

VITAL BACKGROUND NOTES ON DLALANATHI / UTHANDO PARTNERSHIP

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These notes give psycho-social background integral to the work of Uthando and of our relationship with **dlalanathi**.

Poverty, loss, and loss of family networks related to HIV and other stressors have put families under huge strain. Many children are not raised by their biological parents. In many cases caregivers do their best in terms of provision of basic needs and survival. However, to build resilience we need consistent, positive, warm, caring relationships.

From research we know: (Richter,

1. Children's psychosocial needs (even in times of trauma) are best met by their families, schools and communities.
2. Long-term investments in strengthening family support are more sustainable than crisis-driven interventions to help individual children.
3. Early caregiver-child interactions play a profound role in emotional adjustment, nutrition, cognitive development, language acquisition and self-regulation.
4. A stable and emotionally supportive family life has been associated with:
 - Higher rates of school attendance
 - Better school performance
 - Greater resilience to adversity
 - Higher self esteem.
5. Reduction of Risky behaviour (such as early onset of intercourse, number of sexual partners) is directly related to level of positive connectivity between parent and child (Miller, 2002)

Therefore dlalanathi and uthando have focused on prioritizing strengthening everyday systems of care for children in the family. We need to partner with parents/caregivers to support their children's healthy development.

We recognize to strengthen emotional connection; people need an experience of emotional connection themselves. They need an experience of empathy for a child. They need a positive conception of children- one which recognizes children's emotional needs as well as survival needs.

Uthando and dlalanathi have formed a partnership, which uses doll-making processes and dolls to enable a development of this empathic holding for children who face difficult truths.

Two parts to work:

- 1) Doll making workshops, linked to family support workshops. Doll making connection to self, child within and then the children they care for, as way to

initiate conversations around how to care for children such as positive affirmation, sharing time together, showing interest in a child's life and setting positive limits.

- 2) Dolls are made by women in Australia and sent to be used in South Africa, as comfort dolls. This enables children to have a soft beautiful doll that they can talk to, comfort and express some of their turmoil. Doll families are also sent to support conversations about families.

Some input on play, story-telling, communication and parenting through difficult times. The process strengthens the each party and the adult child relationship and places the 'power' of connecting within reach of both.

dlalanathi offers a Family Support Programme in which we work in communities with Caregiver Support Groups for 9 weeks. Caregivers are given opportunities to explore particular themes using creative processes and then given activities to use at home in weekly sessions with their children. Each week they return and reflect together on their experience with the child, their learning and what has been the most significant change they see. Our train-the-trainer in family support enabling others to integrate this process into their direct work.

The partnership also sets up relationship and networks of care across continent that is quite inspiring.

Ideas/ notes:

- The doll making offers an invitation for women, men, artists, mothers etc to make a personal and individual contribution on a personal and person to person connection (notes on the dolls, an extra set of clothes, a koala bear in the pocket);
- The process of making the dolls in Australia allows individuals to reflect on the impact in Africa of poverty, war, HIV and AIDS, loss in a powerful way;
- The process gives something to the giver and the receiver;
- It has set up significant connections, transformations of people in connecting across countries and socio economic divides way beyond the physical exchange;
- This puts the possibility of 'making a contribution' within reach – I am important because I made this doll – my skills, my gifts make a difference

That quote about Gogos in Australia are much the same as Gogos in Australia.

What the doll does.....

Maybe something about the role of the doll, play, the care and relationship communicating to the child, I am important, I matter, someone cares, I am significant, I am worthy of care.

What the doll does for the child is often the same as what the doll making (and connecting play with their children) does for the carer – re-unites us with our own beauty, gifts, significance, love and joy even in difficult circumstances with the same messages I can make a difference in my child's life because I am important to them.

What the doll does for the child and the family can be the same as what it does for the 'doll maker' in Australia/ other places – the doll values the deep personal contributions of love and gifts it invites the maker to get involved in a personal way and reminds us 'I matter. I make a difference, my contribution to the world is important'.