# LOSING a Mother



### 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.

#### Mduduzi, 12 years old, writes about his experiences:

**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."

Us fittewhen my mether pot 1483 steress I can't actually pamember the date and all the years that she was slick 411 but what I remember was what she get whits stoness at the lear of 1998 and she had all these poins and when I adved he whole was wrong with her she dident wont me to feel all the pain and outfor because I was alluby owned about her and sometimes she dident even gollo work and when I asked her why she didn't go to work she hald me to stop worr ing and got to school and then I got so warried that I called my good grandmather and had her that something uss wrong with my mother and my good mather colled me but what is wrong with your mother I sid I don't know because my mother did. ert work us tell me and I was as fed up because my father alluagus had a fight with my mother and he said he desent want her anymore in his house but that was my mothers have and he was alloways beaking my mather and she always agrice to my provid mother cryling that my father had boblen her and the woodd dways and the policemen and the policemen would arrest my father and he would ory and day he will neverever do what again the may mether and my mether would feel ashomed for him and ball him and and my faither would do it appending appending any mather and I was seen along of my fisher because he allways sond me as bright at about 10:0000k and well me so go and buy him sipposets and he always tooles me ap when somewhing got best in the house and well me that I hook It and no body Else can have any kning in the nonse many Eacefit me and when he bodied my mother I always told with to stop it and he alkages told My mothe that she must swork me monnors to stop getting in their problems because they are take their own problems and I now the muterat talk to APM like that and I Ron oway from him and I was skared that my mother would dre at any moment so I badd has to come and show with me and my grand methor and alot of people knows my grand mother so this other lody edd me to make my mother by the ST PRANO'S came centere so my mother got been and belier so now. I know what my mother is I she 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."

**L** 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 skeed becous My MOM was sleaping on a bad everytime When it is Juneng We go to School in break Ickome back two see My MOM and I Found him Socaming in bod and I see the neases cleaning wand Wash. him Hestekant wash Here Self and Hi Kant World I go back two School I was World about him WenWhen I write at School Ithink about him but Itell My Self that I will not for get him and wen I come back to School He was not at Home She was Horspetal and the next day # My Friends tell me that My Mom Hes got AIDS and I gow AHOME I wash My clouthe and at night My brother Said two me dont wary it Will be oright and the Next day My Mother phone and Said you must come to visite Me and Myvancle at Horspell they distherge him and she was better I was hoppy and at the Marning I go to School and at School Iplay. With My Friends they aske Me with My MOM and I Said She is well I gowback at home and she was sick again He gow back to Hospitall they Said Shi will be Well but She dident ander she passidoway and Ithink that I'm lorst

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.



**Thabang, 13 years old (Boitumelo's brother):** "My father stopped loving us after our mother passed away. He used to make us sleep under the tree. He never used to buy us food. He only paid school fees when he wanted to. At school they want money for so many things, like raffles and funerals. We don't want to go back home again. My father fights us when he is drunk."

**Linda, 12 years old:** "I live with my Grandmother, father and 3 brothers. I look after my brothers and sometimes I cook. But I don't make nice food. My little brother is dead. He was hungry. My mother is dead and my father beats me."

The following transcript of a taped conversation between children (9 to 14 years) provides some insight into their perceptions of the impact on children of losing a mother to AIDS.

- **Boitumelo:** "When the mother dies, the children struggle. They begin to suffer. When they grow up they don't become teachers, nurses, or doctors. They just become dead men walking on the streets."
- Mfana: "Because the mother is dead the child does not have shoes, trousers and other clothes."

**C** Nthabiseng, 16 years old: This is the envelope that gives me strength. This envelope encourages me to do the right thing and to have power. Inside this envelope there is a letter, a ring and a will from my mother. She has passed away because of HIV/AIDS. When I look at it I feel like I am with her. She said 'vou can see that I am going to 'clocksa' [die] - please behave and take care of your vounger sister. Keep on working hard if you want a good life. Stop doing things that are going to put your life in danger'. I used to do bad things before my mother passed away. Always when I think about her message I get the power and stop doing crime. I am a changed person because of that letter. I feel like I can jump and touch the clouds. I now listen to other people and I respect them because of that message. People can't believe that I am such a new person.

Tsakane:	"She does not have food. Her relatives
	do not want the child."
Lefa:	"Sometimes the child does not even have
	that family. Also the child does not go to
	school and his family does not take him to
	school."
Karabo:	"Because the mother is dead."
Tebogo:	"Because the mother who was taking care
	of her is no longer alive."

I loved my mother very much and I was always there for her and I will always think about her.



#### **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'.

## 6.2 Conclusion

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 aunties 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."



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.