

School-based Abstinence and Behavior Change Program Empowers Kenyan Youth

More than 122,000 Kenyan school children between the ages of 10-14 have learned to better cope with peer pressure and avoid behaviors that put them at risk for contracting HIV or other sexually transmitted infections, as well as developing problems with alcohol, substance abuse, and violence through a program called "Making Life's Responsible Choices."



Charles Mbalilwa talks with a group of ABY pupils during a visit to St. Augustine's School for Boys in Kenya's Western Province. A Catholic-sponsored public school, St. Augustine's has a total of 780 pupils between the ages of 6-14, 250 of whom live at the school. The school launched the ABY program in 2007 and has four teachers who've been trained in the curriculum as of October 2008.



St. Augustine pupils Brian, Frank, Crispinus, and Ferdinand all say that the ABY program has taught them to behave more responsibly and understand the potential consequences of risky and unhealthy habits, including premarital sex and substance abuse.

figures; positive behaviors such as sharing and respect for others; and, of course, staying healthy and free from HIV—these are all things ABY teaches pupils.

Launched in 2006 with support from the American people through PEPFAR and CDC by HIV/AIDS Twinning Center partners at the Kenya Episcopal Conference-Catholic Secretariat in Nairobi and DePaul University in Chicago, the abstinence and behavior change for youth (ABY) program focuses on empowering primary school children with lessons and life skills that help them live healthier lives. To date, the program has been implemented in 656 schools across Kenya, both Catholic and public-sponsored.

"When you are young, you don't really think before doing, but ABY makes us think about our behaviors and their consequences," says Brian, a 14-year-old pupil at St. Augustine's School for Boys in Mukumu, a town in Kenya's Kakamega Diocese, which is located in Western Province.

Fred Mukoto, head teacher at St. Augustine's agrees. He's seen the positive results first hand in the year since the ABY program was initiated. "Not only are the children becoming more aware of what they should and should not do, they are also becoming more disciplined with a stronger focus on education and other positive things in life," he stresses.

"I am happy that I'm taking the ABY classes because they have helped me change the bad behaviors I was engaging in," says 13-year-old Ferdinand. "I used to hang around with a group of kids who watched pornography and drank alcohol, but now I know how to avoid these things."

Self awareness; building strong and amicable relationships with peers, family, and authority

"ABY is having a strong impact on both pupils and teachers," says Charles Mbalilwa, Religious Education Advisor for Kakamega Diocese. "In the past, teachers just taught their lessons, but now they look at the whole child and all his needs. The program has really enriched our understanding of young people and the challenges they face. It has opened up people's minds and started a dialogue about things such as sex, pornography, HIV/AIDS, and abuse that people weren't able to talk about before," he says.

Recounting the story of a group of ABY pupils who knew one of their classmates was being abused by his father, Mbalilwa explains, "These boys were empowered by what they learned. They reported the situation, the boy was removed from the home, and his father was arrested. I don't think they would have had the courage to come forward before ABY."

According to Judith Shibuku, a teacher with more than 16 years of experience, the ABY training she attended in September 2008 was transformational. "The lessons of ABY teach coping skills that are useful not only for pupils, but also for teachers. I came back a new woman," she says with a laugh. "It's changed the way I talk with my own children. I don't look for what they did wrong all the time and I'm much more open with them ... even about subjects like HIV/AIDS."

The ABY program goes a long way toward reducing HIV-related stigma and discrimination by teaching children the facts about how the virus is transmitted, how it attacks the body, and how medicines and proper nutrition can breathe life into people living with HIV. "We bring people living with HIV into the classrooms to talk with the children and give a human face to the disease. This helps them to better understand and respect people with HIV. This has a positive impact on the teachers, too, because they may lack knowledge about HIV and harbor their own fears or prejudices," Father Mbalilwa stresses.

"Some of our children here have been terribly affected by the AIDS epidemic," says ABY instructor Stela Shilisia, who has been a teacher for 23 years. "Many have old, torn uniforms or no uniform at all, but the program teaches them how to face their problems... how to overcome their challenges," she explains.

And there are many challenges—not just for the children, but for the school and its sponsors at the Catholic Secretariat.

Indeed, St. Augustine's and many other schools that are implementing the ABY program with great success and determination lack sufficient materials, related teaching aids, and even basic supplies such as notebooks and pencils. There is no time within the school day that can be dedicated to ABY, so the courses must be taught before or after classes or even on Saturdays. There is no money to provide teachers with a small stipend, so they volunteer their personal time to the program. Many of the pupils have been orphaned or otherwise made vulnerable by HIV/AIDS and lack a stable home.

But despite all these obstacles, it is the St. Augustine pupils and teachers who participate in the program that are the clearest indicators that the ABY messages have found fertile



Teachers Stela Shilisia, Evaline Shikoli, and Judith Shibuku have all been trained to teach ABY classes. Charles Mbalilwa oversees the program at St. Augustine and other participating schools in Kakamega Diocese.

ground. Not one person—from the head teacher to the youngest pupil—has anything other than the highest praise for the program.

“To me, the ABY program is life. It is so practical in nature. It helps our children understand life and learn how to negotiate the challenges it brings,” Mbalilwa adds, noting that the program is currently being implemented in 57 of the Catholic-sponsored primary schools in Kakamega Diocese. And that is where the real value of the program becomes evident—in the schools, where the children who’ve been empowered through it are thriving.

“I thought the ABY classes were strange at first,” admits 12-year-old Frank. “But they’ve really helped me become a better person and decide that, for me, it’s best to abstain from sex until I get married.”

Crispinus, 16, agrees. “We all have different goals and things we want to accomplish,” he says. “Some of us are orphans without family to support us, though, and that makes it difficult. ABY helps by teaching us how to stand up to peer pressure and live a healthy, responsible life.”



At St. Augustine, the pupils who participate in the ABY program say that what they’ve learned has given them the knowledge and personal strength to avoid behaviors that put them at risk for substance abuse, violence, and sexually transmitted diseases including HIV. They also credit the program with helping them do better in school, improve relationships with parents and other authority figures, and speak openly about sensitive or taboo subjects.

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