

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

## Media Workshop on Children and AIDS

*In conjunction with UNICEF Workshop for Reporters – ‘HIV and AIDS: Leaving no child behind’*  
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**WELCOME ADDRESS BY**

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### **Respected friends from the media**

Good morning, Selamat Pagi and a warm welcome to all. I wish to thank all of you for dedicating your time to attend this workshop.

I have always believed that members of the media are our friends and most important allies in our efforts to protect children’s rights – and there is no issue more significant right now than AIDS, which is one of the most critical Millennium Development Goals for Malaysia to achieve.

HIV and AIDS is an extremely difficult issue for everyone – certainly for those living with the condition, as well as the people in their lives – but also for members of the media who struggle to find the balance between objective reporting and coping with their own emotions about this issue.

The issue becomes even more emotionally-charged when we consider the children who are infected and affected by HIV.

In Malaysia:

- Close to 2,000 children below the age of 19 have tested HIV-positive.
- Beyond that, tens of thousands of children are living in homes shadowed with HIV, as a result of a family member’s infection.
- HIV is gaining a feminine face, with more women becoming infected through heterosexual transmission. Children will ultimately suffer because they become infected by their mothers and/or affected by AIDS.

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These children are the invisible faces of HIV and AIDS. Their plight is often forgotten in our lofty goal to develop policies and programs. Their rights are sadly neglected in the tangled web of morality that we have woven around the issue.

**Impact of AIDS on children**

There are tens of thousands of children in Malaysia who are growing up alone, growing up too fast or not growing up at all.

The biggest impact of the epidemic does not come from the disease, but from the stigma surrounding the condition.

Yes, AIDS is a serious medical condition, sometimes painful and debilitating, sometimes fatal. But we have allowed our fear of HIV and AIDS to poison our thoughts, to hurt people beyond what the disease can do to them.

Stigma can shroud a person with shame and cast the shadow of disgrace upon his/her family. Stigma can cause a person to be ostracised by friends and the community. Stigma can do all that, and more.

Stigma can cause a HIV-positive husband to be so afraid that he does not allow his wife to be tested. Stigma can cause a woman to feel so shamed by her condition that she will not go for treatment. Stigma can cause a child to be shunned by his/her teachers and schoolmates for being HIV-positive. Stigma can force children orphaned by AIDS to live on the streets because no one will care for them.

Our children do not deserve this. They have the right to be protected from HIV and AIDS, and from discrimination. They have the right to receive appropriate treatment, care and support if they are infected or affected by HIV. They have the right to make their suffering known to the world, so that the world will unite to protect them.

**Unite for Children, Unite Against AIDS**

But let's not reduce children to mere victims. They are also the future, the ones who hold the power to halt and reverse the spread of the HIV epidemic. With intervention, care and education, children are more likely to change their behaviour than adults.

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Three years ago, UNICEF launched a global campaign on children and AIDS, called '*Unite for Children, Unite Against AIDS*'. This campaign called for urgent action from everyone involved in the fight against AIDS, to strengthen the protective environment for children and ensure that the next generation of children is AIDS-free.

Parallel with UNICEF Malaysia's mission to protect children, this campaign focuses on four areas to stop HIV in its tracks: preventing primary infections, preventing mother-to-child-transmission, providing paediatric treatment, and providing protection, care and support to children affected by HIV.

By uniting against AIDS, we are calling for a grand alliance between all our partners, including the media, to meet the complex challenges posed by the epidemic. The media plays a unique role in this alliance, as you have the greatest power to end the stigma and discrimination surrounding HIV and AIDS.

You may not wield the medicines to treat HIV infection, or the money to develop better drugs. But it is not just medicines and money that heal. Words heal, too.

Your words, in particular, can transform the thoughts of thousands of people out there. Your pictures can reach into the hearts and minds of people who can then reach out to the next person. Your voices can command everyone into taking the right kind of action.

Over the course of this workshop, there is a lot that we can share with, and learn from, each other. By meeting people with HIV, their families, caregivers and doctors, you will gain a richer understanding of the epidemic and use their experiences to shape your reporting. Your stories can dispel misconceptions and prejudices about HIV and AIDS, and influence the attitudes, actions and policies of people at all levels.

Children are the most vulnerable and voiceless victims of the stigma and apathy associated with the epidemic. You, the media, can give them a voice. You can lift them up and out of the shadows of HIV.

Thank you.