

THE BENEFITS OF PEER MONTORING FOR MOTHERS AND BABIES AFFECTED BY HIV

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Background

Mainstream childcare systems can present challenges to mothers who are either HIV positive or who have babies who are HIV positive. The possibility of discrimination and stigma resulting in social isolation, with the increased risk of anxiety and/or depression, presents unique challenges for mothers who are often facing already complex issues.

The purpose of this program is to create a safe space where mothers can talk openly and freely with each other and be able to ask questions and receive education and support in a non-judgemental, supportive environment.

It was instigated by a member of the Self Help And Personal Empowerment (SHAPE) team working with one of our female mentors who is HIV positive and has a baby. The idea grew out of a conversation where it became obvious that there was a need for support for mothers and babies who are affected by HIV.

Approach

Regular meet-ups among mothers and their babies, initially supervised by a member of the Western Australian AIDS Council (WAAC), with the potential to move the group towards autonomous meet ups.

- The group has been set up using the casual drop-in model to remove any anxiety or potential pressure that may hinder the participation of any members.
- Regular feedback from all members of the group via anonymous monthly surveys and verbal discussions with a member of WAAC.
- The use of the Most Significant Change testimonial and feedback model and anecdotal evidence to gauge the impact of the program.
- Issues of disclosure and discretion have been addressed with communication among members adhering to measures that have been discussed and mutually agreed upon.



Outcomes and Impact

The Mother To Mother (M2M) mentoring and education program in South Africa has had great success in creating life long bonds, friendships and a sense of community and as a result has been influential in bringing the mother to child transmission rate down to 1.4%.

M2M programs have been rolled out to many African countries including Ethiopian Mothers' Support Group (MSG), which incorporate mentoring programs and have been highly successful. There are numerous studies that indicate a positive correlation between disclosure and support. Creating a sense of community and belonging via peer support has the potential to counter experiences of depression, anxiety and substance abuse as a result of isolation.

Though this program is only new the evidence so far is very encouraging with strong evidence in favour of a positive outcome for all members involved.

Innovation and Significance

There are similar mentoring programs set up in Africa and South America, but this is the first of its kind in Australia. Mothers living with HIV in Australia still face discrimination within the community. An opportunity to create a safe environment where experiences and education can be shared has a potentially great psychosocial impact. Though this program is still in its infancy, anecdotal evidence is already strongly demonstrating the positive impacts. Mothers are reporting strong feelings of relief and joy at being able to share their experiences and hear those of other mothers for the first time. This is creating a sense of hope, validation and support; the foundations of a strong community.

Disclosure of interest statement:
The Western Australian Aids Council is a not-for-profit organisation and receives governmental and private funding. No pharmaceutical grants were received in the development of this study.

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