

## Case study: *HIV in the family – the effect on children*

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<sup>85</sup> Fewer than 1% of children born to someone living with HIV are now born HIV positive.

In all actions concerning children, the UNCRC requires that the best interests of the child are a primary consideration. In order to fulfil this requirement, it is essential that the needs of children are fully considered when developing policy and support systems and providing services to parents or carers. In many cases however, the needs of children go unnoticed and the best interests principle is unmet.

There have been many positive developments in recent years in connection with HIV. Effective medications mean that those diagnosed with the virus can live long healthy lives with a near normal life expectancy. Thanks to modern treatments, men and women living with HIV can also now have healthy HIV negative children.<sup>85</sup> Unfortunately though, some aspects of HIV haven't changed and stigma and discrimination continues. Manifesting itself in exclusion, verbal abuse and gossip, HIV stigma and discrimination affects not only those living with the virus but also their families.

Waverley Care take the needs of the children born to families affected by HIV seriously and have dedicated children's services. HIV stigma means children are often unable to be open about their parents' condition amongst their friends or within a school setting. Even though some may have good social networks, this need for secrecy is a burden that can leave them feeling different and isolated. They may also find it difficult to discuss and ask questions about HIV at home if their parent has not come to terms with their own diagnosis.

For some children, HIV is also just one of many issues they may be coping with as Kylie and Clare's story demonstrates:

*Kylie (14) and Clare (12) have been in and out of care throughout their young lives. Their mum, who is HIV positive, is a drug user, whose addiction has meant that although she loves her children she is often unable to meet their physical or emotional needs. Their father is also HIV positive and is now extremely unwell, spending lengthy periods of time in respite care and hospital. Kylie and Clare have been witnesses to many difficult, distressing and sometimes violent situations. Kylie also has the added responsibility of being a young carer, looking after her mum, her sister and Adam, their four year old brother.*

*The burden of keeping their parents' HIV status a secret sits alongside these issues. The children are unable to share their worries with school friends for fear of not being seen as 'normal' and not 'fitting in'. This difficult background manifests itself in Kylie and Clare's poor attendance and performance at school alongside difficult behaviour. The girls have been fortunate to be able to access support from Waverley Care's Children and Families service playschemes. They can get away from their stressful home situation, be relaxed and open about their parent's status' and also just have fun.*

Many children affected by HIV in Scotland continue to go unnoticed and remain unsupported. When developing policy and support systems we need to remember to consider the needs of, not just those infected with HIV, but the many children affected by the condition, and the accompanying personal and social implications and stigma that HIV brings.