

...adolescence represents the period of self-projection and therefore the discovery of one's vocation. Both for physiological, social and cultural reasons, this period tends to be longer today than in the past. Christian parents should educate the children for life in such a way that each one may fully perform his or her role according to the vocation received from God. This is an extremely important task which basically constitutes the culmination of the parents' mission....

Parents should always strive to give example and witness with their own lives to fidelity to God and one another in the marriage covenant. Their example is especially decisive in adolescence, the phase when young people are looking for lived and attractive behavior models.

*The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality*, Pontifical Council for the Family, #98, 102.

The physical and emotional changes accompanying puberty have a significant effect on how children of this age see themselves and others. Changes are happening at different rates in individual, early adolescents. Girls at this stage tend to develop physically and emotionally more rapidly than boys, thus appearing more socially mature. Children are continuing to form relationships outside the family circle, and peers take on great importance because the peer group is the source of their identity. The need for acceptance by the peer group is a priority in this age range. Children often tend to be self-conscious and easily embarrassed. They may have an exaggerated sense that "everyone is looking at me."

Children this age can have doubts about their own sexual identity. It is important that these uncertainties be recognized and discussed as normal.

Young people often imitate their "heroes." The parental role, as well as that of other caring adults, is critical at this time. Youth need and want guidance despite their outward rejection of adult intervention and need for autonomy. They need to know the boundaries, yet be given a certain range of freedom within limits. It is important to keep lines of communication open, offering teens respect, affirmation and a listening ear. Be ready to share correct facts about HIV/AIDS along with the values you hold. Help them to see that their emerging selves are not something to be feared but gifts from God who loves them. Like all gifts, they need to be treated with care and responsibility.

### **What is my child learning about HIV/AIDS in grades 7 and 8?**

In seventh and eighth grade, HIV/AIDS education in the public school may take a much more forthright form. Health instruction is now given by a trained teacher in a separate class. "HIV/AIDS EDUCATION: A CATHOLIC FRAMEWORK OF UNDERSTANDING" states, "The blatant facts and realities of Sexually-transmitted Diseases (STDs), HIV/AIDS must be communicated to the junior high student by parents and teachers who are well versed and comfortable talking about sexuality and transmission modes. Parent and faculty training is critical in insuring that information is shared correctly.

Constant interest in the child's development is imperative."

The New York State Board of Regents clearly states that HIV/AIDS instruction must "stress abstinence as the most appropriate and effective premarital protection against AIDS." The reality of how this abstinence education is carried out in a public school classroom, especially the reality of how much time is devoted to creative abstinence education, varies widely from school district to school district. One means of abstinence education is the Monroe County "Not me, Not now" program, which you may want to suggest to your school.

The media (the "other" school) may be sending your child, at this impressionable age, a very strong message of "if it feels good, do it." Middle school students probably know sexually active peers and friends.

### **How do I talk to my 12-14 year old about HIV/AIDS?**

There can be no greater argument for "Talking With Your Kids About HIV/AIDS" from a Catholic perspective than the reality of the junior high years. While peer relationships are significant, parents still have influence. Middle school students are capable of understanding moral principles, making proper choices, and accepting responsibility and the consequences of their actions, but immediate gratification remains the most common choice for this age group. Girls, developing more rapidly than boys, can be more socially mature.

Information presented in a non-judgmental manner, with compassion for people who have HIV/AIDS, is not incompatible with a strong message of abstinence. You are probably the loudest voice for abstinence in your 12 to 14 year old's life.

## Activities/Strategies for the Home

1. Explain abstinence as a positive ideal, a choice to affirm your self respect and your power to be in control of both yourself and your future. It means you are choosing to give the most intimate gift of self to the person you marry. Abstinence from sex before marriage frees a person to:
  - \* follow life/career plans
  - \* develop skills for emotional intimacy and respect for the opposite sex
  - \* strengthen communication skills and the ability to deal with conflict constructively, rather than use sex to avoid being honest and up front with one's relationships
  - \* develop a fuller understanding of love
  - \* develop close friendships with others and, in this way, avoid restrictive exclusiveness
  - \* enjoy a relationship with a person without the fear of becoming infected with a disease or being caught in a sexual act
  - \* live a life that reflects the teaching of our Catholic faith.
2. Use life situations to initiate discussion with your children on the issue of HIV/AIDS. For example, a news report on TV, a public service announcement, a magazine ad, a rumor or real situation at school or in the community or a health lesson can provide an excellent opportunity for discussion. You can start a conversation by saying, "I know that you have heard a lot about HIV/AIDS and have even learned about it in school. Because I love you and care about your life and happiness, I want to be sure that you have the facts of how HIV is passed and how it can be prevented. Even though you may know many of these facts, I will feel better when I am sure you have the correct ones. I want you to be happy!"

3. Use appropriate vocabulary when you speak about HIV/AIDS. Avoid slang, stereotyping or anything else that could show a lack of respect for persons with the virus, for the body and for sexuality. Avoid stereotyping HIV as a disease that affects only persons who engage in homosexual activity. Be prepared also to dispel the cruel myth that HIV is punishment from God for sexual activity outside marriage.
4. Help your children set goals for themselves and formulate a plan for achieving them. This strategy will increase self-esteem and competency and leave the young person more resistant to negative peer pressure.
5. Read highlights from "Talking With Your Children and Teens About HIV/AIDS: A Catholic Perspective" with your young teen. What does she or he think? What questions do you both still need answered?
6. Pray for those who are suffering from HIV or AIDS, whether the suffering comes from the physical effects of the disease or the social stigma which is often experienced by persons with AIDS. Pray for the families, friends and caregivers who share their suffering.
7. Point out examples of peers, older adolescents or young adults who are models of positive values and behaviors--for example, those who resist negative peer pressure, those who use their energy to help others and effect change for the good, those who have the courage of convictions, those who have good relational skills. Learn their stories and invite these young people to share their stories with their peers.

# TALKING WITH YOUR 12-14 YEAR OLD ABOUT HIV/AIDS

## A Catholic Perspective

Prepared by the Department of Evangelization and Catechesis, Diocese of Rochester, New York. This series of brochures is based on "HIV/AIDS Education: A Catholic Framework of Understanding," a document of the Roman Catholic Bishops of New York State. Copyrighted materials are used with the permission of the New York State Catholic Conference.