

More African children to receive boost in sexuality education

Save the Children[1] is launching a new project to ensure that children have improved access to sexuality information in twelve[2] countries across sub-Saharan Africa. The project will run for 36 months, reaching an estimated 340 000 children between 5-18 years, ensuring that they have both improved knowledge of sexuality, and can engage in safer sexual practices.

The organisation will be working with a number of partner organisations in these countries to execute the project. It will target a range of civil society organisations, including children's groups, HIV networks, schools, religious leaders and national governments to train a core group of master trainers who will then support the ongoing dissemination of key information and materials to children. The project is supported by the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA), with a budget of US\$ 6m.

In 22 countries of sub-Saharan Africa, the HIV incidence rate has declined by more than 25% since 2001. The epidemic is also on the decline for children in particular.[3] However, sub-Saharan Africa continues to bear a disproportionate share of the global HIV burden,[4] and heterosexual sex remains the dominant mode of HIV transmission. Women are disproportionately impacted by HIV - about 76% of all HIV-positive women in the world, live in this region.

Save the Children's project will teach children about the ill effects of stigma and discrimination as well as address inequalities and other power dynamics at the centre of transmission - two key drivers of the epidemic in the region. "The age of sexual debut for children in this region, especially girls, can be as young as thirteen years of age," said Elijah Adera, regional programme manager for Save the Children. "We want to make sure that they have the tools they need to seek help, should they become infected."

Save the Children also wants to prepare children to make the right choices before they become sexually active, as far as possible. The organisations methodology is to engage children in dialogues that both challenge and change harmful perceptions regarding sexuality and gender roles, while at the same time providing accurate information on sexual and reproductive health and services where needed.

"In the context of poverty, where many children in this region live below the headline, sexual relationships become 'transactional' - i.e., sex is exchanged for food or money - thus making children even more vulnerable than they already are. Reaching these children with correct information about HIV is often the only tool we have at our disposal to help them in the immediate-term," said Adera, pointing out that longer-term measures to address poverty, inequality and malnutrition in the region were urgently called for.

Save the Children works in a number of countries in sub-Saharan Africa to make nutrition issues more visible; to encourage exclusive breastfeeding for all children up to the age of 6 months, even if the mother is infected by HIV (as long as she is receiving appropriate ARV treatment); to strengthen health systems, and to protect families from poverty.

About Save the Children

Save the Children is the world's leading independent organisation for children. We work in 120 countries. We save children's lives; we fight for their rights; we help them fulfil their potential. We work together, with our partners, to inspire breakthroughs in the way the world treats children and to achieve immediate and lasting change in their lives.

Notes:

1. Save the Children's project countries include
 - Cycle 1: Cote D'Ivoire, Kenya, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa, Swaziland and Zambia
 - Cycle II: Liberia, Malawi, Tanzania, Uganda and Zimbabwe.
2. UNAIDS data shows that
 - In southern Africa, the number of children under 15 who became newly infected with HIV fell from 190 000 in 2004 to 130 000 in 2009 - a 32% reduction
 - In 2009, 54% of pregnant women living with HIV in sub-Saharan Africa received anti-retroviral drugs to prevent transmission of HIV to their children - up from 15% in 2005
 - In Botswana, Namibia, South Africa and Swaziland, coverage for anti-retrovirals for preventing mother to child transmission of HIV reached more than 80%
 - Between 2004 and 2009, AIDS-related deaths among children in southern Africa declined by 26%, from 120 000 to 90 000.
3. An estimated 22.5 million people living with HIV resided in sub-Saharan Africa in 2009, representing 68% of the global HIV burden. With an estimated 5.6 million HIV positive people, South Africa continues to have the world's largest HIV epidemic. Swaziland has the highest adult HIV prevalence rate in the world; an estimated 25.9% of people in the country were living with HIV in 2009.
4. Children are reached with messaging consistent with their age and maturity, as well as their sexual experience, so that they can make informed choices regarding their sexual and reproductive health, sexuality, and sexual practices. Influences on children's sexual behaviour include:
 - Perceived gender roles, and power dynamics
 - Perceptions of childhood
 - Perceptions of sexuality
 - Knowledge about sex, STIs and HIV prevention

Save the Children's resource books, Tell me More! and Building Resilience and are available on request from info@rb.se

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