

**Author:** Adrienne Sweetman, HBA

**Title:** The Interpretation of HIV Health Messages by Children Living with HIV in Rural Tanzania: Implications for interventions to increase uptake of HIV education and services and achieving the “Three Zeros” among this group

**Key words:** Tanzania; HIV; Health Education; Children Living with HIV; Medication Adherence; Sexual and Reproductive Health

**Supervisor:** Dr. Carola Eyber, Senior Lecturer (Institute for Global Health and Development, Queen Margaret University)

**Abstract:**

Objectives: Since anti-retroviral (ARV) treatment for HIV has become widely available in Tanzania and other low resource settings, many more children living with HIV (CLWH) are surviving into adolescence and adulthood. As this population enters the sexual and reproductive phase of their lives with HIV, it is imperative to ensure that they receive education and messaging about HIV and support that will enable them to prevent the transmission of HIV to future partners and children and remain healthy themselves. This study sought to explore the sources of communication and messages that CLWH receive in the rural Usangu area of Mbarali District, Mbeya Region, Tanzania and the implications of children’s interpretations of these messages for their future behaviour.

Methods: The study was qualitative and exploratory in design. Data collection for the study included 12 semi-structured interviews conducted with adults working with CLWH in Mbarali and a document analysis of behaviour change and information education communication materials and primary school curricula. 15 semi-structured interviews and 2 focus group discussions were conducted with child participants ages 10 and 15 years (m=9, f=12) and who were living with HIV and had been disclosed about their HIV status.

Findings: There are a range of sources from which CLWH receive HIV education and messaging that corresponds to findings in literature from other parts of Tanzania and

sub-Saharan Africa including health care workers, teachers, and parents. Themes in the content of messaging delivered and received included the importance of ARV adherence and simplified prevention messages based on ABC (abstain, be faithful, use a condom) and the avoidance of sharing sharp tools. Children expressed negative attitudes towards AIDS and learning about HIV, but positive attitudes towards ARV adherence and nutrition.

Discussion: Adult participants identified problematic communication patterns between adults and children that prevent open communication about sexual and reproductive health (SRH) and HIV that were confirmed in children's accounts of communication they had received from health professionals, educators and parents/guardians. This perpetuates silence around issues of SRH for CLWH and perpetuates the risk of HIV transmission among CLWH. Adherence emerged as a central theme and promising strategy for improving health outcomes for CLWH because of children's positive orientation to and the cultural acceptability of adult-child communication about ARVs.

Conclusions: Myriad structural factors complicate the issue of pediatric HIV and AIDS in low resource settings such as rural Tanzania, however the promotion of and support for children to maintain ARV adherence shows promise as a potential strategy for preventing HIV-related mortality and morbidity and transmission of HIV to future partners and offspring of CLWH.