

## Psychosocial Support: Discovering and Utilizing Sound Practices

Sound practices are essentially "what works best in a particular context." They are planning or operational practices or sets of actions that are used to demonstrate and analyze what works (or what does not work) and why. Sound practices make a difference; they have a sustainable effect; and they serve as a model for adapting initiatives elsewhere. The sound practices outlined in this document are culled from the experiences of CRS Zimbabwe's Support to Replicable, Innovative, Village/Community-Level Efforts to support children affected by AIDS (STRIVE) Program over the past two years of program implementation.



### Background

AIDS has claimed almost 20 million lives worldwide and an estimated 40 million people are currently living with the illness. The disease has had a particularly devastating impact on children. By 2001, 12% of sub-Saharan African children were orphans. This number represents 34 million orphaned children, of whom 11 million were orphaned as a result of AIDS. By 2010, the number of AIDS orphans is projected to grow to 20 million (*Children on the Brink*, 2002).

Orphans and other children who have been affected by AIDS are at risk of suffering severe psychological damage. Heightened food insecurity, withdrawal from school, stigmatization, and the trauma of watching parents and other families members grow ill and die, all create tremendous obstacles to the healthy mental development of children.

The psychosocial effects of AIDS are far less tangible than material problems such as malnutrition or absence from school. Consequently, psychosocial difficulties are far less likely to be recognized, much less addressed, by organizations providing services to orphans and vulnerable children.

However, if children's developmental needs are not fulfilled, the effectiveness of other interventions targeting them may be decreased and they may develop severe behavioral or psychological problems that will make it extremely difficult for them to function in society as adults.

Psychosocial support initiatives are designed to respond to this threat by providing emotional support to orphans, vulnerable children, and their caregivers.

### Psychosocial Support Interventions

Life skills camps are a "classic" example of psychosocial support interventions. A life skills camp gathers orphans and vulnerable children of similar ages at a venue away

from their home community. The children then participate in activities and team building exercises that help them to develop their problem solving and goal setting skills, teamwork, confidence, risk assessment abilities, trust in others, conflict resolution, capacity to face challenges, etc.

Though life skills camps have proven to be an extremely effective means of helping to encourage healthy psychosocial development in children, their practicality is hampered by the high cost of transporting, housing, feeding, and conducting activities with significant numbers of children. Additionally, because the camps are held outside of the children's home communities, it has been observed that children sometimes have difficulty applying the lessons learned during camp to their everyday lives.

### Sound Practices in Psychosocial Support

Community camps are an example of a sound practice because they incorporate the advantages of life skills camps while overcoming some of their challenges. In essence, community camps are life skills camps that are



held with children from one community, within that community. By holding camps locally, the cost of transport, accommodation, and meals is greatly reduced. Logistically, local camps are much easier to plan and carry out than traditional life skills camps. Local camps also make it possible for members of the community to make direct contributions. Most importantly, the fact that camps are held within a familiar environment, with the local children and the participation of respected local leaders, makes it easier for children to transfer the lessons learned during camp to their daily lives.

Kids Clubs are another example of a sound practice that overcomes some of the challenges of more traditional interventions. The term Kids Club covers a broad spectrum of children's organizations. Kids Clubs may be highly structured and organized, or they may be more informal. They may be directed by an adult, or they may be run by the children themselves with minimal direct adult supervision. Kids Clubs may be dedicated to one type of activity, such as agricultural training, or may include a wide variety of activities including drama, poetry, life skills training, athletics, debate, study groups, etc. The unifying characteristic of Kids Clubs is that they provide a safe environment for children to meet and interact with each other, which is an essential aspect of psychosocial support.

Kids Clubs are an ideal activity for organizations that want to provide more regular psychosocial support than camps allow, or for organizations that do not have the resources to conduct life skills camps. Additionally, Kids Clubs, like community camps, offer a way to stimulate participation by teachers, community leaders, and volunteers.