

# HOW

A Guide to help parents

# TO TALK

understand the basic facts

# TO YOUR

about HIV/AIDS and

# CHILDREN

communicate those facts

# ABOUT

to children.

# AIDS

Published by SIECUS, the Sexuality Information  
and Education Council of the United States

## SOME BASIC FACTS ABOUT HIV/AIDS

*How to Talk to Your Children About AIDS* is a guide designed to help parents understand the basic facts and communicate those facts to children. SIECUS wants to help parents protect their children from infection with HIV, the virus that causes AIDS.

"I heartily recommend...*How to Talk to Your Children About AIDS*. It is written in plain, easy-to-understand language."

**Abigail Van Buren**  
"Dear Abby"

### How to Talk to Your Children About AIDS

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### What is AIDS?

AIDS stands for Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome. AIDS refers to a group of illnesses that are a result of infection by HIV, the human immunodeficiency virus.

A person can be infected with HIV and not know it. People who are infected with HIV often have no symptoms and feel healthy.

On average, it takes more than 10 years for a person who is infected with the virus to become ill with AIDS. AIDS is the last stage of HIV disease. The virus weakens and finally causes a collapse of the body's ability to fight off illness.

When this happens, people with AIDS are vulnerable to other diseases, including rare types of cancer and pneumonia, and infections that do not threaten people whose immune systems are healthy.

### How do you become infected with HIV?

There are three major ways of becoming infected with HIV:

- Through any type of unprotected sexual intercourse.
- Through exchange of blood, primarily by sharing needles.
- From an HIV-infected woman to her baby during pregnancy or birth.

### Can you become infected with HIV from food, air, or water?

No. There are no known cases of HIV infection from toilet seats, clothing, dishes, sneezing, coughing, sharing food, biting, kissing, or simple contact with a person who has AIDS or is HIV-positive. In families where children have played, eaten, slept with, or kissed a brother or sister with AIDS, there are no known cases of child-to-child or child-to-adult transmission. In fact, there are no cases of family members being infected by living with someone who has the disease. Because HIV is found in blood, individuals should not share toothbrushes and razors. Families need information about how to safely handle blood.

### Are blood transfusions safe?

The U.S. blood supply is very safe. Before 1985, several thousand people became infected as a result of blood transfusions. Now all blood is screened for HIV. In very rare cases (one out of 40,000 transfusions), infection still occurs. You can donate your own blood before an elective surgery. Donating blood for other people is needed and poses no risk of infection.

### Can anyone become infected with HIV?

Anyone who practices unsafe behaviors is at risk for HIV infection. Men, women, and children have become infected. Black, White, Asian, and Hispanic people have become infected. Heterosexuals, bisexuals, gay men, and lesbians have become infected. It is not who you are that puts you at risk, but what you do.

### Is there a cure for AIDS?

No, not at the present time. Unfortunately, no cure is likely in the near future, although there are treatments helping people with HIV to lead longer, healthier lives.

### How do you know if you have the virus?

There are tests that can determine if a person has been exposed to HIV. Your local health department can refer you to a testing site. Counseling should come before and after the test. You may want to go to a clinic where the test is tracked by numbers and where you do not have to give your name.

### What if a child in the local school district has AIDS?

You don't need to worry about your child becoming infected by playing with, or studying next to, a child who has AIDS or is infected with HIV. HIV is not spread by any type of casual contact. Children with HIV have the right to attend school.

### How can you protect your children from AIDS?

Because there is no vaccine or treatment to prevent or cure AIDS at this time, the only protection is to teach your children about HIV and AIDS and about how they can protect themselves.

## HOW DO YOU TALK TO YOUR CHILDREN ABOUT AIDS?

Because one of the main ways of becoming infected with HIV is through sexual contact, you must learn to talk to our children about sexuality if you are going to talk to them about AIDS.

Many parents have concerns about talking to their children about sexual issues. Some feel uncomfortable because they do not know what to say or how to say it. Some feel that it will either scare children or encourage them to have intercourse. Yet, most parents want their children to have accurate information about sexuality and HIV prevention that is right for their age.

Whatever your views about sexuality education, you must understand that AIDS is life-threatening. To protect your children, you must overcome your discomfort in talking about sexual health.

These ideas will help you talk with your child.

## BASIC GUIDELINES

### Parents are the primary sexuality educators of their children.

Children want to talk about sex with their parents and they want to hear their values. Don't be afraid of being old-fashioned or embarrassed. You can tell your children that you find it hard to talk about these subjects but that you are doing it because you love them.

### The most important step you can take is to say the first words.

Children do not always ask questions about sexuality. So *you* must begin. Start after watching a television program, after listening to news on the radio, or after reading a magazine or newspaper article about AIDS.

### Try to answer questions as they come up.

It is never a good idea to tell your children that they need to wait until they are older before you will answer their questions. If you don't know how to answer a question, tell your children you will look it up and tell them later. And be sure to do so. With an

older child, you might want to go to the library and look up the information together.

**Throughout your conversations,  
talk about the joys of human sexuality.**

This might include telling them that sexuality is natural and healthy, that loving relationships are often the best part of life, and that intimate experiences can be a wonderful part of adult life.

**Let your children know that  
they can always ask questions.**

Let them know you love them and want to help even if they do things you may not like.

**Know what is taught about human  
sexuality and HIV/AIDS in your schools,  
churches, temples, and youth groups.**

Encourage these organizations to include sexuality and AIDS education in their youth programs.

**When you talk with your children about  
sexuality and AIDS, you are telling them that  
you care about their happiness and well-being.**

When you talk, you are also sharing your values. This is one of the greatest joys of parenting.

**Talking with infants and toddlers (birth–2 years).**

Of course, infants and toddlers do not need to know the facts about HIV/AIDS. But they are beginning to learn about sexuality, and you are their main teachers.

By naming all the parts of their body, you are teaching them that their entire body is natural and healthy. (“This is your *arm*. This is your *elbow*. This is your *vulva/penis*. This is your *knee*.”) By reacting calmly when they touch their genitals, you are teaching them that sexual feelings are normal and healthy. By holding them, hugging them, talking with them, and responding to their needs, you are laying the groundwork for trust and open discussions.

**Talking with preschool children (3–4 years).**

Children at this age are learning about their bodies. They learn about their world through play. They begin to ask questions about where babies come from.

They can understand simple answers. They do not understand abstract ideas or adult sexual behaviors. They can learn simple things about health, such as bathing, washing their hands, brushing their teeth, eating good foods, and napping. They can begin to accept the need for privacy.

The best thing a parent can do at this age is to create a home where children will feel free to ask questions about their bodies, health, and sexuality. Children will then learn that sexuality is one of the things they can talk about in their homes.

**Talking with young children (5–8 years).**

Children at this age understand more complex issues about health, disease, and sexuality. They are interested in birth, families, and death. They have probably heard about AIDS from television, friends, or adults.

They may have questions or fears about HIV/AIDS. They may have heard that people get AIDS from being bad. They understand basic answers to questions based upon concrete examples from their lives.

If your children cut their finger and blood appears, you have an excellent opportunity to explain how germs (things that make you sick) can get into the blood system from cuts in the body. If they are in a school with a child who is infected with HIV, they need to know that they cannot get AIDS from playing, studying, eating with, or talking with that child.

**Talking with preteens (9–12 years).**

Children at this age are going through puberty changes. They are concerned about their bodies, their looks, and what is “normal.” For some, this time marks the start of dating, early sexual experiences, and drug experimentation.

Because of the strong social pressures that start at this age, it is important that you talk about HIV/AIDS regardless of what you know about your children’s sexual or drug experiences. As a concerned parent, you must make certain your children know about prevention *now*.

During the changes of puberty, preteens are very curious about sex and need basic, accurate information. They need to know what is meant by sexual

intercourse, homosexuality, and oral, anal, and vaginal sex. They need to know that sex has consequences, including pregnancy, diseases, and HIV infection. They need to know why sexual intercourse is an adult behavior and why it is a good idea for young people to wait to have sex. They need to know how HIV is transmitted, how it is *not* transmitted, and how to prevent transmission, including talking about condoms.

This may seem like a difficult task, but it will give you a chance to teach your children the values that you hope they will adopt in their lives. It is also the time to let your children know that they can come to you with questions about HIV/AIDS or sexuality.

### Talking with teens (13–19 years).

You should tell your teenagers and preteens that the best way to prevent HIV infection is by not having any type of sexual intercourse or using any type of drugs. At the same time, you should share your values about sexual behaviors.

Many parents want to tell their children to wait to have intercourse at least until they are no longer teenagers. But most children are not waiting. In fact, the majority of Americans have intercourse by their twentieth birthday. Therefore, most parents also want to make sure their children can protect themselves against pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV.

You can talk to your teens about the full range of sexual behaviors that people find pleasurable. Many of these activities involve “safer sex”—not transmitting HIV or causing pregnancy. They include kissing, hand holding, caressing, masturbation, and other sexual behaviors that do not involve the exchange of body fluids.

Social pressure to try sex and drugs are often very strong for teens. All young people must, therefore, know that:

- not having sexual intercourse (abstinence) is the best method for preventing HIV infection. It is also the best method for preventing other sexually transmitted diseases and pregnancy.

- lifelong monogamy with an uninfected and honest partner is as effective in preventing HIV infection as abstinence.
- teenagers who have intercourse must use *latex* condoms for each and every act of intercourse, including oral sex, anal sex, and vaginal sex. Condoms are very effective in preventing pregnancy and diseases. In fact, using a condom is 10,000 time safer than not using one.
- teenagers should avoid all drugs including alcohol. Drugs and alcohol impair good decision-making and may suppress the immune system. Sharing needles of any kind puts people at risk for HIV. This includes using needles for injecting drugs, skin-popping, injecting steroids, piercing the ears and body, and tattooing.

### AIDS IS PREVENTABLE

It is important for children and adults to know that HIV infection is easy to prevent.

You can raise your children to feel good about themselves, to enjoy sex when they are adults, and to protect themselves against unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV.

### MORE ABOUT AIDS: FOR YOU AND YOUR CHILDREN

#### HIV/AIDS: A SIECUS Annotated Bibliography

SIECUS publishes an annotated bibliography on AIDS issues for professionals, parents, and children. A single copy is free on the SIECUS Web site (<http://www.siecus.org>) and for \$2.00 by writing to: Publications Department, SIECUS, 130 West 42nd Street, Suite 350, New York, NY 10036-7802.

## BOOKS FOR CHILDREN

***Children and the AIDS Virus:******A Book for Children, Parents, and Teachers***

Rosemarie Hausherr

\$5.99

Clarion Books, 215 Park Avenue South,  
New York, NY 10003. 212/420-5800.***Come Sit By Me***

Margaret Marrifield, M.D., and Heather Collins

\$6.95

Women's Press, 517 College Street, Suite 233,  
Toronto, Ontario M6G4A2, Canada. 416/921-2425.***Jenny's Locket***

Christine Simpson

\$5.95

Pearl Press, Nazareth, PA 18064. 610/759-7526.

***Losing Uncle Tim***

Mary Kate Jordan

\$5.95

Albert Whitman and Co., 6340 Oakton Street,  
Morton Grove, IL 60053. 800/255-7675.***You Can Call Me Willy:******A Story for Children About AIDS***

Joan C. Verniero

\$8.95

Magination Press, 19 Union Square West, 8th Floor,  
New York, NY 10003. 212/924-3344.***Whisper, Whisper Jesse, Whisper, Whisper Josh:******A Story About AIDS***

Eileen Pollack

\$5.95

Advantage/Aurora Publications, P.O. Box 881, Kendall  
Square, Cambridge, MA 02141. 617/721-1064.

## BOOKS FOR TEENS

***AIDS: Trading Fears for Facts—A Guide for Teens***

Karen Hein, M.D., and

Theresa Foy DiGeronimo

\$4.95

Consumer Report Books, 9180 LeSaint Drive,  
Fairfield, OH 45014. 800/272-0732.***Risky Times: How to Be AIDS-Smart  
and Stay Healthy—A Guide for Teenagers***

Jeanne Blake

\$5.95

Workman Publishing Co, Inc., 708 Broadway,  
New York, NY 10003. 800/722-7202.***What You Can Do to Avoid AIDS***

Earvin "Magic" Johnson

\$3.99

Chronicle Books, 275 Fifth Street, San Francisco,  
CA 94103. 414/777-7240.FOR MORE INFORMATION IN YOUR  
COMMUNITY, CALL YOUR

- Local Health Department
- Local AIDS Organization
- Local Planned Parenthood Chapter
- Local Library
- National AIDS Hotline:  
English: 800/342-AIDS.  
Spanish: 800/344/7432.  
TDD: 800/243-7889.



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