OBJECTIVES: To evaluate the efficacy of the Make A Difference about Art programme, a community art programme in South Africa for children affected by HIV and AIDS, which aims to reduce psychosocial problems by increasing self-esteem, self-efficacy and HIV insight.

METHODS: A quasi-experimental cross-sectional post-intervention survey of 297 children aged 8-18 years (177 programme attendees and a control group of 120). Participants completed an inventory comprising standardized, validated psychosocial measures of depression, emotional and behavioural problems, self-esteem and self-efficacy and key sociodemographic variables potentially relevant as risk and protective factors.

RESULTS: Attending the intervention was predictive of significantly higher self-efficacy, but was not associated with differences in self-esteem, depression, or emotional/behavioural problems. This association remained in the multivariate analysis, controlling for potential confounders. Double parental death exerted a powerful effect on child psychosocial health, eliminating the association between intervention attendance and higher self-efficacy. However, an interaction was found between bereavement status and intervention attendance on child self-efficacy, indicating that the intervention programme may ameliorate some of the psychosocial vulnerabilities associated with becoming an orphan. Other key risk factors for poor psychosocial health in this sample were AIDS-related stigma and community and household violence. Social connection emerged as a key protective factor.

CONCLUSIONS: Our findings suggest that such interventions may offer opportunities to increase the self-efficacy of vulnerable children to protect their psychological health.