

HIV/Aids - an insight for parents

HIV/Aids is a reality all children have to live with. In South Africa, statistics show that children are the most affected by the disease.

South Africa is currently the country with the highest number of people living with HIV infection. The total number is estimated at 6.29 million infected people, including adults and children. In 2004 104963 infants were infected with the virus at birth¹. The total number of infected children under 14 years was 245 000. The estimated number of AIDS orphans who have lost both parents is 626 000.²

It is important to remember that children who live in households with HIV+ adults and/or children, they are also affected by the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

1. The Effect of HIV/Aids on Children

Children in South Africa are being hard hit by the HIV/Aids epidemic. Many have lost both parents and therefore have had to take on adult roles and responsibilities despite their immaturity to deal with it. Even more children have lost one parent. Consequently, many children are forced to fend for themselves resulting in inadequate nutrition, sanitation and health care.

In addition, the loss of an emotionally nurturing environment results in psychological trauma and helplessness. Because of the stigma attached to the disease, children are also unlikely to seek assistance for fear of being rejected.

Some children have the responsibility of nursing sick parents and siblings. For many of the children in this position there is loss of the opportunity to attend school regularly, play and enjoy childhood. AIDS sometimes impacts on a parent's psychological functioning and the resulting confusion and unpredictable and unexpected behaviour can be confusing and traumatic for the child.

In some instances, children migrate to cities and lose contact with their families, ending up as street children. In other cases, siblings are separated after the death of a parent, either through being sent to foster homes, to institutions or to different family members. Unfortunately, sometimes even children placed with families and foster homes are vulnerable to disease, malnutrition and abuse due to receiving less care than the foster families' natural children. Research informs us that children who have lost mothers on average do less well at school, even when in the care of other family members.³

¹ Department of Health, Republic of South Africa: National HIV and Syphilis Sero-prevalence Survey, 2004, www.health.gov.za

² The Centre for Actuarial Research and South African Medical Research Council, : The Demographic Impact of HIV/AIDS in South Africa, National Indicators for 2004, www.mrc.ac.za

³ Ardington, Cally: *The Impact of Parental Death on the Education Of Children And Implications For Policies To Address This Impact*. Paper presented at the Raising Africa's Children OVC Conference, Durban, September 2005

For those children who have no one to care for them, they are 3-5 times more likely to die than non-orphaned children. This is because they are at greater risk of malnutrition, poor sanitation, and sexual abuse potentially resulting in their own infection. In addition, when these children reach puberty and become sexually active, they are also at risk of contracting the virus.

Those children who are orphaned or placed elsewhere feel enormous loss, rejection and grief, and if they are not infected by the disease themselves the lack of family norms and socialization practices may also result in them becoming dysfunctional adults.

2. Symptoms & Early Signs of Aids in Babies and Children

A baby or young child who has the AIDS virus does not gain weight and frequently becomes ill. These illnesses are not easy to cure. As a result of repeated illnesses the child becomes very weak and dies:

Symptoms:

- persistently swollen glands in neck, armpit and groin;
- prolonged fever;
- persistent diarrhea;
- thrush in the mouth;
- sweaty and clammy; and
- loss of weight.

3. Living with Aids

Being diagnosed as HIV positive does not mean an immediate death sentence. There are documented cases of people living with the disease for years. However, one does have to actively ensure that one remains healthy. This can be done by:

- taking care of one's health (eating properly, exercising; resting);
- being positive about life;
- getting support from others;
- practising safer sex; and
- ensuring that one's blood is tested regularly and that when it is appropriate, ARV (anti-retroviral medication) is requested from the nearest treatment centre.

3.1. Eating healthily

The value of looking after one's health and diet when diagnosed with HIV cannot be stressed enough. Although it is not a cure, it does make one's body better able to cope with the disease as well as possibly delay the onset of Aids.

Infected children and adults can remain healthier by:

- eating a lot of fresh fruits and vegetables;
- eating whole grains such as samp and brown bread;
- avoiding junk foods such as chips and sweets;
- drinking lots of water;
- avoiding alcohol, smoking and drugs;
- keeping your cooking and eating area clean;
- looking after personal hygiene;
- making sure that all immunizations are up to date for children; and
- taking sensible precautions around people.

3.2. Developing a positive attitude

Many people, after being diagnosed with a disease, give up on life and no longer see a future for themselves. However, as with physical health, emotional well-being is of utmost importance when fighting any disease. If one is emotionally strong, one is able to stay focused and remain positive about life.

One can remain positive by:

- setting goals in life;
- believing in oneself;
- looking at the positive side of things;
- getting counseling if one feels the need (healthy minds contribute to a healthy body);
- knowing ones strengths and weaknesses;
- not allowing people who have negative thoughts about the disease to make one feel unhappy; and
- joining a support group with other infected persons (this can be very encouraging).

4. Living with Hope

Most people with HIV are well and will continue to feel well for some years after they have become infected. During this period, adults and children with HIV can live active and productive lives at school, work and home.

People with HIV need support and advice and many organizations and support groups have been established solely to provide counseling and assistance for those infected or affected by Aids. The community and especially the school environment can be a source of love, care and support.