



USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

ISSUE BRIEF

Supporting Youth: Educating Young People about Reproductive Health So They Can Achieve Their Fullest Potential

The world has nearly two billion 10 to 24 year olds; of these, 86 percent live in developing countries (1). While much literature on young people's health focuses on the problems and risks they face, there is a great deal of evidence that most get through the transition to adulthood without significant behavioral, social, or emotional difficulties. In fact, among this age group, positive changes in overall health have clearly outweighed the negative changes. Society must harness the energies of young people while helping them realize their full potential so they can contribute to and participate in the social, economic, political, and cultural life of their communities.

Information Contributes to Positive Health Outcomes

Adolescence is a time of rapid personal, physiological, social, and emotional development. For youth in the developing world, the wrong choice can limit future opportunities or even result in death. This is why adolescence is the best time to promote positive behaviors such as the "ABC" approach, abstain – educating youth about both abstinence and delay of sexual activity and first pregnancy; be faithful – or partner reduction; and correct and consistent condom use. Another component sometimes added is "D" for drugs, which refers to reducing use of both intravenous drugs and recreational drugs, such as alcohol, that can increase the possibility of unsafe sex.

Education and Skill Building Help Address Gender Inequality

Adolescent girls face increased discrimination as a result of their sex and age. In many cultures, they face pressure to marry at a very young age and immediately have children. They are vulnerable to sexual coercion and exploitation, including incest, rape, sexual trafficking, and may experience violence or abuse if they resist demands for sex or insist on contraception. To successfully delay sex - or if sexually active, to use condoms and contraceptives - girls need strong communication and negotiation skills. Boys and young men must also build positive communication skills to be constructively involved in reproductive health decisions. Additionally, community-wide education about the importance of delaying first births until girls' bodies have reached full maturity is vital.

Protective Environments Foster Positive Behaviors

Youth want to play active roles in community development through education, earning productive livelihoods, and participating in local institutions. The environment in which young people live profoundly influences their behaviors and ability to participate in society. Poverty and family instability can force them out of the protective environments of home and school, increasing their risk of early and unprotected sex. Protective factors, including close relationships with parents and other adults, school attendance, and supportive community norms are associated with positive behaviors.

Facts and Figures

This generation will be the largest cohort ever to enter the transition into adulthood. Consequently, their fertility will drive future population growth. In the Africa and South Asia regions, youth represent over 60% of the total population, and even as birthrates decrease and stabilize in many countries, the “population momentum”, generated by the sheer number of youth, is expected to account for half the world’s population growth over the next 100 years. (2)

In many countries, youth are becoming sexually active at earlier ages and marrying later. The majority of youth are sexually experienced by the age of 20; premarital sex is common among 15- to 19-year-olds.

Each year, between 14 and 15 million girls ages 15 to 19 in the developing world give birth. These mothers and their newborns are twice as likely to die or have complications from childbirth as women in their 20s. Girls below the age of 15 are five times more likely to die during childbirth (3).

In some generalized HIV epidemics in Africa, one of every three to four new infections is in a young person under age 25, primarily young women. Dozens of studies around the globe have shown that infections are clustered among girls ages 15 to 24 and among the men who infect them, often 10 to 20 years their senior. (4)

USAID Responds

In the 1990s, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) expanded its youth reproductive health activities. The global FOCUS on Young Adults project and its successor, YouthNet, represent a 10-year commitment to improve the health and well-being of young adults. FOCUS emphasized awareness raising, capacity building, and identifying appropriate strategies for promoting youth reproductive health and preventing HIV/AIDS. YouthNet shifted the emphasis to program expansion, adaptation, institutionalization, and sustainability of successful strategies. Additionally, USAID Missions provide direct support to youth programs in their host countries.

- In Kenya, USAID supports the national Girl Guides Association to raise HIV awareness among its members by holding HIV awareness contests and having guides work toward merit badges relating to various aspects of HIV and AIDS. The program provides a forum for girls and young women to discuss HIV and support each other in avoiding risky behaviors.
- Bangladesh’s 29 million young people make up about 23 percent of the population and are largely uninformed about reproductive health issues. Given their demographic impact, they deserve special attention. USAID/Bangladesh supports numerous youth activities within a broader family planning/reproductive health program, including initiatives to reach newlyweds with messages and materials about delaying first pregnancy and with contraceptive and maternal health services.
- In the Dominican Republic, USAID is helping to improve the quality of services at public and private reproductive health facilities where adolescents are a priority target group. The USAID project CONECTA provides training to service providers to improve post-abortion care counseling for youth in public hospitals. The training includes improved counseling on contraceptives and HIV/AIDS and information on post-abortion danger signs and symptoms.
- JA-STYLE, a USAID-funded project in Jamaica, uses the youth resiliency model to enhance protective factors, such as community involvement and youth participation in recreational and other extracurricular activities, to reduce sexual risk-taking behaviors. The project also works to mitigate factors such as substance use and abuse and violence. Focusing on all of Jamaica’s 14 parishes and targeting the entire 10- to 19-year-old population, JA-STYLE is currently implementing a behavior change communication and mass media strategy and has initiated a small grants program to provide funds to community-based organizations for adolescent reproductive health training, education, counseling, and contraceptive distribution to sexually active youth.

Resources: (1) *The World’s Youth 2006 Data Sheet*, Population Reference Bureau, Washington, D.C. (2) *Why Invest in Children and Youth*, The World Bank (<http://go.worldbank.org/EF310LWYJ0>). (3) *Pregnant Adolescents: Delivering on Global Promises of Hope*, WHO/UNFPA (2006). (4) *Growing Up Global - Chapter Four: Health*, National Research Council and Institute of Medicine (2005).

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