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Talking with Your Children about Your HIV Status or Your Children's Status [1]

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When thinking about talking to your children about your HIV status or your children's status, you may feel many different emotions. It is normal to feel frightened, anxious, guilty, or overwhelmed. It may help to discuss your feelings with someone you trust, such as a health care provider, counselor, family member, or friend. You may want to talk with that person about how and what you will say. You may also want to share your disclosure [2] (telling someone) plans with those who already know your HIV status, so they will be prepared to give accurate, reassuring, calm responses if the children bring it up with them.

Remember what you already know about your family: how your children learn new information, what your children may already know about HIV, and what feels most supportive to your family. Use this knowledge to decide how to disclose about HIV to your family. While there may not be an exact best way to disclose, there are some steps you can take to prepare.

Letting Your Children Know You Are Living with HIV (HIV+)

Telling your children that you are HIV+ can be really hard. It can be helpful to prepare yourself by thinking about how your children will react and what they will want to know based on their age and maturity. You may also find it helpful to talk with other parents who have told their children about their HIV status.

Your children will probably ask about your health. However, their main concern may be what will happen if you get sick. They will most likely need reassurance that they will be taken care of if something happens to you. They may also find it reassuring to know how you will be cared for if you get sick. For more information, see The Well Project's article, Making Plans for the Future Care of Your Children [3].

Children may also want to know how you got HIV and if they might get it too. Depending on their ages, they will have different questions. They may not have any questions at all, or ask questions later as they arise. Regardless of when they begin asking questions, it is best not to lie. Lying can damage your relationship with your children and lower their trust in you.

If your children have already learned something about HIV at school or through the media, you can use that as a chance to build on what they already know. Older children or teenagers often learn about HIV in school. Regardless of their knowledge about HIV, children can be quite perceptive and they may already suspect something. They may see you taking medications or going to your health care provider more often than some of their friends' moms. If your children already suspect something, they may feel angry that you have kept this from them. Telling them may help them benefit from being able to talk about HIV openly.

Let your children know whom they can talk to about your status. Tell them who else you have

already told. Be prepared that they might feel disappointed or angry if a lot of people knew before they did. Your local AIDS service organization may have a children's or youth group where they can talk with others in similar situations. Your health care provider may also have a counselor who can talk with your children.

Telling Children about Their HIV Status

Before talking, think about why you want your child to know. Perhaps your child has been in the hospital, taking medications, or asking questions. Whatever your reason, make sure that you are okay with your child knowing. If it is not okay with you, your child may sense that, and find it more difficult to be okay with it her/himself.

It is important to have some HIV-related information ready before you begin talking. Look for materials that have an optimistic tone. Children may want to know if they are going to die, how they got infected, or if they will become sick. It is important to know how you will answer these questions. Also, consider your own feelings about these concerns. You may choose to wait to have the conversation until you get some emotional support or talk through the answers to these questions with a friend.

Children need different types and amounts of information depending on their age. Begin with some simple ideas that you think are most important. Very small children may be too young to be told the name of the disease or many details, but try to be as honest as possible. You can tell them more and more in age-appropriate ways as the children get older and can understand more details.

Young children need information mostly about things that affect them right now. School-aged kids may need some basic information about what to do if they bleed. (All children should be taught that it is not a good idea to touch anyone's blood.) Teenagers will require more information about how HIV is spread [4] and how to prevent this from happening. It is important that all children know they cannot infect friends or family through casual contact.

It may take a long time for children to take in the information. Let your children know that they can always speak freely with you. You want your children to see you as a trustworthy adult so they will feel comfortable coming to you with questions in the future.

Your children may feel isolated, angry, scared, or depressed by knowledge of their HIV status. It may help if there is someone else to whom they can talk. Even before you talk to your child about her or his being HIV+, you can arrange a support network consisting of heath care providers and trusted family and friends.

While laws protect HIV+ people from discrimination [5], you may not want your children to let everyone know their HIV status. You can tell your children that HIV is a private family matter and that you will decide as a family whom to tell and how they should be told.

Taking Care of Yourself

While it can be extremely difficult to disclose [2] HIV information to children, it is better to tell your children as early as you can, especially once they start asking questions. It is usually easier to tell the truth than to try to cover up the diagnosis. Once children know, the family can start discussing things openly and dealing with the feelings that come up. Following the tips

listed below may make disclosure easier for you and your children:

- Deal with your own feelings first. Understand your own emotions about living with the diagnosis.
- Build a strong parent-child relationship
- Seek out support for yourself both before and after disclosure from friends, social workers, counselors, and others
- Prepare by gathering HIV-related information, creating an appropriate environment, and arranging supports for your children
- Find a time to disclose that is free from interruptions and appointments
- Try to be as relaxed and positive as possible before the conversation begins. Even if you feel anxious or sad, being relaxed and OK with your own feelings can help your children trust you and be open to their own feelings.
- Disclosure is a process. Even if your children do not react the way you hoped right away, with time, support, and information, they may be more accepting.
- Encourage your children to ask questions as they come up
- Give reassurance and hugs! And make sure you get some, too!

Tags:

- talking with your children about your HIV status [6]
- disclosure [7]
- disclosing HIV status to children [8]
- HIV+ children [9]

Additional Resources

Select the links below for additional material related to talking with your children about your HIV status or your children?s status.
Disclosing to Our Children: What the HIV Experience Teaches Us (PKIDs) [10]
Telling Your Child He Is HIV Positive (Parent24) [11]
Talking to your child about HIV (aidsmap) [12]
Telling Your Child You Have HIV (Speaking Up!) [13]
How, and When, Do You Tell a Child She is HIV-positive? (Intrahealth) [14]
Disclosing to Your Child (Straight Arrows) [15]
Telling My Child That I Am HIV-Positive (AnovaHealth) [16]
How Do You Tell a Child She Has HIV? (IOL Lifestyle) [17]
Living Positively: The Importance of Pediatric HIV Disclosure (USAID) [18]
How to Dance, by Zvandiri and the Superband of Zimbabwe (YouTube video) [19]

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[12] http://www.aidsmap.com/Talking-to-your-child-about-HIV/page/1374807/
[13] http://hivpolicyspeakup.wordpress.com/2013/04/11/telling-your-child-you-have-hiv/
[14] http://www.intrahealth.org/page/how-and-when-do-you-tell-a-child-she-is-hiv-positive
[15] http://straightarrows.org.au/media/Disclosing_to_Children.pdf
[16] http://www.anovahealth.co.za/images/uploads/TELLING_MY_CHILD_THAT_I_AM_HIV_POSITIVE_4_NewDOH.pdf
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[18] http://blog.usaid.gov/2013/05/living-positively-the-importance-of-pediatric-hiv-disclosure/
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