

10. HIV AND AIDS AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Young people are the group most at risk of infection. They also feel the impacts of HIV and AIDS. Effective prevention and support for this group is critical. Programmes must promote the development of young people's social and emotional skills, support the rights of young people to access the knowledge and information needed to make their own choices, and work with the 10–14 age group, whose patterns of behaviour have not yet been established.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Young people, aged 24 and under, are the people most at risk of infection with the HIV virus and are also dealing with the impacts of HIV and AIDS in communities around the world. More than half of those living with HIV and AIDS today are under 24, with an estimated 11.8 million young people aged 15–24 living with HIV and AIDS. Each day, nearly 6,000 young people between the ages of 15 and 24 become infected with HIV. Yet only a fraction of them know they are infected. 15.2 million children under 18 have lost one or both parents to AIDS, and millions more have been made vulnerable by the pandemic.¹

KEY DEBATES

We know that early adolescence, from the ages of 10 to 14, is a time when enduring patterns of healthy behaviour can be established, including postponing the onset of sexual activity. Establishing healthy patterns from the start is easier than changing already entrenched behaviours. There is therefore a window of opportunity to work with young people on HIV prevention and sexual and reproductive health more generally. However, too many programmes target older youth and do not take account of younger people and their specific needs and desires. Few people of this younger age group are meaningfully involved in developing the content and structure of programmes that are supposed to address their needs.

VSO'S POSITION

VSO believes young people have the right to information and services about all aspects of HIV and AIDS, from prevention to treatment, care and support. It is critical this is made available in a form that they understand and that empowers them to make decisions for themselves and make the choices that suit their own circumstances. Too often, HIV and AIDS interventions for young people have a narrow focus on the need to prevent transmission, with an emphasis on abstaining from sex or the use of condoms. Rarely do programmes support young people to understand the epidemic more broadly or to realise the influence of gender and relationships on their personal vulnerability.

Our HIV-prevention programmes need to work to support young people to be strong individuals with the knowledge and skills to make choices about their sexuality; relationships; contraceptive choices; fertility; how to cope with caring for sick relatives and loss of parents and siblings to AIDS-related illnesses; and their rights as a person living with HIV. This should also include giving young people living with HIV and AIDS (many of whom feel they can never have a sexual and reproductive life) information and advice about sexuality and sexual health.

Programmes need to address external cultural factors such as early marriage, female genital mutilation and inheritance to address young people's vulnerability to HIV and AIDS. It is important that programmes do not only have individual behaviour change as their focus – these broader structural issues must also be addressed. Programmes also need to



¹ UNICEF (2007) *Children and AIDS: A stock taking report*, p2.

ensure life skills and peer education interventions reflect principles of inclusion, gender equality, participation and power in order for them to be appropriate and effective responses for young people.

KEY PRINCIPLES

- VSO programmes should promote the development of young people's social and emotional skills, along with effective communication, negotiation and decision-making.
- VSO should support the rights of young people to access the knowledge and information they need to make their own choices. This should include sexual health, relationships and gender issues.
- Young people need to be given factual, consistent, accurate and comprehensive information.
- Programmes must acknowledge young people's right to be free from coercion and values imposed by others.
- Programmes should respect individuality, privacy and confidentiality.
- Programmes should use safe learning environments free from prejudice and judgement.
- Programmes should use methods that encourage young people to participate fully and direct their own learning.
- Programmes should provide systems that allow young people to report abuse and be able to access counselling and other support.
- Programmes that are targeting young people should always involve them in their design, delivery and review.
- Programmes need to empower communities to talk about issues regarding sex openly.
- Programmes should endeavour to provide young people with direction, guidance and accurate information and facts regarding sexual attitudes and behaviour, and HIV-prevention strategies in a consistent way.
- Programmes should target young people aged 10–14, as this is a vital window of opportunity to establish healthy behaviours.

RESOURCES

- UNICEF (2007) *Children and AIDS: A stock taking report*
- UNICEF (2002) *Young people and HIV and AIDS: Opportunity in crisis*



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