STATE OF SOUTH AFRICA'S FATHERS 2024

About this report

Tataokhona

The *State of South Africa's Fathers* reports are produced by the Tataokhona Project, a cross-institutional, multidisciplinary, and multiyear project housed at Stellenbosch University. The Tataokhona Project aims to support and produce research and interventions related to fathers, fatherhood, and associated topics. A key player in the community of practice on issues of fathers and fatherhood, the project is envisioned as a home for local, regional, continental, and international resources on fathers and fatherhood that help South Africa's men to become more involved in caregiving. The *State of South Africa's Father Report* is one of several reports on fathers and fatherhood produced in different countries around the world, inspired by the *State of the World's Fathers* reports and the MenCare Global Fatherhood Campaign. For more on Tatoakhona, see: www0.sun.ac.za/psychology/centres/tataokhona/.

State of the World's Fathers

The *State of the World's Fathers* reports are produced by Equimundo: Center for Masculinities and Social Justice as part of the MenCare Campaign. The publication is a globally recognised, two-yearly report and advocacy platform aiming to change power structures, policies, and social norms around care work and to advance gender equality.
See www.equimundo.org/resources/state-of-the-worlds-fathers-2023/.

MenCare Global Campaign on Fatherhood, Caregiving and Equality

The MenCare Campaign engages men as fathers and caregivers to advance gender equality. MenCare believes men can lead more caring and meaningful lives and support gender equality by increasing their commitment to childcare and caregiving. Gender equality will only be reached when men are taking on their fair share of the care work. Through programmes, advocacy, and media campaigns, MenCare engages men in equal caregiving and fatherhood.
See www.mencare.org.

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STATE OF SOUTH AFRICA'S FATHERS 2024

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SESAME WORKSHOP
South Africa

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DG MT

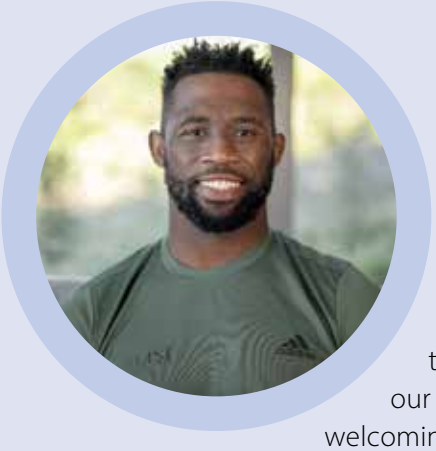
generation foundation

OAK FOUNDATION

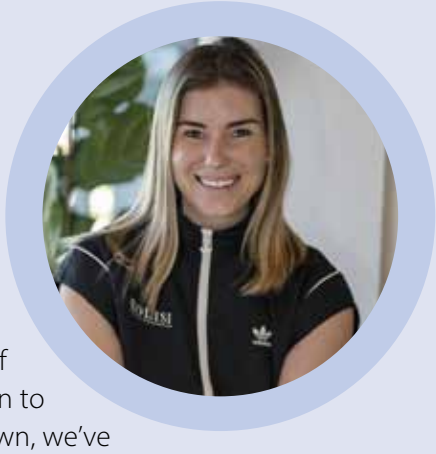
Contents

List of abbreviated terms

ATM	Automated teller machine
COSATU	Congress of South African Trade Unions
EBP	Evidence-based programmes
ECD	Early childhood development
GHS	General Household Survey
LMICs	Low and middle-income countries
MPs	Members of Parliament
NIDS	National Income Dynamics Study
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
OHS	October Household Survey
PLH	Parenting for Lifelong Health (programme)
QLFS	Quarterly Labour Force Survey
RCT	Randomised controlled trial
RTP	Rough-and-tumble play
SABC	South African Broadcasting Corporation
SBCC	Social and Behaviour Change Communication (model)
SAPPIN	South African Parenting Programme Implementers Network
SMS	Short message service
SOWF	State of the World's Fathers
SWSA	Sesame Workshop South Africa
SOSAF	State of South Africa's Fathers
TCC	The Character Company
TREE	Training and Resources in Early Education
UIF	Unemployment Insurance Fund
UNISA	University of South Africa



Foreword



Siya and Rachel Kolisi
Co-founders, Kolisi Foundation

Parenting has been one of the most transformative and humbling journeys of our lives. From raising our biological children to welcoming Siya's siblings into our home as our own, we've learned that family is about more than biology – it's about being present, intentional, and nurturing. Through love, patience, and commitment, we've seen how a child's heart opens and trust grows, regardless of how the relationship began. This experience has taught us that parenting is about showing up for children, not because you have to, but because they need you.

In South Africa, where many children grow up without fathers in their homes, social fathers – men who step in to fill the role of a father figure – play an essential part in shaping children's futures. These men come in many forms: grandfathers, uncles, older brothers, teachers, coaches, mentors, or even neighbours. What makes them special is not biology, but their willingness to be present, to listen, and to lead with love. We've come to see that parenting isn't only about who gave you life but about who is consistently there when life gets hard.

Our journey has shown us how important it is for children to know they are not alone. Every child deserves a sense of belonging and, when fathers – whether biological or social – are active in a child's life, it builds confidence, resilience, and hope. Yet, fatherhood in South Africa is complex. High rates of absent fathers mean that the role of social fathers is more important than ever. We have seen firsthand how these father figures can become pillars of strength, helping children believe in themselves and shaping communities for the better.

The *State of South Africa's Fathers* report sheds light on the vital role that these unsung heroes play. It challenges the narrow definition of fatherhood by celebrating the men who take responsibility, whether or not they are related by blood. It also reminds us that fatherhood is not a one-size-fits-all role – it's fluid, evolving, and deeply personal. What matters is being there – day in and day out – with patience, guidance, and love.

Our hope is that, as you engage with this report, you'll begin to rethink what fatherhood means and who it includes. South Africa needs every adult – especially men – to step up, not just for their own children but for all children who need care, encouragement, and direction. Communities thrive when men commit to being present in the lives of the next generation. We believe that in these everyday acts of fatherhood – whether it's helping with homework, attending a rugby or soccer game, or just listening to a child's fears – the seeds of real change are planted.

Together, we can create a future where no child feels abandoned, where every child has someone to lean on, and where men feel empowered to lead with love, even beyond their immediate family. Fatherhood isn't just a title – it's a responsibility we carry with our hearts and hands, one day, one child, and one moment at a time.

Key Terms Used in this Report

The following terms appear frequently throughout the report and deserve some clarification here to avoid their conflation.

Absent fathers

The term 'absent father' is used to refer to a father that is neither physically living in the same household as his child, nor involved in the child's life. While it is often used in writings about fatherhood to refer to the absence of a biological father in the household where the child lives, it can also refer to a non-biological or social father being absent.

Co-residency

Statistics South Africa regards a person as co-resident when they sleep in the same household for four or more nights per week. This definition is used to estimate, for example, co-residency of a child with their biological father.

Non-resident fathers

A non-resident father is counted by Statistics South Africa when a father is away from home for four or more days per week. Non-resident fathers may still be involved in a child's life.

Social fatherhood

A social father is a person who takes on the responsibility and role of being a father to a child, but who is not the biological male parent (genitor) of the child. The status of fatherhood is therefore a social status rather than a biological one, and may be actively sought by and/or ascribed to the person by their family, community, or the state. One person could be a biological father to one child and a social father to another.

Father involvement

'Involvement' is used as an overarching term for several categories of interaction between fathers and children that include – but are not limited to – emotional support, communication, financial support and caregiving.

Providership

Being a provider includes the important provision of financial support for a child's well-being and health such as providing for food, clothing, housing and education. This notion of 'being a provider' also extends further to include other resources such as attentive time together, care work, educational support, and emotional support.

Care

The word 'care' is used in several ways in this report: 'caring about' refers to paying attention to, or feelings of affection and concern about another; 'taking care of' refers to taking responsibility for the well-being of another; and 'caregiving' refers to the competent engagement in physical care work such as feeding or washing.

Key moments from policy and law developments that affect families and fatherhood since 1994

1994	First democratic elections of South Africa
1996	Constitution of the Republic of South Africa
1998	Maintenance Act 99 of 1998
1997	Basic Conditions of Employment Act 75 of 1997
1998	Recognition of Customary Marriages Act 120 of 199 Domestic Violence Act 116 of 1998
2001	Draft National Policy Framework for Families
2005	Children's Act 38 of 2005
2006	Civil Union Act 17 of 2006 (legal recognition for same-sex couples)
2007	Criminal Law (Sexual Offences and Related Matters) Amendment Act 32 of 2007
2012	White Paper on Families in South Africa
2015	National Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy
2018	Labour Laws Amendment Bill (parental leave provisions) approved
2019	Defence of reasonable chastisement found unconstitutional – prohibiting corporal punishment
2020	Labour Laws Amendment Bill (parental leave provisions) implemented
2020	National Strategic Plan on Gender Based Violence & Femicide
2021	Revised White Paper on Families
2021	Section 10 of the Births and Deaths Registration Act 51 of 1992 declared unconstitutional (unmarried fathers and birth registration)
2022	*Van Wyk and Others* v *Minister of Employment and Labour* High Court ruling on constitutionality of parental leave provisions in South Africa

INTRODUCTION

Kopano Ratele, Stellenbosch University;
Mandisa Malinga, University of Cape Town;
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Chapter 1

Introduction

Kopano Ratele, Stellenbosch University; Mandisa Malinga, University of Cape Town; Wessel van den Berg, Equimundo: Center for Masculinities and Social Justice; Tawanda Makusha, Africa Health Research Institute

KEY MESSAGES

- Traditional father identities are being challenged.
- Men who are prospective parents or provide care to others have to reflect deeply on what it means to be a father.
- This third SOSAF report presents data from the General Household Survey and a new survey of adult caregivers in South Africa.
- In 2023, only 35.6% of South Africa's children lived with their biological fathers in the same household, while 40.3% lived with other men.
- While the physical presence of biological fathers in the same household as their children may be important, living together is not a sufficient condition for a healthy father–child relationship.
- This report is intended to change narratives about fathers and fatherhood.

The evolving state of fatherhood in South Africa can leave us grappling to understand the broader shifts affecting men today. Particularly challenging is the growing detachment of biological fathers from their children. The feeling of not quite understanding what is happening to men regarding fatherhood stems from recent data trends, which paint a complex picture of the relationship between fathers, children, and family dynamics. Examining these statistics closely is a focus in this introductory chapter.

What can be disheartening when we explore the data in this report is that men are struggling, even in roles traditionally associated with being a man and father. Financial provision, long considered a father's primary responsibility, is now an area where men are falling behind. In the State of the World's Fathers 2023 (SOWF) 2023 survey, which is discussed later, a higher percentage of women (85.1%) than men (79.8%) in South Africa reported that they provided financial support to their biological children.

A higher percentage of women (50.2%) than men (44.2%) also reported that they provided financial support to children who are not their biological children. This is also consistent with the fifth wave of South Africa's National Income Dynamics Study (NIDS) in 2017 that found, taking into account the difference in children's co-residence with mothers and fathers, the gap between mothers' and fathers' financial support for children was wide: 69.0% of children aged 7 – 14 received assistance with their educational expenses from their mothers, while only 30.2% of children received assistance from their fathers.[1]

The fact that women are taking on the role of providing for their families and themselves is no cause to lose all hope. The question we should ask is *what new roles are men taking on in care networks* as their traditional roles of provider and protector shift and are no longer accessible to many? If the traditional male roles and father

identities are being challenged, does it not suggest that those men who would be parents, or provide care to others, have to deeply reflect on what it means to be a father in South Africa today?

This deep reflective work about paternal roles is made necessary by the fact that mothers are not only doing the care work that has historically been associated with motherhood but also the financial provision that has historically been associated with fatherhood.

The third SOSAF report wants to change narratives

It is common to observe that some men may have become uncertain about the meaning of manhood, as the meaning of what it means to be a man tends to shift in line with socioeconomic, political, and cultural changes in society. Uncertain manhood, and a lack of clear purpose among men, are linked to the important rise of feminism, women's empowerment policies and programmes in different countries, and changes in worldwide and context-specific gender dynamics.

For example, given the still-powerful racist capitalist patriarchy, it is important to tell young girls to lean in, step up, take up space, and exercise their agency. But usually, there is nothing we tell young boys about how to be all they can be as gender ideas and relations change.

How do we then encourage boys' and men's self-esteem, self-actualisation, and positive contribution to society without reinforcing patriarchy? As women have stepped more into the workplace and economy, the unpaid care work still needs to be done, and yet men's caregiving has not kept pace with women's economic empowerment.

It is also reasonable to assume that the lack of confidence about masculinity could be

Given the still-powerful racist capitalist patriarchy, it's important to tell young girls to step up, take up space, and exercise their agency. But we don't tell young boys how to be all they can be as gender ideas and relations change.

linked to some of the troubles men experience and the troubles they create, as some scholars in the field of men and masculinities have put it.[2] Aggression and violence against others and themselves are one set of consequences of men's uncertainties about masculinity. However, aggression and violence in various forms – from violence against men by other men, or even women[3], to men's violence against women and children – are merely one set of troubles experienced and created by men.[4] There are many others, including mental health issues, suicide, and lack of optimal involvement with children.[5]

At the systemic level, a set of problems crippling the people of South Africa are high levels of unemployment, debilitating poverty, and inequalities. Each of these problems has far-reaching consequences on households as well as individual men, women, and children. For example, the levels of unemployment and poverty result in more men living on the streets, under bridges, and in abandoned buildings.

And while some men live with their families on the streets, some homeless men are likely to live alone or in male groups.

The economic state of the country is, then, an important factor in the state of the country's fathers, determining whether and how men participate in their children's lives and families, more broadly. Given that, at least based on existing research, many fathers in South Africa are battling, how do we change the state of affairs?

A fuller picture: The state of South Africa's fathers from two data sources

The underpinning theme of this third *State of South Africa's Fathers report* (SOSAF 2024) is 'changing narratives of fatherhood'. While the picture of fathers appears bleak in places, the report wants to highlight some of the work seeking to tell a different story about fatherhood and fathers. A different story does not necessarily mean a happy story but rather a more comprehensive story.

What we would like to do is to give a fuller picture of the state of fathers in South Africa. The picture is painted with numbers. We present data from two sources.

The first source is the General Household Survey (GHS) of 2023. The GHS is conducted by Statistics South Africa on behalf of the government of South Africa.

The second data source is the South African quantitative dataset collected as part of 17 country-specific surveys on adult caregivers conducted for the *State of the World's Fathers 2023* (SOWF) report. The survey was undertaken by Equimundo an applied research organisation for achieving gender equality and social justice by transforming intergenerational patterns of harm and promoting care, empathy, and accountability among boys and men throughout their lives. The SOWF survey was conducted for the MenCare campaign, a global campaign co-founded by Equimundo and Sonke Gender Justice in 2011.[6]

We summarise a few findings from the South African data from the SOWF 2023 survey first.

Multiple care responsibilities

The South African dataset reflects similar trends to the surveys conducted in the other 16 countries and published in the *State of the World's Fathers 2023* report. An encouraging finding was that, for most respondents, the word 'care' had positive connotations, and respondents used words like 'love', 'help', and 'empathy' to describe 'care'. Women still reported a higher proportion of time spent on care than men, but men showed more involvement in care than expected, and high investment in seeing workplace and public policies that support care in their daily lives.

Across all datasets, it was also clear that men and women, parents and non-parents all had multiple care responsibilities, and that care for an ageing population is taking up a significant proportion of emotional and physical attention from all respondents. While women still did most of these multiple layers of care work, men also reported involvement in diverse caregiving roles that included care for the elderly, care for partners, and care for disabled family members in need of care.

Care policies

The global report made strong recommendations about the policies and normative shifts needed to move the needle on increasing men's caregiving; for example, establishing equal paid parental leave, and normalising caring behaviours for younger men and boys through gender transformative education.

The survey found that women and men all agreed that the most important issues that politicians were working on were unemployment, crime, and corruption. Women (39.0%) felt that women's rights and gender equality were important more than twice as much as men did (18.4%). Conversely men (6.5%) attached more importance to military and national security than women (1.5%). Women and men both agreed that political activism for better care leave policies was important, even though more women rated this more important than men did.

These themes also show up in the South African dataset and are reflected throughout the SOSAF 2024 report.

The South African survey

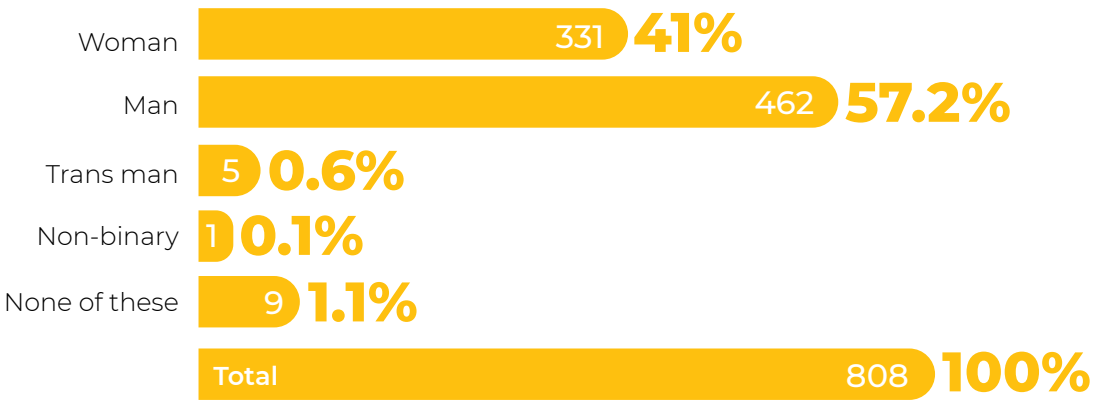
The South African component of the SOWF 2023 survey was conducted in English only. The survey sample consisted of 808 respondents. Of the total sample, 263 were non-parents and 545 were parents. The sample was derived from an existing panel of participants from all nine provinces who have consented to participate in online surveys; so, respondents were likely to be urban and from higher income groups. Thus, the sample is not nationally representative but was designed to reach caregivers who were the biological parents of children and caregivers who were not biological parents of the children to whom they provided financial or psychological care, as well as people who care for elderly or disabled/sick relatives.

To enable a view not only of differences amongst men but also across genders, it was decided to survey not only cis men (henceforth referred to as 'men') but also cis women (henceforth 'women'), but also people with other gender identities.

Three-hundred and thirty-one (331), or 41% of the sample, identified as women and 462, or 57%, identified as men. All the other gender/sex groups comprised under 1% each: five of the respondents identified as trans men, one as non-binary, and nine as none of these (see figure 1).

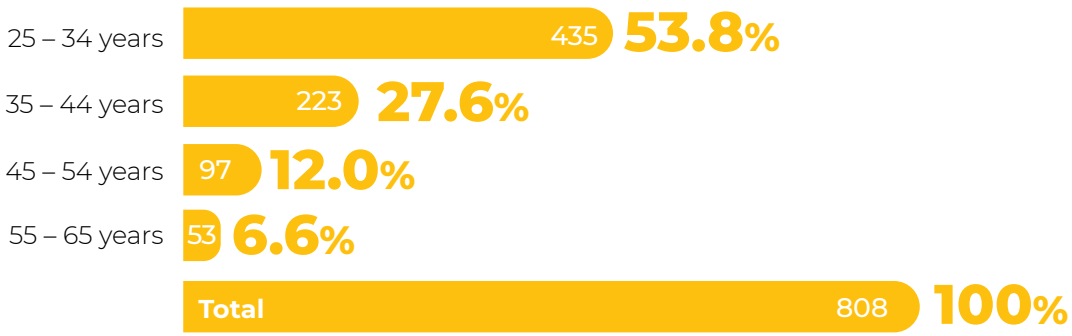
The survey questionnaire included sections on care and time use; constraints on care; share of care work; attitudes towards employment and parental leave; political engagement; gender roles; the grit scale; and well-being.

Figure 1: Gender identities of South African respondents, SOWF 2023 survey



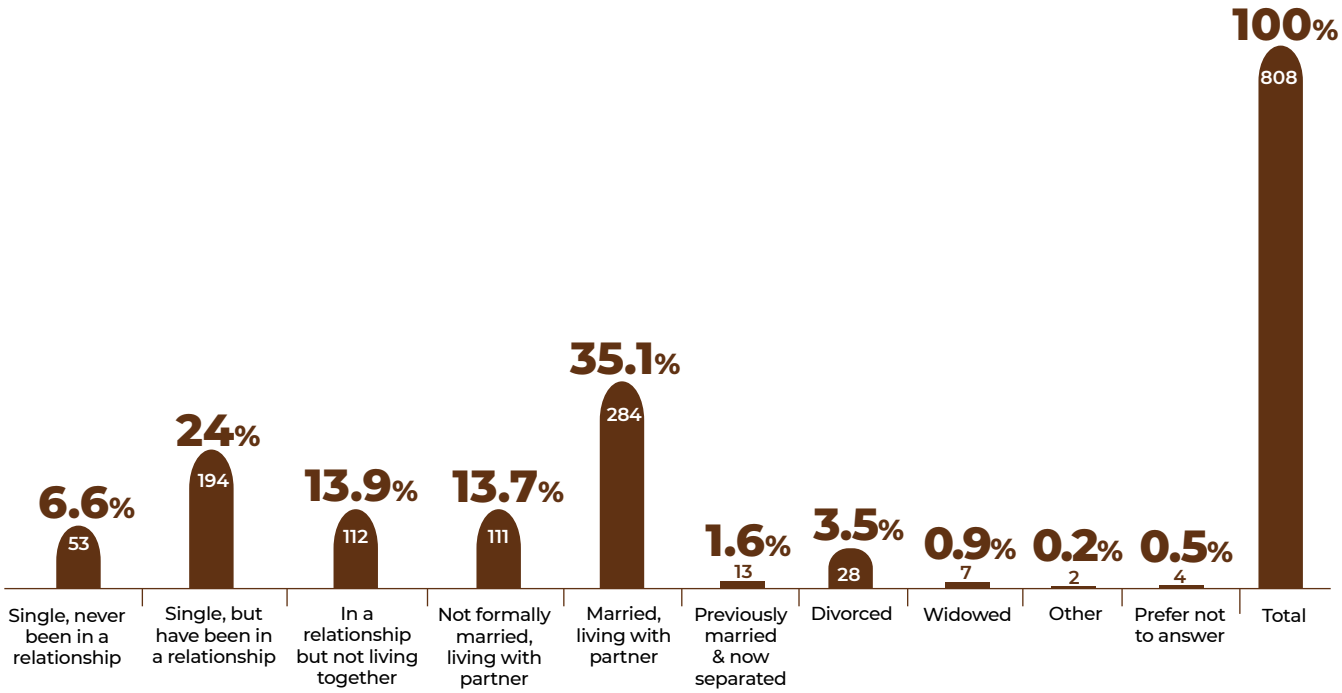
The ages of the survey participants ranged from 25 to 65. The majority of participants (81%) fell in the 25 to 44 age categories (see figure 2).

Figure 2: Age range of South African respondents, SOWF 2023 survey



The majority of survey respondents (35%) were married and living with a partner. The next largest category of survey respondents (24%) indicated that they were single at the time of the survey but have been in a relationship. Approximately 14% of respondents were in a relationship but were not living together, and almost an equal percentage were not formally married but were living with a partner (see figure 3).

Figure 3: Relationship status of South African respondents, SOWF 2023 survey



For a more comprehensive picture of the South African findings from the SOWF 2023 survey, see the graphics spread on pp. 194 – 197.

What the GHS 2023 says about South Africa's fathers, children, and families

The General Household Survey is a great tool when trying to understand the state of fathers, children, and families. We have used the GHS data in the SOSAF 2018 and 2021 reports.[7] There are important reasons for presenting GHS data in these reports besides its use of a representative sample to provide a view of the living conditions of children, men, and women in South Africa. Most importantly, it enables comparison across years of household composition, family forms, co-residency, and other information relevant to understanding the state of children and their parents or caregivers in South Africa.

Firstly, it is important to note from the GHS 2023 that more children (40.3%) in the country live with men who are not their fathers than those who live in the same households as their biological fathers. We delve deeper into this point later in this and the next chapter because it represents an important lens through which to view children's lives in South Africa.

Secondly, when we look at children's living arrangements with their biological parents, the GHS 2023[8] shows that 31.3% of children in South Africa lived with both biological parents (see figure 4). Only 3.3% lived with their biological fathers and not mothers, while 44.8% lived with their biological mothers and not fathers.

To put it in another way, in 2023 only 35.6% of children in South Africa lived with their biological fathers in the same household. To reiterate what was said earlier, it is very important to emphasise that while the physical presence of biological fathers in the same household as their children may be important, living together in the same household on its own is never a sufficient condition for a healthy father–child relationship. It may help, but there is something else that is required. That something else is what can be called 'being there'. Being there means being socio-emotionally present. In other words, a warm, caring presence is the foundation of a healthy father–child relationship.

That caring presence can come from any man who is there for a child.

Figure 5 on the opposite page shows that children's living arrangements with both their biological parents differ across provinces. With around one in every two children (51.9%), the Western Cape had the highest proportion of children co-residing with both biological parents. Gauteng was the province with the second highest percentage (43.3%) of children living with both biological parents. In contrast, the Eastern Cape (19.1%), followed by KwaZulu-Natal (20%), are the two worst-affected provinces when it comes to children's co-residency with both biological parents.[9]

In the second SOSAF report, we drew data from the 2019 GHS. The living arrangements of children and their biological fathers did not change much between 2019 and 2023.

In comparison with 2023, 33% of children lived with both parents in 2019, meaning 2% more than in 2023 (figure 4). In 2023, the same percentage (4.3%) lived with their biological fathers and not their mothers as in 2019, while 42% lived with their biological mothers and not fathers, which is 2% fewer children than in 2023.[10]

Overall, then, there was relatively little change between 2019 and 2023 in the proportion of children living with both biological parents, mother, or father.

Figure 4: Comparison of children co-resident with biological parents, GHS 2019 and GHS 2023

(Percentages were rounded to one decimal point. As a result, the sum of the individual numbers might not always add up to 100%.)

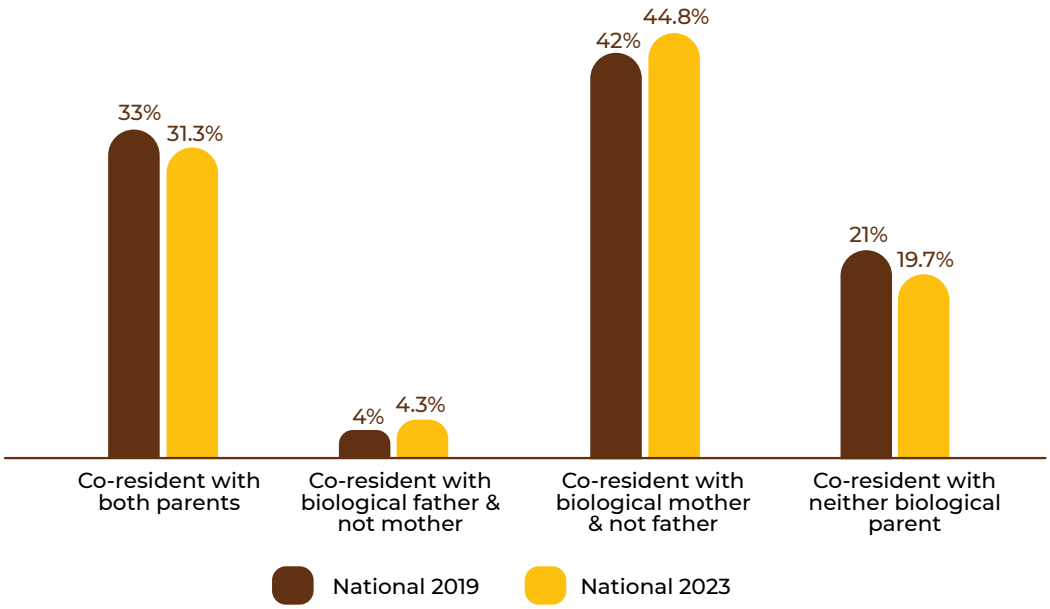
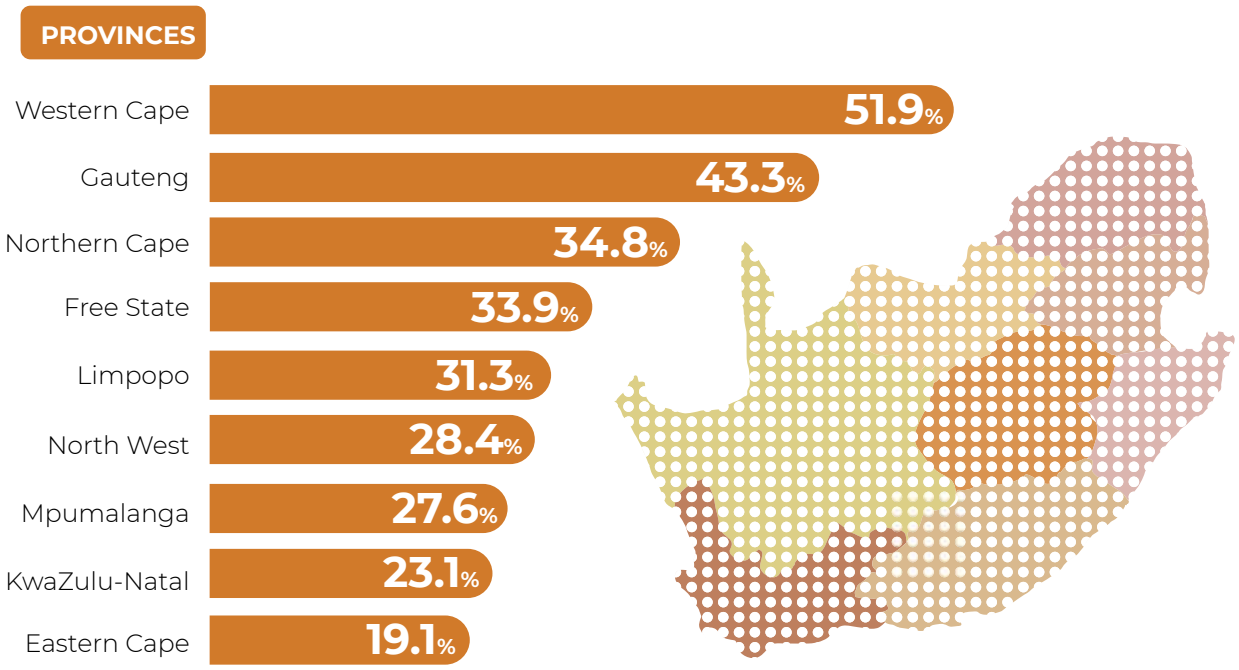


Figure 5: Children co-resident with both biological parents, national and by province, GHS 2023



A deeply worrying statistic is the one on children who live with neither biological mother nor father. In 2023, 19.7%, or approximately four million children, co-resided with neither biological parent.[11] In 2019, a slightly higher percentage (21%) of children co-resided with neither biological parent.[12] That means approximately one in five children in South Africa do not live with their biological parents.[13]

Within the context of co-residency statistics, the number of children not living with both their biological parents may be the most concerning. We recognise that some of the children who do not live with their biological parents are cared for by other adults, including relatives and stepparents. But South Africa is an outlier among countries of the world in this high percentage of children not residing consistently with their biological parents.

Among vulnerable children, the most vulnerable are children who live in child-only households, also referred to as child-headed households. *The South African Child Gauge 2024* analysis of GHS 2023 data indicates that around 44,000 children were living in child-only households in 2022, although this figure needs to be treated with caution. These are children who not only have to parent themselves, but also younger siblings who need to be cared and provided for.

The emotional, cognitive, and behavioural significance of living in a particular structure of households is likely to have a bearing on child and adult lives. More research that delves into these associations is necessary before we can make any conclusion about the nature of these outcomes. That said, statistics on household type offer another view of the living conditions of children and adults in South Africa.

Statistics South Africa categorises households into four types: 1. lone or single-parent households, 2. nuclear households, 3. extended households, and 4. composite households.[i]

[i] A nuclear family is defined as a household consisting of a pair of adults – typically but not always married – and their child/ren; whereas a lone-parent household refers to one in which only one parent resides with their child/children. An extended family refers to a household that extends beyond the lone parent or nuclear family to include grandparents and other relatives. A composite (or complex) household can be broken down into multiple nuclei as it includes at least one non-related household member or comprises multiple families.

In 2023, 2.6% of households were of the composite kind; 10.6% were lone-parent households; 24.5% were nuclear; and the majority, 62.4%, were extended (see figure 6b). An important point here is that most individuals in South Africa live in extended families.

When considering race[ii], figure 6a shows the extended household type was most common among Black households (65.6%) and Coloured households (52.5%) in 2023. The composite household type is three times higher among Coloured households (8.1%) than nationally (2.6%). The nuclear type of family was the most common among White households (70.6%).[16]

These figures suggest that when we consider intervening in the lives of fathers, fathers-to-be, or children – if intervention is what is decided on – we need to consider the type of household that such individuals live in. The life of a father or other male caregiver who lives with his child in an extended family household demands different thinking to the life of a lone father.

The same applies to policy interventions or actions by state organs: household type is likely to be an important factor in thinking about relationships between children and fathers. While allowing for the pooling of resources in contexts of poverty, extended family households may present other challenges for fathering.

The presence of other adults in the household may create the impression that men do not need to participate actively in providing care for their children, leaving the caregiving task to aunts, grandmothers, and older siblings – a phenomenon psychologists refer to as 'social loafing'.[17] The presence of multiple family members in the household also may increase the strain on the available family resources, limiting children's access to and benefit from these resources.

For more statistics relevant to fathers, children, and families from the GHS 2023, see the graphics spread on pp. 28 – 29).

Figure 6a: Household type by race, GHS 2019 and GHS 2023

(Percentages were rounded to one decimal point. As a result, the sum of the individual numbers might not always add up to 100%.)

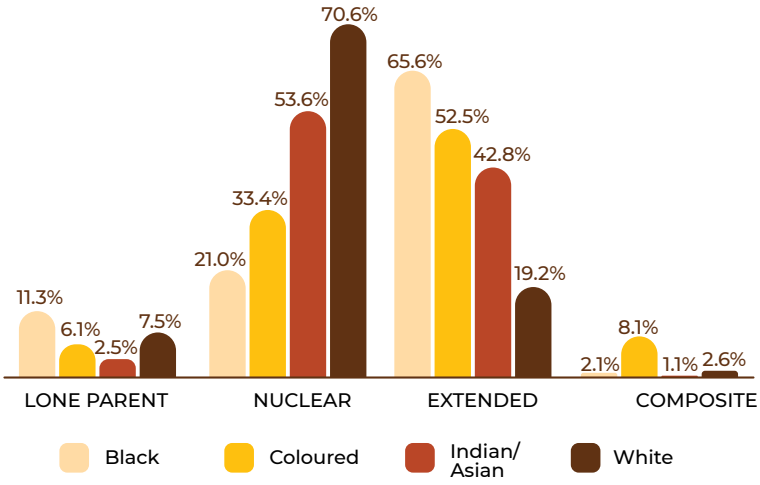
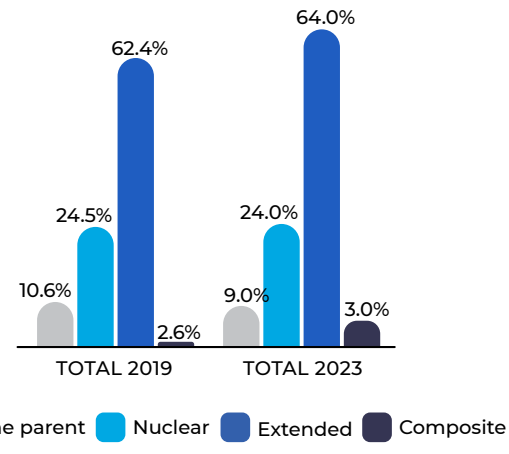


Figure 6b: Proportion of household types in South Africa, GHS 2019 and GHS 2023



[ii] Here, and elsewhere in this report, the four racial categories (Black, Coloured, Indian and White) are used to refer to the Statistics South Africa categories of African/Coloured/Indian and White. We use the term 'Black' to refer to Black African people, and we have replaced 'African' with 'Black' where we report on statistics. This is in acknowledgement that categories other than 'Black African' people may identify as African. It is, however, a compromised position, given that the same applies where Coloured or Indian people may also identify as Black.

Changes in children's co-residence with adults between 1996 and 2023

It is worth taking note of what has changed, or stayed the same, between 1996 – the first time we had relevant data for the whole population in South Africa as was collected by the October Household Survey (OHS) 1996 – and 2023.

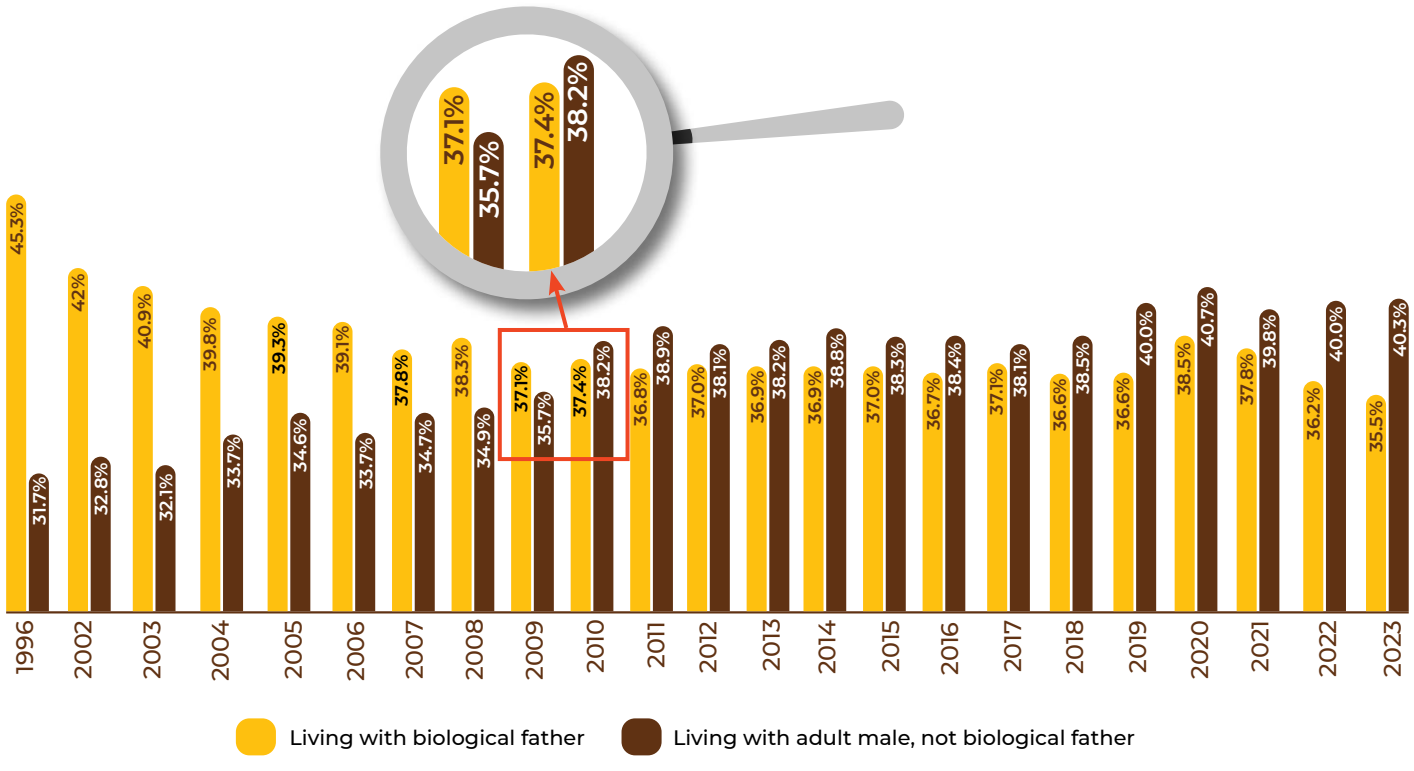
Between 1996 and 2023 there has been a nine percentage point decrease in children living with their biological fathers (see figure 7). This represents a 20% decrease in the proportion of children living with their biological fathers.

At the same time, there has been an eight percentage point increase in children living with adult males who are not their biological fathers, which represents a 25% increase in the proportion of children living with adult males who are not their biological fathers.

In short: While the proportion of children living with their biological fathers has been steadily decreasing since 1996, the proportion of children living with adult men who are not their biological father has been increasing steadily. In 2009 and 2010, the scale tipped over and, since 2010, a child was more likely to live in the same household with an adult male who was not their biological father than in the same household as their biological father.

> Between 1996 and 2023 there has been a nine percentage point decrease in children living with their biological fathers. This represents a 20% decrease in the proportion of children living with their biological fathers.

Figure 7: Proportion of children living with men between 1996 and 2023, OHS and GHS



> There has been an eight percentage point increase in children living with adult males who are not their biological fathers, which represents a 25% increase in the proportion of children living with adult males who are not their biological fathers.

These facts suggest that the prevailing fatherhood narrative is not keeping with reality. The emphasis on the presence or absence of the biological father omits most children's lived experiences. The reality is that when it comes to the day-to-day interactions of a child with close adult males, the child is more likely to interact with men other than their biological fathers, and these men could play social fathering roles.

Figure 7 shows that, in 2023, South Africa had the lowest co-residen ce of children with biological fathers reported since similar data were collected in 1996. The co-residence of children with their biological fathers has been in decline since 1996 when it was recorded as 45.3%. Slight increases in co-residency were noted in 2007 (37.8%) to 2008 (38.3%) and in 2020 (38.5%). These were periods of economic crisis. In a country where male migrant labour – implying the separation of children and fathers – became a damaging norm, a reason for these increases in co-residency could be that men's employment opportunities were reduced during these economic crises and that they returned to their families until new work opportunities emerged.

In other words, the nature of the South African economy is at odds with healthy family life for the men who have little education and prospects. The economy, which remains colonial and extractive, forces men from low-income classes mainly to separate from their families in contrast to men from the middle and elite classes.

Ironically, it is when employment opportunities increase that men are likely to go away to provide for their families and, therefore, deprive their families of their consistent presence. And it is when employment opportunities are scarce that men come to stay home, but then they cannot financially support their families.

Overview of the SOSAF 2024 report

Drawing on the findings from the GHS 2023 and the SOWF 2023 survey dataset for South Africa as well as on recent research by the contributing authors and other scholars, the report includes eight other chapters.

Chapter 2 maps social fatherhood in South Africa conceptually and explores the types of social fathering in the country. The chapter draws attention to the importance of noticing and researching the full range of men who care for children.

Chapter 3 focuses on fatherhood and early childhood development. It highlights interventions and practice-based projects and programmes in the important nexus of parenting and child development.

Religion is an important aspect of the lives of most people in South Africa. Chapter 4 delves into the influences of religion on fatherhood and how fatherhood is defined by the major religions practised in South Africa.

Chapter 5 provides insights into aggression and violence used by and against fathers. Noting the scant attention to fathers in the South Africa violence literature, the chapter considers

aggression and violence as well as how play and perspective-taking might help in their prevention.

Chapter 6 reflects on the mental health and well-being of fathers. While focusing on all fathers, the authors pay particular attention to the specific complexities surrounding the mental health of new fathers.

Poverty and the lack of decent employment are two of the core problems in South Africa. Hence, Chapter 7 focuses on the intimate relationship between fatherhood and the economy, and how these are linked.

The final substantive chapter before the conclusion, Chapter 8, connects the report to the practical application of evidence to programmes and interventions. This edition of the report is the first to explicitly be connected to a new community of practice on fatherhood and the information in the report informs this community of practice just like the community of practice informed the research questions in the report.

In conclusion: What is not in the picture

Those of us who are interested in fathers and fatherhood are inspired by questions like:

- What is a good father? Does it have to do with emotional intelligence, a man's well-being, or being able to provide adequately?
- How can we nurture healthy father–child relationships in South Africa?
- Is being a good or bad father seen differently by children, mothers, and fathers?
- What are the psychological, interpersonal, family, cultural, environmental, and systemic factors that stop men from, or facilitate men's healthy relationship with, children? For instance, is there an association between neighbourhood or provincial factors and a healthy father–child relationship?
- What is it that social fathers can do or are doing that biological fathers cannot do or are not doing?

Those who are interested in these and similar questions include non-governmental, community-based, and faith-based organisations, as well as individuals. Ultimately, these groups and individuals are motivated by the drive to inspire men's attitudes and behaviours toward children to change toward more positive involvement.

But why are we interested in fathers, though? Why do we want to have answers to these and similar questions?

We are keen on more than simply understanding the picture of the state of fathers and fatherhood. Men's positive engagement with children is good for the children's well-being, and good for men. While we need South African research on these, men's positive involvement with children may also be good for society because a society of caring men implies reduced male violence and trauma, as well as increased overall well-being and a flourishing society.

Positive male engagement with children is more important than whether those children are biologically related or chosen, or whether the men and children live in the same household or not. Being closely connected in a warm relationship is more decisive than whether the relationship is one of blood or social father–child type.

> The nature of the South African economy is at odds with healthy family life for the men who have little education and prospects.

What we have presented in this chapter is a broad picture in numbers of the state of fathers in South Africa. What we see when we focus on biological fathers is not a picture of wall-to-wall caring masculinity. We are left with the question of why are biological fathers not in the picture at similar rates to biological mothers?

Part of the answer to this question is found in our history as a society. In the SOSAF 2021 report, we noted that fatherhood in South Africa continues to bear the marks of our colonial and apartheid pasts. African and Coloured family life, and fatherhood in particular, was deliberately interrupted. Fathers' involvement in domestic life was restricted through oppressive laws, predatory capitalism, the migrant labour system and its male migrant hostels. Men were separated from their families and communities by the migrant labour system, forced to work in far-flung places. In this state, they were essentially forced to find ways to survive separation from family life loneliness in the squalid and dehumanising migrant hostels. Therefore, it is no exaggeration to state that colonialism and apartheid created absent fathers among Black men.

Our pasts of disrupted families, destabilised communities, and interrupted fatherhood are far from being fully repaired. But, even though all of that painful historical experience is a fact, we have to contend with our individual lives, communities, and as a society; we must learn more about how to help men today to care for their biological offspring as well as other children who need social fathers.

There is something else we must draw attention to that may not be as clear in the picture that we painted. Most children live with men who are not their biological fathers. We must take serious the simple fact that some men take care of children when biological fathers are not in the picture. These men are what we refer to as social fathers.

But the term 'social father' does not tell us enough, even though it is better than using a term like 'non-biological father', which centralises biology over care. Alongside aunts, grandmothers, and older sisters, some social fathers take care of children because they realise children need caring men in their lives.

What children need is not genetic material but material, emotional, and social care. When the term 'social father' is used, many people tend to think of uncles, grandfathers, older brothers, stepfathers, and adoptive fathers. This is not incorrect. However, a teacher, priest, coach, imam, or mentor can provide the needed ear, presence, food, school fees, and other kinds of economic and psychosocial care. The care that social fathers give can take many forms, though this care and their presence in children's lives is not often recognised.

Ultimately, though, it simply means being there in a young person's life when the young person needs a caring adult. This report, then, highlights the need to shift from a focus on and the prioritisation of biological fatherhood, towards understanding and acknowledging the roles that other adult males play in children's lives, whether in addition to or in the absence of biological fathers.

The higher rates of children living with male adults other than their biological fathers compared to those of children living with their biological fathers suggest that social fathers may be a great resource that we need to tap into in the absence of biological fathers.

By recognising this form of fatherhood, we can focus on how to strengthen the involvement and participation of social fathers, and potentially buffer against the effects of biological father absence in children's lives, shifting the narrative towards more diverse forms of fatherhood that highlight the importance of positive male presence rather than biological fathers' presence.

It is for this reason that the next chapter in this report turns to social fathers. Let us not overlook the care work that social fathers can do in children's lives.

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FATHERHOOD STATISTICS FROM THE

(Percentages were rounded to one decimal point. As a result, the sum of the individual numbers might not always add up to 100%.)

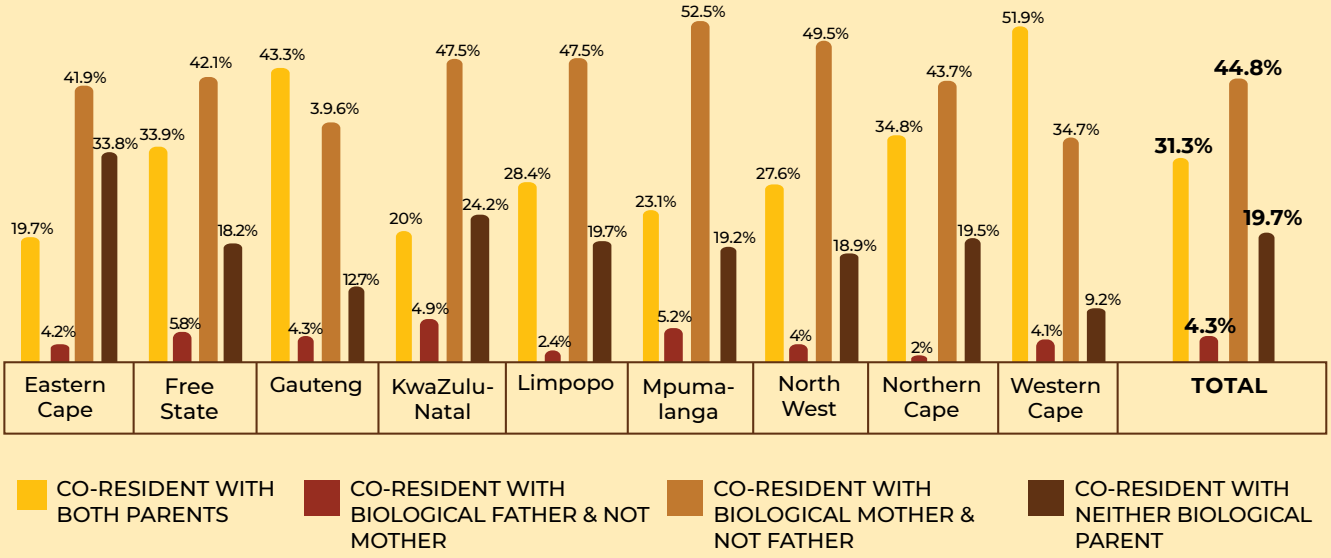


Figure 8: Children co-resident with biological parents, national and by province, 2023

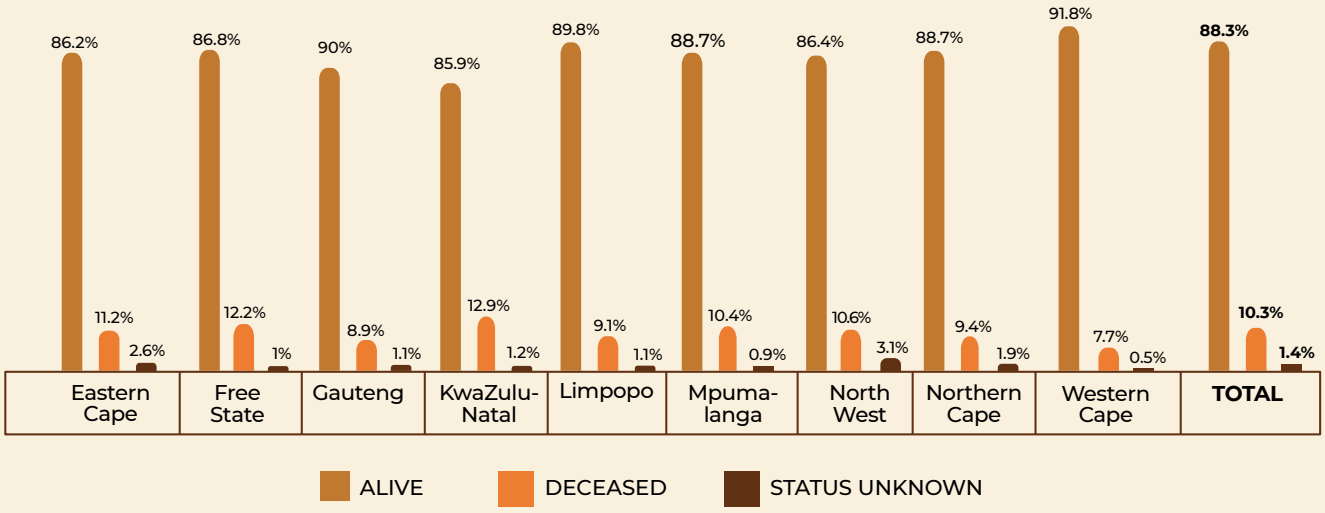


Figure 9: Children whose biological fathers are alive, deceased, or status unknown, by province, 2023

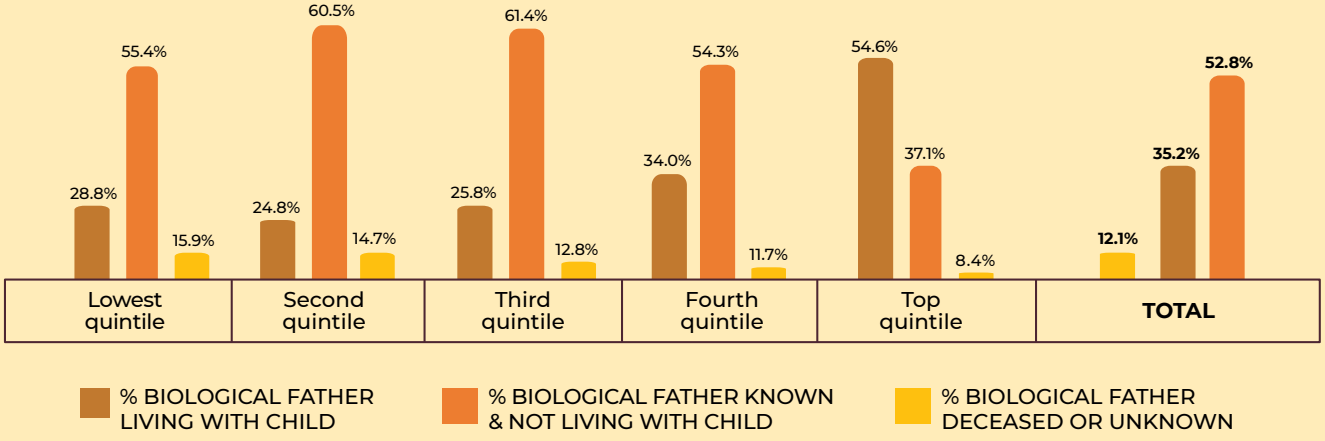


Figure 10: Children co-resident with biological fathers, by income quintile, 2023

Statistics South Africa. (2024). *General Household Survey 2023*. Statistics South Africa. www.statssa.gov.za/publications/P0318/P03182023.pdf

GENERAL HOUSEHOLD SURVEY 2023

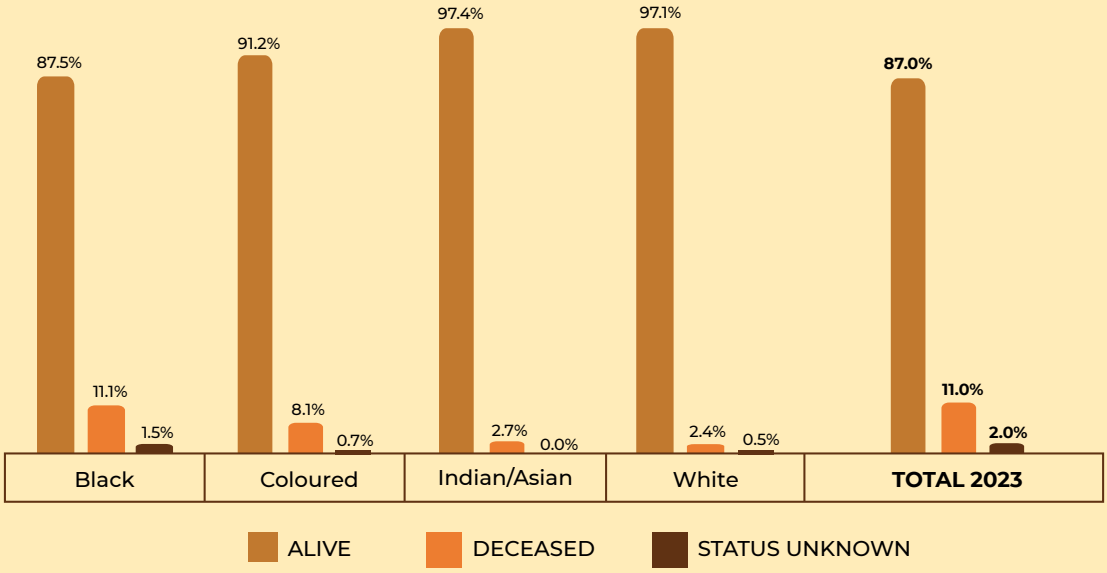


Figure 11: Children whose biological fathers are alive, deceased or status unknown, by race, 2023

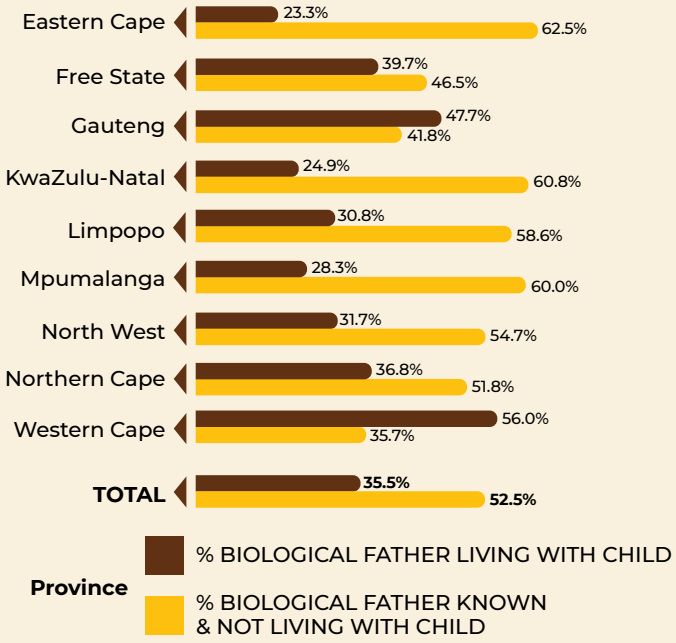


Figure 12: Percentage of alive and known biological fathers living with child, national and by province, 2023

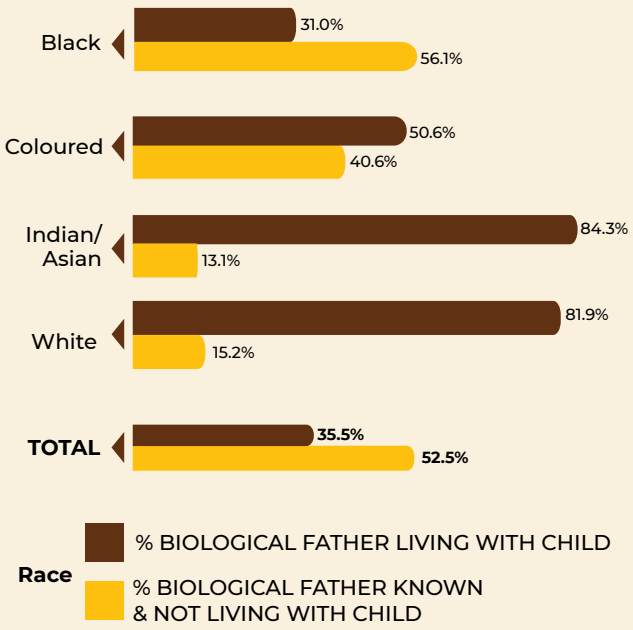


Figure 13: Percentage of alive and known biological fathers living with child, by race, 2023

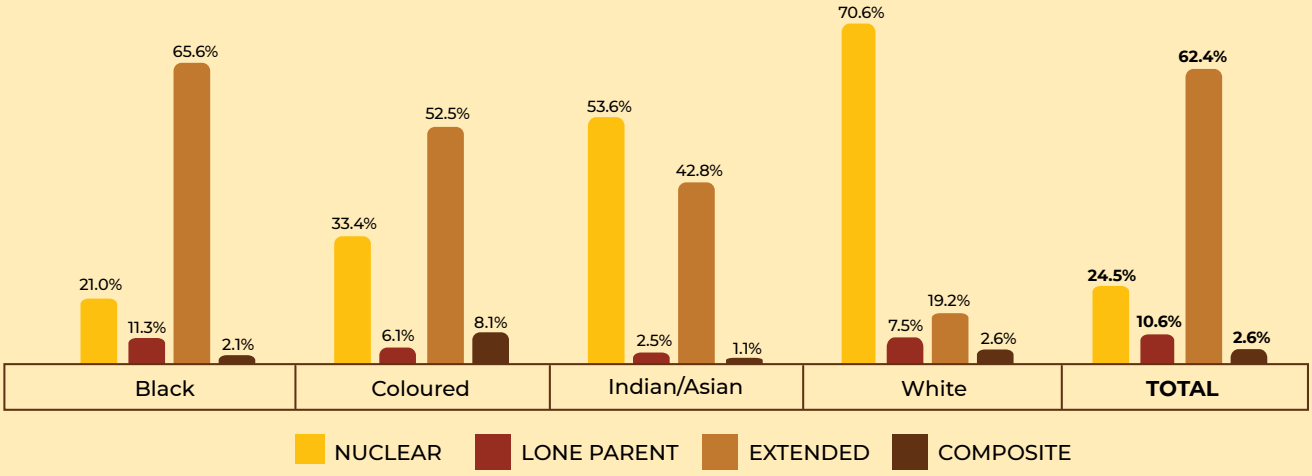


Figure 14: Children's residency in different household types, by race, 2023

MAPPING SOCIAL FATHERHOOD IN SOUTH AFRICA

Wessel van den Berg, Equimundo: Center for Masculinities and Social Justice;
Mandisa Malinga, University of Cape Town

Chapter 2

Mapping social fatherhood in South Africa

Wessel van den Berg, Equimundo: Center for Masculinities and Social Justice;
Mandisa Malinga, University of Cape Town

KEY MESSAGES

- Social fatherhood includes caregiving roles beyond biological fathers' involvement.
- Most children in South Africa live with men who are not their biological fathers.
- Extended family and coaches often fulfil critical social father roles.
- Social fatherhood spans informal, cultural, legal, and systemic caregiving roles.
- Inclusive policies must recognise all fathers' contributions to children's lives.

In South Africa, various theoretical views have developed about fatherhood. These include what is called collective fatherhood[1] and social fatherhood[2]. These views are part of attempts to think about fatherhood as not only related to biological relations but instead also as describing social relations.

This chapter continues the theme of social fatherhood from the previous two SOSAF reports.[3] It explores the roles of men who are involved in the caregiving of the child, specifically the men who are not the biological fathers (or 'genitors') of the children to whom they are giving care. Men like these are what are called 'social fathers' in contrast to biological fathers.

Fathers and fathering in South Africa are diverse, complex, and heterogeneous.[4] This diversity of fathers is also evident in other countries. A recent international review of work on fathers echo this as the authors explain how they define a father (own emphasis added):

> The working definition used in this review is that of male-identified adults who are most involved in the caregiving of a child, *regardless of living situation, marital status or biological relation* [...] The role of father may be manifest in a multitude of ways: as the primary parent, as one of two primary parents, or as a secondary parent. They may be a biological, *foster, or adoptive father, a stepfather, or a grandfather* [...].[5]

Different men may assume the role of social father or provide fathering in different contexts of the child's life. For example, an uncle may be one source of emotional support to a child while a coach, who provides additional mentorship, acts as an additional source of support. It is possible that the child assigns a fathering role to both of these men; that is to say, regards them as father figures.

The assignment of fatherhood

The question of who is a father has many answers. Some of them have been discussed in earlier South African publications[6] and in international research on the various

manifestations of fatherhood[7]. Some points of reference are whether fatherhood has been ascribed to a person and whether this ascription is individual or collective. For example, in the case of individual ascription, a child or mother might say, "you are my father" or "you are the father". In the case of collective ascription, a community, an extended family, or the law might assign fatherhood.

There is an emerging body of literature on the collective attribution of social fatherhood by communities or extended families. This is usually anchored in the connections of kinship or shared customary practices.[8]

Research about adoption, foster care, or mentorship does, however, not centre on fatherhood, although these adult males who adopt, foster, or mentor children can be seen as social fathers. Usually, in research on adoption, foster care, or mentorship, the focus is mainly on other elements such as the state's role in parenting, transracial adoption, and the particular design and evaluation of mentorship interventions.[9]

In focusing on social fatherhood in this chapter, we are not unaware of the criticisms or problems. For instance, research participants in one study[10] highlighted both negative and positive experiences with social fathers. In another study[11], participants referred to sexual violence experienced at the hands of stepfathers. Beyond the borders of South Africa, scholars have referred to sexual violence experienced by female athletes and perpetrated by their male coaches.[12] And we know that in some churches in South Africa, young women and children have also experienced various forms of abuse perpetrated by male leaders who position themselves as fathers in their lives.[13]

However, we are also aware of the positive contribution made by social fathers in the lives of children.

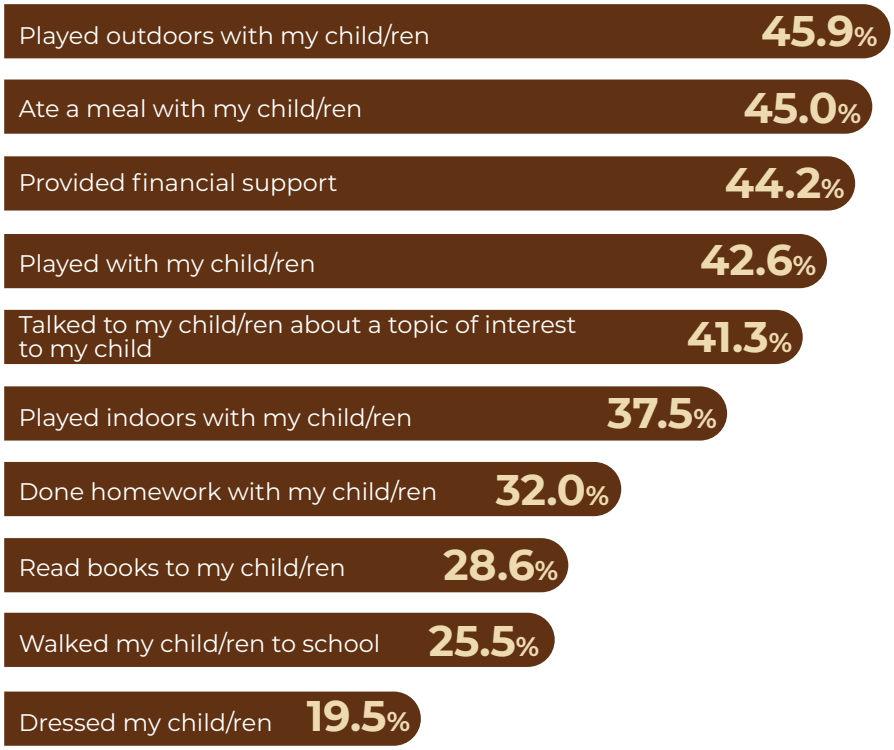
According to the State of the World's Fathers (SOFW) 2023 survey[i] of 462 men in South Africa, 44.2% of these men provided financial support to children they had not biologically fathered. Not only that, some of the participants also provided other non-financial forms of support such as reading books (28.6%); dressing children (19.5%); walking children to school (25.5%); doing homework with children (32.0%); playing with children (42.6%); eating a meal with children (45.0%); and finally, talking to children about topics that were of interest to the child (41.3%) (see figure 15).

On average, 70.2% of biological fathers who participated in the survey reported doing various childcare tasks, whereas 36.2% of men reported childcare for children not related to them as fathers.

Though the SOWF 2023 survey drew a small sample of men in South Africa, these figures show that some children do have men who play an important social fathering role in their lives. That role could be in the absence or in addition to biological fathers. Also, it is clear that one man may play various father roles to different children. For example, a teacher, imam, or mentor can be a father figure to several young people.

While we still know very little about the men who fulfil social father roles in children's lives, what their relationships are to children, and the actual contributions they make, the case on pp. 36 – 39 gives us some insights into the potential of male early childhood development practitioners as a form of social fathering.

Figure 15: South African male respondents' involvement in childcare for children who are not their biological children, SOWF 2023 survey



[i] This survey was conducted for the MenCare Campaign, a global campaign co-founded by Equimundo and Sonke Gender Justice. This report draws on the South African quantitative dataset collected as part of the larger 17-country SOWF 2023 survey. See www.equimundo.org/state-of-the-worlds-fathers-research.

CASE 1

amaGents: A film about male caregivers challenging stereotypes about Black men

Damian Sean Samuels, Fade2Black Productions; Kwanda Ndoda, DG Murray Trust

The opportunity to produce a documentary film that we believe would illustrate the concept of social fatherhood presented itself when Damian, a filmmaker, and Kwanda, Social Innovation Manager at the DG Murray Trust, decided to collaborate. We recognised that early childhood development (ECD) practitioners provide an opportunity to bridge the care-work gap at an institutional and societal level, and that male ECD teachers are an important form of social fatherhood.

Moreover, through prior interaction with male ECD practitioners, we had a sense that these men were generally happier in their relations with family members at home. The apparent happiness of these men piqued our curiosity to understand the positive functioning of care work on the well-being of these men.

The documentary, *amaGents*, is partially inspired by an opinion piece based on interviews with male ECD practitioners in the field.[14] What we thought would simply be a video recording of the testimonies of four Zulu-speaking male ECD practitioners in Kwa-Zulu-Natal subsequently evolved into a full-blown documentary project.

Unsettling the often-unfair representations of Black men

Both of us were raised without our fathers. Yet, today we are present, active fathers in the lives of our young sons. And we can attest to the importance of having had access to positive male role models ('social fathers' in the current parlance) at critical moments in our young lives. Access to positive male role models can help to shape other men's sense of manhood and build trust between men and others who they socialise with, like women and children.

Given the persuasive power of visual media, the central purpose of the documentary film is to promote positive representations of Black[ii] men.

There are others who use film to tell stories about fathers. Heartlines has produced a series of six films as part of their Fathers Matter campaign (see the case on pp. 168 – 172). These thought-provoking films deal with the complexities of fatherhood in the South African context. Our project has a similar purpose but differs in two respects: our concept of fatherhood

[ii] See note (ii) in the introduction chapter, p. 22, about the use of the terms 'Black', 'White', and 'Coloured' in this report.

The sign to the ECD centre.
Photo by Damian Sean Samuels.

is extended to the notion of social fatherhood in the early childhood context; and the documentary film format obliges us to feature real social actors in their communities rather than scripted characters.

There is no denying that South Africa experiences some of the most harrowing crimes perpetrated mostly by Black men on other Black men, as well as high levels of intimate and other violence against women and children.[15] We do not believe that narratives about violence should be suppressed. We support the notion that violence, as an extant social problem, should be addressed with urgency. We do, however, view the narratives about men as too often being one-sided, generalised, and void of nuances about men's positive contributions to society.

In response to limited narratives about violence, we decided that, by actively interjecting and producing visual media representations of men doing care work and expressing novel forms of caring masculinities, we would unsettle the often-unfair representations of Black men in society. The documentary features intimate portraits of caring Black male ECD teachers who work in the areas of Hammarsdale and Inchanga, KwaZulu-Natal, in their role as social fathers.

We believe that these men embody the concept of social fathers and that they represent a human resource usually overlooked in care-work policies. In the documentary, they offer new templates and social scripts for being caring men. They demonstrate that it is cool to care, and that caring is not in contradiction to a man's sense of masculinity.

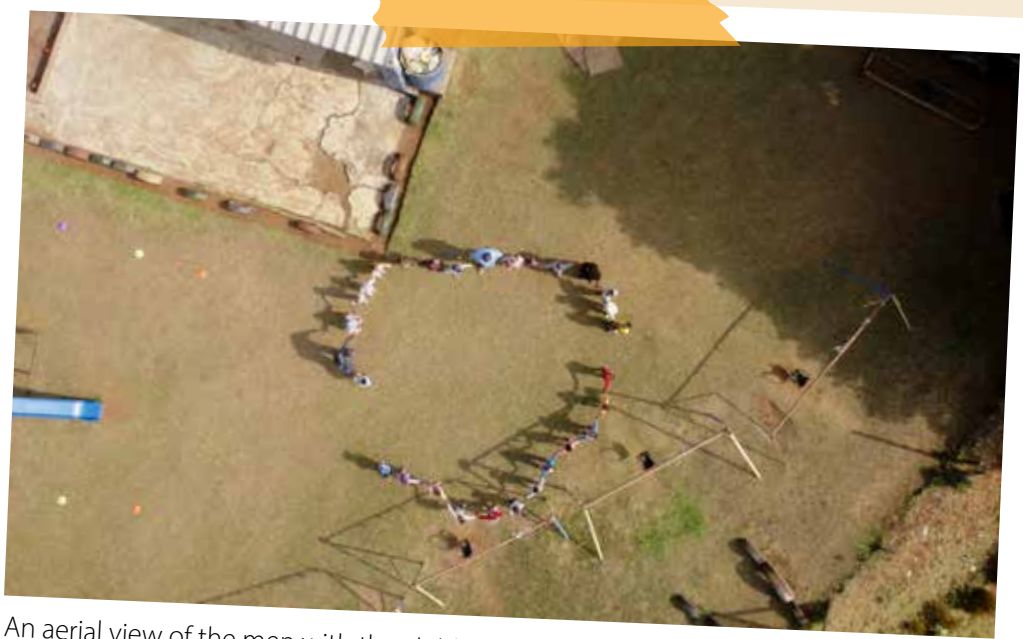
The ECD practitioners also demonstrate that caring as a man fosters social cohesion in a community and inspires empathy. Through open displays of affection and care, these men not only benefit themselves, but those they love, too.

Towards a caring community

The documentary film is structured around the four Black male ECD practitioners' lived experiences, the experiences of their loved ones, and the experiences of the communities impacted by their work. The four call themselves *amaGents* (the gents), which is the working title of the film.

Collaborating on this ongoing documentary film project requires a reciprocity of trust between the ECD practitioners and us as filmmakers. Despite our language, cultural, class, and ethnic differences, we could find common ground as Black men to bridge these divides and agree on the following principles: Firstly, we agree that *amaGents* must be made by Black men about Black men, but the film would be for everyone. Secondly, we believe that challenging demeaning, knee-jerk motifs and taking control of social narratives about Black men is our primary objective.

This set of shared ethical principles are the grounds for the social contract that we have entered into as men, and we are proud of the space we are creating to do so. However, what we have done thus far is only the beginning of a much larger, longer-term project to redefine Black men who openly grapple with their changing roles and purpose in society. Men need to talk and having a non-judgemental space to do so is cathartic.



An aerial view of the men with the children.
Photo by Damian Sean Samuels.

As filmmakers we find that these men, whether conscientiously or by habit, tend to do more care work in their homes and communities because of the nurturing work they do with children. It is the empathy felt by the men in doing care work as a profession that makes them appreciate the value and effort required to do care work in their homes as well.

There are three ways in which these men earn the status of social fathers. The first is that they are receptive to the children in their care, who often referred to them as *'malume'*, a term that literally means uncle but, in a cultural sense, means the brother of the child's mother; the man who plays the role of father if the child is born out of wedlock.

The second reason for their social father status is that they inspire a type of masculinity that involves care – for themselves and of others. Active father involvement is argued to counter forms of masculinity that emphasise male control, lack of emotional availability, and limited involvement in the family and domestic sphere.[16] By extension, this is true for the male ECD practitioners and their active involvement in the care of children.

The third is that they are driven to improve the state of their community. They are beacons of hope for other men who aspire to work as caregivers. They have a passion for education that enhances their work as educators and facilitates their interaction with parents.

Inchanga and Hammarsdale, where these four ECD practitioners are based, are rural communities where the idea of father as the head of the family is dominant. The ECD practitioners, as shown in the documentary, conduct home visits. And because they are males, they will typically engage the mother *and* the father regarding the child's development – rather than only the mother as is largely the case with female ECD practitioners. This is a relatively novel approach in this context, and a positive shift in foregrounding the development of the child as the central and dual responsibility of both parents and not just the mother.

> Through open displays of affection and care, these men not only benefit themselves, but those they love, too.

Highlighting fathers as equally responsible for child development contrasts with prevailing forms of masculinity that emphasise the role of the father solely as a financial provider while negating his latent role as a nurturer.

It is our view that *amaGents* portrays a fairer and more generous, empirically grounded narration of Black men. At the same time, it offers other Black men who watch the film, and who may not know of caring alternatives in the expression of their masculinity, that there are healthier ways to express their own masculinities that will positively impact on those they care about.

A short advocacy-style version of this documentary can be viewed on Fade2Black's Vimeo channel.[iii] The feature-length documentary film is currently in production.

[iii] https://vimeo.com/fade2blackproductions/amagentsshortdoc.

In the next section, we explore existing research on the role of social fathers. We present a typology of social fatherhood that frames the diverse range of relationships between social fathers and the children they 'father'. We highlight the various social, political, cultural, and legal structures that determine who can be a (social) father. And we look at the extent to which social fathers can be involved in children's lives.

Social fathers in South Africa

Co-residence is not synonymous with fatherhood. Proximity is not the only factor contributing to involvement and it also does not necessarily account for the quality of involvement.

At the same time, physical proximity does matter for caregiving. Doing care work, and providing direct emotional support, especially to young children, usually requires being physically close to the child. Fathers who live with their children are more involved in caregiving, emotional support, and play compared to non-residential fathers. It seems that proximity allows for more spontaneous interactions and daily engagement in tasks like feeding, bathing, and helping with schoolwork.[17]

One entry point into social fatherhood may therefore be to understand who the men are that children live with. This is a group of men that could potentially enact care and fathering. The General Household Survey (GHS) indicates that, in 2023, only 35.6% of children lived in the same household as their fathers.

Table 1: Children living with or separated from their biological fathers, GHS 2023

	Separated from biological father	**With biological father**
	19.7% with neither parent	31.3% with both parents
PLUS	44.8% with mother only	4.3% with father only
TOTAL	**64.5% without father**	**35.6% with father**

For the broader category of 'men' (which includes fathers and non-fathers) whom children lived with, the statistics show that 76% of children shared a household with an adult man, while 24% of children lived in homes without any adult men present[18] (see figure 16).

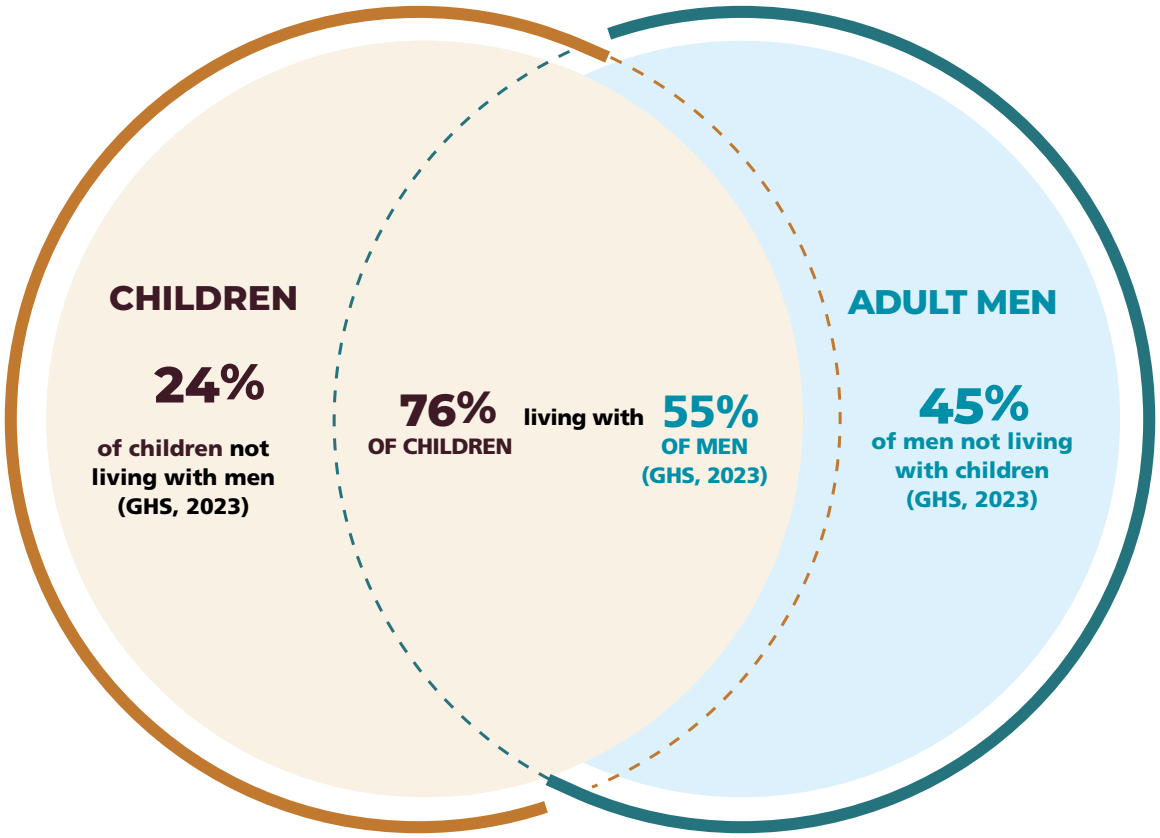
The 76% of children who shared a home with men are made up of 35.6% of children who lived with their biological father, and 40.3% of children who lived with another adult man not their biological father.

In other words, more children in South Africa live with adult men who are not their biological fathers (40.3%) than children who live with their fathers (35.6%). These are likely to be older brothers, uncles, grandfathers, new partners to mothers, or simply tenants or other co-residents. From this pool of men, some *may* act as social fathers, or take on fathering roles.

Social fatherhood also extends beyond the household to family members or other men in children's lives who step into a fathering role for the child.

Regardless of the array of types of social fatherhood and the fact that most children in South Africa share a home with an adult man, men's involvement in caring for children seems to remain low, much lower than women's involvement in care.[19] Given the high number of children who do not live with their biological fathers, it is important that we identify the men in their lives who play an important fathering role, ask questions about the quality of these relationships, and think about how social fathering can provide better support to children. The answers to these questions will help us understand the well-being of men and the children they father, and how to encourage social fathers to become more actively engaged in children's lives.

Figure 16: Children living with men, and men living with children, GHS 2023



Social fathering of kin and others

It has been argued that social fathering is ascribed rather than attained.[20] In this section, we explore the different groups of social fathers and the kinds of care and support they provide for children around them. We focus on studies conducted in South Africa specifically, while drawing on studies from elsewhere to highlight the significance of social fathers in the lives of children and in communities, more broadly.

South Africa has diverse family and household structures, with many families consisting of multiple generations. In this regard, researchers argue that "the African notion of father, then, is a man who enacts the responsibility of caring for and protecting a child".[21] This means that, even if children do not reside with their biological father, there may be another male in the household providing various forms of support such as guidance, material provision, and nurturing. These men often play the role of what has been called *extended* fathers.[22] They nurture and provide children with links to family lineage and access to support in the absence of biological fathers.

The African notion of a father is a man who enacts the responsibility of caring for and protecting a child.

The importance of other male relatives in children's lives in South Africa is highlighted in studies that note that some children and adults refer to children's paternal uncles (*ubaba omncane* or *ubaba omkhulu* in isiZulu), or maternal uncles (the '*bomalome*') as the child's *father*.[23] This group of men is often overlooked in research on fatherhood.[24] Often, they are not

outrightly identified as 'fathers' or even social fathers, though they do fulfil a fathering role. The identity of 'father' is, therefore, still often being limited to biological fathers.

In some townships and low-income settings where young boys and girls do not live with their biological fathers, it is often sports coaches who step up to play the role of a father in the athletes' lives. The role of coaches as social fathers in athletes' lives is documented extensively in studies in some parts of the world[25], but this is barely the case in South Africa. According to one North American study[26], Black male coaches play a significant role in shaping youth, particularly those in low-income and high-risk contexts, where crime levels are high, and such role models can potentially reduce delinquency among young people.

Given the high rates of biological father absence in South Africa and the high levels of unemployment that often leave young people with 'nothing' to do, coaches present an important resource for not only keeping children 'off the streets', but also providing emotional support, guidance, and mentoring. These arguments present a need to focus on this group of men and social fathers more broadly in scholarly research in South Africa.

> Coaches are an important resource for not only keeping children 'off the streets' but also for providing emotional support, guidance, and mentoring.

Most studies that focus on social fathers in South Africa do so from the perspectives of mothers and children.[27] Such a focus neglects the views of social fathers themselves.

Other studies have focused on the poor treatment and sexual abuse of young girls by their social fathers, specifically their stepfathers.[28] Such a focus on abusive social fathers, if there are no other studies to show caring social fathers, can homogenise social fathers as all bad.

There are barely any studies in South Africa that focus specifically on the views and perspectives of social fathers and their roles in children's lives. Even fewer studies explore the ways in which the nature of the relationship between social fathers and children determine the form and quality of support that men offer children, if any at all. This is a missed opportunity to understand and potentially draw on social fathers as a source of social and human capital in children's lives.

A study among young boys in Kwa-Langa, a Cape Town township, found that some of the participants, though they did not have present biological fathers, did have paternal or maternal uncles, brothers, and grandfathers who played an important fathering role in their lives. One of the participants in that study[29] noted:

> It was *utatomncinci* who assumed the role of my father. *Tatomncinci* influenced me so much, especially when it comes to education. If he sees that I do not have shoes for school, he would just buy me as my mother was not working.

Utatomncinci refers to a father's younger brother and is therefore referred to as the child's "junior father". The above quote shows that the participant's paternal uncle played an important role in his life, providing for his educational needs when the mother could not do so, and the biological father was not

present. *Utatomncinci* then played a significant role in ensuring that some of this young man's needs were met.

Children can therefore benefit from care provided by men in their extended family, whether they are the children's biological fathers or not. Most households in South Africa are multigenerational as many adults can simply not afford to live by themselves due to the cost of accommodation and basic living necessities. When family members live together, resources are often pooled to benefit the whole family. Men in these extended care networks[31] can provide for children's material needs and also love, care, guidance, and mentoring.[32]

Case 2 describes men's experiences of assuming the role of father figures for children not biologically their own because of strong cultural expectations and the absence of the children's own fathers.

CASE 2

Social fathering amongst men in Khayelitsha

Khumo Aphane, University of Cape Town

This case presents examples of social fathering and draws on data from a study[iv] on social fathers – namely, men in the family who make economic, emotional, and/or role modelling contributions to children's lives. Such men include uncles, grandfathers, older brothers, and men who are romantically involved with mothers.[33]

A total of 20 semi-structured interviews were conducted with such social fathers in Khayelitsha, a township in the Western Cape. The participants included men who have not biologically fathered a child but were involved in raising, providing, and caring for children in their families, and men who have their own biological children. Three men were not biological fathers of the children for whom they cared. Seventeen participants raised their own biological children as well as one or more children not biologically related to them as their fathers.

Cultural obligations and economic pressures

The study revealed that the participants assumed the role of father figures for children not biologically their own due to strong cultural expectations and the absence of the children's biological fathers.[34] They reported feeling a deep sense of responsibility, driven by family and community expectations. The participants expressed that there was an expectation by the family and extended community that they took on the responsibility to care for children around them. They seemed to think that stepping up to this expectation needed to happen, whether they chose the role of being a father or not. Zungi[v] (50) illustrated this cultural obligation:

> **I have a child that I have adopted as my daughter that we are responsible for. Her grandfather gave her to us, me and my wife, to take care of.** – Zungi

Zungi's words highlight the importance of family obligations in African cultures and the importance of taking care of one's family members. Zungi was taking on the responsibility of raising a child that was "given" to him and his wife by the child's grandfather.

While motivated by cultural duty, the economic burden of taking care of others was a significant challenge. Many of the participants, like Siya (38), had to financially support their families from a young age, often at the expense of their own education and childhood:[35]

[v] Not his real name. This applies to all participants who are named in this case.
[iv] This study is expected to be published in 2025.

> **We are five children altogether. My story of raising them started early 2000 because my father passed away in 1998 and my mother was not working then ... I had to work while I was still in school as my siblings looked to me for financial and emotional support.** – Siya

Such economic challenges were found to be predominant in most of the families as most of these social fathers grew up with a single mother who was either unemployed or worked for very low wages. As a result, some of the social fathers had to quit school to find work and support their siblings and families.[36] The study points to social fathers having a sense of responsibility to care for the young around them amid the financial burden to also support their own biological children and families.

The phenomenon of sibling-parentification was another significant finding. Sibling-parentification refers to a situation where older children took on adult caregiving roles for their younger siblings due to parental absence or death.[37] Parentification can occur in two distinct forms.

The first involves a child becoming a parent to their own parent. This is where the child takes on emotional or caretaking responsibilities for the parent, often managing adult concerns or providing emotional support. The second form, which this case study refers to, occurs when a child becomes a parent to their siblings, assuming duties typically expected of a caregiver, such as looking after siblings' daily needs, managing the household, or providing emotional support.

Occasional sibling caregiving can foster independence and strengthen sibling relationships. However, sibling-parentification can become harmful when the child feels compelled to assume full responsibility for their siblings, often at the expense of their own emotional development.[38]

While some participants gained a sense of responsibility, many expressed the emotional toll this role took on them. Zama (38) shared the frustration he felt from being forced into this role at a young age:

> **I said I can't do this anymore. The experience made me very angry because I was too young to be exposed to such ... I would have to get home and prepare something to cook while hearing my friends play outside. I couldn't go.** – Zama

Similarly, Siya grew up raising his four siblings in a single-parent home where his mother was not contributing financially to the household due to unemployment at that time. He had to work whilst he was still in school as his siblings looked to him for financial and emotional support. Siya, who lost his mother in 2009, shared how he played the role of a father to his siblings and the challenges of being thrust into the role of a caregiver:

> **I was not even able to go and play after school, I had to look after them. It was a hard job.** – Siya

In the quote above, Siya was responding to the question of how he saw himself as a father figure to his siblings. Siya, like most participants in the study, reported that they had to raise their siblings and cousins while still growing up themselves due to a death in the family, financial need in the home, or the absence of a male figure who was available to play that role.[39]

Studies show that sibling support, especially from the eldest children to their younger siblings, facilitates easier adaptation during negative and stressful life events that impact the family, such as the death of a parent, illness, poverty, or economic pressure.[40] However, the quotes from social fathers in this case highlight the emotional strain of parentification, where older siblings like Zama and Siya sacrificed their own childhoods to assume adult responsibilities. This premature caregiving role often left them feeling overwhelmed and resentful, negatively affecting their emotional well-being and personal development.[41]

These findings indicate that older siblings play an essential role in overall family welfare by providing companionship, support, and teaching for younger siblings. Nonetheless, such sibling care can be damaging when responsibility is not age-appropriate, hindering the older siblings' development.[42]

This case shows that, though fulfilling an important role in supporting younger siblings, older siblings (in their roles as social fathers) take on more responsibilities than is appropriate, which can take away from their own developmental processes. Some important questions to consider include an investigation into:

- the long-term effects of social fathering and sibling-parentification on the individuals involved;
- the impact of cultural expectations and economic pressures on the mental and emotional well-being of social fathers; and
- an exploration of the support systems or resources available to social fathers and individuals affected by sibling-parentification to help them navigate their roles and challenges.

An in-depth understanding of the challenges faced by social fathers and the support systems available to them can enable interventions that not only promote social father participation and child well-being, but also can enhance the overall well-being of those who step into this form of parenting.[43]

In addition to culture and tradition, there are other social structures and systems that enable or limit social fathers' ability to actively contribute to the upbringing and nurturing of children in their communities and families. These systems include legal structures, and familial and relational 'structures'. In table 2 on the next page we present a typology of social fatherhood that is framed through the diverse cultural, legal, community, and family practices in South Africa.

These systems and practices determine who identifies or is identified as a father, and the extent of their involvement in a child's life.

An integral map of social fatherhood

We suggest that research on social fatherhood could be mapped into four domains in relation to one another. This framework is titled an Integral Map of Social Fatherhood. The framework is an adaptation of the integral framework developed by Ken Wilber.

Table 2 presents four domains of social fatherhood. These domains of social fatherhood are shaped by varying psychological, cultural, societal, and legal structures and systems that define what the roles are that men play in children's lives, and that possibly determine the extent or limits of their involvement in children's lives.

The four domains depict social fatherhood as determined by the internal and external perspectives of individuals and groups. The intention of this framework is to expand the research and policy lens on social fatherhood to allow for a more complete analysis of, and response to, the challenge of engaging social fathers.

Table 2: An integral map of social fatherhood

	Internal social fatherhood	**External** social fatherhood
Individually identified social fatherhood	**Domain 1 Values** • Identification of father role by child. • Self-identification of fatherhood role by men who give care. • Identification of father role by mothers or other significant caregivers. This group includes but is not limited to men who are neighbours, teachers, religious leaders, or community members in contact with the child or children.	**Domain 2 Documented** • Formalised court orders or governmental acknowledgment of parental responsibilities and rights to individual men. This group includes but is not limited to adoptive fathers, foster fathers, stepfathers, fathers in blended families.
Collectively assigned social fatherhood	**Domain 3 Cultural** • Customary groups, tribes, or extended family and kinship networks. • Religious or faith groups. • Gangs. • Blended families. • Communities.	**Domain 4 Systemic** • Mentors, coaches, workers in diversion programmes. • State systems of childcare, fostering, and protection with the state as parent.

Domain 1 Values (individually and internally defined)

In the first domain, we present those men whose 'identity' as fathers is not based on communal, social, or family structures, and is informal or cultural. The emphasis here lies in the internal values of fatherhood that individuals identify with. These men take on these roles by themselves; or are identified as fathers by the children, mothers, or the child's primary caregiver. This type of identification is informal in that it is not necessarily legally recognised, but rather a subjective individual process.

Domain 2 Documented (individually and externally defined)

In the second domain we have those fathers whose roles are also individually identified (thus is not based on collective or community expectations) and are formalised and documented externally through either processes of legal adoption; foster care, or blended or stepfamilies. These are formal in the sense that there are both socially and legally 'recognised' relationships between these fathers and children.

Domain 3 Cultural (collectively and internally assigned)

In the third domain we group those fathers whose identity has been assigned to them by a collective – by various groups and institutions – based on a set of internal values. These forms of identification remain informal in that they are not externally or formally recognised, but collectively assigned. These include being assigned the role of 'father' by local communities and cultural groups; religious and faith groups; or gangs who often identify a leader who is well respected and considered the 'protector' or 'father' of the group.

Domain 4 Systemic (collectively and externally assigned)

In the fourth and final domain we group those men whose role as fathers has been assigned to them by various external collectives, groups and institutions, and are formally recognised or documented as playing a fathering role in children's lives. This domain includes men in formal mentorship and diversion programmes, and those in state systems of childcare, fostering, and protection, such as men in homes that provide care for vulnerable or abandoned children.

Including social fathers in research and policy

Since more children live with men who are not their fathers than children who live with their biological fathers, it is imperative to understand social fatherhood better. Most of the emerging research on social fatherhood has focused on customary practices or cultural assignment of social fathers through cultural or kinship networks.[46] These types of social fatherhood fall mostly within the first domain (individually and internally defined) and domain 3 (collectively and internally assigned).

The other domains of social fatherhood (individually and externally defined, and collectively and externally assigned) have not received much attention in South African research to date. These domains have been studied in terms of parenting or policy research, but not necessarily with a specific focus on how these domains result in social fatherhood.

When we exclude the full range of social fathers from research on fathering, we communicate that their roles in children's lives do not matter, are neither acknowledged, nor recognised. We sideline them and, thereby, miss out on understanding their own perceptions and views of the roles they can and do play in children's lives.

Consequently, social fathers are excluded from programmes that seek to support fathers. We need a reconstruction of the narrative of fatherhood at the broader societal level so that, when one speaks of a father, it is immediately understood that this phrase includes all types of fathers presented in the typology in table 2. While this may take time, in the meantime, it is important that we explicitly identify and acknowledge social fathers, and study and write about the roles they play in society.

Implications for research and policy

Social fathers are documented in many studies as important in the absence of biological fathers. But social fathers play an equally important role in the case of (physically) present but disengaged biological fathers. Sports coaches and religious figures provide an important source of support for young boys and girls outside of their home and families. However, the presence of social fathers should not be romanticised as some, just like some biological fathers, can be a negative presence in children's lives.

As it stands, we know very little about the experiences and perspectives of social fathers, the thought processes they go through when making the decision to step in and take on a fathering role in the lives of children, and the factors that shape their roles and quality of involvement in children's lives.

These important research questions need to be explored across racial, class, and other demographic factors that inform fathering for men in South Africa. Such research will assist social programme developers and policy decision makers to:

- Invest in understanding the realities of social fathers and inform interventions and fathering programmes targeted at men to equip more men for supporting children in their lives. We acknowledge the efforts of organisations such as Heartlines who, in some ways, are already doing this work (see the case starting on p. 186). For example, they have produced a simple "tip sheet"[46] on how to be a social father, and another that advises young people on how to make the most of their relationship with social fathers[47].
- Contribute to policy and frameworks that are potentially limiting the benefits of social fatherhood for children, men, and families. By expanding the lens on social fatherhood in research, we can contribute to policy on fatherhood that is not only based on biological or customary relationships, and potentially impact legal frameworks that enable the full range of social fatherhood in children's lives.

Conclusion

Reframing fatherhood to include the full spectrum of social fathers is not just an academic exercise – it is essential for building stronger families and communities. When we broaden our understanding and appreciation of who fathers are and how they show up in children's lives, we lay the groundwork for inclusive policies and meaningful social change. This is about more than recognition; it is about fostering environments where all men feel empowered to make a difference, knowing that their contributions – no matter how small – are valued and supported.

Every child deserves to experience love, guidance, and care, whether it comes from a biological parent or a trusted mentor. By shifting societal expectations and investing in the potential of all fathers, we can create a culture where stepping up to care for a child is normalised and celebrated. It is time we embrace a new narrative of fatherhood – one that reflects the diverse realities of caregiving in South Africa and ensures that no child is left without the influence of positive male role models.

Reframing fatherhood to include the full spectrum of social fathers is not just an academic exercise – it is essential for building stronger families and communities.

With ongoing research, intentional programming, and inclusive policies, we can unlock the untapped potential of social fathers. Ultimately, acknowledging the role of these fathers will allow us to build a society where every child, regardless of their family structure, has the opportunity to thrive.

Photo by Kopano Ratele.

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FATHERHOOD AND EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT

Fathima Rawat, Sesame Workshop South Africa;
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Chapter 3

Fatherhood and early childhood development

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Key messages

- Engaged fathers boost young children's cognitive, emotional, and social growth.
- Barriers to father involvement in early childhood development include gender norms and poverty.
- Support programmes and policies can enhance fatherly caregiving roles.
- Father-focused early childhood development interventions can strengthen families and promote gender equity.

This chapter explores the pivotal role that fathers play in the early development of their children. By examining various dimensions of fatherhood, the chapter aims to highlight the profound impact that engaged and nurturing fathers have on young children's cognitive, emotional, and social development. Conversely, it examines how disengaged fathers impact the cognitive, emotional, and social development of young children.

The chapter also explores the barriers and opportunities to father engagement in the context of early childhood development by examining the factors that hinder or promote active paternal involvement and the implications for child well-being.

Fathers' influence on child development

The concept of fatherhood is evolving globally, influenced by changing gender roles and the increasing participation of women in the workforce. As more women join the labour force and family structures diversify, new beliefs about the roles of fathers are emerging. These beliefs, along with various family dynamics and cultural factors, are reshaping the idea of fatherhood, highlighting how the pathways to father involvement and its impact on child development vary across social, cultural, and ecological contexts.[1]

Early childhood development (ECD) refers to the critical period from conception to around eight years of age, emphasising the physical, cognitive, emotional, and social growth of children. This development is supported by essential services such as healthcare, early learning, and parenting programmes.[2]

Within the context of ECD, fatherhood involves the role of engaged and supportive fathers or father figures (also called 'social fathers') who are actively involved in children's lives. It includes providing care, participating in play, offering emotional support, and engaging in various activities with their children.

The Nurturing Care Framework underscores the crucial role of fathers in ECD, emphasising that their involvement is vital for a child's

health, emotional security, and cognitive growth. Engaged fathers help create a nurturing environment that is essential for the child's overall development and well-being.[3] The Nurturing Care Framework outlines a comprehensive approach to ensuring optimal early childhood development by focusing on five key components: good health, adequate nutrition, responsive caregiving, opportunities for early learning, and security and safety.[4]

In South Africa, fatherhood spans across diverse family structures and cultural contexts. The involvement of fathers and other men in ECD is critical for establishing a secure, stimulating, and loving environment, which supports the overall development of children.[5]

Fathers who are engaged in care during pregnancy, birth and early infancy of the child are likely to establish patterns of lifelong involvement, contributing significantly to positive physical, socio-emotional, cognitive, and behavioural outcomes both in childhood and later in life.[6]

Cognitive development and educational outcomes

Research indicates that involved fathers contribute to improved language skills because they have more diverse and complex conversations with children.[7] In addition, children with involved fathers perform better academically due to increased motivation and positive attitudes towards school.[8]

In South Africa, research has highlighted the significant impact of family structure on children's academic and language development. This is confirmed by an international study that demonstrated that children from households with both parents tended to achieve better academically compared to those in father-absent homes.[9]

Similarly, another study[10] found that children with absent or uninvolved fathers exhibited poorer language skills, particularly in syntax,

> The involvement of fathers and other men in ECD is critical for establishing a secure, stimulating, and loving environment, which supports the overall development of children.

pragmatics, and semantics. The author of this study argues that having a male primary caregiver positively influences children's language development, either directly or indirectly. These studies underscore the critical role of father involvement in shaping children's educational outcomes and language proficiency in South Africa.

Long-term studies confirm that children with involved fathers are more likely to pursue and achieve higher levels of education.[11] Additionally, adults who had involved fathers during their formative years often report greater job satisfaction and career success.[12] On the other hand, decreased father involvement is associated with lower academic achievement and diminished educational attainment, thereby constraining children's prospects for future success.

Emotional well-being and positive behaviour

Father involvement is associated with increased emotional security in children. Children with engaged fathers are more likely to have greater self-esteem and reduced levels of depression

and anxiety.[13] Research indicates a link between active father involvement and fewer behavioural problems in children. Engaged fathers are more likely to provide discipline and guidance, which promotes self-control and regulated behaviour in children.[14]

When fathers are involved in caregiving activities, it predicts enhanced cognitive achievement in preschool children and reduced behavioural issues in preschool boys.[15] Conversely, the lack of father involvement can have devastating psychosocial effects on children. Absent or uninvolved fathers can contribute to increased emotional instability in children, deepened senses of insecurity, and increased behavioural issues that impact their overall well-being.[16]

Father absence seems to disproportionately impact boys.[17] For instance, it was discovered that, in Cape Town, boys who grew up without father figures were more prone to engaging in risky behaviours like substance use, violence, and gang activity.[18]

Social skills development

Children with involved fathers tend to have increased social skills and are more likely to form healthy peer relationships. It has been shown that fathers who more often engage in play that encourages problem-solving and social interaction contribute positively to their children's cognitive and social development.[19]

In South Africa, fathers frequently engage in play with infants and toddlers, which is linked to positive developmental outcomes, including improved cognitive and social skills.[20] A more recent study of a sample of 2,298 South African households revealed that over half of fathers participated in caregiving activities at home, and more than 80% engaged in play activities and assisted with homework.

These results indicate that fathers often engage in distinct activities with their children compared to mothers, potentially providing unique developmental advantages.[21]

Development of gender equity values and behaviour

In addition to influencing developmental outcomes, fathers' involvement in caregiving and household activities has been demonstrated to promote gender equality in terms of redistributing unpaid care work fairly amongst women and men.[22] Children internalise concepts of equality and mutual respect through these interactions, likely passing these values on to future generations.

Healthy growth and development through a nurturing environment

The effectiveness of father involvement, however, depends on how actively and meaningfully fathers engage with their children. It is not just about being present, but also about the quality of interactions such as providing emotional support, participating in meaningful activities, and setting positive examples.

The Nurturing Care Framework, launched at the 71st World Health Assembly in 2018 by the World Health Organization, UNICEF, and the World Bank Group, emphasises the vital role of men as nurturing caregivers.[23] It advocates for fathers to take on a central role in parenting, moving beyond merely "helping out" to being fully engaged in nurturing care for children under three years old.

Fathers who consistently engage in their children's lives through responsive communication, supportive play, and consistent guidance significantly impact the children's emotional, cognitive, and social development. This high-quality involvement fosters a nurturing environment that promotes healthy growth and strengthens the parent–child bond.

Challenges, barriers and opportunities

There is much emphasis and research on the lack of involvement of fathers in the lives of Africa's children, and in ECD in particular.

It is not just about being present, but also about quality interactions such as providing emotional support, participating in meaningful activities, and setting positive examples.

Fathers are perceived to be absent from services that improve their children's well-being (such as educational, social, and health services), or physically absent from their children's homes.[24]

Multiple factors have contributed to the lack of father involvement in the lives of their children. Traditionally, caregiving roles are assigned to the mothers, and these gender norms often dissuade fathers from taking on active roles.[25]

Unemployment and irregular employment often constrain fathers' ability to be actively involved in their children's lives due to financial pressures and time constraints. Although many fathers in sub-Saharan Africa may co-reside with their children, poverty, unemployment, high rates of premature mortality among men, and patterns of migrant labour can still lead to limited or inconsistent involvement. Therefore, while co-residence might be present, it does not always translate into meaningful or active engagement with their children.[26]

The General Household Survey (GHS) 2023 reveals that 64.5% of children in South Africa do not live in the same home as their biological

> Supporting fathers in ECD in South Africa involves multiple strategies that address cultural, social, and economic barriers.

father. The 35.6% of children who do co-reside with their father either live with both parents (31.3%) or only with their father (4.3%). (See pp. 28 – 29 for a spread of graphics of fatherhood statistics from the GHS 2023).

These statistics highlight a significant disparity in father–child co-residence in South Africa, emphasising the need for targeted policies and programmes that encourage increased paternal involvement in children's lives. Strengthening father engagement, particularly in early childhood, could have positive effects on family dynamics and child development outcomes. In the next section, we explore several interventions in South Africa that aim to strengthen father engagement in the early years.

Strategies to support fathers' engagement in ECD

The cases discussed in this chapter identify opportunities for enhancing father involvement in children's early development. They provide insights into effective strategies and interventions that support fathers in overcoming barriers and actively engaging in their children's development.

Supporting fathers in ECD in South Africa involves multiple strategies that address cultural, social, and economic barriers. Key approaches include:

Support programmes for fathers: Developing and offering parenting programmes and workshops specifically designed for fathers, including community-based support programmes for fathers to share their experiences, voice their concerns, and seek support.

Public awareness campaigns: Challenging traditional gender roles, flexible work arrangements, paternity leave policies to help fathers balance responsibilities, and inclusive healthcare services that involve fathers in antenatal and postnatal care.

Education and mentoring: Providing educational resources and promoting positive male role models through mentorship programmes and engaging religious and cultural leaders can help shift norms towards inclusive parenting,

Multisectoral collaboration: Collaboration between government agencies, non-governmental organisations, communities, and families.

Research and policy development: Evidence-based research and policy development further enhance these strategies, ensuring the effective promotion of active fatherhood in ECD.

Fatherhood programmes in South Africa that include early childhood interventions aim to promote active father involvement in the developmental stages of young children. These programmes address various socioeconomic, cultural, and health-related challenges, fostering positive father–child relationships, improving family dynamics, and enhancing children's developmental outcomes.

The four cases in this chapter each address a different dimension of fathers' and men's involvement in ECD.

The first case (pp. 62 – 65) describes a book-sharing intervention implemented with fathers and young children by the Mikhulu Child Development Trust.

The second shares the experience of the Heartlines Fathers Matter ECD intervention that focuses on fathers of children using ECD services (pp. 66– 69).

The third case describes a project of the non-profit organisation TREE (Training and Resources in Early Education) to deliberately recruit men as ECD practitioners (pp. 70 –72).

The series of cases conclude with a male caregiver initiative implemented by Sesame Workshop South Africa and unpacks how media and direct interactions can influence norms of male caregiving (pp. 73 – 75).

Conclusion

The role of fatherhood in early childhood development is both vital and complex. Active paternal involvement in the early years of a child's life has significant implications for their physical, emotional, cognitive, and social development. Despite obstacles such as entrenched traditional gender roles, economic constraints, and historical legacies, there is increasing recognition of the critical role that fathers play in child development.

Effective strategies to enhance father involvement encompass tailored parenting programmes, public awareness campaigns, flexible work policies, and inclusive healthcare services. Engaging religious and cultural leaders, along with coordinated efforts among government agencies, non-governmental organisations, communities, and families, is vital in creating an environment that values fatherhood.

Ongoing research and evidence-based policy development are also crucial to enabling fathers to make positive contributions to their children's developmental outcomes, ultimately strengthening families and communities across South Africa.

The cases illustrate a selection of interventions to strengthen family bonds and challenge traditional gender roles. These targeted programmes support and encourage fathers in their caregiving roles, thus fostering more equitable and nurturing environments for children. Continued research and community engagement are vital for ensuring the sustainability and effectiveness of these initiatives, ultimately benefiting families and society as a whole.

CASE 3

Book-sharing as a tool for father involvement and strengthening family bonds

Karen Ross, Mikhulu Child Development Trust;
Carolyn Pringle, Mikhulu Child Development Trust

A Cape Town-based non-governmental organisation, Mikhulu Child Development Trust, has made significant strides in fostering nurturing relationships between fathers and their young children with an innovative "dialogic book-sharing" programme specifically for fathers. This initiative[27], developed in collaboration with Sonke Gender Justice and the University of Cape Town, promotes fathers' engagement with their children by using textless picture books.

By encouraging fathers to spend regular one-on-one time with their children, by sharing a book together, and to ask questions, follow their children's interests, and respond positively to their contributions, the programme aims to enhance communication and emotional connection between fathers and their children.

The community partners who implement the programme do so within a supportive environment that encourages fathers to share their experiences and challenges of fatherhood. Facilitators, who are trained in the book-sharing programme, are experienced in leading men's groups and holding space for discussions on masculinity and fathers' experiences of being fathered.

Combining a discussion space with a new perspective on masculinity and tools for closer father–child bonds has been critical in catalysing the shifts observed in participating fathers. Qualitative interviews with these fathers in various Cape Town communities provide insights into the challenges fathers face, the transformative impact of book-sharing, and how it can strengthen family relationships.

Challenges faced by fathers

Many fathers who were participating in the programme shared their struggles, revealing that societal expectations placed caregiving burdens primarily on women, which denied fathers access to their children if separated from the mother, or discouraged active caregiving. This led to feelings of exclusion among fathers, who might perceive themselves as secondary figures in their children's lives. One father noted:

> **Before book-sharing, I always thought that raising the children was for the mother, and the father wasn't there.** – Father

Such sentiments reflect common beliefs that can hinder fathers from taking an active role in parenting. Cultural pressures surrounding masculinity exacerbate these beliefs. Fathers feel compelled to conform to traditional notions of strength and stoicism, thus suppressing emotions and straining family relationships. A book-sharing facilitator noted:

> **The other issues are around stereotypes regarding being a man; for example, that men do not cry. This is all compounded by unemployment and they [fathers] feel 'weak' when they are not working and not able to support their families.** – Book-sharing facilitator

These issues could lead to unhealthy coping mechanisms such as substance abuse, which further complicated their relationships with their children and partners.

Other fathers longed for greater involvement with their children but faced resistance from the children's mothers, as one father stressed:

> **My ex-girlfriend has my child. Before I did book-sharing, I would have to stay outside and wasn't allowed to see my child. But I spoke to my ex and said, 'I've got this book-sharing thing and want to try it with my son.' She accepted that but only after her parents confronted her about not letting me in. That book-sharing made a whole lot possible for me.** – Father

Book-sharing offers fathers a practical, easy, non-threatening tool for interacting more with their children in regular small increments. In this way, father–child bonds strengthen, and fathers get to know their children better.

To prepare the intervention, the project undertook formative research. Based on feedback from fathers, and among other adaptations to the intervention, the team changed some of the book designs to include more fathers and male caregivers. The images included in this case are examples of the book designs before (on the previous two pages) were changed to include more male caregivers (on this and the next page).

Transformative impact of book-sharing

The book-sharing programme has proven transformative for many fathers. Participants reported significant shifts in their attitudes toward discipline and violence. One father reflected on past behaviour:

> **I feel so bad, I used to beat my daughter. Beatings make children lose confidence.** – Father

Through the programme, fathers learn that violence is not an effective means of discipline, and that nurturing communication is essential for healthy child development. The programme encourages alternative methods of guiding children's behaviour by emphasising positive reinforcement over harsh punishment. This shift in perspective has led to profound changes in family dynamics. One father explained:

> **The book-sharing programme changed the kind of person I was. Even with my wife, I'm not so aggressive anymore. The programme gave me a different perspective and helped me not to do the same things to my children as my father did [to me].** – Father

These insights illustrate how book-sharing not only strengthens the father–child bond but also enhances communication within the entire family unit and shifts perceptions of what it means to be a father.

Strengthening family relationships

As fathers became more engaged through book-sharing, they reported improvements in relationships with their partners and extended family. The programme fosters an environment where fathers can openly discuss their experiences and challenges in a safe space and subsequently with family members, leading to greater emotional intimacy and understanding. One father shared:

> **My children call my name and cry when I leave the house now. Before it was just their mother who was close to them but now, I am also. At least I feel like I'm part of the family now.** – Father

Another father stated that his priorities changed since starting book-sharing:

> **I could see the connection growing between me and my child, not only the child but also his mother and my mother-in-law. The whole family dynamic changed.** – Father

Such newfound closeness signifies a shift from traditional male gender roles of disconnection towards a more collaborative family structure.

Conclusion

The Mikhulu Child Development Trust's Fatherhood Book-Sharing Programme has led to positive changes in men, including shifts in gender perceptions, better parent–child bonding, and reduced aggression. While these changes cannot be attributed solely to the book-sharing programme, it is evident that the increased activity between father and child through book-sharing catalyses multiple shifts within the father, and this plays out in different ways within the fathers' various relationships.

By equipping fathers with simple tools, which centre on responsive parenting, the programme enables effective communication and meaningful engagement with their children. Providing a non-judgemental space where traditional views on fatherhood and masculinity can be questioned, the programme not only transforms individual families but also contributes to a broader cultural shift towards nurturing, non-violent parenting practices.

The positive outcomes underscore the critical role that supportive interventions play in reshaping fatherhood and enhancing family relationships.

For more information: https://mikhulutrust.org/who-we-work-with/parents-and-caregivers.

CASE 4

Fathers matter: Equipping fathers to partner in their children's education

Simone Gregor, Heartlines

The Heartlines Fathers Matter Early Childhood Development Programme seeks to build awareness and create a national conversation about why fathers matter in the lives of children; and to create a supportive environment and share resources for organisations and churches to promote positive fatherhood. It forms part of a broader Fathers Matter programme that was established in 2019 by Heartlines, a non-governmental organisation that promotes positive values in society.

There are some attitudes and beliefs that cause men to think that they have no role to play in being hands-on caregivers for their children. As explained by this male toy librarian:

> **Fathers are not involving themselves so much because they think that children should be taken care of by women.** – Sizwe[i]

A female ECD practitioner went even further:

> **Mothers don't trust fathers with taking care of children.** – Thandeka

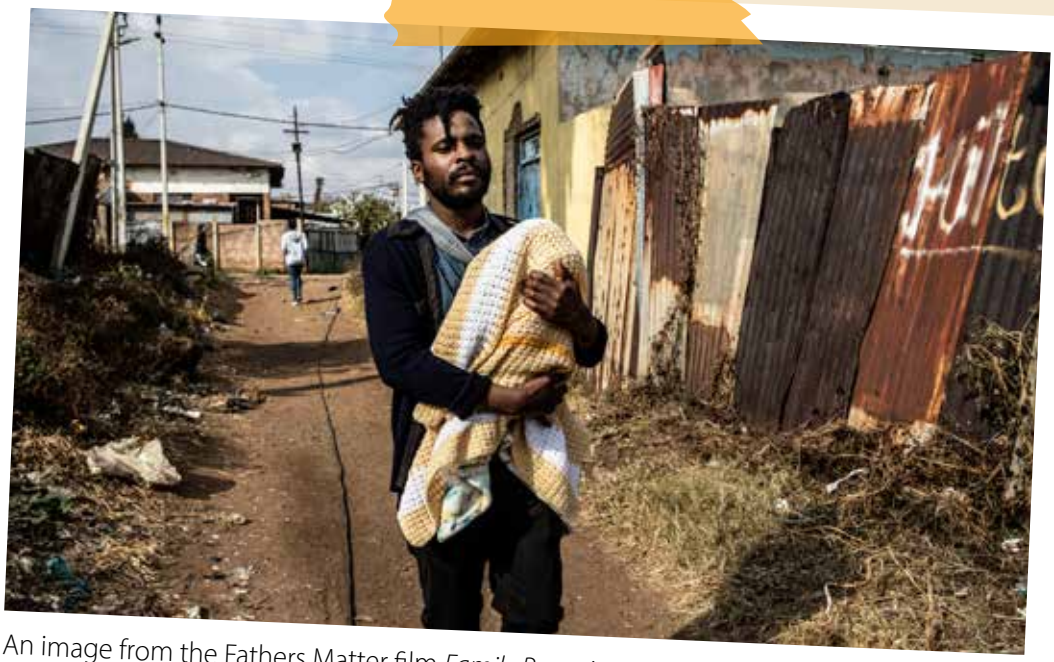
The Heartlines programme aims to give ECD practitioners a clear understanding of the 'why' and 'how' of father involvement to equip fathers better to be more involved in their children's lives, especially in their early development years and education. Heartlines is grateful to its donors, especially Innovation Edge, for its support to this programme.

The Fathers Matter Toolkit for ECD Practitioners

The core resource of the programme is the Fathers Matter Toolkit for ECD Practitioners. The toolkit was formulated on the basis of research with over 80 ECD practitioners across South Africa, and those working in this field, and was reviewed by a curriculum specialist.

This programmatic intervention begins with a series of training workshops and has the potential to cascade wider as a train-the-trainer model. Resource training organisations who attend the toolkit workshops will then facilitate workshops using the same material. In the case of ECD principles and/or practitioners, the hope is that they implement the programme Principals at their own ECD centres.

[i] Not his real name. This applies to all persons who are named in this case.



An image from the Fathers Matter film *Family Portrait*. Photo by Mark Lewis.

The toolkit consists of a written user's guide and a facilitator's guide, accompanied by four short video clips, and covers the topics of: 1. why fathers matter in the context of ECD; 2. the father-friendly ECD centre; 3. helping fathers to be partners in their children's learning journey; and 4. educating mothers and female caregivers about the role of fathers.

At the time of writing this case, the video resources were available in Sesotho, isiZulu, and Afrikaans. Subject to funding and expressed need, there may be a possibility of translation into Setswana and isiXhosa.

Rolling out the toolkit

To date, over 200 representatives and members of national, provincial, and local ECD organisations have attended an online Fathers Matter toolkit workshop. There have also been several in-person Fathers Matter toolkit workshops, a few of which were facilitated by GROW ECD, a local non-profit early learning social enterprise. The majority of the in-person workshops and other information sessions for ECD practitioners and stakeholders were held in the Western Cape.

Attendees reiterated that the ECD sector is not exempt from the pervasive societal belief that a father's only role is simply to provide money. The training was thus welcomed by ECD practitioners who seek to involve fathers in a more hands-on manner in their children's lives at ECD level.

One of the most rewarding aspects of the training was that the ECD practitioners were getting an opportunity to reflect on their own attitudes towards father involvement. A training facilitator for a resource training organisation that cascaded the programme further in Gqeberha in the Eastern Cape province explained:

> **The workshop was challenging for practitioners because it made them face the reality about the male figures in their lives. This was necessary so that, when repeating the process at their ECD centres, they are able to provide support to fathers without being judgemental or biased. A safe space was created for these hard conversations. The atmosphere was positive and practitioners were opening up and sharing their personal experiences.**
> – Nosicelo

Fear, time, and human resources are challenges

However, Nosicelo also noted that the ECD practitioners who she was training anticipated that encouraging father involvement might cause fear:

> ... making a big thing of involving fathers will scare them [fathers], especially if they are not involved at all in the ECD centre.

There is a need for ongoing communication with practitioners who implement and adapt the toolkit as using it requires support and reinforcement to turn recommended practices into habits.

Similarly, a training facilitator for Preschools 4 Africa, a resource training organisation in Gauteng, mentioned that, while "principals [understood] the importance of why it [father involvement] must be done, fear is the biggest factor for them, but they see the need".

While the cascading approach can be adapted for different contexts, for example creating short ECD practitioner-supervised learning opportunities for fathers, given the scarcity of time and human resources in the sector, a train-the-trainer model may not always yield a high level of implementation.

Although there is a strong interest from ECD practitioners, resource training organisations and others, such as social workers, in attending the toolkit workshops, few proceed to facilitate workshops in their own context.

Toolkit "helpful" to break stereotypes

Despite the time limitations, the response of ECD resource training organisations and practitioners to training of this nature has been surprisingly positive. The positives outweigh the fears around the programme training, or any social obstacles that may exist.

One participant said that she "learned that fathers also need to bond with children without fear and that they must make quality time for growing them holistically". She went on to mention that the toolkit training was "definitely helpful to break stereotypes in societies and still ensure that children are safe with male caregivers".

There is a need for ongoing communication with those who implement and adapt the toolkit as using it requires support and reinforcement to turn recommended practices into habits.

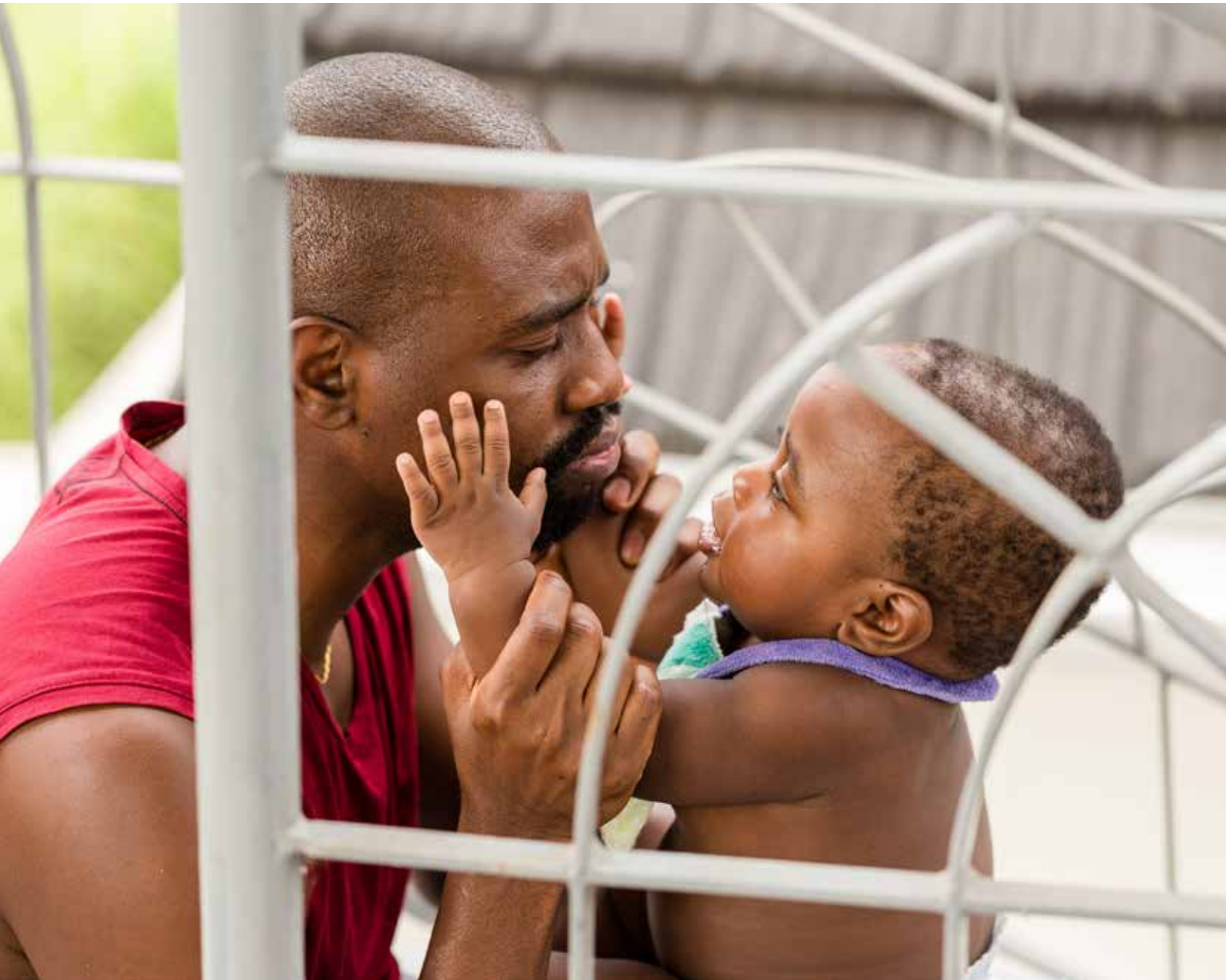
Plans to refine and grow the toolkit

Over time, our approach has shifted from self-administered tracking of father involvement to telephonic and fieldworker-administered surveys. This feedback from ECD practitioners and resource training organisations will be used to refine the toolkit, gauge the impact, and offer deeper Fathers Matter training content.

There are additional topics that have been raised numerous times in workshops for possible inclusion in the toolkit. These include father inclusion in the context of complex relational dynamics between parents; and how to address cultural obstacles to father involvement, such as *inhlawulo* (a payment due to an unmarried woman's elders by a man if he makes her pregnant; see key terms on p. 10), in a constructive manner.

In anticipation of an increased interest in the programme around the time of Father's Day, lesson plans on the topic of father involvement were circulated. During that time, the Fathers Matter ECD Programme also received a few invitations from ECD centres to address fathers on the importance of father involvement.

For more information: www.heartlines.org.za/fathers-matter/ecd



CASE 5

Empowering men as early childhood development teachers in KwaZulu-Natal

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A transformative initiative in Hammarsdale, KwaZulu-Natal province, was launched by Training and Resources in Early Childhood Education (TREE) after a request from a major funder to address both gender disparity in the ECD sector and the educational needs of low-income communities.

TREE is a non-profit organisation that specialises in ECD resources and training. TREE's vision is to become a globally recognised institution and a thought leader in the advancement of universal and quality early childhood education.

The project involved selecting a group of 40 men from low-income communities through ECD forums to become ECD teachers. Informed by global evidence that fewer than 3% of men are involved in teaching in ECD[28], the project approach has aimed to challenge traditional gender roles, provide meaningful employment, and improve early childhood education in underserved areas.

> Globally, fewer than 3% of men are involved in teaching in early childhood development.

Programme overview

The programme commenced with a meticulous community consultation process to ensure that the selection of participants was inclusive and representative of local needs. Engaging with community leaders, parents, local organisations, and ECD forums was essential to identifying individuals who were both committed to their communities and interested in educational development. Following this, the 40 men were chosen and provided with comprehensive training to become ECD teachers.

Training and support

Participants underwent a rigorous accredited training programme (ECD NQF level 4). The programme also offered ongoing mentorship and support, including regular check-ins, peer support groups, and access to additional resources for professional growth. This structured support was crucial in helping the men transition effectively into their new roles.

The sign to the ECD centre.
Photo by Damian Sean Samuels.

Impact and outcomes

The impact of the initiative has been significant. The newly trained male ECD teachers have introduced a fresh perspective into the sector, demonstrating that men can effectively contribute to early childhood education. Their involvement has not only challenged gender stereotypes but also enhanced the learning environment for children. The presence of male teachers has provided diverse role models and contributed to a more inclusive educational experience.

The male teachers have emerged as role models and advocates for education, reinforcing the programme's positive impact on the community. Many of them have since pursued further education and deepened their interest in the field of ECD, highlighting the initiative's lasting impact.

Challenges and lessons learned

The initiative faced challenges, particularly in overcoming traditional gender norms and scepticism about men in caregiving roles. Addressing these issues required dedicated community engagement and education.

One key lesson from this programme is the importance of community consultation in driving successful outcomes. Involving local stakeholders such as ECD forums in the selection process helped build trust and acceptance, while ongoing professional development and mentorship were vital for addressing participants' challenges and ensuring their success.

Conclusion

The case of men from low-income communities in KwaZulu-Natal entering the ECD sector, driven by a funder's request and informed by community consultation, demonstrates the potential of inclusive and innovative approaches to early childhood education.

By empowering men as ECD teachers, the programme has enhanced educational outcomes for children, promoted gender equality, and provided valuable employment opportunities. This initiative serves as a model for similar efforts that aim to improve early childhood education and address gender disparities in underserved communities.

For more information: https://tree-ecd.co.za/

CASE 6

Takalani Sesame: Transforming gender norms and advancing child well-being through innovative father engagement

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Factors like poverty, unemployment, and traditional gender norms limit father involvement in early childhood development (ECD) in South Africa. Socioeconomic constraints and cultural expectations often confine fathers to the role of financial providers, with limited engagement in responsive caregiving. Migration and urbanisation further contribute to family separations that reduce fathers' daily involvement in parenting.

Globally, work–life balance issues, inadequate parental leave, and entrenched gender roles restrict fathers' participation in ECD.[29] Long working hours and inflexible job conditions, coupled with societal expectations that caregiving is a mother's responsibility, hinder father involvement. The absence of resources and support systems for fathers underscores the need for policies and cultural changes to promote active fatherhood.[30] However, even where these resources are available, fathers do not participate in, or drop out at higher rates, from parenting programmes than women.[31]

Inadequate father involvement in responsive caregiving and household activities impede the promotion of gender equity as children may fail to internalise values of equity and mutual respect when their fathers are not actively engaged in these roles.[32] This absence of positive role modelling often leads to the reinforcement of traditional gender norms and diminishes the potential for fostering equitable attitudes in future generations.[33]

From the Takalani Sesame feature: Zikwe is a social father to the triplets who are his sister's children.

Recent initiatives by Sesame Workshop South Africa (SWSA) have focused on dismantling stereotypes through gender-transformative messaging that are promoting unpaid nurturing care by fathers, regardless of their abilities, in all aspects of ECD.

Prevailing gender norms and roles in South Africa

Despite South Africa's considerable progress in gender equality at the policy level since the end of apartheid, gender inequity remains prevalent in everyday life and culture. This inequity is deeply rooted in a historical and traditional patriarchal system. The disparities that begin at home can continue throughout a child's school years, influencing their perceptions of what they can and cannot achieve. Such beliefs are further reinforced by the lack of support for gender equity observed in schools and society.[34]

To address entrenched gender norms, SWSA has engaged key adults, especially fathers, to model positive gender identity and inclusivity, thus fostering a gender-equitable ecosystem for children's early development.

Fatherhood and play-based learning

Research demonstrates that when fathers are empowered to engage in play, it positively impacts their children's development and helps break down long-standing gender biases.[35] This shift benefits not only the children but also fosters a more inclusive and supportive environment, strengthens family bonds, and promotes more equitable approaches to parenting.[36]

Takalani Sesame: Transforming gender norms through father engagement

SWSA launched "Takalani Sesame: Transforming gender norms and advancing child well-being through father engagement", a multi-year intervention to enhance father involvement in responsive care through play-based learning.

Play Workshops

Based on previous play-based learning initiatives with mothers only, SWSA replicated the implementation design with a focus on fathers. To shift gender norms, SWSA engaged fathers more frequently and directly, reaching over 400 families through 192 "Play Workshops" in Gauteng and the Eastern Cape provinces. Play facilitators guided fathers through various play experiences, including traditional games from their childhood. These activities served as a nostalgic reminder of the joy fathers experienced during their own childhood, and helped fathers observe and guide their children's play.

In rural Eastern Cape, recruitment of participating fathers was sluggish and attrition was higher compared to Gauteng. SWSA successfully mitigated this issue by renaming the workshops "Imbizos of Play". Recruitment improved significantly after the name change.

Evaluation and pivoting to broadcast and media approaches

SWSA engaged an external service provider for formative testing with the aim of refining the Play Workshops/Imbizos of Play approach. Despite excellent qualitative

outcomes, the direct service model was not cost-effective, prompting a pivot to promoting gender equity through broadcast and digital platforms.

The aim of the pivot of the project was to develop and implement multimedia video content and targeted digital campaigns to promote and normalise fathers' engagement in safe and gender-equitable play with their young children, and to promote overall gender equity among children and caregivers.

The first phase of the project has enabled SWSA to create an evidence-informed educational framework, refine key messages through stakeholder consultations, and produce 20 Takalani Sesame segments in five official South African languages. The Ndebele and Sesotho translations were launched on 10 December 2024 in Takalani Sesame Season 15 on SABC 2, screening at 15h00 every weekday.

To inform SWSA's social media campaign, a service provider conducted social media listening research. Pertinent keywords were developed collaboratively, enabling the service provider to scrutinise audience preferences, sentiments, and opinions. This thematic analysis guided the creation of content and key messages for the social media campaign. The findings helped SWSA to produce eight data-driven three-minute adult-facing videos. The campaign, launched in September 2024, has achieved 11.1 million video views and 20.9 million social media impressions.

> The emphasis on involved fathers and challenging traditional gender roles fosters inclusivity and models equitable behaviours – all in support of a holistic development for children.

Parents are encouraged to follow the journey on Facebook and YouTube by using the hashtag **#BondThroughPlay**.

At the time of publication, Sesame Workshop South Africa was awaiting the first draft of a quasi-experimental design assessment of the impact of the project's multimedia content on children's and fathers' knowledge, attitudes, and behaviour changes.

Conclusion

SWSA's Takalani Sesame Project is significantly contributing to ECD by promoting positive gender norms and advancing child well-being. It emphasises involved fathers, challenges traditional gender roles, fosters inclusivity, and models equitable behaviours – all in support of a holistic development for children. This project, as discussed in chapter 8, is among the few promising evidence-informed and evidence-based parenting interventions currently available for fathers in South Africa, making it an important resource in the efforts to promote men's active involvement in caregiving.

For more information: https://takalanisesame.org.za.

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FATHERHOOD AND RELIGION IN SOUTH AFRICA

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Chapter 4

Fatherhood and religion in South Africa

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Key messages

- Religious institutions shape fatherhood norms and societal expectations.
- Christianity encourages fathers to be spiritual leaders, decisionmakers, providers, and nurturers.
- Islam emphasises fathers as moral guides, protectors, and providers.
- African traditions shape fatherhood with cultural, spiritual, and community roles.
- Religious institutions can play a crucial role in supporting families and promoting family well-being.

Religious and traditional institutions have significantly defined the fabric of South African society as holders of cultural and social influence and decision-making power. An understanding of these institutions' pivotal role in forming norms that influence behaviour provides greater insights into appreciating the social behaviour of South Africa's fathers.

Due to the intricate history of South Africa – influenced by colonialism, apartheid, and post-apartheid developments – systems, structures, cultural diversity and religion all play a significant role in shaping the diversity of everyday life. South Africa is officially a secular state with functional freedom of religious association. Christianity is the dominant religion in the country, but many follow traditional African beliefs, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism Islam, and many others.[1] This diverse socio-religious landscape has a widespread impact on male identities across all age groups and sectors of South African society.[2]

This chapter focuses on the messages about fatherhood that are communicated within the context of religions in South Africa. It aims to explain how such messages impact how fathers view their societal roles. Complementary to this discussion, the chapter includes a case on a highly structured value-based programme that uses the well-proven concept of mentorship as a model to extend and promote social fatherhood in South Africa.

The context of how faith has influenced masculinities in South Africa

Much of the current research in South Africa is centred on studying how faith-based organisations, spiritual movements, and churches address sexual behaviour and the risks of HIV among their members.[3] However, there is little research that investigates the ways that religious beliefs and spirituality can help promote non-violent behaviour among men and encourage them to be more supportive and violent-free partners in line with achieving gender equality. Despite evidence that

churches and traditional leaders often reinforce conventional ideas of masculinity in young men and fathers, there is little examination of how to challenge these practices and hold men accountable for maintaining gendered power and violence.[4]

The connection between fatherhood and religion has been explored in different religious beliefs, especially when considering individual family dynamics.[5] However, recent research has delved into the intersection of fatherhood and religion, particularly in South Africa.[6] Over the past 15 years, much attention has been given to traditional leaders in rural communities, low literacy rates, and poverty as they pertain to welfare solutions and spiritual leaders' influence.[7]

Nevertheless, debates about the role of men and fathers in religion and spirituality continue in South Africa, especially within church services, revival movements, and men's groups.[8]

Despite evidence that churches reinforce conventional ideas of masculinity in young men and fathers, there is little examination of how to challenge these practices and hold men accountable for maintaining gendered power and violence.

Historical perspectives on fatherhood in South Africa

Fatherhood in South Africa has been shaped by historical and contemporary social forces, particularly colonialism, apartheid, and the transition to democracy. During apartheid, race and class significantly influenced understandings of fatherhood, and with Black[i] fathers often absent from households due to the migrant labour system.[9] This system disrupted family structures and contributed to higher rates of absent fathers.

Furthermore, the socioeconomic conditions resulting from these historical injustices often relegate fathers to the role of economic providers who are frequently absent. It has been argued that the absence of fathers has profound implications for family dynamics and child development as children mostly grow up without the involvement of their fathers.[10]

Fatherhood and the idea of masculinity are also closely related in South Africa, where cultural and religious narratives have a significant influence. Fathers are viewed as authoritative characters in traditional ideas of masculinity, which can result in a limited understanding of fatherhood that ignores emotional participation and caring components.[11]

Religious influences on fatherhood

While various religions are followed in South Africa, Christianity accounts for 82%[12] of the total church population. Christianity consists of various denominations including Catholicism; Protestantism; and African independent church

[i] See the note ii in the introduction chapter, p. 22, about the use of the terms 'Black', 'White', and 'Coloured' in this report.

groups (such as the Christian Zion Church) that comprise 7% of the total Christian.[13]

In 2023, Islam was practised by nearly 1.7% of the total population, while Hinduism was practised by just over 2.4% of the total population.[14]

The influence of Christianity on social life in South Africa is significant, particularly in areas such as family structures and fatherhood. In Christianity, fathers are often seen as those who are expected to live sacrificial lives for their families.[15]

While followers of Islam make up a small percentage of religious people in South Africa, its contribution to social life is significant. Similar to the Christian fathers, Muslim fathers – like fathers in general – are expected to be responsible for the financial and spiritual well-being of their families.[16] The importance of family and community is emphasised in Islamic teachings, which shapes social expectations.

In African traditional churches, the spirits of ancestors play a significant role as their guidance is sought for important events and decisions.[17] In most African religions, the importance of community and collective responsibility is emphasised, which shapes social interactions and expectations.

A 2018 study on fatherhood and spirituality examined different ways in which spirituality influences the fathering experiences of men from diverse religious backgrounds in South Africa.[18] This research underscores the importance of integrating spiritual insights into parenting, ultimately fostering deeper connections between fathers and their children.

The study showed that some households that practise traditional and cultural beliefs were expected to depict the role of fathers as that of the authoritative head of the family, playing more of a 'provider' role and contributing

less to responsive parenting activities in the household. This was true for many households where fathers might seldom engage in supporting the family's day-to-day care needs.

A more recent study on religious influence and fatherhood discovered that absent fathers and their lack of involvement in religious communities had a major impact on how they interacted with their children, whether in an authoritarian or nurturing manner.[19]

A study of Christian and Muslim fathers in South Africa found that religious support among fathers played a role in the living situations of children born out of wedlock.[20] This finding illustrates the significance of religious beliefs held by fathers and emphasises that a faith community not only imparts teachings but also models behaviour in parent–child relationships according to the particular faith.

Attending religious services has been found to have a positive effect on the relationship between fathers and their children, while it also fostered better communication between father and child, made their relationship less conflict-ridden, and even affected the quality of a father's love and affection.[21]

Christianity

In this section, we look at the influence of Christianity on fatherhood in South Africa and discuss the contribution of patriarchy and the notion of the father as a leader and provider. We also look at negative masculinities, loving and indiscriminate fathers, moral authority, and the effects of not addressing societal norms which impact fatherhood.

Patriarch, leader, and provider

In the New Testament, the role of a father as the leader of a family is held in high esteem.[22] It emphasises the importance of fatherhood as a reflection of God's paternal love[ii], and encourages fathers to be spiritual leaders[iii], providers, and nurturers[iv]. In South Africa, Christianity significantly impacts fathers' behaviour and fatherhood, historically and currently. The three historical impacts include reinforced patriarchal authority, fatherly love and responsibility, and missionary influence.[23]

Reinforced patriarchal authority emphasises fathers' roles as spiritual leaders and decision-makers. Fatherly love and responsibility emphasise Christian teachings that a father is responsible for providing for and nurturing their children.[24] The missionary influence introduces a preference towards Western-style nuclear families, altering traditional African family structures, and emphasising individual father–child relationships.[25]

Positive masculinities

The current influence and impact of Christianity on fathers and fatherhood shape masculinities and fatherhood programming. Christian fathers are expected to provide spiritual guidance, discipline, and nurturing.[26] Christianity continues to shape traditional ideals of masculinity, which influence fathers' roles and expectations. One study, which highlights fatherhood programmes by faith-based organisations, illustrates that these interventions promote positive fathering practices and responsible masculinity.[27]

Loving fathers

The New Testament[v] emphasises that Christ is the head of every man, and the man is the head of every woman. It also states that a husband is the head of his wife, mirroring Christ's role as the head of the Church.[vi] It has been argued that husbands are expected to love their wives in the same way that Christ loves His church.[28] These religious beliefs are contrary to the South African Constitution which promotes equality between men and women.

[ii] Ephesians 3:14–15.
[iii] 1 Corinthians 11:3; Matthew 25:14–30.
[iv] Luke 11:11–13.
[v] Corinthians 11:3.
[vi] Ephesians 5:23.

> The church does place moral authority on fathers while not providing adequate support to ensure fathers are supported to lead their families positively.

The New Testament provides a glimpse of promising descriptions of fatherhood. For example, in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus was indignant when the disciples rebuked those who brought the children to Jesus to pray for them. Jesus said to them, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these."[vii] Through this statement, Jesus challenged the prevailing culture where children had no status in society. He demonstrated the protective role of fatherhood.

This view is affirmed in at least three references in the New Testament where God is addressed with a term of endearment. The term 'abba', meaning 'daddy', appears in the New Testament three times[viii], where Jesus and Paul addressed God as "Abba, Father", definitive of a loving relationship between a father and a child. As such, Christianity has shaped how fatherhood is understood in families in South Africa through its scriptures that highlight the role of a "father" and how this positively impacts and influences children and the complex family dynamics and societal expectations.

[vii] Mark 10:10.
[viii] Mark 14:36; Romans 8:15; Galatians 4:6.
[ix] Corinthians 11:3.

The influence of Christianity on moral authority

The church has been criticised for over-emphasising the support it provides for the notion of the inherent moral authority of fathers. This is especially evident in South Africa, where historical, social, and economic factors have disrupted the traditional family structure. Critics[29] argue that emphasising fathers' moral authority can lead to the marginalisation of mothers' roles, framing them as secondary or supportive figures rather than equal partners in parenting, especially around the notion of "father as the leader of a family"[ix].

Due to the biblical definition of a father as a leader of the family, traditional guidelines for fatherhood are no longer effective, and both traditional churches and society still place significant responsibilities on fathers. Despite this, the church does place moral authority on fathers while not providing adequate support to ensure fathers are supported to lead their families positively.

In sum: Christianity and other biblical religions have played a significant role in shaping traditions and expectations of families in South Africa, especially in modern times where the role of fathers is viewed as that of protectors, providers, and the moral authority lead.

Fatherhood impacted by failure of Christianity to address structural issues

It has been observed that the church has become more focused on providing moral support for fathers rather than addressing the structural issues that prevent fathers from being involved in their children's lives.[30] The church's emphasis on encouragement and guidance for positive fatherhood is believed to have led to a lack of engagement with the social and economic contexts in which fatherhood is lived out.[31]

It has been observed that the church needs to move beyond providing moral support

for fathers and start addressing the systemic barriers to involvement in their children's lives, such as poverty and unemployment.[32] The church's overemphasis on support and guidance for fathers to lead their families has led to an unequal care burden on women and the community.

Islam

In this section we look at the Islamic teachings on fatherhood, including the father as a moral compass, guardian and protector; and the father as provider, guide, and role model.

A moral compass, guardian, and protector

Muslim fathers are encouraged to be role models of good character and moral values as they are equally responsible for teaching the child religious moral values and ensuring that the child has good moral character and habits.[33] If the father meets this obligation, the child will grow up to be obedient and responsible. The Quran emphasises the responsibility of fathers as guardians and protectors[x] of good character and moral values[xi].[34]

Provider, guider, and role model

In Islam, Friday is considered a sacred day for congregational prayer (*muštād*), where men and boys must pray in congregations of three or more members. Fathers are generally seen as the only people who can perform the *Juma* (Friday) midday prayers in Islam. It is also the father's responsibility to discipline the child, using a gentle method of admonishment if the child makes a mistake or is about to, as the child has a soft heart, and the father is supposed to be patient and understanding towards a child who cannot resist or fully comprehend their negative behaviour. It has been shown[35] how Islam influences fatherhood by emphasising that fathers take responsibility for their children's upbringing, education, and well-being[xii].

Role modelling is advocated in Muslim society and fathers are encouraged to model good behaviour and character for their children. The Islamic Hadith/Islamic Reports[xiii] on responsibility states that:

"Every one of you is a shepherd and is responsible for his flock. The leader of people is a guardian and is responsible for his subjects. A man is the guardian of his family and he is responsible for them. A woman is the guardian of her husband's home and his children and she is responsible for them. The servant of a man is a guardian of the property of his master and he is responsible for it. No doubt, every one of you is a shepherd and is responsible for his flock."[xiv]

Islam significantly influences fatherhood practices in the South African Muslim community through its teachings on parental responsibilities, rights, and the moral framework guiding family dynamics. Islam places a strict emphasis on providing for the families' financial needs.[xv]

For example, Muslim fathers are primary mentors in teaching their children their skills and trade for business. Transgenerational grooming is common as many Muslim fathers groom their children to assume roles and responsibilities from a very young age. A Muslim father is tasked with creating a loving and peaceful atmosphere for his family; and to guide them towards a life of faith, success, happiness, and righteousness.

[xii] Quran 4:135.
[xiii] 'Hadith' refers to the "sayings and actions of the Prophet Muhammad (SAW), as well as reports about his teachings, actions, and personal characteristics .... [it] is a central source of Islamic theology and law and is considered to be second only to the Quran in importance". Source: www.islamicity.org/hadith
[xiv] Abdullah ibn Umar, In Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī 7138, Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim 1829.
[xv] Quran 2:233.

Indigenous African religions

In this section we look at culture, African tradition, and religion and the influence of these on South Africa's fathers and fatherhood. We also look at how fathers' teachings are influenced by culture and what this means to fathers and fatherhood.

Tradition, culture, and ubuntu

While not all fathers associate themselves with these beliefs, Africans have a strong connection to a wealth of traditional religious beliefs. These beliefs are deeply intertwined within everyday life, culture, and social values, making it challenging to separate traditional religious beliefs from social values.

The traditional African adherence to religious principles, such as goodness and kindness, can be summarised as ubuntu, or *botho*.[36] Many traditional African religions and laws interact with nature with a sense of respect for natural laws.[37] This leads to consistent respect and harmony between the African person and the environment, as every element of creation is seen as possessing a spiritual aspect that is respected and acknowledged by the African people.[38]

There is not a single definition that fully captures all the indigenous African religions. These religions are best understood as those that have been practised by Africans and originate from their indigenous knowledge, cultural beliefs, and social values.[39] African religions existed before colonialism, but encounters with the European world led to their classification as animism (superstition beliefs), paganism (outside the mainstream beliefs of Islam, and/or Christianity), or heathenry (modern-day paganism), among others.

South Africa is home to various indigenous African religions, such as the Zulu religion among the Zulus, the Xhosa religion among the Xhosas, and the Pedi religion among the Pedis.[40] Each traditional religious or spiritual group has traditional healers and operates independently. While they may share core beliefs and values, their cultural, spiritual, and traditional practices differ.[41]

These indigenous African religions are inherently spiritual, are closely tied to cultural practices that promote patriarchy, and have clearly defined roles for fatherhood. With this in mind, fathers and fatherhood in some communities in South Africa are shaped by:

- **Ancestral reverence:** Fathers are expected to honour and connect their children to their ancestral heritage
- **Cultural preservation:** Fathers pass down cultural traditions, customs, and values to their children.
- **Patriarchal authority:** Fathers are often seen as the head of the household, with decision-making authority and responsibility for family well-being.
- **Community involvement:** Fathers are expected to participate in community activities, such as initiation ceremonies and cultural events.

Therefore, the role of fathers and fatherhood in African traditional churches is significant as it goes beyond what other religions see in a father or fatherhood. Fatherhood in the African context is seen also as a protector, provider, guide, and authoritative decision maker on their children's rite of passage.

Community, spiritual guidance, and cultural identity are also emphasised. For example, in many African communities, fathers lead family prayers and are expected to teach their children about biblical stories and moral lessons derived from their faith. This hands-on approach helps to reinforce the family's spiritual foundation.

Indigenous African religions are inherently spiritual, are closely tied to cultural practices that promote patriarchy, and have clearly defined roles for fatherhood.

For South Africa's fathers, African religion teaches them how to teach their children to maintain a sense of identity that integrates both heritage and spirituality. At a community level, the African adage "it takes a village to raise a child" is seemingly practised within the more rural communities of South Africa. This practically refers to fathers and father figures in communities as being able to look out for others in line with upholding morals and culture within their communities.

Challenges posed by religion in shaping fatherhood in South Africa

Religion plays a significant role in shaping fatherhood in South Africa, but it also presents challenges. The absence and low involvement of fathers in families is a serious social issue in South Africa, with far-reaching consequences for families and society. The term 'absent father' is used to refer to a biological father who is neither physically living in the same household as his child, nor involved in the child's life. It can also refer to a non-biological or social father being absent.

Research consistently confirms that a father's absence is a crucial concern, often associated with poverty, unemployment, alcoholism, and other social ills.[42] This absent father trend is particularly troubling given the low marriage rates and low father involvement in households in South Africa.[43]

Another challenge is the erosion of traditional values and the prevalence of immoral behaviour within families. Disruptions in family life, such as divorces and gender-based violence, undermine the moral fabric of society.[44] When family life has been disrupted, many fathers do not have adequate time with their children to teach them about maintaining a sense of cultural and spiritual identity and teachings. These issues are exacerbated by the significant shifts in family structures and the dispersed nature of many households in South Africa.[45] Addressing these challenges requires religion to take a moral role in guiding the multifaceted approach to strengthen institutions, government policies, and community-based interventions.

Despite these challenges, religion also presents opportunities for promoting positive fatherhood in South Africa. Scriptural teachings offer guidance for navigating life's complexities within the family unit, faith communities, and broader society.[46] Many religious organisations have implemented programmes that train and equip fathers to fulfil their roles and responsibilities.[47]

These programmes often emphasise the importance of biblical or Christian fatherhood, which goes beyond themes of violence, gender, and narrow ideas of provision.[48] The Isiseko Family Institute is one such faith-based organisation that runs marriage and fatherhood programmes based on Christian approaches to provide support programmes to families.

Opportunities for religion to influence fatherhood

Pastoral care and integrated community responses

Religious institutions can play a crucial role in supporting families and promoting family well-being. Practical theology interventions, such as pastoral care strategies and family well-being conventions, can help address social challenges and equip families with the necessary skills and support.[49] By partnering with churches, congregations, and community organisations, religious institutions can create a supportive environment for fathers and families to thrive.[50] These integrated approaches could ensure churches play a significant role and contribute to moulding future fathers and stronger family units.

Eco-theological perspectives on fatherhood in South Africa

From an eco-theological perspective, the well-being of families is intrinsically linked to the well-being of society and the environment. Eco-theology focuses on the intricate connections among religion, nature, society, the church, and the family as a vital social unit.[51]

Eco-theology offers a holistic approach to addressing the challenges faced by families in South Africa. By emphasising the interconnectedness of all creation and the responsibility of human beings to care for one another and the environment, eco-theology provides a framework for promoting family well-being and social transformation.[52]

This approach recognises the importance of fathers in nurturing and supporting their families, while also acknowledging the broader societal and environmental factors that shape family life.

Conclusion

Religion plays a significant role in shaping fatherhood in South Africa by providing guidance, support, and a moral framework for fathers to fulfil their responsibilities. However, the challenges of absent fathers, family disruptions, and societal shifts require a multifaceted approach that involves religious institutions, government policies, and civil society organisations to advocate for better community-based interventions that are informed by empirical evidence.

There is a need for churches to partner with community organisations. This can create a supportive environment for fathers to be more responsive parents and non-violent partners, leading to better fatherhood practices and thriving families.

Hence, there is a need for an integrated approach that includes working with civil society organisations and academia to appreciate the dynamics of fatherhood. Across the various religious and cultural practices, one thing is certain: that the role of a father is one of protector, provider, and mentor.

Challenges of absent fathers, family disruptions, and societal shifts require a multifaceted approach that involves religious institutions, government policies, and civil society.

CASE 7

Social fatherhood: Male mentors changing boys' lives

Jaco van Schalkwyk, The Character Company

Adult male family members and close friends, as well as community members such as educators, sports coaches, and religious and youth development workers can help at-risk boys without involved fathers to build positive masculine identities as they grow into men. At The Character Company (TCC), we use the well-proven concept of mentorship as our model to extend and promote social fatherhood in South Africa.

Using a value-based curriculum and a highly structured programme that includes weekly meetings, outdoor activities and youth holiday camps, we bring boys with absent fathers together with volunteer MENtors. At the time of writing, around 250 boys are assigned to 70 vetted adult male volunteers who serve as social fathers and big brothers. Weekly contact ensures consistency, builds commitment, and deepens relationships.

An outdoors focus helps to promote physical activity, life skills and healthy lifestyles. The boys benefit from regular exposure to living a values-based life and exploring life challenges and issues under the guidance of adult men in safe and contained spaces. Meaningful conversations and a variety of activities give our boys opportunities to explore and practice the five specific values we aim to instill – courage, kindness, self-discipline, honesty, and respect.

A MENtor shows the boys the way in a nature activity.
Photo by The Character Company.

The boys and the TCC MENtors are on a life-changing journey together. At the heart of what we are doing is creating safe spaces for boys and men to be vulnerable and share their emotional lives without judgement, enabling them to embrace positive masculinity and build meaningful relationships. MENtors are role models for the power of giving back to others and making a commitment to helping create a better world for all.

The TCC model is based on a holistic approach where social fathers provide support beyond just weekly interaction on values, validation, and belonging as it also includes support at school and home for both the boy and the mother.

It is important to note that the MENtors pick up issues that the boys grapple with through relationship building over months and years, and deal with those issues as they come along – providing a valuable sense of belonging or the sense that "I am not alone" for the boys.

The Character Company has conducted interviews with some of the participants. The following are extracts from the transcripts of conversations with MENtors and boys about their experiences of participating in the programme.

The TCC model takes a holistic approach as social fathers provide support beyond just weekly interaction on values, validation, and belonging as it also includes support at school and home for both the boy and the mother.

Someone to look up to

David Mokoka, a TCC alumnus, grew up in a Johannesburg children's home since the age of three years. He has never known his parents. David came into the TCC programme, at 12 years of age, with anger issues and challenges in defining his identity.

He recalls those early days fondly: "My mentor was asking me to just be myself, and that was amazing to me. On my first camp, being free and being outdoors allowed me to use all my energy. I had experiences I had never had. For instance, we went rafting on the Orange River, it was so beautiful and exhilarating. It's a happy memory that will be with me all my life."

> **Over the years, my TCC MENtors have instilled so much new knowledge in me. There were plenty of times when I didn't know how to handle certain situations, and I would go to my MENtor, and he would give me good advice. They say association breeds similarity, and I wanted to be like the TCC MENtors and older boys, so I started to work on knowing my identity and using the five values also at school and at home. I learned that I could sit and grouch and wallow in self-pity or pick myself up ...** – David, TCC alumnus

On a walkabout in nature.
Photo by The Character Company.

Today, he hopes he can pay his experiences forward: "Having the TCC MENtors as role models has made me push for something really good in my life. One day, I hope that boys would look up to me the way that I have looked up to my MENtors."

Building a significant relationship

Joshua Aikman, who works for an animation studio, met a TCC MENtor through a church group and was encouraged by him to volunteer at TCC as part of his life journey.

Josh says that: "At the time, I understood the concept of mentorship, but I didn't realise all that it means to be a MENtor. I never knew the impact that it makes, and I didn't quite understand how significant the relationship is that you build with the boys, and that the role of being a MENtor becomes a certain force in your own life. It has been quite hard at certain points but also very rewarding."

> **"At almost 27 years, I don't see myself as a father figure to the boys, but rather a bigger brother. I remember looking up to my big brother growing up, and this was an opportunity to be that kind of role model. I can't step into the place of a father in their lives, but it was in my mind to be the best godly example I could be to show these boys the heart of a father, and be there for them, playing a role in raising them to be good men.** – Joshua, TCC MENtor

He reflects how these experiences are changing him: "These years as a mentor coincide with my intentional development of my relationship with God through studying theology. As I have learned and grown spiritually, I see the positive impact on my boys. I try to be the best example to follow, and mentoring keeps me accountable. Whenever I find myself not fully practising a value, I am inspired by the fact that I am a role model, and it makes me want to be doing the right things in all aspects of my life."

Conclusion

As a model of social fatherhood, the TCC programme provides vital opportunities for boys to learn from men about positive masculinity and the contributions of men to society. The programme's strong values set high expectations and provide secure boundaries where the boys can gain skills, practise self-regulation, and work towards self-mastery.

In the absence of fathers in their lives, the chance to develop meaningful relationships with TCC MENtors empowers them by providing caring contact with male role models who are emotionally intelligent, consistent in their actions, and true to their commitments.

The programme's strong values set high expectations and provide secure boundaries where the boys can gain skills, practise self-regulation, and work towards self-mastery.

TCC MENtors step up to become part of "the villages" that we need to raise all our children well, and they will never be forgotten by these boys. Even though they won't be able to tell stories about what they learned from their fathers, they will still have a heartfelt story to tell about what they learned from their MENtors.

Visit www.thecharactercompany.co.za for mor information.

Huddle up and let's talk!
Photo by The Character Company.

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AGGRESSION AND VIOLENCE BY AND AGAINST FATHERS

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Chapter 5

Aggression and violence by and against fathers

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Key messages

- South Africa has relatively little research on violence or aggression by and against fathers.
- Violence or aggression by and against fathers include father-to-partner violence, partner-to-father violence, father-to-child and child-to-father violence.
- Witnessing father-to-partner violence renders children more susceptible to the development of psychological impairments.
- Fathers may be unlikely to report violence against them due to the stigma, shame, and disbelief that they were a victim of female-to-male violence.
- Fathers who are at high risk of acting violently towards their children score lower in emotional and cognitive empathy than low-risk fathers.
- Child-to-parent aggression or violence tends to escalate from a spontaneous response to emotional distress to being goal-directed and deliberate, especially when reinforced by reduced parental authority.
- Play contributes to the health of bodies and minds, including emotional regulation, and father–child play has a unique role in the bodily, mental, and emotional life of fathers and children.

South Africa has copious amounts of research on violence by and against men.[1] Yet there is scant research on aggression or violence by and against fathers. This chapter builds on the chapter on fatherhood and violence in the second *State of South Africa's Fathers* report.[2] We draw heavily from international studies on aggression and violence by fathers and against fathers because, in contrast to the abundant literature on men as a general category, there is little South African research specifically on violence perpetrated by men who are fathers and violence perpetrated against fathers.

Before we turn to the kind of aggression and violence we focus on, it is necessary to note that laws, policies, and the way institutions are organised and operate can be violent. By this we mean that unjust and unfairly discriminatory laws can harm people. When injustice and unfairness are inscribed into laws, embedded in policies and built into institutions, it is referred to as 'structural or institutional violence'.

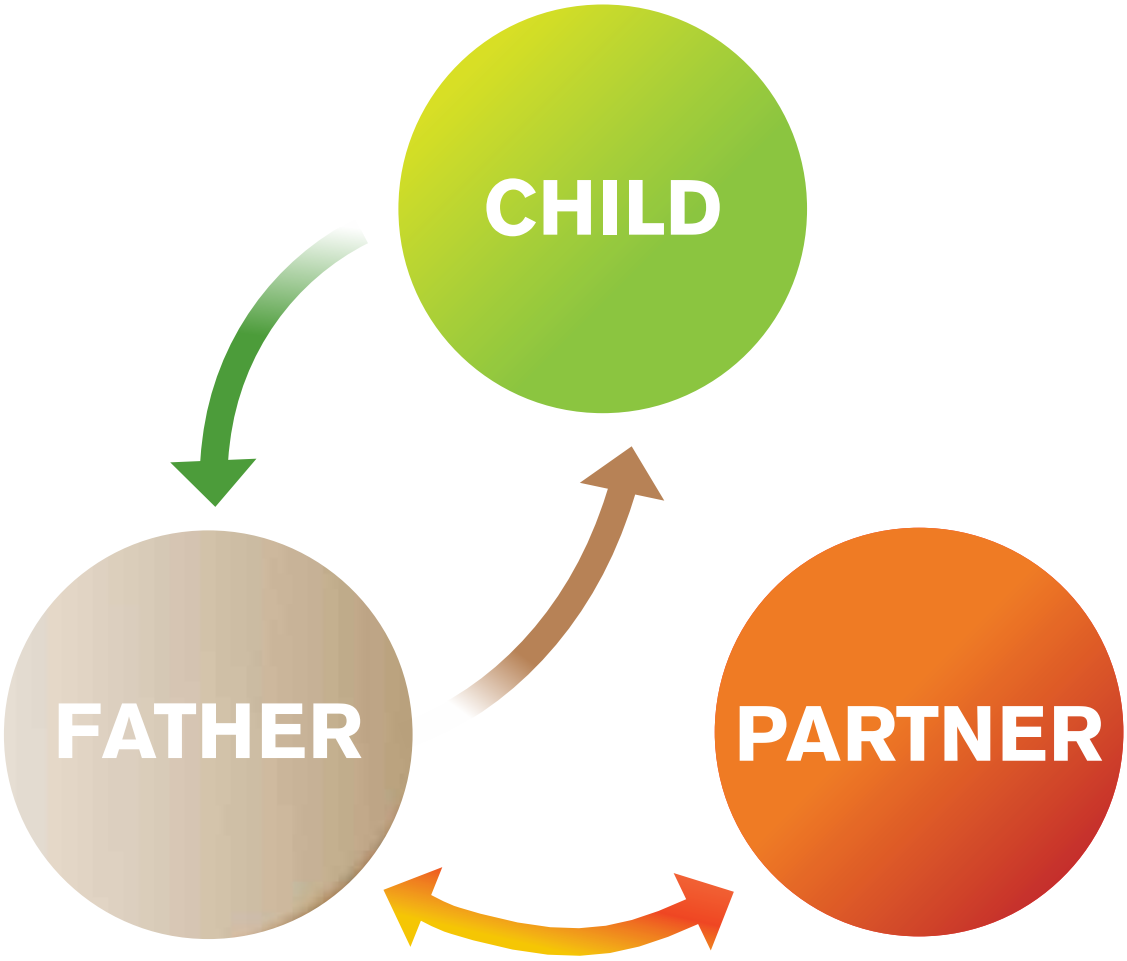
As an example, apartheid was a form of violence against Black people. Prior to the 20th century, many countries in the global South were subjected to violence in the form of European colonialism. Hence, as we concentrate on aggression and violence between individuals in this chapter, a fuller understanding of violence requires us to keep in mind that violence comes in different forms, including structural and institutional violence.

The chapter begins with definitions of aggression and violence. It then looks broadly at fatherhood and aggression. Next, it turns to father-to-partner violence, mother-to-father violence, and then father-to-child violence. We also discuss a topic that has not received much attention in South African research on violence: child-to-parent violence. These four kinds of violence are represented in figure 17.

The prevailing tendency in the literature on fathers and violence is to concentrate on the violence of fathers; however, this diagram illustrates the need to broaden our view to include the violence and aggression against fathers, not only by them, in our discussions. And though we omit these here, we are also aware that there are other kinds of violence against men who are fathers, such as historical, institutional, systemic but difficult-to-compute forms of violence.

In the concluding section, we suggest future research and interventions to mitigate and counter aggression in which fathers are implicated. Some of the work from which we draw focuses on play and the social brain: a circumscribed region of the brain dedicated to social cognition (e.g., interacting with other people, mentalising, and empathising).[3] Hence, we highlight stimulatory play as a tool to counter aggression by fathers, develop the social brains of both fathers and children, build emotional regulation in children, and promote positive father–child interactions.

Figure 17: Aggression by and against fathers



What are aggression and violence?

It is actually hard to come to universal agreement on what aggression and violence mean as these terms can be defined in several ways. In this chapter, aggression is taken to refer to any act that harms another party.[4] However, acts of omission can be considered aggressive. Aggression includes those events in which there is no physical injury, which means the harm can be mental pain, emotional hurt, and a damaged relationship. That implies that, for example, not financially supporting a child when one is able to is an act of aggression.

Finally, aggression can be expressive or instrumental. Expressive aggression or violence, also called reactive, is triggered by threats to the self. For example, the aggressor reacts because of feeling humiliated. Instrumental violence, also referred to as proactive, is intended to achieve a goal, such as in cases of robbery.

Like aggression, violence can be defined in various ways. For example, violence can be defined[5] as:

> the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either result in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation.

Violence can also be defined as a state in which "human beings are being influenced so that their actual somatic and mental realizations are below their potential realizations".[6] That implies that, when considering violence, we must pay attention not only to events where there is an overt application of harmful power but also where, for instance, a party like the state does not intervene to prevent harm when it could have.

While aggression and violence are often used interchangeably, they are not necessarily the same. For one thing, not all aggression results in overt violence, though all violence is, by definition, aggressive. Violence is, therefore, a subset of aggression.[7] That implies that an aggressive person does not always act violently; however, a violent person exhibits aggressive behaviour.

Fatherhood and aggression

The detrimental consequences of a violent father can hardly be argued. Children who witness intimate partner violence between their parents are more at risk of maladaptive socio-emotional development and the emergence of dissociative coping mechanisms.[8] The combination of traumatic exposure to violence and the personal, physical, and emotional distress that accompanies witnessing violence underscores a series of symptoms that, although necessary to cope with the traumatic situation, may further develop into risk factors for and indicators of psychological suffering at a later age.

Exposure to the father's violence towards the mother not only has harmful effects on children as they also may need to take on a mediating role from a young age in households where fathers are abusive or aggressive towards mothers.[9] The assumption of responsibility for something that they are neither prepared nor capable of taking on may result in dysfunctional social development for children, including an inability to adequately express thoughts, consent and needs, as well as acting out their own aggressive tendencies.

Research suggests that both interparental violence and parent-to-child violence influence the development of child-to-parent violence and, later, the occurrence of spousal abuse. The latter is particularly pertinent to men. One way of understanding the intergenerational transmission of violent behaviours from parents to children is through social learning theory.

Children who witness intimate partner violence between their parents are more at risk of maladaptive socio-emotional development and the emergence of dissociative coping mechanisms.

This theory states that it is mainly through observation, vicarious learning and reinforcement that children learn violent behaviour. Boys are stereotypically reinforced for being aggressive, while girls are reinforced for being passive.[10] In the context of father-to-family violence, the implications are that sons may learn to assume the role of the violent perpetrator when they witness their father's actions, whereas daughters tend to learn a victim role from the abused mother.

Son-to-mother aggression is said to be more possible when father-to-mother aggression is present.[11] This is, however, not to say that aggression against fathers, from the mother or child, does not exist. A relatively small body of literature points to how male victims of intimate partner violence are neglected, thus also hiding fathers as victims of intimate violence. And some studies have found similar rates of self-reported physical assault for both women and men in the context of intimate partner violence.[12] More work that attends to male victims in partner violence and child-perpetrated violence is therefore required.[13]

Other research has found no significant difference in mothers and fathers when studying the physical violence that children commit against their parents.[14] However, fathers may be more likely to be reluctant to turn to the justice system, or report child/partner abuse, due to feelings of guilt and shame. Despite these findings, domestic violence research remains largely focused on mothers and women as victims and fathers and men as perpetrators.

Father-to-partner violence

The high prevalence of intimate partner violence in South Africa is a persisting cause for concern, especially with regard to the ongoing exposure of children to such violence in the home.[15] Research suggests that there is a clear correlation between boys who experience frequent interparental violence in their early childhood and an increased risk of engaging in violent behaviour themselves during adolescence and adulthood.[16] It is important to note that, statistically, witnessing intimate partner violence is often compounded by other detrimental childhood experiences that also negatively impact a child's socio-emotional development, including experiences of harsh disciplinary practices, a lack of emotional support or affection, and inadequate parental supervision.[17] All of these circumstances have been linked to subsequent violent behaviour.

Despite the wide range of factors contributing to the later development of violent tendencies, studies consistently identify witnessing maternal abuse as the most robust risk factor for young boys in developing a propensity for violence later in life.[18] Such violent behaviours are not limited to the later demonstration of only intimate partner violence but also commonly manifest as violent acts at work or within the community, arrests for violent and antisocial conduct, and arrests for the possession of illegal firearms.

In addition to the perpetuation of violent behaviour, children who frequently witness father-to-partner violence are also more susceptible to the development of various psychological impairments, including depression and anxiety disorders, developmental delays, and reduced cognitive functioning.[19] The prolonged stress of witnessing intimate partner violence negatively impacts not only health outcomes in adolescents and children, but also their education. Children who are subject to father-to-partner violence exhibit lower verbal scores when compared to children who do not experience such violence.[20] Likewise, there is a positive relationship between exposure to intimate partner violence and the development of dysfunctional attachment patterns as well as aggressive and antisocial attitudes in children.[21]

Witnessing father-to-partner abuse, even in the absence of father-to-child abuse, disrupts a child's sense of security and safety within the home; the very environment in which they first seek stability. The resultant attachment issues may place an ongoing burden on the child's future relationships.

Beyond the risks of their own violent behaviour and psychological dysfunction, children in homes with high rates of intimate partner violence are also vulnerable to emotional neglect.[22] Studies involving mothers as victims of domestic violence reveal the profound impact that father-to-partner violence has not only on maternal physical, mental, and emotional well-being, but also on subsequent child-caretaking abilities.[23]

The constant fear and stress commonly experienced by mother figures who experience violence can lead to significant depression and feelings of helplessness, making it difficult for mothers to meet the emotional and physical needs of their children consistently. Daily tasks of providing attentive care and maintaining a nurturing environment become overwhelming in the wake of constant violence, and the

emotional strain can manifest as social withdrawal. Such a hindered capacity to establish emotional bonds between mother and child can lead to mutual disconnection and neglect, further exacerbating the detrimental effects of father-to-partner violence on the family as a whole.[24]

As Khaya's story in the case on the next pages illustrates, the consequences of father-to-partner violence reach vastly beyond the act of abuse itself and well into the socio-emotional outcomes of a child's future. Current literature highlights the interplay between maternal abuse by fathers and other forms of societal violence, emphasising the impact of targeting intimate partner violence as a key public health strategy to reduce overall crime rates and child neglect.

Therefore, effectively addressing father-to-partner violence is not only a matter of protecting women; it is a critical intervention to safeguard the well-being of future generations. Implementing a holistic approach to researching and combatting intimate partner violence – one in which the consequences for the child are considered – is key to effectively severing the intergenerational transmission of violence and establishing a safer, healthier future for families.

CASE 8

A "trigger happy" policeman: Psychotherapy with violent men

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> **Because, remember you are talking about people who want to prove themselves to the world. These are the characteristics that they have. And they are responding to the society again. You see, the response to society for them is to be masculine. You see the response they want to give, as you know, as you see, there's a lot of killing, and you find it's mostly young men that are doing the killing. It's because they want to respond to the society. They want to affirm to the society 'I am a man now. Don't look at me as a small boy, I'm a man, you know'.** – 31-year-old isiXhosa-speaking postgraduate student

These remarks by a participant in an all-male psychotherapy group[25] suggest that the meanings of manhood are societally organised. He contends that it is within the nexus of negotiations between masculinity and society that the possibility for male violence arises.

The causes of male violence are complex and multifactorial, especially in a South African context. One of the consequences of colonial–apartheid violence is that to this day, male violence disproportionately impacts poor Black men.[26] The persistent structural violence of poverty, unemployment, and inequality adds complexity to this form of continuous violence.[27]

However, there are men who are exposed to the same pervasive violence who refrain from destructive behaviours.[28] Understanding these men requires a deeper look at individual-level factors that may influence male violence. One key that affords us insights on male violence is early childhood experiences.[29]

Psychoanalysts have looked at the origins of violence that arises within intimate relations.[30] The violent behaviour of adults can often be traced back to the trauma of psychological and emotional neglect, and frightening and distressing events experienced during early childhood.[31] I turn to the case study of Khaya to reflect on the association between exposure to childhood trauma and perpetrating violence as an adult.

The "trigger happy" policeman

Khaya, a 44-year-old divorced police officer and father of two young girls, was referred for psychotherapy after he had shot and killed two persons in two separate incidents. One incident was a house break-in (at his own house); the other was a robbery (in the line of work).

The concern from his line manager was that Khaya showed no remorse. The worry was that he appeared to be "trigger happy" and that he might therefore pose a danger. Following these shooting incidents, Khaya felt that he was seen as a problem at work. He saw no need for treatment, but he availed himself to "check the box" as he could not refuse his employer's order to get psychological treatment.

A childhood filled with domestic violence

Exploration of his early experiences revealed a childhood filled with domestic violence. His father beating his mother and the police coming to their house were regular features of his childhood. Sometimes he used to escape the violence by going to grandparents and extended family.

His father apparently impregnated up to 16 women while married to his mother. Hence it was not just his father's physical violence, but the shame his father brought on the family, coupled with the paternal neglect that Khaya had to endure as a child.

His father's refusal to be involved in Khaya's manhood initiation process caused him special shame. His maternal family introduced him to his ancestors and facilitated him going to initiation school. During one of his psychotherapy consultations, he referred to his father as *isilerha*. The word '*isilerha*' may function as a moral judgement and is used to express disapproval of behaviours that violate ethical standards, particularly in familial or communal roles, like when a father neglects his duties and responsibilities toward his children.

Khaya had written his father off, wanting nothing to do with him. He also felt let down by systems like the police; that they did nothing to really protect his mother or her children.

Beginning to feel safe enough to become emotional

Khaya initially exhibited a strong resistance to engaging with feelings, relying heavily on psychological defence mechanisms like denial, avoidance, and hypermasculinity, hence reports that he lacked remorse. His hypermasculinity was manifest in regular gym attendance and the attention he paid to his physical appearance. His resistance to emotional engagement possibly protected him from full awareness, but it could also have been a sign of underlying fear, shame, or distrust of emotional experiences.

He established a therapeutic alliance with his female psychotherapist. Later he followed her into the all-male psychotherapy group where he related easily with his male peers. Forming positive therapeutic relationships suggested that he had begun to trust his therapist and male peers, which was a significant step in his emotional healing. He attended punctually and began to feel safe enough to go near the emotions he usually avoided.[32]

The significance of emotional engagement with violent men

In this case, emotion is not just understood as an internal experience of individual men, but a multidimensional social phenomenon.[33] The specific structural–cultural location (such as inequality or racialised oppression) in which an emotion arises is an integral aspect of the emotional experience.[34] Frustration, resentment, and rage can be regarded as expected emotional responses to experiences of racism, chronic unemployment, or intractable poverty.[35]

As opposed to viewing violence as an exclusively pathological act devoid of logic and morality, expressions of emotions like frustration, anger and resentment can sometimes be seen as a reasonable response to situations of injustice.[36] In some situations, feelings about injustice and unfairness, especially rage, can be seen as moral feelings.[37] Such emotions can be a component of reflexivity, self-awareness, and agency and, if expressed judiciously, have the power to alter social circumstances. These morally grounded and practical feelings may communicate a commitment to justice and to "make things right".[38]

By normalising the expression of aggression in a safe and controlled manner, the therapist helps the aggressive male to recognise their aggressive feelings as valid, which reduces the destructive potential of aggression.

Hence, a nuanced therapeutic response towards aggressive feelings may have the effect of welcoming and normalising direct, balanced, and safe expressions of anger and aggression.[39] By therapeutic responses to aggression, I refer to the restorative strategies and healing approaches that a therapist employs when working with violent males.[40] A critical aspect of working therapeutically with aggressive males is creating an environment in which anger and aggression can be expressed safely and constructively, so that the therapeutic process becomes a space of feeling seen and understood, potentially leading to transformative feelings and behaviours.[41]

By normalising the expression of aggression in a safe and controlled manner, the therapist helps the aggressive male to recognise their aggressive feelings as valid, which reduces the destructive potential of aggression.[42] By focusing on healing

and restoration, the therapist creates a structure in which violent men can explore powerful emotions without judgement. When the direct verbal and emotional expression of aggressive feelings are accepted, male clients may feel safe enough to access deeper emotions such as sadness, hurt, and abandonment.[43]

In other words, the safe expression of aggressive feelings may become the gateway to vulnerability.[44] The expression of vulnerable feelings may be part of the deeper emotional work that is vital to addressing the root causes of aggression.[45] In some instances, it may be necessary to engage the unresolved and underlying pain and trauma, in other words, the root drivers of aggression, before emotional healing and behavioural change can be achieved.[46]

The notion that men apparently do not express vulnerable feelings may be more suggestive of the attitudes and ignorance towards male vulnerability among researchers, some therapists, and society in general.[47] When race comes into play, these attitudes and ignorance may also be associated with racial assumptions of Black males lacking emotional sophistication.[48]

According to scientific literature, women are more emotionally expressive.[49] However, the experience of emotions may be less gendered than commonly assumed because the literature also suggests that, although less emotionally expressive, men are as capable of experiencing a range of emotions.[50]

Failure to grasp the complexity of human nature and a limited understanding of violence may also play a role.[51] Men are not born violent; they are complex and diverse human beings. Once you gain the trust and establish psychological safety with some violent men, they can be supported to express vulnerable feelings.[52] The literature is abundantly clear, humans are neurologically wired with a range of feelings.[53] The core self is emotion, and feelings are part of what we think and do[54], and the ability to feel is foundational to self-transformation[55].

> By targeting a father's capacity to recognise emotional cues, particularly from his children, we can develop targeted interventions that address emotional regulation, empathy, and perspective-taking.

To return to Khaya, his psychological defences were not impenetrable. He began to engage with feelings of trauma. His self-awareness increased, and he demonstrated a willingness to tolerate the discomforts of self-transformation.[56]

Khaya quickly warmed up to his female therapist. Following her into a men's group was something he had no problem doing after just a few individual therapy sessions. Like many who participated in well-run men's groups, he was impressed by his fellow participant-healers. Belonging to a group of high-functioning males who openly discuss their vulnerabilities often proves to be significantly more therapeutically dynamic than individual treatment options for many boys and men.

Mother-to-father violence

A large majority of literature focuses on mothers as victims of interparental violence, with few studies dedicated to the familial and personal outcomes of mother-to-father violence.[58] Literature suggests that men are less likely to report violence against them, perhaps in response to an unwillingness to acknowledge their status as a victim due to the stigma, shame and disbelief that surrounds female-to-male violence. Nevertheless, abused fathers tend to exhibit symptoms similar to those of abused mothers, including low self-esteem and depression.[59]

Not only do these effects of mother-to-father violence inhibit a father's own social functioning and capacity to connect with his children, but they also underscore a co-occurrence of child neglect and mother-to-father violence, resulting in long-term negative implications for a child's social and emotional development.[60]

One study[61] examined the relationship between exposure to interparental violence and teen dating violence by adolescents against their significant other. The findings, consistent with both existing research and social learning theory, suggest that there is a positive relationship between these forms of violence, especially in the context of mother-to-father violence.

While much of the current research does not differentiate between gender variables when discussing interparental violence, studies that do compare exposure to father-to-mother and mother-to-father violence are largely in agreement that witnessing violence against

fathers committed by mothers tends to be an important predictive factor in teenage dating violence perpetration.[62] The authors suggest that this intergenerational transmission of violence becomes particularly normalised when perpetrated by mothers against fathers as mothers tend to assume the role of the primary caregiver in the household. Thus, their actions are especially influential in what their children observe, accept, and model.

Similarly, female violence is often perceived as less severe and thus more acceptable than violence perpetrated by men, and subsequently leads to a higher tolerance for violent behaviour as a norm for children raised in households where mother-to-father violence is prevalent.[63]

The correlation between exposure to maternal violence against fathers and violent romantic relationships is further supported by a study[64] that found that exposure to mother-to-father violence also predicts a child's use of violence against friends, particularly in adolescent girls. The researchers attributed these findings to the "same-sex modelling effect" in that children exhibit greater tendencies to model the behaviour of their same sex parent in their own relationships. Essentially, the prevalence of violence against fathers contributes to the development of aggression and anti-social behaviour in children, with consequences that reach well into future relationships across a range of social domains and perpetuates a cycle of poor social development.

The concept of parental modelling is foundational to the transmission of intergenerational aggression, and thus it becomes imperative to evaluate the role of mother-to-father violence in a child's social development, as well as the implications of a father's own behaviour in response to maternal perpetrated intimate partner violence.[65]

Exposure to interparental violence is undoubtedly a fundamental factor in the cycle of familial violence. However, while much evidence exists for the intergenerational transmission of child maltreatment, one must also recognise the potential for intergenerational transmission of *protective benefits* against child abuse, particularly as relating to the role of the father.[66] Studies suggest that paternal support and involvement provide a protective mechanism against exposure to mother-to-father violence, and fathers assume a vital role in the discontinuation of child maltreatment behaviours across generations.

Thus, the role that fathers play in supporting and protecting their child's socio-emotional development requires further research, beginning with a deeper understanding of male victims of interparental violence. To expand on the support that fathers are offered, particularly as victims of maternal abuse, neither detracts from nor competes with the support to mothers in similar situations. It is an imperative buffer against the repetitive nature of relationship violence and provides a necessary base from which the protective function of fathers can be further explored.

Father-to-child violence

Current literature extensively explores the long-lasting impacts of exposure to domestic violence during childhood, but there is little research on the perpetrators of such violence, particularly within the context of fathering. The limited studies that do exist find that violent fathers tend to display higher levels of hostility and anger, as well as greater over-reactivity, than their non-violent counterparts.[67] These behaviours are underscored by self-reported difficulty to regulate aggression and a lack of emotional connection with both the children and the co-parent, all of which are factors known to negatively impact the socio-emotional development of children.[68]

On risk factors for parental violence towards children, research found that fathers who are

at high risk of displaying violent behaviour towards their children scored lower in emotional and cognitive empathy than low-risk fathers.[69] High-risk fathers are also more likely to report feeling greater levels of personal distress. So when faced with cues of emotional discomfort from their children, high-risk fathers do not respond with warmth and compassion due to the combination of low empathic concern and high personal distress. The result is a more egocentric, aggressive response from the father and little attention to the child's emotional discomfort.

High levels of personal distress have been found to also negatively impact information processing. This reduces the father's capacity for effective perspective-taking. Research has shown that perspective-taking acts as an inhibitory control for aggressive behaviour.[70] However, perspective-taking is diminished under conditions of high arousal and great personal distress. Research supports this finding: negative affect or emotion produces higher levels of aggression, and thus high levels of personal distress can increase violent behaviours from father to child.[71]

A study[72] on emotional recognition in fathers and mothers at high risk of physical child abuse found that high-risk fathers showed deficits in recognising emotions displayed by their children. The authors suggest that violent fathers have dispositional difficulties in perspective-taking and struggle to understand children's emotional experiences. These findings are supported by the reports of children who experienced paternal violence.[73]

The investigation into cognitive empathy and perspective-taking deficits in violent fathers offers novel avenues for conceptualising and intervening within the context of father-to-child violence. By targeting a father's capacity to recognise emotional cues, particularly those exhibited by his children, we can develop targeted interventions that address emotional regulation, empathy, and perspective-taking. This understanding of the cognitive underpinnings of violent fatherhood can inform the development of preventative measures and early intervention programmes focused on men, potentially creating a ripple effect of positive change among individuals and couples, and within families and communities.

By targeting a father's capacity to recognise emotional cues, particularly from his children, we can develop targeted interventions that address emotional regulation, empathy, and perspective-taking.

Child-to-father violence

Historically, the father as the perpetrator of violent behaviour is how the relationship between fatherhood and aggression is mainly studied. In recent years though, we have seen a rise in research that focuses on other dynamics and forms of violence, for example child-to-parent violence.[74]

Aggressive behaviour can be categorised into two major divisions: proactive and reactive aggression.[75] Proactive aggression is characterised by premeditated callousness in pursuit of a specific goal or attempt to obtain

power or domination. Reactive aggression, in contrast, is considered a hostile reaction to a frustration or any sort of real or perceived threat. A certain type of reactive aggression can also develop from a displaced fear response that manifests as externalised behaviour and is referred to as 'affective aggression'.

A similar classification system for child-to-parent aggression or violence identifies two distinct kinds. The typology is based on the prevalence of proactive child aggression (characterised by domination and control through violence).[76] High-proactive dyads were characterised by frequent violence, with children exhibiting a mix of proactive, reactive, and affective aggression.

Parents in these high-proactive families reported feelings of helplessness and fear, suggesting a potential "power reversal" between parent and child. Conversely, low-proactive dyads experienced less physical violence, characterised primarily by reactive and affective aggression. Parents in these families exhibited more authority than their high-proactive counterparts; however, their often-intrusive parenting styles formed the foundation for maladaptive emotional regulation in their children, thus resulting in increasing levels of reactive and affective aggression.

The importance of describing specific typologies of child-to-parent violence is found in the emergence of family systems. These recurring patterns of family interactions offer insight into the manifestation, and often-escalating nature, of child-to-parent violence.[77] Common family patterns suggest that what begins as reactive or affective aggression from child to parent often leads to a gradual inability of parents to enforce consequences and subsequently gives way to more physically violent, high-proactive behaviours as mothers and fathers adjust to a loss of power in the child–parent relationship.

High-proactive child-to-parent violence becomes not only a normative experience but a defining characteristic of familial disputes, to such an extent that the outcome of an abusive episode is considered successful if it does not progress past emotional and verbal aggression to physical violence.[78] This is not to offer a hierarchical order to the various aggression subtypes but rather to illustrate the tendency of child-to-parent aggression or violence to escalate from a spontaneous response to emotional distress to being goal-directed and deliberate, especially when reinforced by reduced parental authority and control.

Ultimately, understanding the nuances of aggression, particularly the distinction between proactive and reactive forms, is crucial when examining the complexities of child-to-parent violence. In light of the potential for parent–child power reversal that high-proactive dyads wield, as well as the proclivity of reactive aggression to escalate, it is necessary to consider not only the functions that aggressive behaviour seeks to fulfil, but also the role of systematic, and often unnoticed, family practices in perpetuating the creeping normality of child-to-parent violence.

Future research is needed to explore targeted interventions that address not only child behaviour but also the broader family dynamics at play, potentially mitigating the escalation of child-to-parent aggression and fostering healthier family interactions. By acknowledging the multifaceted nature of aggression and its role within family systems, we can move towards developing more effective strategies to prevent and address child-to-parent violence.

Fathers, play, and children's emotional regulation

In this concluding section, we briefly highlight stimulatory play as a tool to counter fathers' aggression, develop the social brains of both fathers and children, build emotional regulation in children, and promote positive father–child interactions.

Nearly all the research on play is from outside South Africa. However, one piece of research that speaks to South Africa's fathers and children and play was undertaken as part of a 2023 survey of adult caregivers in 17 countries, including South Africa. The survey was done for the *State of the World's Fathers 2023* report, and we draw on the South African dataset to speak about play (the SOWF survey is discussed in more detail in chapter 1 – see p. 17).

One section of the survey focused on the respondents' activities with children in the three years running up to the survey, including play (see figures 18 and 19). A distinction was made between biological children of the respondents and children who are not biologically related to the respondents but who are in their care.

It is encouraging that a high proportion of men reported playing with children, for all questions related to play, although the proportion of women who reported playing with children was higher than the proportion of men. Across a variety of activities, the proportion of women who reported interacting with children, or doing things for them, was consistently higher than the proportion of men.

Figure 18: Play and other activities that respondents engaged in with their biological child/ren, SOWF 2023 survey

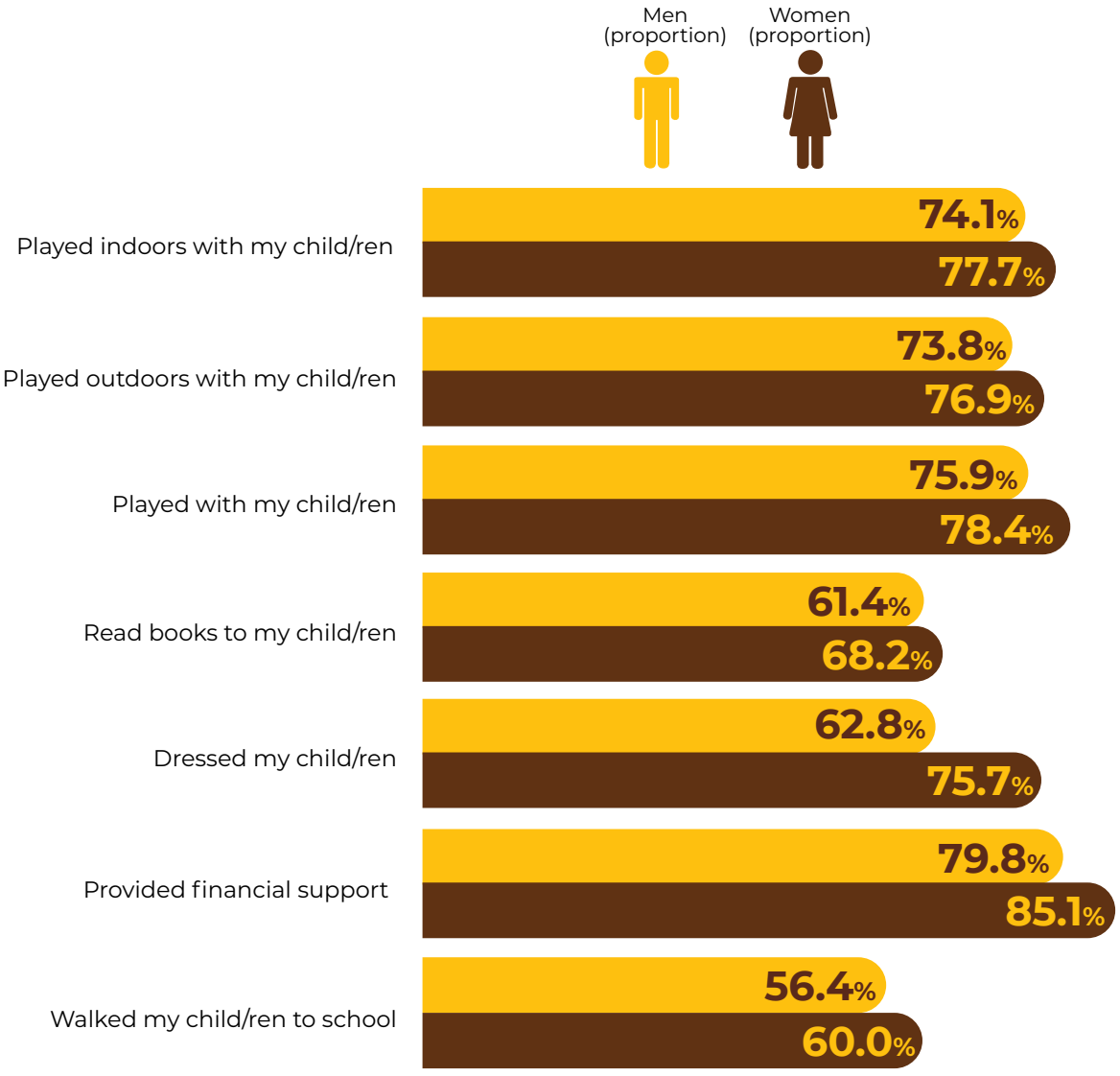
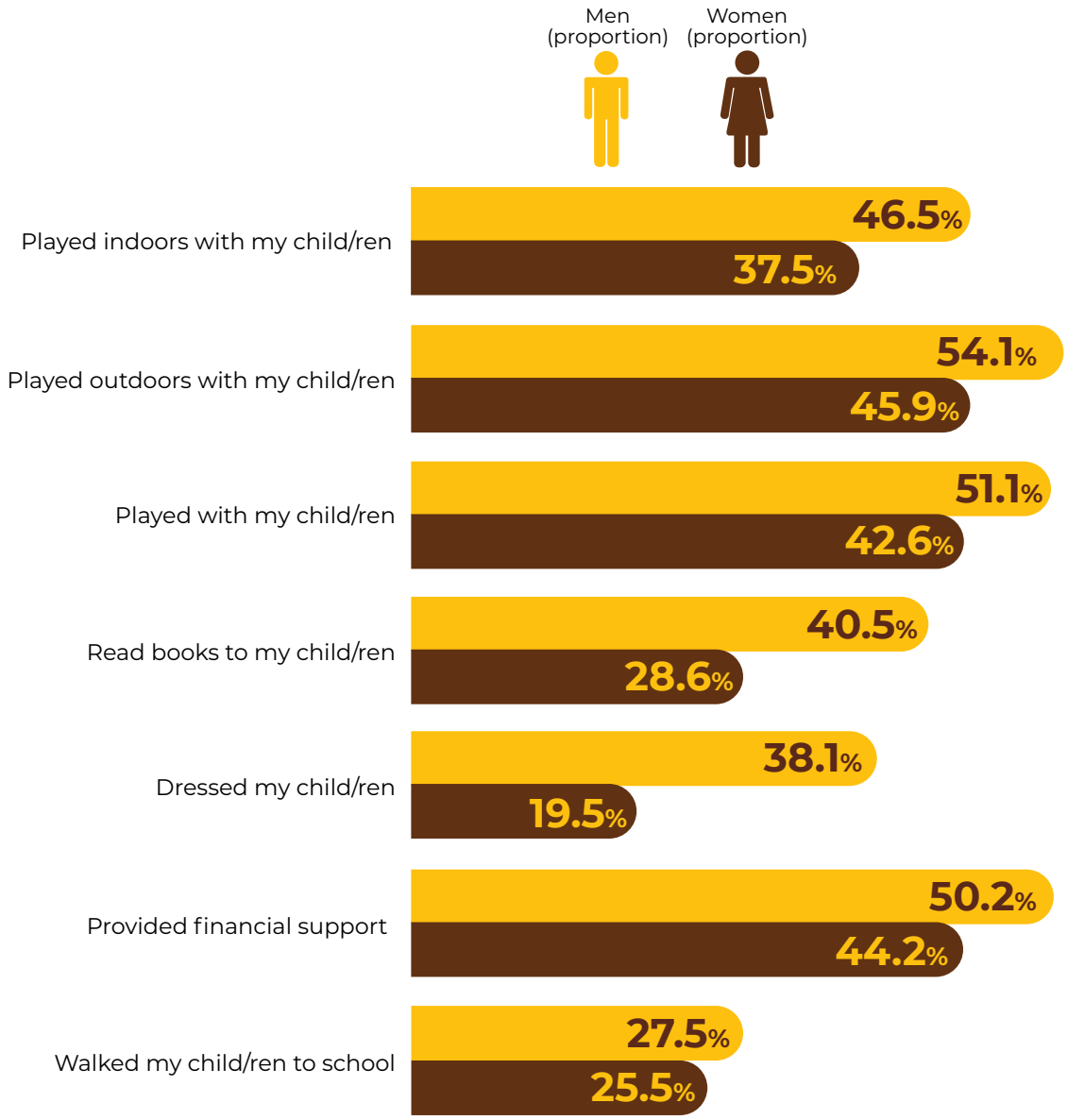


Figure 19: Play and other activities that respondents engaged in with child/ren who are not their biological child/ren, SOWF 2023 survey



Play is not merely for the fun of it. Play is serious business for both children and adults as it contributes to positive outcomes for the interactants.

While all play, including mother–child, adult–adult, and child–child play contributes to the health of our bodies and minds, father–child play has a unique role in the bodily, mental and emotional life of fathers and children. One germane line of research for us, focusing on fatherhood and emotional regulation, refers to what is called the 'parental caregiving network'. This network refers to the interconnected brain areas that activate in response to cues from children, particularly babies, and results in caring behaviour.[79] The parental caregiving network has two major components: regions of the brain responsible for emotional processing, and those responsible for mentalising.[80]

Part of the processes of what is called 'the social brain', 'mentalising' refers to our ability to understand our own mental states and

others'. Mentalising enables the parent to read the infant's cries, other sounds, and nonverbal signals to infer needs and intentions. More broadly, the more responsive parents and children are to one another, as usually happens when fathers and children are playing, the more increased activity is recorded within the father's perspective-taking systems, mentalising, and thus the social brain.[81]

Studies have explored the relationship between active fatherhood and enhanced self-regulation in children.[82] Such studies support the role of father–child 'rough-and-tumble' play in the development of a child's regulation of behaviours, such as the management of aggression. The findings of these studies also suggest that the development of the social brain during early years impacts adolescent dialogical skills. Adolescence is a critical period for learning about intimacy with non-familial others, and therefore a central developmental goal that children must negotiate.[83]

While mother–child reciprocity is important in shaping a child's dialogical skills during positive interactions, father–child play-based reciprocity is independently predictive of children's abilities to handle conflict through dialogue, restrain aggression, as well as develop perspective-taking and empathy.[84] These findings are consistent with previous literature

Figure 20: Father–child play stimulates perspective-taking systems, mentalising, and thus the social brain

that suggests that the absence of engaged father figures results in increased externalising behaviour and conflict in social interactions.[85] As such, father–child reciprocity, as seen in stimulatory play activities, is important for the development of the child's capabilities to restrain from aggression and to self-regulate.

Researchers think that rough-and-tumble play (RTP) between fathers and children serves an evolutionary function. RTP acts as a "training ground" that equips children with essential survival skills, including self-regulation, risk assessment, and social interaction.[86] Influenced by activation relationship theory, in which the bond between parent and child permits children to open up to the outside world, research points to the gentle destabilising of a child's environment that RTP brings. This kind of play serves to foster awareness of surroundings and situational adaptation.

By navigating the emotionally charged situations that arise during RTP play within the confines of a father-controlled environment, children are able to explore aggression management and self-regulation strategies under physically and emotionally safe conditions. This ability to self-regulate in the face of challenging social and cognitive situations becomes crucial for navigating the complexities of the real world, for survival, and, ultimately, for thriving.

Father–child reciprocity, as seen in stimulatory play activities, is important for the development of the child's capabilities to restrain from aggression and to self-regulate.

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MENTAL WELL-BEING AND FATHERHOOD

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Chapter 6

Mental well-being and fatherhood

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Key messages

- Mental health problems affecting fathers are prevalent but receive low priority in South Africa.
- Research on fathers' mental health is limited, especially in South Africa.
- Fatherhood can bring both pride and stress.
- Emotional intelligence enhances father–child relationships and well-being.
- Support and policies can improve fathers' mental well-being and involvement in children's lives.

Studies in South Africa point to the widespread prevalence of mental health problems. A recent survey showed that "a quarter of South African respondents reported moderate to severe symptoms of probable depression".[1] The country's first national survey on gender-based violence found that men's poor mental health and experience of childhood trauma were among the significant factors associated with lifetime physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence perpetration by men.[2]

And yet, compared to physical health, mental health remains a low priority. Even more worrisome, mental health among fathers is not given the attention we believe it deserves.

In this chapter, we build on the discussion on the mental health of fathers in the previous edition of the *State of South Africa's Fathers* report[3] to further unpack mental well-being and fatherhood. We draw on global literature on mental health among fathers, given that there is scanty South African research attention on men's mental health. Even so, we draw attention to the local context, pointing to work being done and suggesting what we think could be done to support the mental health of fathers.

We are interested in fathers in all stages of life, but particularly in new fathers. We highlight the potential and actual benefit of engaged fatherhood on the mental health of fathers themselves, children, and those around the children. We acknowledge the significance of mental health challenges faced by fathers in different circumstances, with a special focus on first-time fathers (alongside other intersecting challenges such as economic problems). However, we underline a strength-based approach by exploring the positive experiences associated with fatherhood. Given the approach we take, we emphasise mental well-being to draw attention to the need to move from coping with life's challenges toward flourishing.

Mental health problems are universal problems

Vikram Patel is a leading voice in global mental health. His work is not focused on mental health among fathers. But something he said about his time in Zimbabwe is instructive and worth relating. When he went to Zimbabwe in 1993 for a two-year position as a research psychiatrist at the University of Zimbabwe Medical School, he was initially very sceptical about whether depression could be considered a valid diagnostic category of suffering within the Zimbabwean sociocultural context. In the end, he said[4],

> I was convinced that although social factors were a major cause of depression, depression was a genuine cause of human illness in this very different cultural setting and one which could respond to clinical and public health interventions.

Two points from this observation by Patel need underlining:

1. mental health is associated with social (and economic) factors; and
2. mental health problems are a universal experience.

Patel's reflections on mental health are relevant because, in some quarters of our society and other parts of Africa, mental health is not treated with the seriousness it should be. There also may still be a lack of conviction about the importance of mental well-being to overall health. It is not uncommon to hear people say that "Africans do not need therapy, we have Jesus" or "psychotherapy is a White people's thing".[5] All too often considered as a luxury, mental well-being may be regarded as less of a priority than physical well-being.

It is necessary, therefore, to point out that, while the terms for psychological illness may be different across cultures, mental suffering is a universal experience. Nevertheless, if one examines lay discussions as well as international literature, the mental and emotional suffering of men in general, and men who are fathers in particular, is often left out. This may be because the mental health of this group is not as seriously considered as the suffering of other groups such as mothers and children.

While the broader societal narrative often focuses on maternal mental health or general gendered experiences, the mental well-being of fathers, and how it impacts families and communities, deserves more attention.

> Becoming a new parent, specifically a new father, can be such a daunting, unknown, or unwanted development that some men avoid the responsibility and step, walk, or run away.

We contend that when fathers have the capacity or support to deal with the challenges they face, cope well with life stresses, realise their abilities and have opportunities to learn, work and leisure, they are more likely to contribute positively to their children's development, to other children in their lives, and their communities, and to have more rewarding lives.[6]

Given the many challenges facing many men in South Africa, a question that arises is, how can a focus on promoting mental health be regarded as important as, for instance, a discussion on violence? We see these as not delinked from each other. Experiencing or witnessing violence affects mental health.[7] Therefore, we see a focus on the mental health of new fathers specifically, and fathers in general, to be as critical as a focus on other parts of their lives. Becoming a new parent, specifically a new father, can be such a daunting, unknown, or unwanted development that some men avoid the responsibility and step, walk, or run away.

Fatherhood is a pivotal experience that can significantly impact a man's mental health. National statistics show that male-headed households are less likely to have the presence of children than female-headed households.[8]

It is now common knowledge that, in South Africa, a significant percentage of children (64.5% in 2023) do not live with their biological fathers.[9]

Recognising that there are men who for various reasons cannot reside full-time or at all with their children even though they can, invites an examination of the reasons behind such a decision. A father who leaves his children to be raised by the mother or other adults may not necessarily be suffering from poor mental health. However, the circumstances could use scrutiny to understand the lives of men better – in this case particularly what can be learned about the mental health-related issues that differentiate between men who do not live with their children and those who do.

What is mental health?

What is mental health, though? And is mental health the same as mental well-being?

It turns out that there is no clear agreement on how best to define mental health or mental well-being. Even the people whose work is to study these concepts or promote positive mental health do not agree. The terms mental health, psychological health, mental well-being, and psychological well-being are usually interchangeable. Even so, they draw attention to different though closely related concepts. These terms are contrasted to terms such as mental health *problems*, mental *ill-*health, mental *condition*, mental *disorder*, and mental *suffering*. Other terms used as opposites of mental health, mental well-being, and psychological well-being include psychological problems, psychological conditions, psychological disorders, psychological suffering, as well as emotional problems.

A widely used definition of mental health comes from the World Health Organization[10]:

> … *a state of mental well-being* that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, to realize their abilities, to learn well and

> work well, and to contribute to their communities. Mental health is an integral component of health and well-being and is more than the absence of mental disorder.

We have stressed the words "a state of mental well-being" as they speak to our emphasis here. However, there are researchers who believe this is not a good definition. For example, Silvana Galderisi and colleagues criticised this definition by arguing that it "lends itself to potential misunderstandings when it identifies positive feelings and positive functioning as key factors for mental health".[11] They also said[12]:

> … regarding well-being as a key aspect of mental health is difficult to reconcile with the many challenging life situations in which well-being may even be unhealthy: most people would consider as mentally unhealthy an individual experiencing a state of well-being while killing several persons during a war action, and would regard as healthy a person feeling desperate after being fired from his/her job in a situation in which occupational opportunities are scarce. People in good mental health are often sad, unwell, angry or unhappy, and this is part of a fully lived life for a human being.

Galderisi and colleagues instead offer the following definition[13]:

> Mental health is a dynamic state of internal equilibrium which enables individuals to use their abilities in harmony with universal values of society. Basic cognitive and social skills; ability to recognize, express and modulate one's own emotions, as well as empathize with others; flexibility and ability to cope with adverse life events and function in social roles; and harmonious relationship between body and mind represent

> important components of mental health which contribute, to varying degrees, to the state of internal equilibrium.

Another definition of mental health we find to be resonant comes from the Public Health Agency of Canada[14]:

> Mental health is the capacity of each and all of us to feel, think, and act in ways that enhance our ability to enjoy life and deal with the challenges we face. It is a positive sense of emotional and spiritual well-being that respects the importance of culture, equity, social justice, interconnections and personal dignity.

The latter definition is more persuasive as it considers relevant ideas that are missing from the first two. While states, actions or experiences like coping with stress, internal equilibrium, contributing to community, and harmony with universal values of society are certainly important, recognising that other things such as the enjoyment of life, spirituality, culture, and especially social justice and dignity deepens how to understand mental well-being.

We recognise that mental health is a broad category. However, tilted as we are toward *good* health instead of *poor* health, we use 'mental health' to mean 'mental well-being'. Given that mental health is broader than mental well-being, 'mental well-being' can be taken as the positive end of the spectrum of mental health.[15] When we want to speak of problems, we shall refer to mental health problems and the other terms mentioned earlier as opposites of mental health.

What we want to draw attention to is the role of mental health in a father's internal life and social relationships. We are aware that mental health, important as we believe it is, is often mired in doubt, stigma, misunderstanding, and disputes.[16] In some cases, though certainly not universally, common mental health conditions such as depression and anxiety may be considered as expected human reactions to the stresses of life and not reasons to visit a health facility.

Furthermore, in light of the colonial and apartheid history of South Africa and other societies formerly colonised by European nations, it is to be expected that there would still be, for instance, scepticism in some quarters about the validity of Western psychiatric concepts like depression and anxiety. As such, calling into question a person's attribution of a mental health-related problem to supernatural causes rather than genetics, poverty, family dynamics, or interpersonal relationships may be dismissed as the continuing dominance of European explanations for local cultural interpretations of suffering.

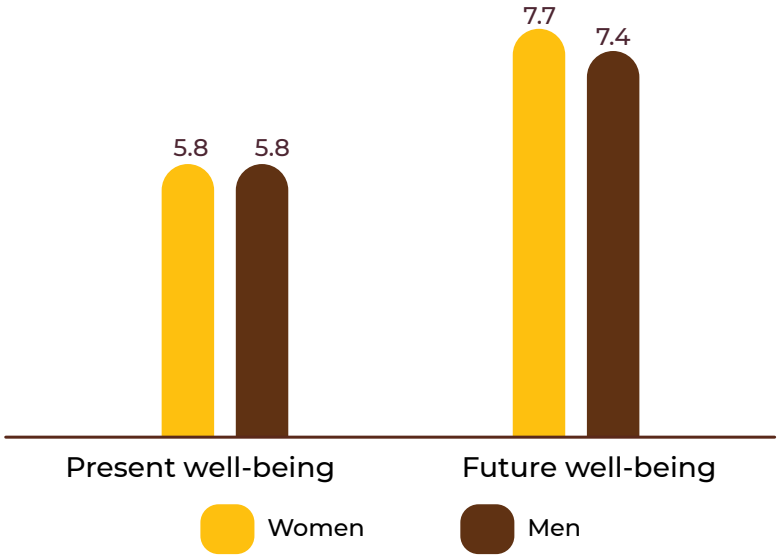
Perceptions of well-being between men and women

The State of the World's Fathers survey 2023[i] included several items measuring the well-being of respondents with different gender identities. For the purpose of this report, we refer to cis men as "men" and cis women as "women" (see p. 17 for a discussion of the survey).

There was no significant difference between women and men who participated in the survey in South Africa when asked about their present state of well-being (figure 21). The average score for women was 5.79 and for men 5.76 (where 0 indicated the worst possible life and 10 the best possible life). However, when asked about future well-being, women scored lower than men (7.35 vs 7.69). These differences between women and men are not statistically significant.

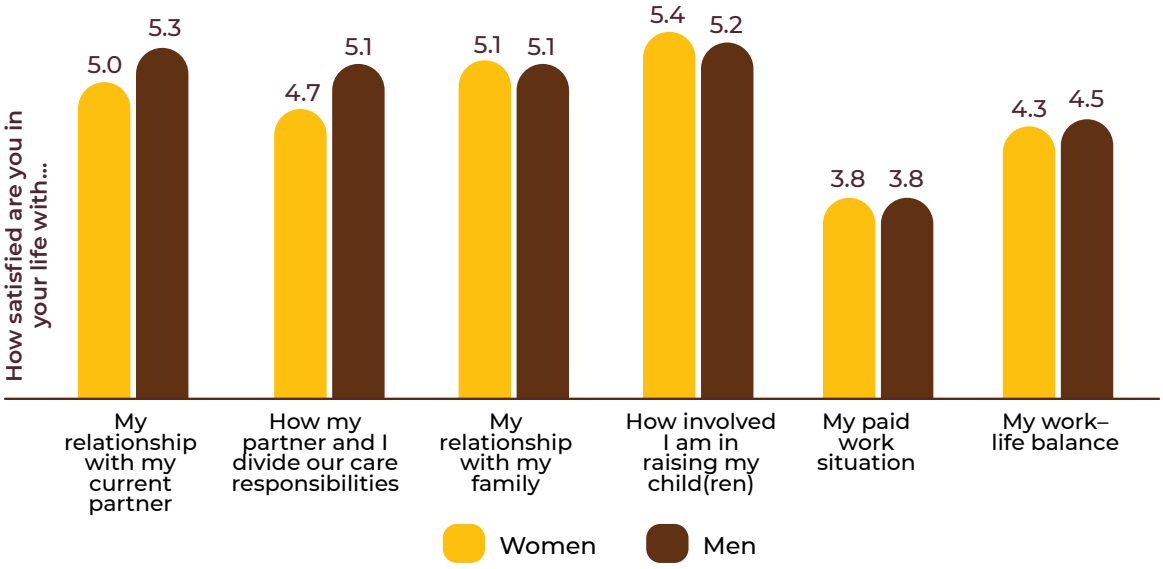
[i] This survey was conducted for the MenCare Campaign, a global campaign co-founded by Equimundo and Sonke Gender Justice. This report draws on the South African quantitative dataset collected as part of the larger 17-country SOWF 2023 survey. See www.equimundo.org/state-of-the-worlds-fathers-research.

Figure 21: Respondents' perceptions of their own present and future well-being, SOWF 2023 survey
(Rated on a scale from 0 – worst possible life – to 10 – best possible life)



Respondents were also asked to indicate their levels of satisfaction with different relationships, responsibilities, and situations. The results are represented in figure 22. Significant gender differences emerge only for satisfaction with relationship with one's current partner and satisfaction with the division of care responsibilities between partners. Women were significantly less satisfied with their relationship with their partners and less satisfied with the division of care responsibilities.

Figure 22: Respondents' satisfaction in different domains of life, SOWF 2023 survey
(Rated on a scale from 1 – strongly disagree – to 6 – strongly agree)



The survey also asked respondents to indicate how often they had experienced some states of mind or emotions in the six months before the survey. These states or emotions include a sense of gratitude, isolation, pleasure, and worry (see figure 23).

These survey results indicate some notable gender differences in emotional and mental health-related experiences. Women reported feeling gratitude slightly more frequently than men, but the difference was only significant in the 'sometimes' category. On the question about how often they experienced feeling isolated from others in their life over the previous six months, there was no significant difference between women (37.1%) and men (37.5%) who indicated that they 'often' or 'always' felt isolated from others. There was also no significant difference between women (27.5%) and men (28.1%) on how often they experienced 'little' or 'no' pleasure in doing things.

Finally, men were significantly more likely to report that they 'never' felt like the person they wanted to be.

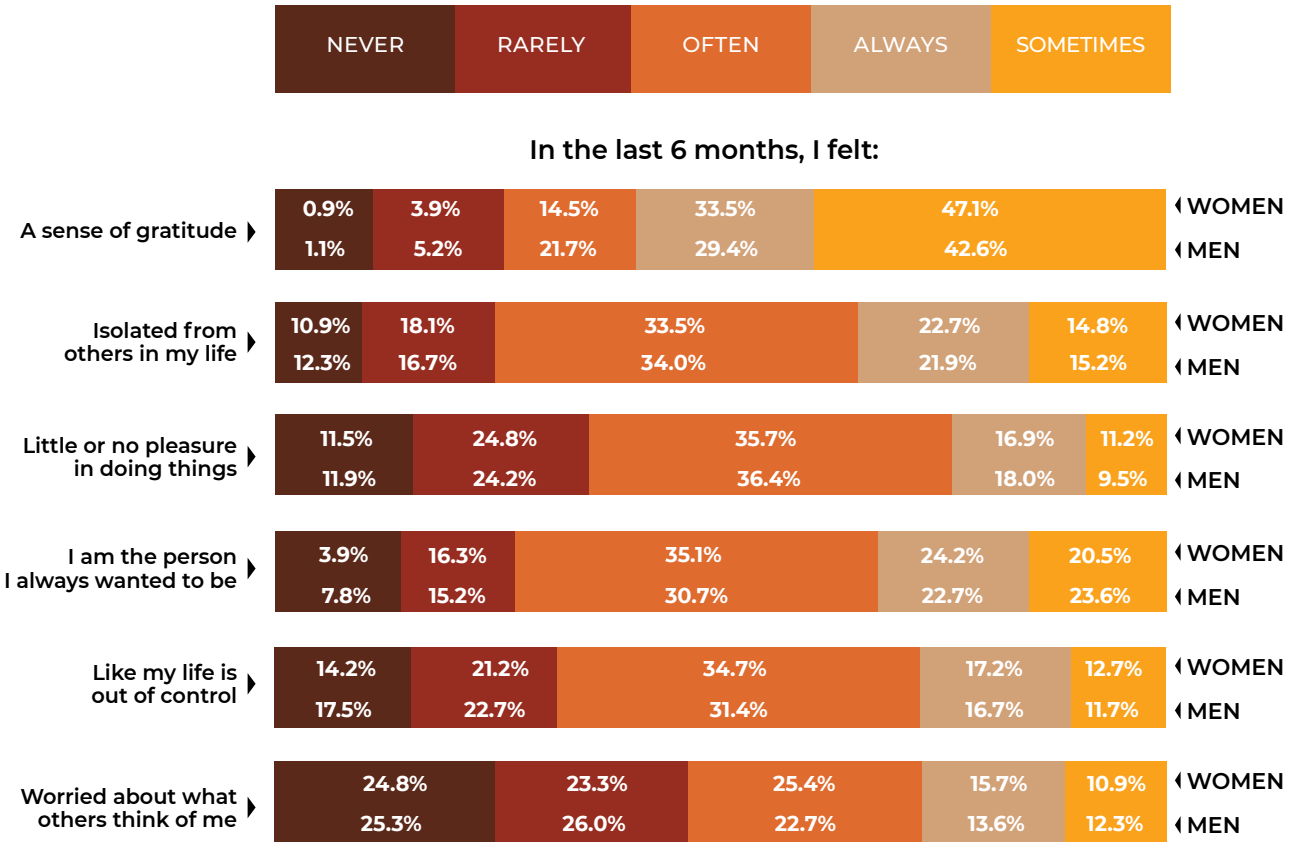
Overall, while many of the differences between these two gender groups were not statistically significant, the findings highlight some nuanced variations in emotional experiences between women and men.

Mental health and fatherhood

While mental health is a topic of significant importance for both new mothers and fathers, literature on specifically new fathers is noticeably less abundant.

Consider the following: A search on Google Scholar for "new parents and mental health" generated about 5.03 million results; a search for "new mothers and mental health" yielded 4.37 million results; while a search for "new

Figure 23: Respondents' experience of mental health-related states and emotions, SOWF 2023 survey



fathers and mental health" yielded only 2.37 million results. Changing the search terms to be more exact, the terms "new parents" and "mental well-being" yielded 1,450 returns; "new mothers" and "mental well-being" 2,870; and "new fathers" and "mental well-being" only 365.

What these search results indicate is that most studies of parental mental health and well-being tend to be generic (meaning that many studies do not factor in the gender of the parent); that mothers remain a more popular research focus; and that there is significantly less attention on the mental health and well-being of fathers. The search results also suggest that mental well-being is less a focus of study than mental health.

There is an increasing body of international studies on fatherhood and mental health and themes emerging from some of these are described in case 9 on the next pages. There is, however, a glaring absence of literature specifically focused on new and expectant fathers in South Africa. The scarcity of studies in this field underscores the urgent need for further investigation.

CASE 9

Fathers' mental health illness and the father–child relationship

James Barnetson, Stellenbosch University

This case focuses on some key themes that emerged from a literature review of research on the experiences of fathers with mental health problems regarding relationships with their children.

South Africa has very limited empirical research on the impact of paternal figures on the father–child relationship. However, there is a sizable and increasing literature from Western countries on mental health issues among fathers.

Some of these works state, for example, that paternal mental health problems such as depression or anxiety (what are called 'common mental health problems') can hinder a father's ability to fully and effectively engage with his child. The problems are closely associated with adverse child outcomes and they present a risk factor for the mental health of the child.[17]

During the perinatal and postnatal periods, fathers experience increased rates and a high prevalence of anxiety and depression. Research indicates that 10% of fathers globally experience both depression and anxiety after the child's birth (postnatal period).[18] Other research has found that during the pregnancy (perinatal period), 5 – 10% of new fathers experience depression, and 5 –15% have anxiety.[19]

During the perinatal and postnatal periods, fathers experience increased rates and a high prevalence of anxiety and depression.

To cope with testing life situations, some fathers turn to unhealthy outlets or engage in damaging behaviour. For example, alcohol abuse and acting aggressively towards family members are among the most frequent negative coping mechanisms.[20]

Researchers have also found depression rates in fathers to be double when compared to those of their childless counterparts of the same age.[21] Furthermore, researchers have indicated a potential increase in paternal depression from 10% to 68% five years after the child's birth.[22]

Young fathers more vulnerable to poor mental health

Paternal depression is more often seen in younger fathers. A history of depression, low income, and marital dissatisfaction are some of the influencing factors to the onset of depression in these fathers.[23] This vulnerability to depression is coupled with young fathers' view of themselves as the less important parent and of feeling inadequate as father figures.[24]

Experiencing feelings of weakness violates the societal expectations of men and men's beliefs about themselves as the source of strength and dependability in their families.[25] These filter into psychological distress that gets outwardly expressed in other areas of their lives, resulting in increased marital problems, decreased parenting efficacy, and increased parenting distress.[26]

A risk of ongoing anxiety

Anxiety, which is often diagnosed together – though not always – with depression[27], presents itself more vigorously in the transitional period of going into fatherhood[28]. A risk of anxiety forever looms for fathers in all areas of the development of their child: during pregnancy, the postpartum period, and throughout child development, and with anxiety levels among fathers sometimes rivalling those of mothers.[29]

The onset of anxiety among fathers is associated with several factors. These include fathering a baby of low birth weight, and living arrangements, with non-resident fathers showing higher levels of anxiety than fathers who live with the child.[30]

The presence of anxiety leads to decreased warmth in father–child relationships, controlling parenting behaviours, and a lack of assistance given to the mother of the child.[31] Also, there are various ways in which anxiety can manifest itself in outward displays of behaviour, for example avoidance, aggressive behaviour, and not being able to take in information.[32]

Some men are unlikely to seek help because of masculinity scripts, for example the belief that men must be tough.

Barriers to fathers seeking help

Studies show that even when they can benefit from mental health care, some men are unlikely to seek help because of masculinity scripts, for example the belief that men must be tough.[33] A masculinity script is a cognitive schema (pattern of thinking and behaviour) that instructs individuals how to understand themselves and others in different situations. It is reasonable to assume that the influence of masculinity scripts, such as the tough guy script, on seeking mental health applies to men who are fathers. The social expectations to display strength and provide for a family tend to go hand in hand with being ashamed to seek any kind of mental health assistance.

Stigma is a significant barrier to seeking mental health help.[34] Where there is mental health stigma, there is likely to be negative coping mechanisms as far as mental health is concerned, forcing fathers into a corner.

Stigmatising behaviours contribute to the perpetuation of depression and anxiety in fathers. Fathers may be inhibited from expressing mental health concerns or unable to disclose such information to anyone except immediate family.[35] Seeking professional support is also avoided due to fathers fearing that their children will be removed from their custody due to mental health issues.[36]

Research gaps to close

With studies from other countries indicating the scale of mental health among fathers, South Africa needs a substantial increase in studies on the impact of the different experiences and conditions of these fathers, such as anxiety and depression, on various aspects of the father–child relationship, such as emotional bonds and parenting behaviours. Also of importance is understanding the cultural and societal factors in South Africa that contribute to the impact of poor paternal mental health on the relationship between fathers and their children.

The research literature suggests that new fathers are more vulnerable to experiencing poor mental health. South African research into paternal mental health will need to pay attention to this group. Given the role of masculinity scripts and mental health stigma as barriers for seeking care, these are two of the many areas in need of study and intervention, including research on how mental health support services can be tailored to address the specific challenges faced by fathers with mental health issues.

The *State of South Africa's Fathers 2021* revealed that 48% of fathers surveyed for this report disclosed feeling depressed; 45% lacked motivation; 40% reported a lack of interest or pleasure in activities; 37% felt anxious; 26% reported anger, irritability, and aggression; and 9% reported substance/drug use.[37] These results, consistent with international trends, were obtained through screening for depression and anxiety-related symptoms.

Our literature review found 22 studies focusing on mental health and fatherhood. Of these studies, only one focused on the positive experiences of expectant and new fathers in South Africa.[38] A total of nine studies were quantitative, two used mixed methods, and twelve were qualitative. In South Africa, one study was quantitative[39], three were qualitative[40], and one utilised both quantitative and qualitative methods[41].

While the literature review revealed a mixture of findings, some studies reported significant psychological distress during the transition to fatherhood, while others did not. A primary focus was placed on the benefits of male involvement for children and women with less attention to the potential impact of such involvement on men's mental health.[42] Risk factors, changes, coping strategies, support needs, and barriers to accessing support for new fathers were discussed in the literature.

Research has demonstrated that paternal involvement during pregnancy is associated with various positive outcomes for both mother and child, including improved attendance at antenatal care appointments, skilled birth attendance, facility births, postpartum care, birth and complication preparedness, and maternal nutrition.[43] It also highlighted the positive impact of fatherhood on men themselves.[44]

The literature suggested various support mechanisms to aid fathers during this transitional period, including guidance and support around preparation for fatherhood and partner relationship changes[45], as well as treatment for depression and anxiety, which could improve mood, father–infant relationships, and perceptions of fatherhood[46].

One study[47] explored fathers' experiences with care work and housework, highlighting

social, cultural, and organisational barriers to their involvement. The study emphasised the potential role of paternity leave as a catalyst for fathers' participation in household duties. This suggests that well-thought-out paternity leave policy may advance a progressive gender equality agenda. (In the next chapter, advocacy for better and more equal parental leave in South Africa is discussed – see pp. 152 – 155.)

A qualitative study[48] of isiZulu-speaking men, ages 25 – 60, in the Umkanyakude district of KwaZulu-Natal, explored their perspectives on fatherhood and its potential influence on men's health and health behaviours. The study included interviews with 13 community informants and 28 men participating in three focus groups that were arranged by age and parenting status. The study intended to provide insight into traditional Zulu perspectives on fatherhood, as well as challenges faced by fathers in contemporary South Africa. Three main themes related to fathering, fatherhood, and men's health were identified:

1. **The interrelatedness of health status and health behaviours with perceptions of 'good' and 'bad' fathers:** 'Good' fathers were seen as healthy men, both in terms of their own health status as well as how they engaged in behaviours that positively promoted family health.
2. **Positive narratives and perceptions of health in men's accounts of fatherhood:** Many men described their desire and actions to change their health practices on becoming a father. For example, one participant stated, "I think I learned my lesson because now I maintain a proper lifestyle. The way that I live now is much better. I am not promiscuous with my health life".[49] Despite no major reports of physical or mental illness due to becoming a father, many men reported increased worries, anxiety, and pressure. Several fathers noted that their ability to handle stress was important to their ability to perform their family roles effectively.
3. **The positive impact of fathering:** Fathers reported the positive impact of being involved in their children's health and well-being on their own psychological and physical health.

Becoming and being a father

Any major turning point in life can cause change in an individual's mental state. Becoming a father is one such major turning point in men's lives. The arrival of a child can be positively received, but it can also cause stress. It can elicit apprehension, irritability, negative mood, even depression and anxiety. But it can also lead to previously unknown emotional, cognitive, and behavioural issues in men. For example, a study[50] conducted in Ghana quantitatively assessed the impact of parenting stress on fathers' overall well-being and qualitatively evaluated their lived experiences as fathers. As can be expected, the researchers found evidence that fathers with higher levels of stress had lower overall well-being. At the same time, according to the researchers[51]:

> … an overarching theme that emerged from our study was the sense of pride and joy that fatherhood brings to these men, counter-balancing the stress-related findings. Being a father earned them homage among their peers, reaffirmed their "manhood," elevated their status in society, and made them heroes in the eyes of their children. Ghanaian men want to, and enjoy being, fathers and must

The arrival of a child can be positively received by fathers, but it can also cause stress.

be supported in this role to combat the external stressors. Our study participants emphasized the importance of mental health resources, including counseling, to alleviate the psychological stressors of fatherhood.

The transition to fatherhood is more often depicted through a lens of stress and anxiety, overshadowing the positive psychological effects that this significant life event can have on new fathers. Interestingly, in the South African component of the SOWF 2023 survey, men who lived with partners and children had higher grit scores than men who lived alone. There seem to be a correlation between these care relationships and a sense of grit, which is a "self-reported measure of persistent and passionate engagement in an endeavour"[52].

Also, as can be seen from the Ghanaian study on fatherhood stress and well-being, some men experience affirmation, pride, and joy from becoming fathers. While acknowledging the paucity of research on fathers' mental health in general in South Africa, understanding these positive aspects can help to create a supportive environment that promotes the well-being of new fathers and their families.

Emotional intelligence

The concept of emotional intelligence is said to have been coined in 1990 by Peter Salovey and John Mayer. They defined emotional intelligence as "the subset of social intelligence that involves the ability to monitor one's own and others' feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them and to use this information to guide one's thinking and actions".[53]

There is not a lot of research into emotional intelligence among fathers. Aspects of emotional intelligence or emotional intelligence as a whole may be related to mental well-being. Both are or may be related to the quality of father–child relationships; yet there is not a large literature on the relationship of emotional intelligence to healthy fatherhood. An emotionally intelligent father is attuned to his own needs as well as those of his partner, child, and others in the child's life.

> Becoming a father often brings about a heightened sense of purpose and meaning in life and instils a sense of duty and direction that can be incredibly fulfilling.

Fatherhood often requires heightened awareness and management of emotions, not only for oneself but also in understanding and responding to the needs of others. For new fathers in South Africa, this emotional intelligence can lead to greater empathy and patience, enhancing communication, and strengthening relationships. This, in turn, fosters a nurturing and positive family environment. Empathy enables fathers to understand and respond to their children's and partners' needs better, while patience helps them navigate the challenges of parenting with a calm and composed demeanour.

Life satisfaction

New fathers frequently report higher levels of life satisfaction. The joy and fulfilment derived from nurturing a new life, witnessing the child's growth and development, and the deep emotional connections formed with the child contribute to a profound sense of accomplishment and happiness. The responsibilities of raising a child provide fathers with a purpose and a goal, which can significantly enhance their self-esteem and overall life satisfaction. This increased life satisfaction can act as a buffer against the stresses of daily life, fostering a more positive outlook and greater resilience.

Purpose

Becoming a father often brings about a heightened sense of purpose and meaning in life. The responsibility of caring for and guiding a child instils a sense of duty and direction that can be incredibly fulfilling. The desire to provide for and support their family motivates fathers to strive for personal and professional growth. This motivation can lead to significant positive changes in a father's life, including career advancements and the pursuit of new skills and knowledge. Fatherhood also encourages fathers to think long-term and set goals that benefit their family's future. This forward-thinking perspective fosters a sense of purpose and direction, which is crucial for mental well-being.

Family bonds

Fatherhood can significantly strengthen family bonds, which are crucial for mental well-being. The active involvement of fathers in caregiving and family activities promotes a sense of unity and cooperation within the family. Fathers who actively participate in caregiving and household responsibilities help create a balanced and supportive family environment. This active participation strengthens the father–child bond and promotes a more equitable distribution of parenting responsibilities, benefitting the mental health of both parents.

Community engagement

Fatherhood can also enhance community engagement as fathers take on active roles in their communities. By participating in community activities and supporting other families, new fathers strengthen social networks and contribute to a supportive environment that benefits everyone. This community engagement fosters a sense of belonging and purpose that is essential for mental health.

CASE 10

Feeling grateful to you all[ii]

Terence Mentor, content creator

Eventually, we're going to tell you the full story about how we welcomed this little guy into the big world.

Right now though, I'm thinking about the kind of support we give dads and dads to be. I've ranted and complained about this issue for years, and now I've got a whole new experience to talk about.

Here's what happened: throughout Julie's pregnancy, during the birth, and even now (a few weeks after), there were people checking in on me.

I had people regularly ask me how I was doing and what help I needed. They weren't asking me about Julie or the baby – I was the central point of concern.

(Don't worry, Julie and Charlie had their fair share of check-ins too!)

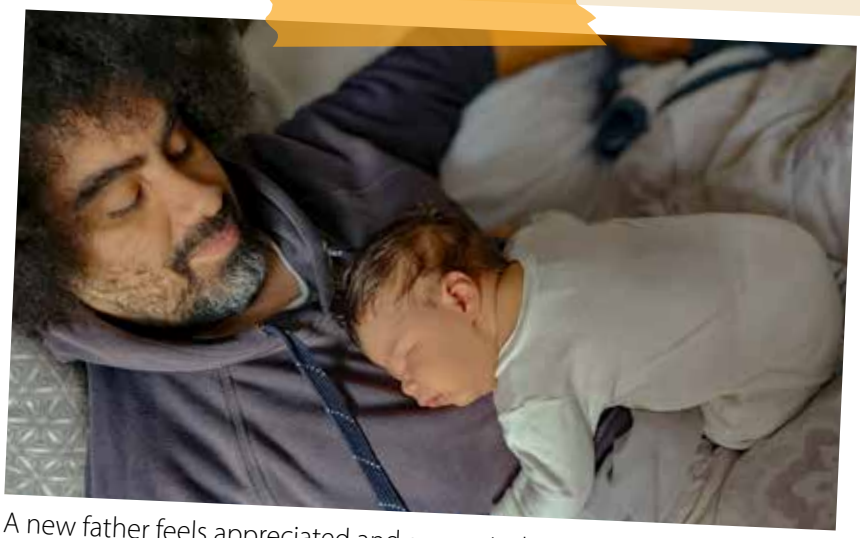
So this meant that I felt important and validated and included and cared for as a father. It helped so much to keep my energy and emotions high, and was a big reason why I was able to be a good partner to Julie through it all.

Long story short – a lot of people did a great job doing what we've been asking people to do for ages: support a dad.

What really struck me was that it wasn't just the moms we know. I regularly received kind and supportive messages from dads and other men. This was a new experience for me, and was very welcomed! You gents know who you are, and I am so damn appreciative for every one of you.

(And ladies, if you are married to one of those guys, you got a keeper there.)

All in all, it feels like we're turning the tide to supporting and caring for dads. My goal is to do the same for the next fella!



A new father feels appreciated and supported when dads check in on him, too. Photo by Terence Mentor.

[ii] Originally published on the author's Afrodaddy blog on 10 July 2024: www.afrodaddyonline.com/post/feeling-grateful-to-you-all. It has been lightly edited. This is what the AfroDaddy blog says about itself: "AfroDaddy is a place for parents, especially dads, to come together and share in the 'duality of parenting' – the fact that being a parent can be fantastic, wonderful and beautiful while simultaneously being exhausting, frustrating and awful. I guarantee that pretty much every mom and dad understand the previous paragraph. So let's chat!".

Conclusion

The limited research and interventions concerning mental health among fathers in South Africa, particularly during key life transitions, highlight a significant gap in understanding and support. While there is growing awareness of maternal mental health, fathers – whether new or experienced – remain largely overlooked in both research and policy frameworks. This lack of attention leaves fathers, particularly those navigating significant turning points such as the birth of a child, marital transitions, or career changes, without the necessary mental health resources and support.

The recommendation is clear: South Africa needs more focused research on the mental health challenges that fathers face during such critical life phases. This research should inform the development of interventions and support systems that take into account the unique emotional and psychological pressures fathers experience. By integrating the mental health needs of fathers into broader public health and social welfare programmes, we can foster healthier families and communities.

Furthermore, as a society, we must challenge the assumption that fathers can adequately care for their own mental well-being without external support (the value of which is illustrated in the case on the previous page about a new father's experiences of feeling "validated, included and cared for as a father").

It is essential for communities, civil society organisations, families, and government structures to actively promote the mental well-being of fathers, especially new fathers who may be particularly vulnerable to stress, anxiety, and feelings of isolation. The mental health of fathers should be treated with the same urgency and consideration as maternal mental health, recognising its impact not only on the individual but also on family dynamics and child development.

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SOCIOECONOMIC CONTEXT AND FATHERHOOD: DECENTRING FINANCIAL PROVISION

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Chapter 7

Socioeconomic context and fatherhood: Decentring financial provision

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There are several factors that shape men's experiences of fatherhood. These include culture, tradition, as well as their socioeconomic contexts. In this chapter we focus on the latter to explore how fatherhood is impacted by men's socioeconomic position.

In the SOSAF 2021 report[1], we have focused on how poverty, precarious work, and unemployment shape fathering. Continuing from the previous report, this chapter shows how increasing unemployment and poverty in South Africa reproduce and maintain narratives of fatherhood that centre economic provision over other fathering responsibilities that men ought to fulfil in children's lives.

Fatherhood, as we argue, involves the integration of multiple roles, such as providing physical care and emotional support for children, alongside providing for their financial needs. We present evidence for why an understanding of fatherhood centred on economic provision persists and will most likely remain dominant for a long time in South Africa. This is despite the evident shifts in some men's parenting practices – shifts towards more actively involved fatherhood. The South African socioeconomic context, as we show in this chapter, plays a significant role in maintaining expectations of fatherhood that are centred on economic provision.

While working against gender transformation and the promotion of equitable division of labour within the home, these (economic) expectations of fatherhood also speak to what is real for fathers, children, and families in South Africa, where poverty remains a key social challenge.

Many scholars have emphasised the importance of moving beyond the provider model of fatherhood[2], calling for fathers to step up to be more actively involved in their children's lives beyond only providing for children's economic needs. Such definitions of fatherhood (that prioritise economic provision) have been cited as problematic as they limit men's contributions within the home and in their children's lives to merely providing for their material needs – what some scholars refer to as "ATM fathers".[3] Such fathers provide financial support for their children with very little investment in children's well-being and the actual mental and emotional labour that parenting requires.

While economic fatherhood remains prevalent, men are reportedly becoming more interested in establishing relationships and spending time with their children and participating in various activities such as walking their children to school and assisting them with homework.[4] However, there is still very little empirical evidence documenting the extent of this shift among fathers in South Africa.

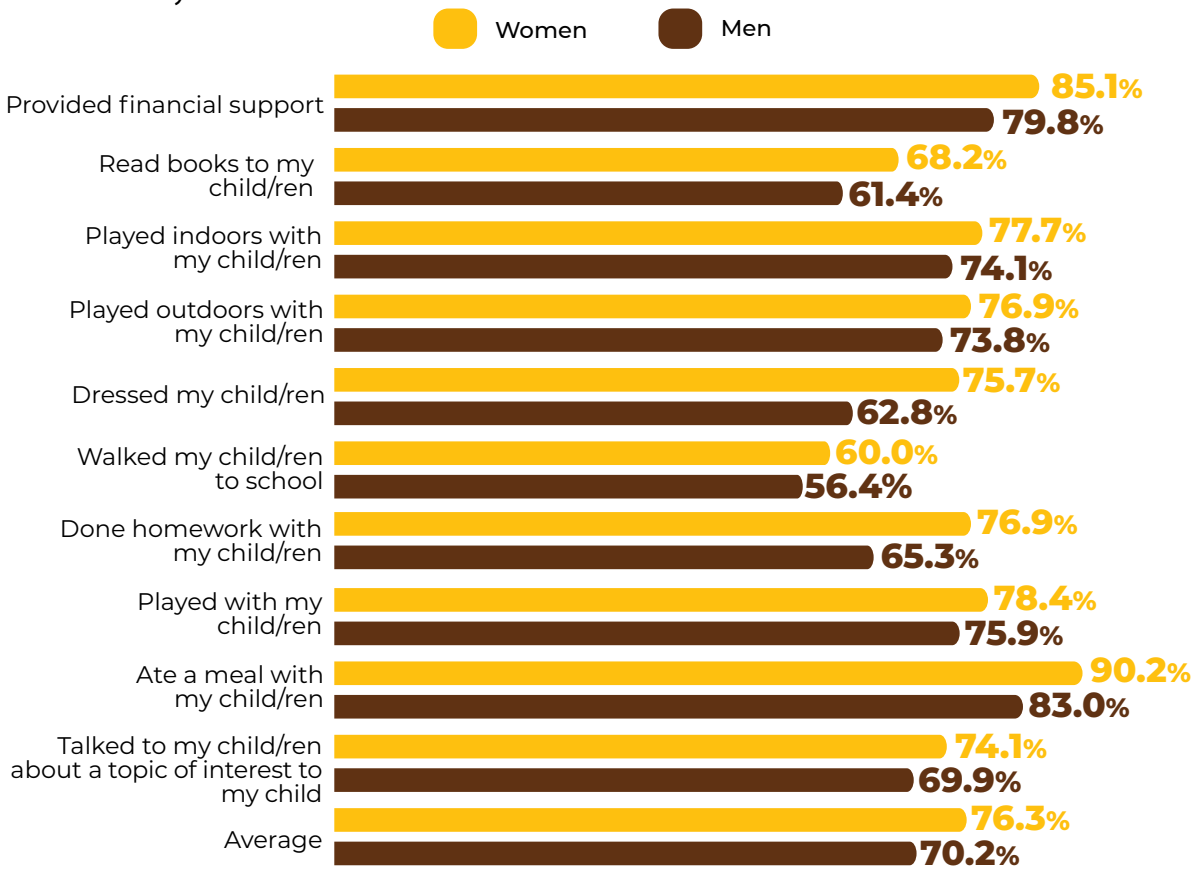
Data from the State of the World's Fathers (SOWF) 2023 survey[i] shows that, even though similar rates of full-time employment were documented for the men and women in South Africa who participated in the study (59.5% and 58.9% respectively), women spent more time tending to their children's physical and emotional needs than men. These findings (figure 24) further show that where men were involved, they provided economic support (79.8% compared to 85.1% of women).

Men reported that they participated in activities such as playing with their children (75.9% compared to 78.4% of women) and eating a meal together (83.0% compared to 90.2% of women). Men who participated in the survey, however, spent less time on primary caregiving tasks such as dressing their children (62.8% compared to 75.7% of women) and doing homework (65.3% compared to 76.9% of women who participated).

Men who participated in the SOWF 2023 survey are shown to be "cherry picking" as they choose to engage more in fun activities with children and less in actual childcare in the home, while women are left to do the primary caregiving work.[5]

Participants in the SOWF 2023 survey were also asked to indicate how much time they spent caring for their children's emotional or physical needs. Figures 25 and 26 show that, where fewer hours (between 0 – 6 hours) are considered, smaller differences were observed between the time men and women spent caring for children's physical and emotional needs. However, larger differences were observed when longer periods (more than six hours) were considered, which shows that women spent significantly more time caring for children's emotional and physical needs.

Figure 24: Respondents' involvement in childcare for children who are their biological children, SOWF 2023 survey



[i] This survey was conducted for the MenCare Campaign, a global campaign co-founded by Equimundo and Sonke Gender Justice. This report draws on the South African quantitative dataset collected as part of the larger 17-country SOWF 2023 survey. See www.equimundo.org/state-of-the-worlds-fathers-research.

Figure 25: Time spent by respondents on care for emotional needs of their youngest child, SOWF 2023 survey

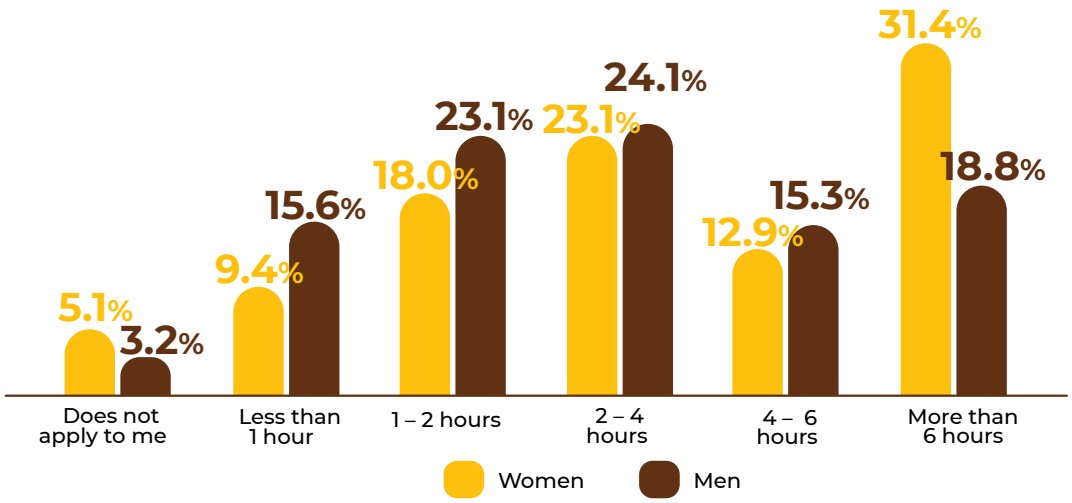
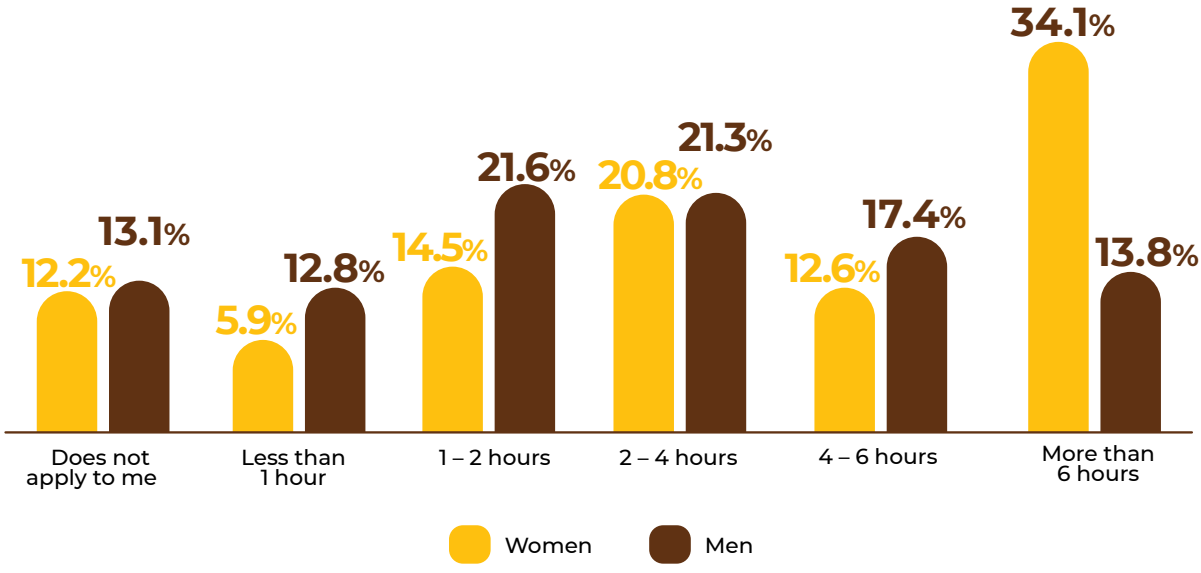


Figure 26: Time spent by respondents on care of physical needs of their youngest child, SOWF 2023 survey



This data from the SOWF 2023 survey suggests the need to ask more specific questions about fathers' involvement in children's lives. When fathers say they are getting more involved in their children's lives, we need to ask specific questions about what exactly they do to clearly document men's participation in caregiving. For some men, being actively involved in their children's lives simply means providing finances and engaging in fun activities, rather than providing primary care. Defining fatherhood in this way creates a challenge for poor and unemployed fathers in South Africa.

Poverty and unemployment in South Africa

According to the Quarterly Labour Force Survey, unemployment in South Africa was at 32.1% in the third quarter of 2024, a 0.2% increase from the same quarter of 2023 (31.9%).[6]

While these statistics include women, who are often worse off when employment rates are considered, men are most often the ones who bear the socio-cultural expectation to provide for their families. This is not to say that men do more of the economic provision in families than women, but that society (including men themselves) is harder on men who cannot meet their families' economic needs than on women.

The belief that a man's primary role is to provide remains deeply entrenched in South African society. When the family is poor and struggling, it is most often men who will be pressured to seek work regardless of their partners' employment status. This often means spending extended amounts of time away from the family seeking or engaging in work, and sometimes even spending time away from home to 'hide away' from the shame that such men often feel, which limits their ability to engage in other forms of fathering.

> Economic support is the only form of parenting that some men deem necessary in their role as fathers.

For some men, providing economic support is the only form of caregiving they deem necessary towards their children. And this is why the work on changing narratives on fatherhood is important, to shift men's understanding of their roles in children's lives and promote and support their active involvement and participation in various caregiving roles. This work needs to be supported by structural shifts in the economic contexts – an increase in employment opportunities and decrease in poverty levels.

Shifting narratives on fatherhood in South Africa

Several South African scholars have documented the shift in how fatherhood is understood, from a focus on economic provision towards more nurturing forms of fatherhood.[7] However, most of these studies report on what men say they consider important as fathers, which suggests that the culture of fatherhood is changing (men's views and beliefs are leaning more towards more nurturing forms of fatherhood).

However, there is still a lack of evidence that supports a parallel shift in the conduct and practice of fatherhood – what men *actually* do. What men say fathers should be doing may not necessarily be what they are able to do. Their ideas are shifting, but there are barriers in place that maintain and reproduce the significance of economic provision, limiting their ability to behave in ways that align with shifting ideas of fatherhood. The available studies, explored here, show that we cannot claim this shift towards nurturing forms of fatherhood to be a change throughout society, though it may be occurring in pockets of society.

One study[8], for example, found that fathers were more actively involved in their children's lives than previously reported in other studies, and that their involvement was enabled by factors such as access to stable employment and living in dual-earner households. These men could, therefore, be more involved in their children's lives without being preoccupied with the concerns about financial instability. The preoccupation with provision may be stressful for fathers, resulting in aggressive fathers who do not contribute positively to their children's lives.[9]

Another study[10] found that the participants were actively involved in caregiving activities in their children's lives. However, the researchers also noted that all except five of their participants were employed, with no reference to the kinds of work these men did or whether those who were unemployed received any financial support from their families, as they, too, were said to be actively involved fathers.

A study of men who live with children[11] found that the majority (80%) of the research participants engaged in caregiving activities such as helping the children with homework. This was found to be the case despite resource scarcity for some living in conditions of poverty. The participants in this study all shared residence with the children they cared for, and as previous studies have shown (and also discussed in chapter 2), physical presence does enhance men's active participation in children's lives although it does not guarantee it.[12]

In South Africa, very few children (35.6% in 2023)[13] live with their fathers. This situation, too, can be informed by a man's socioeconomic

position, which determines whether he can marry or afford *inhlawulo* (which literally translates as a 'fine' or 'penalty' paid to a woman's family when a child is conceived and born outside of marriage) to officially claim fatherhood culturally. When a man is not able to fulfil these cultural requirements, he may be denied access to his child. Access to financial resources plays an important role here, too, in determining whether men are able to access and build relationships with their children. Researchers[14] have argued that men tend to embrace the caregiving role when their material realities 'allow' it, highlighting the role of poverty and unemployment in shaping and determining the forms of fathering that are accessible to men.

In another study[15], with men in informal settlements in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal, researchers found that while most men expressed the desire to be more actively involved in their children's lives, there were factors that limited their ability to do so. These factors included unemployment and precarious work.

The studies discussed here show that the notions of what it means to be a father are shifting and that men are increasingly embracing caregiving roles.[16] However, these studies are very few, thus documenting the realities of a minority of South Africa's fathers and leaving the experiences and practices of many men in the country unexplored. This suggests that we cannot, in fact, claim a social shift in how men father.

But what we can argue is that ideas about fatherhood are shifting, the 'paternal culture' is shifting, and men increasingly acknowledge the importance of being actively involved in their children's lives beyond just economic provision. These changing attitudes towards men's

caregiving roles, however, must be reflected in policies, such as on equal parental leave (discussed in the case on pp. 152 – 155).

More importantly, this shift in thinking does not always align with changes in 'conduct' due to the factors discussed earlier, which include but are not limited to unemployment and poverty.

It is clear from these narratives that economic provision informs what men are able to do, which highlights why such an understanding of fatherhood persists. This construction of fatherhood that prioritises economic provision is also informed by cultural and religious beliefs (see chapter 4) that define fathers as economic providers whose first and most significant responsibility is financial provision. As a result, men are able to engage in caregiving activities when they are not worried about provision, when their material realities allow them to fulfil what they consider their primary responsibility.

In essence, caregiving is becoming increasingly important for men too, but it remains secondary to economic provision. Fathers will, therefore, most likely prioritise economic provision over more engaged parenting activities when they are not financially stable. For some men, even when their employment enables them to be more actively involved in childcare, socio-cultural norms often inform what they do as fathers, limiting their involvement mainly to financial provision.

Implications for fathering

When men are not able to provide, they are less likely to be more actively involved in their children's lives.[17] The high levels of unemployment and poverty in South Africa suggest then that, for many fathers, actively participating in caregiving activities might be an ideal that they are not able to fulfil as they strive to provide for their children's and families' economic needs.

The implications stretch beyond men's ability to support their children emotionally, but also means that men are less likely to engage in caregiving tasks when they are not able to provide, reproducing gender inequality in parenting and childcare by burdening women and mothers with childcare responsibilities while men continue to strive to fulfil what society defines as 'successful' masculinity and fatherhood.

The focus on economic fatherhood, perpetuated further by poverty and unemployment in South Africa, reinforces traditional gender roles that assign men the provider role and women the caregiver role. This division of labour often restricts women's chances of achieving financial autonomy and sustains gender gaps within households and society at large.

Poverty and unemployment, therefore, push against efforts that seek to challenge gender inequality as men spend more time outside the home working or seeking work, leaving women to carry the burden of childcare and other caregiving responsibilities while also making financial contributions to the household through paid work outside the home.

Research (and policy) recommendations

We indicated earlier that, though many South African studies acknowledge a shift in the culture of fatherhood (ideas, beliefs, values), very few have provided evidence that suggests a parallel shift in the conduct (actual doing) of fatherhood. One of the questions we need to ask in studies across the country is: *what do men and fathers do*? By asking men this question, we will gain a deeper understanding of the roles they participate in, and the meanings they associate with such roles, which can inform interventions that seek to promote caregiving among men. From this work, we would also gain a deeper understanding of the many other factors that inform 'what fathers do'.

Poverty and unemployment have been highlighted as some of the most significant factors impacting fathering. We recommend more local studies to further investigate other factors beyond economic provision that may impact men's active engagement in their children's lives and their participation in caregiving roles. It has been argued that while there is some evidence supporting fathers' shift towards more caregiving activities, it is not clear how and why some men increase their involvement and caregiving in their children's lives and others do not – there may be other factors to explore.[18]

Research that includes multiple perspectives (such as mothers' and children's) and not just that of fathers, who may exaggerate the extent of their involvement[ii] is also needed. It is also important that future studies not only report these shifts or the extent of fathers' involvement but also provide a detailed discussion of who the men/participants included in their studies are (demographic information), what their socioeconomic positioning is, and the potential forms of (emotional and economic) support these men have access to.

Such details are important in helping us analyse and make sense of fathers' experiences, how they father, and the factors that inform how they father. This information can also help us understand what enables some fathers to be more involved (beyond economic provision) while limiting others.

In South Africa, unemployed persons currently can apply for a social relief of distress grant to the mere value of R370 per month, making it impossible for those who depend on such social assistance to provide for their own basic needs, not even to mention providing for their children and other dependants. The lack of adequate social and financial support means that many people have to rely on finding job opportunities. These are also hard to access in South Africa, particularly low-skill jobs.

> Social norms that stigmatise and shame men who stay at home and engage in caregiving activities should be challenged.

The absence of adequate financial support and the high levels of poverty and unemployment in South Africa present a challenge towards efforts that seek to promote engaged fathering. Such undertakings, therefore, need to be supported by other efforts that seek to challenge societal constructions of masculinity and fatherhood that are centred on economic provision.

And most importantly, social norms that stigmatise and shame men who stay at home and engage in caregiving activities should be challenged – making it more acceptable for men to do so. This means that, when men are unemployed, they can spend time at home with their children and support their partners with caregiving roles without being perceived as 'bad' fathers simply because they are not able to provide financially.

[ii] The limits and challenges with self-reports have been cited in previous studies.

CASE 11

Advocacy for better parental leave in South Africa

Wessel van den Berg, Equimundo: Centre for Masculinities and Social Justice

It is essential that labour laws include parental leave as it relates to economic productivity and gender equality. In South Africa, the unequal distribution of unpaid care work, mainly falling on women, limits their workforce participation. This case examines efforts to improve parental leave policies in South Africa, highlighting leadership and advocacy that led to policy changes and the challenges that remain.

Unpaid care work remains mostly women's work

In South Africa, women disproportionately bear the burden of unpaid care work, contributing to gender inequality. The previous national time-use survey showed that, in 2010, men spent only 11.7% of the time spent by women on childcare activities.[19] The recent State of the World's Fathers (SOWF) 2023 survey[iii] also found an unequal distribution (2.5 times more women than men reported more than six hours spent on care work) in the sample of respondents.

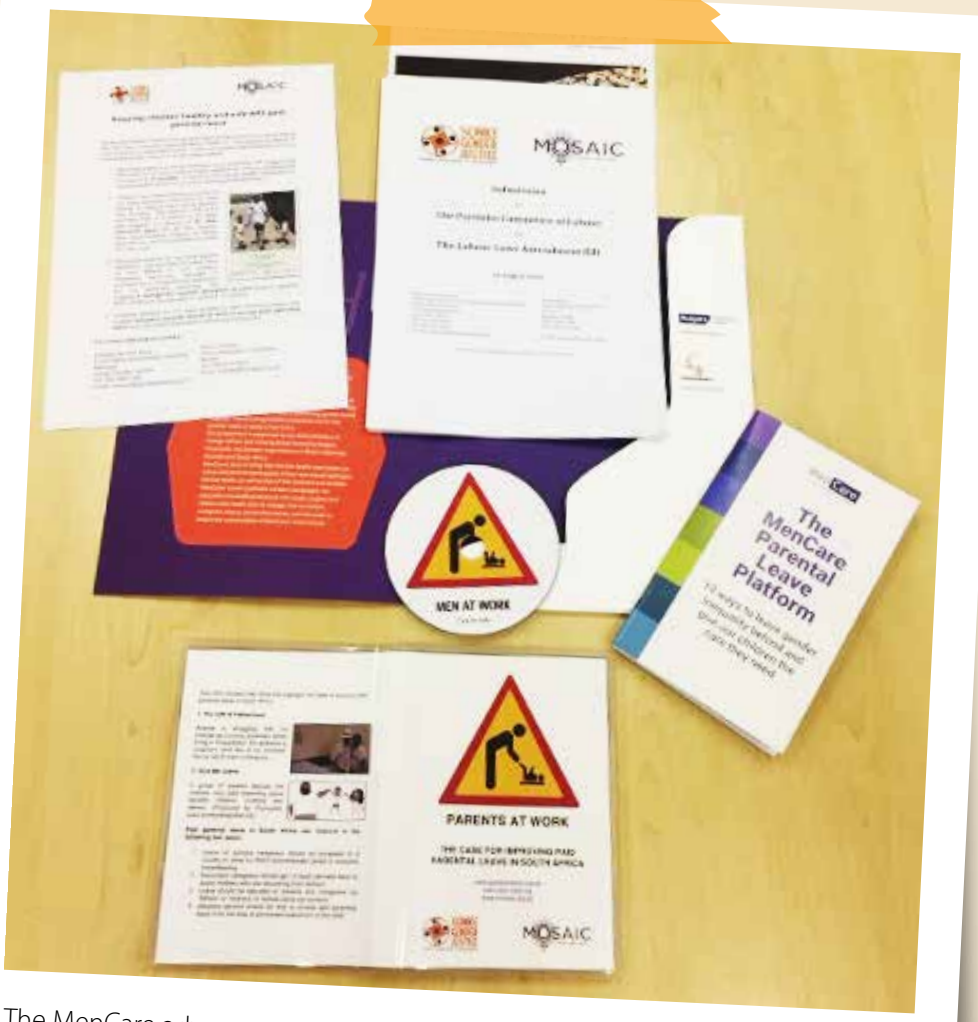
This disparity has significant implications for women's economic participation and employment opportunities, especially for those with children. Before the new legislative changes, described below, labour laws only provided three days of "family responsibility leave" for men, covering all family duties, from attending funerals to caregiving. This perpetuated gender inequality, as only offering maternity leave assumed that men should not contribute to caregiving responsibilities.

Progress towards more equal parental leave – including leave for fathers

Advocacy for improved parental leave in South Africa emerged from a coalition of individual citizens, civil society organisations, trade unions, and members of Parliament (MPs). Initially led by women's rights groups and parents by sharing their lived experiences, the movement grew through grassroots campaigns, petitions, media engagement, and strategic litigation.

Over two decades, discussions in academic and civil society circles influenced parliamentary actions, eventually leading to constitutional arguments for equitable leave in court. This journey has now reached the Constitutional Court, where a final judgment is pending.

[iii] This report draws on the South African quantitative dataset collected as part of the larger 17-country SOWF 2023 survey. See www.equimundo.org/state-of-the-worlds-fathers-research.



The MenCare advocacy materials used in 2018 for parliamentary advocacy. Photo by Wessel van den Berg.

Firstly, the Department of Social Development White Paper on Families 2012 recommended that government departments explore parental leave improvements, including leave for fathers, thereby laying the groundwork for future policy changes.[20]

Secondly, the Labour Laws Amendment Act of 2018 provided better paid maternity leave than before and introduced 10 days of paid leave for fathers and other parents, and parental leave for non-biological parents. This law was a significant step towards gender-equal caregiving by establishing the first formal provision of parenting leave for fathers.[21] Activists like Hendri Terblanche, a father of prematurely born twins, were instrumental in using parliamentary channels to spotlight the need for parental leave.

Civil society organisations, notably Sonke Gender Justice, led media campaigns and litigation efforts based on the MenCare Parental Leave Platform, amplifying public engagement and support. Trade unions, especially the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), played a crucial role in shaping legislation to address workers' needs in parental leave policies. Within parliament, MP Cheryllyn Dudley of the African Christian Democratic Party was pivotal, introducing the Private Members Bill that led to the 2018 Labour Laws Amendment Act, a landmark step for parental leave rights.

Thirdly, the High Court ruling in *Werner and Ika Van Wyk, Commission for Gender Equality, and Sonke Gender Justice versus Minister of Employment and Labour* in 2023 then deemed the Labour Laws Amendment Act 2018 unconstitutional because the leave was being provided unequally. In his ruling, High Court Judge Roland Sutherland recommended a shared leave model, meaning that a shared pool of leave may be divided by co-parents as they see fit. The specific time available to each parent and mechanisms to access the leave still need to be developed in law.

The ruling marks progress for gender equality, though concerns remain that it could reinforce traditional gender norms if the leave model depends on only shared leave – especially in a context where men may be unlikely to choose to take paid parental leave.[22]

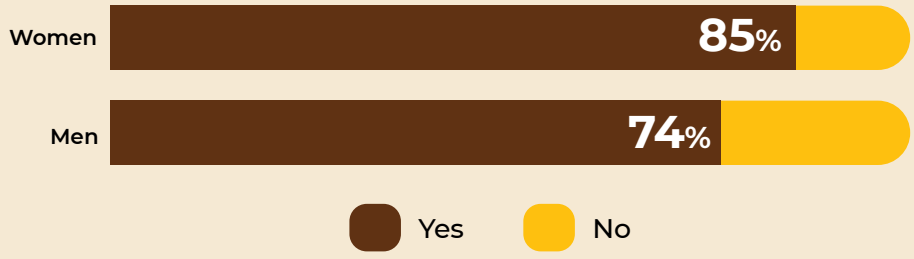
Challenges to gender equality

Despite progress, challenges remain in achieving equal parental leave. The High Court's shared leave model, while an improvement, is still influenced by gender norms. In shared leave models, such as the one used in the United Kingdom, women often take most of the leave, perpetuating caregiving inequalities. Best practice models advocate for paid leave with non-transferable portions for each parent to encourage equal caregiving.

Public opinion is shifting in favour of parental leave and surveys show increasing demand for parental leave for fathers. For example, the Human Sciences Research Council's recent South African Social Attitudes Survey found "that there is public demand for expanded parental leave and growing recognition of the need for working fathers to receive paternity leave, with a preferred entitlement that significantly exceeds the ten days currently offered".[23]

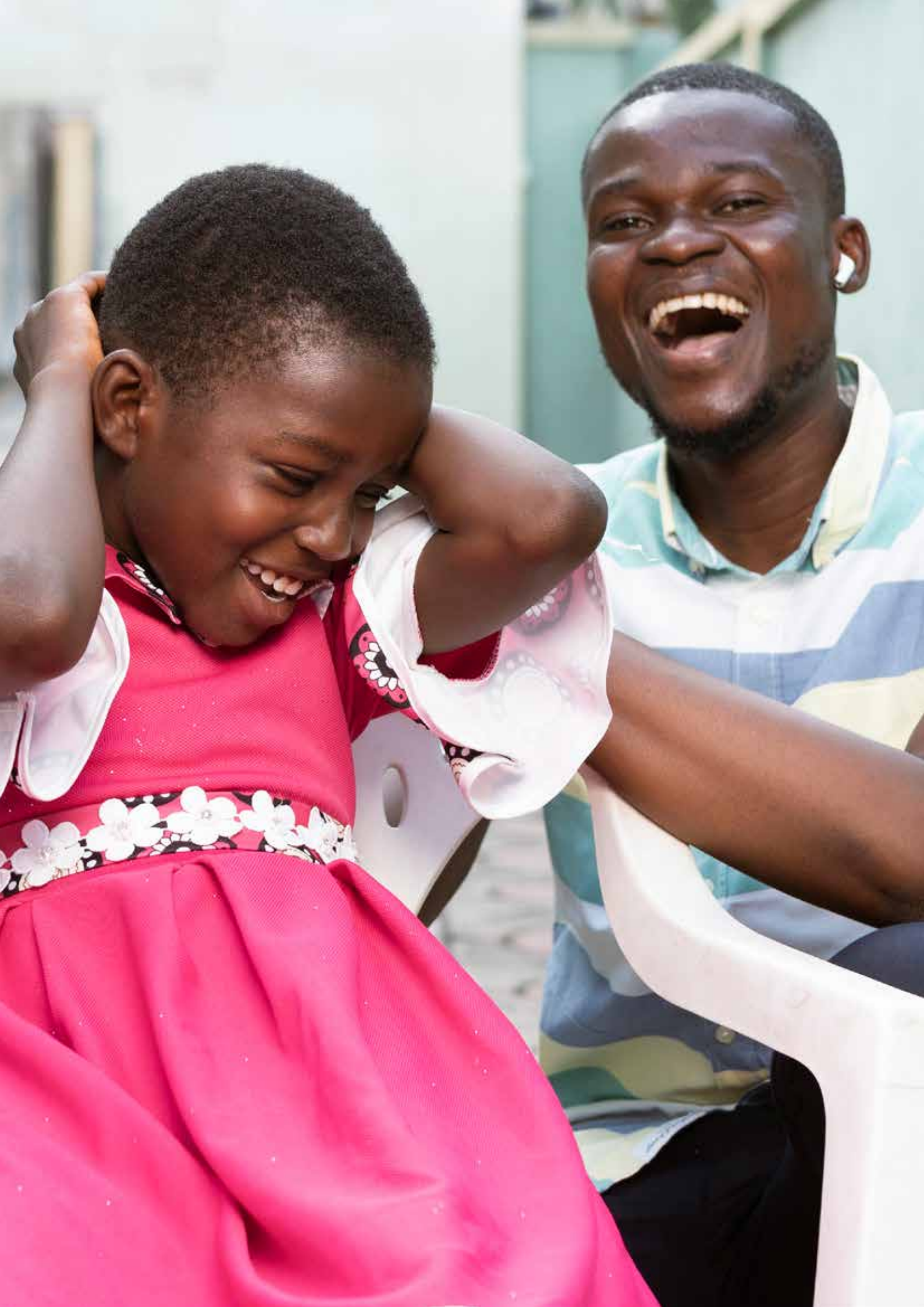
Changing attitudes are also supported by global reports like the *State of the World's Fathers 2023*, which showed significant support for caregiving policies among South Africa's fathers.[24] However, policies must evolve to match this shift in public opinion. Figure 27 on parents' uptake of parental leave from the SOWF 2023 survey shows 85% of women and 74% of men used the full amount of time available for parental leave. This is a relatively high uptake for both women and men, however women still utilised more leave than men.

Figure 27: Proportion of respondents who took the full amount of parental leave available to them, SOWF 2023 survey



Conclusion

The journey to improving parental leave in South Africa highlights the importance of leadership, collaboration, and sustained advocacy in driving change. While progress has been made, challenges persist in achieving gender-equal caregiving. Continued stakeholder engagement and efforts to challenge entrenched gender norms will be crucial in ensuring parental leave policies support all parents equitably.



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EVIDENCE-BASED PARENTING PROGRAMMES FOR FATHERS IN SOUTH AFRICA

Lauren-Jayne van Niekerk, University of Cape Town

Chapter 8

Evidence-based parenting programmes for fathers in South Africa

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Key messages

- Fathers' involvement can improve child outcomes and promote gender equality.
- Evidence-based and evidence-informed programmes can improve parenting skills and family dynamics, and ensure relevance in local contexts.
- Socioeconomic barriers and societal and gender norms limit fathers' participation in parenting programmes.
- Cultural adaptation is essential for successful programme implementation.
- Digital and community-based strategies can increase father engagement.

Father involvement in child development is gaining recognition, particularly in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) like South Africa, where historical, cultural, and socioeconomic factors have limited fathers' engagement. Recognising the crucial role of fathers in children's development, there is a growing effort to implement evidence-based parenting programmes aimed at supporting and enhancing paternal involvement.[1]

This chapter examines several initiatives that can guide the development of such programmes for male caregivers in South Africa. Although these initiatives have mostly succeeded with mothers[2], they offer promising frameworks for intentionally targeting and including fathers in evidence-based parenting programmes.

Unlocking the power of evidence-based programming

Evidence-based programmes (EBPs), grounded in empirical research, offer significant potential for improving parenting skills and child outcomes by addressing various parenting challenges through proven methods. In South Africa, where socioeconomic disparities and cultural norms impact parenting practices, the adoption of culturally relevant and carefully evaluated programmes is crucial. These programmes, which typically include parent education, skills training, and support groups, are designed to ensure effectiveness across diverse communities while minimising the risk of unintended consequences.[3]

Culturally relevant and carefully evaluated programmes help ensure effectiveness across different communities while minimising the risk of unintended consequences. The World Health Organization[4] highlights that EBPs play a vital role in preventing child maltreatment,

improving behavioural outcomes, and fostering positive family dynamics.[5] In the South African context, targeted EBPs have the potential to significantly strengthen father–child relationships and support children's positive developmental outcomes.[6]

The gap in local evidence-based parenting programmes

In South Africa, there is a significant gap in evidence-based parenting programmes compared to high-income countries where such programmes are more prevalent and systematically evaluated. This gap is underscored by several key points:

Effectiveness and availability

Over the past decade, there has been an increase in developing and testing parenting programmes in LMICs, showing promising results in improving child and family outcomes.[7] However, further research is needed to understand the factors that facilitate successful adaptation and implementation across diverse cultural and socioeconomic contexts. Many programmes in South Africa lack rigorous evidence of effectiveness, partly due to the need for cultural adaptations.[8]

Although the number of programmes in LMICs has increased, many do not specifically focus on fathers.[9] Tailoring interventions to the South African context and including father engagement are crucial. Balancing rigorous scientific evaluation with cultural and contextual relevance is a significant challenge.[10]

Implementation challenges

The successful implementation of parenting programmes in South Africa faces challenges, including the need for adequately trained facilitators familiar with the local context. Efforts to deliver interventions often lack strong evidence or comprehensive evaluations.[11] The South African Parenting Programme Implementers Network (SAPPIN) has been instrumental in fostering EBPs that are focusing on fathers and male caregivers; yet more robust evidence and support are needed.[12]

Research and development

Recent initiatives have sought to address the gap in evidence-based parenting programmes by developing locally relevant, evidence-informed interventions. The Parenting for Lifelong Health (PLH) programmes, developed for South Africa, are now used worldwide. These include the Parent–Infant Home Visiting Programme, Dialogic Book-Sharing for infants and young children, "PLH for Young Children" and "PLH for Teens" which, while not specifically targeting fathers, demonstrate successful models for culturally adapted, evidence-based interventions.[13] Despite these programmes seeking to include fathers, some fathers have indicated that parenting programmes were "women's stuff", which emphasises the strength of deeply ingrained societal and gender norms.[14]

Adapting these programmes to become more attractive to men by integrating gender-transformative content and tailored recruitment strategies offers a valuable framework for developing father-focused interventions.

Adapting these programmes to become more attractive to men by integrating gender-transformative content and tailored recruitment strategies offers a valuable framework for developing father-focused interventions.

Barriers to participation

Parents often encounter challenges in participating in parenting programmes due to socioeconomic barriers, limited awareness, and logistical difficulties, which can hinder consistent attendance and engagement.[15] Participation of fathers or male caregivers is limited, with most caregiving interventions directed towards female caregivers and few including male caregivers, especially in LMICs.[16] This is often due to traditional gender norms that view caregiving as a female role, leaving fathers and male caregivers marginalised in child-rearing practices. Consequently, few interventions are tailored to engage men in these contexts.

Developing more inclusive evidence-based programmes requires adapting existing strategies to local socio-cultural contexts and addressing barriers to participation and engagement, particularly among male caregivers, whose involvement is critical for promoting balanced child development and gender equality within households.[17]

The role of research-in-implementation

Research-in-implementation, also known as implementation research, refers to the ongoing process of applying, testing, and refining interventions within real-world settings. It aims to understand how programmes function in practice, identify the factors that influence their success or failure, and explore how they can be adapted or scaled effectively.[18] This approach involves continuous monitoring, evaluation, and continuous adjustments, ensuring that interventions remain relevant and effective as they are deployed across different contexts.

Defining evidence-based and evidence-informed programmes

In the realm of parenting interventions, particularly those for improving father engagement, it is crucial to distinguish between *evidence-based* and *evidence-informed* programmes. Both approaches are designed to enhance parenting practices and child outcomes, but they differ in how they utilise and apply evidence.

Evidence-based programmes: These are interventions that have undergone rigorous testing through methods such as randomised controlled trials (RCTs) and have consistently demonstrated their effectiveness across various settings. These programmes are typically grounded in empirical research, which validates their outcomes and establishes them as reliable models for replication. In South Africa, where socioeconomic disparities and cultural norms significantly influence parenting, evidence-based programmes are essential for ensuring that interventions are both effective and culturally relevant. For example, the PLH programmes have been extensively tested and have shown significant improvements in parenting practices and child outcomes.[19] However, these programmes often require strict adherence to the original model to maintain their effectiveness, which can limit their adaptability to different contexts.

Evidence-informed programming: These interventions, in contrast, offer a wider, more flexible approach, integrating the best available research with practitioner expertise, community input, and contextual considerations.[20] These programmes are particularly valuable in diverse and complex settings like South Africa, where strict adherence to a single model may not be feasible or effective.

Promising evidence-based parenting interventions for fathers

In South Africa, while there are no known parenting programmes specifically for fathers that are both evidence-based and affordable, several promising interventions can guide their development.

- **ParentText and ParentLine:** These are innovative SMS-based interventions that directly deliver parenting tips and support via mobile phones. They aim to support parents by providing timely, relevant advice and may be better able to engage fathers since the programme can be delivered at a time that suits the father, and periods of engagement are very brief (around five minutes), which may suit working fathers. However, while the programme shows promise, a study has acknowledged that strategies to improve male caregiver recruitment and retention were needed as the participation of fathers or male caregivers in the intervention was relatively low. The researchers pointed out that this aspect was crucial for further programme adaptations and for ensuring that male caregivers are more involved, given the positive influence they can have on child outcomes.[21]
- **ParentApp:** Primarily evaluated in Tanzania, ParentApp offers interactive content, videos, and resources tailored to fathers. Features include goal-setting tools, progress tracking, and community forums. Results have shown improved father–child interactions and reduced stress levels, indicating potential for South Africa.[22]
- **Parenting for Lifelong Health interventions:** PLH is a suite of free, open-access parenting programmes for low-resource settings. Studies have shown significant reductions in child maltreatment and improvements in parenting practices and parent–child relationships among mothers.[23] However, there was a need to further enhance strategies for effectively recruiting and engaging fathers. These strategies might include culturally sensitive recruitment, flexible delivery options, the involvement of male facilitators, gender-transformative content, and community-based support initiatives, thus addressing the existing gaps in engaging fathers.

These programmes offer valuable insights and frameworks for developing effective evidence-based parenting interventions for fathers in South Africa. By leveraging the successes and learnings from these initiatives, targeted interventions can be created to enhance father involvement and improve parenting outcomes.

Takalani Sesame: A promising evidence-informed intervention for father engagement

One of the most compelling examples of evidence-informed programming in South Africa is a father engagement initiative developed by Sesame Workshop South Africa (SWSA). This programme underscores the critical role of using not only evidence-based but also wider evidence-informed approaches to design interventions that are culturally relevant and responsive to local needs. Grounded in both global research and an in-depth local needs assessment across Gauteng, Free State, and the Eastern Cape provinces, Takalani Sesame effectively addresses the barriers that South Africa's fathers face in caregiving, such as time constraints, societal norms, and limited perceptions of play as a male role.[i]

The importance of evidence-informed programming is clear in how the initiative's design and execution are based on robust data, ensuring that the programme's interventions are not only theoretically sound but also practically relevant to the realities of fathers in South Africa. Its "Play Workshops", piloted in 2021, reached over 400 fathers and children, helping to reshape perceptions of play, challenge entrenched gender norms, and model positive father–child interactions.

The results from the pilot, such as increased father engagement and a noticeable shift

[i] At the time of writing, Sesame Workshop South Africa was conducting a quasi-experimental design evaluation of the intervention to further strengthen its evidence base, supporting a comprehensive evidence-informed and an evidence-based approach.

in gender norms, demonstrate the value of using research-driven strategies to inform programme design and execution. By grounding their approach in evidence, SWSA ensured that the programme not only resonated with fathers but also laid the groundwork for sustainability and expansion. This highlights how evidence-informed programming can play a transformative role in engaging male caregivers, promoting gender equality, and enhancing child development outcomes.

The Takalani Sesame programme is discussed in more detail in the chapter on fatherhood and early childhood development on pp. 73 – 75.

Leveraging both approaches for maximum impact

Programmes such as ParentText, ParentApp, and PLH for Teens and Young Children are rigorously evaluated through randomised controlled trials, which are the gold standard for assessing intervention effectiveness.[24] RCTs provide high-quality evidence on the effectiveness of programmes, establishing their impact on father involvement and child outcomes, and supporting scalability and wider implementation in diverse settings.[25] Robust RCT evidence also plays a crucial role in influencing policymakers to invest in these programmes and helps refine and improve them by identifying the most effective components.[26]

The evidence-informed initiative by SWSA demonstrates the importance of grounding community engagement interventions in robust research and local needs assessments. By focusing on father engagement and gender norms, the programme not only enhances child well-being but also contributes to gender equity within South African society. This programme illustrates how evidence-based practices can be adapted to local contexts for meaningful and sustainable change.

> Together, these strategies offer complementary methods for advancing parenting practices and child outcomes across diverse South African communities.

Through research-in-implementation, both evidence-based and evidence-informed programmes can be refined continuously and adapted to maximise their effectiveness, ultimately leading to better outcomes for families and children. The SWSA initiative underscores the value of flexible, evidence-informed approaches, while evidence-based programmes like PLH highlight the importance of maintaining rigour in programme design and implementation.

Together, these strategies offer complementary methods for advancing parenting practices and child outcomes across diverse South African communities.

Challenges and strategies for male caregiver engagement

Despite positive outcomes, male caregiver participation in these evidence-based and evidence-informed programmes remains low. For example, only 5% of attendees in the PLH for Teens programme were male caregivers[27], and the RCT for PLH for Young Children included only one father[28]. Thus, the reliability of outcomes for male caregivers is limited due to small sample sizes.

Recruitment biases (when participants do not represent the full range of experiences or characteristics of the wider population), cultural barriers, employment needs, and logistical challenges often restrict male participation. Traditional views of child-rearing as women's work and the predominance of female research staff may discourage male involvement. Additionally, fathers and/or social fathers who are not residing with their children are often excluded, a significant limitation given South Africa's family dynamics.[29]

Cultural beliefs that parenting is women's domain, combined with the legacy of the migrant labour system separating fathers from families, further limit male participation. To address these challenges, some programmes have initiated "fathers only" groups, focusing on "being a good dad", recognising fathers' unique needs, and employing male co-facilitators to boost engagement.[30]

The importance of engaging fathers in parenting programmes

Including fathers in parenting programmes is essential for several reasons.

Consistency in parenting

Involving both parents ensures unified parenting strategies, thus creating a stable environment for children. This is particularly important in South Africa, where many fathers do not live with their children due to socioeconomic factors, employment, or cultural practices.[31] Including fathers helps parents coordinate efforts in discipline, education, and emotional support, benefiting the child's overall well-being.[32] Furthermore, this approach allows for 'gender-synchronised' interventions that shift norms across all genders, recognising that cultural and societal norms are maintained and reinforced by individuals of all genders.

Enhanced outcomes

Fathers' participation in parenting programmes can significantly improve relationships with their children. Engaging fathers, especially in

non-residential situations, helps bridge gaps created by physical absence. Fathers in these programmes report increased confidence and stronger emotional connections with their children, positively impacting children's behavioural and emotional development.[33] As illustrated in the chapter on fatherhood and early childhood development, consistent father engagement leads to better academic performance, lower behavioural problems, and improved social skills.[34] It also provides additional support to single mothers, contributing to a more balanced family environment.[35]

Broader impact

Inclusive programmes promote gender equality in caregiving and reduce the burden on single mothers.[36] Existing programmes in South Africa mostly engage mothers, leading to a lack of data on father outcomes. To address this gap, future interventions should use effective, culturally appropriate models that intentionally include fathers and help align the programmes with participants' lived realities. Tailoring recruitment strategies, content, and delivery methods is essential for enhancing father participation and programme success.[37]

The benefits of father-inclusive interventions are well-documented, showing positive impacts on maternal, paternal, and child outcomes.[38] There is also a growing call for improved inclusion of fathers in parenting programmes to further enhance these outcomes.[39] The adaptation of the PLH Teen programme to address intimate partner violence through co-parenting in rural Zimbabwe successfully engaged fathers, demonstrating the potential for similar initiatives in other contexts.[40]

By learning from these adaptations, South African programmes can better engage fathers and male caregivers through culturally relevant content, effective recruitment strategies, and ongoing support and engagement. Integrating these approaches can strengthen the evidence base for father-inclusive programmes, leading to more effective interventions that benefit all family members.[41]

Breaking barriers: Engaging fathers in parenting programmes

Engaging fathers and male caregivers in South Africa within evidence-based parenting programmes presents both challenges and opportunities. Socioeconomic and cultural barriers, including entrenched gender norms and high unemployment, often position caregiving as a female responsibility, marginalising men from child-rearing practices. Traditional views of caregiving define it as "women's work", further discouraging men from active participation.[42] These barriers are exacerbated by logistical challenges, such as economic migration, limited programme visibility, and structural issues like high unemployment, all of which contribute to the low participation rates among male caregivers.

The case of Heartlines' Fathers Matter edutainment campaign, discussed next, illustrates how a social and behaviour change communication model that uses storytelling aims to help shift narratives about fatherhood among men, women, and children in South Africa.

> Future interventions should use effective, culturally appropriate models that intentionally include fathers and help align the programmes with participants' lived realities.

CASE 12

Shifting narratives about fatherhood: The Heartlines Fathers Matter edutainment campaign

Harriet Perlman with Livhu Maphorogo, Garth Japhet, Lereko Mfono and Nevelia Moloi from Heartlines

> **Men were emotionally charged and some moved to tears. We realised the legacy we need to leave for our loved ones. We were made aware that our presence in our children's lives contributes uniquely to their development.**
> – Participant after watching the Fathers Matter films

In South Africa, there is a distressingly low involvement of fathers and other men in the lives of children. Research, locally and internationally, on the importance of father involvement is clear. Children who have a present, active, and positive father or father figure have a lower risk of teenage pregnancy, abusing drugs and alcohol, or being victims or perpetrators of violence, including gender-based violence. They are less likely to be incarcerated and tend to do better at school.[43]

The Fathers Matter Behaviour Change Communication Campaign seeks to promote the active and positive presence of fathers and father figures in the lives of children to improve outcomes for women, children, and men. This case describes the Fathers Matter campaign, with a particular focus on its six anthology films and highlights information and data gathered between 2022 and the end of 2023.

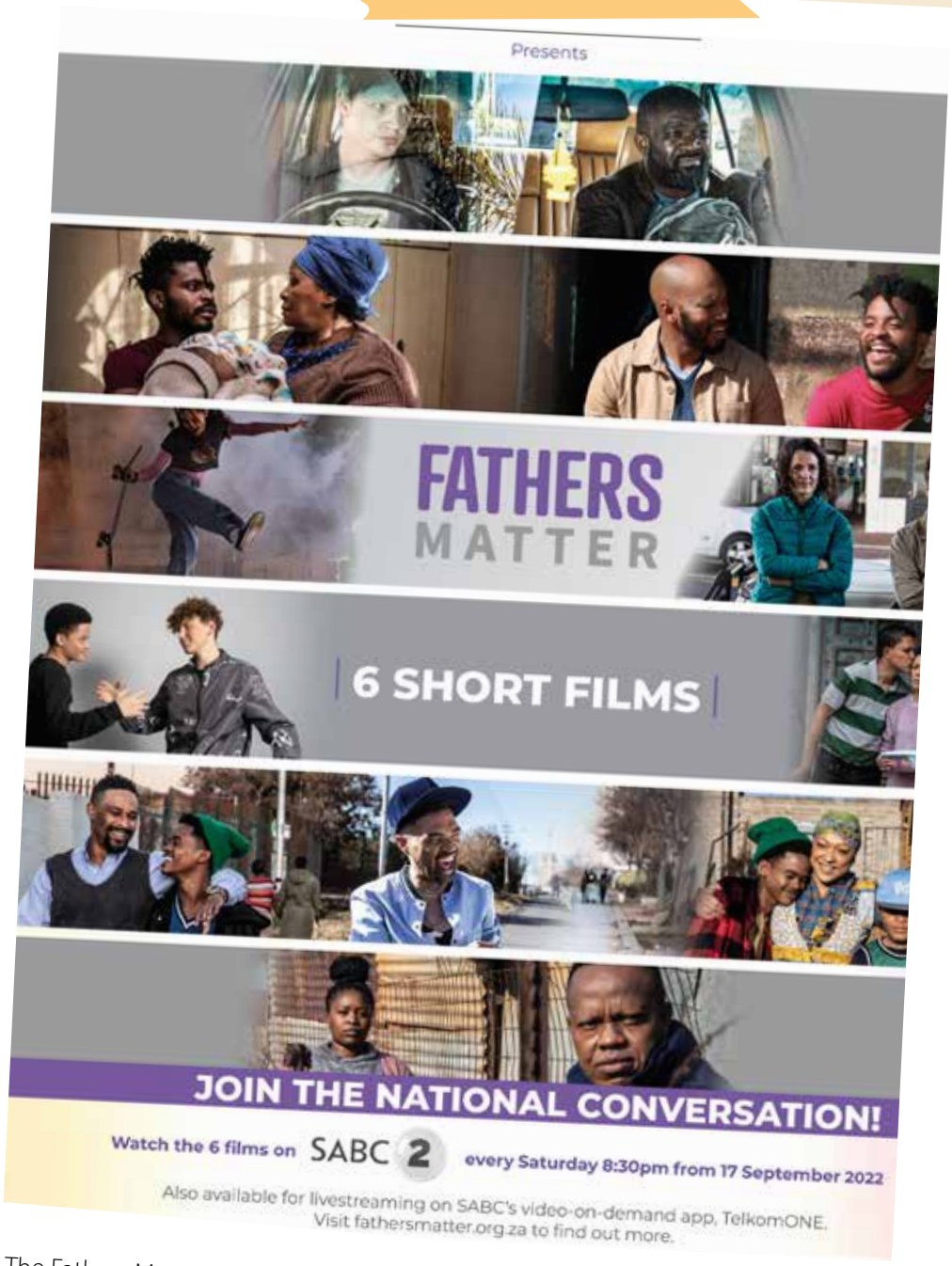
Using the power of storytelling

The Fathers Matter campaign of Heartlines, a South African non-governmental organisation (NGO), is rooted in a social and behaviour change communication model (SBCC). It uses the power of story to affect change and reach large audiences of men, women and children, stimulating debate and discussion nationally. It is also used as a resource by groups in various settings.

The campaign development process consists of several phases, which start with an extensive formative research process. The research findings are then discussed in a message design workshop where messages are crafted; the media landscape is mapped; media formats are selected; and a social mobilisation and distribution strategy designed. Thereafter, media are scripted and pretested to ensure that they resonate with the target audience.

Once testing is completed, the films and resources are produced and distributed. While evaluation happens in the final stage, it is planned for and embedded into the process from the beginning.

In 2019, Heartlines conducted extensive research on fatherhood to inform this SBCC



The Fathers Matter films poster.

intervention. Importantly, the research[44] found that:

- Many people believe that a dad's only role is to provide financially.
- There is a real lack of knowledge about how much fathers matter.
- There are men who want to be involved but lack confidence and skills.
- Some cultural practices help keep men away from their children.

Why films?

The Fathers Matter campaign is multi-pronged, but centres around six, 24-minute anthology[ii] films. Why films? Good stories move us emotionally, an important indicator in the pathway to change. Films stir us emotionally, inspire, and challenge us to reflect on our own lives and the lives of the people around us.

Each of the six films addresses a different perspective of fatherhood that emerged from the research. Each film, set in various contexts in South Africa, tells a compelling drama that explores the complexities of fatherhood in our country.

One of the films, *Melodi*, addresses the effects of the absence of a biological father in the life of a young woman.

Manskap highlights the importance of a social father in the life of a young boy where gang leaders prey on vulnerable young people.

In Time tells the story of a father who, due to economic circumstances, must work on a mine far from his daughter but still finds a way to be present in her life.

A catalyst for conversations on fatherhood

The films are not only distributed through mainstream outlets, which include public broadcast and digital platforms, but are the principal resource used by groups of men, women, and youth in various settings such as NGOs, faith-based organisations, sports clubs, workplaces, and correctional facilities. The films are the catalyst for facilitated discussions, supported by a national network of trainers, to change attitudes and behaviours, spark conversations and challenge entrenched cultural norms about fatherhood.

Comments on the Fathers Matter Facebook page highlight these narrative shifts:

> **Ayize [a character in the film *Family Portrait*] showed us all that there's no excuse: be present in your child's life.** – Fathers Matter Facebook follower

> **I was so touched by the lengths her father went to be at the trials and the love of his co-workers who helped him with transport money. I cried when he was running to the trials. It touched my heart, and I wish we had such fathers who are committed to their kids.** – Fathers Matter Facebook follower

Choosing anthology films as a format widened opportunities for the use of the films over time. As a series they hang together and have been aired numerous times by the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) as a prime-time television series. At the same time, self-contained films are ideal to use in face-to-face groups.

Importantly, the films are not just stand-alone stories but are part of a wider SBCC approach that includes print, face-to-face, and digital formats. Together these elements entrench the films' messages, build dialogue, and widen reach and impact across the country.

[ii] An anthology film is a single film consisting of several shorter films, each complete in itself and distinguished from the other, though frequently tied together by a single theme or idea.

A resource of support to fathers

Fathers Matter is also pioneering the use of a new platform: WhatsApp. Changing behaviour is not easy, so our Fathers Matter WhatsApp Coach provides support to men on their fatherhood journey through weekly tips and "nudges", while fathers can ask questions which are powered by ChatGPT, a generative artificial intelligence chatbot.

Reaching millions via different media platforms and partners

The Fathers Matter films' distribution and outreach strategies have been extensive. We give a summary of some of the key features here.

The films have been screened on different platforms over a period of two years, including on SABC 2, a television channel of South Africa's public broadcaster, where over one million viewers were reached during the premiere broadcasts of the films. They were rebroadcast on Youth Day and Father's Day.

Through a partnership with Sunshine Cinema, community film screenings were also held in small towns and villages in the Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal provinces.

We also developed many short format films and short advertisements, or 'promos', to further embed public conversation. These were aired on SABC radio and television talk shows, and are now available online through the Heartlines website, and are screened at Heartlines' face-to-face learning events.

A still frame from the Fathers Matter film, In Time.
Photo by Mark Lewis.

The Fathers Matter brand and the popularity of the films leverage other related media opportunities and content offerings. For example, we had significant social media engagement on our Facebook page, reaching over one million users, and extensive coverage on radio to date, with around 90 interviews and feature slots on public and community radio stations, reaching a cumulative listenership of 32 million people.

The films and an accompanying discussion guide are also used and promoted in face-to-face workshops, conferences, and events. To date, we have conducted more than 400 face-to-face training and community events in churches, NGOS, workplaces, and sports clubs. We also coordinate a network of more than 80 organisations that are working to promote male presence in children's lives.

Insights on impact and effectiveness

Evaluation is a critical component of the Fathers Matter campaign. As the films serve as an entry point for engaging communities in discussions about fatherhood, it is essential to assess their effectiveness in driving meaningful behaviour change. By evaluating both the short-term and long-term impacts, the campaign can better understand how well the films resonate with audiences, shift social norms, and influence fathers' involvement in the lives of their children.

A comprehensive external evaluation is currently underway, conducted by Stellenbosch University researchers who are using mixed-methods approaches (qualitative and quantitative). This evaluation will provide deeper insights into the impact of the Fathers Matter anthology films and the broader campaign.

While this in-depth evaluation progresses, we already have significant findings from an external evaluation completed in 2023.[45]

This evaluation specifically assessed the experiences of individuals who watched the films and participated in Heartlines' training and workshops. The findings highlight how the campaign is shifting attitudes toward fatherhood and encouraging greater involvement from fathers and male figures. For example, one participant explained:

> **I am unemployed, I did not see the need to visit my children when I don't have money or clothes for them. I have learned that I need to be there for them even though I can't always provide financially.** – Father from Daveyton, Gauteng province

These early results reflect the potential of the Fathers Matter campaign to influence social norms and behaviour change, laying a foundation for the more comprehensive evaluation to build upon.

Fathers' testimonies, along with growing public conversations, indicate that Fathers Matter is achieving its goal of reshaping the way people in South Africa think about fatherhood. By encouraging active and positive involvement from fathers, the campaign seeks to improve outcomes not only for children but also for mothers, fathers, and the broader society.

To view the Fathers Matter films and other resources, visit: www.heartlines.org.za/fathers-matter/films.

For tips on your fatherhood journey, say "Hi" to the Fathers Matter WhatsApp Coach on +27 60 058 2107.

Standards for evidence

The implementation of evidence-based programmes must adhere to robust standards for evidence to ensure long-term success. The Society for Prevention Research has developed frameworks that focus on efficacy, effectiveness, and scalability.[46] In South Africa, programmes need to not only demonstrate effectiveness but also undergo economic evaluations to ensure that cost-effectiveness is integrated into decision-making. This emphasis on rigorous evidence is essential to gaining policy and funding support for father-focused initiatives.

Cultural relevance and community engagement

To effectively engage fathers, programmes must be culturally tailored to address the unique socioeconomic and familial structures in South Africa. For example, many fathers do not live with their children due to economic migration, and this reality must be acknowledged in programme content to ensure relevance and acceptance. Community engagement is also crucial; local leaders, community organisations, and male role models can play a pivotal role in fostering programme buy-in and sustainability. This is especially true in rural or peri-urban

> Policymakers are more likely to fund interventions demonstrated to be effective.

communities where traditional norms around masculinity may present an additional barrier to father participation. Including male facilitators and culturally relevant recruitment strategies will enhance the reach and acceptance of these programmes.

Digital solutions for overcoming logistical barriers

In terms of overcoming logistical barriers, digital platforms offer flexible solutions to address the time constraints and socioeconomic pressures faced by many fathers. Digital tools provide accessible spaces where men can engage with parenting content at their convenience. Online platforms can allow men to explore gender-transformative roles in caregiving without the fear of social shaming or scrutiny that often accompanies in-person programmes. This method can help to break down deeply embedded gender norms and encourage greater male participation.

Policy and funding support

RCTs and other evidence from rigorous studies provide a basis for advocacy efforts that are targeting policies on and funding for father-focused interventions. Policymakers are more likely to fund interventions demonstrated to be effective through these trials. Showing the economic benefits of including fathers in child development programmes, such as improved child outcomes and reduced social costs, can also aid in securing the necessary resources for these programmes. Therefore, evidence generation and advocacy must go hand in hand to ensure the longevity and expansion of such initiatives.

Scalable models for broader impact

Effective programmes must be designed with scalability in mind, ensuring that they can be adapted to different regional contexts while maintaining their core effectiveness. Programmes such as ParentText and ParentApp, which can be delivered through digital platforms, offer scalable models that can reach fathers in both urban and rural settings. These digital interventions are not only adaptable but also allow for cost-effective scaling, making them ideal for reaching a broader audience of fathers across South Africa. This model of scalable interventions will be critical in ensuring that parenting programmes are accessible to a larger population, ultimately improving family health and child development outcomes.

Addressing practical considerations

Throughout programme development and implementation, several practical considerations must be addressed to ensure success. Research and practice questions related to father engagement, content relevance, and overcoming cultural and logistical barriers should be central to programme design. SAPPIN has consistently advocated for the development of father-inclusive interventions and has created a fatherhood community of practice[47] to share lessons and best practices, and foster collaboration among practitioners. This network is instrumental in ensuring that programmes remain culturally relevant and responsive to local needs. The case that is discussed next explains the network in more detail.

CASE 13

"Is the fatherhood role being abandoned?"

Rinchen Van Rijswijk, independent consultant;
Wilmi Dippenaar, South African Parenting Programme Implementers Network[iii]

> **"I attended the 'fatherhood as a role' workshop and realised that men are not socialised to be fathers and this creates a challenge for them. I was confronted by my own stereotypes of what a father can and cannot do. I learned that both men and women need to unlearn certain things for fathers to be able to parent differently.**[iv] – Anonymous, post-workshop questionnaire

With this quote in mind, it is clear that fatherhood is undergoing transformation in many countries of the world, including in South Africa. Historical, social, and cultural influences have shaped the roles and perceptions of fathers, creating a complex and evolving landscape.[48]

To get a better understanding of the role of fatherhood in South Africa, the South African Parenting Programme Implementers Network (SAPPIN) hosted a workshop that was titled "Is the Fatherhood Role Being Abandoned?" in 2024 in Johannesburg, Gauteng province. The workshop addressed the challenges surrounding fatherhood and explored pathways for more inclusive and supportive fathering practices.

SAPPIN is a network of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that uses evidence-based research to develop parenting programmes across South Africa. Member organisations develop and run various programmes that guide and support parents and caregivers to foster safe, warm, secure, and non-violent home environments that allow children to reach their full potential.

The workshop convened 80 participants from diverse sectors, including government, NGOs, academia, and corporate entities. It used a mixed-methods approach to delve into the complexities of fatherhood, enabling participants to examine lived experiences, consider contextual factors, and collaboratively develop solutions to address challenges and barriers that men face in their role as fathers. Combining mindfulness activities, Deep Democracy[v] principles[49], and reflective dialogue, this workshop fostered meaningful engagement, honouring the diversity of experiences while promoting collective growth and understanding.

[iii] This case is based on a forthcoming journal article:
van Rijswijk, R., van Niekerk, L.-J., Eriksson, S., Wynne, T., Ronaassen, J., Dawson, N., Dix-Peek, D., Manjengenja, N., Rawat, F., Jooste, E., Lombard, E., Osborne, A., Cochrane, W., Horne, A., Khumalo, T., Mufamdi-Mathebula, D., Motaung, M., Orr, L., Msibi, L., & Dippenaar, W. (forthcoming). SAPPIN collective perspectives: The state of fatherhood and fatherhood interventions in South Africa.
[iv] Names have been omitted to protect the privacy and confidentiality of workshop participants.
[v] Deep Democracy is a process focused on encouraging diverse perspectives and dissenting voices. It aims to bring democracy to life as a living reality, where everyone 'wins' by gaining more meaningful relationships and more sustainable resolutions (Mindell, 2008). The concept of Deep Democracy seeks to actualise democratic ideals through awareness, political discourse, and social action, attempting to equalise power relations and neutralise the binary of 'winning' or 'losing' (Mindell, 2002).

Although the workshop was entitled "Is the Fatherhood Role Being Abandoned?", there were few male attendees. While exact numbers by gender are unavailable, it is estimated that less than 25% of the participants were male. This lower attendance of men may be attributed to the underrepresentation of men in the social sciences, education, and psychosocial sectors. Research indicates that men are less likely to pursue studies in fields such as teaching and social work.[50] The impact of gender roles and identity has also been shown to steer men away from such fields.[51]

Consequently, discussions at the workshop addressed the lack of male participation in the event and in parenting programmes more broadly, exploring strategies for the NGO sector and SAPPIN member organisations to create a more welcoming and inclusive environment for men and fathers.

Participants were asked to bring to the workshop an item that symbolises fatherhood, which provided an opportunity for deeply personal and varied reflections in a safe and open environment. One participant, who brought a matchbox, explained:

> **A father can either burn down the house or create warmth and light, depending on where you light the fire.** – Workshop participant

Another chose a torch, symbolising how "a father can be a guiding light, showing the way and leading you through the darkness". In contrast, another attendant brought a handkerchief, reflecting on the pain of absence:

> **There were times when I needed a shoulder to cry on, and he wasn't there.** – Workshop participant

Key insights and experiences shared by workshop participants

The workshop was structured around two panels, each offering distinct but complementary perspectives on involved fatherhood. The first panel, "Stories of Fatherhood – Looking at Gender Roles and Beyond", featured personal narratives that challenged traditional gender stereotypes.

The second panel, "Healthy Fathering – What We Have Learned in Different Contexts?" took a research-focused approach, examining historical and socioeconomic influences on fatherhood. Key findings included the need to redefine fatherhood beyond the role of a provider, the importance of play in early childhood, and the value of creating supportive spaces for fathers to heal and connect.

Nuanced fatherhood discussions

The workshop explored fatherhood in South Africa, addressing challenges faced by involved, absent, and social fathers. The high number of fathers not living with their biological children highlighted the growing role of social fathers.[52] It is worth bearing in mind that social fathers may also act as fathers to children in addition to present, but also in the absence of, biological fathers.

Participants rejected the notion of fathers as mere providers and advocated instead for emotionally present and involved fathers. The workshop also tackled how cultural and social factors shape fatherhood.

Participants called for government and NGO interventions that address fathers' lack of involvement in their children's lives, as well as for support to fathers who wish to parent differently following their own traumatic childhood experiences concerning their fathers or those who acted as fathers to them.

The role of gender and culture in shaping fatherhood

The workshop addressed how gender roles, culture, tradition, capitalism, and beliefs deeply influence parenting and fatherhood. Participants raised concerns about avoiding stereotypes about fathers and men while promoting healthy parenting practices.

A key focus in the workshop was to create safe spaces for fathers, as current perceptions of such spaces may not align with fathers' needs, thus discouraging male participation. The underrepresentation of men at the workshop highlighted barriers to their involvement in parenting discussions.

It was also noted that women acted as gatekeepers to fathers, often reinforcing traditional roles that position fathers primarily as providers rather than emotional supporters.[53]

Challenges of fatherhood and manhood

Participants spoke about the close link between fatherhood and manhood, especially in the African context, with discussion about men not receiving sufficient preparation for their role as fathers. In addition, participants felt that poverty and unemployment further limited father involvement, with men feeling they have failed if unable to provide financially.

The underrepresentation of men at the workshop highlighted barriers to their involvement in parenting discussions.

Despite these challenges, the workshop found that many fathers wanted to be present, especially the "new generation" of fathers, though maternal gatekeeping persisted as a barrier. The workshop emphasised the need for society to challenge rigid definitions of manhood that limited fatherly involvement. Discussions also revealed the concept of "father wounds", reflecting the deep personal and historical pain experienced by many fathers and their children.

Participants stressed the importance of reframing masculine roles to disrupt cycles of violence and shift perceptions of fathers beyond the notion of "ATM dad" to more nurturing and involved roles. A question raised during the workshop, "How do we liberate fathers from rigid social definitions of manhood?" highlighted the need for ongoing reflection and societal change.

Financial pressures and public sector barriers

Financial pressures weigh heavily on fathers, who are often seen primarily as providers.[54] One participant noted that many fathers felt inadequate if they could not fulfil this role, leading to emotional withdrawal. This view was corroborated by research.[55]

The participants at the workshop.
Photo by Siyanda Luzipho.

The participants also spoke about how public sector services further reinforced this provider role of fathers by assuming female caregivers were solely responsible for child development, undermining fathers' ability to bond with their children.

Despite these challenges, a growing number of men are challenging traditional fathering norms, striving to meet their children's emotional and social needs while embracing more equal roles within the family.[56] This shift holds the potential for positive impacts on family dynamics, violence prevention, and gender equality in South Africa.[57]

Future steps

The workshop yielded crucial insights into the complexities of fatherhood in South Africa, highlighting the need for safe dialogue spaces, addressing gender stereotypes in paternal involvement, and recognising the role of cultural traditions in shaping fatherhood dynamics. These findings underscored the importance of nuanced interventions that respect cultural diversity while promoting equitable parenting practices.

SAPPIN has outlined several actions to take forward what came out of the workshop. These include collaborating on a fatherhood research article; establishing a fatherhood community of practice; mapping fatherhood-focused parenting programmes via the SAPPIN Parentline app[vi]; developing a comprehensive advocacy strategy; and seeking funding to replicate the workshop across South Africa.

[vi] Parentline SA is a WhatsApp-based support service that provides holistic advice on parenting issues and challenges to parents across South Africa. See https://sappin.org.za/projects/parentline-sa/

By encouraging ongoing participant engagement and action, SAPPIN aims to transform these insights into tangible outcomes, addressing the multifaceted landscape of fatherhood in South Africa while respecting cultural nuances and promoting positive change in parenting practices and societal perceptions of fatherhood.

Conclusion

The workshop provided a critical space for stakeholders to explore the complexities of fatherhood in South Africa, highlighting both challenges and opportunities for transformation. Discussions revealed the need for creating safe spaces that truly engage fathers, as current environments often failed to meet their needs. Low male participation underscored persistent barriers to their involvement in fatherhood discussions; while issues like unemployment, poverty, and entrenched cultural norms were identified as significant obstacles to father involvement.

The workshop also addressed the role of women as gatekeepers, sometimes limiting fathers' participation, and emphasised the deep connection between fatherhood and manhood in African contexts.

Discussions revealed the need for creating safe spaces that truly engage fathers as current environments often failed to meet their needs.

Despite these barriers, many fathers expressed a strong desire to be active in their children's lives, with participants advocating for more inclusive policies and interventions that embrace the diverse experiences of fatherhood.

While the complexities of fatherhood in South Africa present ongoing challenges, they also offer opportunities for meaningful change. By fostering inclusive dialogue, implementing targeted interventions, and advocating for supportive policies, stakeholders can contribute to nurturing stronger, more resilient families and communities.

For more information on SAPPIN, visit https://sappin.org.za/.

Other practical considerations are that participation rates among fathers remain low due to societal expectations, logistical barriers, and limited programme visibility. Many fathers report feeling uncomfortable in programmes traditionally targeted at mothers, while others face shaming or scepticism when attempting to adopt more gender-transformative roles. To overcome these systemic barriers, community involvement and partnerships with local leaders and organisations are essential.

A holistic and sustainable approach

By adopting a holistic approach that leverages both digital tools and community-based strategies, we can create more inclusive and sustainable programmes that engage fathers as active participants in their children's development. Such engagement will not only benefit fathers themselves but also contribute to healthier family dynamics and improved child outcomes. Ultimately, these efforts will help break down traditional barriers, positioning fathers as key players in fostering more equitable societal outcomes.

Conclusion

Fathers' involvement in child development is crucial and increasingly recognised in LMICs like South Africa. Despite historical, cultural, and socioeconomic barriers, evidence-based parenting programmes offer a promising solution for improving parenting practices and child outcomes. The past decade has seen significant growth in these programmes, and with promising results. However, many do not specifically target fathers, and further research is needed to adapt and implement such programmes effectively in diverse contexts, balancing rigorous scientific evaluation with cultural and contextual relevance.

In South Africa, there is a lack of evidence-based parenting programmes tailored to fathers. While promising intervention programmes exist, more work is needed to develop and rigorously evaluate father-specific interventions. Addressing barriers to male participation, such as cultural beliefs and logistical challenges, is crucial.

Building on the successes of existing initiatives and anecdotal evidence and incorporating gender-transformative content and recruitment strategies can create targeted interventions to enhance father involvement and improve parenting outcomes. The future of evidence-based programming in South Africa relies on culturally relevant, well-supported, and scalable models that acknowledge the critical role of fathers in child development.

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CONCLUSION: THE KEY TAKEAWAYS FROM THE THIRD STATE OF SOUTH AFRICA'S FATHERS REPORT

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Wessel van den Berg, Equimundo: Center for Masculinities and Social Justice

Chapter 9

Conclusion: The key takeaways from the third State of South Africa's Fathers report

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Key messages

- The SOSAF 2024 seeks to expand our understanding of fathers and fatherhood with the latest data, research and practice-based analysis.
- The report identifies challenges and opportunities for paternal engagement.
- It underscores the complexities of fatherhood, particularly regarding family structure, cultural norms, socioeconomic influences, and other factors that limit or support men's fatherhood practices.
- We highlight that children benefit most from fathers and male caregivers who are actively supportive, illustrating that co-residence without engagement may offer little advantage.
- The report draws attention to the role of social fathers.
- This third report makes the simple but important point that involved fathers matter in children's lives.

The topic of fathers in South Africa continues to draw attention from the nongovernmental sector and researchers. Increased attention from policymakers and business organisations regarding the potential contribution of involved fathers in the lives of children, as well as to the health of families, workplaces, communities and society as a whole, is needed.

The factors that shape paternal engagement and how men can be supported to become more involved fathers are some of the areas of interest for researchers. A major concern from society is focused on the physical absence of fathers from children's lives. The role of social fathers – father figures, mentors, coaches, teachers, men of religion – who step in to support children is receiving slow but increasing interest.

The third *State of South Africa's Fathers* report provides significant insights into some of these dynamics and concerns. It seeks to expand our understanding of fatherhood with the latest data, research and practice-based analysis. It identifies both challenges and opportunities for paternal engagement in South Africa.

From this extensive report, we have distilled critical takeaways to explore further about the state of fatherhood in the country.

What can we learn from the SOSAF 2024 report?

This third SOSAF report underscores the complexities surrounding fatherhood in South Africa, particularly regarding family structure, cultural norms, socioeconomic influences, and other factors that limit or support men's fatherhood practices (e.g., religion). The following observations provide a basis for deeper consideration of paternal roles:

Family structure diversity and its implications

The most prevalent family structure in South Africa is the extended family model. This is particularly notable among Black[i] and Coloured households, whereas White households are predominantly of the nuclear type. This distinction in family configurations influences where and with whom children live, as well as who undertakes caregiving roles. Extended family settings offer support structures beyond the immediate nuclear family, highlighting the adaptability of caregiving roles in South African households.

Physical presence vs emotional engagement of fathers

South Africa is an outlier in that the majority of children do not live with their biological fathers. It is worth repeating the fact that the physical presence of a father in the household on its own does not translate to a warm, caring relationship with his offspring. The third SOSAF report emphasises that emotional engagement is key. Children benefit most from fathers who are actively involved, supportive, and care, illustrating that co-residence without engagement may offer little advantage.

The role of social fathers

While the majority of South Africa's children do not consistently live with their biological fathers, it does not mean there are no adult males in children's lives who may play the role of father figures. What needs to be understood is that 76% of children in South Africa live in the same house as an adult man[1]. In fact, since 2010 more children have lived with men who are not their biological fathers than children living with their fathers (see figure 7 on p. 23).

These father figures include social fathers such as *bomalome*, *borrangwane*, older brothers, grandfathers, mentors, teachers, and priests. However, while this data tells us that more children are living with an adult male in the household, it does not tell us about the nature and extent of fathering received from these co-resident male figures. They should be included in our discussion of fathers and children.

The question, therefore, should not only be: where are the biological fathers? The more important question is: who are the significant male figures who care for children?

We should also ask: how do these engaged male figures care for children – what are the things that they do in children's lives?

This frame of thinking that considers social fatherhood reaffirms that children in South Africa are not necessarily growing up without father figures; rather, many children benefit from a broader network of male support within the family or community. But, of course, we can get more men to actively care and support children – in the neighbourhood, in the community, in religious settings and sports places, at work, and in other social spaces.

[i] See note ii in the introduction chapter, p. 22, about the use of the terms 'Black', 'White', and 'Coloured' in this report.

A significant number of fathers do not live with their biological children

The SOSAF 2024 presents data from the 2023 General Household Survey that indicates approximately 65% of children in South Africa did not consistently live with their biological fathers in the same household. This low percentage of co-residence of children with their biological fathers is due to various reasons. For example, it is undeniable that some men still view caregiving roles other than financial provision as the roles of women.

There is also the persistence of the sexual double standard. The sexual double standard is the norm that favours men over women when it comes to sexual matters. For instance, according to this standard, men can have multiple sexual partners and do not have to take responsibility for the prevention of unwanted babies, while placing greater responsibility on women for family planning. Men 'can' and often do withdraw from unwanted babies. Men who are facing financial or employment difficulties also may feel inadequate as fathers, which can lead to physical or emotional withdrawal from their children's lives.

We wish to underline that living together in the same household, or proximity between people, is an important component of caregiving. It allows for immediate contact and interaction. Fatherhood is, however, about much more than living together because some co-resident fathers may be uninvolved in care, or can even be sources of harm, and some non-resident fathers may provide care over a distance.

The fact that a child does not live with their biological father does not mean the child does not receive fathering. The popular belief

that most children grow up without a father is simply not correct – the reality is more complex than that.

Why should we care about fathers given South Africa's many challenges?

The third SOSAF report is intended to make the simple but important point that involved fathers matter in children's lives. This point is highlighted in several ways.

Involved fathers are crucial not only for the immediate family unit but also for society at large. As research consistently shows, engaged fatherhood leads to positive outcomes for children's mental, social, and academic development; reduces stress on mothers and other caregivers; and builds resilience within communities. Moreover, involved fathers create positive ripple effects, influencing children's interactions with the mother, family, and other people with whom the father and the child interact within broader social structures such as schools, workplaces, and communities.

Conversely, when fathers disengage, the responsibilities of care and support fall on others, placing additional burdens on families and society.

The SOSAF 2024 also highlights that fathers need support. This is the case for fathers in all stages of life, but more so for new fathers and fathers who experience psychological suffering. The report makes several contributions on the topic of the mental health of fathers. This concern with the well-being of fathers builds on the interest in fathers' mental health initiated in SOSAF 2021.

In this new report, we look more closely at mental well-being and fatherhood. While our interest is in fathers in all stages of life, we pay more attention to new fathers. The aim is to highlight the potential and benefit of engaged fatherhood on the mental health of fathers themselves and also children, as well as those involved in the care of the children.

> Poor or rich, it is possible to be a caring father.

Some of the future areas for exploration include the cultural and societal factors in South Africa that contribute to poor paternal mental health, and therefore impact father involvement and father–child relationship; and tailoring mental health support services to address the specific challenges faced by fathers with mental health issues in South Africa.

What do we wish to achieve with this project?

The aim of the SOSAF 2024 report is to achieve several objectives, focusing on three primary audiences: fathers and would-be fathers; mothers and female family members, and influential people in society.

Fathers and potential fathers

The first aim of the report is to encourage men to recognise the significance of their role in raising children. We wish to remind men of the valuable part they can play in children's psychosocial, emotional, and developmental needs. Poor or rich, it is possible to be a caring father. By promoting a broader understanding of fatherhood that goes beyond financial provision, we seek to inspire men to embrace their roles with greater commitment and care.

Mothers and female family members

The second group we want to make aware of the significance of fathers in children's lives are mothers. Many women know this instinctively.

They want men to provide support in raising their children. But many other women, not just the mothers of the children but other female kin and female friends, may not realise the doubts that men have about their roles and capacities as fathers. They may not fully appreciate that, for instance, when a man has imbibed the belief that a father is only a financial provider, he cannot imagine any other role for himself in the child's life when he is not able to provide financially.

The SOSAF reports call for an expanded recognition of fathers' roles beyond financial provision, including emotional and caregiving contributions, which are sometimes underappreciated due to traditional gender expectations.

Influential people in society

The third group we want to reach are people in influential roles, such as policymakers, cultural and religious leaders, teachers, as well as business people. We want society as a whole to know and acknowledge that fathers, social and biological, are vital for child outcomes. We want society to recognise the barriers to, and the facilitative factors for, positive fatherhood. We want them to support the work of making men better in their roles as fathers. We want them to support fathers, not just new and young fathers, but throughout the lifecourse.

There are a number of organisations who are already doing some of this work; these are foregrounded throughout the report. There are, however, other communities such as religious institutions that have not made support to fathers a central focus of what they do. We hope that this report will reach those communities too, as they are important due to their reach and influence on a significant proportion of the population.

A paradigm shift

In conclusion, the third SOSAF report provides valuable insights into the complex dynamics of fatherhood in South Africa, underscoring the diversity and depth of paternal roles across different family structures and cultural backgrounds. By examining both biological and social father figures, the report challenges conventional narratives of fatherhood, offering a more comprehensive understanding of how fatherhood functions within South African society. This multifaceted view emphasises that paternal influence extends beyond biology, financial support, or physical presence; instead, it encompasses social, emotional, and spiritual contributions that significantly impact children's well-being and development.

Recognising the societal, economic, and cultural influences that shape fatherhood is essential for informed policymaking and social programming aimed at strengthening families. These influences, ranging from socioeconomic disparities and traditional gender expectations to extended family structures and cultural norms, reveal both obstacles and opportunities in supporting engaged fatherhood. Addressing these factors will require a multisectoral approach, involving policymakers, community leaders, civil society organisations, educational institutions, and health services, all working to foster environments that value and empower fathers in their roles.

Supporting father involvement not only benefits children but also strengthens family cohesion and contributes to broader community well-being. By advancing initiatives that support fathers across diverse contexts, South African society can promote healthier, more equitable family structures that ultimately contribute to social stability and economic progress.

In this way, the insights from the SOSAF 2024 report underscore the need for a paradigm shift toward a more inclusive and supportive understanding of fatherhood, one that values the contributions of all father figures and prioritises the holistic development of children and families alike.

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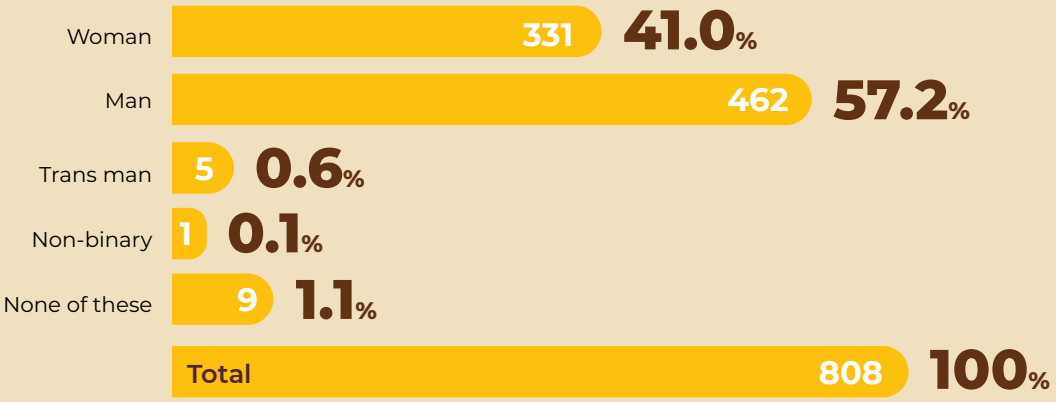

Figure 28: Gender identities of survey respondents

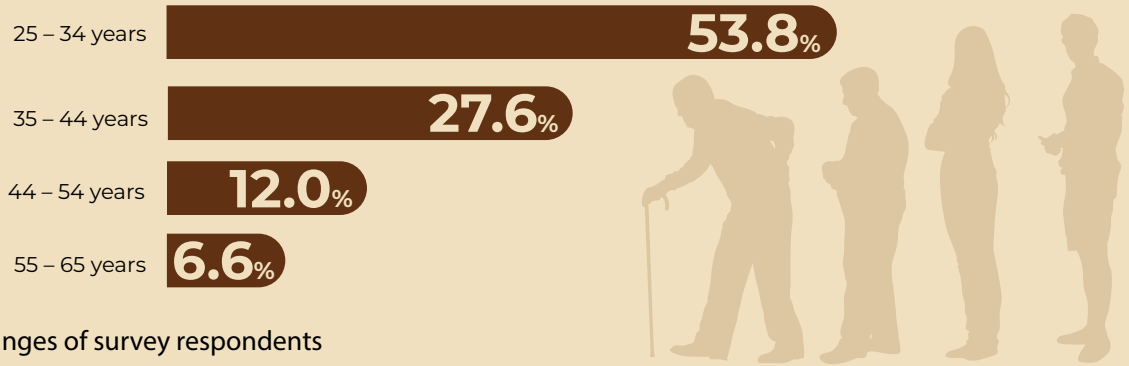

Figure 29: Age ranges of survey respondents

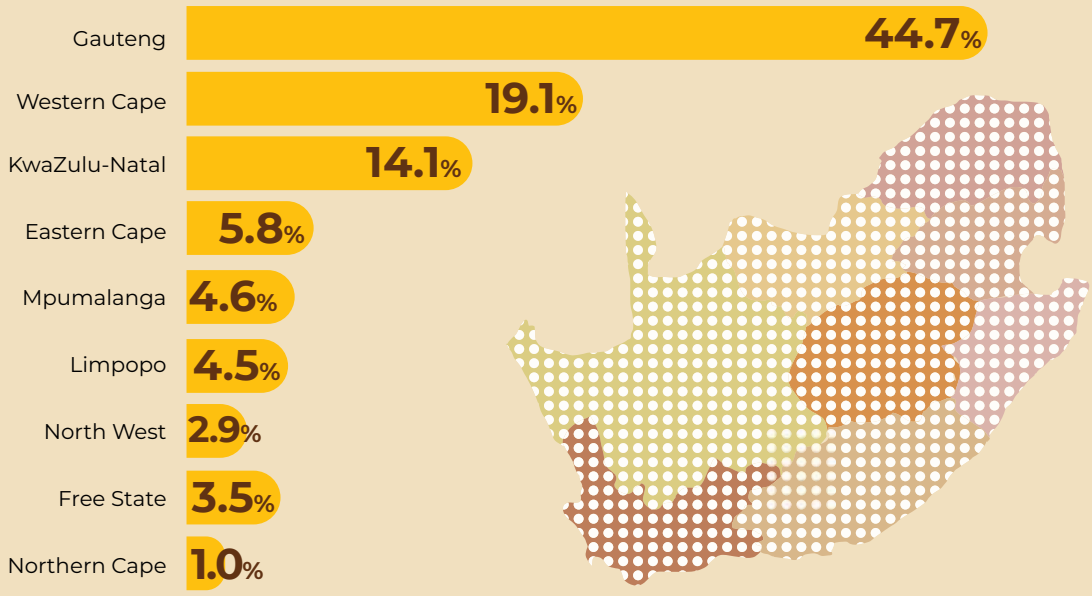

Figure 30: Provinces where survey respondents live

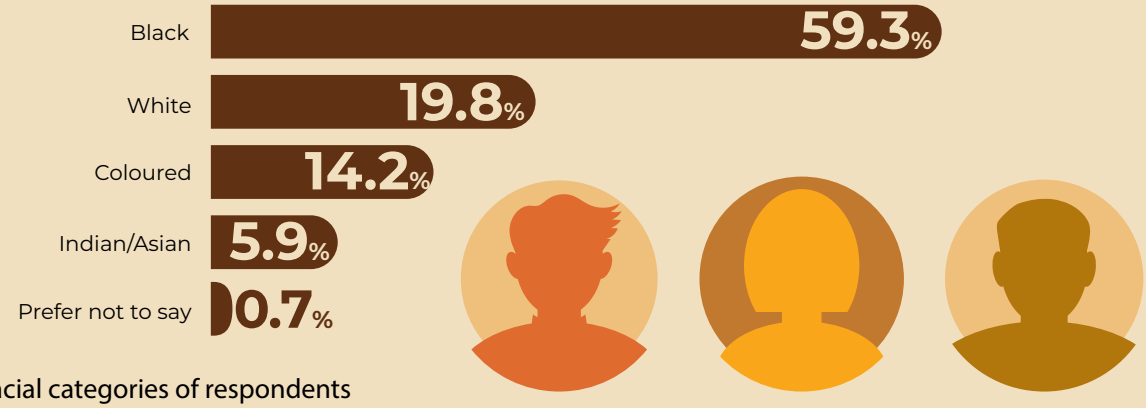

Figure 31: Racial categories of respondents

FATHERHOOD IN SOUTH AFRICA

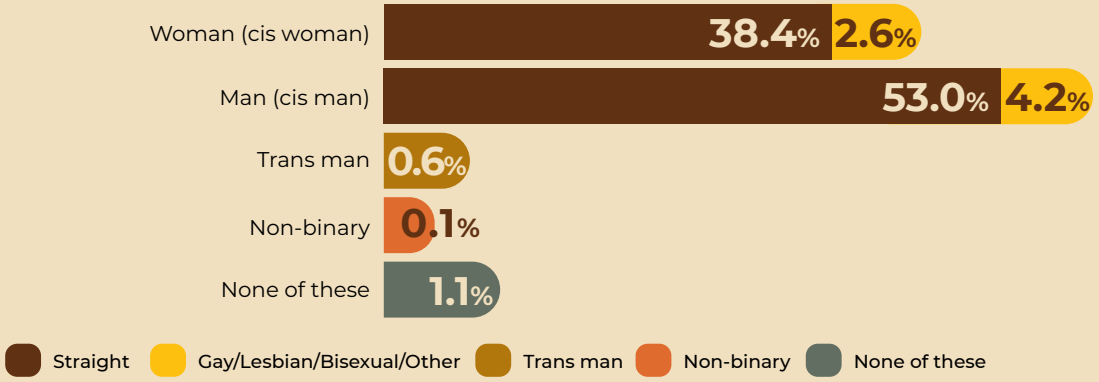

Figure 32: Sexual orientation and gender identification of survey respondents

Figure 33: Employment status of survey respondents

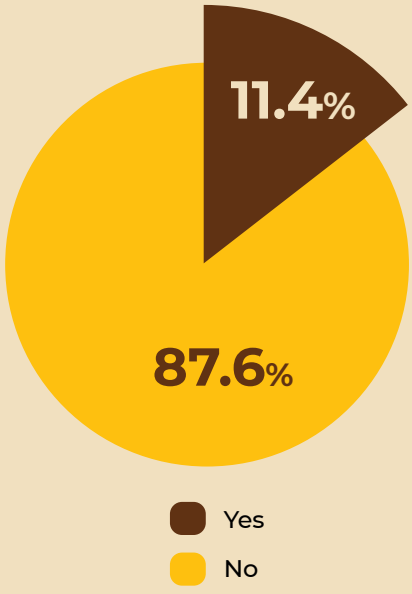

Figure 34: Disability status of survey respondents

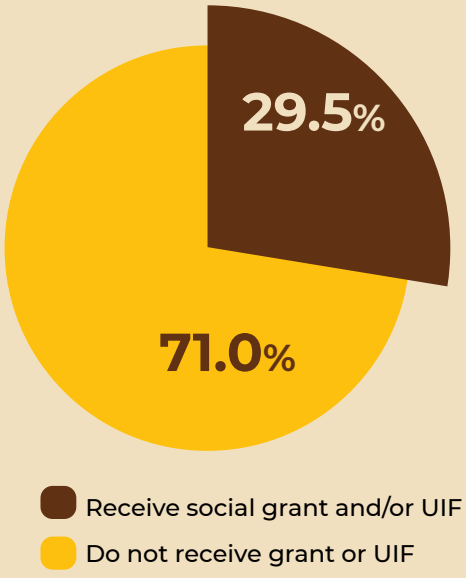

Figure 35: Receive social grant/ unemployment insurance (UIF)

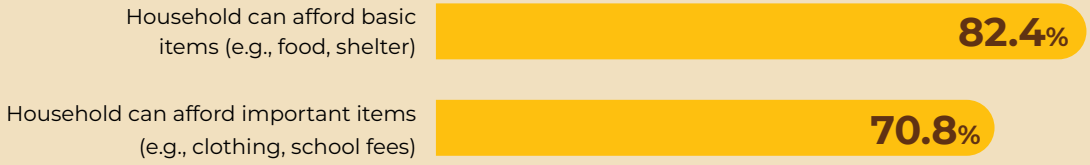

Figure 36: Affordability of household items for survey respondents

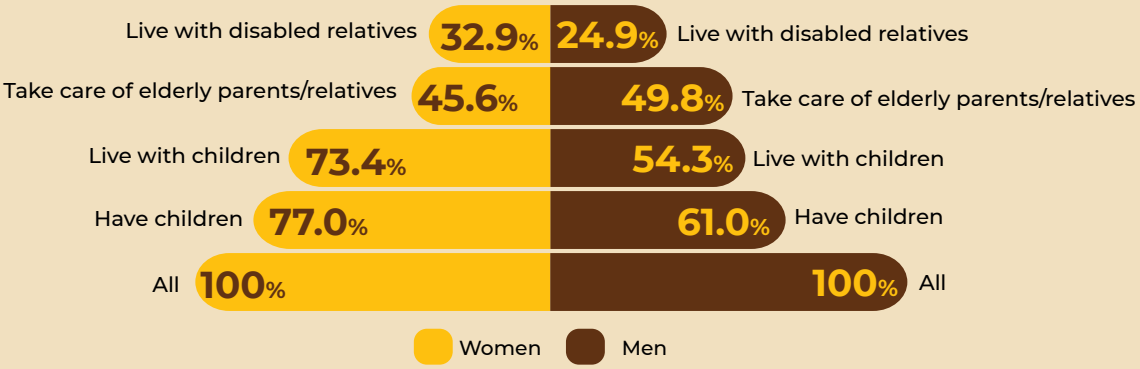

Figure 37: Living and care arrangements of survey respondents

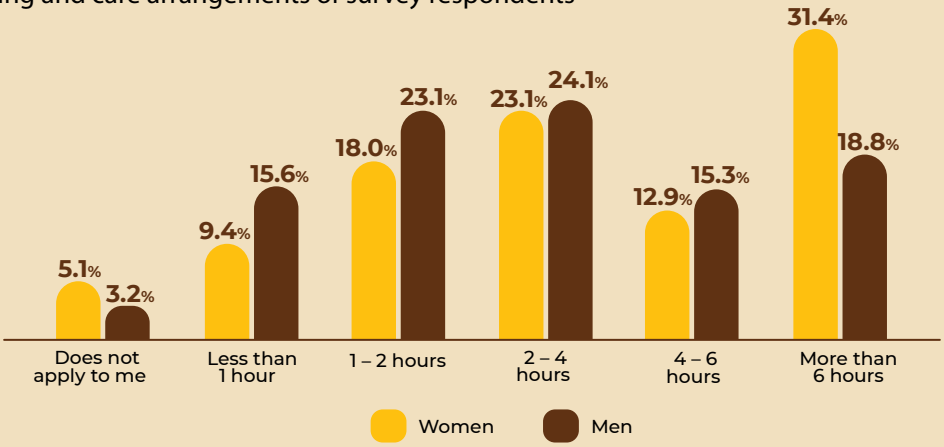

Figure 38: Time spent by survey respondents on care for emotional needs of their youngest child

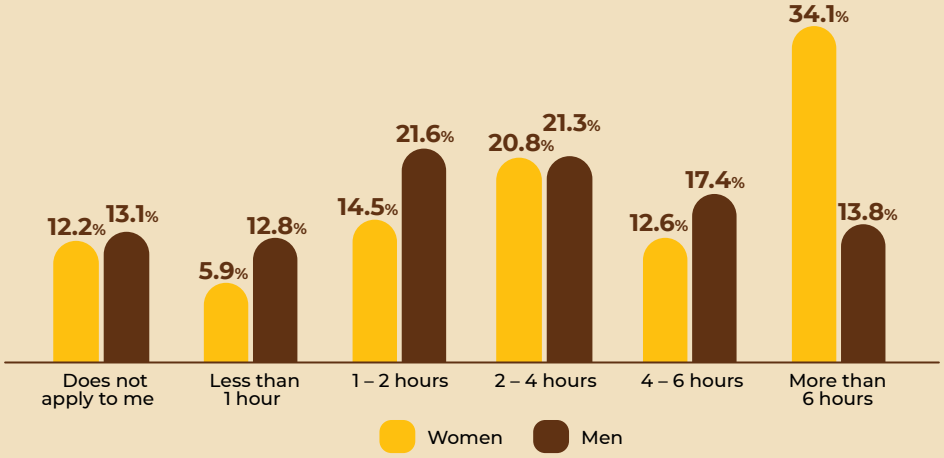

Figure 39: Time spent by survey respondents on care of physical needs of their youngest child

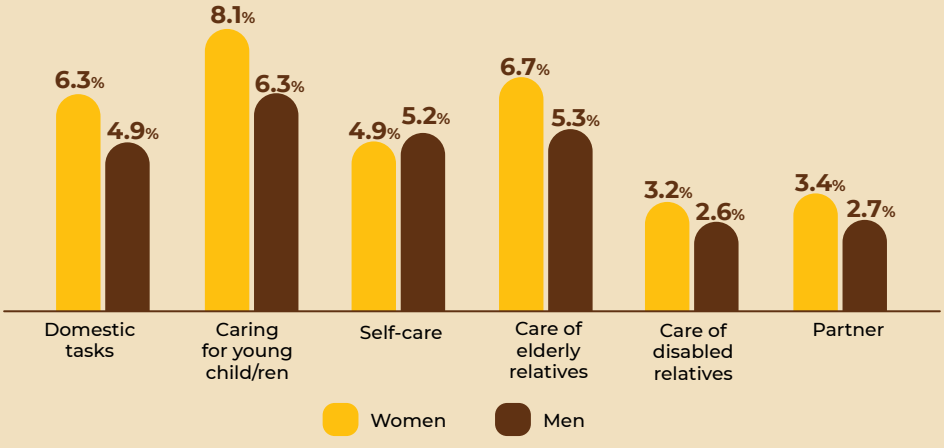

Figure 40: Differences in average hours spent by survey respondents on unpaid care work

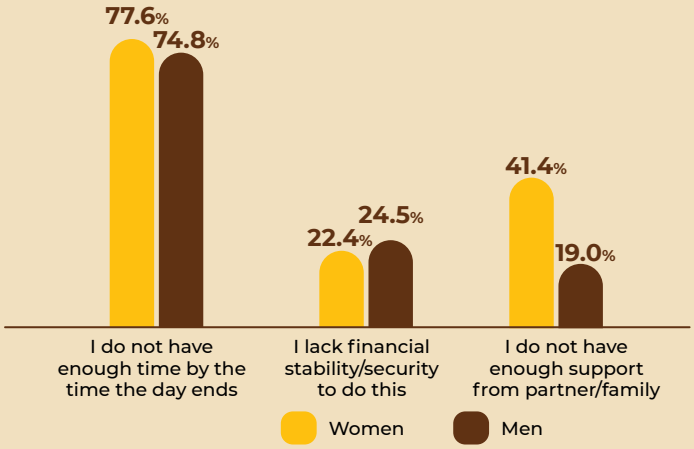

Figure 41: Survey respondents' reasons for having too little time for care work

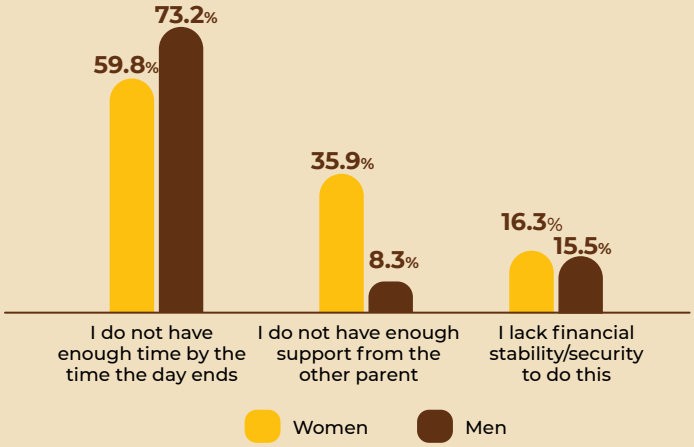

Figure 42: Survey respondents' reasons for having too little time to care for their children

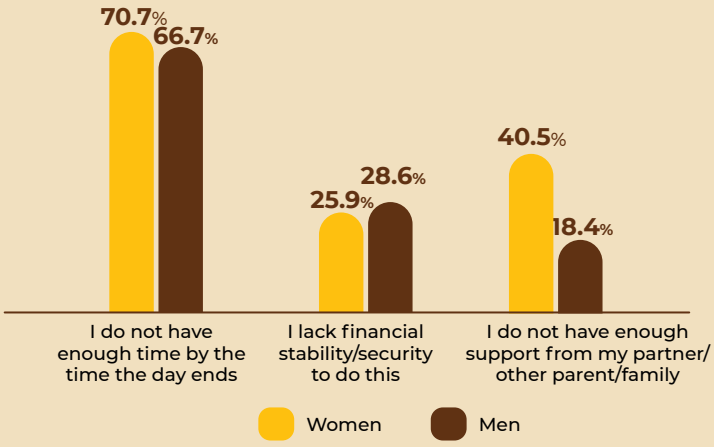

Figure 43: Survey respondents reasons for having too little time for self-care

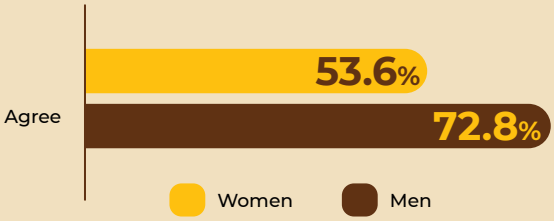

Figure 44: Agreement by survey respondents that care responsibilities are equally shared

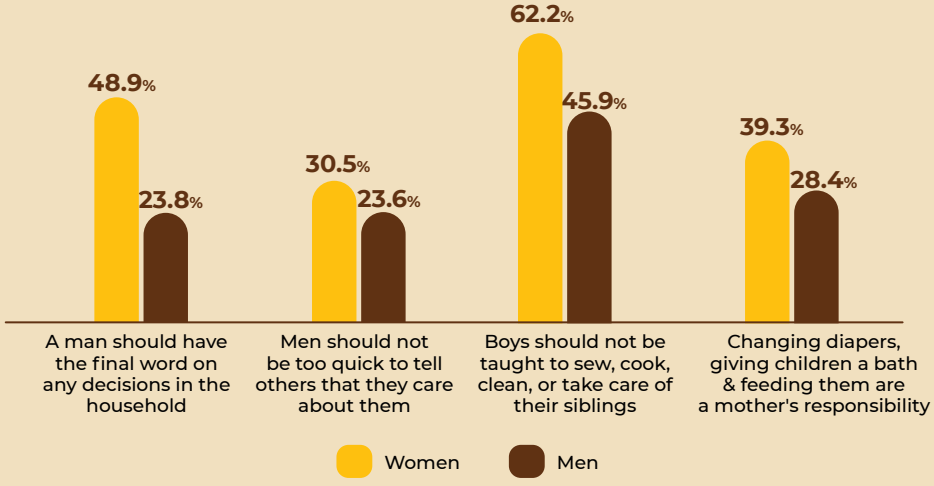

Figure 45: Survey respondents strongly disagree with gender stereotypes

Glossary

Care

The word 'care' is used in several ways in this report: 'caring about' refers to paying attention to, or feelings of affection and concern about another; 'taking care of' refers to taking responsibility for the well-being of another; and 'caregiving' refers to the competent engagement in physical care work such as feeding or washing.[1]

Unpaid care work

The United Nations Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights defined unpaid care work as including "domestic work (meal preparation, cleaning, washing clothes, water and fuel collection) and direct care of persons (including children, older persons, persons with disabilities, as well as able-bodied adults) carried out in homes and communities".[2]

Child-rearing

The 'bringing up' of children by parents or caregivers. It includes the type of control over children, the extent of caregiving and the emotional tone of the home.[3]

Residency

Residency status of fathers refers to whether the child and father live in the same household or not.

Co-residency

Co-residency is acknowledged in household surveys by Statistics South Africa when a person sleeps in the same household for four or more days per week as the person/s they co-reside with.

Non-resident fathers

Non-residency is noted by Statistics South Africa when a parent is away from the home for four or more days per week. Non-resident fathers may still be involved in a child's life. Some authors distinguish between *non-resident fathers* by regarding them as active and contributing members to a household, but who do not live in the household, and *absent fathers* who are neither physically present nor emotionally or practically involved. In this report we focus on residency and involvement of fathers as the two key aspects to consider, and we do not attach the status of 'household member' to non-resident fathers.

Families

The definition of 'families', from the White Paper on Families 2012, refers in this report as: "a societal group that is related by blood (kinship), adoption, foster care or the ties of marriage (civil, customary or religious), civil union or cohabitation, and go beyond a particular physical residence".[4]

Blended families

This term, which is frequently used as a synonym for stepfamilies, refer to families that are formed when a biological parent cohabits with or marries a partner who is not the biological parent of his/her child.[5]

Father and fatherhood

Generally, a man who is the biological parent and/or caregiver of a child. Globally, the definition of a father is very much contested on conceptual, pragmatic and cultural grounds. Some North American and European scholarship on fatherhood tends to focus

on individual and biological determinants, asserting that a man becomes a father when he has his first child. However, in South Africa, as in most African countries and some African-American communities, being a father and fatherhood go beyond conception and extend to a network of other close social relationships between adult males and children who may or may not be biologically their own.

Fathering

In this report 'fathering' refers to the care given by fathers and other male caregivers to children. It has been used elsewhere to mean procreating children, as in 'the man has fathered several children' meaning that the man has 'produced several children' but, in this report, the term is not used in this manner.[6]

Father involvement

Refers to the practical, financial or emotional engagement of a father in the life of his children. Parents may be involved in positive ways such as providing care, or negative ways such as harsh parenting.

Absent fathers

The term 'absent father' is used in this report to refer to a father that is neither physically living in the same household as his child, nor involved in the child's life. While it is often used in writings about fatherhood to refer to the absence of a biological father from the household where the child lives, it can also refer to a non-biological or social father being absent.

Inhlawulo

A cultural practice whereby payment, usually offered in the form of cattle or money, is tendered by the father to the girl's or woman's family for impregnating her outside of marriage. *Inhlawulo* is essentially about acknowledging paternity as much as granting permission to a man to be involved in his child's life. It is often referred to as payment of 'damages'.

Household

Statistics South Africa defines a household as a person or persons that stay in one or more housing units and they may or may not be related, characterised by shared resources. Some time use surveys consider people that are physically present for most of the time as a resident of the household if they stay for four nights per week within a four-week cycle.[7]

Kinship care

A form of alternative care that is family based, within the child's extended family or with close friends of the family known to the child. Kinship carers therefore may include relatives, members of their tribes or clans, godparents, stepparents, or any adult who has a kinship bond with a child. Kinship care may be formal or informal in nature.[8]

Parenting

The promotion and support of the physical, emotional, social, and intellectual development of a child from infancy to adulthood. Parenting is an activity of raising a child rather than a biological relationship.[9]

Social fatherhood

A social father is a person that takes on the responsibility and role of being a father to a child, but who is not the biological male parent of the child. The status of fatherhood is therefore a social status rather than a biological one and may be actively sought by and/or ascribed to the person by their family or community. One person could be a biological father to one child and a social father to another. These include maternal and paternal uncles, grandfathers, older brothers and mothers' partners who singly or collectively provide for children's livelihood and education, and give them paternal love and guidance.[10]

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Photo by Kopano Ratele.

About the authors

Khumo Aphane is a Registered Counsellor with the Health Professions Council of South Africa. She is working at Abbotts College, Cape Town, where she supports the staff and students in resilience-building, emotional regulation, and addressing learning barriers through individual and group counselling. With a particular interest in trauma, she is expanding her work to include gender-based violence and fatherlessness, areas that have inspired her Master of Arts degree in Research Psychology at the University of Cape Town. Her research focuses on the high prevalence of unemployed non-biological fathers in South Africa, a largely overlooked group in parenting research. Khumo graduated with distinctions in her BA Honours in Psychology from Cornerstone Institute and has been in private practice since 2019. She graduates with a Master of Arts in Research Psychology in 2025.

Angus James Barnetson is a Postgraduate Student at the University of Stellenbosch where he completed a Bachelor of Science degree in Human Life Sciences with Psychology, and a Bachelor of Arts Honours degree in Psychology. With a strong passion for understanding the complexities of human behaviour, Angus is particularly interested in mental health and its impact on relationships and well-being. His academic journey reflects a commitment to research and a curiosity about the intricacies of the human mind. Aspiring to become a clinical psychologist, Angus aims to make a meaningful difference by supporting individuals in their mental health journeys and fostering positive change in their lives.

Wilmi Dippenaar is the Director and one of the three founding members of the South African Parenting Programme Implementers Network. As Director she manages and oversees the multifaceted interventions by the network to promote parenting support that prevents violence. Before her professional journey with parenting and families started, she worked on a farm as a therapeutic consultant for Child Welfare South Africa and as Director of a community-based organisation. She has a degree in Child and Youth Development from the University of South Africa and a Master's degree in Implementation Research from the University of the Western Cape. She has co-authored several articles and presented on family work and violence prevention at numerous forums. Her special interest is in holistic health, and especially somatic work to address trauma.

Simone Gregor has degrees in the social sciences, journalism and law. She works for Heartlines, a social behaviour change communication non-governmental organisation, as a Programme Manager for the Fathers Matter Fathers Matter campaign with a particular focus on the Early Childhood Development Programme.

Shahieda Jansen, a clinical psychologist, has a Doctor of Philosophy degree in Clinical Psychology. She works as the Deputy Director: Academic & Technology Support at the University of South Africa (UNISA) with oversight of more than 20,000 students. Her book, *Masculinity Meets Humanity: An Adapted Model of Masculinised Psychotherapy* was released by UNISA Press at the end of 2022. Shahieda's long-standing commitment to prioritising humanity over gender is a perspective that has shaped her facilitation of men's groups, father–son interventions, and male-focused personal development for more than 15 years. Her involvement in UNISA's School Belonging Project adds another critical layer of research by highlighting the systemic influences on the academic performance of boys.

Garth Japhet is a Medical Doctor. In 1992 he combined his interest in story and health and co-founded the non-governmental organisation (NGO) Soul City, which became Africa's largest communications for development organisation. He was Soul City's Chief Executive Officer until 2008. Garth established Heartlines in 2002 – an NGO that initiates large-scale social change campaigns using feature films and television series as a catalyst for community mobilisation to tackle society's big issues. In 2014, Garth established www.forgood.co.za, a web-based platform that connects businesses to approved causes and now the largest volunteering site in Africa. Garth is a Schwab fellow of the World Economic Forum. He has received the global Everett Rogers Award for his contribution to Entertainment Education.

Erika Jooste is the single mother of three grown-up children. She is presently the Gender Advisor for Sesame Workshop South Africa where she has proudly earned the nickname "Daddy Muppet". She has a deep academic footprint in Educational Psychology and countless years leading innovative human-centred design initiatives. She is zealous in her pursuit of gaining new knowledge and evolving her perspectives. Her ultimate passion lies in supporting boys and girls to grow smarter, stronger, and kinder.

Bafana Khumalo is an Ordained Pastor in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa and volunteers his service to the Tembisa East Parish in Gauteng. He holds a Bachelor of Theology (Honours) and Master's degree in Theology from the University of Natal in Pietermaritzburg. Bafana is one of the Co-Executive Directors of Sonke Gender Justice and one of the organisation's co-founders. He served as a Commissioner of the National Commission for Gender Equality, where he worked with the South African National AIDS Council, the National Department of Health, provincial and district AIDS councils, and the Department of Basic Education to integrate gender into all HIV-related public health strategies and activities and incorporate comprehensive HIV-prevention strategies and information into all education-related policies and programmes for schools and communities.

Malose Langa is a Professor and Senior Lecturer in the School of Community and Human Development, Department of Psychology, University of the Witwatersrand; and Associate Researcher at the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation. He has published book chapters and journal articles on violence and other topics on masculinities. He is the author of *Becoming Men: Black Masculinities in a South African Township* (2020) and co-editor of *Youth in South Africa: Agency, (In)visibility and National Development* (2021).

Diana Macauley has over 10 years of experience in the development sector having worked under government development agencies, and local and international non-governmental organisations. Diana holds a Master of Science in Public Health and a Postgraduate Diploma in Project and Organisational Management. She is a skilled Business Development and Programmes Manager and has implemented various programmes in health and social development. She has leveraged gender mainstreaming throughout her career and her core competencies are vast, including capacity building, project management, partnership building, talent management, and strategy development. Diana is of Zambian-Sierra Leonean origin and based in Lusaka, Zambia.

Tawanda Makusha is the father of Tadiwa, Atandwa, and Azenzokuhle. He is a Senior Research Associate at the African Health Research Institute. He holds a Doctor of Philosophy degree in Gender Education, and his research focuses on men, masculinities, fatherhood, male involvement in maternal and child health in the first 1,000 days, and the impact of poverty and HIV and AIDS on children and families. Tawanda has published

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Mandisa Malinga is a Senior Lecturer in the Psychology Department at the University of Cape Town where she teaches Qualitative Research Methods and Social Psychology. Her research interests include masculinities, fatherhood, precarious work, and domestic work and migration.

Livhuwani Maphorogo is a dedicated Research Lead at Heartlines with a background in Psychology. Her passion for research has driven her involvement in the Heartlines Fathers Matter Programme from its inception, when she led the formative research fieldwork. At Heartlines, Livhuwani has contributed as a Monitoring and Evaluation Coordinator for various social behaviour change programmes. She has conducted the fieldwork for the Accelerating Women-Owned Micro-Enterprises programme in partnership with UN Women; the De Beers Group; and organisations in Namibia, Botswana, and South Africa. This initiative focused on building capacity and supporting women micro-entrepreneurs, showcasing Livhuwani's commitment to empowering women and fostering sustainable development.

Siyabonga Mbobo earned his Master of Arts in Psychology from the University of Cape Town, where his research examined the impact of fatherlessness on young Black South African men. This qualitative study explored their psychosocial challenges, the development of gendered identity, and cultural participation, providing critical insights into the far-reaching effects of father absence on young men's lives. Currently pursuing a Doctor in Philosophy degree in Psychology at the University of Cape Town, Siyabonga's doctoral research focuses on co-parenting experiences and involvement among young Black South African fathers. His work delves into the complexities of co-parenting relationships, particularly among non-resident fathers. Siyabonga's academic journey is enriched by extensive experience in teaching, research, and curriculum development. He has served as a lecturer and qualitative researcher. He is the author of the book *Days of Our Lives* (2020).

Terence Mentor is a South African content creator, writer, and speaker, celebrated for his engaging storytelling and relatable insights on modern parenting. Known online as "AfroDaddy", he uses humour and authenticity to share his experiences as a father, exploring the joys and challenges of raising children in today's world. Terence advocates for positive masculinity, diversity, and mental health awareness, connecting with audiences through podcasts, social media, and public speaking. Beyond his digital presence, he is a devoted family man, blending his passion for fatherhood with a commitment to fostering meaningful conversations about family, community, and personal growth.

Lereko Mfono is a multifaceted Writer and Project Coordinator of Heartlines' Fathers Matter Programme, the largest fatherhood campaign of its kind in Africa. He has participated in various national and international writing projects such as the New Visions/New Voices Festival at the Kennedy Centre, Washington DC, and, very recently, the Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity's Playwrights Lab in Alberta, Canada. Lereko also worked as a screenwriter for the award-winning television drama series *Isibaya* and currently writes for an Afrosci-fi animation series – in development –*Azania Rises*. Lereko has facilitated and taught Creative Arts in correctional centres and schools in and around South Africa, and in 2019 was selected as one of the *Mail & Guardian's* 200 Young South Africans.

Nevelia Moloi is Head of Communications for Heartlines and has developed a range of resources and multimedia content for the Fathers campaign.

Mmatsetshweu Ruby Motaung is an accomplished leader with extensive experience in early childhood development (ECD) and education policy. She has a track record in policy development, programme management, and stakeholder engagement and has been recognised for initiating transformative projects and advocating for marginalised communities in the ECD sector. Ruby has recently been awarded for outstanding contributions to empowerment and was recognised as an influential figure in the ECD sector. One of her noteworthy achievements include the development and publication of a policy on a professional qualification in ECD (birth to four years of age). This policy marks the first time in the history of ECD in South Africa that a formal set of qualifications from birth to four years have been formulated as a national policy. With over 30 years' experience in the education sector, she continues to be a champion and advocate for ECD by serving on a number of boards and in different provincial and national structures aimed at transforming ECD.

Kwanda Ndoda is a qualified Civil Engineer who works as an Early Childhood Development (ECD) Specialist for the DG Murray Trust. He has a passion for advancing early childhood education through technology and leveraging positive caregiving practices. Kwanda is a father to a young child and endeavours to do 50% of the care work in his household. He is pursuing a Master degree in Engineering that focuses on Data Science at Stellenbosch University to be able to harness data to enhance policy on ECD and caregiving practices.

Erin Nel completed a Commerce degree at Stellenbosch University before pursuing an additional major in Psychology. During her studies, she worked in research in the Department of Psychology, with a specific focus on the relationship between neuropsychological social development and fatherhood in South Africa.

Jean-Marie Vianney Nkurunziza is an expert in gender justice, and community health, with extensive experience in promoting gender equality and well-being, and in gender equality and advocacy, HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention, human rights, social justice, gender-equitable parenting, and caregiving. He holds a Master in Community Health and Science (University of the Western Cape) and an Honours degree from Stellenbosch University, a Bachelor degree in Social Sciences (University of Burundi), a Certificate in Human Rights and Refugee Law (University of Cape Town), a National Diploma in Project Management (Coltech College). He is the MenCare Regional Programme Specialist at Sonke Gender Justice. He has contributed to publications on fatherhood and parenting, gender equality, HIV/AIDS awareness, human rights, and sexual reproductive health and rights.

Carolyn Pringle holds a Bachelor of Music degree from Stellenbosch University and brings over 15 years of non-profit sector experience to her role as a Communications Professional. She uses her expertise in storytelling and materials development to support initiatives in early childhood development, focusing on empowering parents through book-sharing programmes. With a special interest in fatherhood, Carolyn champions engaging fathers in book-sharing to foster lasting, positive family dynamics. Through her work, Carolyn is dedicated to empowering parents – especially fathers – to play an active role in their children's growth and development.

Harriet Perlman has worked as a Writer and Producer in film, television, and print over the past 30 years. She has spearheaded award-winning campaigns that address fundamental issues of human rights and highlight the stories, courage and humanity of ordinary people. She has experience as a writer, book editor, film producer, publisher and researcher. For 12 years, Harriet worked at the Soul City Institute and headed their southern Africa regional programme which set up and

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Kopano Ratele is the father of Ketso Ratele and son of Mathabiso Gloria Lion. He is Professor of Psychology at the University of Stellenbosch and Head of the Stellenbosch Centre for Critical and Creative Thought. His books include *Liberating Masculinities* (2016); *The World Looks Like This From Here: Thoughts on African Psychology* (2019), *Why Men Hurt Women and Other Reflections on Love, Violence and Masculinity* (2022); and *The Palgrave Handbook of African Men and Masculinities* (co-edited with Ezra Chitando, Obert Mlambo and Sakhumzi Mfecane, 2024).

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Karen Ross is the Head of Programmes at the Mikhulu Child Development Trust where she oversees early childhood development (ECD) initiatives, including the dialogic Fatherhood Book-Sharing Programme. She holds an Honours degree in Sustainable Development Management, a Postgraduate Diploma in Education, and a Bachelor of Arts degree with a focus on social sciences. With extensive experience in education and social development, Karen excels in turning evidence-based research into practical tools for parents. Her work supports the Mikhulu Trust's mission to empower parents as their children's first educators, fostering a systemic, community-driven approach to ECD. As Head of Programmes she continues to champion holistic child development at the Trust.

Jacob Segale holds a Doctor of Philosophy in Human Rights from the Africa Research University, Zambia; a Master of Public Health (University of South Wales), and a Master of Science in Strategic Management (University of Derby). He is a Research Monitoring Evaluation and Learning Manager at Sonke Gender Justice. Jacob has worked with regional organisations such as the AIDS and Rights Alliance for Southern Africa, African Men on Sexual Health and Rights, FHI360, Anova Health Institute, and the Wits Reproductive Health and HIV Institute. He has published several articles on LGBTQ+ health equity, stigma and discrimination, access to healthcare services, analysis of the Anti-Homosexuality Act of Uganda, technology facilitated gender-based violence, and employee motivation in non-profit making organisations. He is also a Research Fellow at Northwest University and an external research supervisor at the Africa Research University.

Damian Samuels is a Filmmaker from Cape Town with a wealth of experience in Media Management and Higher Education. He is founder of the film production company, Fade2Black Productions. Damian also lectures in the Film Production Programme of the Media and Communication Department at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology. Currently, Damian is pursuing his doctorate degree in

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Wessel van den Berg is the father of Daisy and Jean and works as the Senior Advocacy Officer at Equimundo: Center for Masculinities and Social Justice. His curiosity about men and care led him to work as a kindergarten teacher, counsellor, activist, and researcher. He is co-founder of the MenCare Global Fatherhood Campaign and the *State of South Africa's Fathers* report series. He is passionate about evidence-based advocacy, and has worked on topics such as the prohibition of corporal punishment of children, the promotion of gender-equal parenting leave, gender-equal and violence-free workplaces, and gender-transformative sexual and reproductive health and rights. His thesis for a Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology degree, completed in 2022 at Stellenbosch University, is about the distribution of care work and engaging South African men in a feminist ethic of care.

Lauren-Jayne van Niekerk, a Lecturer in the Department of Social Work and Social Development at the University of Cape Town and Gender Transformative Research Fellow of the Global Parenting Initiative, holds a Master of Social Science in Social Planning and Administration. Having started in the early childhood development (ECD) non-profit sector, Lauren managed impactful programmes across South Africa to improve ECD access and quality. Her passion for addressing inequality in early education propelled her into academia, where she sought to engage more significantly in the science behind early childhood with a strong research focus on ECD and father involvement. Currently pursuing a doctoral degree, Lauren's research delves into how diverse South African fathers perceive their roles and engage with their children, aiming to reshape the discourse on fatherhood in South Africa.

Rinchen Van Rijswijk is a Social Impact Professional with a strong foundation in psychology and an Honours degree in Social Development. With extensive non-governmental organisation experience, she leverages her expertise as an independent consultant to drive meaningful change. Rinchen excels in programme development, management, dialogue facilitation, and strategic communication, with a focus on innovative solutions such as chatbots to improve community engagement and service delivery. Passionate about creating lasting social change, Rinchen is dedicated to violence prevention and breaking cycles of intergenerational violence.

Jaco van Schalkwyk is the Founder and Chief Executive Officer of The Character Company, a long-term MENtorship programme for young boys growing up with absent fathers or no positive male role models in their lives. Jaco has 25 years of hands-on experience in the non-governmental organisation sector with a specific focus on the restoration of positive masculinity over the past decade. He is a values coach and a regular media commentator on masculinity, men's mental health and gender-based violence prevention and raising awareness on the impact of absent fathers and the lack of positive male role models in society. Jaco is a proud single dad to his daughter and believes that only through intentional MENtorship and establishing a culture of MENtorship in South Africa will we be able to change the current culture of violence, corruption, and abuse.

The State of South Africa's Fathers 2024: Changing narratives of fatherhood

What does it mean to be a father in South Africa today?

The third *State of South Africa's Fathers* (SOSAF) report confronts the evolving realities of fatherhood in a nation grappling with deep socioeconomic challenges. With fewer children living with their biological fathers than with other men, and caregiving dynamics being reshaped by shifting gender roles and ideas about masculinity, the report offers a data-driven exploration of the lives of South Africa's fathers.

Drawing on the 2023 General Household Survey and a global survey of adult caregivers, SOSAF 2024 uncovers the struggles, reflections, and emerging roles of men as traditional identities of fatherhood are challenged.

The report does not just highlight the gaps between the realities and expectations about fathers. It seeks to change the narrative about fatherhood. By examining how care is shared and redefined, SOSAF 2024 offers a fuller, more nuanced story of fathers. It sheds light on their contributions, struggles, and potential in a world where economic uncertainty, precarity, shifting gender norms, and systemic inequities shape their realities.

From exploring the financial and emotional support men provide to their children to examining policy reforms and caregiving trends, this report is a call to change how we think about fatherhood – not just as a role but as a transformative force for families, communities, and society.

Whether you are a policymaker, researcher, caregiver, or simply curious, this vital work challenges us all to reflect on what being a father and fatherhood can and should mean in South Africa today.

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