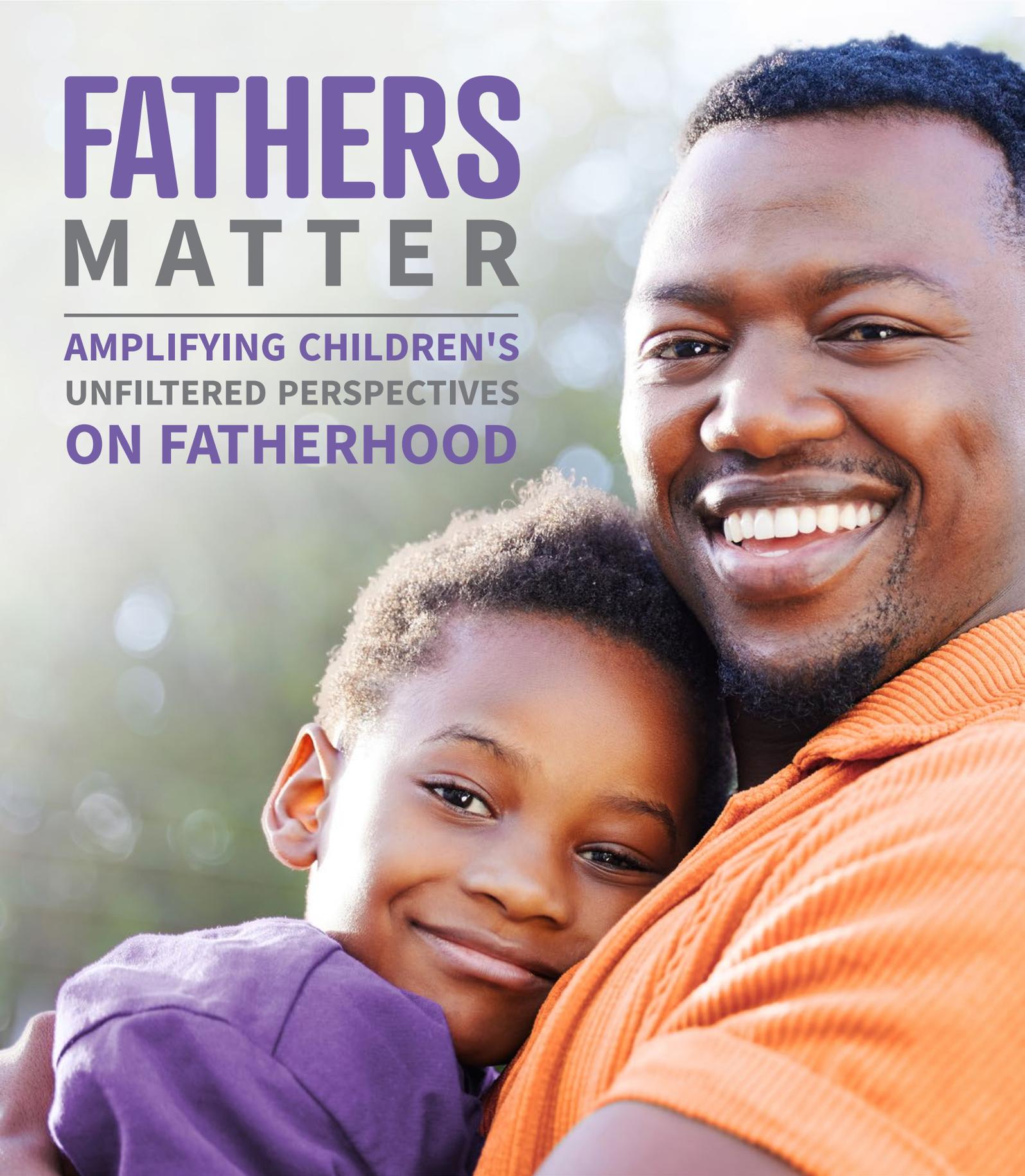


FATHERS MATTER

AMPLIFYING CHILDREN'S
UNFILTERED PERSPECTIVES
ON FATHERHOOD



SUMMARY REPORT

Formative research conducted in South Africa by

HEARTLINES

Acknowledgements

We would like to extend our deepest gratitude to the children who participated in this Fathers Matter formative research. Your willingness to open up about your fatherhood perceptions and experiences, often sharing deeply personal and painful stories, has been invaluable to this research. We are profoundly grateful for your bravery and resilience throughout this process. We are grateful for all the teachers, counsellors, psychologists, and child-focused organisations who generously shared their observations, perceptions, and professional expertise, greatly enriching the depth and quality of this research. Thank you too to the children who shared their writing and pictures with us, and to those who facilitated that process.

A special thank you to Prof. Malose Langa, Christopher Kane, and Erick Kabongo for their comprehensive and insightful literature review, which laid the foundation for this research. Thank you to Dr Brendan Belsham for contributing his expertise during the research process. We also express our heartfelt thanks to the Heartlines research team: Livhuwani Maphorogo (Author), Phufile Kganyago, Thandi Ndaba, and Thulile Shongwe whose dedication and hard work made this study possible.

Our sincere appreciation goes to Candice Harrison-Train for her invaluable role as an advisor during this process. We would also like to acknowledge Garth Japhet, Zamabongo Mojalefa, Harriet Perlman, Portia Ravhutulu, Lereko Mfono, and the entire Heartlines team for their unwavering support and encouragement.

A special thanks to Lindsey Moyo for her careful and thoughtful editing of the report. Lastly, we are immensely grateful to all our funders, including Oak Foundation and the FirstRand Empowerment Foundation for their financial contributions, which made this research possible. Thank you for believing in the importance of this work and enabling us to explore and document these critical insights.

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Design and layout: Man + Wife

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FirstRand
EMPOWERMENT FOUNDATION



WHO WE ARE

Heartlines is a non-governmental, values-promoting organisation based in South Africa.

It is a social change organisation that specialises in “edutainment”-based mass media and aims to impact society at the individual, community and socio-political levels. Heartlines’ approach to developing values-based interventions uses best practice social change theories to inform and tackle issues of major societal relevance that lend themselves to values-based approaches. Heartlines encourages people to live out positive values such as empathy, responsibility, honesty, self-control, compassion, perseverance and forgiveness.



Heartlines’ Research Approach

The initial phase of any Heartlines project involves a comprehensive formative research and consultation process. This includes conducting literature reviews, interviews with subject matter experts and field practitioners, and engaging in focus group discussions and in-depth interviews with targeted communities. Grounded in the Social Ecological Model, Heartlines recognises that behaviour is influenced by multiple factors, including individual, interpersonal, organisational, community, and socio-political elements. This model underscores the reciprocal relationship between behaviour and the social environment. Consequently, Heartlines’ formative research aims to identify barriers to change and potential intervention points across these various levels. The outcome of this rigorous formative research process is a meticulously developed, research-driven project brief and intervention design. This foundational research is then woven into messaging and storylines, which are tailored to resonate with the intended audience.

DEFINITIONS

FATHER:

The term father is used broadly to encompass any individual who assumes a fatherly role in a child's life. This includes biological fathers, stepfathers, adoptive fathers, and male caregivers who provide emotional, social, and developmental support to children. To simplify language and avoid repeatedly distinguishing between terms such as father, father figure, or other male caregivers, the report uses father to represent anyone fulfilling this role. By using the term father in this inclusive way, the report acknowledges the diversity of fatherhood experiences and emphasises the importance of the role, rather than focusing on the individual's specific relationship to the child.

FATHERHOOD:

In the context of this research report, fatherhood can be defined as the role, responsibilities, and identity of a father in the life of a child, encompassing the emotional, social, and developmental impact a father has on their child's well-being. Fatherhood extends beyond biological ties, including the influence of father figures, such as stepfathers, adoptive fathers, and male caregivers, and it involves a commitment to nurturing, guiding, and supporting children through active engagement and positive involvement in their lives.

FATHER FIGURE:

A father figure refers to an individual who assumes the role of a father in a child's life, regardless of biological connection. This person takes on fatherly duties, providing emotional, social, and sometimes financial support. The term is often interchangeable with social father, as it encompasses any male caregiver or mentor who plays a significant role in a child's upbringing and development.

FATHER DISCONNECT:

Father disconnect refers to the emotional, physical, or social absence of a father in a child's life, where the father is either minimally involved or entirely absent in key aspects of the child's upbringing and development. This disconnect can occur due to a range of factors, including physical separation, lack of emotional engagement, abandonment, or estrangement, and may result from issues such as divorce, death, incarceration, or voluntary withdrawal.

MASCULINITIES:

Masculinities refer to the socially constructed ideas, practices, and behaviours that define what it means to be a man within a given cultural or societal context. These concepts encompass a range of identities and expressions of manhood, recognising that there is no single or universal definition of masculinity. Instead, masculinities are plural, varying across different cultures, time periods, and social groups. Masculinities include norms related to power, strength, emotional expression, and responsibilities, and they influence how men view themselves and how they are perceived by others. The concept also encompasses the expectations placed on men regarding their roles in families, communities, and society, particularly in relation to fatherhood, caregiving, and relationships.

TOXIC MASCULINITY:

Toxic masculinity refers to a harmful set of cultural norms and behaviours associated with traditional views of manhood that emphasise dominance, emotional suppression, aggression, and a rejection of traits perceived as "feminine". It promotes the idea that men must adhere to rigid standards of strength, control, and stoicism, discouraging vulnerability and emotional expression. Toxic masculinity can negatively impact both men and those around them, as it encourages behaviours such as violence, emotional detachment, and an unwillingness to seek help, while also reinforcing patriarchal power structures. This form of masculinity often contributes to harmful gender dynamics, including the perpetuation of gender-based violence, inequality, and strained relationships.

CHAPTER

01

INTRODUCTION

In 2019, at the inception of the Fathers Matter programme, Heartlines conducted formative research to explore how adult men and women in South Africa perceived fathers and fatherhood.

This research, which is a continuation of the research done in 2019, began in 2023, and focuses on young people aged 10 to 16. The research underpinning this report aims to capture children’s voices and understand their perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs about fatherhood. The focus on this cohort was intentional for several reasons:

- Pre-teen and early teen years are critical for developing knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours related to identities, relationships, and parenting.
- Most of this cohort is still in school, providing opportunities for communication, education, and life skills development to help break the cycle of father absence and its effects.
- There has been limited work with this age group, and there is a dearth of resources to foster healthier and more positive identities. This observation is supported by key informants from various organisations working with this demographic and by the findings of a related literature review.

Children’s Research Objectives

The overarching objectives of the research were to gain insight and understanding of children’s perceptions of fatherhood, masculinity, gender-based violence (GBV), and gender roles and identities in the context of South Africa. This insight contributed to the development of a “message brief” and storylines

for an edutainment drama series and accompanying resources. These resources will support young people to develop healthier attitudes and beliefs about what it means to be an active and positive father and why the positive and active presence of men in the lives of children is important.

CHAPTER

02

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS WITH ORGANISATIONS AND EXPERTS

First, 10 key informant interviews were conducted with subject matter experts and selected organisations that work closely with tweens and teens, to gather insights for a comprehensive literature review and this formative research study. This allowed us to identify the significant issues that need to be addressed, particularly concerning tweens, teens, and fatherhood. These interviews revealed that issues of fatherhood cannot be effectively addressed in isolation. Organisations and topic experts emphasised the need to also examine related issues, such as GBV, toxic masculinity, gender roles and identities, and substance abuse. These interconnected factors significantly influence the conceptualisation of fatherhood.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review, conducted in April 2023, was written by Prof. Malose Langa, Christopher Kane and Erick Kabongo from the University of the

Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It aimed to identify relevant research, focusing primarily on local studies, with some international sources, and sought out key authors in the youth sector addressing issues such as GBV, masculinities, gender roles and identities, and teenage fatherhood.

The literature review's key findings were critical in shaping the protocol and instruments for the formative research. These instruments were then risk assessed by child and adolescent psychiatrist Dr Brendan Belsham to ensure they were appropriate for the study's sensitive focus.

Formative research

A qualitative research methodology was applied for this formative research to gain in-depth insights into children's perceptions, experiences, attitudes and beliefs of fatherhood and connected topics. The study used focus groups and key informant interviews as the primary data collection methods. This allowed for rich, detailed data to be gathered from participants, facilitating a deeper understanding of the nuanced views held by these children.

FOCUS GROUPS WITH YOUNG PEOPLE

In our research study, we purposively selected three provinces for the focus group discussions: Gauteng, Limpopo, and the Western Cape.

The participant sample aimed to be representative of the South African population, including Black, White, Coloured, and Indian groups. However, due to recruitment challenges, no Indian groups were included, and very few White groups participated.

The groups were stratified by age, and included participants of between 10 and 12 years, and then of between 13 and 16. Both single-gender and mixed-gender groups were facilitated to explore diverse perspectives. We had 6 mixed-gender groups, 8 groups consisting only of boys, and 12 groups consisting only of girls. In total, 26 focus groups were conducted. The interviews were carried out in the participants' preferred languages and later translated and transcribed to ensure the accuracy and authenticity of the data.

The framework employed in this research to ascertain children's perceptions and experiences of fatherhood focused mostly on eliciting their descriptions of what constitutes a "good" father and a "bad" father. This approach was strategically chosen to minimise the need to probe into their personal experiences beyond what was necessary for the research objectives.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ethics clearance for this research was obtained through the Human Sciences Research Council, ensuring that all study procedures adhered to ethical guidelines and standards. Prior to conducting the focus groups, the research questions were reviewed and analysed by a child psychiatrist to ensure that potential harm to participants was minimised. Written consent was obtained from both the parents of the children and the children themselves. Additionally, researchers secured permission to record the interviews from all parties involved.

Heartlines also conducted follow-up psychosocial awareness workshops, facilitated by trained counsellors and psychologists.

DATA ANALYSIS

The transcribed data were thematically analysed using ATLAS.ti, a qualitative data analysis software. Thematic analysis allowed the researchers to identify, analyse, and report patterns within the data, providing a detailed and nuanced understanding of the participants' perceptions and experiences.

The qualitative approach enabled the collection of rich, detailed data that contributed valuable insights to the understanding of this complex issue.

Participant Demographics and Characteristics

Figure 1: Gender of research participants

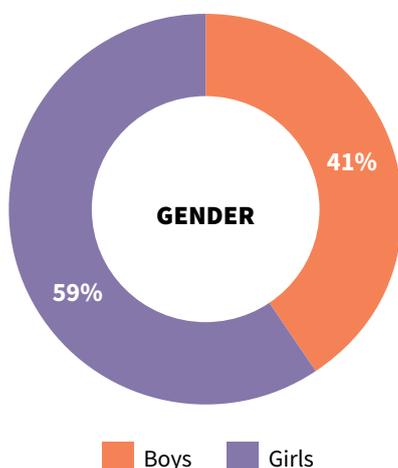


Figure 2: Demographics of research participants

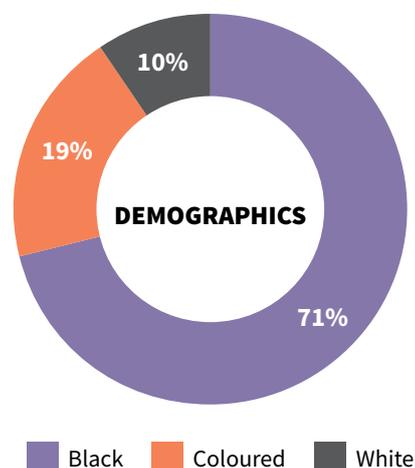


Figure 3: Age groups of research participants

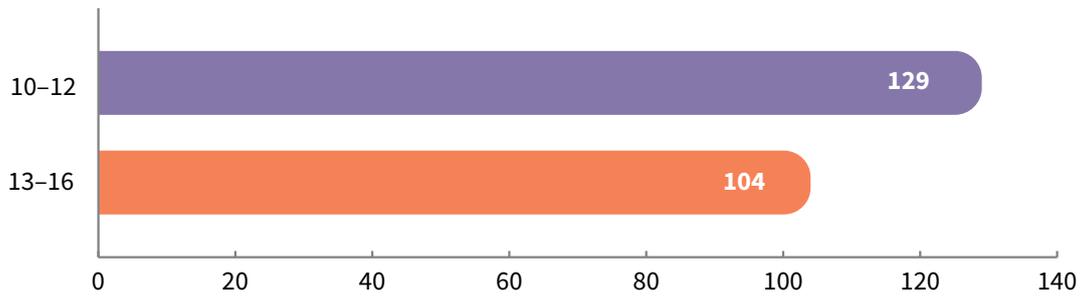


Figure 4: Group dynamics

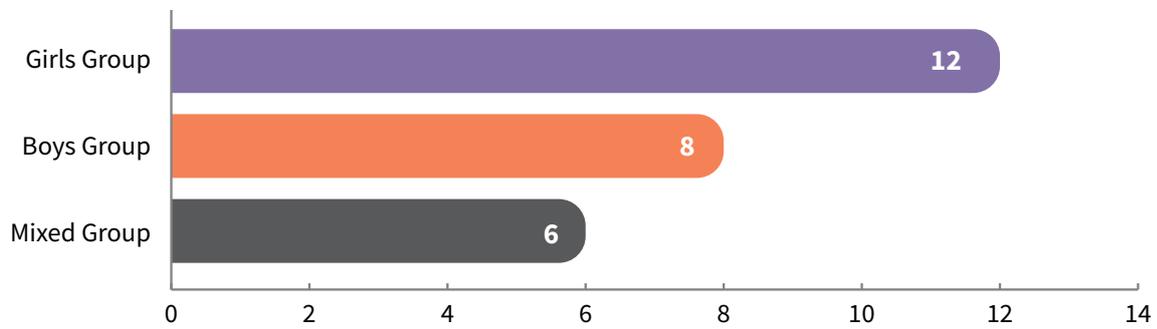


Figure 5: Areas covered

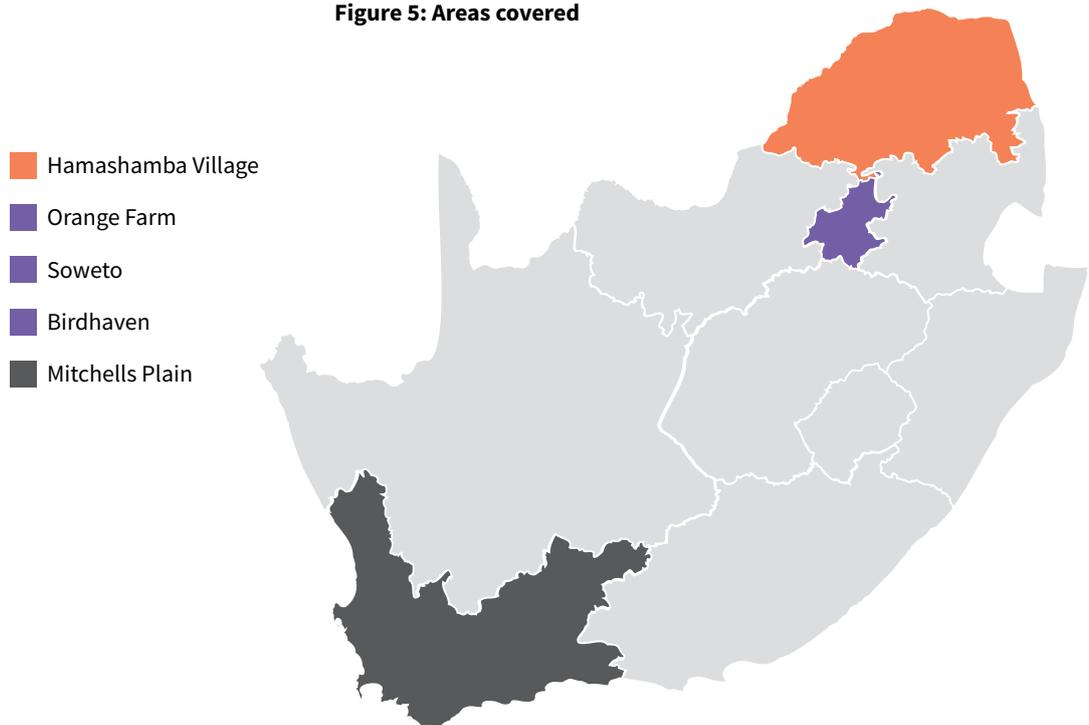


Figure 6: Rural vs Urban vs Suburban

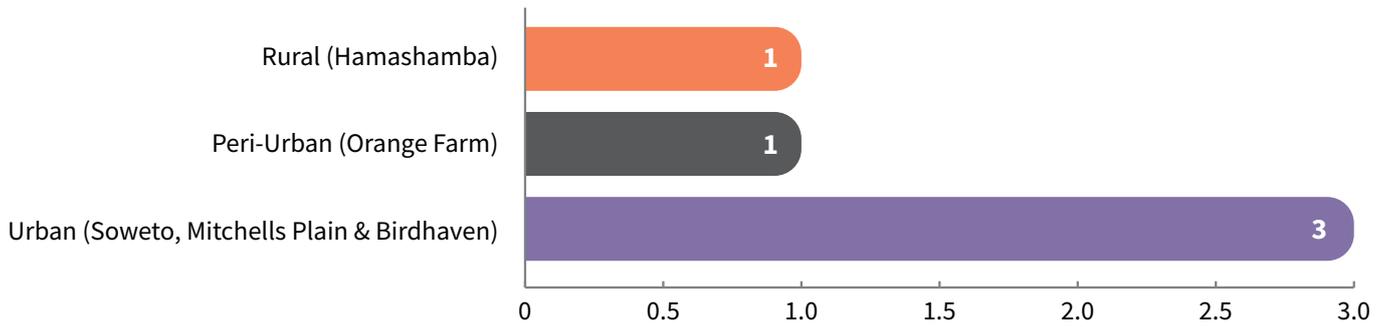
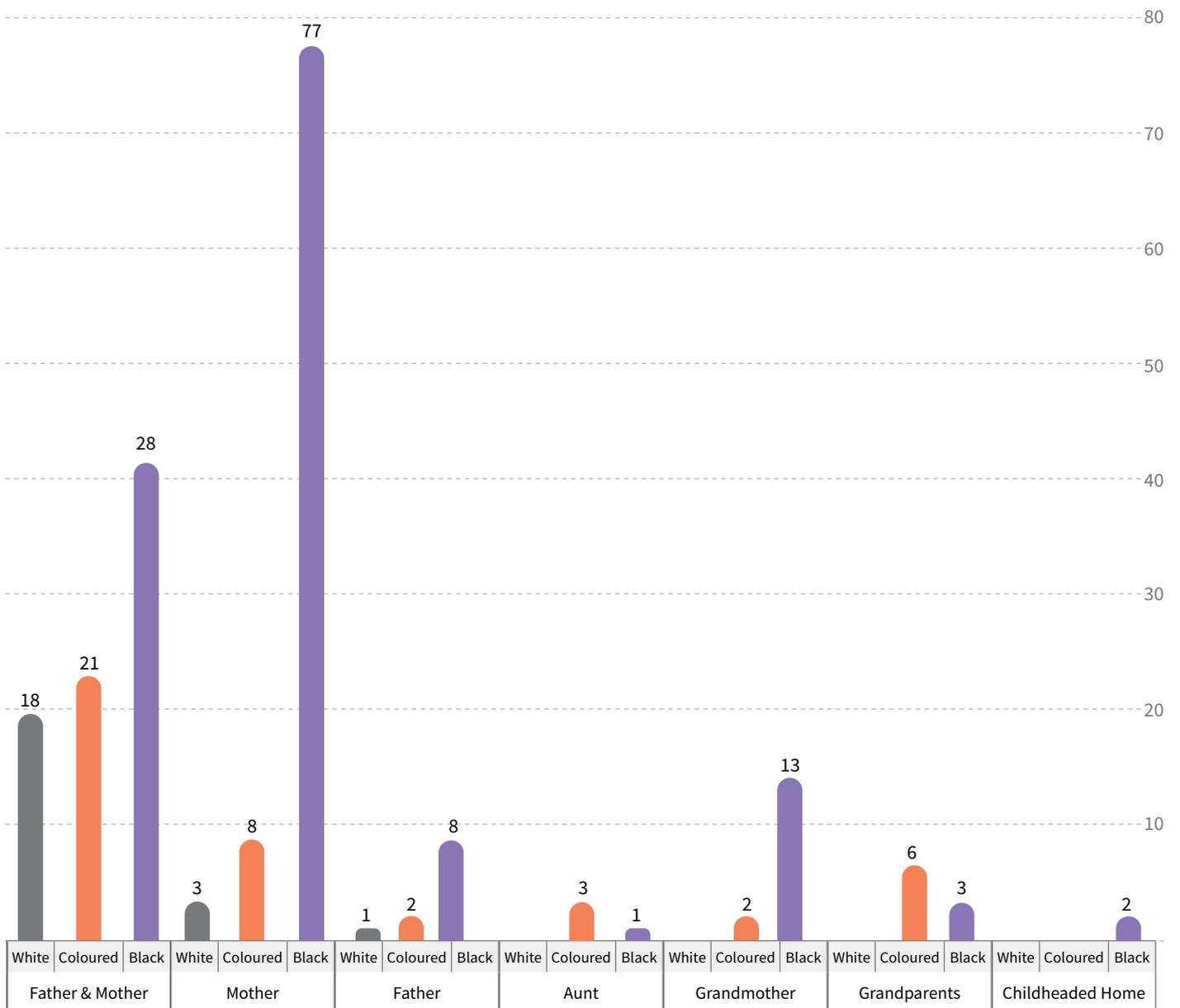


Figure 7: Who do you live with at home?



The graph illustrates the living arrangements of participants, with data covering 88% of the respondents; the remaining 12% did not answer this question. There were more focus groups conducted with Black children than other races.

CHAPTER

03

QUOTATION KEY:

PROVINCES:

GP – Gauteng Province

LP – Limpopo

WC – Western Cape

GENDER:

M – Male

F – Female

LOCATIONS:

O – Orange Farm

S – Soweto

B – Birdhaven

FORMATIVE RESEARCH FINDINGS

Children’s Definitions and Perceptions of Fatherhood

This section of the report explores children’s perceptions and definitions of fatherhood, offering a multifaceted view of their perceptions, attitudes, and experiences of fathers. Through their voices, we see how they view fathers in different capacities, such as fathers as providers, emotionally present figures, and protectors. The section also addresses more complex and painful realities, examining children’s perceptions of fathers through experiences of abuse, including substance, physical, sexual, and verbal abuse. Additionally, this section looks at how children perceive the importance of having a father figure, especially in cases of absent fathers, and highlights the positive influence of men who step in as role models, standing in the gap where fathers may not be present.

FATHERS AS PROVIDERS

Throughout the focus group discussions, a recurrent theme was a sense among children that the primary role of a father is to provide. Children overwhelmingly

associate a father’s role with the provision of basic needs. For children, the distinction between a “good” father and a “bad” father often hinges on the father’s ability to fulfil his family’s material needs. This expectation encompasses providing mostly food, paying school fees, and ensuring that household needs are met.

“ **F: Someone who is a good provider and contributes to the household, helps the mother and makes sure his children have everything they need.** (GP (O), Girls, 10–12)

“ **M: Makes sure that his family sleeps with full stomachs.** (GP (S), Mixed, 13–16)

Employment, or at least having a source of income, is viewed as crucial, because it enables fathers to provide for their families. This includes buying clothes and food, and ensuring the children have what they need for school.

Where fathers are present, loving, and actively involved in their children's lives, there is a positive perception of fatherhood that impacts on children's feelings of being loved and cared for.



Interestingly, the children do not equate good fatherhood with providing luxuries. Their emphasis is on necessities rather than extravagant items. The findings suggest that they value the sacrifices their fathers make to put food on the table:

“ M: I think he will always make a way to provide for food on the table and if there isn't enough, he'll let his children and wife eat and he will sacrifice. (WC, Boys, 13–16)

Conversely, according to the children, a bad father is characterised by irresponsibility and doesn't see to the needs of his children:

“ F: A bad father is someone who is not responsible, he is careless. (LP, Girls, 13–16)

These findings reflect broader societal expectations about gender roles and responsibilities. Although mothers work, the children's understanding is that fathers are the ones who provide for the family. Women or mothers as providers was only highlighted in situations where a father was physically and financially absent in the home:

“ M: A father isn't really necessary because a mother can do all the things that he is supposed to do. My mother is the one who gives me all the support. (GP (O), Boys, 13–16)

FATHERS AS EMOTIONALLY PRESENT AND LOVING

Despite the focus on fathers as providers outlined above, a common view amongst the children was the understanding that fatherhood involves more than money. The findings underscore the nuanced views children have regarding the role of fathers in their lives. For children, a good father is someone who loves them unconditionally, provides encouragement, and offers guidance. They are seen to teach their children right from wrong and support their children's character development. The children's accounts reveal that nurturing and emotional support are critical components of their perceptions of positive fatherhood:

“ F: A father is someone who loves his children, he encourages them to go to school and doesn't want them to be absent from school. (LP, Girls, 13–16)

“ M: **A good father would guide you to do the right things in life; he teaches you respect, and he is always there to correct you when you go wrong.** (GP (O), Boys, 10–12)

“Good” fathers are seen to make time for their children, actively participating in their lives and showing genuine care for their well-being. They are seen as problem solvers, offering support when their children face difficulties. This involvement goes beyond the provision of basic needs, with fathers fulfilling the emotional and psychological needs of their children, but a bad father is characterised by a lack of love and care.

“ F: **A father is someone who sits down with you and talks to you when you have a problem and tells you that it is not the end of the world.** (LP, Girls, 10–12)

“ M: **A good father is someone who makes time for his family.** (WC, Boys, 13–16)

Where fathers are present, loving, and actively involved in their children’s lives, there is a positive perception of fatherhood that impacts on children’s feelings of being loved and cared for, and these fathers often become significant role models for their children. They positively influence their children’s behaviour and attitudes, and values that the children wish to emulate.

The children’s accounts convey a powerful message to fathers: their importance extends beyond mere financial provision. Children express a desire for emotional connection, guidance, and time spent together. When participants were asked if they thought a father could still be a good father if he struggled to provide, responses included:

“ F: **A father can be a good father without money because it doesn’t always have to be about money. His presence in a child’s life and his support and love is what matters, the most important thing in life is love, just love for the child will be everything.** (GP (S), Girls, 10–12)

“ *It doesn’t matter about the money; it matters about the kindness and the love that he gives you.* (GP (B), Girls, 10–12)

The reality for some is that although their fathers are physically absent due to work commitments these fathers maintain a relationship with their children through communication, emotional availability, and financial support.

However, some children experience absent fathers who have abandoned the family, leaving a significant emotional void.

“ F: **I just hate fathers who make children and then leave them with nobody to take care of them.** (GP (S), Girls, 10–12)

“ M: **Some fathers are not doing anything for their children...they pass you in the street as if they don’t know you.** (GP (O), Mixed, 13–16)

Additionally, there are instances of “present absent” fathers who, despite living in the same household, remain emotionally and physically disconnected from their children, failing to engage in a nurturing relationship:

“ M: **He does not care what is happening in your life...even when he is there in the house, he is not interested in your life.** (GP (S), Boys, 10–12)

Fathers were reported to frequently spend their time drinking with friends and socialising in taverns, which results in a lack of meaningful interaction with their children. Consequently, alcohol emerges as a significant factor that creates physical and emotional distance between fathers and their children.

A few children expressed that they find their fathers unapproachable and perceive them as harsh and emotionally distant. Instead of receiving the love, care, and emotional availability they need, these children endure criticism, a lack of warmth and often rely on their mothers for emotional support.

These insights highlight that the essence of fatherhood lies in a balance of provision and emotional engagement, reinforcing the profound impact of a father’s involvement in his children’s lives.

These perspectives challenge traditional notions of fatherhood and emphasise that both active presence and financial provision are central to how children perceive fatherhood.

Alcohol emerges as a significant factor that creates physical and emotional distance between fathers and their children.

FATHERS AS PROTECTORS

The research findings highlight another recurring theme in children's perceptions of fatherhood – the role of protection. Across various interviews, many children consistently indicated that a father's primary responsibility alongside provision is to protect his family. This notion is deeply ingrained in their understanding of what it means to be a father and is seen as a fundamental aspect of a father's identity. The idea that "a father is important because he can protect you" underscores the significant value placed on the father's role as a defender against potential dangers. Children often equate being a good father with the ability to provide safety and security.

Our research also indicates a significant paradox in children's perceptions of fathers as it relates to protection. While children overwhelmingly express a desire for fathers who protect them and ensure their safety, it was reported that it is often fathers who are the perpetrators of abuse towards children and other family members. This contradiction is particularly poignant for girl children, who articulated a strong yearning to feel safe in the presence of their fathers.

“ F: **Our fathers should make us feel safe around them...some of us are afraid of our fathers, they are always shouting and beating us up. My father tries but I would like it if he was approachable; we always call on our mothers whenever we need something...he should make it easier for me go to him for my needs.** (GP (S), Girls, 13–16)

Fathers are perceived as protectors and role models, guiding their children towards positive behaviours and shielding them from harmful influences. However, our research suggests that in some cases, fathers inadvertently or deliberately condone harmful behaviours such as drinking alcohol and using drugs and by so doing potentially normalise this kind of behaviour.

PERCEPTION OF FATHERS THROUGH THE LENS OF ABUSE

The ideal image of a father for children is that of a protector, someone who makes their children feel comfortable and safe. However, this ideal is far from the reality for many children. **Instead of being protectors, some fathers are the perpetrators of violence, creating a complex dynamic where the figures meant to provide security are instead sources of fear, harm, and instability.**

Fathers as abusers of substances

A bad father is not only seen as irresponsible but also as someone who engages in harmful behaviours such as smoking, drinking, and drug use. These actions are particularly condemned because they often lead to negative consequences for the family including physical and verbal abuse.

The children's views reflect a broader societal concern about the relationship between anger and substance abuse among men. Many children observed that fathers/men tend to drink and smoke when they are angry, which can exacerbate family tensions and lead to abusive situations:

“ M: **They take their anger out on friends or take it out on the alcohol.** (WC, Boys, 13–16)

“ F: **They go to where they can release stress, they'll either beat someone up or go and drink and do drugs.** (LP, Mixed, 13–16)

In a key informant interview, a high school teacher highlighted the profound impact of parental behaviour on children, particularly in households where alcohol abuse is prevalent. The teacher noted:

“ **In most cases the father and mother are drinking and when drinking is involved, the father becomes violent and then it affects the child. And then some cases we feel that the child is just being naughty but if you listen to them, the father is not there and they are actually longing for a father's love but they don't have it.** (HS Teacher)

In contrast, a good father is viewed as someone who abstains from drinking and getting drunk, which is viewed as essential for maintaining a healthy and supportive family environment. This ideal aligns with their broader understanding of responsible behaviour.

Fathers as physical abusers

The research findings reveal a clear and troubling picture of how some children perceive violence within the family and its impact on their concept of fatherhood. **A bad father is strongly associated with physical abuse, both towards his children and his wife or partner. Such actions are unequivocally condemned by children, who see physical abuse as a defining characteristic of a bad father.**

Children stated that fathers/men often physically abuse their wives and children after consuming copious amounts of alcohol.

“ M: **He comes home drunk, hits you until your arms turn blue and he doesn't care about you and will just leave you and your mommy and for your mommy to be single and raise you alone.** (WC, Boys, 10–12)

Respondents link physical abuse in the home to anger, with men being described as being physically violent to their wives and children when they are upset:

“ *When men are angry, they beat people up or go and drink at the tavern.* (LP, Boys, 10–12)

“ F: **He hits my mother and threatens to do the same to me when I ask why he hits my mother.** (GP (O), Girls, 10–12)

A good father is someone who refrains from physical abuse. This distinction is crucial in the eyes of children, who believe that a “real” man does not engage in such harmful behaviour. By not physically abusing his children or the women in his life, a father demonstrates care, respect, and emotional control, which they deem to be essential qualities of a good father.

Fathers as sexual abusers

For some, fathers are perceived as people who sexually abuse children. Consequently, when some children hear the term “father,” they associate it with a sexual abuser, leading to feelings of insecurity around men:

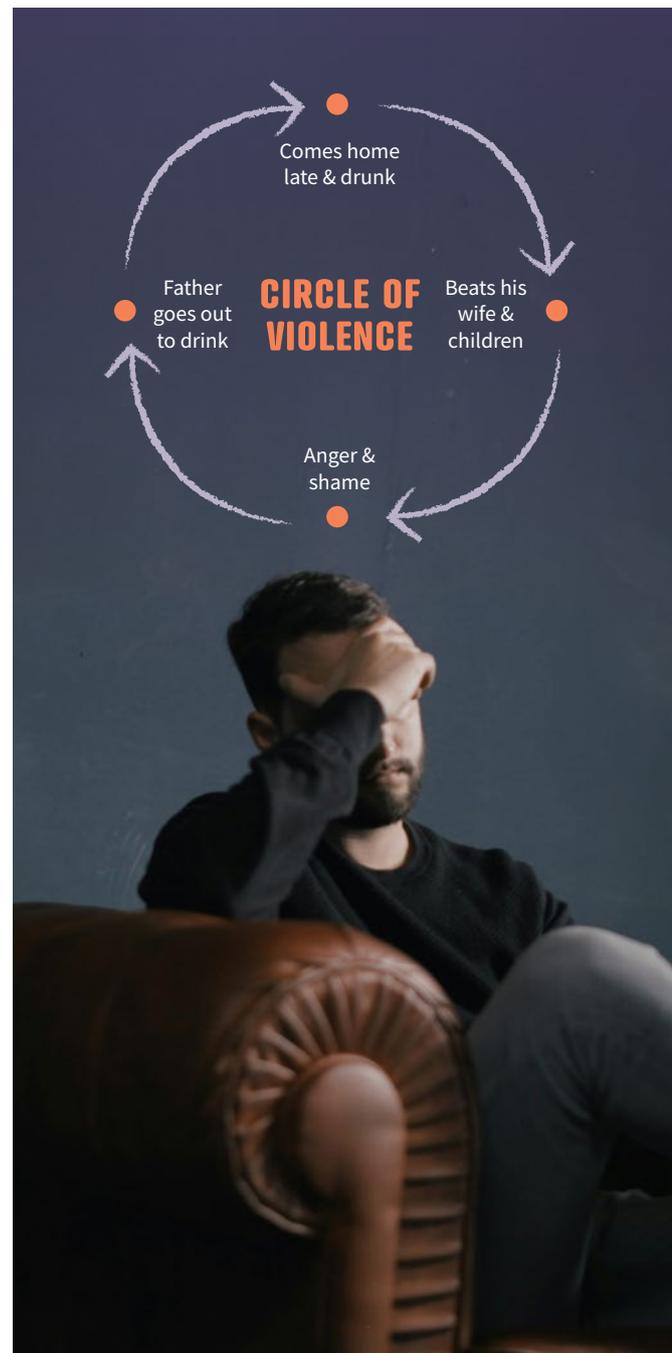
“ F: **He forces his kids to sleep with him in his bed.** (LP, Girls, 10–12)

A good father is perceived as someone who does not sexually abuse his children or others:

“ F: **He doesn't do bad things to his kids like sleeping with them, abusing them.** (LP, Girls, 10–12)

Fathers as verbal abusers

Alongside other forms of abuse, children reported that they witnessed verbal abuse from fathers in their communities. They view a bad father as someone who engages in verbally abusive behaviour towards both his wife and children. This includes shouting and harsh reprimands.



CHILDREN AND THEIR PERCEPTION OF THE IMPORTANCE OF A FATHER

For children who grew up with absent fathers

Our research findings highlight varied perspectives on the importance of a father based on children's personal experiences and societal observations. Some children who grew up without a father associate the term "father" with abandonment. These children frequently describe fathers as individuals who abandon their responsibilities and run away from their children. This perception is shaped by their lived experiences and the absence of a father figure in their lives, which in turn affects their perception of a father's importance.

“ M: **They don't want to take care of the children that they themselves made.** (LP, Boys, 13–16)

Some children who are being raised without their fathers have developed the view that the absence of a father does not diminish the family structure. They often believe that mothers are capable of fulfilling both parental roles, thus questioning the traditional importance of a father.

This perspective stems from their reliance on and admiration for their mothers, who have single-handedly provided care, support, and guidance:

“ F: **My father doesn't live here...my mother is the one who is very important to me because she makes sure that I eat before I sleep, she makes sure I have clothes and that I'm neat when I go to school.** (GP (S), Girls, 10–12)

“ M: **A father is not important because he doesn't love like a mother does.** (LP, Boys, 13–16)

Despite some children's belief that mothers can wholly fulfil the dual parental roles, there is also a subset of children who, despite growing up without a father, recognise the importance of the role.

These children, while lacking first-hand experience of a father's presence, often imagine and idealise what having a father would mean for them:

“ M: **I don't know because I don't have a father, but yes I need him because he would still love me.** (WC, Boys, 10–12)

“ M: **I wish my dad would protect me, and be kind and always make sure there's food in the house and light and water in the house.** (WC, Boys, 10–12)

Some children associate the term "father" with abandonment.

They acknowledge that mothers cannot bear the entire burden of parenting alone and speculate that a father's presence could provide additional support, stability, and guidance:

“ M: **I think fathers are important because mothers need support in raising their children.** (GP (S), Mixed, 13–16)

These varied perceptions highlight the complex and multifaceted ways in which children who grow up without fathers understand and internalise the concept of fatherhood. Their experiences and imaginations shape their beliefs, which range from viewing fathers as abandoners to recognising the hypothetical benefits of a father's presence, thus influencing their broader understanding of family dynamics.

MEN WHO STAND IN THE GAP: ROLE MODELS

In the research, it was observed that children's experiences and ideals of fatherhood are diverse, ranging from positive to negative. Despite these varied personal experiences, many children are still able to identify and connect with representations of men and fathers within their communities and society. These figures often serve as role models and father figures, offering the children alternative perspectives and influences that shape their understanding of fatherhood and manhood. This ability to see and relate to these representations highlights the significant role that societal and community influences play in

the formation of children's perceptions of what a good father or man can look like. Brothers, grandfathers, uncles, cousins, and men in their community become important sources of behavioural direction and support:

“ M: **My grandfather because he loves me, he protects me, he makes sure I go to school. He makes sure I eat and that the house is clean.** (WC, Boys, 10–12)

“ M: **My uncle, he encourages me to be serious about my education and he tells me the things that I need to do if I want to be successful like him one day.** (GP (O), Boys, 13–16)

“ M: **My brother, he encourages me and when I come back with my school report, he tells**

me that he knows I can do better. (GP (O), Boys, 13–16)

“ F: **I look up to my cousin because he plays with me, he looks after me and he makes me laugh. He comforts me if I'm sad or if I'm hurt.** (GP (B), Girls, 10–12)

“ F: **I have a lot to say about that teacher because he's also my favourite teacher. He was there for me even when I had my ups and downs and things like that. Even if I failed a test, he would cheer me up. He's like a father to you.** (WC, Girls, 13–16)

“ F: **Tumelo, someone who lives in my street. He doesn't allow children to play without writing their homework.** (GP (S), Mixed, 10–12)

Children's Perceptions of Their Current and Future Gender Roles and Identities

This section explores children's perceptions and understanding of their current and future gender roles and identities. Through their reflections and observations, boys and girls expressed distinct views on the identities of boys and girls, shaping their sense of identity and future expectations. The findings reveal how deeply-ingrained cultural norms influence children's understanding of these roles, from boys seeing themselves as future providers and fathers, to girls identifying with domestic responsibilities and the role of homemaker.

“BOY” MEANS FUTURE PROVIDER

Children expressed that boys, seen as future men and fathers, are expected to take on the role of providers when they grow up. This expectation underscores the cultural importance placed on men to fulfil their responsibilities through work and hustling, ensuring their families are well supported. Boys already identify with and understand the responsibility attached to the future role that they will have to play as providers of their children and families.

BOYS AS FUTURE FATHERS

Boys are convicted about their identity as future fathers and aspire to be loving, caring, and involved in their children's lives. They aim to transcend the traditional gender role expectations of men solely as providers. These boys express a strong desire to be present for their children not just financially, but also physically and emotionally. They want to embrace a more holistic and nurturing approach to fatherhood.

Findings indicate that boys hold complex and multifaceted aspirations regarding fatherhood which are influenced by their own experiences with their fathers. For many boys who have grown up with a positive and loving father figure, the desire to emulate this role in their own future families is strong.

“ M: **I want to be involved in my child's life and be there for him. I want to buy all the things that he will need and do for my child what my father did for me.** (GP (B), Boys, 10–12)

On the other hand, some boys who have experienced the absence of a father figure or who have endured neglect and abandonment by their fathers appear

to have a profound determination to break the cycle of neglect in their own lives. This aspiration is fuelled by a keen awareness of the void left by their absent fathers and a resolute desire to ensure their children never feel the same way:

“ M: I want to be there for my child as he grows up so that he doesn't grow up the way that I am growing up. I don't want my child to struggle, I want him to know that I love them, not for him to be raised by a single parent. (GP (O), Boys, 13–16)

Furthermore, most boys expressed a strong desire to provide for their children. They want to work when they grow up so that they can take care of their children and buy them food, clothes, and anything they might need.

They emphasise the importance of being present in their children's lives, offering love and support and being there for their children.

Many boys aim to be role models for their children, demonstrating good behaviour and instilling strong values. This commitment to being involved and nurturing fathers underscores their understanding of fatherhood as a comprehensive role that extends beyond mere provision.

CHILDREN'S PERCEPTIONS OF THE ROLE OF GIRLS IN THE HOME AND IN MARRIAGE

Roles

The research findings indicate that both boys and girls commonly define girls as individuals who, like their mothers, are primarily responsible for cooking, cleaning, and managing various domestic responsibilities within the household, as well as broader caregiving roles:

“ M: By doing household chores they are learning how to take care of a family. (GP (O), Boys, 13–16)

These perceptions are deeply rooted in observed behaviours and societal norms, where girls are seen as the primary caretakers, mirroring the roles fulfilled by women in their families. Furthermore, this view positions girls as future mothers and wives,

embedding expectations of nurturing and domestic management into their identities from an early age. There is a significant consensus among both boys and girls that being a girl inherently involves the future roles of mother and wife:

“ M: To be a girl means you will grow up to be someone's wife. (LP, Boys, 10–12)

This shared belief underscores the pervasive influence of gender socialisation, where cultural and familial contexts shape children's understanding of gender roles from an early age, reinforcing the association of womanhood with domesticity and caregiving.

While children possess a clear understanding of the traditional gender roles assigned to women and men, some expressed a desire for fathers and men to contribute more significantly to household responsibilities:

“ F: Personally, I don't think they should say you cook because it's a girl thing or you look after the kids cause it's a girl thing. I think they can also be involved, maybe try and cook one day and they need to help clean and help look after the kids and help bath them, not just sit down. (GP (B), Girls, 10–12)

“ M: I feel a right man, is a man [who] should be able to help in the house, wash his own dishes, to show he is a responsible man. (GP (O), Mixed, 10–12)

This desire reflects a shift in attitudes towards gender equality within the home, suggesting that children are not only aware of the gendered division of labour but also recognise the benefits of shared responsibilities.

On the other hand, a subset of boys hold strong beliefs in traditional gender roles, asserting that a woman's primary responsibility is to stay at home, take care of the house, and raise children. These boys emphasise that they do not want a wife who is perceived as lazy or neglectful of her household duties. This perspective reinforces rigid, stereotypical notions of gender roles, where domestic responsibilities are seen as inherently feminine tasks.

There is a significant perception among both girls and boys that parents treat their girl children differently from their boy children, particularly in reinforcing traditional gender roles.



Perceptions are deeply rooted in observed behaviours and societal norms, where girls are seen as the primary caretakers, mirroring the roles fulfilled by women in their families.

Views on marriage

Our research also reveals that a man's ability to provide is also perceived to be a determinant factor when it comes to preferences among young women regarding their future marital dynamics and the kind of men they want to marry. Some of the girls interviewed expressed a desire to marry a man who can act as the primary provider for the family.

Conversely, another group of girls highlighted a preference for an egalitarian approach to marriage. These participants aspired to form partnerships where both spouses equally share the responsibilities of providing for the household. They emphasised the importance of mutual contribution to financial obligations and household needs, reflecting a desire for equality and shared decision-making. This perspective challenges traditional gender norms and supports the idea of both partners working together to achieve financial and domestic balance. Some girls want to marry a man who wants an equal partnership:

“ **F: I want someone who will treat me equal. Like if I have to clean, he should also help me and when I cook, he should help me. Yes, we should help each other, even when it comes to money.** (GP (S), Girls, 13–16)

A few of the children expressed reluctance or outright refusal to marry, citing various negative experiences and perceptions of marriage. Girls, particularly, expressed concerns rooted in their observations of men's behaviour in marriage and how men mistreat and take advantage of their wives:

“ **F: I don't want to get married because of the kind of men I'm exposed to. They do not set a good example.** (GP (O), Girls, 10–12)

Some of the girls linked marriage to experiences of abuse and violence, either witnessed or anticipated.

“ **F: I don't want to get married because I fear that I will be abused by my husband. I don't want to have pots thrown at me. My parents are no longer married because that is what my father used to do to my mom.** (GP (O), Girls, 10–12)

These responses suggest that exposure to domestic violence and neglect has profoundly influenced their perceptions of marriage, leading to a pervasive fear of becoming victims of similar circumstances.

Consequences of Father Disconnect: Replication of Negative Behaviours

Father disconnect, or the absence or lack of positive father involvement can lead to the replication of negative behaviours among children, including substance abuse and various forms of violence. Troubling patterns of abuse and aggression that emerge in the context of inadequate father engagement, contributing to a cycle of violence and emotional harm in schools and communities.

BOYS AND GIRLS AND SUBSTANCE ABUSE

Children growing up in homes without a father are at an increased risk of substance abuse, including alcohol and drugs, compared to those with an engaged father figure. The presence and involvement of a father can serve as a protective factor against substance use in both childhood and adolescence.

The research findings reveal a troubling trend of substance abuse among both boys and girls, extending beyond mere consumption to involvement in the distribution and theft of drugs. Respondents indicated that students are not only using drugs, but are also actively selling them to their peers within school environments.

Boys at school are consuming and fighting over drugs, which highlights the adverse impact of substance abuse on young lives, and girls are said to be involved in selling drugs, consuming them and stealing to sustain their habit.

PHYSICAL ABUSE AT SCHOOL

Boys in father-absent homes may replicate the aggressive behaviours they witness or experience in their homes and communities, contributing to a cycle of violence that includes physical, sexual, and verbal abuse directed at girls in school settings.

These findings extend to children's observations of their peers. Boys hitting or beating girls at school indicate a troubling perpetuation and normalisation of such behaviour. Boys are said to sometimes be violent at school and react with violence if they don't have their way:

“ F: There was a group of four boys who said that after school they were going to beat me up but luckily my brother helped me.
(GP (S), Girls, 10–12)

“ F: They force us into corners and try to kiss us. If we refuse, they hit us.
(GP (O), Girls, 10–12)

Conflicts among boys and girls often revolve around romantic rivalries, with boys frequently engaging in fights over girls and girls similarly fighting over boys.

BOYS SEXUALLY ABUSE GIRLS AT SCHOOL

South African research highlights significant links between father absence and the perpetration of sexual violence by boys, as well as the increased risk of sexual victimisation for girls. Studies show that boys who grow up without a father or with disconnected fathers are more likely to engage in violent behaviours, including sexual violence, towards girls.

Similarly, girls who grow up in homes where fathers are absent are at a greater risk of experiencing sexual abuse. Both South African and international studies focusing on the prevalence of sexual abuse among girls in father-absent households show that the lack of a positive fatherly influence is a contributing factor to increased risks of victimisation.

Our research respondents reported a concerning and pervasive culture of sexual abuse in school settings. Boys and girls alike have reported that girls are being subjected to inappropriate touching by their male peers. Boys are viewed as the perpetrators of sexual abuse at school and will corner girls into bathrooms to touch them inappropriately.

Boys reportedly frequently engage in behaviours that sexualise their female peers, including making sexual jokes and innuendos. These remarks often allude to a desire to engage in sexual activities with the girls, contributing to an environment of discomfort and objectification:

“ F: **They sexualise females with their other guy friends and make jokes about girls and act dirty.** (WC, Girls, 13–16)

“ M: **Boys usually treat girls as objects, they don't see them as their equals or see them as their friends; they see them as somebody they can hit on or get a make-out session with or tap basically.** (WC, Boys, 13–16)

Furthermore, boys in schools are said to sexually abuse or even rape girls. Girls have indicated that boys will force them to engage in sexual activities and will make them do things that they don't want to do.

“ F: **Some boys make you do things that you don't want to do. For example, if they want you to have sex at school and you don't want to have it, then they will hit you or something.** (WC, Girls, 13–16)

BOYS VERBALLY ABUSE AND BULLY GIRLS AT SCHOOL

Research on father absence in South Africa indicates that boys raised in households without active father figures are more prone to engage in bullying and verbal abuse, particularly directed towards girls in school settings. Father absence not only impairs emotional regulation in boys but also fosters the replication of harmful gender norms learned outside the home.

Boys at school exhibit verbal abuse towards girls, resorting to name-calling or shouting when their demands are not met. Additionally, boys frequently make inappropriate remarks about girls' bodies:

“ F: **When you look nice, they'll tell you that you look ugly just so that you can feel bad about yourself.** (GP (B), Girls, 10–12)

Findings further indicate that boys and men often struggle to accept rejection from girls, frequently responding with hostility, violence and derogatory behaviour. They react in the form of name-calling and other mean-spirited actions, reflecting underlying issues related to masculinity and emotional regulation because they feel pressure to assert dominance or retaliate when faced with rejection.

Boys frequently engage in bullying behaviours directed towards girls in school settings. This bullying

often takes the form of physical aggression, such as stealing lunch boxes and pocket money:

“ F: **They hit us, mess around with our schoolbooks and take our lunch boxes.** (GP (O), Girls, 10–12)

The bullying also takes the form of physical violence and verbal abuse, which includes making derogatory comments about the girls' appearances:

Boys raised in households without active father figures are more prone to engage in bullying and verbal abuse, particularly directed towards girls in school settings.

“ M: **For me it's terrible because the way the boys treat the girls, they call them names, the 'B' word or the 'N' word [naai]. It's like calling someone the 'B' word but it's more of a gangster slang.** (WC, Boys, 13–16)

Respondents also reported that some boys force girls to perform tasks for them, such as completing their homework, and will become violent as a means of asserting dominance. When asked if they felt they could report the bullying to the principal or teachers, they indicated that:

“ *When we tell the teachers, they say 'You'll get over it, boys will be boys.'*

(GP (B), Girls, 10–12)

Boys who reportedly bully often seek to exert power and control over their female peers, using both physical and psychological tactics to intimidate and demean them. Such behaviours are indicative of broader issues related to gender inequality and the socialisation of boys to adopt aggressive and dominant behaviours. The impacts of such bullying are profound, affecting the psychological well-being and social development of the girls involved.

GANGSTERISM: A PERVASIVE CULTURE OF VIOLENCE

Research has consistently shown that a father's absence plays a significant role in the development of aggressive behaviour among young boys, making them more vulnerable to gang involvement. In the absence of a father figure, boys often turn to gangs in search of a sense of belonging, identity, and protection, with gang leaders frequently assuming the role of father figures.

Our research indicates that boys are drawn into gangsterism primarily because they desire to be feared and feel immense pressure from friends and family to conform to these violent norms. This involvement in gangs offers them a sense of belonging and identity, even though it perpetuates a cycle of violence and crime.

Research findings suggest that some girls join gangs after returning from initiation school, often becoming involved in physical altercations at school. Additionally, girls may join gangs due to romantic interests, seeking proximity to a particular member they admire or have feelings for.

For some, gang membership represents a way of life, offering a sense of identity, belonging, and protection that they might not find elsewhere. This lifestyle choice often stems from a combination of socio-economic factors, including family dynamics, community environment, and limited opportunities for positive engagement.

“ M: **All these new bloods grow up with seeing their fathers be gangsters and so they automatically believe that this is correct and the right way of life...They don't have a proper example.** (WC, Boys, 13–16)

“ F: **My brother joined a gang. His father left him when he was 13 so at that time he says it was really hard for him because that's the time he needed his father. So, he joined the gang because the gang said 'No, we're gonna be your real family' and he felt that the gang was the only place he could trust and feel love.** (WC, Girls, 13–16)

Boys learn to suppress their emotions, adhering to the pressures put on them to 'not be weak'. They are encouraged to be tough and are led into negative behaviours by friends and other men around them and, as a result, will channel their feelings through aggression.

“ F: **Some men can even say 'Be a man' to challenge someone to do wrong things like maybe to be brave to get into crime...so it may be a way to push someone to do wrong things.** (GP (O), Mixed, 13–16)

“ M: **Boys shouldn't cry; they should just accept that what has happened has happened.** (LP, Mixed, 13–16)

When asked how they would react if someone made them angry, children provided a range of responses, with many expressing a desire for physical retaliation. Boys, particularly those aged 13 to 16, often articulated extreme reactions, including desires to fight, inflict serious harm, or even kill the person who angered them:

“ M: **When I am angry, I feel like I can kill the person who made me angry.** (LP, Mixed, 13–16)

“ M: **When I'm angry, I go up to the person... and if they're being like really rude or disrespecting someone, only if they're disrespecting someone, I'll punch them and kick them.** (GP (B), Boys, 10–12)

These violent inclinations reflect a significant concern regarding anger management and aggression in young boys, suggesting that many might feel compelled to respond with immediate and severe physical action when provoked.

In contrast, girls (and a few boys) though also prone to physical responses, showed a slightly different pattern. While some girls expressed a desire to hit

or fight back when angry, others indicated internal conflicts that prevented them from acting on their aggressive impulses:

“ F: **If somebody makes me angry, I won't hit them.** (LP, Girls, 10–12)

“ F: **I want to hit them, but something stops me.** (GP (O), Girls, 13–16)

A notable number of girls preferred non-violent coping mechanisms, such as walking away, crying, or locking themselves in their rooms. A few boys shared the view that when someone makes them angry, they just go to sleep or cry about it. This dichotomy between immediate aggressive reactions and restrained responses suggests gender differences in dealing with anger.

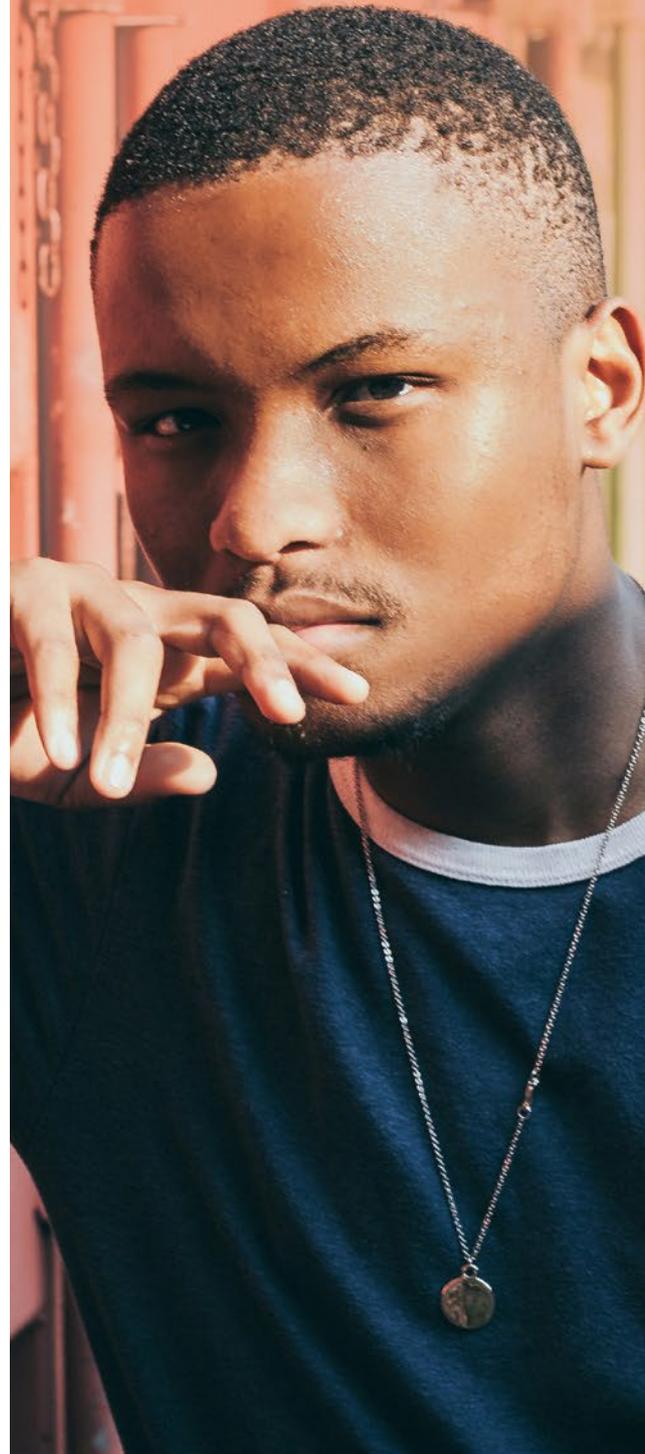
Teachers have also reported that the children they encounter at school cannot manage their anger. One primary school teacher highlighted:

“ *There are many children with so much anger, they do not get to experience love from home.*

For teachers it is often difficult to control these children when their anger leads to fights and poses safety risks for the teachers themselves:

“ **In some instances, they are fighting and you have to stop the fight, you are being beaten when stopping the fight. They have so much anger, these children, it's like they are possessed by some angry monster.**

In the absence of a father figure, boys often turn to gangs in search of a sense of belonging, identity, and protection.



CHAPTER

04

DISCUSSION

This research provides critical insights into children's perceptions of what constitutes a "good" and "bad" father, revealing complex intersections between social expectations, economic realities, and the perceived and lived experiences of children in South Africa. The findings emphasise that children, regardless of race or socio-economic background, strongly associate a "good" father with his ability to provide for their basic needs and protect them against harm. However, **the research also reveals that children's perceptions of a good father extend beyond financial provision to include emotional support, love, and active involvement in their lives.**

In the context of this research, it is important to note that while children do recognise and value the role of fathers as providers, it does not diminish their perception of fatherhood if a father struggles to meet this expectation. The children's understanding of provision is focused on fulfilling basic needs, mostly food, shelter, and clothing, rather than luxury goods or material excess. This distinction suggests that children's expectations are grounded in a pragmatic view of what is essential for their well-being, and they exhibit a degree of empathy and understanding regarding the economic challenges that fathers may face.

The children do not perceive these struggles as a failure of fatherhood; rather, they place greater value on the father's presence, emotional support, and efforts to care for the family within the constraints of their circumstances.

In addition to their perception of fathers as providers, children in this study also emphasised the importance of fathers as protectors. However, paradoxically many children witness or experience behaviour that contradicts this idealised notion of protection. Children shared troubling instances where fathers, instead of offering protection, are the source of fear and insecurity in the home. Fathers who return home late and drunk after spending the night out are often the perpetrators of physical and verbal abuse, further deepening the sense of insecurity that their presence should counteract. Moreover, these fathers are seen as failing to protect their children from engaging in harmful behaviours, such as drinking alcohol and using drugs. Instead of reprimanding or guiding their children away from these behaviours, some fathers are perceived to condone, introduce, or ignore them, which stands in stark contrast to the children's understanding of what a "good" father should do.

Children who grow up without positively present and engaged fathers are at a greater risk for a host of negative outcomes...

Children are replicating the negative behaviours they associate with fatherhood. This is evident in their involvement in substance abuse and acts of physical, verbal, and sexual violence, particularly in school settings. Teachers reported that a significant number of children who exhibit negative behaviours at school, such as anger, aggression, and other disruptive actions, often have absent fathers. This absence can manifest in different ways: some fathers are physically absent from the household, while others, though physically present, are emotionally disengaged from their children's lives. Teachers indicated that these children tend to struggle the most, both academically and socially, as they grapple with feelings of anger and frustration that are often linked to the lack of a supportive father figure. The emotional void left by absent fathers appears to be a key factor contributing to the behavioural challenges these children face.

The school playground is a critical space where hegemonic and heterosexual identities are enforced, with boys competing for status as "real" boys, often exacerbated by the absence of a father figure. Boys frequently engage in bullying behaviours directed towards girls, usually manifesting as physical and emotional aggression. Such hypermasculine behaviours are often a response to the uncertainty and insecurity caused by negative fathering experiences, where the absence or inadequacy of a father figure leads boys to compensate through violence and toxic displays of masculinity. These actions, while temporarily earning them social status from being seen as strong and capable, have profound negative impacts on the psychological well-being and social development of the girls involved, perpetuating gender inequality and the harmful socialisation of boys into aggressive roles.

The research underscores the importance of addressing cultural norms that condone violence and constrain the agency of women and girls. The experiences of girls in schools, who report sexual

harassment and a lack of agency due to intimidation and threats from boys, highlight the urgent need for interventions that promote gender equality and challenge harmful masculinities. The role of fathers, whether biological or social, is crucial in this regard. While the research found that some children experience their fathers as absent or neglectful, it also reveals that boys, reflecting on their future roles as fathers, aspire to embody more positive, loving, and supportive forms of masculinity.

The findings from this research further corroborate literature and Heartlines' assertion that children who grow up without positively present and engaged fathers are at a greater risk for a host of negative outcomes, including child abuse, perpetrating and being victims of violence, substance abuse, teen pregnancy, and mental health issues.

Father figures such as grandfathers, uncles, teachers, and community members play a critical role in filling the void left by absent fathers. In many instances where fathers are either physically or emotionally absent, these father figures step in to provide the guidance, support, and role modelling that children require for healthy development. Father figures are especially vital in promoting positive values, including gender equality and healthier forms of masculinity and femininity, which are essential for countering the negative influences that may arise from the absence or negative behaviour of fathers.

The involvement of father figures is crucial not only in providing emotional support but also in modelling behaviours that promote respect, responsibility, and care within the family and community context. Teachers also emerge as key figures in this dynamic, given their unique position to influence children and adolescents daily.

Father absence can create a gap in children's lives that, when unfilled by positive influences, may lead to the replication of negative behaviours such as drinking and drug use. The lack of a strong, supportive male presence deprives children of the necessary emotional support and role modelling that are crucial in steering them away from such harmful behaviours.

This research contributes to the limited body of knowledge on the perceptions of tweens and teens concerning fatherhood, providing valuable insights into the perceived impact and lived experience of father absence on children's lives.

Recommendations

Efforts to break the cycle must focus on providing children with alternative narratives and coping strategies. Interventions such as counselling, mentorship programmes, and education about healthy relationships and emotional regulation can help counteract the normalisation of abuse.

Given their potential to shape the lives of these children, it is crucial to encourage father figures and other positive male figures to actively engage with and support children who lack a strong paternal presence.

By coming alongside these children, father figures can introduce them to different ways of being that are not dominated by toxic and violent notions of manhood. Instead, they can model and promote a form of masculinity that is grounded in empathy, respect, and responsibility. This involvement not only benefits the individual child but also contributes to fostering a more positive and equitable community environment, breaking cycles of violence and promoting healthier, more supportive relationships.

Conclusion

This research highlights a consistent desire among children across various racial and socio-economic groups for fathers who are involved both financially and physically in their lives. However, it is important to note that **children do not seek material luxuries from their fathers; rather, they prioritise the fulfilment of basic needs, alongside protection.** Despite these expectations, many children experience a reality of fatherhood that is marred by various forms of abuse, which profoundly influences their perception of what it means to be a father.

The findings also emphasise that, for children, the importance of having a father extends beyond financial support. Their presence and active engagement in their children's lives hold greater significance than monetary contributions alone. Our hope is that this research encourages both present and absent fathers to reflect on what is truly best for their children. It is crucial for fathers to recognise that their presence, love, and care are far more impactful than money, and that their involvement can play a pivotal role in shaping their children's futures in positive ways.

HEARTLINES

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MATTER**

www.fathersmatter.org.za