

... stress management sessions with a psychiatrist.

ing ones' beddings regularly and ensuring they sleep in a quiet

... ways to treat sleep disorders," Osire says.

LIFESTYLE

Adolescents and sex: Education is key

For most parents, having "the talk" comes with so many scary thoughts that lead to it always being pushed to another day. This then ends in teens learning as they go along and thus, the many negative outcomes. The time, therefore, to talk to them is now.

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Sabrina Kitaka was 11 years old and in Senior One when her mother first talked to her about menstruation. Her father was liberal and did not think along the gender roles.

Kitaka, a paediatrician today, is worried owing to trends that show adolescents are continuing to expose themselves to risky sexual activity with a resultant large number acquiring Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) and opting for unsafe abortions when they get pregnant.

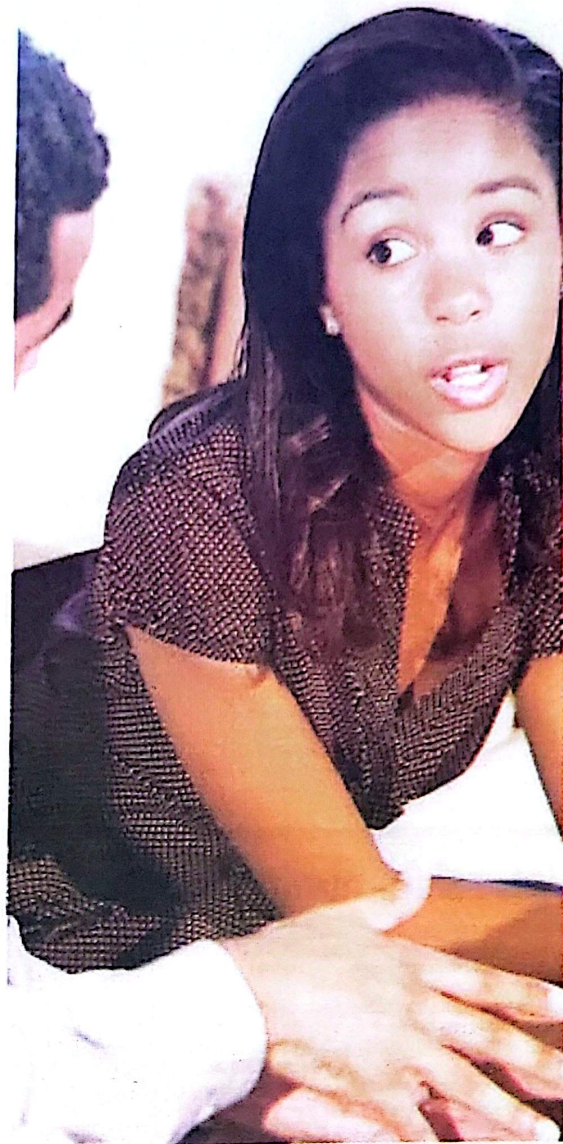
Her qualms are proven by the recently released Uganda Demographic and Health Survey (UDHS) implemented by the Uganda Bureau of Statistics that was released last year. It states that girls (16) and boys (17) are exposed to sex. A quarter of the girls in Uganda are pregnant by 19 years of age.

"It means we see many abortions and many babies born to these teens," Dr Kitaka observes. She defines human sexuality as the capacity of humans to have erotic experiences and responses.

Effects

"What comes with young people engaging in sexual intercourse is a lot of things. They can get STIs, HIV, get pregnant (and the pregnancy rates are really high) and there are many young people living with HIV. There are those born with HIV but also those who get it through sexual intercourse at an early age," Zaituni Nabaterrega, director of programs at Health Plus Development Communications (HeDCO) explains.

HeDCO is a Non-Governmental Organisation that envisions a society where young people are nurtured and supported to become responsible adults. "Also, we, as parents, do not want to talk about sex with our children but it is happening. We leave this to the schools which, many times, have a lot to do. There are schools with interven-



There is no substitute for parental advice on the intimate subjects of relationships, puberty changes, growing up and sex. NET PHOTO

tions but how much time do they have to talk to children about sex? Do they have the necessary skills to talk about challenges pupils or teenagers are facing as they are growing up especially when it comes to reproductive health issues?" she asks.

Dr Rebecca Nantada, president

of Uganda Paediatric Association, attributes the sexual behaviour adolescent pick to the environment in which they are raised.

Alcohol and its effects

Researcher Monica Swahn, a professor from the University of Georgia, says one reason girls living in

HOW PARENTS CAN HANDLE THE 'TALK'

Tackling a sexuality conversation face to face as a serious sit-down lecture can be fraught for all concerned. But talking about sex and relationships when you are driving, washing-up, walking or shopping can relieve some of the eye-to-eye intensity of the situation.

The main thing is to make sure that the talk is not a one-off lecture but an ongoing conversation that your children feel they can come back to. Also, getting to know the topics a school will be covering over the coming term means you can anticipate questions and tackle them casually through everyday conversations and support it in the home.

slums start sex early is due to early exposure to alcohol which, coupled with lack of education, subsequently leads to early pregnancies since alcohol is bought for them by men who demand sexual favours in return.

Go Down Zone, a slum in Kisumu grapples with prostitution where its Local Council (LC) 1 chairman, George Kakule says in absence of a school in the area and low income among residents, many girls end up selling their bodies for economic gain.

"It goes back to how much we are involved in our children's lives as they grow up. Are we able to be open to them, and may be tell them and tell them what to expect as they grow up or are they making discoveries on their own?" Dr Nantanda questions.

But on all guardians are afraid to talk about sex with their little ones. Kitaka says that her mother, a retired nurse, was blunt when she started talking to her about the biology of menstruation.

Some schools have started the conversation with children. Charlotte Nalumansi, co-director at Home Decor Network Kampala is one that attests to this. When she was in Primary Five at Aga Khan Primary School, she was gathered alongside fellow pupils to receive her first talk on body changes, bad touches and adolescence in general.

They were taught about gender changes like boys developing deepened voices, breast development in girls, pubic hair, bad touches where unless when at the doctor's.

"It was mostly to get us to understand that these were natural body transformations and no one was to be teased about the natural changes. Sex was mentioned without actually explaining how it happened because we were made aware of the consequences such as pregnancy. It was assumed that we knew what they were talking about but we really knew nothing," Nalumansi recounts.

She was lucky to get an early talk. According to the UDHS report, girl's sexual debut is 16 years, when they are in Senior Two (S.2) or thereabouts.

Knowing that there were consequences for engaging at an early age was a basically a good speed governor for her. To this day, the introductory message to body changes and sexuality is still very important and valid.

"One of the things that I always remember is seven minutes of fun can turn into a lifetime of regret. Depending on what consequences show up. And some people never get into any trouble, but they are aware that they could if they don't protect themselves," Nalumansi adds.

Nabaterrega says that when girls get pregnant at an early age, they immediately panic because they realise their future hangs in balance and are not sure about what they parents, guardians or friends would say.

"They resort to abortions and many times it is unsafe abortion," she adds. But as Nalumansi observes, the sad thing is the lack of this basic information in rural areas has led to belief in wrong stereotypes that if one showers after sex, they can wash away whatever may have been transfused during sexual intercourse.

Her call is for improvement in the way sex education is done or approached needs to be revised. Nabaterrega acknowledges the Ministry of Education & Sport for working on a framework that we can work with as Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) or those working in schools to deliver this information on sex education. "I know that by the close of this year, we should be able to have a framework to guide us," she adds.

She says the framework has a referral component on where young people can get services. "The reality is that majority of our young people are sexually active and we need to do something about it in helping them prevent STIs, pregnancies," Nabaterrega adds.