

PARENTING AND HIV AND AIDS

What is meant by good parenting skills?

Having good parenting skills means that you know how to educate your children and how to be a good parent. Children need support when growing up to be a happy, responsible and productive adult. Parenting skills refers to the ways mothers and fathers support their child in growing up, such as giving warmth, providing a secure home life, as well as helping the child to learn the rules of life and to develop self-esteem.

What are the specific parenting skills?

One important skill is getting involved in your child's life positively. The more involved a parent gets in his/her child's life, the more valued the child feels and the more likely the child will listen and respond to the parent.

The following are tips for a parent to get involved in a child's life:

- Establish a "together time". This must be a routine, weekly or bi-weekly time for doing something nice together.
- Be familiar with your child's activities, his/her friends and his/her friends' parents.
- Eat together as often as you can. Meals shared are a great opportunity to bond and talk about the day's events. Communicate clearly and in an unambiguous manner but take into consideration the child's age, ability, developmental stage, etc.
- Be a good listener, i.e., listen actively to what the child says. If your child makes statement that challenge and shock you, don't react to cut off further discussion.
- Be a role model: A parent should be living day-to-day example of his/her values. Let the values that you as a parent want in your child guide your family life.
- Praise and reward good behaviour consistently and immediately.
- Use mass media programs, such as radio, TV and print reports wisely to introduce sensitive subject in a natural, unforced way.
- Lay down family rules. Create rules and discuss them with the family and make sure everybody understands and appreciates their importance and the consequences of breaking them.

How can PLHIV take care of their children without infecting them?

It is not a problem to be a mother, father or caretaker of a child while being HIV-positive. A person can only get infected with HIV when in direct contact with body fluids such as blood or the fluids of sexual organs of a person who is infected with HIV.

If parents are HIV positive, should they tell their children?

Yes. It is very important that children are informed about the status of their parents and supported on how to live with this status. However, it depends on the age of the children if it is appropriate to tell them and what are the right words when explaining what the infections means for everyday life.

What kinds of skills do parents need for taking care of children living with HIV, and how can you show parental love and care for an infected child?

The first and foremost skill is to understand what an infected child is going through, for example:

- A child who is infected is likely to suffer from emotional problems or disturbed behaviours such as getting upset because of the stressful experience he/she is going through.
- An infected child might go through educational problems such as missing school,
- Difficulties in learning and needing extra help at school.
- A child might view him/herself as different from other children and might hate this.
- A child might become depressed.
- A child may be vulnerable to bullying.
- A child may undergo considerable physical suffering when the infection causes illnesses such as opportunistic infections. In addition, it will also be stressful for a parent when he/she has to deal with many people such as doctors, nurses and counselors. The parent has also to deal with the other children – the siblings who may feel neglected and embarrassed because of their sibling.

It is also easy for a parent to be overprotective of such a child.

The following are tips on how a parent can cope with such a situation:

- Live as normal a life as possible.
- Be open with your child about his/her difficulties.
- Restrict the child as little as possible.
- Encourage the child to be as independent as possible.
- Link with other families with similar experience for support.
- Help the child to get along with other children.
- Seek help if you feel you are not able to manage.

Parents who appreciate the emotional impact of the illness on the child and on the rest of the family are in a better situation to recognize problems early and do something about them.

Remember

All children need care, attention, security, love, nurturing, play, acceptance, a supportive home environment and specific help to overcome their individual problems. A guardian, leader or helper of a child should know/do the following to support an HIV positive child:

- Get sound knowledge of HIV and AIDS so that the child/children will be supported to avoid risk situations for infections and complications.
- Get regular medical check-ups for the child to initiate antiretroviral therapy when needed.
- Get information on and visit social services in the community for help and support.
- Love and care can be shown in many ways, for example, by hugging a child. There is no danger in touching HIV-positive children.

What is wrong with current parenting skills?

There is nothing wrong with current parenting skills, but the fast change of society and the many different influences in our lives often put new challenges into family lives. In order to face the challenges, a close relationship and communication between parents and children is important. A parent might assume that he/she has to make all the decisions of the family and the children have no right to disagree or have their say. Many parents do not talk to and educate their children on issues of sexuality. This is because of traditional norms that expect other people from the community to provide such information. However, these selected people within ethnic groups are often no longer around because people no longer live in traditional communities but there are no alternatives in place yet.

Why is it so difficult for parents to talk to their children about puberty and sexuality?

Traditional norms and customs of many ethnic groups in Tanzania have taboos that do not allow parents to talk about sexuality and reproductive health with their children. In the old traditional settings, respected members of the community were selected to do this; it was institutionalized in some ethnic groups.

To date, the traditional settings have been disrupted. Institutions are no longer effective because what is being taught does not prepare the young person to live effectively with the forces of modern times.

Unfortunately, no alternatives have been put in place. Young people often remain uninformed, partially informed, or misinformed about their sexuality. If they experiment with sex without protection, they might get infected with STIs and HIV. Half of all HIV infections are acquired by people below 25 years of age.

What kind of education can be given to children about HIV?

Children can learn in simplified concepts according to their ages about the following:

- How HIV is transmitted.
- How HIV and AIDS weakens the immune system.
- Disease progression from HIV to AIDS.
- Why the body can be attacked by opportunistic infections.
- Risky environments for HIV transmission.
- How to protect yourself from getting infected.

- How to take care of PLHIV.

The methodologies used must be child-friendly. They can learn, for example, through stories, poems, songs, drawings and pictures/cartoons.

Is it necessary for a mother and father to teach their children how to put on a condom openly? Isn't openness contributing to the increase of HIV and AIDS?

Health education is crucial in the prevention of HIV infections. Parents should ensure that their children get accurate information about HIV and about condom use. It is a very sensitive issue and it is not necessary for a mother or a father to teach their children how to put on a condom. If parents feel uncomfortable talking about it, they can find a respected professional such as a nurse, doctor or biology teacher who is more comfortable speaking about sexuality.

No research has ever shown that openness is responsible for the increase in the HIV prevalence; instead there is strong belief that information is power and that if people are accurately informed, they are better able to protect themselves from an HIV infection.

How can Peer Education Programmes contribute to inform and empower youth?

Peer education programmes have contributed effectively to young peoples' knowledge and empowerment by addressing sexuality and risky sexual behaviour. Peer educators are selected from a group of peers for their relationship and leadership potentials. They are trained to provide accurate information and teach peers through demonstrations, supporting healthy decisions and behaviour as well as serving as role models. Peer education programmes are successful because:

- Young people are likely to listen and imitate peers that are well-liked and respected.
- Peer educators who give examples of healthy behaviours can influence behaviours of their peers and help them avoid taking risks.
- Peer educators can support their peers both during and after training sessions.
- Peer educators are enabled to help manage and solve problems within groups of youth.
- Peer educators themselves can gain self-esteem, learn valuable social skills, make contacts and take more pride in their lives.

However, peer educators must work under supportive supervision of knowledgeable professionals who will continue to support them, answer difficult questions from their peers and provide moral support.

What is Life Skills education?

Life skills usually refer to cognitive (learning to know), personal (learning to be) and communication and interpersonal (learning to live together) skills. In relation to HIV and AIDS, life skills address issues around a healthy sexual lifestyle. It includes issues such

as HIV and AIDS and STI prevention and healthy relationships of young people. It moves beyond providing accurate information. It especially aims to develop in young people the skills to say “no”, to negotiate with a partner and to successfully follow their own objectives in life.

The following life skills should be taught to young people:

- Decision-making skills and critical thinking.
- Skills to set goals for the future.
- Skills for resisting peer pressure.
- Communication and negotiation skills for partnerships, sex and prevention of pregnancies and diseases.

Who should give sexual and reproductive health education to children and when?

Topics of sexual and reproductive health (SRH) are part of the science curriculum in primary schools and of biology, civics and home economics curricula in secondary schools. These topics can be learned well in schools. This type of education should be given preferably just before puberty and be reinforced in their health clubs and Peer Education programmes.

How can we facilitate parent’s awareness and who should do this? How can we reach children whose parents have died?

It is indeed true that parents sometimes do not have accurate knowledge about HIV and AIDS and yet they remain very crucial in the lives of children, as they are responsible for raising children and guiding them to live a healthy life. Parents who live in remote areas have limited access to education on HIV and AIDS by radio and TV. Ward AIDS Committees could be trained to provide this education and information for parents. The same could be done with faith leaders, who could be requested to talk to parents and pass on messages on HIV and AIDS prevention. In addition, Ngoma groups and singers could be trained in using edutainment skills to pass on messages in their communities, targeting parents.

The goals advocated by the campaign of the First Lady, Mama Salma Kikwete, “Mtoto wa mwenzio ni mwanao, mkinge na UKIMWI” could be a good guide in supporting parents, vulnerable and orphaned children. These goals are:

- Provide help to orphans and vulnerable children.
- Increase parents’ awareness on young people’s issues.
- Address cultural and traditional malpractices that fuel HIV transmission.
- Create partnership between the LGAs and all CSOs (NGOs, FBOs and CBOs) dealing with HIV and AIDS targeting young people and children.
- Promote VCT.
- Promote PMTCT services.

How can we guide and empower adolescents?

During adolescence many changes are happening to the body of a boy or a girl. This is a time when a child undergoes secondary sexual growth, psychological and sociological changes. This is the time when a boy/girl needs accurate information about sexual and reproductive health and when he/she needs a person to answer many questions the child has about the changes the child is experiencing.

This means: Treat every child as your own, protect them from AIDS. Unfortunately, often parents and teachers do not provide accurate information, or information is too little and comes too late. For parents, it is important to understand the need of their children for information. Parents can support their children by finding information for them, or by sending them to knowledgeable people or youth services.

Youth are at a risky stage in life. How can we best reach them and what can the CMAC do?

There are approaches that have been successful in other countries that we can learn from:

- Peer Education Program can be used to reach more young people with sexual and health information.
- Edutainment - combining education with entertainment, has worked well for young people who like to learn in a positive environment.
- Use young people's celebrities and idols to pass the messages to the youth. Celebrities such as footballers, singers, journalists, radio/TV presenters are good choices.
- Combine sports and education; for example, camps could be organized with morning session in sports followed by education session on life skills.
- Combining games and education- so there is an education session before or after a game of football.

Point to remember

In any activity targeting young people, remember to involve young people from the beginning to the end, i.e., from planning and implementation to monitoring and evaluation.

This can achieve high acceptance among the target population.