Talking with Your Children about HIV: HIV Awareness for Children

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HIV can be a tough subject for parents, guardians, and caregivers to discuss with their children. However, it is important that all families teach their children about HIV. There are many reasons you may want to discuss HIV and AIDS with your children: you or a family
member is living with HIV, your child is living with HIV, or you simply want to help your child understand HIV so that he or she does not get the virus.

There can be times when it is not appropriate or safe for women to tell their children or families that they are living with HIV. For more information about telling others that you or your child is living with HIV, see our fact sheet on Disclosure and HIV [3].

**Important:** if you are feeling threatened right now, call 911 or the National Domestic Violence hotline in the US at 800-799-SAFE [1-800-799-7233; or 1-800-787-3224 (TTY)]. You can also search for a safe space online at Domestic Shelters [4]. If you live outside the US, please go to the Hot Peach Pages [5] to find help near you.

Globally, around 2.1 million people living with HIV are between 10 and 19 years old, an increase of 30% since 2005. Each year since 2010, young women and girls have accounted for two thirds of new HIV cases.

In the US, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports that young people, ages 13 to 24, accounted for more than one in five of all people newly living with HIV in 2017. Yet nearly half of young people who are living with HIV don't know it. The CDC also reported in 2017 that 40% of high school students in the United States reported having had sex, and 30% said they had sex during the last three months. Among these, almost half did not use a condom. These statistics serve as a serious reminder to parents that they cannot afford to avoid talking with their children about HIV. For more information, see our fact sheet on HIV Risk and Teens [6].

Children and teenagers find out about HIV from all sorts of places: TV, radio, friends, newspapers, magazines, and the Internet. Talking with your children about HIV lets you give them facts and correct any myths [7] or incorrect information they may have picked up outside the home. It is also a chance to develop an open and honest relationship with your children.

The Facts about HIV

Many parents are uncomfortable talking with their children about HIV because they do not have the correct information themselves. Before you talk to your children about HIV, it is important for you to know the facts.

**What is HIV?**

- HIV stands for "Human Immunodeficiency Virus"
- Without treatment, HIV will eventually wear down the immune system [8] in most people to the point where they develop serious infections
- Many people take powerful and effective medications to fight the virus and live full lives; however, there is no cure for HIV [9]

**What is AIDS?**
• AIDS stands for "Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome"
• AIDS is the most advanced stage of HIV infection
• Many people take powerful and effective combinations of medications to fight the virus; however, there is no cure for AIDS

What is the difference between HIV and AIDS?

• Someone can be infected with HIV for many years with no signs of disease, or only mild-to-moderate symptoms
• The CDC identifies someone as having AIDS, if he or she is living with HIV and has one or both of these conditions:
  ○ At least one AIDS-defining opportunistic infection (see a list of opportunistic infections in our fact sheet on AIDS Defining Conditions (10))
  ○ A CD4 cell count (11) of 200 cells/mm$^3$ or less (a normal CD4 count is about 600 to 1,500 cells/mm$^3$)
• When people are diagnosed with HIV, they will always live with HIV. Regardless of how low their viral load (12) may be – even if it becomes "undetectable" – they will never go back to being HIV-negative.

For more information, see our fact sheet "What Are HIV & AIDS?" (13)

How is HIV transmitted (spread)?

HIV is transmitted through:

• Blood (including menstrual blood)
• Semen ("cum") and other male sexual fluids ("pre-cum")
• Vaginal fluids
• Breast milk

HIV is not transmitted through:

• Sweat
• Tears
• Saliva (spit)
• Urine (pee)
• Feces (poop)

HIV is also not transmitted through sex when a person living with HIV who is taking HIV drugs and has an undetectable viral load. This is one way that HIV treatment can also be HIV prevention. For more information on this exciting development, please see our fact sheet on Undetectable Equals Untransmittable (14).

The most common ways in which HIV is passed from one person to another are:
• Re-using and sharing needles and other drug equipment ("works") for injecting drugs (including steroids or hormones)
• Unprotected/unsafe sex (no condoms or other barriers, or treatment-as-prevention methods)
• Mother-to-child (during pregnancy, birth, or breastfeeding)

For more information on how HIV is spread, see our fact sheet on HIV Transmission.

How can HIV be prevented?

One of the most important messages you can share with your children is that HIV can be prevented. HIV cannot be transmitted, except when certain body fluids are exchanged (see above). Teach your children that they can greatly reduce the risk of getting HIV by:

• Always practicing safer sex (using condoms or other barriers, or treatment-as-prevention methods)
• Not having sex, if that is appropriate for them
• Having types of sex that present no risk of HIV, including masturbation
• Once they are sexually active, getting tested regularly for HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and getting any treatment they need
• Talking with their partners about sexual histories and HIV/STI status, and when they were each last tested
• Limiting their number of sexual partners
• Not injecting drugs, or if they do, always using new, clean needles and drug equipment

It is also important to tell children that HIV is not transmitted by casual contact such as:

• Being a friend to someone who is living with HIV
• Hugging
• Dancing
• Sharing food or drinks
• Using a shower, bath, or bed used by a person living with HIV
• Kissing (between people with no significant dental problems, such as bleeding gums or open sores)
• Sharing exercise equipment or a swimming pool

For more information, see our fact sheet on HIV Transmission.

Starting the Discussion

Every parent has his or her own style when talking about important subjects. Some parents choose to have a specific time when the family will sit down and discuss HIV. They may give out printed information (e.g., books, info sheets) or other resources to help children understand the facts.

Other parents take hints from their children and what is going on around them to talk about HIV. For example, they may try to bring up the topic when their children see or hear something about HIV on TV. Ask what the children have heard and what they know about
HIV. This will help you figure out what they already know and what you need to explain.

Note: When talking with your children about HIV, questions about death may come up. Explain death in simple terms. It is important not to explain that death is like sleep. Such an explanation may make your children worry that if they fall asleep, they will never wake up. It is also important to explain that while HIV is serious, it can be prevented and treated.

**Talking to Children of Different Ages**

It is never too early to talk to your children about HIV. In fact, by age eight (third grade in the US), many children have already heard about it. Talking to children about HIV is not a one-time-only conversation. Children will be ready to hear different levels of information at different ages. Often their questions will let you know that they are ready to hear more about it. The more open you are to questions, the more likely your children will be to ask them, and the greater your opportunity to give them correct information and help them make healthy choices. Talk early and talk often to make sure that your children have the right information for their age throughout their childhood.

**Toddlers/Preschoolers:**

Children up to age four are learning the basics about their bodies. They do not understand the concepts of disease, death, or sex. However, you can set the stage for future conversations: introduce them to the idea of sexuality by telling them the correct names for body parts. Most importantly, however, you want to give young children the message that you are open to their questions. When they feel they can ask you anything, they will be more likely to talk to you as they get older.

**School-age Children:**

Children five to eight years old are just learning about health, sickness, death, and sex. They can understand that HIV is a serious health problem which is caused by a virus, and that their chances of getting HIV are very small. You do not have to discuss sex at this age; however, you can teach children that some body fluids carry infection and should not be shared.

**Preteens/Tweens:**

Children nine to 12 years old think a lot about their bodies. Many of them are entering or going through puberty. At this age, children also feel a lot of peer pressure – pressure from other children their age – to try new (and possibly dangerous) things. Now is the time to tell them how HIV is spread. Since HIV is commonly spread by sexual contact, now is the time to give your children correct information about sex. Tell them about the importance of sexual health and safer sex [20]. Let them know that sharing needles or syringes for injection drug use [23], steroid injection, and informal tattooing or body piercing can put them at risk for getting HIV. Teach preteens that they have choices in life and that the decisions they make today could affect them for the rest of their lives. You may also want to tell your children that it is okay for them to talk to an adult they trust (parent, teacher, older relative) if they feel unhappy, pressured, or bullied.
Teens:

Thirteen- to 19-year-olds are often more concerned with their self-image and friendships than with what their parents have to say. Many teenagers take risks and feel that "it can't happen to me." During these formative years, it is important to continue to provide your child with correct information about HIV and safer sex. You may wish to provide resources such as books and videos that they can view on their own. This is also an important age to talk about treatment as prevention, including pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) and post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP). For more information, see our fact sheet on What Parents and Providers Need to Know about HIV Risk and Teens.

Taking Care of Yourself

Talking with children about HIV can make parents anxious. Educate yourself and have resources on hand. You will feel more comfortable, if you know the facts. Try to relax and let the conversation flow naturally. It is important to begin talking with your children at an early age, so that you all become comfortable with the subject and the words used to talk about it. You can use this opportunity to create a supportive and loving environment in which your children will feel comfortable asking questions and empowered to make healthy life choices.

Related articles by The Well Project

Talking with Your Children About Your HIV Status or Your Children's Status

Disclosure and HIV

What Parents and Providers Need to Know about HIV Risk and Teens

Teens and HIV: The Transition into Adulthood

Tags:

- talking with your children about HIV
- HIV awareness for children
- children and HIV
- HIV children
- speaking to children
- HIV facts for children
- parenting and HIV awareness
- HIV facts
- talking to children

Additional Resources

Select the links below for additional material related to talking with your children about HIV.

Talking with Young People About HIV/AIDS & Youth Development (New York State Department of Health)

South African Muppet Kami Speaks the Language of Acceptance (UNAIDS)