

Social support central for caregiver health in AIDS-affected South African communities

December 9 2014

Psychosocial support should be a key element of health interventions for caregivers of children in HIV-affected communities, particularly for women who take on the majority of care-giving responsibilities.

These are the findings of Dr Marisa Casale, a Senior Researcher at the Health Economics and HIV and AIDS Research Division at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), South Africa.

For the past five years, Dr Casale has been conducting mixed methods research with caregivers of children in urban and rural South Africa, to assess the impact of social networks on health among these populations. This research is part of the larger Young Carers project, a collaboration between the South African government, NGOs and universities such as the University of Cape Town, the University of Oxford and Brown University. The project interviewed 6,000 children and 2,500 adult carers in three South African provinces, to identify the needs of AIDS-affected families.

A commentary published in the *British Journal of Health Psychology* today (9 December 2015) shows that caregivers with more emotional support from family, friends and the broader community are less likely to have [mental health problems](#) and more likely to have better self-reported general health. Findings also suggest that social support can be particularly important for the mental health of women living with chronic illness. Women were found to receive less support than men, while providing more support to other caregivers.

Dr Casale explains: "These findings are not only important for caregiver health in the region, but also for the health of children in their care. There is a large body of research showing links between caregiver and child wellbeing, but most of these studies are from high income countries. With this in mind, we are currently assessing whether there is a positive relationship between more caregiver social support and better child behaviour and [mental health](#) in this sample, and to what extent this can be explained by better parenting."

She adds: "An understanding of how and why [social support](#) may be affecting health outcomes differently can help us protect child and caregiver health, by allowing us to develop more effective [health](#) responses and encourage service uptake. It would also be useful to protect and strengthen valuable social networks."

Provided by British Psychological Society

Citation: Social support central for caregiver health in AIDS-affected South African communities (2014, December 9) retrieved 19 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2014-12-social-central-caregiver-health-aids-affected.html>

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