

Reaching Out to Roma Youth

Andreea is a thin 10 year-old girl with dark hair and big intelligent eyes. I was curious about her because she was the one student not drinking the milk and eating the biscuit, that the school provides each day. I asked her why and she explained that she was saving the food for her little brother, who is too young to come to school.

I visited Andreea's school in Cluj, to provide technical assistance to the Association for the Emancipation of Roma Women (AFER). AFER has initiated *Be Aware about Your Life* a school-based project that targets Roma students ages 6-16 with educational sessions on sexuality and hygiene. The educational sessions are held three times a week and are coordinated by a team formed by the school nurse and two trainers (for sexuality education and communication sessions). They provide an orientation on age-appropriate sexuality and reproductive health issues. Hygiene topics are also covered and are important because these Roma children live in a neighborhood situated at the peripheral area of the town, next to the garbage dump. In order for the family to earn money, they assist their parents to sort the city's garbage. With almost no access to water, health and hygiene are a concern. In fact, one six-year-old boy had his first bath in the bathroom that the school created for these students.

The project began as a pilot project and now has reached 96 students in one school. It will be utilized by AFER as a model for expansion to other schools. What is important about the project is that the educational sessions provide a means to reach out to the students, empower and encourage them.

When I asked Andreea what was most important to her about the educational sessions. The answer, coming from a ten-year girl, surprised me: she found out something new about herself, that she wants to continue in school and become a hair-stylist.

