

Memory boxes

Parents living with HIV and AIDS often worry about what will happen to their children when they die. If the child is young, or the family is separated in a time of crisis, memories can fade and important information is often lost. The child can grow up confused about their background and identity.

One practical gift that a parent living with HIV and AIDS can give to their children is a memory box, or memory book. By writing down key facts, and including family traditions, photographs and happy memories, as well as their hopes and beliefs, the parent can help their child to remember information about their family and early life.

Making a memory box gives parents and children a chance to remember shared experiences, to talk openly about problems and worries, and to plan for the future. Every memory box will be different as it is a very personal thing, but here are some suggestions...



What to put in...

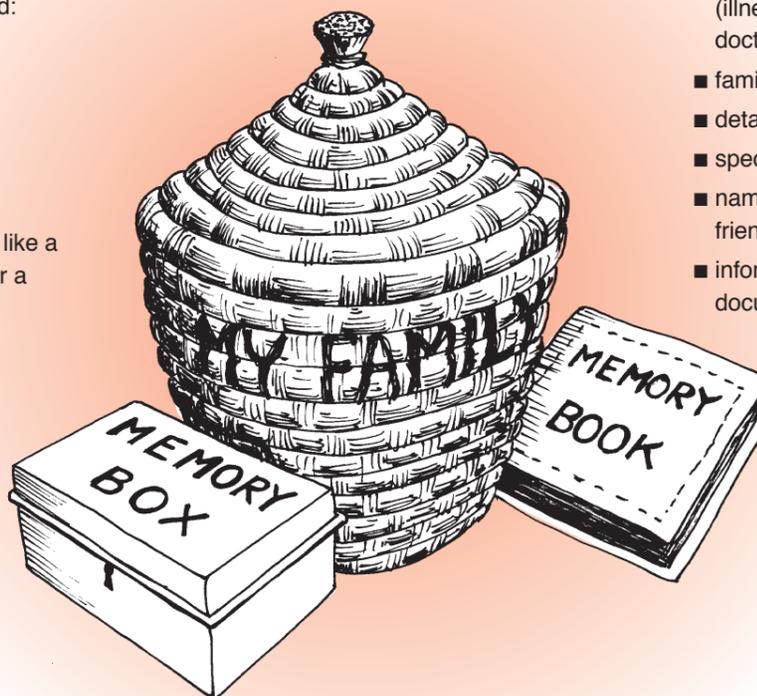
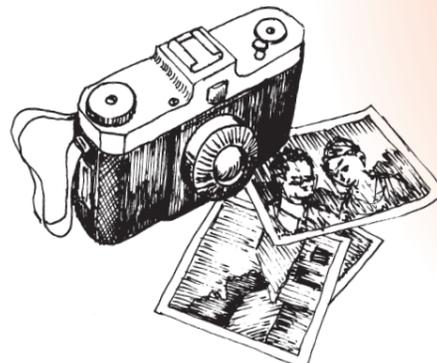
Family traditions and beliefs

- Explain family traditions.
- Describe events or dates that are special to the family or community.
- Describe beliefs and thoughts on life, and hopes for the future.

Memories

Write down memories of happy times, or how the family coped with difficult times. Add:

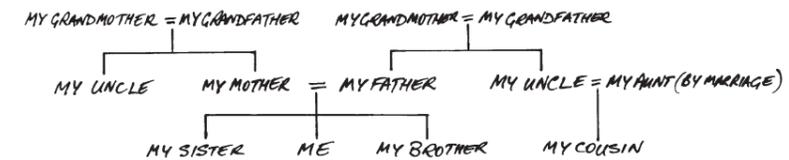
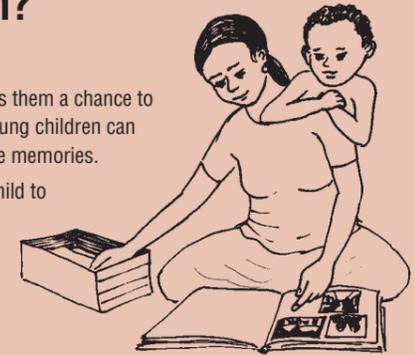
- photos
- favourite recipes
- words of favourite hymns or poems
- family jokes
- special pictures, cards and letters
- small objects with special meaning – like a handkerchief, beads, baby clothes, or a stone or seeds from the garden.



Who should make them?

Anyone can make a memory box or book...

- Involve children as much as possible. This gives them a chance to talk about their concerns about the future. Very young children can join in, drawing pictures and sharing their favourite memories.
- If writing is difficult then ask a friend or older child to help. They can ask questions and write down answers.
- If the parent has already died, then other relatives or family friends could help the child to make one.



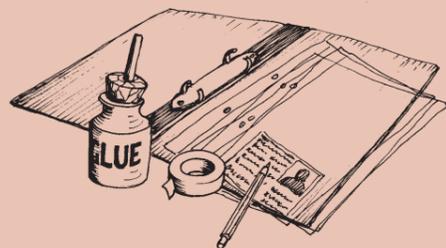
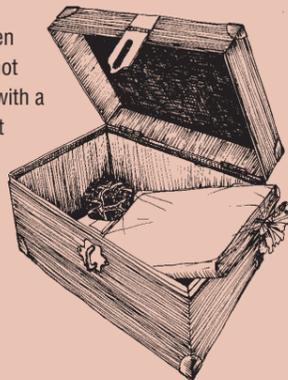
Important information

- information about both parents including full names, dates and places of birth, marriage and death and medical information (especially any medical conditions that could be inherited)
- information about the child including details about their birth and early years, how they got their name, medical information (illnesses, injuries, allergies, names of doctors or clinics where treated)
- family tree (see above)
- details about where the family has lived
- special ceremonies
- names and addresses of close relatives, friends
- information about where important documents or valuables are stored.

A family tree (see above) is a simple and clear way to show how all the family members are related to each other.

What are they made of?

Memory boxes can be any shape or size. If the memory box is to last then it needs to be strong. If possible use a lockable metal box or a strong basket or box. If you are making a book, then write in pen so it will not fade. Use a notebook with a hard cover, and wrap it in plastic to protect it from the rain and termites. Children can help you decorate it.



Practical tips

- A memory box is **not** the place to keep valuables or original copies of important documents. Birth certificates, passports, wills and property ownership documents, health and immunisation records should all be kept in a safe place. This could be a bank, or with a lawyer, senior relative or trusted friend. Put a note in the box to say where they are stored.
- Making a memory box can bring up strong emotions. It is good to have the support of a friend to share painful memories and difficult questions.
- Check that all information is correct. If any information is missing, it is better to leave a gap rather than make it up, otherwise it will be hard for the child to know what to believe.
- Write private or difficult information that you want to save until the child is older in a letter, and leave with a trusted friend. Leave a note in the box to say who has the letter.

Compiled by Maggie Sandilands, with thanks for permission to use information from the book *Memory Book for Africa* from which much of this information is adapted. This book costs £2.50 and is available from TALC (UK). (see page 14 for address)