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Children, orphans, and AIDS

Today is International AIDS Memorial Day. In view of that, we take a look at the impact of the disease on the most vulnerable section of the population: children.

HIV/AIDS is undermining the rights and well-being of children. Millions of children around the world are growing up alone, growing up too fast, or not growing up at all. The impact of HIV/AIDS on children is both complex and multifaceted. Many suffer intense psychosocial and economic distress and are likely to leave school to work to support their families.

- HIV/AIDS is robbing children of their fathers and mothers. The impact of the epidemic is seen most cruelly in the mounting numbers of children orphaned and made vulnerable by the epidemic.

Globally, 15 million children have lost their mothers and/or fathers because of AIDS. Millions more are in households with sick and dying family members. By 2025, there will be 25 million children "missing" one or both of their parents.

- HIV/AIDS is threatening child survival and development. The sickness and death of parents due to AIDS affect infants, children and adolescents in clear ways. If they have lost their parents to HIV/AIDS, most live with the stigma and discrimination attached to the disease.

This means they have less access to basic

services and are at higher risk of abuse and exploitation. Ultimately, they are at higher risk of becoming HIV-positive themselves. Efforts to provide care and support to orphaned children must reflect an understanding of the different stages of development and changing needs of infancy, childhood and adolescence.

- The family is a child's first line of protection from abuse and exploitation.

Every effort must be made to keep HIV-positive parents alive, and to support affected families in protecting and providing for children.

This is the best way to ensure that children, including those who are orphaned, are enrolled in school and have access to shelter, good nutrition, health, and other social services on an equal basis with other children.

- Schools are the best defence against HIV infection. The trouble with HIV/AIDS is that children often have to leave school to support themselves and their families. With knowledge and life skills so critical in the fight against HIV/AIDS, the best defence against the epidemic is keeping vulnerable young people, especially girls, in school.

- People living with HIV/AIDS need care and support. While access to medicines is

extremely important, the needs of people with HIV/AIDS extend far beyond drugs. Comprehensive care and support strategies need to include voluntary HIV counselling and testing, psychosocial and material support, adequate food and good nutrition, healthcare and treatment of opportunistic infections, and protection from exploitation and abuse.

- Winning the fight against HIV/AIDS hinges on leadership. In countries that have cut spiralling infection rates, the single factor that made the greatest difference was credible, visible and audible leadership by individuals who have the public's trust.

Leadership in the face of the HIV/AIDS crisis means breaking the silence that keeps the disease hidden and breaking the barriers of discrimination that persecute people and propagate infection.

Leadership works towards prevention of HIV/AIDS and towards treatment and care for those living with, and affected, by the disease.

The role of parents

Supportive mothers and fathers can teach children values and life skills that will guide them in making the right choices in life.

- Parents can start by building good parent-child relationships. Parents should show their children they care and that they are interested in what their children do.

- Parents should talk with their children, not at them, and keep the lines of communication open. They should pay attention to what their children are saying.

- Parents should be alert and pay attention to their children's body language. A relaxed child smiles, and will not show obvious signs of nervousness. These signs may include shaking or tapping of feet, drumming fingers, and hanging the head when speaking.

- Parents should help make their children feel responsible. Children can be given tasks at home to learn responsibility.

- Parents should help children say "no" to drugs. One way is to encourage them to take up sports or hobbies and teach them to make creative use of their leisure time.

- Parents should learn about the dangers of drugs and their effects so they can help their children make informed choices.

- Parents should learn to look out for signs of drug abuse.

■ *This article is courtesy of UNICEF Malaysia.*