

HIV and Young People: The Greatest Hope for Turning the Tide

Young people remain at the centre of the AIDS epidemic. About 40 per cent of new HIV infections are among 15-24 year-olds and 4.9 million of the 33.4 million people living with HIV are in this age category. Though they show increasing vulnerability and rates of infection, young people also have the greatest potential for change.

When young people are well informed of HIV risks and prevention strategies, they can change their behaviour in ways that reduce their vulnerability. In several sub-Saharan African countries, for example, targeted education has led to delayed sexual debut and increased use of condoms, resulting in a decrease in HIV prevalence.

Yet too many 15-24 year-olds do not know how to prevent HIV infections and hold misconceptions about how the virus is transmitted. Surveys indicate that by the end of 2007, only 40% of young men and 38% of young women had accurate and comprehensive knowledge of HIV¹ — far below the 90% target set by governments for achievement by 2005.

ENSURING AN HIV-FREE GENERATION

As a member of UNAIDS, UNFPA, the United Nations Population Fund, leads efforts to provide information and education for young people, condom programming, prevention for out-of school youth and prevention efforts targeting vulnerable groups and HIV and sex work. With its expertise in sexual and reproductive health, UNFPA also plays a lead role in ensuring that young people are dually protected against sexually transmitted infections, including HIV, and unintended pregnancies.

In order to ensure an HIV-free generation, we need to:

- Undertake a comprehensive approach to prevention that is based on evidence;
- Promote responsible sexual behaviour, including the use of condoms;
- Develop youth-specific HIV and sexuality education programmes;
- Roll-out mass media interventions;
- Provide youth-friendly health services for the prevention, treatment and care of HIV. It is also critical to reduce the risks of unsafe injecting drug use and to provide drug dependence treatment.

UNFPA advocates for young people to be treated as partners and to be fully involved in the design, implementation and evaluation of HIV programmes that affect their lives.

LEARNING HOW TO PROTECT YOUNG PEOPLE

¹ Global Report on the AIDS Epidemic, UNAIDS, 2008.

- Young people are a **diverse group**. Interventions must be tailored to their age, sex, religion, socioeconomic and marital status and domestic arrangements, among other factors.
- It is important to **link HIV and sexual and reproductive health** information and services. The majority of HIV infections are sexually transmitted and young people have very high rates of sexually transmitted infections (excluding HIV).
- **Providing age appropriate, accurate sexual health information** regarding abstinence, condom use and sexual development delays the onset of sexual activity and encourages safer and more responsible behaviour, such as condom use.
- Greater attention and resources are needed to **reduce young people's vulnerability to HIV**. Young women between the ages of 15-19, for example, are particularly vulnerable to HIV because of gender inequalities, sexual violence, early marriage, intergenerational relationships and more limited access to education.
- Providing young people, including those who are HIV positive, with **training, livelihood skills and jobs is key**. The absence of opportunities makes young people vulnerable to sex work and other factors which increase their risk of HIV infection.

KEY DATA²

- Globally, an estimated 4.9 million of the 33.4 million living with HIV are young people aged 15-24 years. 61% live in sub-Saharan Africa, of which 76% are female.
- Every day, an estimated 2,500 youth become newly infected with HIV, resulting in about 910,000 new infections each year.
- Of the 2.7 million new HIV infections in 2008, about 40% were among 15-24 year-olds, down from 45% in previous years.
- A typical HIV prevention program reaching a young person costs US\$9 per year.³

EXAMPLES OF PROGRESS

- From 2000-2007, decreases in HIV prevalence amongst youth aged 15-24 years was noted in **Haiti** and in some sub-Saharan African countries (**Botswana, Cameroon, Chad, Kenya, Malawi, Togo, Zambia, and Zimbabwe**), suggesting that HIV prevention programmes may be having an impact on sexual behaviours in these countries⁴.
- In **Viet Nam**, secondary students are being empowered to protect themselves against HIV infection through a nationwide integrated reproductive health and HIV prevention curriculum. Developed by the Ministry of Education and Training with support from UNFPA and other organizations, the curriculum also includes special training for parents to help them discuss sensitive health-related issues with their children.

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² Unless otherwise indicated, all figures are taken from Outlook 2010: AIDS Epidemic Update 2009, UNAIDS, 2010

³ "We Can..." Speaking about hope, the HIV response and UNAIDS, UNAIDS, 2010

⁴ Global Report on the AIDS Epidemic, UNAIDS, 2007

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