

Ages and Stages of Children

When talking with your children about HIV/AIDS, it's important to take their ages and developmental stages into account so that you provide age-appropriate information.

- **Toddlers/preschoolers:** Young children up to age 4 are learning the basics about their bodies and the world around them. They don't understand the concepts of disease, death, or sex. Children this age need to know that you will always be there for them. Although you wouldn't be talking about HIV/AIDS to children this young, you can introduce them to the concept of sexuality by providing the correct names for body parts associated with reproduction. Most importantly, however, you want to give young children the message that you're open to their questions. When they feel they can ask you anything, they'll be more likely to talk to you as they get older.
- **School-Age Children:** Children 5 to 8 years old are just learning about health, sickness, death, and sex. They can understand that HIV/AIDS is a serious health problem that is caused by a virus, and that their chances of getting HIV/AIDS are very small. If children are fearful about HIV/AIDS, reassure them that while HIV is a serious infection, few children get it.
- **Preteens:** Children 9 to 12 years old think a lot about their bodies, which are changing rapidly. Let them know how HIV is spread. Since HIV is commonly spread by sexual contact, it is important for your preteens to get correct information about sex. Warn them of the dangers of casual and unsafe sex. Let them know that needle or syringe sharing for intravenous drug use, steroid injection, tattooing, or body piercing can put an individual at risk for getting HIV. It is important that preteens know that the choices they make today have consequences that will affect the rest of their lives.
- **Teens:** Thirteen- to 19-year-olds are preoccupied with their self-image and friendships with peers. They are trying to become independent of their parents. Risk taking seems to be a part of many young people's lives. However, teens who experiment with sex and drugs are especially at risk of getting HIV.

Additional Resources

Talking With Kids: A Parent's Guide to Sex Education.

Produced by National PTA in cooperation with the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, the guide is intended to help parents communicate with their children about tough issues like sex. For a copy, which also is available in Spanish, go to National PTA's website at www.pta.org/parentinvolvement/healthsafety/index.asp, or call National PTA's customer service department at (800) 307-4PTA (4782).

"Talking with Kids About Tough Issues" is a national campaign encouraging parents to talk with their children earlier and more often about issues such as sex, HIV/AIDS, violence, alcohol, and drug use. In addition to its website, the campaign has English-language and Spanish-language booklets available. Call (800) CHILD-44 (244-5344), or visit www.talkingwithkids.org.

American Academy of Pediatrics. The academy has published a series of brochures dealing with teen issues. Titles include *Tips for Parents of Adolescents* (parent-child communication), *Talking to Your Young Teen About Sex and Sexuality* (for parents of children ages 9 to 14), *Know the Facts About HIV and AIDS*, and *Sex Education: A Bibliography of Educational Materials for Children, Adolescents, and Their Families*. Brochures, available in quantities of 100 for \$34.95 (nonmember price), can be ordered in the Bookstore area of www.aap.org or by calling the academy's toll-free number, (866) 843-2271. Individuals interested in a single copy of any of the above titles should contact their children's pediatrician.

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Talking with Kids About



HIV/AIDS

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HIV/AIDS is a difficult subject for parents to discuss with their peers, let alone explain to or have a conversation about with their children. Yet, HIV/AIDS is one of those tough subjects that all families must discuss.

Statistics from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention show that young people between the ages of 15 to 24 account for approximately half of all new HIV infections in the world, and represent almost a third of the total global population living with HIV/AIDS. Confronted with such startling statistics, parents cannot afford not to talk with their children about this topic and provide them with the facts about HIV/AIDS. (See box below.)

Parents also need to convey their values regarding sexual activity and drug use—behaviors that put young people at risk for HIV/AIDS—and help their children develop values they'll carry into adulthood.

So, what can parents do to make themselves comfortable when talking with their children? Here are some tips.

- **Relax.** Many parents feel uneasy talking to their children about such an emotionally charged issue. However, such conversations are necessary in order to keep your child safe and healthy. When you are able to look at the HIV/AIDS issue objectively, you probably will feel more comfortable broaching the subject with your son or daughter.
- **Know the Facts.** You don't have to know everything about HIV/AIDS, but knowing some basic facts and statistics will help you address some of your children's questions. (See "Facts About HIV/AIDS" below, as well as the additional resources cited at the end of this brochure.) When you can't answer your child's question, be honest and let him or her know that you don't have an answer. Then use that opportunity as a learning experience as the two of you investigate to find the answer together.
- **Talk Early.** It's never too early to talk with your child about HIV/AIDS. For example, school-age children undoubtedly will have heard something about HIV/AIDS. After all, HIV/AIDS has been an issue in

this country for almost a quarter-century. What your school-age child may have heard, however, may not be factually correct, and that's one of the reasons to have an age-appropriate discussion with your child.



- **Listen and Learn.** Listen to what your child has to say. Make time in your busy schedule to give your children your undivided attention and really observe and listen to them. Listening carefully to your children can build their confidence, letting them know they can express themselves freely, that you hear what they say, and that you care about what they think and what they feel. As a parent you can learn by listening. For example, conversations with your child about HIV/AIDS may reveal what your child does or doesn't know about the issue, as well as the myths that have been circulated about HIV/AIDS, which you can dispel with correct information.
- **Communicate Your Values.** Research shows that children want and need moral guidance from their parents. As a parent you have the chance to talk with your children about HIV/AIDS before anyone else can impart his or her views and perhaps confuse your child with incorrect information. Present the facts, give your child honest answers, and communicate your beliefs concerning sex, drug use, and other behaviors that put your child at risk for HIV/AIDS.
- **Talk Again and Again.** Don't think that a one-time discussion is all that is necessary. You want to have discussions about HIV/AIDS with your children early and often. Having these conversations with your children at different ages provides them with more in-depth information on the subject as they grow in their understanding of concepts such as disease, death, and sex. (See "Ages and Stages of Children" on back.) By talking with your children frequently, you learn to find teachable moments during a typical day to make talking about HIV/AIDS and other difficult topics more natural.

Facts About HIV/AIDS

- HIV stands for "Human Immunodeficiency Virus." The virus attacks a person's immune system, making him or her vulnerable to infections and diseases.
- AIDS stands for "Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome." It is a fatal disease caused by HIV infection.
- HIV is spread through personal exchange of body fluids such as blood and blood products, semen or vaginal fluid, and breast milk. The principal ways people can contract HIV is through sexual contact with an infected person or the sharing of needles or syringes for intravenous drug use, steroid injections, tattooing, or body piercing with an HIV-positive individual. Infants can be infected as the result of being born of or breast-fed by a woman who is HIV-positive.
- Contaminated blood or blood products as a result of blood transfusions, organ transplants, or artificial insemination is very rare, according to the American Academy of Pediatrics, as donors of blood, sperm, tissue, and organs in the United States are routinely tested for HIV.
- HIV cannot be spread through casual contact such as shaking hands, hugging, sharing living space with an HIV-infected person, or eating food prepared by an infected person. HIV also is not spread by insect bites, via swimming pools, by giving blood, or by the air around us. HIV is a weak virus and does not live long outside the body.
- You cannot tell if someone is HIV-positive or has AIDS just by looking at him or her.
- Currently, there is no cure for AIDS, and no vaccine to prevent contracting HIV.

Fact:

HIV cannot be spread through casual contact.