

# Testing for parents towards an HIV-free generation

By Seble Daniel



Talk to the child as he or she is playing and involve them in the fight against HIV. Children in this photo are not necessarily living with HIV. [Photo by REACH/SAfAIDS].

**Bringing an HIV-free generation into this world is the responsibility of parents in particular, and health sectors as well as nations in general. Whereas children have the right to be born HIV-free, unfortunately, there is so much more to be done. Ethiopia has no law that compels parents or specifically pregnant women to test for HIV as a means of preventing mother-to-child transmission (PMTCT) of HIV. As part of the national health policy, women are advised to seek antenatal care where HIV counselling and testing is part of the package.**

Testing for HIV in Ethiopia is voluntary for pregnant women. Expectant mothers may refuse to establish their HIV status due to fear of public disclosure, as well as stigma associated with positive status. Other mothers-to-be may claim their right not to be tested.

On the other hand, mandatory testing could deter pregnant women from seeking prenatal care out of fear. It is also a violation of the fundamental human rights of pregnant women to be tested for HIV without their consent. The assumption is that any pregnant woman can decide by

herself what to do or what not to do, based on their marital status, their age, their living arrangements and decision-making patterns in households and communities.

According to the *Ethiopian Ministry of Health - Prevention of Mother-to-Child Transmission of HIV Reference Manual (2005)*. [http://www.etharc.org/pmtct/resources/PMTCT\\_ReferenceManual.pdf](http://www.etharc.org/pmtct/resources/PMTCT_ReferenceManual.pdf) (accessed 07/09/2011), maintaining confidentiality is an important responsibility of all healthcare workers and is crucial to establishing client trust. The manual adds that information that is shared between healthcare workers and clients must be kept private. "It is essential that a private venue/room be used for all discussions of HIV-related matters, particularly HIV diagnosis.



**Getting the children involved in interactive games and role playing can build their capacity to control their own future.** Individuals in this photo are not necessarily living with HIV. [Photo by REACH/SAfAIDS].

Clients should be informed that personal and medical information, including HIV test results, might be disclosed.”

Just like people living with HIV in other countries, Ethiopian men and women living with the virus desire to have children and experience parenthood. Since most HIV infections occur via sexual intercourse, prevention efforts must address the sexual and reproductive health needs of PLHIV.

Related to this is how discordant couples can safely have children. Even if there are options such as artificial insemination for HIV positive women, pregnancy is problematic when the man is HIV positive. Options such as sperm washing and sexual intercourse when a man’s viral load is undetectable are too costly for many people with HIV, especially those in low-resource settings. Testing is essential for PLHIV to fully access and benefit from the available health services such as anti-retroviral therapy

(ART). However, disclosing HIV status still remains an issue of sensitivity and confidentiality. Yet, testing can encourage partners to access VCT, and can reduce risky behaviours and support ART adherence. On the other hand, disclosure can carry with it potential for blame, discrimination, abandonment, anger and violence, depression, loss of economic support, and even disruption of family relationships. Individuals may not disclose their HIV status due to fear of these risks.

#### **What needs to happen?**

HIV and AIDS has affected children and young people just like other demographics. To address these issues, the Ethiopian Strategic Plan for Intensifying Multi-Sectoral HIV and AIDS Response (2004 - 2008), (<http://www.etharc.org/arvinfo/HIVStrategicPlan.pdf> accessed 06/09/2011) committed itself to integrate HIV and AIDS education into curricula of all levels of schools.

Some strategies adopted to achieve this include promoting peer education; use of effective communication and appropriate technology and strengthening civic education. Effective implementation of the above will help curb the spread of HIV and also empower young positives in the schooling system.

To ensure an HIV-free generation, various actions need to be taken. They include formulating a nationwide policy that ensures every pregnant woman tests for HIV. Testing during pregnancy will improve the health of mothers and prevent mother-

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Empowering young people begins at an early age. Individuals in this photo are not necessarily living with HIV. [Photo by REACH/SAfAIDS].

to-child transmission of HIV. Such a policy would be mainly implemented by the health sector, and reinforced by traditional birth attendants. The HIV testing approach would require strict confidentiality and respect. Those found to be HIV-positive should be put on treatment and counselled on positive living. Such a measure could significantly contribute towards decreasing the number of new HIV infections in Ethiopia and also elsewhere, especially in Africa.

“Testing during pregnancy will improve the health of mothers and prevent mother-to-child transmission of HIV.”

According to Avert.com (<http://www.avert.org/hiv-testing-pregnancy.htm>-accessed on September 5,2011), mandatory testing is different from voluntary testing because the mother has no choice over whether she gets tested or not. She is bound by law to be tested and no consent is required. However, there is no law in Ethiopia that makes HIV testing mandatory.



Young children will have a bright future if they are given opportunities and educated about their rights. Individuals in this photo are not necessarily living with HIV. [Photo by REACH/SAFAIDS].

The ethics of mandatory testing, Avert.com adds, are frequently debated. Mandatory testing can be useful in that it can help prevent MTCT by identifying all women at risk of transmitting HIV to their babies. However, it also removes a woman's right to give informed consent. This could

*“Testing can encourage partners to access VCT, and can reduce risky behaviours and support ART adherence.”*

have implications for women who do not wish to be informed (and thus have their partners told, too) because they fear the repercussions for themselves or their babies. It could also mean that women are put off accessing health care services, because they worry that their status will be forcibly disclosed. ■



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