

LOSING a Mother

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6.1 Children's experiences

The psychosocial impact on children of losing a parent often goes unrecognised. The children's drawings contained pictures of coffins and crosses and their discussions reflect the very real presence of death and dying in their everyday lives.

Wendy, 12 years old: "I am asking for flowers. When die you'll put them in my coffin box with me."

Busisiwe, 7 years old: "Please can I have a doll and a dummy for my doll, because then I can play with my doll in my mother's room and near her grave. The doll will be my friend because I don't have friends because they say I am dirty."

Mduduzi, 12 years old, writes about his experiences:

At first when my mother got this sickness I can't actually remember the date and all the years that she was sick till but what I remember was that she got this sickness at the year of 1988 and she had all these pains and when I asked her what was wrong with her she didn't want me to feel all the pain and suffer because I was always worried about her and sometimes she didn't even go to work and when I asked her why she didn't go to work she told me to stop worrying and go to school and when I got so worried that I called my grand grandmother and told her that something was wrong with my mother and my grand mother asked me but what is wrong with your mother I said I don't know because my mother didn't want to tell me and I was so fed up because my father always had a fight with my mother and he said he doesn't want her anymore in his house but that was my mother's house and he was always beating my mother and she always came to my grand mother crying that my father had beaten her and she would always call the policeman and the police men would arrest my father and he would cry and say he will never do that again to my mother and my mother would feel ashamed for him and tell him out and my father would do it again and again sending my mother out and I was very scared of my father because he always send me at night at about 10 o'clock and tell me to go and buy him cigarettes and he always beats me up when something got lost in the house and told me that I look it and no body else can take any thing in the house ~~except~~ except me and when he beat my mother I always told him to stop it and he always told my mother that she must teach me manners to stop getting in other problems because they can solve their own problems and I mustn't talk to him like that and I ran away from him and I was scared that my mother would die at any moment so I told her to come and stay with me and my grand mother and a lot of people know my grand mother so this other lady told me to take my mother to the ST FRANCIS care centre so my mother got better and better so now I know that my mother is in the good hands

6.1.1 "My mother suffered a lot and I saw how she suffered"

The impact of 'orphanhood' on a child can begin long before the death of a parent. HIV/AIDS is typically associated with a long and painful death and children of HIV+ caregivers are forced to witness this. The children talked about how difficult it was to watch their parents suffer and to be unable to do anything to help.

Mcedisi, 12 years old: "I felt very bad about what my mother died of. She had AIDS. My mother's friend told us my mother has AIDS. People who have AIDS must take their medicine but they will never be the same as they were before. The medicine can make them stronger but later they will get weak again, their hair falls out, there are sores in their mouth. I loved my mother very much and I was always there for her and I will always think about her. My mother suffered a lot and I saw how she suffered but I could do nothing about it."

Catherine, 10 years old: "Children are not nice to me because my mom has the disease and I get worried not knowing whether she will be alive when I get back from school. The children bully and tease you and that makes you sad. They push you and they don't like me. This makes me want to stop going to school, because my mom has AIDS."

Mduduzi, 12 years old: "We didn't know what was going on when my mother got sick.. We asked, she said she didn't know. They took her to a hospice at the Hospital and they told her she had AIDS. And when I heard I felt so bad about telling everyone. I spoke to a counsellor and they gave me hope to face it because anybody can get AIDS. When I used to go to school it was so bad because I couldn't even write. My teachers suspended me for seven days because they didn't know what was happening to me. I'm thinking so much about my mother that I couldn't concentrate. I spoke to a teacher who could understand but when the teacher said I could come back my mother passed away so I couldn't come to school. But now, it has gone through me, because that person was sick for a long time, so there is nothing I can do to bring her back."

“ I spoke to a counsellor and they gave me hope to face it because anybody can get AIDS. ”

6.1.2 "They did not know that their mother had AIDS"

Many of the children were not prepared for their mother's death and were not told that their mother had AIDS. Children spoke about how they found out about their mother's HIV+ status by accident.

Anneline, 15 years old: "My story is about a girl who lost both her parents to AIDS. Her mother did not know that her husband had AIDS. She needed good medication only to find that it was expensive and the clinics were far away, clinics where she could get the best medication. And when her children went to visit her in hospital they found that in the ward she was sleeping in was written 'HIV positive'. And they did not know that their mother had AIDS. So they had a problem with the word 'HIV positive' because they did not know what it means. Her mother's confidentiality was broken that way."

One of the children spoke about how his mother had talked openly with him about her illness and how she had given him a few of her possessions before she died. His story highlights the benefits to children of doing this (see *picture and story on next page.*)

6.1.3 "When the mother dies – children suffer"

The children spoke about what can happen to children who have lost a mother. Their experiences highlight the vulnerability of maternal orphans. They talked about how their fathers' behaviour and attitude towards them changed after the death of their mothers.

Tebogo, 11 years old: "Some treat the child well when the mother is still alive and sick. When she dies they begin to ill treat the child."

Boitumelo, 9 years old: "After my mother died, my father started behaving funny. He's often drunk. He locks us out of the house and we have to sleep under a tree. He takes the key to Sebolelo's place [his girlfriend] and locks us outside. He comes back only when he wants to. One night he locked us outside and we slept underneath the tree. We met Tumelo's mother and she helped us. When my father comes home late at night, drunk, he swears at us. He beats us and chases us around. He buys food at Sebolelo's and does not buy anything for us."



My Mother was very sick and I was very scared because my mom was sleeping on a bed everytime. When it is ~~June~~ We go to School in break I come back to see my mom and I found her screaming in bed and I see the nurses cleaning and washing her. She can't wash herself and she can't walk. I go back to school. I was worried about her. When I write at school I think about her but I tell myself that I will not forget her and when I come back to school she was not at home. She was in hospital and the next day my friends tell me that my mom has got AIDS and I go home. I wash my clothes and at night my brother said to me 'don't worry, it will be alright'. The next day my mother phoned and said 'you must come to visit me at hospital'. They discharged her and she was better. I was happy and in the morning I go to school and at school I play with my friends. They asked me about my mom and I said she is well. I go back at home and she was sick again. She goes back to hospital and they said she will be well but she didn't and she passed away and I think that I am lost.

Babalo, 12 years old, writes about his mother's illness:

“ My mother was very sick and I was very scared because my mom was sleeping on the bed everytime. When we go to school in break I come back to see my mom and I found her screaming in bed and I see the nurses cleaning and washing her. She can't wash herself and she can't walk. I go back to school. I was worried about her. When I write at school I think about her but I tell myself that I will not forget her and when I come back from school she was not at home, she was at hospital. The next day, my friends tell me that my mom, she has got AIDS. I go home, I wash my clothes and at night my brother said to me 'don't worry, it will be alright'. The next day, my mother phoned and said 'you must come to visit me at hospital'. They discharged her and she was better. I was happy and in the morning I go to school and at school I play with my friends. They asked me about my mom and I said she is well. I go back at home and she was sick again. She goes back to hospital and they said she will be well but she didn't and she passed away and I think that I am lost. ”

“Some treat the child well when the mother is still alive and sick. When she dies they begin to ill treat the child.”

Sizwe: “Because there is no one who will pay her school fees for her. No one is there to buy the child’s school uniform.”

Lefa: “Those children will struggle. They will never be able to be doctors, teachers or anything. There won’t be people to help them. They will suffer.”

Tumelo: “When the mothers of these children passes away, their fathers abuse them. They make them sleep outside, beat them and come home drunk at night. When their fathers receive their salaries they go and buy liquor and do not do anything for their children.

Lefa: “And they become street kids.’

6.1.4 “You eventually have to leave school to fend for yourself.”

Many children spoke about the impact that their mothers’ deaths had on their schooling. Some of the children felt that they would never be able to realise their ambitions because they were ‘orphans’.

John, 13 years old: “HIV/AIDS kills your parents and you eventually have to leave school to fend for yourself.”

Nolwaka, 15 years old: “At school the children had problems with their studies because they knew that their mother is going to die. The teachers also knew about their mother’s sickness. Two years later, their mother passed away. Their problem was who is going to pay for their school fees? Who is going to buy their uniform? And their elder sister would have to come back, stay with them and be their parent. They had to ask their aunts and uncles to come and stay with them, since there was no one to take care of them. The children lost their confidence in school, and their performance went down.”

Boitumelo, 9 years old: “I can’t go to school because he [my father] hasn’t paid my school fees for two years. Teachers at school say we cannot go to school without paying. My brother does not like being at home because of my father. We haven’t come to this forum [National Children’s Forum] for fun and games. We’re here to talk about our problems because we need help. Right now we get help from our friend’s mother. But she doesn’t cope. She’s got her own children.”



6.2 CONCLUSION

The children’s experiences highlight the impact on children of living with (and often caring for) a dying mother. The death of a mother can have tragic consequences for children, including increased vulnerability to physical and sexual abuse, reduced opportunities for education and poor access to services. Some suggested interventions that emerged from discussions at the forum included the following:

- Support groups are urgently needed for children who have been orphaned and for children whose parents are dying. These support groups could be run through local churches, NGOs, clinics, schools or hospitals.
- Health care providers, caring for dying adults, should be encouraged to identify children who are at risk of being orphaned and to refer them to the appropriate authorities / services so that they may be provided with the necessary support.
- Parents should be encouraged to plan for their children’s future, to write a will and to involve the children (where appropriate) in this process. Organisations running programmes such as the ‘memory box projects’ should be supported and encouraged.