Background Information. The aim of this activity is to give parents experience in really listening and responding to their children.

Parents with HIV/Aids have so much important information that they need to talk about. Most of them really want to be open with their children. But it's hard to find the right moment to make a start; its also difficult to find the right words to talk about illness or other big problems in the family. Many parents fear that if they try to be open, it will set their children off on asking a whole lot more questions which will be painful or embarrassing to answer.

The difficulty of finding the right time and the right words to tell the true facts to their children, is a problem shared by many other families who are facing a crisis in their family for many other reasons - separation, financial problems, violence and a whole lot more.

At the same time the children are probably well aware that there is a major problem and are living with fears which they dare not raise with the parents. So instead of talking about the things that really matter, the parents and children are shut off from each other. They miss all the opportunities which come up in everyday life to get these matters out in the open.

Sharing Secrets is a game with cards which will give parents and other people who look after children, a chance to practice talking about a whole range of tricky subjects which come up in the life of most families..

Some of the cards have tough questions, the sort of thing that children would ask if they got half a chance; other cards have unfinished sentences which will give parents an opening to talk about something they want to say, including good news and happy memories. The important thing is for parents to get an experience of really listening to what is being asked and, instead of brushing a tricky subject aside, they can try out using the opportunity to say something useful and truthful. Gradually parents will find that they can find the words they need and that taking the first step makes it easier to go a bit further next time the question comes up. Other tricks that can be practiced through this game are how to turn general conversation around to the subject which really needs to be discussed – but which everyone is avoiding

Note to workshop leaders:

- *Try out this game in advance so you will be confident about how it works.*
- *If necessary you can add extra cards to suit the people in the group, or take out cards which are not right for the group or the subject you are working on.*
- *Before you introduce the game, cheat a little by checking the sequence of the cards. Make sure a few "easy" questions or topics are at the top so that everyone get a chance to warm up before the difficult issues come up for discussion.*

- *Explain very clearly that this is ROLE PLAY – they do not have to be themselves or give away any private information about their own families.*

THE GAME.

The AIM is to get both sides talking openly and to get a feel of how it might be for a child who desperately wants information or for a parent who doesn't know how or when to break bad news.

- *Divide workshop members into groups of 4 or 6.*
- *Each group is given a pack of cards. Each card has a question or unfinished sentence. Each card is marked to show if it is a "parent card" or a "child card".*
- *One person takes the role of parent; another takes the role of child. The rest are supporters who can join in with ideas and advice after the role-players have had their go.*
- *The "parent" and "child" take cards in turn.*
- *When the "child" asks a question the "parent" follows up by answering as truthfully as possible or by giving an explanation such as "I need to find out more before I can tell you that, but I promise to get back to you before Sunday."*
- *When the "child" has a card with an unfinished sentence, he or she has the chance to turn it into something that will lead on to what he or she really wants to raise with the parent.*
- *The "parent" needs to listen out for what the child is really asking or saying and find ways to move the conversation on, to give important information.*
- *The "parent" needs to make it easy for the child to ask more questions.*
- *When it's the "parent's" turn to ask a question or make an unfinished statement, the "child" has an equal chance to deal with the question or try to get out of it.*
- *The "child" has an opportunity to see just how difficult it is for parents to raise difficult subjects.*
- *Both sides have a chance to see that direct questions are not the only way to get answered.*

For many real children it will be a new experience to ask questions or to be listened to, so this is also an opportunity for the roleplay "child" to try out asking for or giving information in ways which wont make the "parent" shut down completely. For some parents it will also be a new experience to listen to their children and to get as near as they can to giving honest answers to sensitive or embarrassing questions.

EXAMPLE:

parent: *What did you do at school today?*

child: *We did a lesson about clean water. We had to work in twos with a friend, but my friend Freda wasn't there.*

parent: *That's a pity. What was up with Freda?*

child: *Her mum is sick; she had to stay at home to help.*

parent: *That's hard for Freda. Is her mother very sick?*

Parent and child now have an opening to talk about Freda's fears that the illness may be AIDS and what this would mean for Freda and her family. Instead of switching the subject, the parent has the chance to find out what her child knows about AIDS, to give reassuring information about people living with AIDS for many years and to talk about support systems in the community. At a later date, when she feels ready, the mother can go back to this conversation and begin to talk with her child about her own illness.