



# Abstinence and Delayed Sexual Initiation for Youth

***Complete sexual abstinence is the most effective means of protection against both pregnancy and HIV infection. Messages encouraging abstinence appear to work best when aimed at younger youth who are not yet sexually active, especially girls.***

Adolescents who successfully practice abstinence require strong social support from community members and the development of specific skills, including strong motivation, self-control, and communication. Programs that include comprehensive messages can teach skills for practicing abstinence as well as provide information for sexually active youth about condoms and reducing the number of partners.

## **Practicing Abstinence**

Youth may not practice abstinence perfectly, just as they might not use condoms consistently and correctly. Some may consider themselves to be practicing abstinence if they abstain from vaginal intercourse, even though they engage in other kinds of sexual intimacy. A young person may have sex in a "weak" moment and need help developing skills to say no consistently to unwanted sexual activity. Other youth may be coerced into sex.

## **Delaying Sexual Debut**

**Early sexual debut can place adolescents at increased risk of unintended pregnancy, HIV, and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs).**

Youth who begin sexual activity early appear more likely to have sex with high-risk partners or multiple partners and are less likely to use condoms.<sup>1</sup>

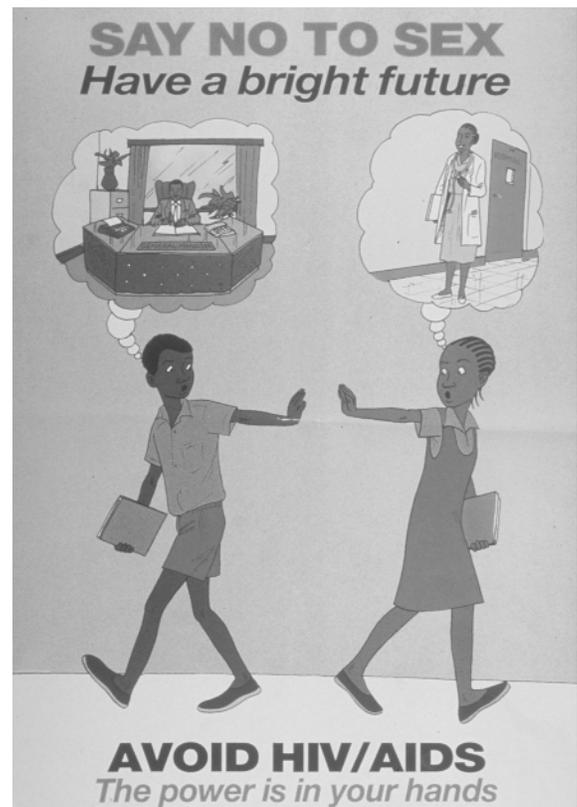
**Practical skills, coupled with social support from family members and peers, are essential for adolescents to achieve the confidence and ability to refrain from early sexual activity.** Skills can include making an "abstinence plan" so that

adolescents are prepared to handle pressure and successfully say no to sex (see box on next page). While abstinence messages may have the most impact on youth who have not yet initiated sex, some older youth also appear to respond to the choice of being abstinent again or faithful to one partner.

## **Lessons Learned and Program Implications**

Programs have promoted abstinence successfully among specific audiences.<sup>2</sup>

**Media campaigns have successfully contributed to delay in sexual initiation.** The HEART Campaign (Helping Each Other Act Responsibly Together) in Zambia, designed by youth for





youth, promoted abstinence and condom use, while including information about HIV/AIDS and protection against infection. The campaign's slogans included "Virgin Power, Virgin Pride" and "Abstinence is Cool" and were used in television and radio announcements addressing young people ages 13 to 19. A year after the campaign, a survey of more than 1,000 youth compared sexual behaviors of youth exposed to the campaign with that of youth not exposed, taking into account differences in age, sex, education, residence, and the like. Those exposed to the campaign were 46 percent more likely to be practicing abstinence and were 67 percent more likely to have used a condom at last sex.

**Age-appropriate messages must be segmented for adolescent populations.** Because physical and emotional maturity vary widely among adolescents, messages need to be age-appropriate. In Jamaica, a mass media campaign of the Youth.now project used a segmented approach based on age to address the reproductive health needs of adolescents. The program promoted abstinence for youth ages 10 to 12, emphasized increased self-knowledge and abstinence for youth ages 13 to 15, and promoted protection from unintended pregnancy, HIV, and other STIs for older youth.

**Return to abstinence can appeal to some youth.** Programs in South Africa and Thailand found that most youth, including those who had sporadic sexual activity, did not intend to be sexually active. The programs taught skills in refusal, negotiation, and planning in a comprehensive approach, promoting abstinence as well as condom use for sexually active youth.

### Messages for Youth about Abstinence

#### Be clear about why you want to wait

List your reasons. Talk them over with someone who supports you. Check your list from time to time to remind yourself.

#### Have a plan

Know what situations might make it hard to stick with your choice. Decide ahead of time what you'll do to avoid or deal with them, such as leaving a scene when being pressured to have sex.

#### Be impressed with yourself

It can be hard to go against the crowd and make your own choices. Give yourself credit. You deserve it.

#### Notice the pressures

Pay special attention to messages in music, videos, and movies telling you to have sex.

#### Get support

Hang out with friends who know about and respect your decisions. Avoid people who might pressure you. If pressured, threaten to tell someone in authority (a relative, police).

#### Practice communication skills

Learn to say "No!" emphatically or "No, no, no" repeatedly. Give a reason such as "I'm not ready" or "I've decided to wait until I've achieved my academic goals." Turn the tables: "You say that if I love you I would, but if you really love me, you wouldn't insist."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> World Health Organization. The context of young people's sexual relations. *Progress in Reproductive Health Research* 2000; 53:2-4.

<sup>2</sup> For more information on these programs, see: Ruland, CD. Abstinence and delayed sexual initiation. YouthLens No. 8. Arlington, VA: FHI/YouthNet, 2004.

<sup>3</sup> Adapted from Abstinence Focus Poster No. R045, Scotts Valley, CA: ETR Publishing, 2002; and Grossman L, Kowal D. *Kids, Drugs, and Sex. Preventing Trouble*. Brandon, VT: Clinical Psychology Publishing Co., 1987.

**Where to get more information:** [www.maqweb.org](http://www.maqweb.org)

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