



Groundbreaking Research on Fatherhood in South Africa

In South Africa, most children grow up in homes without their biological fathers.

Heartlines, the Centre for Values Promotion, has conducted innovative research on fatherhood in South Africa. The research was conducted over two years and includes the voices of both men and women. Their experiences shed new light on the state of fatherhood in our country.

“It is difficult when you see other children with their fathers and you just wish your father was there...”

[GP, MALE, FG PARTICIPANT,18 – 35]



Fathers Matter

Many children grow up and thrive when they are raised by single mothers. However, the Heartlines study, which looked at local and international work, found that for many others, the absence of positive and active fathers puts them at risk.

It found that children without involved fathers or without the involvement of a significant older male father figure, are at great risk of:

- perpetrating and becoming victims of violence (both as children and adults)
- substance abuse
- teen pregnancy
- poor academic achievement
- mental health problems and delinquency.

The study found that whilst many fathers do not live in the same house as their children, others live in the same house but are unengaged and emotionally absent from family life. It also found fathers who were physically absent, but who were positively involved with their children. Whatever the living arrangements, the study highlighted that active and positive fathers matter in the lives of children.

The Heartlines study is important because it provides insight into how fathers are defined and how they live out their fatherhood role. It also sheds light into both barriers and enablers of active participation.

Financial provision is everything

The research showed most strongly a deep and embedded view that equates fatherhood with material and financial provision. Fathers who are able to provide financially are seen as ‘good fathers’. Fathers who are unable to provide are simply ‘not good enough.’ The role of fathers was equated to that of an ATM. With unemployment so high in our country, it is difficult for many men to earn an income. But despite this, men are expected to provide financially and women are seen as the primary caregivers.

Other barriers to father involvement

The research found that this transactional view of fatherhood is by far the biggest reason for non-involved fathers. However, the study also identified a number of additional barriers to men being active and present figures in the lives of their children. These included:

- **Migrant labour. Many men are forced to work away from their families.**
- **Unemployment.**
- **Institutional and systemic practices, for example in healthcare and legal services.**
- **Difficult personal relationships between parents.**
- **Cultural and gender roles and practices. For example, women returning to their parental home after giving birth.**

“The findings of the Heartlines research on fatherhood are enormously rich and powerful because they capture the voices, experiences, beliefs and practices of the participants themselves.”

LATASHA TREGER SLAVIN – HEAD OF RESEARCH, HEARTLINES



“So you can be a decent father, but you need to have money. When you do not have money they disrespect you at home...”

[EC, MALE FG PARTICIPANT 18 – 35]

In addition, many men said that women were often barriers to them being involved in their children’s lives. If they couldn’t provide financially, women sometimes denied them access to the children.

The research also showed that despite the reality of father absence, many individuals want more when it comes to the role of their father in their lives. There was a yearning for connection, attachment and engagement with their fathers.

Conclusion

The Heartlines research on fatherhood provides a fascinating understanding of South African family dynamics. It offers organisations and individuals insights and possible solutions to promote stronger social cohesion in families and communities around the country.

For more information

For a copy of the full report or a summary of the research findings contact:

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Despite the findings that many fathers are absent from their children's lives, there were many stories of positive fatherhood; stories of fathers who despite difficult circumstances chose to be engaged with and to care for their children.

Gosiame's story

For Gosiame Masike, taking on the sole responsibility for his daughter, Simologo, has had its challenges. But it is a role he has assumed with great pride for the past five years. Gosiame knows the pain of growing up without a father.

"Unfortunately, I did not have a father in my life. My mom raised me and I learned most things from her. I have never met my father. I tried to reach out to him but I did not succeed."

This shaped Gosiame's decision to become a single dad. After witnessing his daughter being neglected by her caregivers when she was three years old, he decided there and then to bring her up alone, and be a present, loving and supportive dad no matter the challenges.

Learning to be a father

"I did not learn how to be a father from anyone specific. However, there were good fathers that I came across especially at church," he recalls.

"Fathers from my church played a big role because I saw how they did things."

"I learnt that being a single parent takes a whole lot of sacrifice and energy. I understand why God says there should be two parents. Sometimes you are too tired to play with your child and you just want peace. But she wants to play now and not tomorrow. If you are in a bad mood, you have to adjust yourself. That is the most challenging thing," he says.

Gosiame says he has developed a routine of waking up at 4.30am daily, preparing Simologo for school, making breakfast, waking her up and giving her a bath. After work he comes home to cook a fresh meal. "This is a routine I've had for five years," he says.

"It is not an easy thing and I understand why some fathers cannot cope. But I want my daughter to be in a good space. I want her to enjoy her childhood."

Gosiame and his daughter Simologo, when she was five years old.

