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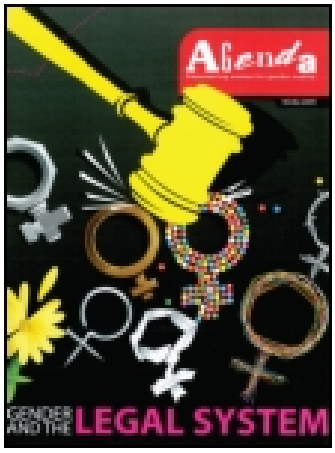

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The Fatherhood Project: confronting issues of masculinity and sexuality

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The Fatherhood Project: confronting issues of masculinity and sexuality

Robert Morrell and Linda Richter

abstract

The Fatherhood Project is a research and advocacy intervention. Its goals include promoting the concept of fatherhood, initiating debate about how fathers might better relate to their children and researching how South African men historically discharged and currently discharge the fatherhood role. Being a father is related to a man's sense of his masculinity. In this *briefing*, we outline some of the challenges that fatherhood poses for men, and particularly examine the relationship of fatherhood to masculine sexuality.

keywords

father, fatherhood, masculinity, children, gender, parenting

When Todd Hamilton won the 133rd playing of the British Open at Royal Troon, one of the first things he did was walk over to his family and hug his young child. The same has been true over and over again as prominent sportsmen have put their children in the spotlight and, on significant occasions, their children before their sporting commitments and chance of fame and fortune. Think here of Sean Pollock (cricket), Mark Fish (soccer) and Ernie Els (golf) electing to be at the births of their children rather than on the sportsfields. And David Beckham's presentation of self as a man for all seasons has prominently included being a father (Cashmore and Parker, 2003). The public rise of the father has been a significant feature of the gendered politics of masculinity in recent times, but it has not been without its darker sides.

Before proceeding it is necessary briefly to review the different understandings of the key terms, father and fatherhood. Father, in this *briefing*, refers to biological father. In some contexts (but not in this *briefing*), the term is used to refer to a wide variety of adult men who may be taking the place of, or standing in for, the biological father. Fatherhood refers to the social role performed by men in relation to children. Not all fathers accept or discharge this role or do so satisfactorily and, conversely, many men who are not biological fathers successfully take on this role. In many countries, including South Africa, it is common for grandfathers, uncles, step- and foster-fathers, older brothers, ministers of religion and even teachers to take on the fatherhood role. Despite the fact that around the world there are many men who are social fathers (non-biological fathers), it is still common for the term 'father' to refer specifically to biological fathers. While there are good reasons to support the responsibility of biological fathers to take on their fatherhood duties, this *briefing* explicitly does not suggest that only biological fathers are capable of doing so. Indeed, in some contexts it is preferable for non-biological fathers to take on the fatherhood role; for example if he is abusive (Jaffee et al, 2001). On the other hand, there is a common presumption that the biological father has a particular relationship with the child that emanates from the act of insemination. This presumption has

been extensively researched and there appears to be some proof that biology does, indeed, give fathers a special connection to their children. It does not follow, however, that this in itself bestows rights or ensures good fathering. In South Africa, the Natural Fathers of Children Born out of Wedlock Act (86 of 1997) is an attempt legally to define the rights and obligations of paternity.

Despite our attempts to define father and fatherhood, these terms are not neutral or uncontested. While this *briefing* uses these distinctions, this should not in any way be understood as arguing for a privileged position for biological fathers over the men who are not biological fathers but who perform the role lovingly and well.

Fatherhood can be successfully discharged without having a biological relationship with a child. A dramatic illustration is David Reimer who, after a surgical accident as a very young infant, lost his penis, had his testicles removed and was brought up as a girl. In his late teens he chose to become a male again. He could never father children but married a woman who already had three children. Quoted in Colapinto (2000: 271), he says:

> *'From what I've been taught by my father,' he said, 'what makes you a man is you treat your wife well, you put a roof over your family's head, you're a good father. Things like that add up much more to being a man than just bang-bang-bang – sex. ... [M]y children's biological fathers... didn't stick around to take care of the children. I did. That, to me, is a man.'*

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The Fatherhood Project[1] promotes men's care and protection of children in the face of shockingly high rates of child sexual abuse, father absence from families and lack of support by men for the children they have sired. But fatherhood can and has been used by men to try and reverse the gains of feminism on behalf of women (Farrell, 1993). Invoking arguments about a child needing his father and the rights of the father, in this country and in the developed world, fathers are increasingly engaging in bitter court cases to gain custody of their children in situations of divorce. And, since men often lose these battles in a context where mothers are deemed to be the more important parent, feuds continue long after the divorce has been granted, and may significantly affect maintenance support for the child/ren.[2] In this way, the courts have played a part in contributing to the social distance between fathers and their biological children.

In this *briefing* we discuss why fathers and fatherhood are important. We argue that active, responsible and engaged fathers make an important contribution to the health and wellbeing of children, to constructions of masculinity and to better gender relations. In making this argument we are mindful of the great differences in material and cultural contexts in which men live and in which fathers can respond to, and engage with their children. In the course of outlining this argument, we use the HSRC-initiated Fatherhood Project for illustration (Richter et al, 2004a & b).

Why are fathers important?

A great many South African men are fathers. Although exact figures are not available, estimations suggest that about half of all men over the age of 15 are fathers (Posel and Devey, 2004, forthcoming). The figures suggest that there may be a decline in the number of fathers in the 1990s but we have no way yet of knowing whether this trend is real or due to changes in the format of questions asked in national surveys. If accurate, it is not immediately evident what might be causing a drop in male fertility. We do know that in a selection of countries in Southern, Central and Eastern Africa, the percentage of fathers ranges from 47% (Zimbabwe) to 66% (Mozambique) of men in the reproductive age range.

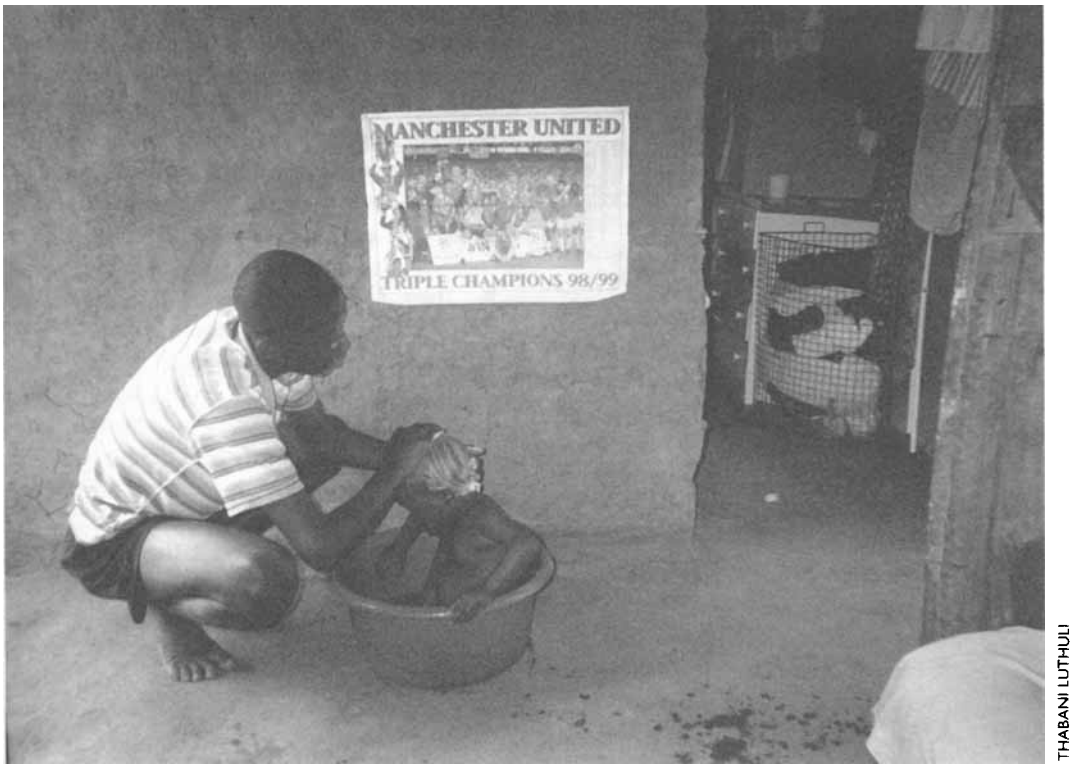
Apartheid deprived many African children of the presence of their fathers

The fact that a man has sired a child may mean very little. Nhlanhla Mkhize (2004), for example, points out that in many traditional African societies, fatherhood is only established when an *imbeleko* sacrifice is made and the child is introduced to his or her family and *abaphansi* (ancestors). Official statistics indicate that close to half (42%) of South African children grow up living only with their mothers (Budlender, 1998) and, by the time they reach the age of 18 years, close to 15% of children have lost their fathers – mortality that is still predominantly attributable to non-accidental injury, although the HIV/AIDS epidemic is also taking its toll.[3] However, biological fathers are not the only men who take responsibility and care for children, and even when the biological father is not present, a child may be in a loving and nurturing relationship with one or more adult men whom he may think of, and call, father.

In general, the empirical evidence indicates that men and children are good for each other. Children with involved and engaged fathers (biological and social) tend to achieve better at school and are more self-confident (Lamb, 1997; Williams, 1999).[4] In turn, men who have the resources to undertake a fatherhood role are generally emotionally healthier than single men (Hawkins and Belsky, 1989). Men who are able to have active relationships with their children, tend to have more satisfying and supportive relationships with their children and their partners (Engle and Leonard, 1995; Lamb, 2002; Palkovitz, 2002). In South Africa, children who have fathers who provide for them are better off financially than those who don't (Barbarin and Richter, 2001). And children who have fathers who love them are likely to be happier than those without such men in their lives.

In South Africa there are a number of reasons why it is important for a child that somebody take on the fatherhood role. Apartheid deprived many African children of the presence of their fathers, as their migrant labour took them away from home for long periods of time, and influx control broke up the residential stability of families. More recently, a trend has emerged where many children have no adult male in their lives (biological or social father) as increasingly, women tend to have children alone, unmarried or without male support. AIDS mortality is compounding this situation. It is critical that men feel able to take up fatherhood roles when appropriate, even if they are not biologically connected to children, and even if they cannot live with their children or provide for them because they are chronically unemployed.

The goal of being a father is also important. Despite low and declining marriage rates in South Africa, young, particularly African, men continue to believe in the importance and



THABANI LUTHULI

desirability of becoming a father. In the State of the Youth Report (2004), Emmett et al present data to show that 70% of young people in South Africa, with roughly equal numbers of men and women, believe that adulthood is defined by one's capacity to provide materially, and to take responsibility for one's children. Similarly, in a study by Robert Morrell (2004) in three Durban secondary schools, it was found that particularly African, Zulu-speaking, working-class learners vested substantial importance in becoming a father. Among the responses (Morrell, 2004) given by seven Grade 10 learners to questions about family and fatherhood were:

> *Silwane: I don't want to be a strict father who will be feared by children. I want to be able to sit down with them and talk about issues and give them advice if there is a need.*
>
> *Nzulu: I want to be a good father to my family, supportive and admit when I am wrong and to agree with my family in many things.*
>
> *Bigman: Yes I would love to have a family because of my mother's behaviour, and I would like to be a father to a woman who will be just like my mother to my kids and encourage them to do good things, and I tell my kids when they are young not to do bad things.*

In these cases, the young men were aspiring to be 'good fathers' even though they and many of the other young men interviewed had not had good experiences with their fathers. Drunkenness, neglect, absence and beatings were common. These young men aspire to a new vision of fatherhood which is more affective, but nevertheless considers the primary responsibility of fatherhood to be that of provider.

How can fatherhood be promoted?

Despite the factors that demonstrate the value of fatherhood, it is lamentably the case that many fathers are irresponsible, absent, negligent and even cruel. There are many reasons for this, and account must be taken of the practice of migrant labour and influx control which made it impossible for millions of men over one and a half centuries to live with their children (Wilson, forthcoming). But these historical conditions are not the sole cause of the current situation. Another determinant, we argue, is that the estate of fatherhood is inadequately esteemed and frequently attacked. While there are changes, and the testimony of the young men above is evidence of this, hegemonic constructions of masculinity in South Africa do not yet centrally include the loving and responsible discharge of the fatherhood role. Masculinity is generally and primarily constructed with reference to what other men think – the peer group during adolescence, professional and other cohorts later in life. While mothers, wives, partners and children might long for an attentive, loving father, this will only occur when men place store in the importance of fatherhood or when the processes by which masculinities are constructed change. Nevertheless, gender relations and identities are changeable. We therefore believe that interventions can be made to elevate the status of fatherhood and to valorise its social worth. The Fatherhood Project, established in 2003, has sought to do just this.

Masculinity is constructed with reference to what other men think

Based on *a priori* intervention principles, including the need to promote desired behaviour in addition to highlighting problems, the Fatherhood Project aims to promote men's care and protection of children through consciousness raising, through increased resources for programmatic work that includes men in promoting children's development, through networking, and through new research.[5]

At the heart of the advocacy campaign is a travelling exhibition of more than 120 photographs assembled from the works of professional photographers, students and children.[6] Together with UNICEF South Africa, the Fatherhood Project disseminates a set of key messages for the media, as well as partners and collaborators to reinforce this. These are:

- There is no such thing as a fatherless child. Every child had a father or has a father somewhere, even if they don't live with or see him very often. Many men can play the role of father to a child, including grandfathers, uncles, step-fathers, foster-fathers, older brothers, cousins, family friends, and men who have responsibility to care for children.
- Children need and want the care of men. Children in all cultures value the idea of a father or a father-figure. They are taught to respect men, and children want to spend time with men and learn from them. Children also have great fun with men through adventurous and boisterous play.
- If you don't live with your children, don't lose contact with them. They appreciate hearing from you and knowing that you care about them.
- If you can't support your children or provide materially for their needs, you can still give them love, affection and support, and you can still offer them guidance and help.
- If you live with your children, be kind to them and don't hurt them. You are so much stronger than they are, and your strength is given to you to protect them from harm.
- Children need the care and protection of all men. A man can make all the difference to a child's life by preventing or stopping abuse perpetrated by other people. Men need to protect children in the neighbourhood, at school, on public transport systems, and in the home.
- Young men benefit from staying in contact with their children and may do more to protect themselves from harm and be economically active as a result of knowing that the child they love depends on them.

A new discourse of fatherhood should present men, but particularly fathers, as active in child-rearing. But it is important to avoid narrow prescriptions of such engagement. In some of the literature on fathers in the developed world, an equality approach is used to argue that fathers are negligent in caring for children. The contention is that fathers don't change nappies as often as mothers, participate equally in feeding, or generally spend as much time caring for children. Leaving aside the question of the necessity of equality when treated in such a literal manner, it is important to consider the context in which fathers operate in order to assess what being 'active' might usefully mean. In resource-poor and impoverished environments where the labour market is more accessible to a man than a woman, it may be critical for a father to provide materially for the family. In other less precarious contexts, it may be appropriate to share a range of parenting tasks that historically have been shouldered primarily by mothers or women generally.

The essence of active fathering is involvement for the good of the child, and this involves constancy and responsibility. One of the major criticisms of fathers in South Africa is that they flee their responsibility by failing to acknowledge paternity, provide support for the child's expenses, and guidance necessary for children's development. Evidence of this distressing trend is in the legislative and judicial focus given to issues of maintenance and the sadness that both authors have encountered in interviewing young children who don't know their fathers.

We do not wish to argue either that mere presence is important or that it is the presence of a biological father that is at issue. Time after time, research work on fathers has stressed that it is the nature of the relationship between child and parent (social or biological father) that is important (Kimmel, 2000).

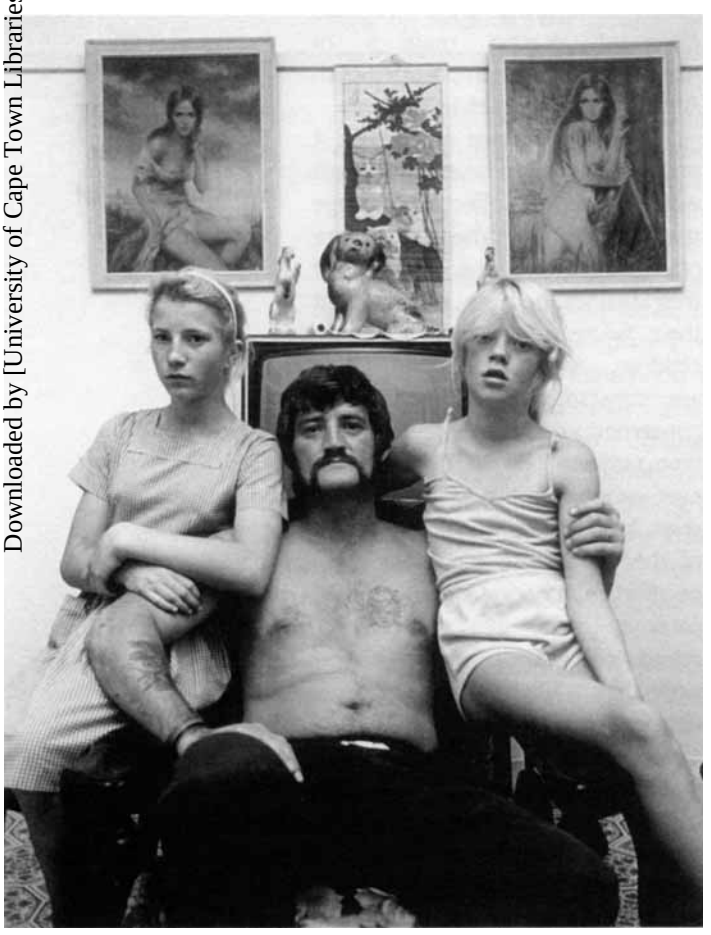
Although studies on fathers rarely use the word, we contend that 'love' is a critical element of fathering. Not all cultures understand 'love' in the romantic way that it is often understood in European culture (cf Lutz, 1990), but the idea of caring for another person in a way that respects their selfhood, is universal. People make sense of this in narratives that they tell. These narratives are generated from experience and framed in terms provided by culture (Swidler, 2001). The challenge is to develop and use language that makes it possible for men to talk about love and caring in ways that currently seem unavailable to many men. Men have historically been boxed by stereotypes that present them as unemotional and inexpressive and this has made the explicit affirmation of love for children difficult. A language of care and love is still generally disassociated from particular versions of masculinity, stigmatised and cast in homophobic registers. 'Don't be a girl', 'sissy', 'moffie' are all responses to male behaviours that threaten dominant macho readings of masculinity in contemporary South Africa (Nayak and Kehily, 1993).

The essence of active fathering is involvement for the good of the child

Another challenge is to make it possible for men to have experiences with children that affect and engage them emotionally. When fathers are physically absent, when they avoid their families because of shame at their failure to provide for their children financially, when they are constantly and/or obsessively concerned with their careers and their leisure-time pursuits, it is likely that they will rarely, if ever, experience the fulfilment that fatherhood gives. In contexts like Norway, the recognition of the importance for father and child alike, of affective fathering experiences, has driven a paternity policy that encourages fathers to spend long and unbroken periods of time with their children during their early years (Brandth and Kvande, 2002). While such a policy is not feasible in developing countries that lack Norway's resources, wealth and very high per capita income, the message is nevertheless important: men need to give themselves, and be given, the chance to **experience** fatherhood.

Fathers, fatherhood and sexuality

In the final section of this *briefing* we consider the question of fathers and sexuality. This can be an emotive topic, particularly in the context of a welter of recent media reports of child rape, often by close male relatives including fathers, grandfathers, uncles and stepfathers (Richter, Dawes and Higson-Smith, 2004). According to Diana Russell, levels of incest in South Africa have historically been high (Russell, 1999). For our purposes, we therefore need to note that there is nothing automatic about the positive effect that a father will have on his children, either by virtue of his presence or behaviour, and this is profoundly illustrated in autobiographical works, such as Zaza Khuzwayo's moving story *Never been at home* (2004).



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According to psychoanalytic theories, men are feared by children because of their aggression and sexuality. It is the transformation of the fear by identification and imitation, for the boy with the father, and for the girl with the mother, which is believed to be the fulcrum around which the child's gender identity is formed (Tyson, 1982). In turn, the father's empathic identification with the good and innocent child for whom he feels responsibility, contains both his aggression and his sexuality. Nonetheless, there may be considerable ambiguity in the space between the virile father-figure and his emergently sexual children, as is illustrated in the photograph by Paul Weinberg of, as described by the subject to the photographer, a 'man devoted to his children'.

It is conceivable that this image can be interpreted in a number of ways, which is part of the attraction of creative photographic work. There is, as is made clear in Susan Sontag's book *On photography* (1977), no objective determination of the truth of an image.

In contrast, both the very young father-figure, such as a brother, or the old father-figure, represented by the grandfather, seem safer mainly because their masculinity, for a number of reasons, appears to be less *potent*. Jarrett and colleagues refer to this, in the context of African-American males – and it might well hold with respect to African males in South Africa – as an oppressive fear that *American society*, a term used by the authors, has of these men. This fear distorts the ability of these men to participate in family life (2002). The apparent violence, irresponsibility, antisocial behaviour, and sexuality frequently attributed to unemployed groups of physically powerful men, by the popular and professional media, are feared in their own right, as well as their impact on, and behaviour towards, children. Such perceptions of men are often in sharp contrast to the conventional aspirations for work, marriage and parenting that many of these men express (Waller and Plotnick, 2001).

Conclusion

There are many challenges faced by projects aimed at promoting fatherhood. They have to be sensitive to different, culturally-specific definitions of fatherhood and the material contexts in which such definitions are lived out and negotiated. They have to be aware of the processes by which masculinities are constructed in order to develop a place for fatherhood in the ideal of what a good man is or does. They have to be careful not to upset delicate gender balances which exist between parents while, at the same time, not devaluing motherhood or overvaluing fatherhood. No fatherhood project should succeed at the expense of female caregivers. And finally, fatherhood projects must take cognisance of the possibility that fathers can, and sometimes do, develop abusive and inappropriate relationships with their children. Promoting fatherhood cannot be an exercise in emasculinisation. The special qualities that men, either as a consequence of their biology or social construction, bring to parenting need to be identified and promoted.

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Notes

1. http://www.hsrc.ac.za/fatherhood
2. See Childs (Children in Legal Disputes) http://www.childs.co.za
   Child Law Centre http://www.childlawsa.com
3. Statistics South Africa, Census 2001, Pretoria.
4. There is a literature which argues that biological fathers in most cases are better for children than social (and specifically step) fathers. These studies have mostly been conducted in the developed world and we know of no equivalent literature in the South African context.
5. In the 48th session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women dealing with 'The role of men and boys in achieving gender equality' on 12 March 2004, among the agreed conclusions was 'Promote understanding of the importance of fathers, mothers, legal guardians and other caregivers, to the well being of children and the promotion of gender equality and of the need to develop policies, programmes and school curricula that encourage and maximize their positive involvement in achieving gender equality and positive results for children, families and communities.'
6. See http://www.hsrc.ac.za/fatherhood

Robert Morrell is a Professor of Education at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. He is editor of Changing Men in Southern Africa *(Pietermaritzburg, University of Natal Press, 2001) and author of* From Boys to Gentlemen: Settler Masculinity in Colonial Natal *(Pretoria, UNISA Press, 2001). He is an advisory board member of the US journal,* Men and Masculinities *and a consulting editor for the* Routledge Encyclopaedia on Men and Masculinity. *Among his current research interests are: postcolonial masculinities in school, gender, sexuality and HIV prevention in schools, and parenting and fatherhood.*

Linda Richter is the Executive Director of Child, Youth and Family Development at the Human Sciences Research Council. She holds a Chair in Psychology and is an elected Fellow of the University of KwaZulu-Natal. She is an Honorary Professor in the Department of Paediatrics and Child Health at the University of the Witwatersrand, a Consultant in the Centre for the AIDS Programme of Research in South Africa (CAPRISA), and an Honorary Fellow in the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Melbourne. She also serves on several national and international committees. Professor Richter is the Principal Investigator of Birth to Twenty, a longitudinal study of the maturation and development of more than 2 000 young people, born in Soweto, Johannesburg, in 1990, who are being followed up prospectively for 20 years. She is a co-author of a book on the study, entitled Mandela's Children: Growing up in Post-Apartheid South Africa *(2001). Linda is also the lead editor of a recent book,* The Sexual Abuse of Young Children in Southern Africa *(HSRC Press, 2004), as well as the author of a review entitled 'The Importance of Caregiver-Child Interactions for the Survival and Healthy Development of Young Children' (WHO Geneva, 2003).*