Talking with Your Children about HIV: HIV Awareness for Children

Talking with children about HIV can be tough but important. On this National Youth HIV & AIDS Awareness Day (#NYHAAD), get some tips on how to share age-appropriate information about HIV with kids.

April 10, 2025 By The Well Project

This post originally appeared on The Well Project

Table of Contents

- The Facts About HIV
- Starting the Discussion
- Talking to Children of Different Ages
- Taking Care of Yourself

Note: This fact sheet talks about discussing HIV in general. If you or your child are living with the virus, you may want to read our fact sheet "Talking with Your Children About Your HIV Status or Your Children's Status."

HIV can be a tough subject for parents, guardians, and caregivers to discuss with their children. However, it is important that all families teach their children about HIV. There are many reasons you may want to discuss HIV and AIDS with your children: you or a family member is living with HIV, your child is living with HIV, or you simply want to help your child understand HIV so that he or she does not acquire the virus.

There can be times when it is not appropriate or safe for women to tell their children or families that they are living with HIV. For more information about telling others that you or your child is living with HIV, see our fact sheet on Disclosure and HIV.

Important: if you are feeling threatened right now, call 911 or the National Domestic Violence hotline in the US at 800-799-SAFE [1-800-799-7233; or 1-800-787-3224 (TTY)], or text BEGIN to 88788. You can also search for a safe space online at Domestic Shelters. If you live outside the US, please go to the Hot Peach Pages to find help near you.

HIV can be a tough subject for parents, guardians, and caregivers to discuss with their children. However, it is important that all families teach their children about HIV.

Globally, around 2.5 million people living with HIV were less than 19 years old in 2022. That year, an estimated 140,000 adolescents and 130,000 children acquired HIV, UNICEF reports. Young women and adolescent girls accounted for 77 percent of new HIV cases in sub-Saharan Africa.

In the US, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports that young people, ages 13 to 24, accounted for one in five of all people newly living with HIV in 2021. Yet nearly half of young people who are living with HIV don't know it. These statistics serve as a serious reminder to parents that they cannot afford to avoid talking with their children about HIV. For more information, see our fact sheet on Teens and HIV Prevention: What Parents and Providers Need to Know.

Children and teenagers find out about HIV from all sorts of places: school, TV, radio, friends, newspapers, magazines, and the Internet. Talking with your children about HIV lets you give them facts and correct any myths or incorrect information they may have picked up outside the home. It is also a chance to develop an open and honest relationship with your children.

The Facts About HIV

Many parents are uncomfortable talking with their children about HIV because they do not have the correct information themselves. Before you talk to your children about HIV, it is important for you to know the facts.

What Is HIV?

- HIV stands for "Human Immunodeficiency Virus"
- Without treatment, HIV will eventually wear down the immune system in most people to the point where they develop serious infections, which can lead to an AIDS diagnosis
- Many people take powerful and effective medications to fight the virus and live full lives; however, there is no cure for HIV

What Is AIDS?

- AIDS stands for "Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome"

- AIDS is the most advanced stage of HIV
- Many people take powerful and effective combinations of medications to fight the virus; however, there is no cure for AIDS

What Is the Difference Between HIV and AIDS?

- Someone can be living with HIV for many years with no signs of disease, or only mild-to-moderate symptoms
- The CDC identifies someone as having AIDS, if he or she is living with HIV and has one or both of these conditions:
  - At least one AIDS-defining opportunistic infection (see a list of opportunistic infections in our fact sheet on AIDS-Defining Conditions)
  - A CD4 cell count of 200 cells/mm^3 or less (a normal CD4 count is about 600 to 1,500 cells/mm^3)
- When people are diagnosed with HIV, they will always live with HIV. Regardless of how low their viral load may be – even if it becomes "undetectable" – they will never go back to being HIV-negative.

For more information, see our fact sheet "What Are HIV & AIDS?"

How Is HIV Transmitted (Spread)?

HIV is transmitted through:

- Blood (including menstrual blood)
- Semen ("cum") and other male sexual fluids ("pre-cum")
- Vaginal fluids
- Breast milk
- Rectal fluid (not feces or "poop")

HIV is not transmitted through:

- Sweat
- Tears

- Saliva (spit)
- Urine (pee)
- Feces (poop)

A person living with HIV who is taking HIV drugs daily and has an undetectable viral load will not transmit the virus through sex. This is one way that HIV treatment can also be HIV prevention. For more information on this exciting development, please see our fact sheet on Undetectable Equals Untransmittable.

The most common ways in which HIV is passed from one person to another are:

- Re-using and sharing needles and other drug equipment ("works") for injecting drugs (including steroids or hormones)
- Unprotected anal or vaginal sex (no condoms or other barriers, or treatment-as-prevention methods). There is little risk of acquiring HIV during oral sex.
- Birthing parent-to-child (during pregnancy, birth, or breast/chestfeeding)

For more information on how HIV is transmitted, see our fact sheet on HIV Transmission.

How Can HIV Be Prevented?

One of the most important messages you can share with your children is that HIV can be prevented. HIV cannot be transmitted, except when certain body fluids are exchanged (see above). For more information, see our fact sheets on HIV Prevention and Transmission.

Teach your children that they can greatly reduce the risk of acquiring HIV by:

- Always practicing safer sex (using condoms or other barriers, or treatment-as-prevention methods)
- Not having sex, if that is appropriate for them
- Having types of sex that present no risk of HIV, including masturbation
- Once they are sexually active, getting tested regularly for HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and getting any treatment they need
- Taking pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP), if that is appropriate for them
- Talking with their partners about sexual histories and HIV/STI status, and when they were each last tested

- Limiting their number of sexual partners
- Not injecting drugs, or if they do, always using new, clean needles and drug equipment

It is also important to tell children that HIV is not transmitted by casual contact such as:

- Being a friend to someone who is living with HIV
- Hugging
- Dancing
- Sharing food or drinks
- Using a shower, bath, or bed used by a person living with HIV
- Kissing (between people with no significant dental problems, such as bleeding gums or open sores)
- Sharing exercise equipment or a swimming pool

> Talking to Teens about HIV and HIV Prevention: For the 24th episode of A Girl Like Me LIVE, host Ciarra "Ci Ci" Covin was joined by Kimberly Canady and Ieshia Scott, two long-time The Well Project community advisory board members. Don't miss the chance to learn from these advocates about how they have initiated the conversation about HIV prevention and awareness with youth in their communities, tips for when to begin talking with children, and what you can do to create a supportive and loving environment in which adolescents and teens will feel comfortable asking questions and empowered to make healthy life choices.

View other episodes in the A Girl Like Me LIVE series

For more information, see our fact sheet on HIV Transmission.

Starting the Discussion

Every parent has his or her own style when talking about important subjects. Some parents choose to have a specific time when the family will sit down and discuss sexual activities and sexually transmitted infections, including HIV. They may give out printed information (e.g., books, info sheets) or other resources to help children understand the facts.

Children will be ready to hear different levels of information at different ages.

Other parents take hints from their children and from what is going on around them to talk about HIV. For example, they may try to bring up the topic when their children see or hear something about HIV on TV. Ask what the children have heard and what they know about HIV. This will help you figure out what they already know and what you need to explain.

Note: When talking with your children about HIV, questions about death may come up. Explain death in simple terms. It is important not to explain that death is like sleep. Such an explanation may make your children worry that if they fall asleep, they will never wake up. It is also important to explain that while HIV is serious, it can be prevented and treated.

Talking to Children of Different Ages

It is never too early to talk to your children about HIV. In fact, by age eight (third grade in the US), many children have already heard about it. Talking to children about HIV is not a one-time-only conversation. Children will be ready to hear different levels of information at different ages. Often their questions will let you know that they are ready to hear more about it. The more open you are to questions about HIV or sex in general, the more likely your children will be to ask them, and the greater your opportunity to give them correct information and help them make healthy choices. Talk early and talk often to make sure that your children have the right information for their age throughout their childhood.

Toddlers/Preschoolers

Children up to age four are learning the basics about their bodies. They do not understand the concepts of disease, death, or sex. However, you can set the stage for future conversations: introduce them to the idea of sexuality by telling them the correct names for body parts. You may also want to tell them that certain body parts are private, and that they should let you know if anyone touches them in a way that makes them uncomfortable. Most importantly, however, you want to give young children the message that you are open to their questions. When they feel they can ask you anything, they will be more likely to talk to you as they get older.

School-Age Children

Children five to eight years old are just learning about health, sickness, death, and sex. They can understand that HIV is a serious health problem which is caused by a virus, and that their chances of acquiring HIV are very low. You do not have to discuss sex at this age; however, you can teach children that some body fluids carry infection and should not be shared.

Preteens/Tweens

Children nine to 12 years old think a lot about their bodies. Many of them are entering or going through puberty. At this age, children also feel a lot of peer pressure – pressure from other children their age – to try new (and possibly dangerous) things. Now is the time to tell them how HIV is transmitted. Since HIV is often transmitted by sexual contact, now is the time to give your children correct information about sex. Tell them about the importance of sexual health and safer sex. Let them know that sharing needles or syringes for injection drug use, steroid injection, and informal tattooing or body piercing can put them at risk for acquiring HIV. Teach preteens that they have choices in life and that the decisions they make today could affect them for the rest of their lives. You may also want to tell your children that it is okay for them to talk to an adult they trust (parent, teacher, older relative) if they feel unhappy, pressured, or bullied.

Teens

Thirteen- to 19-year-olds are often more concerned with their self-image and friendships than with what their parents have to say. Many teenagers take risks and feel that "it can't happen to me." During these formative years, it is important to continue to provide your child with correct information about HIV and safer sex. You may wish to provide resources such as books and videos that they can view on their own. This is also an important age to talk about treatment as prevention, including pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) and post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP). For more information, see our fact sheet on Teens and HIV Prevention: What Parents and Providers Need to Know.

Taking Care of Yourself

Talking with children about HIV can make parents anxious. Educate yourself and have resources on hand. You will feel more comfortable if you know the facts. Try to relax and let the conversation flow naturally. It is important to begin talking with your children at an early age, so that you all become comfortable with the subject and the words used to talk about it. You can use this opportunity to create a supportive and loving environment in which your children will feel comfortable asking questions and empowered to make healthy life choices.

Related articles by The Well Project

Talking with Your Children About Your HIV Status or Your Children's Status

Disclosure and HIV

Teens and HIV Prevention: What Parents and Providers Need to Know

Teens and HIV: The Transition into Adulthood

Lea esta hoja informativa en español

The Well Project is a non-profit organization whose mission is to change the course of the HIV/AIDS pandemic through a unique and comprehensive focus on women and girls across the gender spectrum. Visit their website, www.thewellproject.org, to access fact sheets (English and Spanish), blogs, and advocacy tools, and to join a global community of women living with HIV.

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.

http://beta.docker.poz.com/blog/talking-children-hiv-hiv-awareness-children