

Brazil: HIV/AIDS Prevention for 7 Million Adolescents



“Learning about prevention is important for our health and also for our future”, says Tatiana Ramos, an 11- year old girl, participating in this week’s HIV/AIDS prevention workshop during “Jamboree III”, the biggest Girl and Boy Scouts meeting in Brazil. Despite her young age, Tatiana is knows everything about how to use condoms and how to prevent the risks of HIV infection. “What I learned here, on how we can get AIDS or not, will be used when I grow older. It is a dangerous disease that destroys our immune system and I do not want to die because from that”, she says.

By playing board games, chatting about safe sex and doing simulations on how to use both male and female condoms, young instructors hold the attention of boys and girls for about an hour, showing them why it is important to prevent new HIV infections and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). “We do not teach them anything, we share information”, says Jorlany Lima, one of the instructors. “And the good thing is that children and young people like to talk about what they have learned or seen with other people at home or at school. They spread out good attitudes.”

Jorlany is 19 years old and was only 16 when she first worked with the group of peer educators. For the past three years, while teaching other boys and girls about HIV/AIDS prevention, she has overcome the shame of talking about sex. “We are often surprised about the level of information that children get, even from an early age. They are curious and they always want to learn more. We must be open and show them how important it is to be protected, without hurting their principles or religious beliefs.” Jorlany has also learned an important lesson to fight AIDS and its stigma. “You can’t really tell if you have prejudice or not against people living with AIDS, until the day you meet someone who is HIV-positive. Then, you see that it’s just someone like you, or like any of your friends. I always tell children about it. We show them a hidden mirror saying: ‘Take a look on how a person with HIV may look like’. When they open it and see their own faces, they understand that everyone is vulnerable to HIV.”

Throughout the week of 16-20 July, over 400 children and adolescents aged 10-17, have participated in activities that emphasize the importance of knowing about and protecting oneself against HIV/AIDS and sexually transmitted diseases. Groups were divided by age, ranging from 10-13 and 15-17. The workshops took place in Brasilia, and were conducted by the Federação de Bandeirantes do Brasil – the Brazilian branch of the World Association of Girls Guides and Girls Scouts – with support by UNAIDS, UNICEF and the Instituto Sabin.

Health and Prevention in Schools

At the end of each workshop, the adolescents and young people receive a confidential questionnaire, designed and distributed by UNICEF. By evaluating their own attitudes related to safe sex, pregnancy, drug use and STDs, girls and boys can assess their own vulnerability to HIV infection, and further decide on whether or not to do an HIV test. The strategy is the same used in the program “Health and Prevention in Schools”, promoted by the Brazilian government and UNICEF for over 7 million students in public secondary schools throughout the country. This initiative is part of the global “Unite for Children, Unite Against AIDS” campaign.

Information, addresses and telephone numbers are provided to everyone on public testing and counseling centers held by Brazilian National Program on STD/AIDS, a key partner in the global campaign. At these centers, condoms are available for free and testing and counseling is strictly confidential.