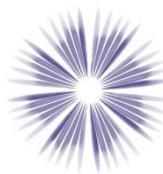




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Supporting and Strengthening Child-Caregiver Relationships (Parenting): Summary of a Comprehensive Parenting Literature Review

In 2012, USAID, PEPFAR and the AIDSTAR-One Project commissioned Linda Richter and Sara Naicker from the Human Sciences Research Council in South Africa to conduct a comprehensive literature review of evidence-based parenting programs from around the world.

The PEPFAR Orphans and Vulnerable Children (OV) Technical Working Group (TWG) and AIDSTAR-Two Project presented findings from this initiative, “A Review of Published Literature on Supporting and Strengthening Child-Caregiver Relationships (Parenting),” at a public launch and global webinar event on March 26, 2013 in Washington, DC.

This brief summary of the comprehensive literature review was developed by the AIDSTAR-Two project. The full review and the webinar are available online at: www.ovcsupport.net.

Introduction

In sub-Saharan Africa, very large numbers of children are directly and indirectly affected by the HIV and AIDS epidemic and by the contexts of poverty, inequality and social instability in which the disease has flourished. In 2009, 16.6 million children were estimated to have lost one or both of their parents to AIDS; 80 percent who have lost a parent to AIDS have a surviving parent—most often their mother—and almost all double orphans live with extended family.

PEPFAR, the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, other local and international donors, as well as governments, have provided resources for mitigation of the impact of HIV and AIDS on children—but reach and scale is still very low.

Families were the first to respond to people affected by AIDS, both in the USA and in southern Africa, and families have continued to be the vanguard of care and support for vulnerable children. The same pattern of response is being seen in China, India, Eastern Europe and other sites of concentrated AIDS epidemics. When parents become ill or die, their spouses, siblings, parents, other family members and neighbors help with or assume childcare responsibilities. In the poorest communities, where there is little or nothing in the way of services provided by government or civil society organizations, family and kin are the only form of support for vulnerable children—whether by default or choice.



Main Findings of the Review

There is strong evidence of the effectiveness of parent support programs that address a range of child and family concerns, and that the core elements of many parenting and caregiving programs can be adapted for use across different settings and cultures.

From the studies reviewed, there is strong evidence supporting the positive outcomes of ongoing parenthood programs, and especially those that help prepare new parents, particularly young mothers, and other caregivers facing challenges that put them at high risk. In the context of HIV and poverty in low and middle-income countries, these at risk groups are likely to include parents and other caregivers living with HIV, destitute families in high HIV prevalence areas, aged caregivers, caregivers or children living with a disability, and socially isolated caregivers with little social support.

Children in many non-Western cultures are parented by relatives other than or in addition to their biological parents, and often by more than one person with whom they have intimate and secure relationships. This is true in southern Africa, where African families regard the siblings of a mother or father as ‘big mother’ or ‘little father’ to a child, depending on birth order. For this reason, the more general term “caregiving” is sometimes used to describe the parenting children receive from people other than biological parents. “Parenting” is the best way to describe the long-term relationship through which one or more adults provide care and protection for a child.

Around the world, relationships between parents and children vary according to social and cultural norms and economic circumstances. Yet there are many similarities in the day-to-day activities of parenting across cultures. Parenting programs in high-income countries often revolve around three common goals that also apply cross culturally:

1. **They enable parents to better promote and facilitate their child’s health, development and achievement.** This is particularly important when parents need additional knowledge, skills and confidence to parent effectively, or when parenting is compromised by specific challenges, such as HIV and poverty.
2. **Help adults to parent with less stress, fewer problems, and more pleasure and satisfaction.** This is important when family and couple relationships are strained by childcare challenges, including those brought about by HIV and poverty.
3. **Assist parents to manage child behavior that is of concern to them.** Parents may be concerned about any number of aspects of their child’s behavior, emotional state or schooling, including bereavement, anxiety, rebellion and disobedience, their relationships with friends, and their educational performance.



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Support for parenting is helpful because HIV and poverty challenge both children and families.

Families and communities caring for HIV-affected children are often severely challenged by the adverse effects of HIV and AIDS on household social, emotional and economic stability. It is estimated that up to two-thirds of families in high HIV prevalence countries in southern Africa are directly affected by HIV—either because someone in the household is living with HIV, is sick with AIDS or has recently died. In low and concentrated epidemics, the children of parents in marginalized groups who are HIV-affected are often stigmatized and excluded from services and frequently in need of additional support.

Communities affected by AIDS and poverty contend with a variety of needs related to children and parenting: disclosure to children of their own or other family members' HIV status; speaking to and reassuring children about illness and death; counseling and supporting children against stigmatization and discrimination; supporting children undergoing difficult experiences when parents are ill or die; and helping children stay in school—to name only a few.

Research shows that parenting interventions, including individual or group information sharing and social support, have a direct positive effect on caregivers. Linking parents with available services in the community—whether sponsored by the government, churches or volunteer groups—play a pivotal role in strengthening families and providing significant benefits to children.

Parenting programs need to be situated within a broader context of improved supports for caregivers and families.

Poverty is the major threat to the wellbeing of children and families in both low and high-income countries, and poverty frequently exacerbates the impact of HIV and AIDS on children.

Experience drawn from several countries indicates that the most effective parenting programs acknowledge and address the socioeconomic and other challenges vulnerable families face. When programs ignore the material challenges families must contend with, parents frequently feel misunderstood, report that their needs are not being met, and often drop out of the program.

At-risk families need policies and services—including employment, financial assistance, and help with housing, education and childcare—to enable them to provide for their children. The lack of such basic provisions increase parental stresses and can diminish and distort parent's ability to care for children. These stresses affect parental mental health and can trigger neglectful, harsh, and even abusive parental behavior.



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Social support is a core component of many successful parenting interventions.

Parenting interventions have a wide range of objectives, but social support is reported by both parent participants and professionals to be at the core of what they find most valuable.

Social supports improve access to services, provide guidance and information, and help create and maintain personal and community relationships. Supportive actions provided by partners, families, peers and professionals have positive effects on a wide range of parenting aspects, including self-perception, coping and mental health. Such interventions can be integrated into existing orphan and vulnerable children or parenting programs in a variety of ways, including community outreach and home visiting, and participation in group activities.

Parents can be supported to promote their children’s early development, learning, literacy and school performance.

Programs promoting children’s early language, literacy, cognitive development and transition to school have been shown to be effective, are highly feasible in resource poor and HIV affected settings, and can be used to promote educational performance and positive relationships between parents and children. For example, parents can be encouraged to converse more with their children, tell them stories, explain what is happening in pictures, prompt them to ask questions and provide replies, and link explanations to the child’s day-to-day experiences.

Parenting support can be provided in low-income, HIV-affected settings using a set of common elements or principles that have been shown to be effective in parenting programs.

Most parenting programs have been developed and evaluated in high-income countries, most notably Australia, Britain, Canada and the United States. Many parenting programs in their original form are culture-bound and labor-intensive, and, if implementation remains faithful to the original program design, will likely be challenging and costly to reproduce in low-income countries. However, evidence and expertise gained from a large number of programs and studies strongly suggest that adaptation across parenting challenges, settings and cultures is feasible using a set of common elements or principles.

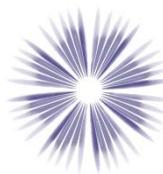
Common Elements Identified in Parent Support Programs

The literature review identified a set of common elements found in almost all parent support programs that are known to be effective in their approach:

- **Information:** Parents want factual information about their child and their special needs, and tips about how to manage day-to-day practical challenges.



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- **Positive Parenting:** Parents are eager to learn how to communicate with and provide appropriate guidance to their children in ways that will positively influence their child's behavior and improve the parent-child relationship.
- **Understanding:** When parents understand their children's developmental behaviors and age-appropriate needs, they are more likely to provide improved support and guidance without resorting to harsh disciplinary practices.
- **Promotion of Pro-Social Behavior:** Parents can teach their children cooperative social behaviors. By modeling how to resolve problems through verbal skills and negotiation rather than physical aggression, for example, parents teach children how to self-regulate and manage their frustrations in a socially appropriate manner.
- **Responding to Parents' Needs:** Parents need to feel confident and effective in their parenting skills. Programs can help support parents by empathizing with their concerns, encouraging and providing feedback about their parenting efforts, and providing them with social support.

Common Features of Programs in Successful Parenting Support Interventions

Many lessons have been learned with respect to parenting program implementation, including understanding which aspects of programming are more acceptable to and effective when working with parents. The following components have been identified as key ingredients and most highly valued by parents:

- Guidance, affirmation and access to resources
- Opportunities to make friends and share troubles with people in similar circumstances
- Activities that counter social isolation
- Parental engagement and consultation
- Practical skills to deal with day-to-day matters
- Social support from family
- Supports and activities that nurture parents' confidence
- Referrals to additional services as needed

The use of mass media in parenting programs offers many possibilities for transmitting knowledge and changing parents' attitudes about and behaviors toward their children's development.

Mass media includes television, radio, meetings, health fairs, child-to-child communication programs, and other forums for the wide dissemination of information in communities. Educational mass media campaigns focused on parenting and child protection are flexible and cost-effective, and can be tailored to suit the needs of the local community.

Programs that increase child safety and promote positive discipline practices are extremely relevant for families living in conditions of high HIV prevalence and poverty. Evidence from child abuse prevention initiatives shows that children and families labeled "high-risk" often require intensive



professional services and interventions, which are not always feasible. Mass media interventions are known to effectively improve child safety, replace harsh punishment with positive discipline, and provide parents with information about children’s development and suggestions for supporting their children’s learning and school performance.

Conclusion

All parenting programs aim to change parental beliefs and practices in a way that positively influences children’s health, development and wellbeing. At the same time, parenting programs also aim to reduce parental stress, improve the parent-child and couple relationship, and promote overall family wellbeing.

The solid evidence gathered from the global parenting literature review shows that children, caregivers and families affected by HIV and AIDS are very likely to benefit from universal and targeted parenting interventions. What is still not clear is whether existing programs from high-income countries like Britain and the United States can be adapted and delivered effectively in low-income, HIV-affected settings, and whether they are relevant to the concerns of parents and families affected by HIV.

The review identified a common set of parenting program elements that have been found to foster successful outcomes. These “common elements” need to be assembled according to parents’ varying needs and circumstances, and tailored to meet the appropriate developmental stages of the children they care for. For example, parental supports for an HIV-positive mother with a newborn are very different than those that would be delivered to a grandmother caring for two adolescent granddaughters and a young toddler.

Parents and caregivers are an under-tapped resource for nurturing children’s early learning, development and safety. Any new efforts to strengthen parenting should be informed by meaningful parental participation and a thorough understanding of what caregivers would find useful. In the context of poverty and HIV, parental participation and program effectiveness will be greatly enhanced by addressing the material and other challenges parents face when trying to meet the basic needs of their children in often desperate situations.

To view the entire report, please go to: www.ovcsupport.net

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