

## Combined psychological and behavioural intervention package reduces sexual risk behaviour: Results from a cluster randomized controlled trial in South Africa

Adolescent orphans and vulnerable children (OVC) are at heightened risk of HIV infection. Effective preventive strategies are therefore urgently needed. While behavioural interventions are the cornerstone of HIV prevention, psychological interventions may also hold promise as part of a coordinated effort to decrease sexual risk-taking.

### Interventions

Interpersonal Psychotherapy for Groups (IPTG) is a program of structured psychological support designed to mitigate mental health problems, including depression. Vhutshilo is a group behavioural intervention that aims to build HIV prevention knowledge and related skills. Both are situated within a broader program offered by World Vision South Africa and designed to provide educational and economic support to adolescent OVC and their families.



### Study design

- A two-year cluster-randomized controlled trial of 1014 adolescents ages 14-17 enrolled in World Vision's Network of Hope OVC program, and their primary caregivers, in two rural districts in the Eastern Cape province.
- Adolescents were assigned to one of four groups defined by the intervention(s) offered: Vhutshilo only, IPTG only, both Vhutshilo and IPTG, or no intervention.
- Participants were assessed on sexual health outcomes including sexual debut and consistent condom use.

### Findings

- Exposure to either intervention alone did not impact sexual risk taking.
- Exposure to both interventions was associated with risk reduction among sexually active adolescents, which varied by gender: boys reported fewer risky sexual partnerships and girls reported more consistent condom use relative to the control group.
- There was no difference in the likelihood of sexual debut across intervention groups for either gender.

### Policy and program recommendations

- Providing both psychological and behavioural interventions for reducing sexual risk behaviour among vulnerable adolescents holds significant promise for preventing HIV in this priority population.
- The introduction of gender-specific sessions and activities tailored to address predominant gender norms and concerns could increase intervention efficacy.
- This study captured World Vision's first experience implementing the interventions in these communities. Facilitation and logistics are likely to improve with time and experience. Continued intervention proficiency and refinement could lead to even greater impact, highlighting the value of evaluating these efforts as an iterative process.

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