

AIDS Link

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Who's following in my footsteps?

A Catholic priest recently told the following story: "One day a father and son went down to the Belize River. As they were standing on the bank, preparing to brave the river, the father turned to the son and said, 'Watch your step crossing the river.' But the boy looked at his father and said, 'No you watch your step as I will be following in your footsteps'." This is an interesting example of how parental behavior affects the development of children's attitudes, morals, values, and actions.



Parents cannot forget that their actions have a tremendous impact on their children. Children look up to their parents as role models. They want to be just like them. So as parents it is important to make sure your behaviors are worth imitating.

Think about what personality traits you possess that you would be pleased if your sons or daughters developed. Is it your genuine concern for others, your sense of humor, or your ability to have lots of sex partners? Although the latter is common tradition to be passed from father to son, fathers are also modeling promiscuity for their daughters. And in this situation, mothers, by not stepping in or voicing their opinions, are reinforcing that promiscuity is an acceptable behavior for all children. As a parent, consider why you would feel any differently if your son or daughter assumed your traits. Why are boys and

girls treated differently? Why don't we hold men and women accountable to the same standards? They are certainly capable of making the same decisions to do the right thing. And they are also both vulnerable to being infected by HIV due to the effects of promiscuity.

It is time to tell our children that they can do better. They can wait to have sex with a person of integrity, a respectful partner who is interested in protecting both people involved. And if they can't wait, give them tools and knowledge that empower and support them to respect, protect, and care for their body, for it is the only one they will get in this lifetime. It is the role of parents to protect children and let children know that they do not have to put themselves at risk of HIV.

Life with HIV

A family story

"I was diagnosed in 2004. Before that I was really sick. I was going down, down. I was working and I got sick so my mom decided to take me to a different place to get tests done. I was married to my husband. I went to Belize City with my mom to get the test. They ran all kinds of blood work. When the test came back they took us in to a room and told me I was positive. I was shocked. My mother told me it was not the end of the world, that she would be there for me and my son with support. So we went home. It

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Issue 9

Family issues

When looking at the effects of HIV on the family unit it is important to ask ourselves what examples we want to set as parents and how can we prepare our children for the future and make them aware of the reality of HIV. Communication and education, modeling positive relationships, and encouraging early and routine access to testing and care are all ways to inform our children about HIV, while improving our own lives.

Communication

Communication is crucial for all healthy relationships. Communication helps us to share information, recognize others' perspectives, and avoid misunderstandings. For healthy communication it is important to balance speaking and listening. Studies have shown that the tone of our voice, our body language, and our facial expressions can contribute to a conversation just as much as our words. So it is important to be mindful of these factors when speaking to others. In the family unit it is important for positive communication to take place not only between parents but also between parents and children. Hopefully, modeling this positive communication with your children will improve their communication skills with their siblings and peers.

When comfortable communication exists in the home it will be easier to bring up the challenging issues of talking to children about puberty, sex and sexuality, HIV, and sexual and reproductive health (see box with tips on how to do this). Remember, when talking to your children be careful about the language that you choose to use because these are the words they will repeat, especially when talking about HIV

and those that are infected. Negative and stigmatizing words like victim, sinner, wicked, or bad person are words that keep people from getting tested and continue the spread of HIV.

Role of sexual education in schools

Some parents assume that their children will learn all they need to know about health education at school. And at the same time some teachers feel uncomfortable teaching about sex and related topics, so in the end the child is the one who suffers from this misunderstanding.



However, for the schools that are following the Health and Family Life Education curriculum (HFLE), which addresses four major strands of information: self and interpersonal relationships, eating and fitness, managing the environment, and sex and sexuality, they hope to see improvements. Research shows that skills-based health education, such as HFLE, can prevent high-risk sexual

behavior and delinquency, delay the onset age of the abuse of substances (tobacco, alcohol, and other drugs), and improve self esteem and academic performance. Many parents are skeptical of HFLE because they think that teachers will be talking to their children about sex, HIV, and condom use before they are old enough to know. In truth, HFLE does not address HIV until Standard IV at which point it discusses the facts about HIV, showing empathy for those infected, and prevention through a lesson entitled: *'I am not ready for sex right now'*. If you are interested in what your children are learning at school, take the time to talk to their teacher or have conversations with your children where you can share your values and listen to their thoughts.

Strategies for talking to children

- Set good examples that show kids how our lives are enriched by our values.
- Use correct names for sex organs and sexual behaviors.
- Take advantage of "teachable moments." A friend's pregnancy, neighborhood gossip, and TV shows can help start a conversation.
- Don't use scare tactics as a way to stop young people from having sex — it doesn't work.
- Give accurate, honest, short, and simple answers.
- Figure out what you want to say about your own feelings and values before you speak.

This list is an excerpt from Planned Parenthood website. You may access the entire list at www.plannedparenthood.org.

For more information, see page 12.

Modeling positive relationships

Communication is a good thing and many positive things will come from it, but we are all familiar with

the saying, 'Actions speak louder than words.' It is important to make sure that our behaviors are in line with the messages we are giving to our family and our community. This accountability for our actions can affect all relationships but here we will look specifically at the dating relationships. A women's development officer recently said in reference to dating and marriage, "Don't get into a relationship looking to change someone." For example, if your partner cheats on you while you are dating it will likely get worse when you get married. The same principle applies to alcohol and drug abuse, verbal and physical abuse, not going to church, and unwillingness to communicate. If you chose to be with a partner that has certain habits that you do not agree with or would not want your children to possess, it will make raising children difficult. Also, in accepting these behaviors you are modeling for your children that it is okay for dad to hit or yell at mom, it is okay for mom to have lots of men besides dad, or it is okay that either parent drinks too much. Domestic violence, multiple partners outside of marriage, and alcohol abuse are all factors that increase your risk of HIV and are probably not behaviors you want to be teaching your children.

Behaviors to teach your children about healthy lifestyles include healthy communication (mentioned above) and routine medical care, including family planning and naming a guardian.

Early and routine medical care

Routine medical care in regards to sexual and reproductive health should start before your first sexual encounter. If you are considering marriage or beginning a sexual relationship it is important that both partners get tested for HIV. Before you have sex is also a good time to talk about family planning. There are many options when it comes to family planning - condom use, birth control pills or injections, and natural family planning, to name a few. When both negative partners are mutually faithful family planning is totally free from HIV. However, when mutual faithfulness does not exist, the only method that protects you from HIV is condoms, used correctly and consistently. Using condoms from the beginning of a relationship will greatly increase your safety no matter what happens to your partner's faithfulness.

After becoming sexually active it is important to continue to test for HIV on a regular basis. Doctors recommend every six to twelve months. It is easier to remember to test if you incorporate this into your regular medical exam or plan it for a day that has significance to you. By testing early and often, you will not only set a good example for your children about taking care of their bodies, but it also will give you the power of knowledge. When you know your HIV status, even if it is positive, you can take steps to protect yourself and others. When you find out your HIV diagnosis early, you can access treatment and care early and take steps to greatly extend your life.

It is also important for both parents to get tested before planning to have children and at the very least the mother should be tested for HIV in the first three months of her pregnancy. Currently, over 75% of mothers are finding out their HIV status during pregnancy. If the mother is HIV positive, testing early during pregnancy will allow time for precautions to be taken to prevent the baby from being born with HIV.



Placencia billboard created by St. John's

Naming a guardian

Another part of planning that comes with having a family is planning for a future without you in it. Many people struggle with their own mortality and choose not to think about the idea that one day we all will leave this life. However, as parents we are responsible for another life. We need to think about who would assume our role as caregiver if anything ever happened to us. This has nothing to do with living with HIV, because if parents who are HIV positive have tested early, are in treatment, and are taking care of

their body, they can lead a normal life. Making a plan and naming a guardian is about being a responsible parent, one who is looking out for the best interest of their children. Legally this process can be done by a lawyer or justice of the peace. But it can be as simple as having a conversation with the person you would like to take over as caregiver in the event that you are unable. This gives them the opportunity to think about and prepare for the responsibility of raising children.

Discussion Topic

How can you protect your family from HIV?

HIV has become one of the biggest threats to the human family and has certainly made its place in the history of our time. However, *AIDS Link* wanted to look at this issue on a smaller level and see how HIV is being addressed at the basic family unit. By asking the question, 'How can you protect your family from HIV?' we hope to identify strategies that will empower families to make a difference to our future as it relates to HIV. Various responses included education and being informed, communication, parental behavior, seeking early testing, and early care.

Helen Smith, St. Andrew's School Principal

"Bring in the spiritual aspect by teaching children bible principles. Help children to practice refusal skills in order to equip them to say 'no' with dignity and strength."



Tammy Caliz, Claret Care

"You can protect your family by first educating them about different prevention methods and how HIV is spread. With this knowledge they will know how to protect themselves. Also, it is important to educate children who are HIV positive on ways to protect themselves from other various infections and colds."

Nurse Elizabeth Blanco, Corozal Hospital

"I would educate my family on building their self esteem, delaying sexual activity until they have laid a foundation for themselves and their future, by making sure to get an education and go as far as possible, resisting peer pressure and how to balance life, and taking care of each aspect of physical, emotional, social, spiritual and mental well being."

Elisa Castellanos, PASMO

"I believe that information is protection and I see a lot of Belizean families who don't talk to their children openly about HIV in particular, nor sexual reproductive health in general. In the work I do I have come across many young people who ask questions that I believe parents should answer. Young people need to be able to openly discuss with parents so that the young people
4 are aware of what the parents expect of them in terms of sexual debut, as well as to give parents a

chance to warn them about the different STIs. And if parents don't know, perhaps they can visit educational clinics such as BFLA together with their kids so that the experience is a familial one."

Dr. Marvin Manzanero, National AIDS Programme

"Education starts at home, that is the key aspect that everybody needs to understand and may be the only solution to the HIV epidemic. You can't rely a 100% on the health aspect for the prevention component in HIV/AIDS. A good percentage lies within a family educational matrix."

San Ignacio VCT Center Nurses

"It is important for children to talk to their parents, especially about sexual abuse. With that immediate conversation, there are things that can be done to prevent pregnancy and HIV infection. Also, I talk to my children about how to deal with blood on the playground. Encourage them to always call their teacher."

Diana Pook, San Ignacio COMPAR

"As a parent you need to be conscious of how you are living and remember that you are responsible for others and know that if you become infected it not only affects you but your entire family, as well. You are not the only one that suffers. Your children and your partner suffer too. This is not only for HIV, but other illness such as alcoholism and drug abuse. Love, responsibility, and giving up selfishness are key to being a successful parent. Lastly, you should be responsible for your health with regular check-ups and HIV tests. If you are HIV positive, take advantage of early access to care, which can extend your life."

Stephanie Gillet, Alliance Against AIDS

"Discussing the issue at home is the way to start. Assess what your family members know and ask them how they would react if a family member was HIV positive. It should be talked about at least three times a year when the family gets together. This is something that no one is immune to, no family, village, town or neighborhood. Another way could be to get involved with an NGO that provides services for people living with HIV by volunteering, fundraising, or taking the time to learn more about the issue."

Rubi Magana, Corozal HECOPAB

“Talk with them. When they start asking questions you have to give answers according to their age. The moment they ask you a question take the opportunity to give the answer because they may not ask again. Don’t give negative answers. Don’t try to fool yourself, because they will find out the answers from somewhere. Make sure you give correct answers. We, as parents, need to step up and stop assuming the teachers will teach them for us. Education starts at home. Things will change when we start talking to our children and letting them know the consequences of their actions. But remember our actions as parents speak louder than our words. If something is okay for you as a parent, but not for your child, be ready to answer why.”

Marcie Martinez, Punta Gorda BFLA

“The basic way is to use universal precautions at work, and in your personal life stick to one partner and be faithful.”

Rodel Beltran Perrera, Alliance Against AIDS (AAA)

“Get the information and translate it into the most effective and respectful way to share it openly with your family. It will make a difference.”

Pulcheria Teul, Toledo Mayan Women's Council

“Be careful when choosing a partner. I advise my daughters not to have sex with anyone that they haven’t known for a long while and to use condoms. Also, everyone should make a habit of putting condoms in their bag, wallet, or pocket so that they are always prepared. We need to address the factors that keep people from accessing condoms.”

Debo Johnston, Dangriga Peace Corps Volunteer

“I think the best thing is for parents to become educated and openly talk and share information with family and children.”

Joel Coleman, Dangriga BFLA Youth Officer

“Number one, it starts from your person. You must be faithful to your partner. Also you need to educate your family members about HIV. We must teach our children the importance of good decision making. This can be a helpful tool in all aspects of their lives; choosing quality education, staying away from drugs, or protecting themselves from HIV.”

**Ofelia Gomez, Toledo AIDS Committee Chair**

“For me, I am a single mother, and I am not sexually active but if I do have sex I use a condom. I have one son and I am very open with him about what can happen and how to protect himself. Also, I share this information with my sisters and family members. I always say, ‘you can’t trust anyone but yourself to protect you.’ I don’t take anything for granted. I go and get my test every six months so I know my status. Also, I advocate for abstinence among young people so they don’t feel the need to rush into sex.”

**Donald Sandoval, Youth for the Future member**

“The first line of defense is knowing what you are doing and being educated on all the important issues such as condomizing and ways of getting infected. Next, I would encourage my siblings to use condoms or abstain. And for my future family, I would be faithful, which will be difficult because of the pressures of sex that bombard us in the media through music videos, commercials, movies, etc. We must get over the idea that everybody is doing it because that is not necessarily true.”

Caleb Orozco, United Belize Advocacy Movement

Some examples from my work include, a girl collected brochures from the clinic and left them on the shelf at her home. Others give parents or aunts condoms to distribute to sexually active sons. In another case, a mother and son watch porn together followed by discussions about safe sex. And my cousin gathered her entire extended family and asked AAA to do a workshop. There is not only one way to discuss sexual health.”

Alyssa Noble, National AIDS Commission

“Being informed is your best defense! And back it up; make sure your behaviors match your words. Success in any type of relationship depends on trust and respect where both are informed, educated and communicating with one another.”

Gema Catzim, Orange Walk BFLA Youth Officer

“Teach them about universal precautions and the importance of making sure equipment is clean at barber shops and beauty salons (such as razors and nail clippers).”

Who's Who**Belize Family Life Association**

Belize Family Life Association (BFLA) started in Dangriga in 1985 as an effort to improve family life and to address concerns for young women. They have continued to grow and now have multi-national sites and association to regional and international family planning organizations. BFLA's growing staff has allowed an increase in the number of clients accessing services and the variety of services being offered.

This growth helps to support their mission to be the country's leading non-profit provider of comprehensive and high quality sexual and reproductive health services. Qualified professionals are committed to providing modern clinical services and individualized client education in a caring environment. "We make people comfortable and give them the proper counseling and education that they need. Also, we hold confidentiality in the highest regards, putting the rights of our clients first," commented BFLA nurse, Dolly Witz.

BFLA offers services designed to meet the needs of youths and adults with the overall hope of contributing to a "healthy and productive nation". Their year end report (November 2006 to October 2007) states that over 22,000 clients were offered services at the different centers throughout the country, showing "a constant increase in our client flow as the public becomes more aware of the services offered." Some of the clinical services available include pap smears, HIV tests, family planning, sexually transmitted infection (STI) screenings and treatment, pelvic and breast exams, and gender based violence counseling. Marcie Martinez, Punta Gorda BFLA nurse, says, "The services are extremely beneficial, giving people an informed and affordable option when it comes to sexual reproductive health, especially family planning counseling."



Global Fund for AIDS supported BFLA's family planning initiative by providing for the 542,000 male condoms and 2,700 female condoms that BFLA distributed throughout the country last year. This may have had a great impact on family planning, pregnancy, and HIV testing.



Persons under 25 find additional support in accessing BFLA's services by receiving a reduced price for all clinical services and free counseling. It is worth noting that from November 2006 to October 2007 BFLA performed over 700 HIV tests with just over half of these administered to persons under twenty-five.

This may be a result of the empowering non clinical services that are offered to youth. Youth who become involved with BFLA have the opportunity to become peer educators or join one of the four chapters of Youth Advocacy Movement (YAM), BFLA's youth group. As a peer educator, youth are trained with the knowledge and skills needed to share information with others about sexual and reproductive health, including STIs and HIV. Since the beginning of this program, over 100 young people have been certified as peer educators. This year trainings will be held in Orange Walk, Stann Creek and Belize City. YAM provides young people with the opportunity to become involved in the community, and youth drop-in centers provide a safe and constructive environment. Dangriga youth officer Joel Coleman had this to say about his job, "I am happy to listen and educate young people about their sexuality, STIs, and their body, either in the office or when I go out to the schools with peer educators. Working with young people is the passion that keeps me coming to work everyday."

In spite of all the work BFLA does to serve the community, Executive Director Joan Burke looks to the future recognizing challenges and identifying areas of growth. She says, "There are still a number of young people who aren't accessing the services and this is evident in the teenage pregnancy rate (20%) and the growing incidence of HIV infection among young women. Our inability to reach the most remote communities continues to be one of our major outreach challenges."



BFLA strives for a time when "every Belizean's sexual and reproductive rights are free from prejudice and discrimination and where individual choice is respected and services are culture, age, and gender sensitive."



Nationwide News and Services

National AIDS Commission (NAC) began holding workshops with each district AIDS committee in late January and will continue into mid-March. Some of the aims of these meetings are to clarify expectations and enhance communication between the districts and national level, to develop an action plan and strengthen the local response, and to empower district groups to advocate for the specific need of their communities regarding HIV. These workshops are being facilitated by Ms. Martha Carillo. NAC will now fall under the Ministry of Health and the new Chair is Kathy Esquivel.

BFLA is recognizing International Women's Day with their Women's Health Promotion which will take place in March in most of their district centers. Also they have scheduled to hold a Peer Educator Retreat in Cayo on 5 and 6 April with over 80 peer educators.

Alliance Against AIDS (AAA) in mid-March will expand services over their hotline, 223-6911, by allowing individuals to report incidences of stigma and discrimination. Complaint forms may be shared with partners for individuals to fill out in the various districts but all complaints will be readdressed by AAA. So that the most accurate documenting can be done AAA encourages individuals to get the names of people that treat them unjustly and to record the date and location where the stress, discomfort, or pain took place. The last week in February, consultants for AAA began conducting a rapid assessment of community response to the national HIV response. This assessment hopes to capture the human and organizational capital at the community level and build capacity for partners.

Latin American and Caribbean Council of AIDS Services Organizations, along with AAA and NAC, hosted a forum addressing universal access to HIV prevention, treatment, care and support. This workshop brought up priority areas of the national strategic plan, which aims to create a stronger national response, reduce the prevalence of HIV and extend the lives of people living with HIV. The hope is that if these goals are met they will reduce the impact of HIV in the economic, social, and cultural context in Belize. Targets were set for 2010 but many of the targets had no current statistical data so it was decided to focus on goals with current data. Many participants said that these unknown numbers were in the districts but there

was no national collection to compile this data. The general consensus was that these numbers should be sent to NAC for compilation, monitoring and evaluation. A more detailed report will be prepared and circulated to all participants.

United Belize Advocacy Movement (UNIBAM) continues to lobby on the local, regional and international level for the rights of men who have sex with men (MSM). UNIBAM continues to collaborate with VCT and Red Cross' Together We Can (TWC) to do trainings focusing on reducing stigma and discrimination so that the estimated 51% of Belizean MSM who are still keeping their sexuality secret can feel more comfortable accessing health services and accepted in their lifestyle choices. UNIBAM, with funding from UNFPA, recently completed research entitled, 'Show No Mercy', which addresses barriers affecting MSM in Belize from accessing sexual health services.

PASMO has trained AAA and POWA Fu Women to use interactive learning tools similar to board games and cards as a form of HIV outreach. These activities Personal P, 123 Safe, and Pataki are appropriate for clubs and bars and target various at risk groups. The objective of this type of outreach is to discuss risk and its association to behavior and to become familiar with local services. PASMO reports that these activities always draw a crowd at bars and participants say it is a less patronizing way of learning about HIV. Now that the products are here PASMO is set to implement and soon AAA and POWA will be using these tools at their various outreach events. Also, look for PASMO to be doing outreach during the Ruta Maya and on Caye Caulker.

Street Beat is a National AIDS Commission project supported by BFLA, Red Cross' Together We Can, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Health, UNIBAM, and AAA. This prevention project takes place on 1st March in recognition of Youth AIDS Day, which was 26th February, and continues the World AIDS day theme, 'Youth Take the Lead'. Peer educators will be taking to the street in Belize City, Dangriga and Orange Walk Town to distribute information and be available to start dialogue. Strategically placed information tables will be set up for giveaways, condoms, additional information and possibly HIV testing. A big thanks goes out to the over 200 volunteers that make this day possible.

District News and Services

Belize District

Hand-in-Hand Ministries has identified the need for support groups for adolescents infected with HIV and simultaneously a group for their parents that would empower them and give them strategies about how to talk to their children about living with HIV. Possible facilitators have been identified and UNICEF is helping to secure funding for the project.

The VCT Center has been conducting interviews seeking to find additional support for Nurse Bradley and to better serve the needs of clients. This new employee would assume the role of nurse and counselor assisting in the responsibilities of testing and adherence education.



San Pedro AIDS Committee show off their winning trophy after the Christmas boat parade. The red ribbon was lit up to bring awareness about HIV to over 5,000 people.

Youth for the Future held a torch run within the major streets of Orange Walk Town on 2 February. This event's objective was to raise awareness about HIV. Approximately 30 very enthusiastic participants with the help of the local police and fire department spread their message through the streets with posters and banners encouraging people to get tested, know their status, use protection, and stop HIV.

The VCT Center, as a result of the Ministry of Health's Capacity Project sponsored by USAID, will be working to sensitize nurses in an effort to integrate services, better serve all patients, and reduce the risk of occupational exposure to HIV. The VCT center has secured a vehicle and has great hopes of outreach projects with teachers, students and communities but is

waiting for a driver to be hired. Also, Nurse Ortega reports that the Orange Walk HIV/AIDS Committee continues to support children affected by HIV and that they are hoping to get together Easter baskets with food and goodies for children infected and affected by HIV.

Orange Walk District

Women's Week activities include a bike rally sponsored by the Women's Department on 1 March, a Women's Health Promotion by BFLA from 3 through the 14 March, and a health fair offering HIV testing and educational activities conducted by HECOPAB and VCT nurses. BFLA's health promotion offers a variety of services for a total of \$25, including pap smear, breast exam, weight check, sugar test, and blood pressure screening. Nurses from Chicago's Loyola University will be assisting screenings to ensure that all women seeking services are accommodated.

Youth Advocacy Movement (YAM) has rescheduled their variety show to take place on 29 March at the Fort Carrn's Market Plaza from 5 pm to 9 pm. The show will address the ABC's of HIV prevention through music, song, dance, and drama. It is geared to youth, as all area high schools and youth groups have been invited, but it is open and free to the public. HIV testing may be available at the event. YAM plans to have one major HIV prevention event every quarter for the purpose of **8** sharing information.

Cayo District

Cayo HIV Pledge Event challenges all to pledge support, pledge to be informed, and pledge to act responsibly. This two day event organized by Cornerstone volunteers and Galen students is scheduled to take place 4 and 5 April at the park located next to the bus station in San Ignacio. The focus of the Friday evening and Saturday event is to raise awareness and encourage testing through activities ranging from a walk/run, candle light vigil, puppet show, music, face painting, information booths and HIV testing. If any organization is interested in having a booth, being a sponsor, or participating in any way please contact The Cornerstone Foundation at 678-9909.

BFLA will be holding a Women's Health Promotion from 3 to 28 March in San Ignacio. For \$25 women can receive a pap smear and breast exam, getting results within three weeks. All women who have had a sexual experience are encouraged to take advantage of this event.

International Women’s Day will be celebrated with a festival at Coronation Park in San Ignacio on 8 March from 9 am to 3 pm. There will be music, art, public speakers, and informational booths on health, women’s issues, community development, and more. The event is sponsored by The Cornerstone Foundation. For more information, call 678-9909.

BFLA will have their Pap Smear Promotion in March. Check ads or call 502-2280 for specific dates and more information. The youth department’s calendar is filled with activities for the months of March and April including movie night, kite competition, Easter egg hunt, tutoring program, and YAM member certification trainings. The office also offers free internet access by appointment for homework and research.

Stann Creek District

Claret Care, located at the Sacred Heart Parish Center on Front Street in Dangriga, offers free HIV testing and counseling services in English, Spanish, Creole, and Garifuna. The office is open Monday through Friday, however off-site testing can be arranged if needed. As people often risk becoming very ill before accessing services because of stigma and discrimination, Claret Care holds confidentiality in the highest regard and has taken certain precautions to ensure it. The office and counseling rooms have tinted windows, none of which face the street, and the staff knows that they will be fired if any personal information leaves the office without written consent of the client. Claret Care tested 22 people in January, made home visits twice a week, provided outreach on Fridays, and had a CD4 testing day. Claret Care was founded in May 2007 as a response to the high number of people being buried by the parish who had died of AIDS related illnesses and having very little support and medical treatment.

POWA recently received a US Ambassador grant. On 23 February they held a workshop, facilitated by PASMO, focusing on behavior change communications (BCC) targeted toward POWA members and community youth. POWA plans to do a KAP (Knowledge, Attitude, Perception) study in Back-a-town and Lakeland neighborhoods surrounding BCC. With the help of UNICEF, their after school program assists 91 at-risk students. In an effort to continue to get mothers into prenatal care earlier, POWA has created a calendar that can be found at the maternity clinic with reminders of what to do to ensure a healthy baby, stages of development of a baby, and actions to take during each month of pregnancy.



Toledo BFLA hosted a youth movie night in December for about 40 area youth who watched a film on the issues of HIV prevention and good decision making, followed by a question and answer period where prizes were awarded. Toledo BFLA also shows an increase in HIV testing with 18 people being tested in January.

Toledo District

Toledo Mayan Women’s Council (TMWC) has begun a six month literacy training project in five communities. Participants of this project will be informed about the issues of HIV awareness and prevention. TMWC continues their health project in the villages. This project targets women and addresses general health, hygiene and sexual and reproductive health. When it comes to maternal healthcare women in the villages are accessing the services available but lack the follow up and care information due to language barriers. TMWC’s youth arm recently had a workshop focused at developing leadership skills.

A Toledo HIV/AIDS Committee strategic planning workshop was conducted by NAC on 23 February. The workshop resulted in identifying the priority areas of coordination, advocacy/policy, prevention, and mitigation as well as determining a vision, mission, and goals. Some of the goals are to increase community participation, increase quality care and treatment, eliminate discrimination, and increase

awareness and behaviour change in youth, persons in the work place, and mobile workers.

Corozal District

The Health Department addresses HIV prevention through community education in schools and youth groups by highlighting human growth and development, self esteem and self control, and HIV and protection. HIV testing is available at the hospital and in the villages through mobile health clinics. Nurse Blanco is starting an education/support group with clients due to poor adherence from a lack of clear understanding about how HIV is affecting their bodies.

Living With HIV

Self care: self esteem and disclosure

Self Esteem is your personal judgment of your own worth or value. It allows you to feel powerful and in control of your future, to feel significant and have success in being accepted by others, and to feel competent and effectively cope with your life. Self esteem generally increases with age but can change based on your life experiences. Many people go through life experiences and are left feeling powerless, isolated, and unable to cope. HIV infection, like other chronic illnesses can bring up several difficult issues that lead to these feelings. It is not unusual for individuals to access support from a family member, a religious leader, or other people sharing a similar experience (such as a support group).

To access any of these support systems it is necessary to disclose your HIV status. Disclosure is telling someone that you are HIV positive. This can be a difficult process for many individuals. Here are some tips that may make the sharing process easier. Remember that every family is different and you know your family best. So ultimately, the decisions of how and where to share (or not to share) your status is up to you.

Choose people you trust not to share your information

Before revealing your status, ask yourself, "Why do I want this person to know? How does their knowing about my status help me? Do they gossip about others? Will they share my information?" Also, prepare for their reaction. You know this person well enough to share your status so think about what the best and the worst reaction could be and prepare for those situations.

Right time, right place

When and where you share your status is important and may influence people's reactions. When telling family members or friends that you are living with HIV, it is important that the timing is right and you are comfortable sharing this information. However, the longer you wait the more difficult it will be, especially when sharing the news with your sexual partners who could be at risk.

When selecting a place where you will reveal your HIV status, think about the privacy of that place. Is this a place where anyone could be walking by and listening to what you are saying? On the other hand, if you feel the person you are telling may react violently you may want to be in a public place so that you could get help more easily or have someone else present when you tell that person.

Decide how much you are willing to tell

HIV infection brings up questions about choices made surrounding lifestyle and behavior. Many of these questions leave people feeling shameful or that they are to blame for becoming infected. Realize that no one sets out to get HIV and everyone has made mistakes. With that said, before having these conversations make up your mind about what information you want to share and decide about how you want to respond to questions that you don't want to answer. Examples: "You know I don't really feel comfortable talking to you about that...", "I am not ready to talk about that...", "Does it really matter. The fact is I am infected and I need your love and support."

Have resources ready

People also will have questions about HIV. Make sure you know the true facts about HIV so that you are able to clear up any myths. Have information about the treatment and care available to you. Share with them how you will need to live to remain healthy for many years to come. Supply your friends and family with materials about HIV or where they can find more information. A good source is the HIV information hotline 223-6911.



Tell them who you have shared with

Let your family members know who you have told so that they can go to one another for support. Like you, your family and friends will need support in the process of accepting this new information. If you have only told one person, reassure them that they can come to you with any questions, concerns, or just if they need to talk.

A woman living with HIV discusses her experience with disclosure: “It is really hard to disclose to your family, but you have to find a way that you feel comfortable - the best time, somewhere private, maybe at the beach, or somewhere you feel safe. Your partners especially have a right to know. Once you tell, a tremendous weight of stress is lifted off of your chest. It is a big relief. It tells on your whole body when you have a battle inside.”

In the past, children born with HIV had a low life expectancy and therefore were not told about their HIV status. However, due to advancement in medication and care, children born with HIV are now living healthier and longer lives. This change has presented a new set of challenges. One of the most important challenges is developing ways for parents to tell their children that they are infected with HIV while providing the support needed to cope with the new information.

Recognizing challenges

There will be challenges to disclosure and many parents will be reluctant. Parents may address concerns about the negative impact on the child’s will to live or their inability to keep a secret. Other parents will struggle with their own guilt about transmitting the infection, possible questions children will ask, or accepting their own illness. Stigma and discrimination also will be a factor in the decision to disclose.

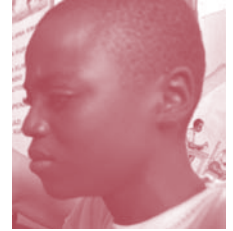
An American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) study has shown that, “children who are informed about their diagnosis have better coping and higher self esteem and parents who disclose HIV status to their children express less depression than parents who do not disclose.” In essence, disclosure can benefit both the child and the parent.

Preparing to disclose to a child

Here are some things to think about when preparing to disclose to a child: their age, maturity, complexity of family dynamics, and clinical issues. Remember some of the previously mentioned tips: find the right words, decide where and when to tell, have time to discuss the issues, and as best as possible prepare the child for the information.

When and what do I share?

The AAP committee on Pediatric AIDS recommends that for young children parents should provide simple explanations about their illness and how to stay healthy. As children mature, they should be fully informed about their diagnosis and their medical outlook. By the adolescent stage, children should be fully informed so that they can assist in their care and reduce the risk of HIV transmission and exposure to other STIs through unprotected sex. The one situation where disclosure may not be advocated for or recommended is when children are critically ill and in this case discussions regarding death and dying may be more appropriate.



Support in the process

Disclosure can be a difficult process for parents and one where they may need outside assistance. Here are a few of options: support groups, medical providers, counseling services, or internet research. Support groups will allow you to talk with other parents who have gone through the same issue and get recommendations on how they went about disclosing to their children. Next, medical providers can help in identifying any local concerns and share strategies used by other parents. Also, they could help with any medical questions your children may ask. Counselors are not easy to access, but if your child is having a hard time accepting their diagnosis and doesn’t want to talk to you, a counselor or pastor may be the right choice. Lastly, internet research allows you to get numerous opinions and tips so that you can have more options for finding what will work best for your family.

Disclosing to a child is becoming a well-known issue, yet still an individual process. Whether or not you decide to disclose is ultimately your choice, but if older children ask direct questions about their HIV status you should answer their questions truthfully, otherwise if they hear it from someone else they might become embarrassed or angry.

Sexuality and your child

Three to Five

- By this age kids are ready to know that women and men have different sex organs. When talking about sex organs always use the right names. Say “vagina,” “penis,” and “breasts,” instead of family or street words. Otherwise, kids may get the idea that something is “wrong” with these parts of the body.
- “Where do babies come from?” May be asked during this period. Give simple answers like, “Babies grow in a special place inside the mother.” As they get older you can add more details.

Five to Seven

- Kids in primary school may be shy about asking questions. But that doesn't mean they don't have questions. Most of them have heard about AIDS, rape, and child abuse. So keep talking with them.

Eight to 12

- Preteens need to know about menstruation, wet dreams, and other signs of puberty and growing up. They need to know that everyone develops at different times.
- Most preteens are ready to know about sex and reproduction. They need to know about STIs, birth control, and the consequences of teen pregnancy. And they need to know how all of this can affect their lives.

13 to 18

- Adolescents must learn how to say “no” and understand what “safer sex” is. “Safer-sex” activities lower the risk of spreading STIs. They should also know about birth control methods.
- It's important to talk with them about how to have relationships without getting hurt and without hurting other people. And they must know they are responsible for their choices.
- Reassure them that their sexuality and feelings are normal. Gay, bisexual, and questioning teens may need even more reassurance.

Sexuality includes...

- our sex
- our bodies and how they work
- our feelings about being male or female
- our values on life and love
- our sexual orientation (gay, straight, bisexual)

A family story

Continued from Page 1

took a while for her to tell my father. When I returned home I told my husband and he was devastated. He was shocked and crying. It took him a while to accept it. I told him he needed to get tested. He finally did and got his result: positive - he knew it was coming.

“We both started taking medication. The first time I took them I had headaches every day but I told myself these are good for me and my family. Since then, I haven't missed a single day.

“I finally told my son and he started crying. I told him it is not the end of the world. He is in high school now and they do lots of education so he is much aware.”

This is what her son had to share: “My name is Turique and I am 14 years old. My mother and I are both living with the virus.

“When I was first told by my mother that she got HIV, I felt bad because I did not know it could have happened to us. She explained to me the three ways of catching HIV. I understand, and we are both living good lives. I am glad she told me, because I would have felt embarrassed hearing it from somebody else.

“I am not ashamed to say my name. I feel that HIV and AIDS is everybody's business now. I think that if we talk openly about our feelings and thoughts on HIV and AIDS it will heal our hurts.”

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