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What they really want to know

Developing booklets for young people on growing up, sexuality and HIV

A large proportion of young people worldwide are sexually active, and this exposes them to the risk of contracting sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV, and to the risk of unintended pregnancies. In 2008, 16 million girls aged 15 to 19 gave birth and approximately 40% of these pregnancies were unintended. Young people between the ages of 15 and 24 years account for more than one third of all new HIV infections, with some 3,000 young people becoming infected with HIV each day.

The UNAIDS Report on the global AIDS epidemic 2010 reports that the proportion of 15–24 year old young women and men who have comprehensive and correct knowledge of HIV and AIDS is only 34 per cent. This is far from the UN goal set at the beginning of the millennium, in which the governments of all member states committed themselves to providing 95 per cent of their young people with this knowledge by 2010. Addressing this widespread lack of knowledge must be a priority for educators and public health experts worldwide since there is strong evidence that such efforts are effective.

Information materials on sexual and reproductive health for young people often take a very technical approach and fail to address the kind of questions that adolescents themselves grapple with. The only way of ensuring that information is relevant to them is to involve young people systematically in its development and production.

Young people's involvement – from the initial needs assessment through to the actual development and production of information materials – is at the heart of this approach, which entails the following steps in creating question-and-answer booklets:



Young people in Yemen using the question-and-answer booklets in school.

- Establishing baseline information on young people's knowledge, attitudes and practices relating to sexual and reproductive health
- Collecting young people's questions on growing up, relationships, love, sexuality, pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections, and HIV and AIDS
- Grouping and analysing questions with young people
- Deciding on and selecting the final set of questions

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- Developing scientifically correct, understandable and relevant answers in a multidisciplinary team that specifically includes young people
- Creating illustrations with a graphic artist, cartoonist and a photographer working together with young people
- Clarifying ownership and responsibility for dissemination
- Printing and disseminating the product
- Monitoring and evaluating the booklets' dissemination and their impact on their readers' knowledge, attitude and behaviours.

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German-supported programmes in 18 different countries with very diverse socio-cultural contexts have developed and published these booklets since the approach was first conceived in Tanzania in 1999. In all these settings, the booklets have been accepted and actively demanded by young people. The high demand for the booklets wherever they were distributed shows that – despite the multitude of information sources and media that exist today – there continues to be an unmet need of information on sexuality-related issues for young people.

The Tanzanian and Yemeni programmes conducted surveys of the booklet's impacts on their audiences. Their results showed that exposure to the booklets increased young readers' knowledge about the risks of early pregnancy, the use of modern contraceptives and how HIV is transmitted. It also changed readers' attitudes towards people living with HIV.

In Tanzania, a reader survey showed high appreciation and further demand for the booklets by young people, educators and parents alike.

In the course of the 13 years since the approach was first conceived, programme teams have learned a number of valuable lessons. These include the following:

Communication with young people is most effective if it uses their own words and perspective: Experts have a tendency to “correct” and reformulate young people's questions and answers in technical terms. This should be avoided whenever possible. The more genuinely the questions and answers are expressed, the more they will speak and appeal to young people.

Address growing up, friendship and sexuality before dealing with HIV and AIDS: Young people have many questions, hopes and worries in their minds regarding the emotional and physical changes they go through including sexual desires. They worry about being accepted by others, and about being attractive or not, normal or abnormal, fertile or “barren”. By addressing these genuine questions, the booklets increase young readers' receptiveness to information about the prevention of sexually transmitted diseases and unwanted pregnancies.

Consider the pros and cons of partnering with government or non-government organisations: In more traditional societies, being asked to authorise booklets on sexuality-related issues for young people can put government representatives in a difficult position. In such cases it may be more productive to partner with NGOs. The ministries of health and education can join in later once the materials have gained public support through demand from their audiences.

Follow all steps of the participatory development process: Many of the questions that young people pose are the same all over the world. But about 20–30% of these questions differ according to the specific socio-cultural context. The booklets have been most successful and sustainably established in countries where programmes invested in all steps of the participatory development process, which was carefully designed to ensure the booklets' relevance to young people while creating shared ownership amongst all participating stakeholders.

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