

Memory books: giving HIV/AIDS orphaned children a sense of family and belonging

The HIV/AIDS crisis in the African region is having an enormous impact on children, their families and communities. The loss of life has resulted in many children being orphaned, while others must take on roles as carers when their parents' health deteriorates. Other children and youth face the very real risk of contracting the disease themselves.

According to recent figures from the United Nations, over two million children under 15 years old are now infected with HIV, while another 15 million children under the age of 18 have lost one or both parents to AIDS¹.

Impact of HIV/AIDS on children

The spread of the illness has also led to an increased level of vulnerability among children. As parents become increasingly ill, they may be unable to work resulting in increased poverty and potential homelessness for families. Other negative impacts include discrimination against children where the disease is present in their family, and an increased number of school drop-outs, as children leave education to find work to support their families.

With funding support from the government's Australian Partnerships with African Communities (APAC) program, ChildFund Australia is working with HIV-affected and other vulnerable children in Kenya, Uganda and Zambia.

The program, which began in 2004 and will continue until 2009, works with local communities to raise awareness of HIV/AIDS, provides education on prevention and care, and works with local and district community structures to ensure psychosocial support is available for orphans and vulnerable children impacted by the disease.

Memory books

ChildFund Australia CEO Nigel Spence says: "One of the more unique parts of the program, and an area which is often overlooked, is a succession planning and memory books initiative. So many children are orphaned - many at an age where they are too young to remember facts about their family. The memory books ensure that these children are given some sense of their family history, as well as personal mementos from their parents."

The memory books involve putting together a book containing the family history, any photographs, personal stories and any other family-specific information which they can then pass on to their children.

¹ Children and AIDS: A Stocktaking Report. *Actions and Progress during the first year of Unite for Children, Unite Against AIDS*. January 2007.

So that individuals with HIV/AIDS are not discriminated against within their community, all parents and people looking after children (referred to as caregivers) in ChildFund's program areas are encouraged to participate in the memory books and succession planning initiatives.

To date, the memory books initiative is proving very popular. ChildFund interviewed a number of caregivers of orphans and vulnerable children who cited the following benefits.

The books:

- act as a good method of sensitising others about HIV/AIDS;
- can be used as a training tool - through family trees, people can learn who they are related to (thereby avoiding cases of intermarriage) and children are guided on their family links;
- help to instill discipline and respect for elders;
- allow writers to include 'body mapping' pictures, which indicate where they feel unwell or hurt. This in turn can help identify illnesses and, in case of death, it is easy for the children and relatives to identify the cause. It also helps to trace any hereditary diseases;
- are a good way to share traditions, histories and past practices with children;
- have enhanced family cohesion especially in cases where children have been involved in memory work writing.

For those people who are unable to write, memory boxes, in which personal items can be stored, offer an alternative to the books. Using locally produced woven baskets, or clay pots, individuals can place family mementos, photographs and other belongings within the memory box, thus providing a keepsake for the children.

Succession planning

The succession planning program encourages all community members to create personal wills. For instance, it gives farming families the chance to formally bequeath any land holdings to children who may be too young to understand their entitlements. It also means there is less likely to be disagreement among family members once the owner has passed away.

Nigel says: "Often families have very little in the way of material possessions to leave, but the wills allow them to ensure that what they do have remains with their children.

"In Kenya, there have already been a number of cases of children and caregivers who have been able to protect their property as a result of the wills left behind by deceased parents."

Case study: Mutamino Memory Works Support Group, Zambia

The Mutamino Memory Works Support Group is a group of caregivers in the Lusaka province of Zambia who are working to build a better future for children affected by HIV/AIDS.

Before the memory work activities, caregivers generally didn't make inheritance plans and there was little discussion between caregivers and their children on HIV/AIDS issues. Children also had little information on their family backgrounds due to a lack of documentation, which left them vulnerable to poverty and abuse after the death of their caregivers.

The introduction of memory works in communities has increased communication between caregivers and their children. Caregivers have been able to share their life experiences and have used the opportunity to warn their children against risky behaviour. "Development of a memory book requires openness and can help show why and how you were able to change your behaviour," said Martin, a caregiver.

It has also enabled people to trace their family members. For example, Phoebe was able to trace her relative in the process of developing a memory book. "I lived with Mwalilanda for 12 years without knowing she was my relative. As I was being taught on how to develop a family tree, we realised we were actually from the same extended family. From that time, we have been very close to each other, and I am very happy," said Phoebe.

Through memory works, the writing of wills has also been enhanced. Caregivers are now able to plan for their children's future and children learn their property rights and responsibilities.

Case study: Hero books, Zambia

ChildFund's development work with young people in Zambia also includes Hero Books, which allow teenagers to write down their experiences in a diary format.

The creation of a hero book is a process designed to help young people set goals and give them power over specific psychosocial challenges or obstacles in their lives. They are the author, illustrator, main character and editor of their very own book. Hero books have been found to be beneficial to both the writer as well as other members of the community.

Twenty-four-year-old James views a hero book as a biography: "It is a record of the past. Others can learn from it as well as get inspired."

The hero book is also used as a tool for coping with various challenges. "The hero book helps us understand that there are other people facing challenges, which make us strong," James added.

Through hero books, youth have been able to identify their strengths and develop strategies for overcoming difficult circumstances. Mordy, an apprentice carpenter says: "When you come out of a loss or a difficult situation which you managed well, you come out as a hero, especially if you know that you managed it well. You also learn what to do when you encounter a similar situation in the future."



A cover of a memory book.



Phoebe updating her memory book



Martin uses his memory book as an important record of history.



Mutamino Memory Work Group during a planning meeting



Martin keeps old Zambian currency in his memory book.



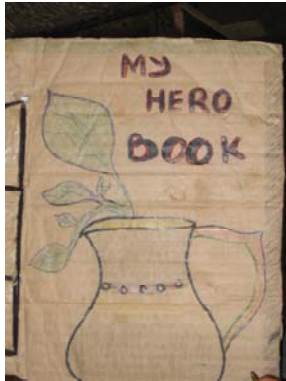
Susan shows her son pictures from her memory book



Susan and her son.



James records all his successes and failures in his Hero book.



James' Hero book.

THESE AND OTHER IMAGES ARE AVAILABLE IN HIGH RESOLUTION AT REQUEST.

NOTES TO THE EDITOR:

About ChildFund

ChildFund Australia is an independent and non-religious international development organisation that works to reduce or eliminate poverty for children in the developing world. Using a child sponsorship approach, as well as public donations and government grants, ChildFund Australia directly implements programs in Vietnam and Papua New Guinea and manages projects delivered by partner organisations in Asia, Africa and the Americas.

ChildFund Australia is a member of ChildFund International – a global network of 12 organisations which assists five million children in over 50 countries. ChildFund Australia is a registered charity and is fully accredited by the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID).

About Nigel Spence

Nigel Spence joined ChildFund Australia as CEO in February 2006, after almost nine years at the helm of the Association of Children's Welfare Agencies (ACWA). During this time, he was responsible for leading the association and the sector to achieve significant improvements for vulnerable children, young people and their families. He was previously director of Children and Youth Services Centacare, Catholic Community Services, Sydney.

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Interviews can be arranged with ChildFund Australia CEO Nigel Spence. Please contact Larissa Tuohy to arrange times.

Images are available upon request.