

Love in the time of HIV

Growing up with Aids can bring a whole new set of issues when you reach puberty and want to start dating. **MANTOE PHAKATHI** looks at how HIV-positive teenagers are handling the situation in Swaziland



TEEN
LOVE . . .
Dating when
you are
HIV-positive is
fraught with
problems

Picture:
Lucky
Nzumalo

JABULILE Dlamini* is sweet 16 and has never been kissed. And she is not expecting to be kissed any time soon. While most of the girls in her class were excited about receiving presents from their boyfriends on Valentine's Day, Dlamini - who is HIV-positive - did not think she would get any. And she didn't.

The teenager is reluctant to become involved in a relationship because of the complications her HIV-status will bring to it. But the secondary school student admits that she is not immune to love and is attracted to someone she goes to church with.

There is a spark in her eyes when she talks about her crush, a boy who has declared his love for her. However, the thought of having to disclose her status to him prevents her from declaring her true feelings.

"I'm worried that he might embarrass me by going around telling people about my status," says Dlamini.

"I think it's fair to disclose your status to your boyfriend but I'm not sure how he will take it," she says. "Each time he proposes love I tell him that I can't handle school and a boyfriend at the same time."

According to the National Emergency Response Council on HIV/Aids, about 15 000 Swazi children are living with HIV/Aids. The majority were born with the virus. Antenatal surveillance at clinics in Swaziland show an increase in HIV prevalence among pregnant women from 39% in 2006 to 42% in 2008.

Dlamini's friends at school also do not know about her status because she is worried about the stigma and discrimination that remain rife. Swaziland has the world's highest infection rate. Almost 26% of the population between the ages of 15 to 49 are HIV-positive.

Dlamini only discovered her status six years after her HIV-positive father died.

"I had always been a sickly child and my mother took me to traditional healers but my condition did not improve," she says. "I had a bad rash all over my body and this affected my performance at school because I was absent most of the time."

Her father, a mineworker, died in 2001. But Dlamini's mother believed her husband's death and daughter's subsequent illness were the result of witchcraft.

Dlamini's mother kept taking her to traditional healers until their relatives advised her to seek medical help.

In 2007 mother and daughter were referred to the Baylor College of Medicine Children's Foundation-Swaziland for HIV counselling and

testing. Dlamini tested positive and her mother, a food vendor at Mbabane market, was also found to be HIV-positive.

"When the doctor told me that I was infected with HIV, I cried and asked my mother where I got it. She said I was born with the virus," says Dlamini.

She was only 13 at the time and was put on antiretrovirals (ARVs) immediately. Thanks to extensive counselling and joining the Teen Club at the Baylor (where she still gets ARVs for free), Dlamini was able to accept that "living with HIV is not a death sentence".

Officially opened in 2006, the Baylor provides a safe haven for children and young adults living with HIV. About 1 500 children are counselled and tested, initiated on treatment and introduced to a support group. Realising that a generation of children born with HIV had become teenagers, the Teen Club was started.

About 200 teenagers across the country are part of the club.

"The earlier children are made to understand their status, the better they deal with HIV/Aids," says Dr Hailu Sarero, director of Baylor.

But dealing with these children is a big challenge because most of them are orphans. Food security and dealing with abusive relatives are a bigger challenge, Sarero says.

"These are not easy issues and we partner with other organisations," says Sarero. "As an organisation, we can only do so much."

'The earlier children are made to understand their status, the better they deal with HIV/Aids'

But for Dlamini, the organisation makes a big difference. Once a month she meets with other teenagers living with HIV at the centre. Adolescents living with the virus come together to talk about their concerns.

"I have a friend at the Teen Club whom I'm comfortable to confide in especially about issues pertaining to HIV/Aids," she says.

She says that being part of the club has also helped her gain a measure of confidence and she is no longer shy around people. Although she is not ready for dating, she says that she relates much better to the opposite sex than she did in the past.

"The club has made me realise that I'm not alone in this situation," she says.

According to Dr Douglas Blank, the coordinator of Teen Club, HIV-positive children deal with intense issues at a very young age which is a major emotional strain for them.

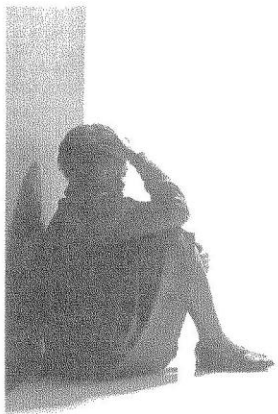
Most of the members of the club do not look their age because of stunted growth. Malnutrition is a serious challenge among HIV-positive children because, according to Blank, the body requires an increased amount of energy to fight constant illnesses common in children with HIV.

"In fact, most of these kids have not reached puberty because of HIV/Aids," says Blank.

But Dlamini is heading towards it. She participated in a recent Teen Club weekend camp where discussions were held on the development of adolescents.

"After this experience, I realised that I'm like any other child and will go through the stages all children go through - that includes dating," she says with a mischievous smile. - Inter Press Service Africa

*Name has been changed to protect the identity of the minor



NEVER BEEN KISSED ... Being HIV-positive forces many teenagers to become reclusive **Picture: Foto24**