

# how do parents and children talk about HIV?

## why is communication important?

Sexual activity begins early for many teens. Almost four of ten (37%) 9th graders have had intercourse, and nearly seven of ten (66%) have had intercourse by 12th grade.<sup>1</sup>

*Every year three million teens, or almost a quarter (1 out of 4) of all sexually experienced teens, will contract a sexually transmitted disease (STD). Chlamydia is more common among teens than among older men and women, and teens have higher rates of gonorrhea than men and women aged 20-44.<sup>2</sup>*

The HIV epidemic in the US is increasingly becoming an epidemic of the young. One fourth of all new HIV infections in the US occur in people under the age of 22, and one half of all new infections occur in people under age 25.<sup>3</sup>

**"I want my daughter to be prepared [for sex and puberty]. I was taken by surprise." Parent**

*In spite of these staggering statistics, many parents are unaware of or in denial about their children's sexual experience. A study of mothers and their adolescent children found that 70% of the mothers believed their sons were virgins, but only 44% of sons actually were (had not yet engaged in sexual intercourse). With daughters, 82% of mothers thought they were virgins, and only 70% of daughters actually were.<sup>4</sup>*

## are parents and their kids talking?

Unfortunately, not enough. A survey of pre-adolescents and their parents in a high HIV seroprevalence neighborhood found that parents overestimate how much they talk about HIV. Kids remembered less than one-fourth of HIV discussions parents said occurred. They were most likely to remember talks with the parent that were private.<sup>5</sup>

*Parents often think they're talking to their kids about AIDS, but may be discussing medical facts and not necessarily sexuality or safer sex. A national survey found that mothers of children aged 11 and older rated themselves "unsatisfactory" on talking about issues such as: how to tell when youth are ready to be sexually active (38%), preventing HIV (40%), sexual orientation (47%) and how to use a condom (73%).<sup>6</sup>*

**"I think it's sad I can't talk to my mom about it—but it's her loss. I can always go other places. I think that is a lot of the problem, because when you go 'other places' sometimes you get the wrong information." Teen**

## what is the role of parents?

Parents can influence their children's actions. At-risk youth in five cities took part in an HIV prevention marketing initiative. They reported that parents exerted substantial influence on sexual behavior in three ways: by communicating with them, by acting as role models and by providing direct supervision.<sup>7</sup>

*Contrary to popular opinion, children do look to their parents for guidance. Kids often want to talk to their parents about HIV-related issues, but may find it difficult to do so.<sup>8</sup> Kids may worry that parents' disapproval and fears will prevent honest discussion, or that parents lack correct information about HIV.*

**"I want my boys to be respectful of others and learn to develop a relationship with a person before having sex with them." Parent**

Children learn from parents by watching what they do as well as hearing what they say. Whether parents answer, don't answer, or get angry at children's questions can show children how to deal with difficult issues. Discussions about healthy relationships should start early and grow more sophisticated as children mature. Early talks with young children about naming body parts accurately, learning how to say no, and taking health precautions can set the stage for later education in HIV prevention and sexuality.

## Says who?

1. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Youth risk behavior surveillance—United States 1995. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*. 1996;45:64.

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3. Rosenberg PS, Biggar RJ, Goedert JJ. Declining age at HIV infection in the United States (letter). *New England Journal of Medicine*. 1994;330:789-790.

4. Miller K. Data from the Family adolescent risk behavior and communication study. Personal communication, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; 1997.

5. Krauss BJ, Goldsamt L, Pierre-Louis M. How pre-adolescents and their parents talk about HIV in a high HIV seroprevalence neighborhood. Presented at the 11th International Conference on AIDS, Vancouver BC. 1997. Abstract ThD4878.

6. Mothers' Voices. Mothers speak out on preventing and curing AIDS. Survey conducted by EDK Associates. 1997.

7. Kennedy MG, Bye L, Rosenbaum J, et al. Focus group theme that will shape participatory social marketing interventions in 5 cities. Presented at the 11th International Conference on AIDS, Vancouver BC. 1997. Abstract TuD2882.

8. Heft L, Faigeles B, Hall TL. Where are the parents in HIV education? Adolescents want their parents to talk about HIV. Presented at the 11th International Conference on AIDS, Vancouver BC. 1997. Abstract ThC4431. Contact: Lisa Heft (415) 487-8088.

## what are barriers to communication?

Talking about issues of sexuality with their children can be a difficult experience for many adults. When many of today's adults were children, their parents didn't talk about sexuality and other topics with them. Today's parents may want to take a different approach with their own children, but have no experience to guide them.

**"We didn't talk about these things when we grew up so I'm not always used to it. I try, and I laugh...the kids are more comfortable with [talking about sex] than I am." Parent**

*Youth need to carve out their own autonomy during adolescence. As young people begin to separate from their parents, they may be more resistant to parental advice.*

Parents may have unfounded concerns about talking to their kids, such as the fear that talking about sex will increase curiosity and cause them to experiment prematurely, or that giving information about birth control is a green light for kids to have intercourse. Some parents fear that talking about homosexuality might influence a child's sexual orientation. In fact, open discussion with parents can help postpone sexual activity, protect from risky behavior and support the healthy sexual socialization of youth.<sup>9</sup>

## what's working?

In Los Angeles, CA, a program addressing newly arrived immigrant parents found that involving churches and health providers, providing culturally sensitive presenters in the parents' language, and scheduling meetings during the evenings all helped to attract parents to meetings.<sup>10</sup> Parenting and communicating classes often attract more parents than classes specifically addressing HIV, especially in religious communities.

*Peer education among parents has been effective. "Talking With Kids About AIDS" trains volunteers to conduct workshops with parents and guardians in a variety of community settings. Parents learn about HIV, practice communication and risk reduction skills and complete homework assignments to discuss HIV with their children. The program significantly enhances parents' ability to initiate talks with their children.<sup>11</sup>*

**"Parents need to inform and guide (and get involved) with their kids more! I think it will help tremendously." Teen**

In Virginia, parent educators were trained to lead HIV information programs for parents of elementary, middle and high school students. These parents also served as resource persons for their community. Word-of-mouth recommendations from parents have been effective in attracting other parents. Parent participants reported they were more likely to talk to their children about HIV/AIDS if they felt knowledgeable on the subject.<sup>12</sup>

*The Fast Road/El Camino Rapido is a training program for migrant families and educators to help families discuss healthy relationships, practice communication skills, and focus on HIV prevention. The program uses cartoon videos in English and Spanish and drawings with bubbles for spoken words and thoughts. Parents work with other parents and with their children to fill in the blanks and help stimulate discussion.<sup>13</sup>*

## what needs to be done?

Parent-child communication often has not been a focus of HIV prevention efforts. However, programs that involve all family members, children and adults, in educating about sexuality, values and family life, can be very effective. Programs that are most effective must involve parents and youth in program design and staffing. A comprehensive HIV prevention strategy uses many elements to protect as many people at risk for HIV as possible. Given what is at stake, family members and prevention educators must work together to ensure the future health and safety of our children.

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11. Tiffany J. HIV/AIDS education for parents and guardians: talking with kids about AIDS. Presented at the 9th International Conference on AIDS, Berlin, Germany. 1993. Abstract PO-D13-3716. Contact: Jennifer Tiffany (607) 255-1942.

12. Rankin DL. When "just say no" isn't enough: parents educating parents about AIDS. Presented at the National Conference on Women and HIV, Los Angeles, CA. 1997. Abstract P2.37. Contact: Daphne Long Rankin (804) 828-2210.

13. The Fast Road/El Camino Rapido. Contact: Angela Branz-Spail (800) 580-0740. <http://www.speakeasy.org/plaintalk/>

### Parent/Child Resources:

Advocates for Youth, 1025 Vermont Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20005, (202) 347-5700, <http://eos.atmos.washington.edu/~robert/Advocates/>

American Red Cross, AIDS Education Office, 8111 Gatehouse Road, Falls Church, VA 22042, <http://www.redcross.org>  
Mothers' Voices, 165 West 46th Street, Suite 701, New York, NY 10036, (888) MVOICES, <http://www.mvoices.org>

National AIDS Clearinghouse, PO Box 6003, Rockville, MD 20849-6003, (800) 458-5231, <http://www.cdcnac.org>  
Planned Parenthood, (800) 230-7526, <http://www.igc.apc.org/ppfa/>

Sexuality Information and Education Council of the US, 130 West 42nd Street, Suite 350, New York, NY 10036, (212) 819-9770, <http://www.siecus.org>