

Can HIV counsellors be supported to attain better outcomes for their child clients and their caregivers? The case of *Stepping Stones with Children*.



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Background

Children affected by HIV and their caregivers face many physical, psycho-social and material challenges, which can lead to poor health outcomes. Salamander Trust and PASADA developed transformative participatory workshop materials¹, to enable children aged 5-8 and 9-14, and their caregivers, to realise and build on the children's strengths, and create happier, healthier and safer ways of being. We also developed a parallel guide² to counselling children affected by or living with HIV and their caregivers, to be used in conjunction with the main programme. We then used it to train PASADA's counsellors, to improve their effectiveness.

Description

The materials were developed and tested during 2012-14 in Tanzanian coastal regions. Community workshops and counsellor training then took place during 2015, led by Kimara Peer Educators. 185 people participated in the community workshops, comprising 23.8% children aged 5-8, 28.6% aged 9-14, and 47.6% caregivers. 56.7% of the children and 78.4% of the caregivers were female. 88.7% of the children were clients of PASADA living with HIV. 80.6% of the 31 counsellors trained were female.

"I used to believe that children should not be told some things, I came to realise that hiding things would make situation worse as they will learn about these things from other people and often in a wrong way."

A counsellor



In this game the children withstand the storms of life by supporting each other and bending in the wind

"I found it very hard to treat children who were not aware of their HIV status. It was difficult to make treatment and follow up plans. The increased disclosure has tremendously improved [the] child management plan."

Dr. Henry Mwizanduru,
Head Pediatric Unit,
PASADA



Children aged 5 – 8 years during a workshop

STEPPING STONES

WITH CHILDREN
COUNSELLING GUIDE



Jovin F. Riziki
and Sue Holden

Responses from 13 counsellors, trained in counselling children, who had child clients who took part in the *Stepping Stones with Children* workshops.

Responses ordered from highest to lowest percentages.

What positive effects have you observed among the children who attended the workshops and their caregivers?

Better adherence to treatment	100%
Better relationship between child and caregiver	92%
Benefits for children from knowing their HIV status	92%
Better adherence at our clinic (coming for appointments)	92%
Better relationship between me and the child or caregiver	77%
Coming to PASADA's support clubs for children living with HIV	77%
More willingness to talk openly	69%
More knowledgeable about HIV and living well	62%
Other	62%
Less need for appointments at our clinic	8%
No positive effects	0%

What negative effects have you observed among the children who attended the workshops and their caregivers?

No negative effects	84%
Reacting negatively to finding out their HIV status	8%
Less willingness to talk openly	8%
Worse attendance at our clinic (not coming for appointments)	0%
Worse adherence to treatment	0%
Other	0%

Lessons Learned

Working with children and their caregivers and with the counsellors produced beneficial synergies:

- Caregivers and counsellors learned the importance of and skills for listening to children and involving them in decision-making, and children became better at expressing their thoughts and feelings to others, including to their counsellors. This led to improved relationships between family members and with the counsellors (see table).
- Caregivers and children learned about managing living with HIV, leading to greater willingness among caregivers to share their child's sero-status with them, while counsellors improved their skills in supporting decision-making around 'disclosure', and supporting caregivers and child clients in that process. The proportion of children knowing their status increased from 27% to 93%.
- Greater understanding of HIV and increased attendance at counselling sessions linked to improved adherence to HIV treatment and statistically significant clinical outcomes³.
- All parties learned about puberty, sexuality and sexual abuse, and grief, and became less inhibited about discussing sexual matters and death.

"Before the training I was afraid of talking with children about sensitive issues such as HIV and sex. After the training the fear is gone; I am more competent and at home in handling child issues. I now love to work with children."

A counsellor



Children drawing their trees of life and support

"Parents have reported that school attendance has improved as the result of improved health condition of many children due to increased adherence."

A counsellor

Conclusions

Working only with child clients or their caregivers or HIV counsellors would likely be beneficial, but working with all parties produces important positive synergies that support and compound the outcomes.

¹ Gordon G, Chiziza N, et al. (2015) *Stepping Stones with Children: A transformative training for children affected by HIV and their caregivers*. Rugby: Practical Action Publishing.

² Riziki JF and Holden S (2015) *Stepping Stones with Children: Counselling Guide*. Available at <http://steppingstonesfeedback.org/resources/stepping-stones-children/>.

³ Holden S, Gordon-Dseagu VLZ, et al. (2018) *Building resilience to adverse childhood experiences: an assessment of the effects of the Stepping Stones with Children training programme on Tanzanian children affected by HIV and their caregivers*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0017896918787217>.