

Special Topic:

Healing Through Literature

- ◆ Educating students on AIDS
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Educating students on AIDS

In today's society, HIV/AIDS is a serious and real issue facing our communities. More and more cases of children with HIV/AIDS are being reported. With this reality, more and more children that are either HIV positive or who have developed AIDS will be attending school.

HIV/AIDS is a disease of the young. Last year altogether 400,000 children under the age of 15 years became infected with HIV worldwide, bringing the total number of children living with the virus at the end of 1996 to 830,000. Hundreds of thousands of HIV-infected babies are born every year to HIV-positive mothers. (<http://gbgm-umc.org/CAM/aidsinfo.html>)

An examination of the behaviors that transmit the HIV virus and the characteristics that make these behaviors difficult to change will further define the importance of developing effective AIDS-prevention programs (Ostrow, 1989). There are four major obstacles that schools need to address in order to provide effective HIV/AIDS education programs.

The first obstacle is fear. It is a common response to the unknown. "As school leaders come to understand that effective HIV education must focus on the prevention of risk behaviors—including discussion of sexual intercourse, condom use, and homosexuality—they worry" (Ingraham & Miller, 1993). They worry because school board members, parents, and the community will object to the issues being discussed. Facts seem to provide the best

remedy for fear.

The second obstacle is inadequate programs. These inadequate programs lack the proper information and time needed to educate people. A key to successful programs is to ensure that students can identify, avoid, and escape an HIV-risk situation. The program should also tell students how to protect themselves from HIV-risk situations they are unable or unwilling to avoid or leave such as peer pressure (Ingraham & Miller, 1993).

Third, today few programs exist that are effective and which prepare teachers to effectively instruct students on HIV/AIDS issues. Teachers do not have the capacity to provide skill-based education. They need to be provided with the adequate training and information, including focused staff development activities that prepare them to provide AIDS education that is understandable to children and that works (Ingraham & Miller, 1993).

Finally, most of these programs fall short of effectiveness because they do not sufficiently involve the students. In order for these programs to be successful, they need to be designed around the needs of the students, rather than the school board, teachers, parents, and the community.

One way to educate students on HIV/AIDS is through the use of children's literature. By using books to which they can relate, children can more readily understand the concepts being taught. The following is a brief review of children's literature that address HIV/AIDS in an easy-to-read fashion and can be integrated into any K-12 curriculum.

CHRISTIE-DEVER, B. (1996). *AIDS: Answers to questions kids ask*. Santa Barbara, CA: The Learning Works, Inc.

This book is geared towards middle school students. It explains the basic facts about HIV; for instance, how the virus is transmitted and how it affects the human immune system. The book's main purpose is to teach students that prevention is the only way to stop the spread of this disease. Since many people who are infected with the HIV virus do not even know it for many years, they can infect others with this deadly virus. In fact, it takes up to ten years for any symptoms to occur. Symptoms include extreme weight loss, severe pneumonia, and other infections. More importantly, the book

promotes abstinence and the importance of staying away from drugs. It stresses learning effective communication, decision-making skills, and assertive skills in dealing with peer pressure. The book also provides teachers with a set of additional resources for obtaining more information and activities that can be done with the students to enhance their learning experience.

FASSLER & McQUEEN, K. (1990). *What's a virus anyway? The kids' book about AIDS*. Burlington, VT: Waterfront Books.

This book poses questions such as "What is a virus?" and answers them with words children can easily understand. It also encourages children to express their thoughts through drawings. The act of drawing enhances the learning experience by providing children with a means of expressing themselves and their questions. The information provided is nonthreatening and prepares both teachers and parents with the proper tools needed to discuss a difficult topic.

GIRARD, L. (1991). *Alex, the kid with AIDS*. Morton Grove, IL: Albert Whitman.

This is a book about a fourth grader named Alex, who has AIDS. One of the unique qualities of this book is that it is written from the perspective of a classmate named Michael who befriends Alex. Michael and the rest of the school were informed that a student with AIDS would be enrolled in the fall. It tells how the school prepared the teachers and students to deal with a student with AIDS. One of the highlights of the book is the incident in which Alex is cut in an accident. Because of the classmates' preparedness, they are able to handle the situation without concern for their safety.

GREENBERG, L. (1992). *AIDS: How it works in the body*. NY: Franklin Watts.

This book differs from the previous books discussed because it is a more science-oriented book. It provides a detailed explanation of how the AIDS virus invades the body and how it affects the immune system. People who have AIDS get infected by a virus which is called HIV, human immunodeficiency virus. This virus attacks the person's CD4 cells; these are the cells that help the body fight foreign

microorganisms when they enter the body. HIV is generally spread by sexual contact or by sharing needles used to inject illegal drugs. It cannot be spread by casual contact, and the virus cannot survive outside the body for very long (Christie-Dever, 1996). In addition to the text, colored pictures illustrate how the virus attacks the cells, destroys the immune system, and travels throughout the body. Even though it provides teachers with the necessary tools needed to educate students; it is also a good personal resource.

HAUSHERR, R. (1989). *Children and the AIDS virus*. New York: Clarion Books.

This book explains in simple terms the body's immune system, how it is attacked by the AIDS virus, and what can be done to prevent the disease. The text is divided into two sections—one geared to a younger audience and an informational subtext for older children and adults. The book also contains suitable pictures that will help young readers understand the text. The author presents the information in a way that inspires children to treat those with this deadly disease with compassion and concern.

WIENER, L., BEST, P., & PIZZO, P. (1994). *Be a friend: Children who live with HIV speak*. Morton Grove, IL: Albert Whitman & Company.

This is a heartwarming book that contains letters and artwork of children living with HIV/AIDS. It expresses the hopes, fears, and reality that these children must face everyday of their lives. Through the letters and illustrations, readers can experience what it is like living with the disease. Some examples are: how patients cope with the fact that they will die someday; that society does not accept them; and the emotional pain they endure fighting the disease. It is a good book to teach all students compassion. After all, through compassion and awareness, a sense of responsibility can be achieved that will change people's perception of the disease, and more importantly, those who are living with it.

WOLF, B. (1997). *HIV positive*. New York: Penguin Books.

This is a true story about a 29-year-old mother of two, and her struggle with AIDS. The author illustrates the everyday battle that

Sara must endure and the emotional roller coaster that her two children must face. It tells of the good and bad days that Sara has and how the family manages to get through them. The book is a good example of what children must go through when dealing with a parent dying of this disease. It provides a good portrait of how simple everyday things can sometimes be impossible to accomplish.

In addition to these books there is a web site that can offer more information and other resources that can be useful to teachers. Contact UNAIDS at <http://gbgm-umc.org/CAM/aidsinfo.html>. The following are some activities that can be useful.

Teaching tips

- Write a poem or short story about discrimination against people with HIV/AIDS or about some of the myths related to HIV and AIDS (Christie-Dever, 1996).
- Write a letter expressing your support to a friend, real or fictional who has contracted HIV (Christie-Dever, 1996).
- Create an HIV/AIDS awareness poster to display in the school.
- Create a comparison chart, comparing AIDS to the Black Plague, and small pox.
- Have students research the origins of each disease, how they are transmitted, and their impact on society (Zarnowski, 1997).
- Create a phone directory of all the AIDS support organizations and services in the community (Christie-Dever, 1996).

Today, proper AIDS education is our first line of defense. Effective education programs which incorporate children's literature can help educate youth about this disease, therefore preventing it from spreading any further. Through effective education of teachers, students, parents, and the community, the fear of HIV/AIDS can be addressed in the proper manner. By addressing these fears and the questions that people have about this disease, society will become more informed about how to deal with the issues of HIV/AIDS.

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