

The Years of Innocence

It can be said that a child is in the stage described in John Paul II's words as "the years of innocence" from about five years of age until puberty...This period of tranquility and serenity must never be disturbed by unnecessary information about sex....So as not to disturb this important natural phase of growth, parents will recognize that prudent formation in chaste love during this period should be indirect, in preparation for puberty, when direct formation will be necessary. – *The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality, Pontifical Council for the Family, #78*

Children of this age range are experiencing an expanding social circle. Their world now includes relationships beyond their immediate family—relationships with teachers, classmates, peers and adults in other settings such as those of neighborhood, sports teams, and parish. Their media exposure also contributes to a broader awareness of life outside the family. Children of this age range are coping with the need to learn skills of independence and self-sufficiency while learning skills of interdependence and relationship--sometimes a difficult balancing act. Children of this age tend to see things concretely and literally and live in the immediate moment. They usually have vivid imaginations and show an eagerness to learn new skills.

In teaching six to eight year olds about HIV/AIDS, it is important to present facts that are appropriate to the child's life

experience, to teach healthy caution without instilling fear, to establish good health and self-care habits, and to teach skills for building positive relationships—especially the qualities of tolerance and compassion.

What is my child learning about AIDS/HIV in grades K-3?

In grades K-3, a public school AIDS/HIV curriculum would not differ greatly from a Catholic perspective. Emphasis is on developing attitudes, knowledge and behavior that contribute to self-worth, respect for the body and good decision-making skills. Specific health habits (e.g. washing hands) are also taught by the regular classroom teacher. "Good touch/bad touch" and stranger danger information may be presented. AIDS/HIV may not be specifically mentioned at these ages. While AIDS/HIV education is mandated by the State of New York for each grade, schools have leeway to tailor the curriculum to their specific situation. You may want to contact your school for specifics on what your child is learning.

It is crucial to remember, however, that children do not learn only from their school teacher, a parent or another caring adult. Your child's exposure to the media (movies, television news, soap operas, music, commercials) or life experiences and contacts may raise for them specific questions regarding AIDS/HIV, dying, sexuality, or disease.

How do I talk to my 6-8 year old about HIV/AIDS?

The six to eight year old is becoming increasingly aware of the world, and how it affects not only him or her but also others. Questions such as, "Are people who get AIDS bad?" "Where do babies come from?" "Could I get sick and die?" may arise, even repeatedly.

It is important to give truthful, but not necessarily detailed answers. These should be appropriate to the child's life experience and specific to the child's questions; "over-answering" is a common mistake. Your child may be dealing with misinformation or unfounded fears. It is also important to teach and model the qualities of tolerance and compassion.

From a Catholic perspective, children should understand that:

- ★ Each person is a special creation of God.
- ★ All that God creates is good.
- ★ God loves all people, sick or well.
- ★ All God's people are valuable and deserve our compassion and respect.
- ★ Love is central to friendship, especially our friendship with Jesus.
- ★ Life is a precious gift, and we have a responsibility to stay as well as possible.
- ★ Illness is not a judgment by God of a person's worth or a punishment from God.

Activities/Strategies for the Home

- Using wrapping paper, trace the outline of your child's body to create "The Wonderful Paper Me." Invite your child to label various parts of the body and what they can do with that part. Display the "Wonderful Paper Me" as a reminder that God has given us our bodies to enjoy life by using our gifts and giving our love to help others.
- Reinforce the practice of good health habits by displaying a chart of good health practices including daily and other generally good ones:
 - Daily – eating good foods, getting enough rest, exercising, brushing teeth, washing hands, bathing, etc.
 - General – covering mouth when coughing or sneezing, using sunscreen in the sun, visiting the doctor and dentist, etc.
- Go to the library and look for simple books to read with your child on germs/viruses and their effect on the body. A great suggestion is the book *Germs Make Me Sick* by Melvin Berber.
- Find opportunities for your child to care for another person when that person is sick or hurt. Discuss with your child what it feels like to be sick or hurt. Making a card or drawing to cheer a person, bringing flowers or a treat, making a phone call to or spending time with the person are all ways of developing a sensitivity to those who suffer.
- Remember regularly in your bedtime or mealtime prayers those who are sick and those who care for the sick, especially those affected by HIV/AIDS.
- Use the following guidelines when you answer children's questions about HIV/AIDS
 - Refer to the brochure "Talking with Your Children and Teens About

HIV/AIDS: a Catholic Parent's Perspective," so that the information you have is correct.

- Highlight the very specific ways that *children* can contract the virus, making sure that they know that they can't catch this virus the same way they catch a cold or the flu.
- Reinforce the fact that children with HIV/AIDS deserve our friendship and care, and that we cannot contract the HIV virus through our everyday contact with them.

PRAYER FOR THE FAMILY

Dear Lord,

Draw all people suffering with AIDS close to you.

Look with love on each one, especially the children.

Help us to understand their fears and anxieties, that we and all their relatives and friends may learn to live with them and love them.

When life seems most difficult, may they know the human touch of compassion and concern.

At times, when their innermost being is torn and uncertain, may they feel the sheltering nearness of a merciful and caring God.

God, who moves in mysterious ways, grant them the reassurance that you are their God and they are your people.

For this we humbly pray, in the name of your son, Jesus Christ.

Amen.

Composed by a contemplative nun as her outreach to persons with HIV/AIDS and their families.

TALKING WITH YOUR 6-8 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.