

Editor's Note: NORTH CAROLINA LIBRARIES presents this feature in recognition of the increase in excellent unsolicited manuscripts that merit publication, but are not necessarily related to each issue's specific theme.

What Our Children Are Dying To Know: AIDS Information Dissemination and the Library

by Jim Zola

"At a hearing last week, book opponents argued that [two controversial books] promote a lifestyle against God's teachings and that *innocent* children should be protected from reading them."

— "Kids Books On Homosexuals Will Remain on Library Shelf," *News and Record*, Oct. 24, 1992.

"I don't want to die because I don't know ... I don't think it's fair to us for adults to hide all this from us."

— Melissa Roberts, a seventh grader quoted from "Children Seek More Education On AIDS," *News and Record*, Oct. 25 1992.

One only needs to go as far as the morning newspaper to realize that Acquired Immunity Deficiency Syndrome (from hereon AIDS) is a major issue in the world today. Naturally, major world issues have a way of filtering into every aspect of society. The dissemination of accurate current information on AIDS is a monumental task. Just to stay ahead of the rumors and misinformation is beyond the scope of the layperson. What sources can we trust? Dr. Stephen Gluckman of Cooper Hospital in Camden, N.J. recently conducted a survey of thirty-three AIDS hotlines and found that the hotlines "often give out information that's misleading, oversimplified, or just plain wrong."¹ If librarians are the gatekeepers to the world of information, they must be able to gather the most current and accurate information available in order to inform the public. But is this enough?

One of the most common misconceptions about AIDS is that it is a problem confined to large urban areas. Guilford County, North Carolina accounts for only five percent of the state's population, yet twelve percent of the state's AIDS cases occur here. That means twelve cases per 100,000 people.² But the statistics just reveal the surface of the problem. Despite hope, the realistic chances for a cure in the near future are slim. Therefore, the only viable weapon in the war on AIDS is the dissemination of information on ways to avoid contracting the disease. This being the case, libraries must become the major battlefield in the war on AIDS.³

Few people would disagree with the concept that the key to minimizing the spread of AIDS is through public awareness and access to accurate information. And yet, when the issue is focused on the teaching of AIDS education to children, the pots begin to boil. Why? Perhaps the overall problem stems from an image of

children as the innocent lambs and the adults as the shepherds. There is a pairing of the concepts of innocence and ignorance that has followed children through history. The problem with the concept of safeguarding the innocence of children is that it is virtually an impossible task because they live in the modern global village where information bombards them from every angle.

For libraries, the issue of AIDS information dissemination for children needs to be broken down into several categories. First of all, there are two primary areas of access for children's books, the school and the public library. Although the materials available and the patrons served in the two localities may be the same, circumstances determining the collection policies of school libraries and children's collections in public libraries are vastly different. The second consideration in a discussion of AIDS information dissemination for children is the ages of the children being informed. The distinguishing milestone in an examination of access to AIDS information in children's departments of public libraries is the child's ability or inability to read. Most AIDS education in public schools begins in the seventh grade. The issues involved with older children (those more likely to be involved with high-risk behavior in terms of exposure to AIDS) are quite different from those of the younger children. In fact, the

very notion that younger children are not getting information in the classroom makes the availability of information in the library that much more important. It is imperative to examine the information needs of those children who are able to read on their own, but are not yet receiving classroom AIDS education.

During the Reagan administration, U.S. Surgeon General C. Everett Koop mandated the teaching of AIDS education in Public schools. In July 1988, the North Carolina General Assembly enacted a law requiring AIDS prevention

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be taught in school. Yet a 1989 survey reveals that 80 percent of elementary libraries in the U.S. had no fiction titles dealing with AIDS and 52 percent of elementary libraries surveyed had no non-fiction titles.⁴ Educated speculation provides a variety of reasons for the weakness of school collections in this area. The first thing to consider is that children are not voting citizens and therefore do not wield power in a society that respects advocacy. Young children, when viewed as the innocent lambs, are not considered AIDS risks. Therefore, in times when overall funding is tight, and where children's resources are funded by what is left, the gathering of AIDS material may not be a high priority for children's librarians. Then, factoring in the possibility of a book challenge or some fundamental group's sabotage, along with the lack of sources and the currency problems, the dearth of AIDS materials for children might be explained, but not justified. Finally, there is a possibility that the attitudes of the librarians towards the subject might be keeping the books off the shelves.⁵¹

In the case of school libraries, it is virtually impossible to separate the issue of AIDS classroom curricula and the dissemination of AIDS information in the library. School libraries should support and expand on the classroom curriculum. Yet, in the formulation of curricula on AIDS education in the Greensboro Public School system, every department has been included — English, mathematics, social studies, science, health and even physical education — except for the library.⁶ The results of these curriculum decisions can have far-reaching effects on the library collection. In New York City, the Board of Education enacted a measure stressing sexual abstinence in the school curriculum. The ramifications of this ruling enable the school board to censor or ban materials that they feel fail to stress abstinence.⁷ Book challengers are given the strength of political approval.

It could be argued that the issue of AIDS information in children's libraries is just a rehashing of the old sex education debate. But there are some major differences. Not only are young people concerned about AIDS as a life and death issue; they are also considered by some to be a HIV high-risk group.⁸ The problem is not just sex, however. In an article in *The Journal of Moral Education*, Kenneth R. Howe identified these compound issues:

It is only one step from talking about risky behaviors, to talking about the victims of AIDS, social policy, compassion, and constitutional rights ... more generally, the controversies surrounding AIDS ought not to be ducked. Evasiveness only contributes to artificiality of schooling, and results in missing an opportunity for some timely and important education. Students ought to be taught how to cope with controversy and disagreement, rather than presented with a model of how to ignore it.⁹

Unlike the case of sex education, few voices deny that AIDS education is important. While the value of AIDS information dissemination is hard to contend, controversies develop over the approach and extent of the information made available.

There are basically two camps concerned with the inclusion of AIDS materials in children's library collections. Kenneth R. Howe has labeled these two approaches "paternalist" and "neutralist." Paternalism is based on the view that "children, say, through high school age, are simply not competent to master all of the information about AIDS, including the uncertainty, needed

to make responsible judgments."¹⁰ So the paternal approach is to protect children from themselves by censoring the information made available and by advocating abstinence. One of the main problems with the paternal approach, besides the unrealistic belief that ignorance is bliss, is that children today receive information from many sources — peer networks, print and television media. Denying them the access to reliable information in an open educational setting may simply lead to a distrust of schools and libraries.

The alternative approach to AIDS information dissemination, according to Howe, is neutralism. This is based on a respect for adolescent autonomy and on the reservation of moral judgment. While the conservative paternalist believes in abstinence, the neutralist believes that the teaching of safe sex is necessary since all avenues of the issue need to be presented. One group believes that abstinence should be taught as an absolute value, while the other group believes in teaching protective prevention. [This would be a non-issue if both abstinence and safe sex were presented in the available materials.] But the paternalists believe that abstinence should be the only approach, and therefore materials that mention safe sex are viewed as "sheep

clothing for the lupine purveyor of libertarian perversions."¹¹ In order for librarians to resist challenges from these paternalists, it is necessary for them to understand the basis for these beliefs.

There are a few underlying contentions that recur in the arguments against the neutralist approach to AIDS education. The first fundamental belief is that there is a strong relationship between the communication of information and the changing of behaviors.¹² It is hard to argue against this point. Yet the paternal logic continues by arguing that safe sex information "will be ineffective and counter-productive because it will implicitly sanction sexual permissiveness — the primary cause of AIDS."¹³ This argument relies heavily on the innocent child theory. Allowing the thought of anything but abstinence to enter the child's mind will lead to corruption, the breakdown of moral consensus, and the breaking of implicit rules. These implicit rules existed before AIDS, but the paternalists are using the threat of AIDS to enforce the advocacy of abstinence before marriage and fidelity during marriage.

That is not to say that the other side, the neutralists, advocate premarital sex and infidelity. They argue that "kids who come from open-communication situations do better with risk-taking behavior."¹⁴ The question that needs to be asked concerning the neutralist position is just how far the librarian should go. Can the librarian

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remain truly neutral, supplying the information in a non-restrictive manner? Should they be expected to do more? It is far more likely that a public librarian (versus a school librarian) would be able to become an AIDS information advocate. As early as 1987, an article in *School Library Journal* called on all children's librarians to become involved to the fullest extent:

Clearly, both school and public libraries have an opportunity to play an important role in the collection of materials and the dissemination of information about AIDS. School librarians can assist administrators and other officials in collection and disseminating information. Public librarians can complete bibliographies, add information to vertical files, hold forums, show videotapes, provide pamphlets and coordinate outreach programs.¹⁵

The idea of the outreach program was taken a step further in a 1991 *American School Board Journal* article on rural areas and AIDS information dissemination in which it was proposed that bookmobiles be used to reach rural areas in order to teach children ways to prevent AIDS.¹⁶

As with most controversial issues, the essence of the problem tends to get clouded by fringe controversies. The issue in AIDS information dissemination for children is not whether we should pass out condoms, or promote one extreme or the other. The real issue is how we answer this question — if not education and open information dissemination, then what are the alternatives? Frances Bradburn writes in *The Wilson Library Bulletin*:

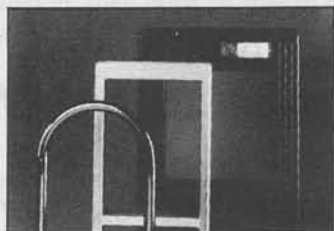
No longer can our discomfort simply confuse our children; it can kill them. No longer can we adults afford the luxury of debating whether or not we want our children sexually educated. "When" perhaps; but never again "whether." For, you see, AIDS is killing our children.¹⁷

If librarians believe that they are advocates for children, then they must continue to promote the dissemination of accurate AIDS information to the fullest extent: not only how to avoid contracting the virus, but information that will dispel the fears and prejudices about the victims of the disease, as well. Familiarity, sympathy, and understanding are the keys to battling AIDS. Children have a right to know, especially when their lives are at stake.

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Greensboro AIDS Program

The Greensboro Public Library has received a grant for \$4,000 from a coalition of the community, organizations, and institutions for the purpose of establishing a Public Library AIDS Project. The funds will be used to distribute packets of AIDS education materials at libraries in Greensboro and High Point and to establish an AIDS Resource Corner at the Chavis Lifelong Learning Library.

The Library has named an Advisory Committee composed of librarians, AIDS activists, educators, and business leaders, which will advise the library on specific activities in its AIDS education campaign. Current plans include the production and distribution of bookmarks, bibliographies, and a local resources list. An AIDS Program Kit containing books, videos, a discussion guide, and other materials will also be assembled for the use of community program developers.

Future plans include sponsoring a program featuring an author who has written on AIDS and providing software to educate youth about AIDS.

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