

HEALTH FOR US ALL

Many young people do not feel that health is their priority. They may have more urgent concerns such as looking for work or finding their next meal, safe shelter, food, clothing or protection against violence. Many programmes working with young people do not discuss health issues, especially sexual and reproductive health.

Yet what happens if a young man you work with asks you about an STD infection? Or a young woman becomes pregnant and doesn't feel able to cope with having a baby? How will your project cope with the costs of care and treatment for young sick people, if you are providing shelter to street children for example? What happens if adequate health services are not available in your area or young people do not use them because they feel that health workers are unfriendly?

Promoting reproductive and sexual health should be an integral part of working with young men and women. Young people often have limited information about sexual and reproductive health yet during adolescence they experience great and rapid changes in their bodies, in their concerns, relationships and roles in society. They want to try new experiences and take risks, but also to experience safe and healthy sexual development and to know how to protect themselves from HIV, other STDs and unwanted pregnancy.

It can be difficult to begin working with young people on health issues, especially sexuality and sexual and reproductive health, if you have not yet done so. You may feel that it is more than you and your project can handle. But including sexual health as a regular part of work with young people does not need a special project or mean taking on new workers.

The games and activities in this pack can easily be included along with existing activities and can be fun to use. They may even provide an opportunity to expand your understanding of the issues faced by young people and to develop closer relationships with them.

Sexual health, sexuality and HIV

Sexual health includes:

- feeling good about ourselves and our bodies and being able to express ourselves in the way that we choose
- knowing how our bodies work
- being able to have safer sex that is pleasurable, free from guilt and safe from unwanted pregnancy, disease and abuse of power
- having enjoyable friendships with both men and women
- being able to discuss concerns about health and sexuality with a knowledgeable person
- being able to have sex without fear of sexual harassment, verbal abuse and rape
- feeling able to challenge common beliefs about how women and men should behave with each other, such as the expectation that men should take the initiative and that women be sexually passive, or that boys should hide what they feel.



Our sexuality includes how we feel about ourselves and our bodies, as well as our self-esteem, feelings about being a man or woman and how we relate physically and emotionally with both men and women. People's expression of their sexuality is greatly influenced by their culture and religion.

Being prepared

Working on sexual health can be difficult. It is often hard for us to deal personally with issues of sex and sexuality and to raise these issues with young men and women.

Some youth workers and educators are worried that discussing sex and sexuality might encourage young men and women to become sexually active. In fact, research has shown that in most cases the opposite is true. When provided with an opportunity to learn about sex and to discuss it openly, both young men and women tend to become sexually active later than others who do not have the same access to information.

It is important to make sure that you and your co-workers are confident with the topic of sexual health, HIV and STD prevention before beginning to discuss it with others. You may have strong feelings about issues such as adolescent sexuality, gender roles, contraception, abortion or homosexuality. However, you need to be confident that you can discuss these issues in a supportive and non-judgemental way and feel able to provide information and services appropriate to young men's and women's needs or to know where they can get such information and services. This includes working with health and other services where necessary, for example organising family planning clinics that take young people's needs into account.

What do we want?

Young people will have their own views on what they feel they need. Often young people prefer to learn about sex and sexual development from their peers and may not have raised the issue with adults before. The young men or women involved in the project need to be involved as equal partners in deciding what kinds of activities they enjoy and what kind of support and information they need.

Be clear before you start that you are willing to meet the needs of young people as they define them. For example, are you willing to advocate for these young people with agencies such as the police, and with health and social care services?

Ask the young men and women that you will be working with these questions:

- What do they feel they need in terms of information, skills and access to services, and what risks are they facing now?
- Where do they seek information, advice and support? Are there sources of sympathetic counselling, STD treatment and condom supply?
- What kinds of activities do they enjoy? How could these provide opportunities for learning?
- Do they want to be involved in planning the activities? What training would they like to be able to do this?

If adults want to work with young people they must have faith in us, and support us in developing our own activities. This may feel like a risk, but it is a risk worth taking. You will be amazed at how much we know, and at our energy and commitment.

Youth peer educator, Botswana

