

## Tree of Life

The Tree of Life was originally created for professionals working with children affected by HIV/AIDS in southern Africa. The process allows children and youth to share their lives through drawing their own tree of life which enables them to speak about their lives in ways that make them stronger without re-traumatizing them. The Tree of Life focuses on strengthening the child and youth's relationships with their own history, culture, and any significant people and places.

The methodology was co-developed through a partnership between Regional Psychosocial Support Initiative (REPSSI) and Dulwich Centre Foundation. To find out more about the Tree of Life and the Dulwich Centre Foundation, visit their website at: <http://www.dulwichcentre.com.au/tree-of-life.html>

This activity can be done with children and adults in a short period of time; reserve about an hour to complete the activity. This activity may not be appropriate for small children or those with limited cognition since they are responsible for writing their story on the paper and may not be able to comprehend the purpose of the activity. Once the Tree of Life is complete, give the final copy to the youth. Prior to giving the Tree of Life to the youth make a copy and save it in eWiSACWIS or take a picture and scan the image into eWiSACWIS.

Prior to completing the Tree of Life, explain to the child the purpose of the activity:

- To share their story from their perspective
- To think about where they come from
- To think about what they are good at
- To think about their hopes, dreams, and wishes
- To think about the significant people in their lives

Strategies for engaging the child:

- Be mindful of the child's developmental stage
- Allow the child to take the lead
- Work with child at their convenience and in a place they feel safe
- Encourage caregiver's involvement only if the child feels comfortable with their participation
- Keep a sense of humor
- Be flexible and patient
- Respect individuality
- Remember the unique cultural aspects of the child
- Provide examples if the youth appears confused by the instructions

**Materials Needed:** An assortment of markers, poster size paper, tape, and a private space that ensures the child feels safe and can share information without concern of others overhearing. It is preferred The Tree of Life be done in the child's home.

**Instructions:**

1. Tape the paper on the wall. Explain to the youth that they will be drawing a tree with instructions to draw different parts such as roots, ground, trunk branches and leaves. They can use any of the markers as they draw their Tree of Life and can be as elaborate as they want.
2. Ask the youth to draw the **ROOTS** of the tree and ask the youth to identify in the roots:
  - Where do you come from?
    - This can include places you come from, the people, the ideas, traditions, etc. This can include things such as books, religion, language, ancestry, and social movements.
  - Who are the people who have taught you the most in life?
  - What is your favorite place at home, a treasured song, dance or item (such as a teddy bear, blanket, or picture)?
3. Ask the youth to draw the **GROUND**. Ask the youth to identify in the ground:
  - Where do you currently live?
  - What activities do you do in your everyday life?
4. Ask the youth to draw the **TRUNK** of the tree and ask the youth to identify in the trunk:
  - What do you value?
  - What skills and abilities do you have?
  - What qualities and characteristics do you have?
  - What are you committed to and what is your purpose(s)?
5. Ask the youth to draw the **BRANCHES** of the tree and ask the youth to identify in the branches:
  - What are your hopes, dreams and wishes?
    - These could be for you or others
  - Where would you like your life to be heading?
6. Ask the youth to draw the **LEAVES** of the tree and ask the youth to identify in the leaves:
  - Who is important to you?
    - These people could be alive or deceased.
    - These people can be children or adults.
    - This can include people who you haven't met but contributed to your life in important ways (an author, artist, musician, or historical figure).
7. Ask the youth to draw the **FRUIT** of the tree and ask the youth to identify in the fruit:
  - What "gifts" have you received or what legacies have been passed on to you?
    - This includes being cared for, being loved, or having acts of kindness done for you.
8. Ask the youth to draw the **SEEDS** of the tree and ask the youth to identify in the seeds:
  - What are the legacies or gifts you want to give others?
    - This could be specific, such as, "I want to give the gift of love to my children."
    - This could be general, such as, "I want to be remembered as one who offered kindness to those who needed it."
9. Ask the youth to draw a **COMPOST HEAP** near the tree and ask the youth to identify in the compost heap:
  - Who has been harmful or abusive in some way but should still be remembered?
  - It may be possible that people in the compost heap are included in other parts of the tree.
10. After the tree is complete, ask the youth to tell their story starting from the roots. The information shared by the youth should help determine who is important to them and if they should be involved in planning for the child.