



U.S. Agency for  
International  
Development

Bureau for  
Global Health

# SUCCESS STORIES

HIV/AIDS

## Abstinence: **Zambian Youth Are Asking For It**

ABSTINENCE AND OTHER PREVENTION STRATEGIES come as good news to Zambian youth who seek to avoid HIV/AIDS. In a country where 84 percent of young people have had sex by the age of 19 and approximately one in six of urban youth are HIV-positive, the HEART (Helping Each Other Act Responsibly Together) program is helping young Zambians steer clear of HIV/AIDS.

The HEART mass media campaign, designed by youth for youth, is creating a social atmosphere conducive to changing prevailing social norms and individual sexual behavior. This campaign promotes HIV/AIDS prevention through messages around abstinence, consistent condom use, and the fact that “you can’t tell by looking” if someone is HIV-positive. Although condom messages are present, they are balanced with the abstinence messages that further strengthen the ideals that Zambia as a Christian nation preaches. While many argue that abstinence messages are ineffective in a country where such a high percentage of young people are sexually active, HEART has revealed that youth, girls in particular, are asking for support in their choice to abstain.

The HEART campaign is implemented by the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health/Center for Communication Programs and Population Services International (PSI), with support from the U.S. Agency for International Development through the Zambia Integrated Health Program with approval of the Government of Zambia. The HEART campaign uses multiple communication avenues and delivers its health messages through television, radio, music videos, posters, stickers, and even on buses.

One television spot, entitled *When He Says*, endorses virginity and cautions young women to be wary of men’s efforts to seduce them before they are ready for sex. The message: Say no to sex before marriage. Another spot called *Ice* portrays a young man who contracts a sexually transmitted infection as a result of his cavalier refusal to use a condom. The message: Use a condom every time you have sex. And another spot called *Choices* highlights the prerogative of young men to choose abstinence until they are ready to make another choice. The message: Abstinence is cool.

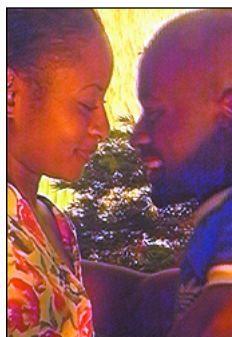
A 2001 impact survey of the campaign’s target audience, youth aged 13 to 19, found that many decided to remain abstinent as a direct result of exposure to the television and radio advertisements. Contrary to the argument that advertising prevention messages promotes promiscuity, respondents reported they are more likely to say they chose to abstain than to report condom use. In addition, viewers reported more discussions about abstinence and were 1.68 times more likely to report primary or secondary abstinence (return to abstinence) than were youth who did not see the advertisements.

The survey concluded that future mass media campaigns must convey ideas that abstinence is a social norm among young people. Many youth may know or perceive that most of their peers are sexually active, yet they request abstinence messages to “help them be better” and provide the support they need to remain virgins or “return to virginity,” a popular theme among many young women. Interventions should continue to encourage abstinence or a return to abstinence as a viable alternative for youth.

“We tried to give abstinence a message of coolness.... The ads worked because they made delaying sex seem ‘kind of hip.’”

—Holo M. Hachonda,  
the Zambia Integrated  
Health Program

Photo courtesy of Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health/Center for Communication Programs



One of HEART’s messages is that “you can’t tell by looking” if someone is HIV-positive.

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