

Overcoming barriers to educating young people about sex and HIV: session notes

UNESCO, UNFPA, the UNAIDS Secretariat and IPPF-Western Hemisphere co-organised a side event at the UN General Assembly High-Level Meeting on AIDS. The side event was a lunchtime meeting for invited delegates on Tuesday 10 June 2008. Participants included 120 ministers and other government officials, UN representatives, young people and civil society representatives from all over the world.

The purpose of the event was to discuss how HIV prevention efforts can be improved by more explicitly dealing with the sexual transmission of the virus. In many cases, HIV prevention efforts have not reached their full potential because they have failed - at a meaningful level - to explicitly discuss sex and sexuality with young people.

This note summarizes the main discussion points during the table discussions. Each table was asked to identify barriers in educating young people about sex and HIV as well as identify promising strategies for overcoming these barriers. The table discussions were based on three opening speeches by Michel Sidibe (Deputy Executive Director of UNAIDS), Dr. Jose Angel Cordova-Villalobos (Minister of Health, Mexico) and Ms. Sanyoyoko Hoilett (Youth Representative, Jamaica). The session was chaired by Salman Ahmad (member of rock band Junoon and UNAIDS special ambassador).



(From left to right, Salman Ahmad, Sanyoyoko Hoilett, Jose Angel Cordova-Villalobos, and Michel Sidibe)

Barriers in educating young people about sex and HIV

Cultural barriers

- The age gap between older people (such as teachers and parents) and young people makes it difficult to broach sensitive issues such as sex or condoms.
- In some countries, there is a tension between “traditional” and “modern” views. Differences in attitudes to sexual behaviour are due to these diverse approaches to life and living and are clearly evident in the different attitudes of young people and older generations.
- In many countries, there is widespread denial that young people are having sex and this makes it very difficult to gain the political will needed to introduce sex education into schools.
- Cultural attitudes toward sex and sexuality can turn these issues into taboo subjects and therefore teachers fear stigma and criticism for teaching sex education.
- In some African countries, the change in family structure from extended families to more nuclear families means that traditional forms of sex education (such as between an uncle and a nephew) are weakened. Parents are not expected to teach their children and yet some of the other avenues for sex education have dissolved.

“Stigma surrounds sex education. People are not comfortable with their sexuality and talking about it.” (Participant at side event)

“Most religions – especially those of Judeo-Christian heritage- see sex as a sin outside of procreation within marriage. With Islam the challenge is around early marriages.” (Participant at side event)

“Who is working with young gay men? It is great that there is an increased focus on young people but this focus seems to exclude sexual minorities.” (Participant at side event)



Table discussion at the luncheon

Religious barriers

- In some instances, the Catholic Church as well as certain interpretations of the Koran discourage the use of condoms.
- Some faith-based schools forbid the teaching of sex education.
- Many religious leaders see their role as preserving traditions, culture and morality. This can conflict with the changing world in which young people are forging their identities and making personal choices.

Political barriers

- Prevention of a problem is always more difficult to galvanize political support for as it involves taking action on something which might or might not happen in the future.
- Many young people do not have access to decision-makers.
- There is a lack of strong leadership from the international community on sex education. UNESCO is beginning to play an increasing role in this area but countries need more guidance and evidence about what is effective.

Legal barriers

- In many countries, there are laws which make certain types of sexual behaviour illegal and also deny the existence of certain sexual minorities. Such forms of punitive legislation hamper HIV prevention efforts by denying that some of the key populations involved in the HIV epidemic even exist.

Individual barriers

- Young people often think they are invincible and do not see HIV as a serious threat, especially with the increasing availability of treatment.
- Attitudes towards young people are often negative and can assume that young people are not responsible and cannot be trusted with too much information.
- It is often assumed that young people are a homogenous group.
- Gender roles can make it more difficult for teachers to teach about sex to students of the opposite sex.
- Adults (including teachers) often lack the necessary communication skills needed to teach sex education.

Limitations of programmes and education quality

- Educational materials are too often developed as one set of materials irrespective of the age of the learner. Materials are not differentiated for pre-pubescent, pubescent and older youth who are more likely to be sexually active.
- Most sex education programmes in schools are not examinable and are therefore not taken seriously by teachers and learners.



Mexican Minister of Health, Dr Jose Angel Cordova-Villalobos

- Teachers are not adequately trained to teach about sex and HIV and can therefore be resistant to teaching what is often perceived as a sensitive subject.
- Many schools are poorly resourced and if education in general is of a poor quality then it is much more difficult to deliver a good quality sex education programme.
- There are so many different external groups providing sex education in schools that young people risk receiving conflicting messages.
- Too many HIV education programmes are not adequately based within a wider sex and relationships education programme and therefore fail to deal with the sexual transmission of the virus in a frank and accurate way.

Strategies for overcoming barriers

Collect data: identify which young people need to be reached and research what the contexts of their lives are so that educational messages are appropriate.

Admit that many young people are having sex: become familiar with the average age of sexual debut in your country and use this evidence to design sex education messages which are age-appropriate.

Trust young people: young people are making their own decisions and are the ones who are having sex or not. Trust young people to make their own informed decisions based on a range of options on how to protect themselves from HIV infection.

Show the evidence: there is now overwhelming evidence that sex education programmes do not encourage sexual experimentation and good quality programmes are associated with a range of positive health and behaviour outcomes.

Make sex education age-appropriate: Materials need to be designed for pre-pubescent, pubescent and older youth, who are more likely to be sexually active.

Use multimedia: take advantage of popular culture and make the messages relevant to today's youth.

Target young people where they are: provide educational messages to young people in cinemas and clubs – anywhere where young people tend to spend time.

Include youth: invite young people to design and test the messages and educational materials. This will help ensure that programmes speak to the realities of young people and their sex lives.

Include parents and the community: ensure that parents are included in the dialogue and that community processes are prioritized to gain support for sex education programmes in schools.

Include religious groups: negotiate with religious groups about the importance of providing sex education. Try and find some compromise without undermining the accuracy and comprehensiveness of the sex education programme. Take advantage of any religious groups that might be more supportive of frank, accurate and comprehensive sex education programmes.

Include PTAs: Parent Teacher Associations are one useful fora for enlisting the support of parents and teachers.

Identify positive role models: involve community leaders such as youth leaders, religious leaders or public media role models.

Identify the agents of change: discuss with communities and identify who are the agents of change in that community. Work with those people.

Reach all young people: do not just restrict sex education to schools but also target out-of-school youth who are often more vulnerable. Strategies might include mass media campaigns and social marketing.

Coordinate: the ministry of education needs to play a coordinating role to ensure that messages given by different NGOs on sex education are compatible and evidence-based.

Advocate for legislative change: review national laws which violate human and sexual rights. Advocate for legislative change which will create a more supportive environment for HIV prevention and for supporting all people regardless of their sexual orientation.

Link education to services: try to link access to condoms, family planning and treatment and testing of sexual transmitted infections (including HIV) with educational programmes.

Increase access to condoms: Young people are increasingly using condoms for HIV prevention and family planning purposes. However, demand is far greater than supply and there is an urgent need to scale-up comprehensive condom programming.

“We tend to forget about local level advocacy. Small victories accumulate and can lead to great change.”
(Participant at side event)