

GLOBAL HEALTHLINK®

THE NEWS MAGAZINE OF THE GLOBAL HEALTH COUNCIL



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A New Tool for Teaching Young People about Fertility



Photos courtesy of the Institute for Reproductive Health

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The training tool provides a guide for educators to better inform young men and women about the physical and emotional changes that occur during adolescence.

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MY CHANGING BODY, FERTILITY AWARENESS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE, is a training manual developed by Family Health International (FHI) and the Institute for Reproductive Health of Georgetown University (IRH) to teach girls and boys ages 10 to 14 years about their fertility and the changes they experience as they approach puberty. It was a natural fit that the two organizations should collaborate on such an effort as FHI has a wealth of experience working with young people and adolescents around reproductive health issues, while IRH has significant experience teaching fertility awareness. Although designed for adults who teach human development and fertility to youth, the manual can also be used by teachers, youth group leaders, religious instructors and others who work with young people. This interactive manual can be used as a stand-alone curriculum or as a supplement to other reproductive health training materials for youth.

The manual is divided into six educational sessions consisting of a set of interactive lessons around an issue related to

fertility, puberty and sexuality. Sessions include: 1) "Puberty: My Body, My Self," which describes the physical and emotional changes experienced during puberty; 2) "Female and Male Fertility" focuses on the signs of female and male fertility; 3) "Combining Female and Male Fertility: Fertilization" covers the menstrual cycle, fertilization and pregnancy; 4) "Concerns About My Fertility" dispels myths and concerns that girls and boys have about their fertility; and 5) "Hygiene and Puberty" explains how young people can take care of their bodies during puberty. A final, sixth session, includes a review and a course evaluation exercise. The sessions can be conducted at different levels of depth, depending on the instructor and the amount of time available. The instructor need not be an expert on these issues as the manual includes answers to common questions that young people pose and a glossary of terms and useful diagrams. An effort has been made to make the manual accessible and relevant to people of diverse cultural backgrounds, including the developing world, and includes activities for low-literacy populations.

While *My Changing Body, Fertility Awareness for Young People* covers a number of issues, as the title suggests, the emphasis is on fertility awareness. Fertility awareness helps young people understand their maturing bodies and how to protect



Educator leading educational activity from the *My Changing Body* manual. In this activity, the Girl Scouts are using CycleBeads™ as a tool for understanding the menstrual cycle.

their reproductive health. Discussing physical and emotional changes and signs of fertility during puberty empowers youth to make appropriate decisions about sexual behavior. While many excellent curricula for youth exist, a review identified a need for material designed to help boys and girls understand the basis of their reproductive life – fertility awareness. As a tool for helping youth understand an often confusing subject, and to make the educator’s job easier, the manual employs the concept of a fertility awareness necklace, or Cyclebeads, which were developed by the Institute for Reproductive Health as a simple device to be used in conjunction with the Standard Days Method, a fertility awareness based method of natural family planning. Extensive field testing of the necklace has demonstrated its effectiveness as an educational tool in helping people understand the menstrual cycle.

One activity in the manual consists of making a necklace, by either using beads and string, or drawn on paper, depending on available material. The necklace consists of 32 beads of different colors that represent the different days of a woman’s menstrual cycle. The colored beads provide a visual tool to help the girls to understand the menstrual cycle and the changes that occur in their bodies each month. Boys can also benefit from learning about how the female body works and when a girl can become pregnant. Aside from helping to explain the menstrual cycle, the necklace is useful in stimulating discussion on a number of related issues; such as ovulation, secretions, PMS and pregnancy.



Girl scouts of Our Nation’s Capitol learning about their menstrual cycles using CycleBeads™.

Field tests with youth organizations in India, Jamaica and the United States revealed that the games and role playing activities that appear throughout the manual were the most popular activities. Younger boys and girls were initially uncomfortable with discussion of the fertility of the other sex, but opened up over time. Educators reported that use of the concept of the necklace to teach fertility worked well and that it had the added advantage of facilitating communication with parents.

Educators who used the manual remarked on its effectiveness in sparking discussion around issues that are often difficult for adolescent boys and girls to talk about. It was reported that during the sessions youth raised issues of body image, peer pressure and the desire for independence. The conflict between fitting in, while at the same time asserting their independence, was also discussed as were issues of sexual pleasure and coercive sex. Participants reported learning new and useful information from the manual. Worth noting is that they also described it as fun and interesting. They stated that they felt better prepared for puberty, and many stated that they would talk with their parents about the issues discussed during the workshop. One participant concluded, “I learned to be glad of my body.”

Since its public release last year, *My Changing Body, Fertility Awareness for Young People* has been well received. A number of youth organizations such as the Girl Scout Council of Our Nation’s Capital and the YWCA of India are using the manual, and international organizations such as the World Health Organization are interested in incorporating it into their programs in countries such as India. At present, the manual is only available in English, but because of strong demand, versions will soon be released in both Spanish and French. To order a copy, write to publications@fhi.org A PDF version can also be downloaded, free of charge, at www.fhi.org/en/Youth/YouthNet/rhtrainmat/fertilawareyoungpeople.htm

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