

Beyond the ABC Campaign: How TeachAids Rebuilt HIV Education

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Abstain. Be Faithful. Condomize.

This three-word ABC campaign once defined HIV awareness and prevention efforts around the globe. Under the ABC campaign and similar models, people assumed that if they followed the “right” behaviors, they would be protected from HIV risk. But this was not the reality: a person could be faithful to one partner who was not faithful to them, or could marry someone already infected. Countries gravely affected by HIV/AIDS were investing hundreds of millions of dollars into BAND-AID awareness campaigns—from billboards warning residents of HIV risk to corporate fundraising initiatives like Johnson & Johnson’s bandage line, which donated a percentage of sales to the HIV/AIDS fight. But these efforts proved ineffective. Infection rates remained high, and misconceptions persisted. Common misconceptions included believing that HIV has a cure, that it can spread through coughing, or that certain communities are at higher risk of contracting it because of their religion. Education also focused on actions without understanding the underlying mechanisms. Students were told they could get HIV from blood, but were never taught how blood leads to infection. In several Indian states, sex education was banned entirely, so HIV education was either removed or heavily diluted. In Uttar Pradesh, educators even burned government materials, and in Andhra Pradesh, schools expelled HIV-positive children. These responses revealed how stigma and fear blocked learning.

The founding of TeachAids, spearheaded by Dr. Piya Sorcar at Stanford University, hinges on the recognition that there is a real break in the chain linking HIV/AIDS awareness and understanding, which has been costing people’s lives for years. Rather than funding more billboards that would lead to deleterious gaps in people’s understanding, the organization sought to explain HIV from first biological principles in ways that were culturally safe. Today its animated series *Prevention Begins With Me* exists in 27 languages, features voices from celebrities such as Shabana Azmi and Shruti Haasan, and has been used across the globe, from Indian army barracks to Kenyan schools without electricity.

TeachAids began by rebuilding HIV education from the ground up. Each animation opens with a metaphor rooted in local culture: “The body is like a country with a defense system called the immune system.” CD4 T cells become “army chiefs,” subordinate cells “jawans,” and HIV the invader that weakens command. Viewers learned a simple three-point mantra, yet it proved far more effective than that of the ABC campaign: infection requires a high-risk fluid, direct transfer, and a possible point of entry. Only after this foundation are behaviors like unprotected sex or sharing needles discussed.

Dr. Sorcar discussed how the team chose 2D animation, not because of budget limits, but because research showed it felt safer than realistic 3D imagery. Surveys, renamed from “HIV/AIDS Survey” to “General Health Surveys” to reduce anxiety, found 98.6% comfort rates. HIV was

portrayed as a clinical molecule rather than a devil-like villain to avoid deepening stigma for people actually suffering from the condition. Dr. Sorcar also described how TeachAids used a translation and back-translation process with bilingual HIV experts. This prevented errors such as the Chinese translation that rendered “breast milk” simply as “milk,” or the Hindi confusion where the same word means both cure and treatment. Local advisors shaped details as well: in Botswana, students loved a brightly colored schoolgirl character, but educators asked for more neutral colors so children could see themselves in the story.

Dissemination did not rely on forcing change but on earning credibility. Remarkably, 78 of 82 countries that adopted TeachAids first discovered the materials online and reached out themselves. Partnerships were formed with UNICEF, UNESCO, the U.S. Peace Corps, and numerous ministries of health. Over 100 formats were created, including interactive CDs, low-bandwidth videos, and television broadcasts, so the materials could work in almost any setting.

Stories from the field illustrate this reach. Dr. Pankaj Singh Poswal, a physician stationed at an Indian Army base without internet access, received CD-ROMs from TeachAids and screened them for 300 soldiers; soon, local educators asked him to teach hundreds of children. In Rwanda, the animations played between 2010 World Cup matches. In Botswana, where nearly 23% of the population lived with HIV, the former president declared June 15th “TeachAids Day.” Even in Andhra Pradesh, once hostile to HIV education, the state government distributed 25,000 copies to schools and aired the videos on popular television.

TeachAids also supported local implementation. Materials were hosted on multiple servers, including Amazon mirrors for regions with download difficulties. Organizations received packages tailored to their context, from waiting rooms in hospitals to community centers run by retired pastors who carried portable CD burners from village to village.