II-III degree “Cossack Lyceum”
2.	Zaporizhzhia special boarding school “Oberig”
3.	Zaporizhzhia educational complex №64
4.	Berdiansk general education sanatorium boarding school
5.	Khortytsia Academy general education sanatorium boarding school of I-III degree
6.	Zaporizhzhia gymnasium №3
7.	National University “Zaporizhzhia Polytechnic”
8.	Zaporizhzhia secondary school №80

9.	Zaporizhzhia Machine-Building Higher Vocational School
10.	Zaporizhzhia specialized boarding school “Sich Collegium”
11.	Small Humanitarian Academy
12.	Zaporizhzhia Electrotechnical College
13.	Zaporizhzhia collegium №98
14.	Melitopol Professional Agricultural Lyceum
15.	Berdiansk Machine-Building Professional Lyceum
16.	Primorsky Professional Agrarian Lyceum
17.	Yakymivka Professional Agricultural Lyceum