COVER STORY

HELP YOUR TEEN PREPARE FOR ADULTHOOD

Concerned about the negative influences all round, some organisations have come up with ways to help parents play an active role in their adolescent children's formation. DOROTHY KWEYU reports on a recent presentation by the Initiation to Responsible Adulthood Programme

Amid the gloom of teenage pregnancies and drug abuse, a quiet revolution is taking place in sections of Kenyan society, whose impact could put the brakes on a gathering storm that is the crisis of parenting.

Recently, I was part of an audience that is keen to play an active role in their teenagers' character formation. The event was held at St Peter Clavers' Primary School on Racecourse Road in downtown Nairobi. So eager were the parents that even those who missed a place to sit in the jam-packed hall stood or sat outside to catch the body language of the main presenter, Mr Martin Simiyu.

A team member of family life counsellors from the Catholic archdiocese of Nairobi, Mato, as he is fondly known by colleagues and the youngsters he mentors, is a gifted motivational speaker.

Although the half-day seminar was meant to prepare parents whose sons and daughters — mostly this year's Kenya Certificate of Primary Education examination candidates — are preparing for initiation into adulthood, the lacklustre programme brochure promised far less than Mato ended up delivering to his enthralled climax on Sunday, November 22, 2009, with the circumcision of 220 boys, and 80 girls who will undergo a symbolic rite of passage.

The nine-day programme at Queen of Apostles Seminary in Ruaraka, on the outskirts of Nairobi, which entails circumcision for boys (for those who come from communities that circumcise boys) and alternative rites of passage for girls and those like peer pressure, negative media influence, substance abuse and the new environment and experience in secondary schools they will be joining soon.

The holistic programme aims at enabling teenagers to build healthy relationships with their parents and peers as they are prepared to become responsible adults.

According to the Irap brochure, "Absence of proper guidance and counselling has led many teenagers to engage in substance abuse, premarital sex, HIV/Aids, bad attitudes and many other antisocial behaviours that lead to irresponsible adulthood."

As Mato takes to the podium, he allays parents' fears over their young ones' wellbeing during the seven days they are prepared to handle the situation, should the need arise.

The focus of the seminar is behaviour change. How do you empower your teen to become a responsible adult?

Noting that the teens know a lot more than their parents would admit (wamechanuka), at 13 and 14, most of them are not yet at the stage where parents would throw in the towel and say, 'Wamenishinda' (they've defeated me).

The facilitator emphasises that the retreat ahead of the youngsters is a tiny, though important aspect of their learning, and that the real task lies in parents' realising and being connected with their children's needs.

"What does your adolescent want?" Mato thought would be the doctor or lawyer you failed to become tells you that he wants to be a musician — or a DJ — and for a good reason."Musicians have money", the boy argues.

You want to reach out for the hammer, and you can't resist telling him — or her — just how brainless they are. The girl might wish to be a model, simply because she is mesmerised by the catwalks she sees on TV.

Instead of hitting the roof and rubbishing their career choice, Mato recommends that you build on that. Say to him: "That's a very good profession. Now, what you need to do is study hard to qualify for a degree in mass communications so that you become the best musician in town." The teenager, says Mato, is looking for achievement, satisfaction and excellence, and the worst you can do is give them PhDs — pull them down.

Another thing they value is their friends. Unlike preteens who live by examples on parental — and even teachers — naïveté. They treat "mbuyus" (fathers) with disdain, he says, giving the example of the familiar "song" against children using condoms. Truth is, they watch condom ads on TV 24/7 and an authoritarian ban on the "rubbers" without explaining why they should not indulge in sex during this period is useless.

The truth, Mato says, is that teenagers are walking about with condoms because "DJ Pinye ana yake (DJ Pinye has his)" and they are abusing drugs and getting them into school under the very noses of their teachers. He gives the example of a teacher, who while trying to explain how to use a condom said, "I wish I had one to show you how it works" — only for one boy to shoot up with, 'I have one'. "Actually, he had three," Mato quips.

Due to peer influence, schoolboys have devised elaborate ways of sneaking in drugs and other forbidden substances, which they hide under fences and in flowerbeds ahead of inspection, only to retrieve them later.

Therefore, the point is not about forbidding your teen to have friends, but rather, allowing them to be close to him — at your house — so that you are able to judge the kind of company he keeps. That way, "if he's in bad company, you know and can deal with it," he says.

You get your teen to bring his friends home by opening up discussion on what they like — or dislike — about their friends. Because they value their friends, showing them that matters if their friends confirm it."

Recognition matters a lot for teenagers, Mato says. They want to feel accepted and "grown-up". You hurt their feelings and sense of self-worth when you trust the house-help with cash all the time. As long as you appear to trust the house-help more than them, you make them feel inferior and they will con you of money when they get an opportunity.

Ignoring their feelings can result in costly arrangements such as extra tuition that fails to bear fruit because they never asked for it, or rejection of shoes you bought for them without consultation, all because you thought you knew it all.

Mato suggests that forced tuition that denies youngsters rest could be some parents' way of running away from the responsibility of raising their children. And when children fail to perform as per your expectations, you call them "useless", further denting their self-esteem. According to him, recognition goes with responsibility and boosts teenagers' feelings of self-worth.

Coming up with programmes like family outings without consulting the teens is another problem. They might decline to join you, and if you force them to, they will be with you in body while their mind is elsewhere.

Closely related to feelings is the all-important need for identity, which mostly affects children of single parents. While acknowledging factors that might lead to raising a child single-handedly, Mato underlines the need to link the child with the other parent.

He gave the example of a mother who consistently rebuffed her daughter's efforts at knowing her father. In spite of the mother's consistent protests that her ex was a drunkard, the girl endeavoured to find her father, whom she eventually invited to her graduation. True to form, he showed up drunk, and although the girl was not bothered, the mother walked away in protest.

And then there's the tricky one: boy-girl relationships! Although most parents view their teenagers' relations with the opposite sex with much unease, Mato notes that this is a basic need for adolescents and it is not always with bad intentions. He sympathises with parents who live the blissful lie that their children have no relationship with the opposite sex.

"You got married to his father or her mother because you related as boy and girl, so why pretend that he or she is covered by the blood of Jesus and has no need to mix with the opposite sex?" Mato asks.

The danger in shielding teens from the opposite sex is that when they eventually go out into the world, they don't know how to behave and end up in reckless relationships that expose them to pregnancy or HIV. Instead, teach girls practical ways of rebuffing unwelcome advances, Mato advises.

"Begin helping them now," he says. Although they are somewhere between childhood and adulthood, teenagers want to be seen as mature and it's the parents' duty to help them transit to adulthood. Let them know what is entailed in being an adult by socialising them — another of adolescents' needs.

In summary, teenagers are looking for affirmation, and this demands that parents relate to them on a one-on-one basis. Assign them roles to enhance

Far left: Family life counsellor Martin Simiyu (in a black-and-white shirt) with last year's Standard Eight leavers three days after the boys were circumcised. Above: XXXXXXXXXXXXX
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LIVING POSITIVELY

Loss of a worker that left me dumbstruck

It is the unsung helpers who link me with the community

That Thursday I woke up feeling extremely low. My instincts told me I might receive very bad news, but I banished the evil thought. "Perhaps it's because I have to wake up early and head straight for a donor's meeting on the other side of town," I told myself. The previous day, the country director of the donor agency had called and insisted that I attend the meeting myself. I felt intimidated by the tone because they hold the purse strings, but I did not take it very kindly, given that I have staff who can able represent me at such meetings. Nevertheless, I took a quick shower, took my antiretroviral drugs and headed straight into the Kiambu Road traffic jam.

The traffic looked heavier than usual. Normally, I would use this time to meditate, but not that day. I impulsively picked my phone and checked for incoming messages. There was a terse one from the office: "I'm sorry, one of our Korogocho community health workers and her daughter have been murdered."

What? It couldn't be! How could they kill a health worker? What does a health worker have that is worth her life? These and other questions raced through my mind as I pulled over. Then I decided to go to Korogocho. I didn't care what the donor would say. My 50-plus CHW Josephine and her 19-year-old daughter, who was eight-and-a-half months pregnant, had been murdered.

Their house, a makeshift structure, was splattered with blood. It was the ugliest and saddest scene I had witnessed in the recent past after the Mathira massacre. Another community health worker who lived nearby narrated what had happened the night before, and how they had all run to their houses for cover, leaving Sheila, the deceased's 13-month-old grand-daughter, at the mercy of the killers.

The poor child witnessed the murder of her grandmother and mother. She had screamed and crawled over the two corpses, trying to alert neighbours. Those who had heard her said she had cried, "Ua mum, dush dush!" apparently imitating the sound of gunfire. I couldn't take it, and sank lower in my sorrow.

"Has she been fed?" I found myself asking.

"No," one of the surviving daughters answered, rushing to get something for Sheila when they remembered that she had slept between the corpses until the police came.

"We were too shocked to remember things like food," they apologised.

I tried to find out what the authorities were doing. Nothing much. In fact, some spent cartridges were still there.

I promised to be with the family as I tried hard not to break down in front of my workers. I guessed they could feel the helplessness and emptiness of my promise. Everyone is scared of the gang; how could I promise anything yet I could see the fear and insecurity as we watched who came in through the door and prayed it wasn't the same gang coming to finish us? Apparently, as they left the previous night, they had been heard saying they were not through with the family yet. Well, I took Sheila under my care although I felt overwhelmed.

When I meet people on the street, they congratulate me for doing a good job in the community, I wondered what would say now that one of my "hands" had been cut off through this brutal killing. Because it's the unsung CHWs who make me be recognised as reaching the community.

Josephine has been there for as long as I could remember, waking up at 5:30 a.m. to split firewood to prepare porridge for some 300 orphans in our Korogocho drop-in centre. She would then carry a few jerry cans of porridge to the bedridden clients, bathe them, feed them and ensure that they took their medicine before dashing back to the drop-in centre to prepare lunch for the children and other clients.

This is the diary of Asunta Wagura, a mother of two who tested positive more than 20 years ago. She is the executive director of the Kenya Network of Women with Aids (KENWA).