

Planning for life in Latin America

IMIFAP of Mexico City has introduced totally new approach to the prevention of adolescent pregnancy and STDs in Latin American countries. Our correspondents there are Susan Pick de Weiss and Irving Perez

Up to few years ago, sex education programmes for the general population of adolescents in Mexico and Latin America could be classified into one of three groups: inaccessible, ineffective, or both. Inaccessible because the vast majority of teenagers had not taken a course, and ineffective because in the case of the few who had, the course had been a traditional one, producing little if any effect in at least two key areas: pregnancy in adolescence, and the risk of sexually transmitted diseases, including AIDS.

There was an evident need to find out what was determining sexual and contraceptive behaviour among adolescents, and from this to create a programme and evaluate its impact in a representative population, keeping in mind that it would probably be used in other Spanish-speaking countries on the American continent.

At the Instituto Mexicano de Investigación de Familia y Población (IMIFAP), we started by carrying out a study to see what was the general level of knowledge about sexuality, and what were the current sexual and contraceptive practices of adolescents. At the same time, we decided to diagnose what were the psychosocial determinants of adolescent sexual and contraceptive behaviour and pregnancy.

These psychosocial variables had been shown by several independent researchers to be related to the behaviour of adolescents. We looked specifically for factors associated with abstaining from sexual intercourse, practising contraception and avoiding pregnancy. A representative household and clinic sample of 12-19 year-old girls of lower-middle and lower socioeconomic levels in Mexico City showed: 1) a need to do away with their erroneous beliefs, but at the same time provide them with detailed and practical knowledge about the types of sexual behaviour studied; and 2) a need for a broader definition of sex education which would emphasize family, partner and peer communication, the clarification of values, assertiveness, decision-making and support networks among peers.

We then developed a programme called *Planeando Tu Vida* (Planning Your Life), which was innovative in several ways, mainly in that unlike the traditional sex programmes, it was based on this descriptive and diagnostic research. When designing the programme, we also kept in mind the following goals:

- the programme should be able to provide up to date information about sexuality, while making the adolescent aware of myths and erroneous beliefs and replacing them with facts
- it should be adapted to the adolescent's psychology and should make the best use of his/her cognitive abilities



Adolescents learn to foresee the effects of their behaviour. Photo Jørgen Schytte ©

- and parents, teachers and the community should participate actively in the educational process, to reinforce the newly learned attitudes and behaviour.

The teaching techniques used for *Planeando Tu Vida* also differed from those used in traditional courses. The students took part in group and individual exercises where they were meant to translate the new concepts into action; they were also given "active homework" so that they could to practise their newly acquired skills and abilities.

After the first three versions of *Planeando Tu Vida*, in which improvements were made in the contents, exercises and duration of the course, we evaluated its effect on knowledge and contraceptive behaviour. Two groups were formed from public high schools: 1) a control group which had not attended a formal course, and 2) a group which had attended a *Planeando Tu Vida* course.

As expected, there was a significant increase in the level of knowledge of the group that had attended the course. We also found a higher probability that adolescents, especially boys, who attended the course before beginning sexual relations would use contraceptive methods. There were no differences in contraceptive behaviour in those adolescents who had already had at least one sexual relationship before taking the course. The results indicated that sex education should start before the sexual debut.

Concurrently, we performed another set of analyses to determine the relationship between the behaviour preceding the sexual act, risk behaviour, personality traits, characteristics of the adolescents' interpersonal relationships, and sexual and contraceptive behaviour. The fourth and fifth versions of *Planeando Tu Vida* incorporated changes that dealt specifically with the attitudes and behaviour associated with a higher risk of becoming pregnant, and with the prevention of psychoactive substance abuse, which in one of the evaluations

had been found to have similar determinants to those for early sexual intercourse and non-use of contraceptives.

For early sex education to be effective, it should provide youngsters with certain "tools". For example, it should enable them to:

- relate to others in healthy and constructive ways
- make decisions which agree with their knowledge
- be aware of the sexual roles and values common in their societies
- make additional efforts to pursue a higher level of education
- strengthen family ties, communicate with others
- plan for the future while, in the case of girls, perceiving motherhood as an inappropriate alternative
- and be aware of the likely effect of their present behaviour.

We are now developing a series of books to educate young children in the areas mentioned. Each book is age-appropriate and content-specific, and gives hints and guidelines for parents. All the material is fully tested for its effectiveness in conveying messages to adolescents and children. Programmes for parents are also on the way, and teachers and health workers are being trained all over the country to implement the course in their respective institutions.

The course and the books are also being tested in Colombia, which will give us new experience with the programme. Our aim is not only to educate about sexuality, but to integrate sex education with education for life and health.

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