



FORMATIVE RESEARCH SUMMARY

Understanding Fatherhood in South Africa



HEARTLINES
FATHERS
MATTER



FORMATIVE RESEARCH SUMMARY

Understanding Fatherhood in South Africa

This research was made possible through the support of:



Definitions

BIOLOGICAL FATHER Male genetic contributor to the child.

FATHER In the report, to avoid using the designation father/father-figure/men in general the term father is used broadly to encompass the role.

FATHERHOOD The social role performed by men in relation to children.

FATHERING The activity of bringing up a child.

SOCIAL FATHER Non-biological father-figure in a person's life. A man who is not the biological father of the child but takes of the role of a father. Can include uncles, family members, teacher, pastors or community members.

Background

Heartlines – a South African not-for-profit company (NPC) that specialises in “Edutainment” mass social change programming – is developing, with local partners, an intervention to promote the active, positive presence of fathers/ men in the lives of children.

Heartlines’ overarching approach to developing values-based interventions uses best practice social change theories to inform and tackle issues that are of major societal relevance and which lend themselves to values-based approaches. Based on the Social Ecological model, Heartlines believes that the influences on behaviour are multifactorial and include personal, relational, community, and socio-political environment influences.

Using the social ecological model as a backdrop, Heartlines’ values-based initiatives are based on formative research findings with target groups, influencers and key-informants, and the community at large.

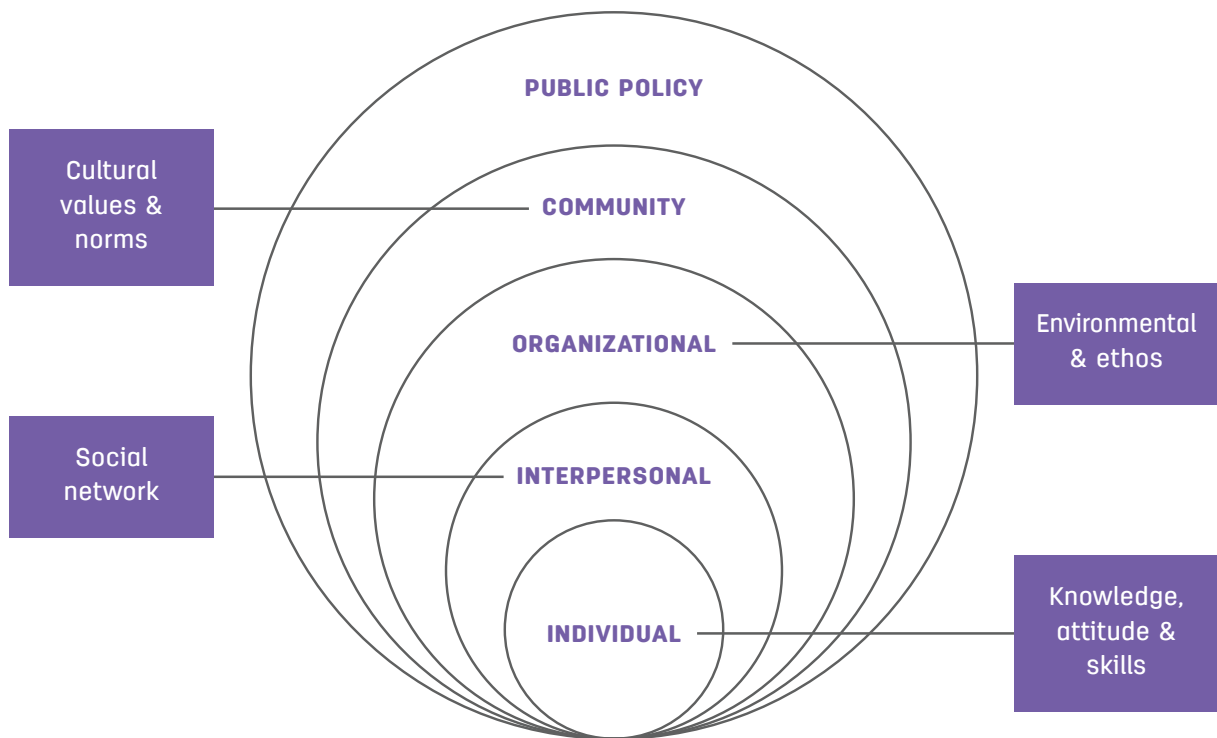


Figure 1: Social Ecological model



Defining the issue

A father plays a critical role in child development, emotional well-being, educational attainment and future productivity. There is a positive correlation between positively participating fathers/father figures and school achievement, emotional well-being, social competence, behavior control and self-esteem. Fathers often struggle with the balance of adhering to masculine norms and being emotionally available and nurturing towards their children. The active presence of a father figure who embodies a positive masculinity is particularly beneficial to male children because it provides boys with an example of positive, while simultaneously playing a role in forming a stronger sense of identity. Children who grow up without positively present and/or engaged fathers/father figures are at greater risk for negative life consequences. These include, but are not limited to perpetrating and/or being victims of violence as juveniles and adults, drug and alcohol abuse, teen pregnancy; poor scholastic achievement, mental health issues; and delinquency.

Based on this, Heartlines has identified that the widespread absence of positively present and engaged men in the lives of children is an important social issue needing to be addressed. As per the methodological approach used by Heartlines since the roll-out of its first programme in 2006, a series of edutainment interventions grounded by a formative research process, will be developed.

This report provides a summary of the formative research findings.

The formative research approach

The formative research set out to answer four key questions, namely:

1. Describe and provide insight into what fatherhood and being a father looks like in the South African context.
2. Determine attitudes, beliefs, practices around fathering (personal experience).
3. Identify and understand barriers to father participation throughout the life course, as well as within different contexts.
4. Understand the impact of father absence and presence.

Methodology

A qualitative research methodology was applied to answer the formative research questions. The methodology included a combination of focus group discussions and key informant interviews. A purposeful sampling methodology was applied with both the key informant interviews and focus groups taking place across four provinces, namely, Gauteng (GP); Eastern Cape (EC); KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) and Mpumalanga (MP). The participant sample was representative of the South African population, with most of the participants being African, and smaller samples being Indian, Coloured, and White. Participants were from both urban and rural areas, and included both men and women. All participants were over the age of 18 years, and each focus groups were conducted among individuals of similar age-groups.

Key informant interviews targeted community leaders and influencers, religious leaders, and teachers, as well as individuals identified through the focus groups who had personal experiences or stories that could lead to an in-depth understanding of fatherhood in South Africa.





Overview of the findings

The South African Context

The nuclear family and co-residence

The nuclear family is not a reality lived by most South African children. For these children, the norm is that they mostly reside with and are cared for by women, namely mothers, grandmothers and aunties. Co-residence data from Statistics South Africa further highlights this through its finding that only a third of South African children live in the same household as their biological father.

Poverty and unemployment

South Africa's unemployment rate (above 29%) is one of the highest in the world. This is a national crisis and feeds two other big socioeconomic challenges: poverty and inequality. Unemployment and poverty play a significant role in fathers' abilities to provide financially for their children. In addition, financial provision is deeply entrenched in masculine identity in South African society.

Legacy of Apartheid and patterns of migration

Apartheid affected and continues to influence patterns of father involvement in South Africa. The inability to own land, coupled with low-paying wages forced men to work away from homes. Some research shows that the deliberate exclusion of black people from the education system and from skilled occupations under Apartheid contributed to high rates of unemployment today. Migrant labour continues to play a role in South Africa even after the advent of democracy. In most impoverished areas in South Africa there are limited opportunities to earn a living wage, making it impossible for fathers to support and live in the same location as their children.

South African fathers

The formative research provided insight into fatherhood based on levels and types of engagement and involvement. South African fathers can loosely be described as follows:

- **Present fathers:** those fathers who are both physically and emotionally present. Physical presence means that they reside in the same house.
- **Absent fathers:** those fathers who are neither physically or emotionally present.
- **Present-absent fathers:** those fathers who are physically present but do not participate or engage in any aspect of child rearing.
- **Absent-present fathers:** those fathers who do not live with the child but do participate in various aspects of the child's life.
- **Social fathers:** those individuals within the family and/or community that step in, in the absence of father involvement. Examples include mothers and their kinship networks such as grandmother, aunts, uncles, pastors, teachers.

Barriers to active fathering

Fathers encounter various barriers to parenting their children. Some of these barriers are personal or interpersonal, and some are imposed by society. Irrespective of the type of barrier, the barriers play a role in inhibiting fathers' abilities to play a positive and active role in their children's lives.



Figure 2: Barriers to father involvement

Fathers are financial providers

By far, the most common barrier to fathering was whether a father could provide financially. Financial provision differentiated between “good” and “not good enough” fathers. Communities and families reinforced the idea of fathers as financial providers, irrespective of employment status. This resulted in fatherhood being a transactional relationship, almost equivalent to the role of an ATM. Men who provided financially, gained both entry and ongoing access to participation with their children.

“...reduce the participation of fathers in the family circle into an ATM. That our participation must only be when you provide money, then you’re a father. If you don’t have money, then you are not regarded as a father. (GP, religious leader)

“So, you can be a decent father, but you need to have money. When you do not have money, they disrespect you at home. The kids will respect you when you have money. A father should always be able to provide otherwise he will be called names. (EC, male 18-35)

Definitions of masculinity

South African men and women define fatherhood in relation to the father’s ability to care for and provide for his children. Fathering and masculinity is equated with being unemotional, unattached, unaffectionate. Showing signs of affection towards children and engaging in child care are believed to be women’s work.

“When you start playing with your kids, culture will say: “This one is not man enough, he’s busy with children” and at that time you’re trying to be around your kids...-culture has a way of suppressing you by making you feel inferior as a man in the community. (MP male FG participant, 35-50)

“I remember walking, I was carrying my son on my back, and he was sleeping. I walked passed the taxi rank and some women who were in a taxi were shocked to see that. (MP, male FG participant, 18-35)

Interpersonal relationships

The relationship between mothers and fathers is a crucial component of the relationship between fathers and their children. This is primarily because mothers are often the gatekeepers of the father-child relationship. Mothers often determined how, when and in what context fathers can have contact with their children. The father-child relationship is further confounded by the mother’s perceptions of the father. A father who has a good relationship with the mother of his children is therefore more likely to be involved, spend time with the children and contribute financially.

“When I’m fighting with the mother, she says: This is not your child. And when you give money, the mother is happy and then suddenly your child is yours again. And that’s when you also start distancing yourself not understanding where you stand. (MP, male FG participant, 35-50)

“When the child is born out of wedlock, after a while, when you are no longer with the mother of the child, you are not given an opportunity to see your child as you wish but when there is a need for a child, you are notified. (EC, male FG participant, 18-35)

Cultural barriers

Cultural practices (payment of inhlawulo/damages, lobola (bride price) and mothers who return home after giving birth) compounded by family dispersal, economic insecurity and employment instability, contribute to the social and residential separation of biological fathers from their children. These cultural practices are not practised universally, and are more prevalent in the rural parts of KwaZulu-Natal and the Eastern Cape. Urban families were less likely to engage in these cultural practices.

System barriers

Institutional and system barriers prevent active participation by fathers. These institutional barriers are evident in the public health system, the legal system, and the educational system. The public health system sets the stage for the lack of engagement by creating a woman-centred environment that is unfriendly and unwelcoming to a father's participation during antenatal care, labour and delivery, and early child well baby visits. This is further perpetuated in early child development centres and schools, which tend to prefer to engage with the mother on all issues relating to the child's development.

Similarly, in the case of divorce or separation, the legal system is unlikely to award custody of children to the father, even in cases where the father is the better option for the child.



I think the legal system sides with women more over men...It is assumed that men cannot do the job (of parenting) like a woman can... A man cannot be a maternal figure. (GP Male FG participant, 18-35)





The fatherhood dream

It is clear from the formative research that individuals, irrespective of age wanted more when it came to the participation of their fathers. The participants expressed a yearning for connection and attachment with their fathers. They wanted their fathers to be engaged, available and responsible.

“ It is a very sad life, because your father was not there. (GP, male FG participant 18-35)

“ For me as someone who did not have a father, I would love the small things... Like someone to say, 'I love you' those small things. (GP, male FG participant 18-35)

“ Especially being a boy, and your father is not by your side, you are going to make many mistakes in life, because a father is supposed to guide you as a boy. (GP, male FG participant, 18-35)

“ It's difficult, when you see other children with their father and you just wish your father was there... (GP, male FG participant 18-35)

“ You can see other children taking photos with their fathers and wish that if only you were in the photos. (GP, male FG participant 18-35)

The formative research highlighted the difference between being a father and a dad. A father was purely biological. But to be a dad, a biological father needs to be engaged, available and responsible. This formed the basis of the positive, nurturing and participatory relationship between fathers and their children. Participants wanted their fathers to be dads who showed emotions, provided guidance and showed love, support and encouragement towards their children.

“ He should be there and play the role of being a father to his children even when he is not working or even if he can’t afford (the maintenance) of the child. (KZN, female FG participant, 18-35)

“ Create time, even if it is 30 minutes to talk to children, whether he is busy, he should give himself time, 30 minutes, 15 minutes. That would be enough. That’s when I’ll be able to tell him about the problems I’m having. (MP, male FG participant, 18-35)

“ You can give me a million, but most of the thing I need is the bond with you...like I need you, not what you have. I need you when I’m in need of a motivator, or when I need someone who will advise me, so I need you. (EC, male FG participant 35-50)

Provision, while important, was less important than being engaged and available.

“ Most of the people thought that to be a father is just like to... it’s just to give your child money, like support your child financially. Of which in real life it is not. (EC, male 35-50)

“ But I think that even if you don’t have money, right...Being there... go and check on your kid... ja like being there for the kid. (GP, male FG participant, 18-35)

“ I think the expectation to provide should not be too heavy. (GP, male FG participant, 18-35)

“ He must give you love and care if he can’t provide financially, that’s what is needed from a father... he must be available in your life. (MP, male FG participant, 18-35)

Homes and families based on love and respect are central to the fatherhood dream.

“ Fights are there but when you fix it, you should fix it with love. Love is important above all else. (GP, male FG participants, 35-50)

“ Love goes hand in glove with respect. If there’s respect in the house then there will be love. (GP, male FG participants, 35-50)



Conclusion

The formative research provides insights into fatherhood in South Africa. Based on the findings, it is clear that there is a need to promote positive active engagement and participation by fathers with both men and women in South Africa. Using the findings from the report, Heartlines has identified three values that will underpin the key messages for the fatherhood intervention. These are:

1. Positive Presence
2. Responsibility; and
3. Empathy

The key messages identified are listed below:

- A father's responsibility is more than just providing money.
- Women should encourage fathers to play a positive role in their children's lives.
- A father's involvement can act as a protective factor and promote the wellbeing of children.
- Shared decision-making and good communication are essential.
- Caring and care work for children can be learned by both men and women. Skills in parenting build confidence.
- There are improved health and wellbeing outcomes when there is shared attachment in the first 1000 days but also throughout the child's life.
- Social fathers can make a positive difference in raising children.
- Supportive social networks, such as the church, can promote healing.

www.fathersmatter.org.za

HEARTLINES

**FATHERS
MATTER**