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Teens Complacent about AIDS

By CWK Network Producer

Every nine and a half minutes someone in the United States is infected with the HIV virus. Even more troubling, half of those new cases are in the 13 to 25 age group. Our young people are at risk. Do they care?

"We understand [AIDS], but it's just more of they don't care, it won't affect me, personally."

-Seth, 16 years old

Ask the average teen what he or she knows about AIDS, and they usually know the basic facts.

"It's a sexually transmitted disease, and you can die from it," says 15-year-old Britney.

Leslie, 14, says, "A lot of people are infected every day, and you get it by not being safe."

"They know a good deal from sex education and stuff. They know it's dangerous and that it has the possibility of being lethal," says 16-year-old John.

"Yeah, it'll kill you," echoes Seth, also 16. "You don't want to get it. It's definitely a bad thing."

Many young people certainly know the risks and understand the dangers of HIV and AIDS. So why do teens continue to take chances with their health?

"Teens take chances, but that's just more of the feeling of being invincible and being young," Seth says. "We understand it, but it's just more of they don't care, it won't affect me, type of personality."

"You don't even think about it even though you hear about it every day," says 16-year-old Peter. "You don't really think about it unless it hits home."

Health experts are taking note of this ambivalence and are trying to zero in on the 13-25 age group, which is the fastest growing population of new HIV infections.

"There's a lot of work to be done," says Kay Scott, president of Planned Parenthood of Georgia. "What we know works is comprehensive sex education, connection to school, church and other community groups and really strong support from parents."

Scott says parents should consistently talk to their children about their values and beliefs, risks and responsibility. But more than anything, Scott says, they should find a way to show their kids that AIDS is real.

"One of the most powerful tools that I've seen used is having people with HIV and AIDS talk to young people about what their risks were and how they were in denial and just didn't think it would happen," Scott says.

Teenagers agree that the message strikes a chord.

"Knowing someone close that has experienced it or has contracted it – that's very eye-opening," Peter says.

Rates Too High

By CWK Network, Inc.

Recent reports show that nearly half of high school students are or have been sexually active. Unfortunately, with sexual activity comes an increase in Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs). That's why it is extremely important to talk to your kids about being sexually responsible – *before* they engage in sex. Consider the following statistics provided by *The Alan Guttmacher Institute*:

- Every year three million sexually active teens – about one-in-four – acquire an STD.
- A single act of unprotected sex with an infected partner puts a teenage woman at a one percent risk of acquiring HIV, a 30 percent risk of getting genital herpes, and a 50 percent chance of contracting gonorrhea.
- Chlamydia is more common among teens than among older men and women. In some testing situations, 10 to 29 percent of sexually active teenage women and 10 percent of teenage men were found to have Chlamydia.
- Teens have higher rates of gonorrhea than sexually active men and women aged 20 to 44.

What Parents Need To Know

Talking to your child about sex and sexually transmitted diseases may not be something you look forward to, but it could be the most important step in protecting your child from risky sexual behavior. Studies show that teenagers who feel highly connected to their parents are far more likely to *delay* sexual activity than their peers. Before approaching this sensitive topic, consider the following tips developed by *Peer to Peer: Stop, Think, Be Safe!*

- **Start early** – Research shows that younger children seek their parent's advice more than adolescents, who tend to depend more on their friends and the media. Take advantage of the opportunity to talk with your young children about sexual health. Discussing dating, relationships, STDs and HIV can make a lasting impression. And it gives you a chance to provide your children with accurate information that reflects your personal values and principles. The quality of parent-child relationships has an important influence on adolescents' sexual behaviors.
- **Initiate conversations with your child** – Don't wait for your children to ask you about sex, HIV or STDs. Although you can hope that your children come to you with their questions and concerns, it may not happen. Use everyday opportunities to talk about issues related to sexual health. For example, news stories, music, television shows or movies are great starters for bringing up health topics. If your family is watching a television show where the teenagers are promiscuous or a teen is pregnant, ask your kids what they thought of the program when it's over. Ask if they agree with the behavior or decisions of the teenagers in the show. Just a few questions can start a valuable conversation.
- **Talk WITH your child, not AT your child** – Make sure you listen to your children the way you want your children to listen to you. Try to ask questions that will encourage them to share specific information about feelings, decisions and actions. Try to understand exactly what your kids are saying. It is important for your kids to feel that they have been heard. Try not to be judgmental. Let your kids know that you value their opinions, even when they differ from your own.
- **Create an open environment** – Research shows that kids who feel their parents speak openly about sex and listen to them carefully are less likely to engage in high-risk behaviors, compared to teenagers who do not feel they can talk with their parents about sex. Adolescents who report a sense of connection to their parents, family and school, and who have a higher grade point average, are more likely than other teens to wait to engage in intercourse. Teens who report previous discussions of sexuality with parents are *seven* times more likely to feel able to communicate with a partner about HIV/AIDS than those who have not had such discussions. An open family environment not only reduces sexual risk-taking behaviors, it also gives teenagers a safe place to ask questions and get accurate information. As parents, be available, honest and attentive. Praise your children for coming to you to talk about sex, which will teach them that you are always available for information or advice.
- **Be prepared and practice** – It isn't necessarily easy to talk about sex with your kids. In fact, it can be extremely difficult for some parents. Don't be afraid to practice. You can practice in front of a mirror, with your spouse or partner, or with friends. Your ability to speak comfortably about sexual health will make your children more comfortable asking questions and discussing sensitive issues.
- **Be honest: It's okay to say, "I don't know"** – When your children trust and value your opinion, they will be more likely to come to you with their questions and concerns. It's also important to know that you do not need to be a sexual health expert. It's okay if you don't know all the answers to all of your children's questions. It's okay and honest to say, "I don't know." In fact, if you don't know the answer to a question, you can search for the correct information together.
- **Communicate your values** – In addition to talking to your children about the biological facts of sex, it's important that they also learn that sexual relationships involve emotions, caring and responsibility. Parents need to share their values and principles about sex. Although your children may not adopt these values as their own, they are an important source of information as your children develop their own set of values about sexuality.

Resources

- [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#)
- [Peer to Peer: Stop, Think, Be Safe!](#)
- [U.S. Department of Health & Human Services](#)
- [First Focus Campaign for Our Children](#)

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