

# 08 HOW TO HELP PEOPLE INFECTED & AFFECTED BY HIV/AIDS IN THE SCHOOL CONTEXT

## 1) Ensure that students & teachers infected & affected by HIV/AIDS stay at school

Students and teachers affected by HIV/AIDS face many challenges in their personal lives that may lead them to decide to abandon school. One of the aspects that can cause this is misunderstanding and fear among the community in which they live, which often leads to stigma and discrimination.

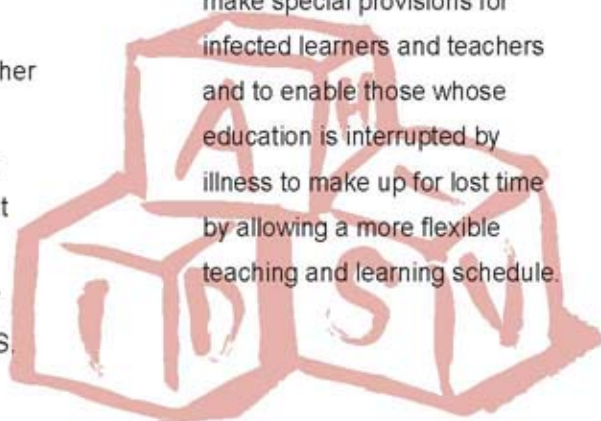
It is important that schools are aware of the potential impact of AIDS and related stigma and discrimination on people affected by HIV/AIDS, and that they take action to prevent this from happening. Teachers and students affected by HIV/AIDS have the same rights to education and employment as other people, and people infected and affected by HIV/AIDS need to be assured that they are not denied basic human rights. A first step in this direction is developing policies and guidelines for the protection of people living with HIV/AIDS, which should include broad action in making all school administrators aware of this issue.

It is imperative to work with community groups, NGOs, and other Ministries (especially the Ministry or Department of Social Welfare) to keep students and teachers at school if they have become affected by HIV/AIDS. Schools can play an important role in setting an example for the community by promoting understanding, compassion, empathy, and non-discriminatory attitudes towards people infected with or affected by HIV/AIDS.

## 2) Provide for those who are infected

People infected or affected by HIV/AIDS have specific needs for psychosocial support (counselling), but also specific medical needs. The education system must learn to care about, and take responsibility in addressing, these needs. For example, by having in place systems for referral to social welfare and health service providers.

In terms of policy and guideline development, there is a need to make special provisions for infected learners and teachers and to enable those whose education is interrupted by illness to make up for lost time by allowing a more flexible teaching and learning schedule.



- Keep infected students and teachers at school
- Care and provide for those who are infected and affected
- Avoid stigma and discrimination

### 3) Deal with trauma and other AIDS-related issues

The learning capacities of young people affected by HIV/AIDS, including AIDS orphans, may be severely impaired by their sense of personal loss or their uncertain status in households of relatives or friends who may have taken over their care and support. The existing curriculum may become irrelevant to their current situation of trauma, distress and loss. It is important that schools are assisted in developing in-class activities addressing these issues in an atmosphere of support, compassion and understanding – not of fear, moral judgment and rejection.

On an individual level, teachers and peers can play important roles in counselling or referring students affected by HIV/AIDS to help them deal with grief, stigma, and other stresses that arise from HIV/AIDS in their families. Teachers need to be prepared for this important responsibility by providing them with adequate training – or providing them with information on where to refer students and their families for assistance. At the same time, teachers themselves will be dealing with loss of family and friends and thus may need counselling.

### 4) Reduce stigma & discrimination

HIV/AIDS affects learners through the trauma, silence, prejudice, and discrimination frequently associated with it. This experience may cause some young people to discontinue their education while others may drop out of school because they do not feel able to learn or to be as attentive as before. Education can provide information about people living with HIV/AIDS and create supportive and understanding attitudes towards them, thus reducing stigma and discrimination in the community and helping people affected by HIV/AIDS deal with it.

#### Examples of AIDS-related fears and stigma

**"I don't want to get tested – what will my friends say if they find out I am infected?"**

**"I'm not surprised he is sick now – after all he is gay."**

**"Why would I hire someone who I know is HIV positive? I will certainly not invest in someone who may fall sick anytime. An HIV positive employee is simply not attractive for us."**

**"I wanted to talk to people but I was afraid that they would feel disgusted by my appearance."**

**"We had to close our family restaurant because nobody wanted to come and eat there anymore since people started talking about my son having AIDS."**

**"I was forced out of high-school because the community was afraid of me."**

**"I'm not scared of the disease - I'm scared of how people are going to treat me if they find out that I have AIDS."**

**"Nobody will come near me, have lunch with me, nobody wants to talk to me after school since they found out that my mother is sick."**

**"We didn't dare to feed her anymore, we were scared of coming close to her - so she died."**

Stigma derives from the association of HIV/AIDS with sex, disease and death, and with behaviours that may be illegal, forbidden, or taboo, such as pre- and extramarital sex, sex work, sex between men, and injecting drug use. Stigma builds upon, and reinforces, existing prejudices.