Support for HIV Positive Mothers and Their Families

What is this research about?
This paper examines the lives and relatives of HIV positive mothers who require continual support in coping with their illness while caring for children. It examines the implications for current programs serving HIV positive mothers and suggests several strategies that could be further developed for better support.

How can you use this research?
**ACGWC - AIDS Committee of Guelph and Wellington County:** implementing support programs and drop-in clinics designed for HIV positive mothers and HIV positive mothers to be.

**School Boards:** implementing HIV/AIDS education so that children with HIV positive mothers (parents) can obtain information without fear of being stigmatized.

**Women’s Shelters:** making it known that HIV positive mothers in abusive relationships are welcome and will be protected and supported. Also provide contacts and locations for community support networks.

**Pregnancy Clinics:** providing information for expecting or new HIV positive mothers about how to take care of themselves during and after pregnancy.

**Day Care Centres:** providing information for HIV positive mothers about how to inform their child (ren) of their illness.

What you need to know:
Focus group participants said that there needs to be more opportunities to share their experiences, connect with other HIV positive mothers with similar circumstances and learn from each other about useful community resources. With support from HIV/AIDS service organizations and health care related agencies, developments can be made to improve the lives of HIV positive mothers regarding poverty, isolation, sexual health, stigmatization, discrimination, disclosure and in overcoming health care barriers.

More programs for support are needed and they need to be comprehensive, easily accessed and support the whole family with a focus on client-centred approaches and practical initiatives. HIV/AIDS service organizations should focus on helping HIV positive mothers with their medical problems and emotional issues in ways that allow mothers the option of concealing their physical and emotional health issues linked to their HIV status.
What did the researchers do?
Six mothers in two focus groups were asked open-ended probe questions to discuss their personal experiences regarding disclosing their illness and challenges of childcare. Questions were asked to understand the community support services they used and to gain a better sense of what they wanted from these services. Factors affecting mothers’ overall health, stigma and discrimination, cultural identity, barriers to health care and support, disclosure, parenting challenges and support program needs were the themes discussed.

What did the researchers find?
Many participants were classified as impoverished as their illness and side effects of medication disabled them from working. As a result they became financially dependent with limited access to transportation and subsequently healthy food. This led them to feel isolated from their community and placed them under emotional strain. Some participants also dealt with substance abuse which increased their obstacles to accessing appropriate medical care and support services. The experience of mothering, however, provided many of the women with an emotionally fulfilling life and provided them with a purpose and community connection. Many mothers worried about community members discovering their illness and to avoid stigmatizing their children they would not access health and support services. Women of colour feared that knowledge of their infection would create racism for the Black community for housing and employment. One participant feared deportation and losing her ability to sponsor family members to Canada. The continuous struggle of balancing their own health needs and well-being of their family was a strain on many of the women; one mother was emotionally burdened because her adolescent child was taking care of her. Disclosing their illness to their children was also an emotional and mental strain on the mothers and these factors greatly affected their decision about whether to disclose.

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