

## **CHOOSE LIFE PRESENTATION FOR UNESCO**

Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen. I am very honoured to be speaking here today representing Choose Life - a local Zimbabwean NGO that works with young people in schools. Choose Life utilizes the power that HIV positive youths having in preventing further infections in their peers.

The question is no longer should sex education be taught in school but rather how do we do it?

The first time I heard about HIV I was 15 years old. We had someone come into our school and talk to us about sex and AIDS. She told us not to 'sleep around' or we would contract HIV. She showed us pictures of body parts that were rotting away - using scare tactics. I passed the book on to the next person thinking – That will never happen to me. I am not one of those people and I don't sleep around. Having thought that - 3 years later - I contracted HIV.

From my experience many young people who are HIV- positive were told this. It would have been more factual for her to say that having unprotected sex, even just once, exposes you to HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases.

Worldwide, over 10 million young people, aged 15 - 24 are living with HIV and AIDS. I am a young person who has been living with HIV for the past ten years. I myself have been on death's door and because of access to treatment, good health care services and lots of tender loving care from family and friends I have been brought back to life physically, mentally and emotionally. Most other young people in African are not as fortunate.

It is vital that information, sex education and contraceptives are available and accessible to all young people.

Because of my diagnosis and realising the need that exists The Choose Life Trust was born. Through education, knowledge can be passed on, thereby conquering the fear, ignorance and silence that surround HIV/AIDS. Knowledge, accompanied by young people individually and collectively talking about changing their behaviour and receiving support from their community institutions can make a difference. Choose Life hopes to reinforce a process of change that all young people have to go through if they want to take responsibility for their actions and to live healthy positive lives, irrespective of their HIV status.

Over the past 4 years Choose Life has implemented programs in 26 schools and reached over 6000 young people. Presentations are usually for a

maximum of 40 students and generally 90 minutes in duration. Choose life is about young people talking about what it is like to live with HIV. Because the message is coming from a young person and it is real it is powerful. Giving a face to an infection helps make young people relate and make the scenario more realistic. One of the major problems with young people is that we do not see ourselves at risk and deep down believe that we are invincible.

The presentation covers:

- ❖ Statistics on the growth and spread of the HIV/AIDS pandemic in Zimbabwe
- ❖ Who is at risk?
- ❖ How HIV affects the human body and causes AIDS
- ❖ Dealing with the myths surrounding HIV/AIDS, including the different modes of transmission
- ❖ Providing information on counselling and HIV antibody testing
- ❖ Coping with HIV/AIDS as an infected person
- ❖ Different types of treatments available
- ❖ Diet and correct eating habits as an infected person
- ❖ Prevention and behavioural change
- ❖ Questions and answers
- ❖ Feedback questionnaire are filled in, to determine the information that has been retained and for evaluation of the program.

Follow up consists of Facilitated discussion forums throughout the term, where the youth discuss ideas and topics amongst themselves. Participants are linked up with help lines and crisis centres. It is then up to them to keep the program alive by creating their own Choose Life clubs within their school. Choose Life assists them in their first fundraising project by giving them a roll of red ribbon and safety pins with which they are able to make and sell red ribbons and use that money to create more money with which to run their own projects and programs.

Currently sexual education and HIV and AIDS awareness in school, in most African countries are not youth friendly or realistic and do not address our needs. We have very specific needs, which greatly differ compared to the needs of older people. Being young means that we do not always have all the information we need. Sometimes young people lack the self-assurance to ask and search for the information and services they need. If and when we attempt to access health care services, the information is either not available or we are faced with judgemental health care providers.

The World Health Organisation and other bodies have scientifically proven that condoms protect people against most STIs, including HIV and unwanted

pregnancies yet condoms are not as accessible as they should be to young people.

In my work with young people I have seen the lack of basic information that exists and lack of access to sexual and reproductive health services. This means that we often lack the correct information we need to protect ourselves against sexually transmitted infections including HIV and unwanted pregnancies.

Young people, especially young women are the most vulnerable group at risk of contracting HIV yet some governments have not paid enough attention to us and included us in strategies. We are the future and should be protected and nurtured as the most valuable resource.

It is often said that talking to us about sex and sexuality promotes promiscuity. Therefore, adults, such as parents and teachers, avoid the subject perpetuating the lack of knowledge that exists among young people. Sometimes I have not been allowed to talk to the youth about condoms, let alone demonstrate how to use one. Youths are just as frustrated as I am when I tell them it is because it is against school policy. Their response is – Well what are we supposed to do? It is not about *if* young people are having sex. It is a question of *when* will they have sex and will they be protected? In this day and age we need to be able to have all the skills and tools with which we will be able to protect ourselves.

Many different studies have proven that talking to young people about sex and issues of sexuality enables them to make informed and educated decisions. They are more likely to delay their first sexual experiences or abstain. If they do decide to have sex, they will have the knowledge of how to practise safer sex.

Youth today need:

1. Comprehensive education and information on HIV and AIDS
2. Knowledge and skills on how to prevent themselves from contracting the virus and how to prevent further infections.'
3. To be able to assess the risks, weighing up the pros and cons of abstaining, delaying sexual intercourse or beginning a sexual relationship
4. Self-efficacy – To feel that they will be able to follow through with decisions that they make the regard to their sexual and reproductive health.
5. Knowledge on what their rights are, including their sexual and reproductive health rights

6. The opportunity to discuss difficult issues surrounding HIV and AIDS in an open and transparent manner.

Peter Piot said Adults need to work *with* young people and *not for them*. Young people have the creativity and the energy to be at the forefront of preventing further HIV infections. They should be involved at a decision making and policy making level. They need to have a voice, be listened to and taken seriously. Governments should include youth in devising and implementing prevention messages for young people; after all they know what messages will work best for them.

It is vital that youth today have all the facts and not just the information we think they are ready for. Young people have sex for exactly the same reasons that adults have sex. It feels great, it is wonderful to connect with another human being and like adults they too are experiencing, experimenting and exploring each others bodies. We also know that beginning a sexual relationship too early can be devastating if one or both parties are not mature enough to deal with it. How will our youth know if they are ready if we are not even talking to them about sex? Aren't our actions encouraging them not to discuss the dangers of having sex, especially unprotected sex? It is high time that you take your heads out of the sand and look at the realities of the situation and provide accordingly.

Just to clarify - I am not against abstinence. It is **100% risk free** and you do not get that any other way but I strongly believe in giving youth all the facts. This will allow them to make their own decisions about their lives that they will have to live with and bear the consequences thereof. How will they know what the consequences of their actions are if they do not have all the facts to begin with?

Now that I am educated and informed I have the capability to be proactive and steer my own life. I would like this choice available to all young people in Africa and world wide.

Thank you