

# Parenting the Preschooler

 **Working for Wisconsin Families**

Joan E. LeFebvre  
Area Family Living Agent  
University of Wisconsin-Extension  
Vilas, Forest, Florence Counties

## Preventing AIDS Starts Early

### Definitions

HIV: (Human Immunodeficiency Virus) is the virus that causes AIDS.

AIDS: (Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome) is the last stage of HIV infection. People with AIDS have been HIV positive long enough that their immune system has been seriously compromised and can no longer fight off infection.

### Ways People Can Contract HIV

People can contract HIV from sexual intercourse, blood-to-blood contact (blood spills, blood brother rituals, tattoos), and mother-to-child contact during pregnancy, delivery, or breast feeding.

### Number of Young People With HIV/AIDS

The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) estimates that a significant proportion of HIV infection is contracted during the teen years because 18% of all AIDS cases in the U.S. are in the 13-29 year old category. Because of the often lengthy time between contracting HIV and the onset of AIDS, experts conclude most of these 13-29 year olds contracted HIV during their teen years.

As of July 11, 1997, 2.2% of Wisconsin's HIV cases and .8% of Wisconsin's AIDS cases were in people 13-19 years of age. Also, 1.2% of HIV cases and .9% of AIDS cases are classified as "pediatric"--under 13 years. So, 3.4% of HIV infection are those 19 or younger and 1.7% of AIDS cases are 19 or younger.

These numbers are only for diagnosed cases. Because many HIV infected people do not know they are infected, these numbers are underestimates.

### What Can Preschoolers Understand About Sexuality?

#### ✦ Three Year Olds:

Boys and girls have different sexual body parts and both are normal. Several body parts have names and it's good to use their real names. It's OK to ask parents about male/female differences.

#### ✦ Four Year Olds:

Everyone has the right to privacy. Men and women cover private body parts with clothing. People don't have a right to touch private body parts of others without consent except in special circumstances such as a doctor's visit. Curiosity about sexuality is normal and an acceptable topic of conversation.

#### ✦ Five Year Olds:

Sexual words are sometimes used to hurt others. As early as five years, children begin to use derogatory sexual names such as fag, homo, etc. They don't understand what they mean, but they do understand their effect on others. Communicate that you do not approve. Germs make people sick. AIDS is "hard to catch." Children don't do things like intercourse that puts them at risk for AIDS. Reassure your child that children are unlikely to contract AIDS, so are parents. You can't get AIDS from sitting near, hugging, coughing, or using the same glass as someone with AIDS. It's good to be friends with people who have AIDS.

## Start Talking About Sexuality Early

Children begin asking questions early. It's important to normalize questions about sexuality as there will be less resistance to talking during adolescence when kids are more sensitive. Lay the ground work for later discussions. If parents don't talk to kids about sexuality, kids will have to rely on what they hear from friends, media, etc. Here are some hints:

- Answer questions now, rather than later.
- Answer calmly, in a matter-of-fact manner.
- Admit it if you don't know the answer to a question.
- Find out new facts and get back to the child with an answer.
- Answer questions in a way that is appropriate to the age.
- Answer questions honestly and concisely.

### Some Questions Children Ask--Possible Answers

Common reasons that children ask questions relate to feelings or fears. It is important to recognize and respond to your child's feelings as well as the substance of the question. Here are some of the things that may be behind questions about AIDS.

1. Your child may simply be asking for information and expressing normal curiosity. **Example: How do people get AIDS?** Tell your child that AIDS is "hard to catch." Normally, children don't do things, like have sexual intercourse, that puts them at risk for AIDS. Mention that a mother with AIDS can transfer the disease to their babies during birth or nursing.
2. Anxiety for one's own welfare. Sometimes children wonder about their own safety and welfare. **Example: Can you get AIDS from kissing?** Reassure your child that HIV/AIDS is not transferred through casual contact such as kissing.
3. Children also worry about the welfare of parents, or other family members, and friends. **Example: Is it okay for my daddy to have sex?** Assure your child that you can have sex without getting HIV/AIDS. You can only get AIDS from someone who already has it.
4. Your child may want to help find a solution. **Example: Can we give somebody with AIDS new blood?** That's a good idea, but no, AIDS isn't like

Author: Joan E. LeFebvre, Professor, Department of Family Development, University of Wisconsin-Extension  
Reviewer: Ann L. McLean, Extension Specialist, Human Development, UW-Green Bay

leukemia. New blood won't help. We'd all like to find a way to help people who have AIDS get well.

5. Children often repeat parts of adult conversations they have heard. **Example: Why is it cousin John's fault that he has AIDS? or Why are people who have AIDS happy?** The question may result from reference to AIDS as a "gay" disease. Tell your child no one is happy to have AIDS. Ask what he/she heard that made him/her think that.

6. Often children simply want to "test" parents to see how they will react or find out what they think.

**Example: I hate people who have AIDS. I don't want to be friends with them.** Tell your child that people with AIDS need kindness and support.

It is important to have accurate information about HIV/AIDS. For more information, contact Northern AIDS Network (715/369-6228 or 800/374-7678).

Some books to consider are:

The Essential AIDS Fact Book by P.H. Douglas and L. Pinsky, 1992. (\$6.00)

Does AIDS Hurt? Educating Young Children About AIDS by M. Quackenbush and S. Villarreal, 1988. (\$14.95)

Tell Me About AIDS by the American School Health Association, 1992. (\$10.00)

Remember, as a parent, your most important role is "protector." Children this age have a right to expect protection from parents against most things that might hurt them. Reassure your preschooler that s/he does not engage in behavior that puts them at risk for HIV/AIDS.

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For more information on Parenting and Child Development, contact: JOAN E. LEFEBVRE, Area Family Living Agent, University of Wisconsin-Extension, P O Box 369, Courthouse, Eagle River WI 54521, 715-479-3653, FAX 715-479-3605, E-Mail joan.lefebvre@ces.uwex.edu

April, 1996

Updated August, 1997