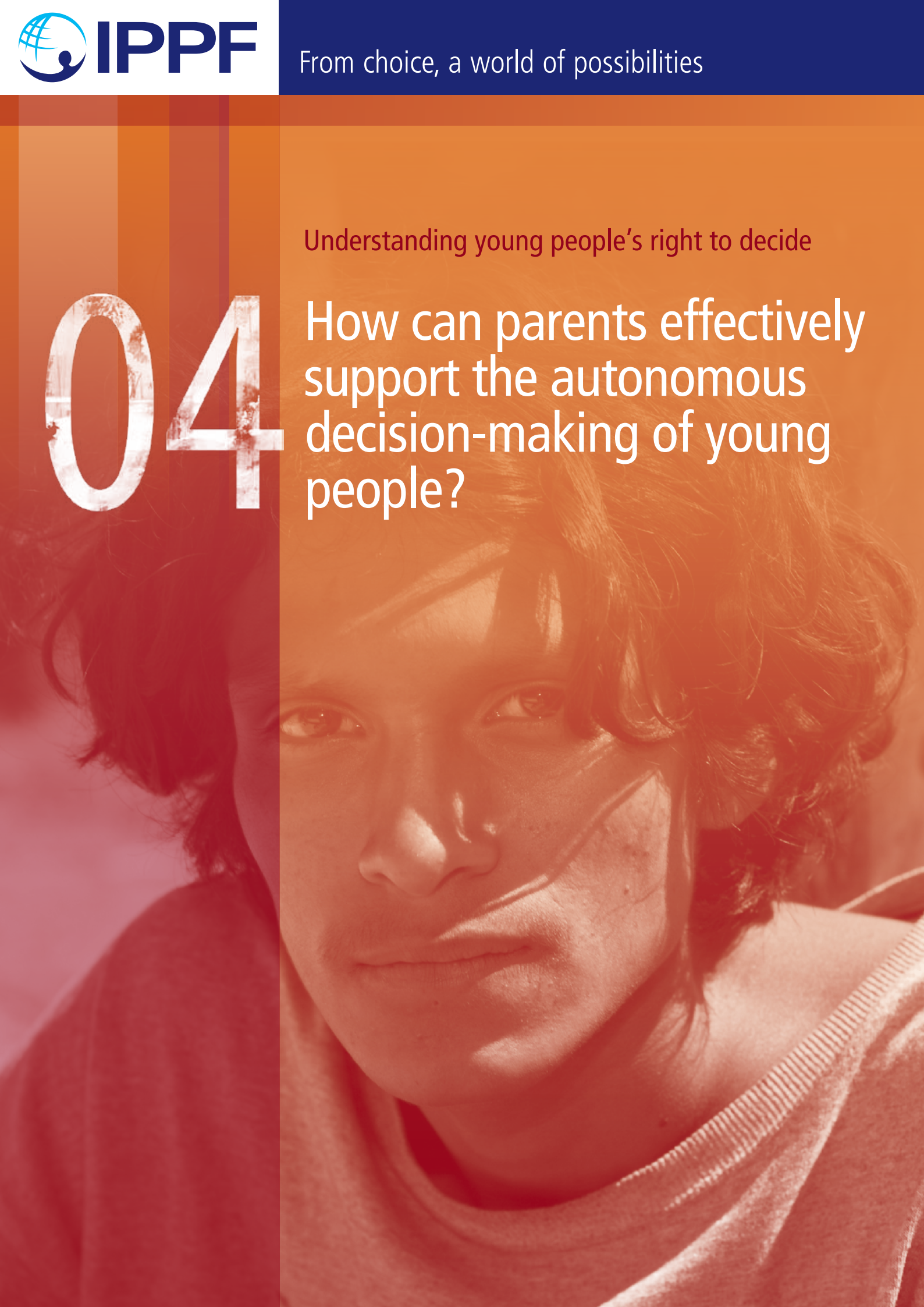


Understanding young people's right to decide

04

How can parents effectively support the autonomous decision-making of young people?



About the Right to Decide series

The International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) works towards a world where women, men and young people everywhere have control over their own bodies, and therefore their destinies. We defend the right of all young people to enjoy their sexuality free from ill-health, unwanted pregnancy, violence and discrimination.

IPPF believes that all young people have the right to make autonomous decisions about their sexual and reproductive health in line with their evolving capacities. We also recognize that the estimated 1.7 billion young people in the world are sexual beings with diverse needs, desires, hopes, dreams, problems, concerns, preferences and priorities. Amongst the 1.7 billion, there are young people living with HIV; young women facing unwanted pregnancy and seeking abortion services; young people with an unmet need for contraception; people with sexually transmitted infections and lesbian, gay, transgender and bisexual young people. IPPF advocates for the eradication of barriers that inhibit access to comprehensive sexuality education, information and sexual and reproductive health services that respond to all young people's needs and realities.

One such barrier that impedes young people's access to education and services is the widely-held and historically-rooted belief that young people are incapable of making positive decisions about their own sexual and reproductive health. IPPF's experience providing education, information and services around the world for the past 60 years tells us that this is untrue. Thus, in 2010 IPPF initiated a year-long project to learn more about young people,

autonomy and sexual rights from experts working on these topics in various fields. We wanted to understand the theory behind the laws, policies and practices that both facilitate and restrict young people's autonomy as well as the key factors contributing to the development of young people as autonomous decision-makers.

IPPF commissioned five experts to answer the following questions that form the basis of the papers you find in the Right to Decide series:

1. What is childhood? What do we mean when we say 'young person'?
2. Why is it important to develop young people's capacities for autonomous decision making?
3. Are protection and autonomy opposing concepts?
4. How can parents support young people's autonomous decision making?
5. How do we assess young people's capacity to make autonomous decisions?

With an enhanced understanding of young people, autonomy and sexual rights, we hope to be better placed to promote and fulfill our vision of a world where young people are recognized as rights-holders, decision-makers and sexual beings whose contributions, opinions and thoughts are valued equally, particularly in relation to their own sexual and reproductive health and well-being.

About the author

Nora Vargas is a dynamic and accomplished leader with broad experience in non-profit management, government, politics and public policy. She serves as the first Vice President of Community Engagement for Planned Parenthood of the Pacific Southwest. In her role, she is responsible for leading the development and implementation of the overall vision and plan for the Agency's Community Engagement Department through community collaboration, outreach and education. She has committed her career to advancing an agenda of inclusion, and many of her endeavours have served as models across the United States. Nora received her BA in Politics from the University of San Francisco, and completed graduate work in Women's Studies and Claremont Graduate University.

01 Introduction

'Sexual Rights: An IPPF Declaration' states that "societies must create environments in which children can achieve their optimal capacities and where greater respect is given to their potential for participation in, and responsibility for, decision-making in their own lives."ⁱ

For decades, countless organizations working on sexual and reproductive health around the world, such as the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF), have supported the rights of young people to make decisions about their own sexual and reproductive health. Over the years, numerous efforts have been made in support of this pledge. These include the generation of educational programmes that focus on the development of young people, specifically on providing the information and tools that are necessary for them to make responsible reproductive health choices. However, these same organizations also recognize that involving parents and guardians in young people's decision-making processes is often beneficial to all parties.

The recognition and role of young people and their parent(s) creates a complex array of decision-making responsibility. Some governments mandate and/or legislate the involvement of parents into young people's decisions about reproductive health, often with the notion that young people are dependent on and need the support of their parents. In the US, one of the first Supreme Court cases on this issue was that of *Bellotti v. Baird* in which the court concluded that "pregnant teens lack the capacity to make the abortion decision for themselves, and that parental involvement serves as a beneficial counterweight to youthful immaturity."^{ii,iii} Yet research has shown that young people have the capacity to make these decisions.

Looking at both sides of the issue, the ultimate question is: what role, if any, does a society take to support young people's right to make autonomous decisions about their sexual and reproductive health, with or without parental support?

The impact of parental involvement

A fine line exists between parents providing support and parents pushing their own values and beliefs on young people. In this paper, I will argue that research suggests that most young people are capable of making mature, healthy decisions about their reproductive health and that most of the time there is a positive association when parents are involved in young people's reproductive health decisions.^v These two ideas are not in competition with each other. However, one of the major factors that young

people are faced with in relation to parental involvement is how societies choose to legislate or mandate parental involvement. I will address this topic by highlighting research on parental involvement laws in the US, and in particular California, and will identify research that points to the fact that parental notification and parental consent laws often do not encourage parental communication, but instead have a negative impact on young people.^{vi}

To address the impact of parents on young people's decision-making processes we must first address the following questions. Are young people truly capable of making reproductive health decisions for themselves? Is there an inherent benefit for young people in involving their parents or guardians in the decision-making process? Is mandatory parental consent or notification an effective mechanism to ensure beneficial parental involvement in supporting the rights of young people? What are the most effective ways that parents can support young people to make healthy decisions?

Factors that affect decision-making

Understanding how young people make decisions – and what social factors influence them – are two issues that are critical in developing effective ways to build relationships with young people. The act of looking at the reasons behind young people's behaviour and their decision-making processes, a recommendation from the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, is often overlooked when adults and societies create policies or initiate programmes.^{vii} On this theme, researchers and societies have asserted that young people are capable of making decisions.

Many different factors influence how young people make decisions overall. Like adults, their decision-making process in the 'real world' includes, but is not limited to, factors such as habit, tradition, emotional state, social strain and time constraints.^{viii} In addition, the literature notes that young people tend to have a sense of 'invulnerability' that influences their decision-making process. However, research also shows that parents have a significant influence on the decisions that young people make. "When parents talk to and affirm the value of their children, young people are more likely to develop positive, healthy attitudes about themselves. This is also true when the subject is sex. Although young people's decision-making processes are influenced by many factors beyond their parents or guardians such as peers, media, communities, and access to education, research shows that positive communication between parents and young people can help young people establish individual values and make healthy decisions."^x

02 Parental involvement is an invaluable aspect of young people's decision-making

Becoming an askable parent

How a parent can become an 'askable parent' has been an initiative that Planned Parenthood of the Pacific Southwest of America has focused on. The aim is to engage parents in our communities by providing them with the tools they need to lay the foundation to strengthen communication. One of the biggest challenges parents face when talking about sexuality is fear. Parents are often uncomfortable about broaching the subject because they are embarrassed that they may not have the right answers, that they may look dumbfounded if they can't answer the question, that if they speak about 'it' they are encouraging sexual activity, and sometimes it is just that they feel they may not make a difference because they feel that young people may not be influenced by them on this topic.

Yet, the US-based non-governmental organization, the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, has found a positive and beneficial correlation between parental involvement and health outcomes for young people. "More than half of teens, 53%, say parents or their own morals, values, and religious beliefs influence their decisions about sex the most – far more than such other influences as friends, the media, teachers and sex educators."^{xi}

The experiences of young people in the US also translate to young people across the globe. Research in Chile acknowledges that the structure of the family constitutes the fundamental social and emotional framework of young people, where they learn their models of behaviour that later influence their decision-making process.^{xii} A recent Harvard study reports that parents continue to have a significant amount of influence in the development of young people and identifies 'five basics of parenting' that support the development of a healthy adolescent.^{xiii} One in particular – 'guide and limit' – identifies strategies for parents to be able to set boundaries, maintain family rules and values, but also encourages increased competence and maturity.

Role of communication and structure

There are other factors that provide parents with the tools to support young people's autonomous decision-making. According to a recent review of several scholarly articles, "the literature reveals there is an association between parental communication, parenting style, and adolescent sexual activity and contraception use ... communication has been shown to delay sexual intercourse and increase contraceptive use."^{xiv}

Another study reveals "four aspects of parental involvement – shared dinner time, participation in shared activities, relationship quality, and communication about sex – are significantly and independently related to sexual initiation."^{xv}

One key component necessary for successful parental involvement is structure. In a study looking at quality of parental involvement following parental notification of a young person's intention to have an abortion, "it is clear from this study that family adaptability is more importantly related to the quality of parental involvement than any other single factor."^{xvi} Family adaptability is the family's ability to change its power structure, role relationships, and relationship rules in response to situational and developmental stress. This makes sense, as a minor would feel most comfortable turning to an understanding parent rather than one set in their ways.

Going even further, one study asserts the intrinsic need for parental involvement. According to the authors, there exists "clinical and laboratory evidence on differences between adolescents and adults in how they come to decisions. These differences in advice seeking, perspective taking, consideration of the future, and so forth, are held as evidence of less satisfactory decision-making skills that could be improved by the participation of parents presumably more experienced and mature."^{xvii}

The international community, via the World Health Organization, highlighted the importance of parental involvement in the life of adolescents by bringing together researchers and practitioners in 2007 to highlight research and programming. They concurred that parents do influence adolescent behaviour. They identified five dimensions of influence between parents and adolescents: connection, behaviour control, respect for individuality, modelling appropriate behaviour, and provision and protection. What was emphasized and well defined in the international research was that "empirical evidence from every culture studied shows that this sense of connectedness to the primary caregiver is vital to successful adolescent development."^{xviii}

Even though the benefits of positive parental involvement are clear, there is a huge difference between encouraging people to communicate with young people about healthy decision-making, and legally mandating that minors communicate with their parent or guardian.

03 Legislating parental involvement: is it an effective mechanism for parent–youth communication?

At first glance, the discussion about legislation and policies that regulate young people's sexual behaviour and access to services seem appropriate. After all, it is a parent's natural inclination to want to be involved in their child's life. However, what research has found is that such assumptions are not always as simple to accept^{xix} – as in the case of California, after facing three ballot initiatives that would require young people to notify their parents before being able to obtain abortion services in the state.

In a presentation prepared for IPPF,^{xx} Bair, Sandoval and Lundahl raise an important question. Are parental involvement laws that would require parental notification or consent for young people to access reproductive health care services from contraception to abortion the most effective mechanisms for parents to support young people's decision-making processes? In addition, the authors also address how young people would react to parental involvement laws and, if those laws were implemented, what they would do?

Unintended side-effects of legislation

One of the key points of the research which impacts on a young person's decision-making process and parental involvement when these laws are enacted is that the majority of adolescents involve at least one parent in discussions about sexual activity, contraception and abortion.^{xxi} In addition, the authors highlight their experience in health centres that shows that "lack of confidentiality, or suspected lack of privacy, is a clear deterrent to teens seeking reproductive health care and that parental involvement laws that seek to reduce teen abortion could ironically lead to increased abortion rates if they lead fewer teens to seek reproductive health care, including family planning."^{xxii}

According to the literature, the strongest finding in the review of studies on teenage pregnancy is an increase in the number of minors who travel out of states with parental involvement laws to obtain abortions in places without these regulations. Additionally, studies indicate that parental involvement laws do not improve parental involvement in the decisions that teenagers make about sexuality.^{xxiii} Another report declares that one of the unintended side-effects of restrictive abortion laws is a higher cost of abortion services.

"The empirical results find that two types of state restrictive abortion laws – parental notification and mandatory counseling – have a spillover effect on abortion demand due to the increase in the price of an abortion that results from the higher costs imposed on abortion providers as a result of complying with each restrictive abortion law."^{xxiv}

04 What does the research suggest about the need for parental involvement?

Henshaw and Kost^{xxv} report that only 7 per cent of the minors from their study on parental notification in abortions among young people would have been helped by obligatory parental knowledge and notification.

“Thus, relatively few young people appear to have been in a situation in which needed adult or parental assistance was lacking.” Young people reported that they “all had discussions with or assistance from someone other than the staff of the abortion facility, with 52% involving an adult other than the staff of the abortion facility.”

In another study on induced abortion, the researchers report that “if required parental notification keeps young people from using mainstream medical or mental-health services, this would effectively remove [young people] from established means of receiving health care as well as any potential benefits envisioned through parental involvement.”^{xxvi}

Expanding on work in relation to the Texas parental notification law, researchers found a correlation that “was also associated with increased birth rates and rates of abortion during the second trimester among a subgroup of minors who were 17.50 to 17.74 years of age at the time of conception.”^{xxvii} This is corroborated by another study that found that “Some minors postpone abortion until the second or even third trimester of pregnancy to circumvent parental notification requirements.”^{xxviii} This is problematic because the risk of death associated with abortion increases with the length of pregnancy, from one death for every 500,000 abortions at eight or fewer weeks to one per 27,000 at 16–20 weeks and one per 8,000 at 21 or more weeks.^{xxix}

05 Alternatives: lessons learned from effective parenting programmes and successful models

Lessons learned

Many of the implications for action are derived from lessons learned in California as well as research compiled from across the US, and including evidence from leading experts on effective parenting programmes. The author of a publication presented to the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy reports that organizations “should focus on factors that are strongly related to sexual behavior” as a way to strengthen parent-youth communication and, in turn, enabling parents to guide their child effectively through the decision-making process. Although the author states that there are over 500 factors that impact on young people's sexual behaviour, the author highlights four major themes that impact on young people's decision-making processes. These are (1) biological factors such as age; (2) physical maturity, and sex; (3) disadvantage, disorganization; and (4) dysfunction in the lives of young people and their families, peers and communities; sexual values and norms expressed or modelled by young people or by their families, romantic partners, peers, faith communities, schools and communities; and young people's connection to groups or institutions that discourage risky sexual behaviour, encourage responsible behaviour, or both.^{xxx}

The scope and resources available to an organization will ultimately determine the intensity and effectiveness of its youth development programmes. The challenge for organizations is not only their work with young people themselves, but also understanding how parents can become ‘askable parents’. Taken together, this will not only allow organizations to discover and understand the needs of young people, but also to better understand the needs of parents and what tools they can be provided with to guide and strengthen ongoing communication.

Learning opportunities

Programmes that are specifically designed to reach parents can also provide an excellent opportunity to learn how to communicate effectively with young people about sensitive issues like sexuality. This is especially true among populations that have a higher incidence of unhealthy sexual outcomes, such as pregnancy among young people and sexually transmitted infections. By providing this population with culturally appropriate curricula, such as contextual connections to their socio-cultural experiences, language and interactive approach, the programmes have the potential to cultivate a new generation of young leaders, and educate parents on childhood development and building strong family relationships. In practice, these programmes – when paired with educational classes about pregnancy, anatomy and physiology, prevention of sexually transmitted infections, clinical services and gender equity – provide the community's young people with the resources and support system they need to make positive life choices.

So that young people are able to develop in this way, they must have positive living examples in their lives as role models, such as teachers, counsellors, elders and supporters. It is essential that adult men and women serve as guides, teachers and examples in the programme to reflect positive role models for young people. Additionally, it is important that adults participating in a programme take ownership and have a high level of buy-in to ensure that the programme is delivered effectively.^{xxxi}

06 Conclusion

Parental/guardian engagement is pivotal to developing healthy decision-making skills in young people. Parental involvement and communication about sexuality and health are critical components of healthy development. Open, accurate and early communication about sexuality is necessary, but also difficult to achieve. Parents need resources with the most up-to-date facts about reproductive health and about how best to deliver healthy sexuality messages that are rooted in the family's values system. This is not achieved through parental notification laws and can, in fact, be undermined by restrictive laws. Parents and young people alike are their own best advocates when it comes to seeking community-based resources to meet their individual needs.

The close parent-child relationships that help protect young people from early sex can also help limit other risky behaviour such as violence, substance and alcohol use, and school failure. Whether parents are concerned about drinking, drugs, violence, trouble in school, smoking or sex, or all of these, the best advice is the same – parents should stay closely connected to their child.^{xxxii} Encouraging open communication is the best way to keep young people safe. Laws that could put many young people in dangerous situations are not an effective way to develop close family relationships. Lastly, one researcher asserts that “The role of parents in the lives and decision-making processes of young people is often underestimated. Although the transition to greater independence is the hallmark of this developmental phase, parents clearly have a role and exert significant influence in the choices young people make about sex.”^{xxxiii}

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