

Introduction

IoveLife is the largest effort ever launched in South Africa to positively influence adolescent sexual behaviour with the aim of reducing teenage pregnancy, HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections. Organised under the auspices of a national advisory board of leading South Africans chaired by Mrs Zanele Mbeki, loveLife combines a high-powered media campaign with a nationwide drive to develop adolescent sexual health services, education, outreach and support programmes. loveLife is implemented through a consortium of four organisations: the Reproductive Health Research Unit, Advocacy Initiatives, Planned Parenthood Association of South Africa, and the Health Systems Trust.

The Henry J Kaiser Family Foundation and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation provide major funding for loveLife. Other donors include the South African government and UNICEF.

loveLife is a brand-driven initiative to reduce the rate of HIV infection among South African teenagers by promoting sexual health and healthy lifestyles for young people.

Past efforts at HIV education in South Africa have had limited impact on adolescent sexual behaviour. loveLife is a comprehensive sexual health strategy that harnesses popular culture to promote sexual responsibility and healthy living,

while at the same time developing frontline reproductive health services that are more responsive to the sexual health concerns and needs of adolescents. By combining sexual health education with popular culture, this approach is designed to grab and hold the attention of young people, but also to produce benefits beyond HIV prevention – such as decreased teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections – and to confront deeply ingrained attitudes towards sex and sexuality, and relationships between men and women, which impede more conventional efforts to combat HIV/AIDS.

loveLife is a carefully conceived response to the fact that repeated surveys show that upward of 95% of South Africans are aware of HIV/AIDS, but risk-reducing behaviour – specifically condom usage, age of sexual initiation and number of sex partners among South African teenagers – has not changed dramatically.

The loveLife strategy and approach is the product of extensive investigation of international public health education experience, substantial research among South African adolescents, as well as extensive consultations over a two year period with key South African interest groups and the South African government. loveLife was formally launched in September 1999.

loveLife's primary objective is to reduce the rate of HIV infection among 15-20 year olds by at least 50% over five years and to effect substantial reductions in teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections.

loveLife's strategy is based on three facts:

- The peak age of new infection for women is between 15 and 20 years of age, while the incidence mode for men is several years older.
- About 45% of South Africans are under 15 years of age.
- Reduction in the rate of HIV infection among 15-20 year olds will lead to a slowing of the epidemic.

The essence of the loveLife brand and strategy is to encourage young people to achieve their aspirations through healthy living. This approach is premised on three assumptions:

- Open communication about sex and early sex education is essential to delaying the onset of adolescent sexual activity, reducing teenage pregnancy, increasing condom usage and reducing HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections.
- Equally essential is the need to back up open communication and sex education with adolescent-friendly sexual health services, outreach and support programmes.
- There is no quick fix. Behaviour change requires substantial and intensive effort over many years.

