



PUBERTY, PARENTHOOD AND SEXUAL HEALTH

Helping adolescents to make healthy choices

THE IDEA

In some communities there are pressures on girls to get married and become pregnant when still young. In other situations many girls get pregnant at an early age, are forced into sex or lack the support or negotiating skills to avoid pregnancy. Early marriage and pregnancy damage a girl's health and her life chances. But this information alone is not enough to help girls. They need education which develops their life skills to make safe choices, assess risks, communicate clearly and be assertive. They also need support from their families, friends, community and health services in order to remain healthy and to delay motherhood until they are mature and wish to have a child. Boys also need these skills, information and support as they share equal responsibility with girls. Peer education is often the most effective way for young people to learn about these topics. Informed and motivated young people can help and support each other.

Main facts

The information in this Activity Sheet is vital for adolescent girls and boys, both for the future and for now, while they are coping with puberty and pressures for engaging in sex. It is also necessary for older children to understand these ideas before they reach puberty. Even young children need to know that there are good and bad kinds of touch and that sexual abuse is wrong and should be reported to a trusted adult.

There are many issues covered in this Activity Sheet. Other materials are available on adolescent sexual and reproductive health, which go into more detail. Because of the HIV and AIDS pandemic, many countries now have specific text books focusing on these topics. This short sheet cannot cover all the issues, but it aims to provide an introduction and to stimulate teachers and other facilitators to think how they can best cover this topic to meet the needs of their young people. The book **Child-to-Child Approaches to HIV and AIDS** provides more information on teaching the topic of adolescent sexual and reproductive health.

Here are the main facts, linked to the activities in this sheet:

- Pregnancy before the age of 18 risks the health of the mother and baby.

- The health of both mother and baby can suffer if the space between births is less than two years.
- Family planning services provide people with knowledge and methods to plan when to have children. There are many safe and acceptable ways of avoiding pregnancy, which is the responsibility of both men and women.
- Many countries have adolescent-friendly health services to give young people the advice and help they need.
- Girls who are educated, healthy and have a good diet as a child and adolescent will have fewer problems in pregnancy and childbirth.
- During pregnancy, a woman needs to have more rest than usual, and a sufficient and balanced diet. She should also avoid smoking, alcohol and harmful drugs.
- During pregnancy, a woman needs to go for at least four check-ups with a health worker. She also needs to be immunised against tetanus.
- A trained birth attendant should assist at every birth.
- Some traditional practices promote the health of mothers and newborn babies and some are harmful. For example, female genital cutting can cause serious infections that risk death. It also can lead

to sterility or to dangerous complications in childbirth, as well as mental health problems.

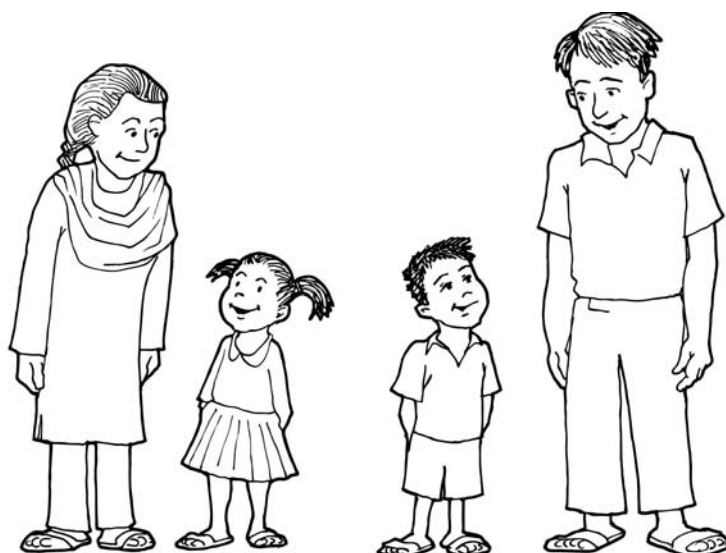
- At puberty physical and emotional changes in both boys and girls can produce strong sexual feelings. These are a normal part of growing up, but do not need to lead to sex.
- Older children and adolescents need to understand the changes that happen at puberty and where to go for help so that they are able to make healthier choices (see below).

Before starting the topic

- Discuss with the young people what ground rules they want to have in place. These might include: listening respectfully to each other; confidentiality (not talking about people's secrets outside the sessions); the right not to participate in discussions; the option to request group work in same-sex groups. Also help the group to identify a safe and trusted adult to whom they can tell their concerns, especially if a child or adolescent has suffered or is at risk of sexual abuse or other kinds of abuse.

What older children and adolescents need to know about puberty

- Puberty is the time when boys and girls go through physical and emotional changes to prepare them for adulthood.
- Various physical and emotional changes occur at puberty in boys and girls.
- Menstruation is normal (and not shameful). With good hygiene, rest, and nutritious food, a girl can continue with her usual life. It is important that schools have separate latrines to give girls privacy.
- Wet dreams are normal in adolescent boys.
- The facts about how pregnancy occurs.
- Sex is an important part of a loving and committed relationship.
- It is a crime to force someone to have sex.
- Unprotected sex can cause unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV and AIDS.
- STIs can cause ill-health, pain and future problems in having children.
- Everyone has the right to refuse sex. Young people need practice to develop the confidence and skills to be assertive, as well as support from families, peers and protection from the community.



We need to know what happens to us when we grow up

ACTIVITY SHEET 1.6

CHILD-TO-CHILD TRUST

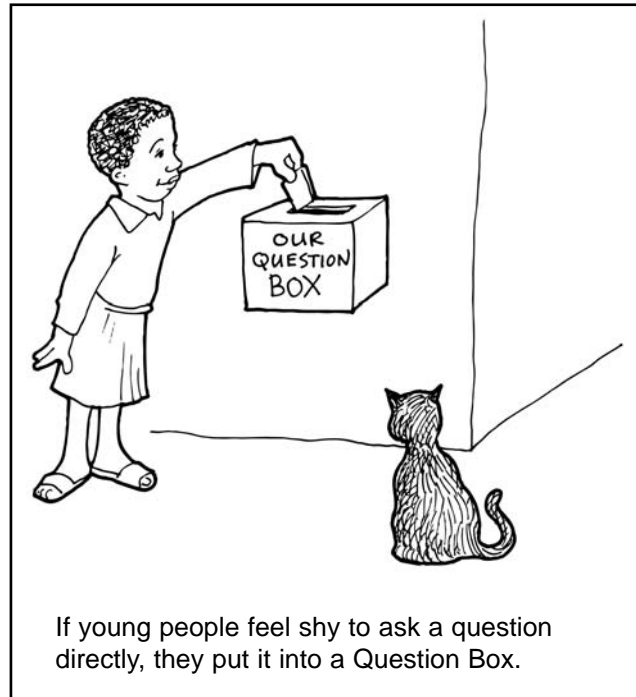
Note: If you are in school, it is important to discuss your ideas for teaching this topic with the head teacher. Also hold a meeting with parents and guardians to discuss with them why this topic is vital for children and adolescents and gain their consent. Because this topic is sensitive, many of the activities promote peer education, rather than having the young people involved in wider community action, like other Child-to-Child Activity Sheets. The activities you do will depend on the local context.

Different topics are appropriate for different ages of children. Decide which topics need to be taught at what age. Remember that children and adolescents need to know the information and to have practised the life skills *before* they reach the age when they are needed. In the activities below, children and adolescents are all referred to as 'young people'. The age is not specified as this will depend on your context.

Understanding

- Collect materials, including books and posters, on adolescent sexual and reproductive health and on safe motherhood. Review them first so that you are ready to introduce the topic to the young people.
- Develop a questionnaire – to be filled in anonymously (no name) – to check what facts about this topic the young people already know. After finding out the results, go through the facts to clarify the answers with the group.
- Use stories, from books or newspapers, to understand more about the risks of early marriage or early pregnancy, e.g., the Child-to-Child reader, **Freda Doesn't Get Pregnant**. With each story, ask: *'To be safe, healthy and happy, what did the young person need to know? What life skills did the young person need to cope? What support did the young person need from the family, friends, community, school or health services?'*
- Divide the young people into separate groups of boys and girls. Give the young

people materials about puberty. Ask them to discuss the materials for both boys and girls. In an anonymous Questions Box they can write any further questions they have about the topic, which the teacher/facilitator can answer.



If young people feel shy to ask a question directly, they put it into a Question Box.

- The young people write letters giving advice and information in response to imaginary 'problem' letters. The teacher and young people can make up situations based on their own context. Here are some examples of the letters:
 - From a young male or female cousin, of 11 years, who feels that their body is changing, but no adults will explain what is happening to them.
 - From a male or female friend of 12 years who is confused because he or she suddenly has very strong feelings of love for someone else in the class and doesn't know what to do.
 - From a girl of 16 years who left secondary school last term and now admits that she is pregnant.
 - From a 16-year-old boy who is feeling bad because he has made his 14-year-old girl friend pregnant.
 - From a 9-year-old cousin who is afraid because her father's friend touches her in ways she does not like.

- From a 15-year-old orphan girl who is looking after her younger brothers. An older man has offered to pay her for sex so she can buy food.
- Using the letters as a basis, the young people can act out role-plays to show how children and adolescents can help each other to cope with their problems and how they can get help from adults, if necessary.

Finding out more

- Invite a health worker to come and talk with young people about the risks of early pregnancy, the health needs of pregnant women and about birth spacing. The young people can prepare questions which are given to the visitor in advance. They may want to ask follow-up questions to the visitor. This can be done either directly or through a Questions Box.
- The young people can design their own questionnaire about the facts of puberty. Check that it is correct before they use it. The young people can try the questionnaire anonymously with their peers who are not part of this learning group. This will help them to find out their friends' gaps in knowledge about puberty.
- Girls do a survey amongst their friends to find out what methods the girls use during menstruation. They compare the advantages and disadvantages of different materials. They can find out whether it is possible to get free donations of sanitary towels from local companies. They can also discuss how to wash and dry cloths in the sun to keep them clean and free from germs.
- The young people can find out if any girls have been pushed out of school due to early marriage or pregnancy. In pairs, girls in the group can visit these girls to find out about their lives. What advice would they give to girls still in school? Is there anything that the group can do to help these girls? Can they be helped to return to school?
- The young people can do a survey to find out local beliefs on what a pregnant woman should eat. They may need first

to practise asking questions sensitively, by acting out a role-play. Afterwards they can organise their findings into those beliefs which are good and those which are incorrect and why, for example, some communities believe that pregnant women should not eat eggs. This is incorrect and deprives the mother and baby of much needed protein.

- Find out and make a map to show where trained birth attendants live.

Planning and taking action

- The young people can work in small same sex groups, including those who are new to this topic. Together they can develop body maps for males and females, drawing the physical and emotional changes that happen during puberty. They discuss and share information on how to cope with these changes, including how to continue in school during menstruation. If necessary, talk with the school authorities to get separate, private latrines for girls.
- Adolescent girls in school can support girls of the same age who are pregnant. Often these girls are isolated from their school-going peers and from adult women. They can discuss the health of the mother and baby: the need for rest, for a good diet, for health check-ups and tetanus immunisation, and for a skilled birth attendant to be present at the birth. Even when these girls become mothers, the friendship and support of girls their own age will be important. The young mothers can also become effective peer educators.
- The young people can give special support to their own mothers and other women who are pregnant in their families, helping them with their chores and sensitively making sure that they know how to take care of themselves and their babies. In the learning group, they can discuss how they are helping these pregnant women.
- The young people can make up a role-play of a couple caring for four children, aged three months, 18 months, three

years and four years old. What problems do they face? Discuss why having a space of at least two years is important for the health of mother and children. Show this role-play to other young people and discuss.

- The young people can talk with their younger brothers and sisters about keeping safe. They can tell them that no one, including adults and family members, has the right to touch them in a way they do not like. They can help the young children think about who they would go to for help if they were worried. Together they can practise a role-play on how they would explain to this trusted adult that someone was trying to touch them in a way they do not like.
- Young people of all ages can practise *screaming 'fire' and running* if they are approached or touched by someone who frightens them.
- The young people can analyse the words of pop songs and think critically about advertising images and stories in magazines or newspapers. How much do these media encourage early relationships and early sex? In small groups think about why some young people want to have sexual relationships at an early age – and what problems such relationships may cause (e.g. being distracted in school; getting pregnant; getting infected with STIs, including HIV; becoming depressed if the relationship goes wrong; being abused if the relationship is with an older person).
- The young people can then write alternative words to the pop songs, to encourage delaying relationships and preventing pregnancy and STIs through safe sex. They can also make posters and role-plays to convey these messages and show these to other young people, followed by a group discussion.
- Young people may wish to become peer educators. If so, they will need support from a teacher, health worker or from an NGO, to make sure that they have all the correct information and know where to go

for help. Link these peer educators with the health services. Help them to work together to make the health services accessible and welcoming to young people. For example, the young people could write their list of criteria on what would make health services adolescent-friendly.

Discussing results

- The young people can think about their activities in this topic and discuss:
 - What new knowledge have we gained that has been useful for us?
 - How have we been able to help other young people with advice and support? If giving examples, do not give the person's name.
 - If we have a system of peer educators, how has this worked? What has gone well? What challenges have we faced? How can we strengthen our activities?
 - Have our attitudes to relationships and early pregnancy changed? If so, how?
 - What changes have we seen in our school/learning place, in our peer group and in our community which now give young people more help?
 - Are any adults more supportive of young people's needs? If so, how?
 - What other problems do we face about puberty, growing up, sexuality and early marriage? What other information and support do we want?

Doing it better

- The young people will have found out what other problems or further support they need in the area of puberty and sexual and reproductive health. With support from their teacher or facilitator, they can plan further activities to help themselves and also help other young people who otherwise would not have access to this information and support.
- As the group of young people mature, they will face different challenges, which can also be addressed using this same active learning process.

- Continue to build links between community leaders, traditional counsellors and advisers of young people, schools, health services and local NGOs to build a more supportive and protective environment for young people.

USING THE SHEET

Teachers, school counsellors and head teachers can use these ideas to introduce sessions on puberty and sexual health in schools. Most education ministries now include a component on sexual health and HIV and AIDS in the school curriculum, but it may be information-based, rather than taught through active, life skills-based education. The activities in this sheet all develop different kinds of life skills, such as critical thinking, decision making, problem solving, communication, etc. However, this sheet is just an introduction to the topic. It is strongly recommended that schools develop an on-going education programme on sexual and reproductive health. It is our responsibility to help our young people grow up healthy, safe and secure.

Health workers and NGO workers with a focus on adolescent sexual and reproductive health can use these ideas, especially in developing a peer education initiative.

The media can use this information to think critically about how they currently deal with issues of adolescent sexuality and how they could support young people with more constructive images and ideas.

For further information this Activity Sheet can be used together with Activity Sheet 7.3 **Preventing HIV and AIDS**.