UNICEF Unite for Children, Unite Against AIDS:
The Role of Parents – Keeping Children Safe from HIV

in conjunction with PETRONAS AIDS Awareness Day 2006

Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia – Thursday, 26 January 2006

REMARKS

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UNICEF Special Representative, Singapore & Brunei

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my pleasure to be with you this morning. On behalf of the United Nations Children's Fund, I would like to thank the management of PETRONAS for your initiative in organizing this HIV/AIDS Awareness Programme and taking the necessary steps to ensure the wellbeing of your employees and their families.

We have all heard and seen what HIV/AIDS is doing to children, their families and communities, and the systems that are meant to protect and provide them with services. This epidemic is increasingly undermining the hard won gains and progress in child survival in many of the highest impacted countries, and undermining our efforts in low prevalence countries like in Malaysia.

HIV/AIDS is an unprecedented attack on the lives and well-being of all our children. Not only is this virus robbing our children of their lives, it is also killing their mothers and fathers, depriving children of an education, healthcare and the chance to have a healthy future. As a result, our children are being left unprotected from abuse, exploitation and illness.

HIV/AIDS is increasingly a disease of the young and most vulnerable. Every minute of every day, one child under the age of 15 is infected with HIV, while one child dies of AIDS. Equally alarming is the fact that one young person between the age of 15 and 25 gets infected with HIV every 15 seconds. Of the 40.3 million people alive today with HIV infection, at least a third are young people under the age of 25. Children and young people in Malaysia are part of these tragic statistics.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Malaysia is home to the fifth fastest growing HIV/AIDS epidemic in the Asia Pacific region. The number of people reported to be infected with HIV in Malaysia has risen sharply since the early 1990s, reaching some 65,000 in 2004[1], with an average of 19 people reporting HIV-positive each day. Malaysia also has an estimated 25,000 children who are infected with HIV or affected by AIDS having already lost one or both parents to this virus.

[1] Ministry of Health Annual Report 2004

Growing Pains The Transition Years from Adolescence to Adulthood

For us to do right by our children and young people, we must first of all understand the special reasons as to why young people are especially vulnerable to HIV infection. One is that adolescence and youth are times of discovery, emerging feelings, exploration of new behaviours and relationships. It is a time when young people feel they need to test their boundaries to determine who they are and what they can do. Establishing healthy behavioural patterns during this time is therefore critical to keeping our young people safe and a lot easier than having to change risky behaviour later on.

Teenage years and the transition to adulthood is a very taxing period for both parents and youth. Since they are so vulnerable, youth are faced with peer pressures and influences. They go through physical, emotional and psychological changes which come along with a range of problems. Expectations are ñimposedò upon them and on their part, youth have a need for acceptance by family, peers and society. Advice sought is normally from friends, which more often than not, can lead them astray. Hence, appropriate guidance and communication are vital to assist our young to be able to make independent and correct decisions in life. Lack of supportive environments to practice safer behaviours and disturbingly low basic knowledge on HIV infection and transmission gives rise to this pandemic problem.

Helping Children and Young People Confront their Challenges

We can however confront these challenges, as UNICEF has learnt from our experiences around the world. There are many ways to help our children deal with the pains of growing up. Children and young people need safe spaces to meet and socialize with their peers. They need age-appropriate education as well as programmes that will build their skills and confidence to keep them safe from HIV infection. They need opportunities to talk about their problems with honesty and without fear of recrimination.

Providing young people with knowledge that is thorough and accurate and equipping them with skills to put knowledge into practice is the best way to fight against HIV/AIDS. How else can young people be expected to make careful and sound decisions that will impact their lives forever, and learn to respect the decisions and wishes of others if they do not possess the necessary information and skills?

While schools are one place for young people to get their education, parents also have their own roles to play in educating and empowering their children to make the right decisions. Some parents may fear that talking about HIV/AIDS will encourage their children to be sexually active or use drugs; to the contrary, when children and young people are well-informed and feel able to express themselves openly, they are in a better position to make sound decisions about issues that will affect their lives forever.

It is important that young people fully understand the implications of being sexually active, and take appropriate measures to protect themselves. Many of us may feel uncomfortable speaking openly about HIV/AIDS with our children. But, difficult though it may be at the time to talk about it, we know that they will always remember and appreciate having benefited from an open atmosphere at home, in which they were able to discuss such important issues when they were young. If they have had a good example set for them, our children will be more likely to be frank and open when they themselves are older.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Role of Parents in Keeping Children Safe from HIV

Our greatest hope for curbing the HIV/AIDS epidemic is to ensure that our children are well-informed – that they understand the causes and means of transmission of the virus and, better still, know how to prevent infection in the first place. Along with the responsibilities that fall on them, young people have the right to be equipped with the skills and knowledge that will enable them to behave in ways that reduce vulnerability to HIV infection – for themselves and for future generations.

Parents play a critical role in ensuring that young people are provided with the information they need to reduce their risk of acquiring HIV. First and foremost, it is essential that we, as parents, fully understand the issues around HIV/AIDS, so that we may share this information with our children, work with them to create a positive environment at home in which they feel comfortable expressing themselves and one that encourages them to make sound decisions and to treat others with respect.

Another critical factor in teaching young people about HIV/AIDS is to assist them to be clear about their values and to make choices consistent with these values. Their value-informed choices will be more durable than those made in contradiction to their value system. Some times, we as parents may want to bring our children's values and actions in line with our own. While our children may find our values at odds with that of their own generation's, they do care about what their parents think and they do want to try and understand what their parents believe. Discussions about values and how choices are made on the basis of values are an important part of talking to your children about AIDS. But before we start talking about values to our children, we must also try to understand our own values and stereotypes.

Above all, we must listen to our children. The less we talk as parents, the more we may learn from our children. Listen for the meaning behind the questions that they ask. You need to understand exactly what young people are concerned about before you can address their questions. Too often young people accuse adults of not listening, and too often they are correct. Listening to our young people includes watching out for non-verbal clues and asking for clarifications when we don't fully understand them. Really listening to our children is one way to show that we care. Listening is especially important when children ask questions, because understanding the meaning behind their questions, helps you know what your child's concerns are and where they come from.

Ladies and Gentlemen

Today more than ever, it is important for parents to be there for their children. As adults, we must also recognize that young people have a big role to play in the fight against AIDS. Too often, we make decisions about how to deal with AIDS and youth related issues without taking into account the experiences of young people. The time has come for us to change our own behaviours and to extend our young opportunities and platforms that will enable them to speak out honestly about their needs so that we may learn from one another.

To assist all of you, UNICEF has prepared a few fact sheets that will provide you with background information on how to talk to your kids about HIV/AIDS. These fact sheets will provide you with tips on how to get started on the subject of HIV/AIDS; how to assess risks in your children as well as an age chart to help you plan on the topic of discussion for children of different ages.

I am here today with my team from UNICEF Malaysia as part of our promise to uphold our obligations of the Global Campaign on Children and AIDS. **Unite for Children, Unite Against AIDS** underlines UNICEF's strongest commitment to fight the HIV/AIDS pandemic. The Campaign, launched globally in October 2005, will meet the needs of children by facilitating partnerships between governments, UN agencies, civil society, private sector, the media and most importantly young people themselves. Talking to parents and mobilizing their support is one part of this partnership.

On behalf of UNICEF, I invite all of you to help create a healthy Malaysia for the young people of today, the future generation and the leaders of tomorrow. Let us **Unite for children and Unite against AIDS**.

Thank you.