

A New Lease on Life through UNICEF's Assistance for Children Affected by HIV/AIDS

By Tezeta Tulloch

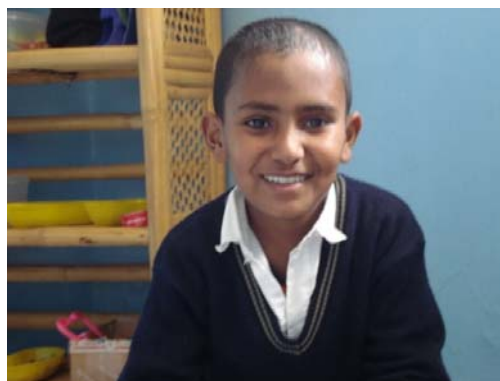
Behailu Tefear likes math. He likes going to school, playing with friends and charming strangers. And he likes – no, *loves* – football. When asked to describe a typical day, he starts, as any ten-year-old would, at the beginning:

“First I wake up. After I wash my face, I put on my uniform. Then I eat breakfast and go to school. When I get to school....”

Behailu delivers his recitation in rapid English, unusual for an Ethiopian fifth grader.

By any measure, Behailu is an unusual boy—and, until three months ago, a very different boy than he appears today.

Three years ago, Behailu's father died from AIDS-related causes. Shortly afterward, to help alleviate the economic stress his mother now faced, alone, his younger sister was sent to live with relatives.



It was all too much. Then seven, Behailu became withdrawn and incommunicative. He remained this way until his mother enrolled him in a course of play therapy at Hope for Children, a local UNICEF-supported nongovernmental organization working with children and families whose lives have been affected by HIV/AIDS.

“He didn't want to interact with others, says his mother, Lemlem Gebremariam, who is also HIV positive. “And his school performance got weaker and weaker. That's why I brought him to the programme.”

Talking through Play

As he painstakingly describes his average day, Behailu's impossibly big eyes dart around the room that by now has become as familiar as his own classroom. He is sitting beside his mother in one of three rooms dedicated to play therapy at the Kiera branch of Hope for Children, in Addis Ababa. An assortment of toys—dolls, drums, rattles—fills two corners of the neat, sunlit room. The sky blue walls lend an air of calm to the space.

For six weeks in this very room, Behailu attended weekly one-on-one play therapy sessions with Zenaye Aklilou, whose training in the method was facilitated by UNICEF.

“In the first and second sessions he was very sad,” said Aklilou. “By the third he had begun to relax. He had seen his mother taking medicine and was afraid she too would die. He began asking me questions like ‘How long will my mom live?’ This type of reflection is good in play therapy, because the child is releasing his inner feelings.

“After six weeks, Behailu showed so much improvement that he was able to stop going for therapy. His school grades began to improve, and he began socializing again with other children.”

Through the medium of play, traumatized children are able to come to terms with their most painful experiences. In a typical session, the therapist will observe and mirror the child’s behavior. If a child shakes a rattle in anger, for example, the therapist will do the same.

“What he feels, he shows,” said Tizita Sadecha, a therapy supervisor at Hope for Children. “I do what he does. It is a way of letting the child know you understand his feelings.”

Building a Childhood for Children

In Ethiopia, more than one million children are without a parent because of HIV/AIDS. Some 300,000 have lost both parents to the disease. Surviving children are often left without adequate social, physical or emotional support. Many are ostracized by peers and other community members.

Hope for Children offers a range of essential services to promote the wellbeing of HIV/AIDS-affected children and to help sustain the communities in which they live. These include psychosocial support, such as grief counseling and play therapy; HIV education and outreach activities; behavior change programming; community sensitization; and vocational training for orphans and their caregivers. Group homes provide a structured family environment for children who have lost both parents to the pandemic.

Although no longer enrolled in play therapy, Behailu and his mother continue to benefit from Hope for Children’s services. Behailu has made new friends through Hope’s Saturday Programme, where caregivers and children gather together to watch and participate in games, puppet shows, dancing and other entertainment.

Puppet shows are all very well, but for Behailu, football is still the only game in town. Small in size but big on ambition, he hopes to become a professional player one day.

UNICEF covers all expenses associated with Hope for Children’s play therapy programme. More widely, UNICEF works in partnership with the Ethiopian government, civil society and the private sector to protect and empower vulnerable children and adolescents.