

Adolescents and HIV/AIDS: What Works and What is the Way Forward?

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Based on the UN Population Fund, 16% of the world population are adolescents, which is equivalent to 1.8 billion (1). During the rapid transition from childhood to adulthood, this adolescent age group is highly vulnerable to several diseases such as HIV/AIDS. This devastating disease has largely affected the global population. Especially, in 2021, there were an estimated 1.7 million (1.2 million–2.2 million) adolescents living with HIV globally, and approximately 170,000 new HIV infections among adolescents aged 10–19 years (2). This pattern of HIV infection is not surprising considering the early sexual initiation of the adolescents.

Adolescents are vulnerable to the risk of being infected with AIDS due to a lack of knowledge about the disease. Typically, AIDS tends to affect individuals when they begin engaging in sexual activity, which often occurs during adolescence (3).

Despite recent advancements in treatment strategies, many people with HIV or at risk for HIV still do not have access to HIV services. According to UNICEF Data, each day in 2022, approximately 740 children became infected with HIV and approximately 274 children died from AIDS related causes, mostly because of inadequate access to HIV prevention, care and treatment services (4).

Inadequate access to comprehensive sex education, especially in low-middle income countries, among adolescents who are sexually active undermine efforts aimed at protecting them from contracting HIV through access to high-quality HIV services (5). Utilization of the HIV services can also be hampered by limited financial resources, lack of health care facilities and poor means of transport (6). The availability and

accessibility of HIV/AIDS services, coupled with raising awareness among children approaching sexual maturity, offer the best hope in HIV prevention. Enhancing awareness and correcting misconceptions and behaviors are crucial in the prevention of this disease. Various initiatives have been implemented to promote HIV/AIDS education among school students with the support of international organizations in different nations. Nevertheless, educating students about HIV/AIDS continues to be a major hurdle. Schools are considered the most effective means to spread HIV/AIDS awareness and knowledge (7, 8). Research indicated that adolescent students have a preference for receiving education within a school setting, and they show a preference for being guided by teachers or experts in the field (9, 10).

Moreover, life skills education has long been recognized as a valuable tool for young individuals to navigate the challenges of life and thrive in society. Despite this, recent assessments from UNICEF have revealed that schools have not given sufficient attention to incorporating life skills education into their curricula. This neglect is attributed to a lack of teachers, overwhelming course loads, insufficient teaching resources, and an emphasis on conventional exams. As for adolescents who are not in school, life skills education is often provided by Non-Governmental Organizations. However, issues such as poor coordination, inadequate reporting mechanisms, and the absence of quality assurance measures have arisen as significant concerns (11).

Accordingly, to better understand the possible health implications of HIV/AIDS among teenagers, more in-depth research is needed. It is important to delve into the different ways it impacts school-aged

children. Collaboration between policymakers in the health and education sectors is advised to create a comprehensive strategy using social and mass media platforms to encourage and support healthy behaviors among this age group. It is essential to prioritize investing in adolescent health as it holds a crucial role in ensuring the well-being of the current generation, future generations, and intergenerational health benefits. Additionally, investing in adolescent health leads to economic growth through improved productivity and is a fundamental human right. Today's adolescents are the future youth, and it is evident that the youth play a vital role as change agents in any country.

Authors' Contribution

All authors have contributed equally to the conceptualization of the work and writing and reviewing of the manuscript. All authors have read and approved the final manuscript and agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved.

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