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By the end of 2005, South Africa had more adults and children (5.3million) living with HIV/AIDS than any other country in the world. The prevalence rises to nearly 40% among pregnant women attending public antenatal services in the worst affected areas. **The most recent estimates are that 14.4% of all children 2-18 years of age have lost one or both parents.**(HSRC March 2008).

It is estimated that fewer than 15% of households supporting children orphaned or made vulnerable by HIV and AIDS are reached by either community-based or public sector support programmes (UN General 2006).

### **Emotional impact of loss on children**

Research shows that in response to loss, children will experience intense anger, sadness, helplessness, and depression. Young children (aged 4-14 years) battling to cope with loss often exhibit behaviours that are not identified as grief related. A child may become aggressive or withdrawn, both of which may be labelled as problematic behaviour. Instead of eliciting the necessary support, therefore, the child becomes isolated as support is withdrawn in response to 'negative' behaviour.

The energy it takes a child to avoid or ignore or manage powerful difficult emotions associated with grief also can also have a marked effect on the child's concentration, energy levels and participation at school. Thus the grief response can produce behaviours that result in a child being left behind from a learning and developmental perspective. Recent findings presented at the 2008 International AIDS Conference also emphasized the importance of helping children cope with emotional challenges as this builds healthy emotional intelligence pathways in the brain.

### **Why Play?**

REPSSI (Regional Psycho- Social Support Initiative) argues that, the most powerful and important form of psycho-social support is everyday care and support provided by families, households, friends, teachers and community members....(and)....many severely affected children are less likely to develop serious symptoms that require specialised PSS – if they are given family-based and community based care and support and helped to maintain or resume a sense of normality in their lives (From REPSSI publication 2007 PSS for young children in the context of HIV and Aids). Mainstreaming PSS means making sure that in every part of the child's life (at home, in the classroom, on the play ground, in the street, at a soup kitchen, at a kids club etc) the child feels socially and emotionally supported .....(it asks) ..... that we look at every aspect of an individuals life through PSS-tinted glasses (From REPSSI publication Memory Work Manual 2007).

Play offers a unique space for connection, communication, exchange and support that strengthens both children and adults within a household. Basic awareness of how to begin conversations with children about death and loss, and use play and listening to support children and their families has a significant effect on children's ability to cope as they adjust to the challenges of living without their parents. Play and communication also allows for relationships between children and their caregivers to be strengthened, which is critical for the longer-term development and growth of a child facing loss of one or both parents. Helping the family help their children strengthens the adults as well.

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## **Reach & Response**

Given the great numbers of children and families we have to work with strategically creative ways of increasing reach. At present there are not enough professional people able to respond to this urgent and critical need. Our vision for all of our programmes is to strengthen the work of others to be able to respond to the devastating emotional impact of loss on children they serve.

Psycho social support around bereavement needs to be embedded in other forms of support (material needs, placement needs, food security etc) to be truly effective. Similarly material support on its own is not enough for healthy development and adjustment of families affected by death and loss. Hence we work in partnership with Community Based Organisations (CBOs) and Non governmental Organisations (NPOs and NGO's) and other stakeholders where our capacity building optimally complements their material support to families.

## **What we do at RobS**

We are primarily a capacity building organization, although we also do direct work with children and families as a way of teaching in practice. By strengthening partner organizations, community volunteers, churches, teachers in school, caring adults in the children's lives already working within communities we build on what exists, thereby optimizing use of available resources.

We train others to run, structured play programs for children and families affected by death and loss. The training relies on using the play and listening skills to explore your own experiences of loss, and on using skills in practice with children (and/or families). The combination of the participants' experience, using skills and reflection on the learning in practice, facilitates the effective transfer of learning. As one participant expressed it, 'the skills are part of how I relate to children now, I don't have to go and read a book before I engage with children I know where to start.'

## **Our intention and experience**

Our desire is to see nurturing relationships between adults and children in communities affected by death and loss in the context of HIV and Aids. We have 8 years experience as a learning organisation working in communities and training formal and informal organisations. To date we have achieved our goal defined above others through our 2 main projects:

- Community Level Capacity Building – In this project we work intensely in a specific geographic area for a period of 2 years to strengthen and build the community's response to the emotional needs of bereaved children. Within the 2 year period RobS provides therapeutic counselling for bereaved children through play; provides therapeutic support to families and adults in these children's lives through play; and trains and mentors community members who have a passion for children to meet the emotional needs of bereaved children through play. We also try to assist community members to establish links with organisations, potential partners and government departments who can respond with material support so that programmes can be sustained long term. We work in 4 communities per year.
- Strategic Partner Organisation Capacity Building – In this project we scale up impact by training and mentoring partner organisations to provide direct support to bereaved children and families through play and in turn to be able to train others to do the same. Last year alone we trained 20 partner organizations who reported to use how they reached out to 1623 children within the year. A key strength of our approach in each of the projects is that we train and support implementation of the skills learned. Progress in training is directly linked to using the skills in practice, this helps us ensure as far as possible the quality of services provided by others and helps to increase our reach..

This work fits into our basket of values in practice and the key principles of invitation, choice and care. We invite people to participate and they choose to do so, this practice of choice and respecting choice of

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participation is vital at all levels of work. Without it the work does not begin, it forms the basis from which participants can create similarly safe and open spaces for families and children.

**The impact of these programs:**

The feedback we have had consistently from children and their caregivers (both those we work with directly and those supported through our partners) is that this intervention makes a significant difference in their lives. It has been demonstrated and reported (through independent focus groups) to improve relationships between caregivers and the children in their care, and improve the child’s coping. Children have expressed the value and benefit to themselves personally and we have observed and reported significant changes in behaviour as a direct result of participation in the program. This month in a reflection a 7 year old boy drew a picture of the river of life and told us that ‘Being in the group has help me learn to respect myself’.

The program has also changed individuals in organizations who have made changes around how they work with children, how they care for staff, how they structure work with children and families, and how they provide support to others. A pastor trained in Foundation Play Skills told us, ‘I visit homes all the time to prepare for conducting funerals and I visit the family thereafter to comfort them and pray. I see the children playing and I have only ever asked them to direct me to the adults. I would like to change that thanks for showing me how’.

**The team supported by Uthando**

The training managers bring play skills, communication and listening to life in facilitating a deep reflection within the training for each individual, and accompany the trainees on a process through which they bring the same skills and listening to life for children and families. They create the safe spaces for people to connect with themselves and each other and model how to do the same for children. The training is not about skills it is about learning and change. Change happens in the way adults see and respond to children and so new possibilities are born. The team who make this happen below:

<b>Position</b>	<b>Qualifications/ Experience</b>
Program Director - Robyn Hemmens	<p><b>Qualifications</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 2 year Diploma in Child and Youth Work</li> </ul> <p><b>Experience</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 18 years work experience with Youth for Christ in KZN (Director of Homeless Children) and 3 years as Regional Director.</li> <li>• 1.5 years work with RobS as Operations Director</li> </ul>
Training Manager - Sibongile Mkhize	<p><b>Qualifications</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• B. Admin, UNISA</li> <li>• B.Admin (Honours), UNISA</li> <li>• Project Management Diploma, Damelin</li> <li>• Master of Arts (Counselling Psychology) - Current</li> </ul> <p><b>Experience:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 10 years with Standard Bank (various departments)</li> <li>• 10 years with Durban Solid Waste (various positions including Education Officer and Education Manager)</li> <li>• 4 years work with Open Door Crisis Centre as a Lay Counsellor</li> <li>• 1 year as an intern counselling psychologist at University of KZN Westville Student Counselling Centre</li> </ul>

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Been with RobS since January 2008</li> </ul>
<p>Training Manager - Pinky Majola</p>	<p><b>Qualifications</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bachelor of Social Science</li> <li>• Honours in Psychology</li> <li>• Currently completing Masters' Degree in Psychology</li> </ul> <p><b>Experience:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Worked as an Intern in 2007</li> <li>• Been with RobS since January 2008</li> </ul>