

Puberty, which constitutes the initial phase of adolescence, is a time in which parents are called to be particularly attentive to the Christian education of their children. This is a time of self-discovery and of one's own inner world, the time of generous plans, the time when the feeling of love awakens, with the biological impulses of sexuality, the time of the desire to be together, the time of particularly intense joy connected with the exhilarating discovery of life....

Parents should pay particular attention to their children's gradual development and to their physical and psychological changes, which are decisive in the maturing of the personality...This is naturally an important moment for teaching the value of chastity, which will also be expressed in the way sexual information is given.

*The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality*, Pontifical Council for the Family, #87-88.

Children in this age range are in a period of relative physical stability. They are either growing at a steady rate or in small "growth spurts." They are becoming increasingly conscious of their peer groups and have a heightened need to be accepted. They seek orderliness and appreciate limitations. As they make decisions, they are increasingly able to see the positive and negative consequences of their choices on themselves as well as on others. Some nine to eleven year olds experience the onset of puberty. They may become self-conscious about their bodies and about other characteristics of their sexuality.

### **What is my child learning about HIV/AIDS in grades 4-6?**

School health classes in grades 4-6 are more formalized, although they are usually still taught by the classroom teacher and not a separate health teacher. Through health units, students are taught to become increasingly self-reliant in solving their own health problems and those of the group. They also begin to study the body scientifically.

Remember that all learning does not take place in the home or school. This age is an important time for parents to talk with their children about HIV/AIDS. It is impossible to know exactly what messages your preadolescent is receiving, or HEARING, about HIV/AIDS and sexuality from school, the media, or peers. This is a time when children are likely to listen to quantities of factual information and to appreciate one-on-one discussion with a parent.

### **How do I talk to my 9-11 year old about AIDS/HIV?**

In teaching children of this age about HIV/AIDS, it is important to emphasize the power that their choices have on themselves and on others. It will become increasingly important to present the facts about how HIV is transmitted in adults and teenagers, as well as in children. Continue to reinforce good health and self-care habits; teach skills for building positive relationships and assertiveness skills for resisting peer pressures to choose destructive behaviors.

Parents are an important influence at this age. In choosing between right and wrong, children look for affirmation and approval from parents and other significant adults.

From a Catholic perspective, children should understand that:

- When persons care for themselves, they are recognizing God's wonderful gift of life.
- Our relationships with others must be like those of Jesus: pure, loyal, unselfish, and responsible.
- The Church gives us a framework for making moral decisions centered in Christ and guided by the Holy Spirit.

### **Activities/Strategies for Home**

1. Use stories from books, movies and TV shows to draw your child into conversation about the power of our choices on ourselves and on others. Choose a character on which to focus and ask: What did she or he choose to do? Do you think it was a good decision? Why? Whom did it affect? What was the effect? What other choices could have been made?
2. Encourage the older children in your family to be "peer examples" to the younger children in the practice of good health and safety habits. For example, older children can teach younger ones the value of wearing a bicycle helmet more effectively than can an adult. Have your child, along with a group of friends, design a cartoon strip or write and illustrate a booklet for younger children about a good-health or safety practice.

3. Use the following scenes to engage your child in conversation:

What would you do if--

- a very popular kid in your grade that you would like to hang around with asked you to start a nasty rumor about another kid?
- a new kid who has HIV came into your school, and everyone said to steer clear of him because you might get the virus?
- One of your friends bragged that she had tried drugs?
- Someone in an on-line chat room asked you questions about your body which made you uncomfortable?
- Your friend asked you to go to another friend's house where you would try to pierce one another's ears?

While talking, encourage your child to express feelings and communicate honestly. Do not make a judgment on your child for responding in a way that is different from what you expect, because that might close off communication. Simply state your own values and give reasons for them, pointing out the good and positive consequences of adhering to those values.

4. Remember regularly in your bedtime or mealtime prayers those who are sick, especially those affected by HIV/AIDS and those who care for them.

5. Play "Truth or Dare" with your child as a review of the facts from "Talking With Your Children and Teens About HIV/AIDS: a Catholic Perspective." Present a "fact." If your child guesses the truth, either reinforce it or say where to find the correct answer. If your child guesses "dare," you are challenged to prove the truth of the fact and to earn the right to have a chore done for you. If you cannot prove its truth, your child can ask you to do a chore for him or her instead.

- Sometimes people are afraid to be with a person infected with HIV because they think that it is spread like a cold or the flu. This is not true. A person with HIV can be very sick and deserves our kindness and our help. The following activities can encourage a better response:

1. Read a story of Jesus' compassion for the sick from a children's bible (e.g. Luke 5:12-14). This sick person knew about God's love for him because of Jesus' love and care. Jesus asks us to treat people the same way. When we show love and kindness to someone who is sick, we are showing God's love. God is working through us to help the person.
2. Tell your child about an agency or hospital which cares for children who have AIDS. Use brochures, photos, and videos to tell the story. With your child, figure out a way to raise money or donate goods to that place as a way of caring as Jesus cares. Later on, explore how it felt to use the money for someone else instead of using the money for yourselves. Affirm your children for her or his caring.

# TALKING WITH YOUR 9-11 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.