

The Cool Parent Guide: Preventing HIV/AIDS in young children

Successes and lessons learned from Mangochi District, Malawi, September 2008

BACKGROUND

In 2006, UNAIDS estimated Malawi's national prevalence of HIV among 15- to 49-year-olds to be 14 percent. However, in Mangochi District, the prevalence of HIV is substantially higher, reaching 21 percent, most whom are young people¹. Two separate surveys conducted by Save the Children in Mangochi in 2002 and 1998 found that the mean age of sexual initiation was extremely young ranging from 10 years old to age 13 years old^{2,3}. Save the Children regards the younger age as a more honest representation of the situation because the questionnaire underwent more rigorous testing to check that children's responses were accurate. While figures are not available for Malawi, 95 percent of transmission of HIV globally occurs through sex.

In 2003, Save the Children and the Manoff Group conducted research which indicated that Malawian girls and boys face a multitude of pressures to have sex at an early age⁴. Our research suggested girls most commonly feel pressure to engage in transactional sex with boys or older men to get gifts or money. Our data also indicated that parents and community members sometimes encourage children to have sex for money, to produce

grandchildren, or to prepare for marriage. Although condoms are widely available at stores and children are familiar with them, they are not often used because many see condoms as inappropriate or even dangerous for children. In our study, community members reported a belief that just seeing condoms can induce children to have sex. Some boys also complained that condoms are too big or reduce a boy's pleasure. One boy asked, "How can one eat sweets with the wrapper on?" Children said that they could delay having sex if they had more adult moral and financial support.

Most importantly, our research showed that **children trust their parents most for advice and support on sexual health but that parental advice on sex usually comes after children are already sexually active or is given in a disciplinary way.**

In response to this finding, Save the Children tested a number of different parent- and child-suggested strategies designed to delay sexual debut and increase condom use. These ranged from friendship pacts, alternative income generation activities, couple counseling, and various methods to improve parent-young child communication. The most promising strategy was the *Cool Parent Guide*—named by a student who wished his parents could talk to him in a "cool" way. The *Cool Parent Guide* is a tool to help parents discuss HIV/AIDS with their children before they become sexually active.

APPROACH

To begin, community health workers throughout the district screened community members to become *Cool Parent Guide* distributors. They selected ten distributors in each school community, for a total of 1010 distributors.



A distributor counsels a parent on how to use the *Cool Parent Guide* to communicate with her children about HIV/AIDS prevention.

Save the Children trained distributors to disseminate the guide, counsel parents on its use, and conduct monthly visits to all households that received it. After handing out the guide, distributors spent thirty minutes to an hour counseling parents and showing them how to use the guide. To ensure that all communities were supportive of this activity, Save the Children worked very closely with Ministry of Health staff, head teachers, Parent Teacher Associations, School Management Committees, and Voluntary AIDS Committees.

COVERAGE

Save the Children distributed the *Cool Parent Guide* to parents with children seven to eleven years old in Balaka and Mangochi Districts. By April 2008, more than nine thousand households received the guide and counseling, benefiting 16,547 children ages seven to eleven.

SUCSESSES

Save the Children conducted qualitative and quantitative surveys in Balaka and Mangochi Districts and found that, since introduction of the *Cool Parent Guide*, parents are talking and interacting more with their children.^{5,6,7,8}

One ten-year-old boy reported, “At first I thought it was not proper for my parents to be talking to me about sex. Now I see it as being important because it has helped me know more about HIV/AIDS.” A father noted, “At first my wife and I were not advising our children [about HIV prevention and related issues], but after receiving the *Cool Parent Guide*, we find it easy and necessary to advise our children.”

In Balaka, the percent of children who reported having talked to one of their parents or an adult in their family about HIV/AIDS rose from 43 to 71 percent in the two years following the guide’s introduction. Our survey also showed a smaller increase among families that didn’t receive the guide, suggesting other factors may have also influenced child-parent communication.

Children also reported having less exposure to risky situations. They were less likely to play at night and more able to resist sexual relationships. And eight-year-old boy reported, “At first I was going to video shows at night but

Excerpt from *Cool Parents Guide*

Avoid risky situations:

To abstain, children must avoid dangerous situations. This means that they should not play outside at night without being watched.

*It is important for parents to arrange some alternative entertainment for children at night, especially on a full moon. For example, grandparents or others could lead fireside chats or games during each full moon.

Supervise your children when they are playing at night.



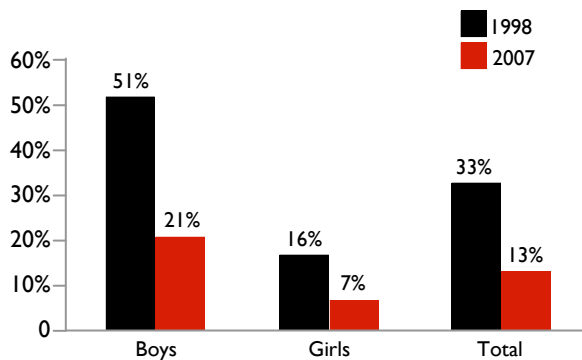
now I don’t. Instead I read my books.” An eleven-year-old girl noted, “I have stopped going out to play at night.” A ten-year-old boy explained, “The discussions have changed my attitude towards sex. I don’t think of having sex anymore.”

In Mangochi, a comparison of results between a survey conducted in 1998, before the *Cool Parent Guide*, and the same survey in 2007 found that the percentage of students in grades six and seven who reported having had sex fell from 44 percent to 22 percent. Of those who reported having had sex, the percentage who were less

than 15 years old fell from 32 percent to just 13 percent in 2008 as demonstrated in the following graph.

Percent of students under 15 who have had sex

1998: n=151, 2007: n=444



The same two surveys suggest that the average number of sexual partners that children in grades six and seven have had has also fallen from an average of 4.1 in 1998 to 2.3 in 2007. The drop is most dramatic among boys, whose average number of sexual partners fell from 5.4 to 2.4. Similar results are found among students under 15 years old.

CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNED

Although results of our study suggest a delay in sexual initiation following introduction of the *Cool Parents Guide*, they also suggest that condom use rates have worsened. All children surveyed understood the purpose of a condom and where to obtain one. However, in 2007 only 26 percent of sexually active students interviewed in Mangochi said they had ever used a condom, down from 38 percent in 1998.

The *Cool Parents Guide* has seen a number of operational challenges too:

- Due to the often large distances between households and the high workload of community health workers, *Cool Parent Guide* distributors could not always visit every family every month and some families needed a great deal of counseling, particularly early on. More distributors are required to ensure more frequent follow-up visits to households.
- It was challenging to involve fathers, who were often out in the field when the distributors visited and less interested in talking with their children.



HIGHLIGHT

Mrs. Salaf and her husband have four children, ages two to twelve. They received a copy of the *Cool Parents Guide* from their local community health worker, Mr. H. Symon, who also counseled them on how to use the guide. Mrs. Salaf has since made it her priority to sit with her children and talk with them about HIV/AIDS. Imran, her seven year old son, has paid particular attention and often passes on what he has learned to his friends and siblings. He even reminds his dad to avoid risky behaviors. Imran has recorded messages from the guide for his community, which have already aired on Dzimwe community radio on Wednesday afternoons and Saturday mornings. Mrs Salaf's family life has changed: her children now come home earlier in the evening, they spend more time together playing games, especially soccer, and the children aren't allowed to watch or participate in local dances which are sexually suggestive. The future looks bright for Imran. When asked what he wants to be when he grows up, he smiled brightly and said: "A pilot."

- In food insecure communities, some families could not see an immediate benefit from the *Cool Parents Guide* in relation to other material needs, like food. Save the Children introduced the guides during a period of famine, when communities expected the agency to provide food assistance for survival.
- The low literacy rate in the impact area meant that many parents had difficulty rereading the guide after the distributor reviewed it with them. Save the Children revised the *Cool Parents Guide* to include pictures (see excerpt in this document). An August 2008 review meeting with parents and children found that illiterate parents now understand the guide better and are more likely to remember key messages. The pictures also generate more interest from children and can be used as discussion prompts. The distributors also report that counseling parents takes less time now that the guide includes pictures.

Some distributors were significantly more successful at counseling and promoting communication between parents and children than others. During the review, parents and children drew out the essential qualities for a successful distributor, listed below.

Essential qualities for a CPG Distributor

- They know the subject matter well,
 - They are well trained,
 - They come from our village,
 - They have their own children.
 - They approach the parents with respect.
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NEXT STEPS

With the phase out of Save the Children's School Health and Nutrition program in Mangochi and Balaka districts, the future of the *Cool Parents Guide* is uncertain. The

possibility of the District AIDS Coordinating Committee continuing to support these activities has been discussed. However, the committee has many existing responsibilities and lacks sufficient resources to purchase necessary items like fuel for monitoring visits. It is important to note however, that when Save the Children reprinted the *Cool Parents Guide*, the agency improved the durability of the cover material to extend the life of the guides. We hope that communities will continue to use the guide in the future, even without support from the health system.

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References

¹ *Demographic Health Survey*, 2004

All other references, Save the Children:

² *Behavioral baseline survey*, SHN, 2003.

³ *Baseline report for the SHN Initiative, Mangochi District*, 1998.

⁴ *Formative Research Report: HIV/AIDS Prevention*, 2002.

⁵ *Balaka Phase Out Report* [Quantitative]. SHN, 2006.

⁶ *Mangochi Phase Out Report* [Quantitative]. SHN, 2008.

⁷ *Balaka End line Survey Report* [Qualitative]. SHN, 2006.

⁸ *Mangochi Endline Survey Report* [Qualitative]. SHN, 2008.



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