Young people, especially girls, are at the centre of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. They are also the key to overcoming it.

Almost one third of those living with HIV/AIDS are under the age of 25. And of the 4.2 million new adult infections in 2002, half were among young women and men.

Yet young people are also the key to overcoming the disease. We know that early adolescence, from the ages of 10 to 14, is a time when enduring patterns of healthy behaviour can be established. In areas where HIV-infection rates are declining or subsiding, it is primarily because supportive environments have enabled young men and women to practise safer behaviours.
Tragically, world leaders and other adults have done little to empower young people against HIV/AIDS: Although the crisis is now over two decades old, even young people’s basic knowledge about the disease and how it is transmitted is disturbingly low. Nowhere is this more true than in developing countries, home to 85 per cent of the world’s young people.

- Studies in sub-Saharan Africa, where 70 per cent of young people with HIV/AIDS live, show that half of the women aged 15 to 24 do not know that a healthy-looking person can have HIV.
- In Haiti, almost two thirds of sexually active women aged 15 to 19 do not believe they are at risk of infection.
- Approximately 61 per cent of women aged 15 to 19 in Indonesia know about AIDS, but they do not know how to protect themselves from HIV infection.
- In Ukraine, although 99 per cent of girls surveyed had heard of AIDS, only 9 per cent could name three ways of avoiding sexual transmission.

Young women are typically at even higher risk of infection than young men. More than twice as many young women as young men are contracting HIV in some developing countries, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. In fact, for the first time since the start of the pandemic, half the number of people living with HIV/AIDS at the end of 2002 were women and girls. In a handful of countries, as many as six girls are infected for every boy among adolescents aged 15 to 19. This pattern – suggesting ‘age mixing’, or sex between older men and younger women – is also appearing in other regions of the world.

Social, physiological and economic factors contribute to the vulnerability of young women, preventing them from learning about sexual health and gaining the self-confidence they need to refuse unwanted or unsafe sex.

In regions where HIV epidemics are at an early, concentrated stage, more young men than young women are infected. This is currently the situation in Latin America, where epidemics are centred among men who have sex with men, and in Central and Eastern Europe, where injecting drug use drives the spread of HIV. However, as these epidemics move into the broader population, young women will be at higher risk of infection.

In the Caribbean, the second worst affected region after sub-Saharan Africa, young women already represent the majority of young people acquiring HIV. At especially high risk of HIV infection are young refugees and migrants. So are young people involved in commercial sex, those in institutions or living on the street, and young men having sex with men.

Even more than other young people, these groups lack access to health information, skills and services. They are susceptible to being coerced or enticed into sex for money, food or ‘protection’. Drug use is also widespread, including drugs that are injected, an efficient mode of transmission for HIV.

Many adults have failed inexcusably to fulfil their responsibility to educate young people about HIV/AIDS. Even worse, adults are frequently the very people forcing young men and women into unsafe or unwanted sex. Other adults have conspicuously failed to stop such abuses even when aware that they are being perpetrated in their communities.

**INTERNATIONAL ACTION**

At the United Nations General Assembly Special Session on HIV/AIDS in June 2001, governments adopted a Declaration of Commitment outlining specific, time-bound goals and targets for overcoming the pandemic. Agreeing that children and young people are central to fighting HIV/AIDS, governments and partners committed to the following:

“By 2005, ensure that at least 90 per cent, and by 2010 at least 95 per cent of young men and women aged 15 to 24 have access to the information, education, including peer education and youth-specific HIV education, and services necessary to develop the life skills required to reduce their vulnerability to HIV infection; in full partnership with youth, parents, families, educators and health-care providers.”

**Young women’s knowledge of HIV prevention**

Percentage of women (aged 15-19) who correctly indentified the three primary ways to prevent HIV.

*Assessed using knowledge of All: Abstinence; Be faithful; Consistent.

Sources: UNICEF Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys; and Demographic and Health Surveys, Macro International.
Governments also agreed that they would:

“Reduce by 2005 HIV prevalence among young men and women aged 15 to 24 in the most affected countries by 25 per cent and by 25 per cent globally by 2010.”

Achieving these goals requires:

- Establishing time-bound targets by 2003;
- Mobilizing effective leadership;
- Intensifying efforts to challenge gender stereotypes and attitudes, and gender inequality in relation to HIV/AIDS;
- Encouraging the active involvement of men and boys in HIV/AIDS prevention efforts; and
- Strengthening commitment to working with and for young people.

In addition, young people need to have the skills and knowledge to protect themselves from an early age. Imparting such information should be in the context of children’s and young people’s general development. With concerted action, the world can now fulfil its duty to ensure that children enter adolescence equipped to make the choices that will allow them to live free of HIV. It is critical that these efforts be initiated in the vital years before adolescents become sexually active.

**UNICEF’S RESPONSE**

Fighting HIV/AIDS is a top priority for UNICEF because the disease is depriving millions of children of their right to survive, to develop, to be protected and to have a say in decisions that affect them. In this and other areas of UNICEF’s work, the organization is guided by the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the world’s most widely embraced human rights treaty.

No single organization can defeat HIV/AIDS. Partnerships at all levels are therefore crucial to UNICEF’s response. UNICEF is working closely with national governments, people living with HIV/AIDS, NGOs, civil society and faith-based organizations as well as with UNAIDS and its co-sponsors. Other alliances have been forged with young people’s associations, which have shown themselves ready and willing to combat the disease.

As a priority, UNICEF is expanding its efforts to:

- **Break the silence surrounding HIV/AIDS**, address stigma and discrimination and build young people’s participation in responding to the epidemic;
- **Ensure that all children and young people are thoroughly informed about HIV/AIDS** and have every opportunity to learn the life skills they need to reduce their vulnerability and avoid risky behaviour;
- **Promote and expand access to youth-friendly health care**, including voluntary and confidential HIV counselling and testing, condoms and the treatment of sexually transmitted infections;
- **Expand and sustain communication and social mobilization initiatives** promoting HIV/AIDS awareness and healthy lifestyles;
- **Increase the proportion of girls staying in school** and strengthen the capacity of schools to respond to HIV/AIDS;
- **Reduce the vulnerability of children and young people** at particularly high risk of HIV infection;
- **Create environments that empower girls and young women to protect themselves** from HIV infection;
- **Promote responsible male partnerships and participation**, and address the gender inequity, violence, discrimination and unequal power relations that fuel epidemics; and
- **Ensure that young people are central** to the planning, implementation and monitoring of actions that affect them.

Progress on many fronts looks promising. A survey of UNICEF offices reported that, by the end of 2002, 106 countries had completed or were developing national strategies for preventing HIV infection among young people; and 102 countries were integrating life skills education into their school curricula. The number of youth-friendly health services had also risen in 22 countries.

It is young people who will determine the future course of HIV/AIDS. UNICEF is committed to working with them and ensuring they have the knowledge, skills and confidence to protect themselves until this devastating pandemic is defeated.
MAKING AN IMPACT

Within the last few years alone, UNICEF and its partners have:

- Helped create *Youth Talk* and *Straight Talk*, newspapers promoting HIV/AIDS education in Uganda that are reaching half a million children and adolescents each month.
- Set up 147 ‘anti-AIDS’ clubs for students and out-of-school youths in Rwanda.
- Facilitated the involvement of young people in running youth-friendly services in Malawi.
- Collaborated with local NGOs to implement HIV/AIDS education through media, drama and peer education in Côte d’Ivoire and Namibia.
- Reached out-of-school youths and helped create youth-friendly clinics, information centres, clubs and other safe meeting places in Ukraine.
- Expanded HIV/AIDS education efforts in schools with the Ministries of Education in Myanmar and Viet Nam.
- Promoted a communication initiative focusing on prevention by linking activities to sports and the arts in Honduras.
- Helped fulfil the right of all people to life-saving information on HIV/AIDS through *Facts for Life*, a simply written but authoritative health promotion guide. More than 15 million copies are in use in 215 languages.

LISTENING TO YOUNG PEOPLE

During the UN General Assembly Special Session on HIV/AIDS in 2001, 62 youth participants representing 26 countries presented their point of view to world leaders. Following is an extract of the Youth Position Paper on the Declaration of Commitment agreed to at the Session:

“Young people are and will remain at the front lines combating the global AIDS pandemic, however we can and must do more. We must be bold and assume leadership in breaking the conspiracy of silence and shame that drives AIDS underground and stigmatizes [people living with HIV/AIDS].

Youth commitments:

- We agree to assume leadership responsibilities in our communities, in full partnership with families, schools, faith-based groups, advocates and grass-roots organizations.
- We further agree to play a dual role of both direct service provision and engaging in broader processes to advocate, lead, inform and mobilize communities to demand action on AIDS where enough is not being done.
- We commit ourselves to ensuring that young people living with HIV/AIDS assume key leadership positions in youth organizations and are an integral component of our collective efforts to end the epidemic.
- At the national level we pledge to hold governments accountable for their commitments at global and regional level – words are no longer enough.
- We will work with youth organizations globally to monitor governments’ progress in ensuring that the rights of young [people living with HIV/AIDS] are respected, by using networks and calling to attention the violation of young people’s human rights wherever they come under attack.”