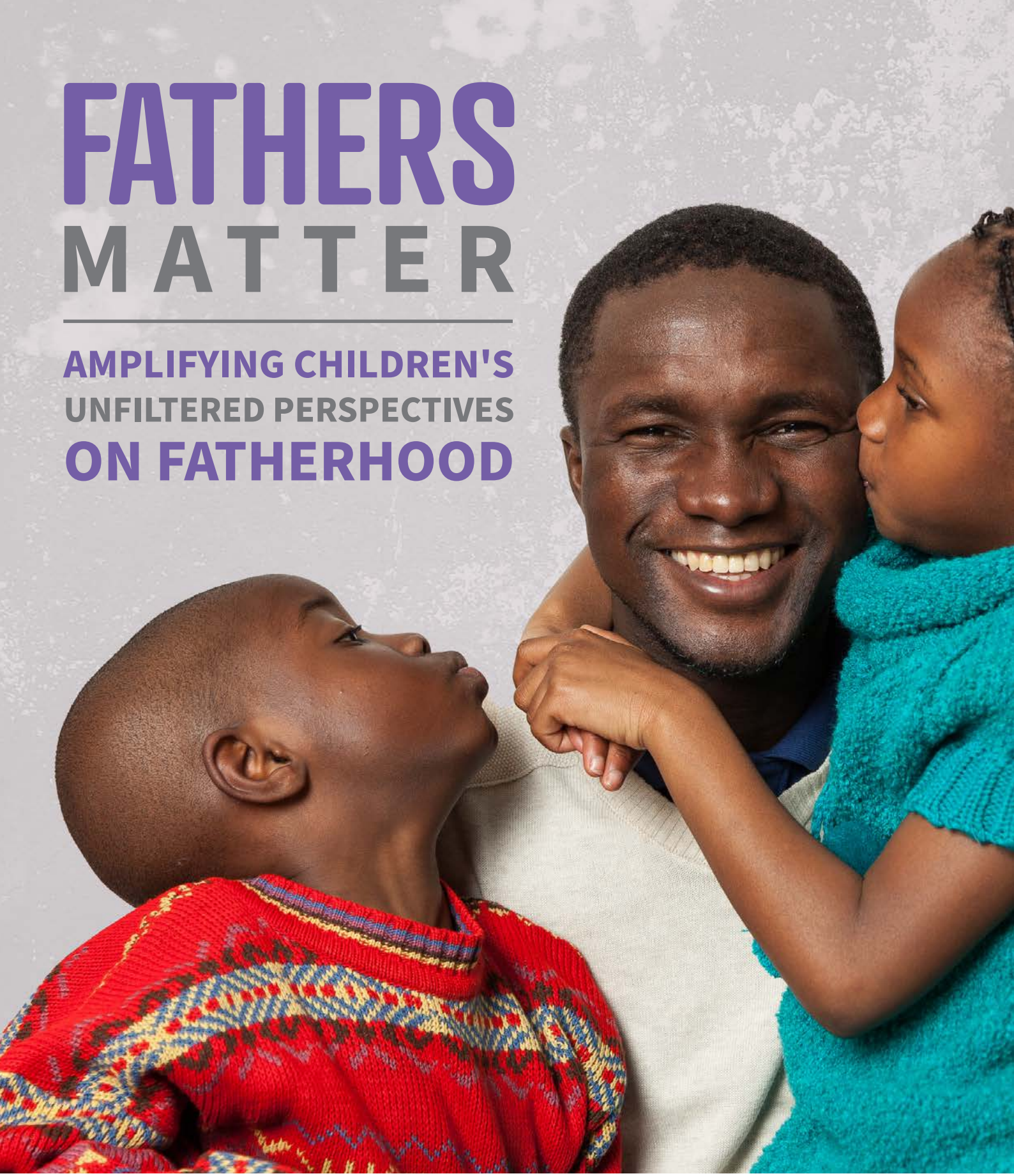
FATHERS MATTER

AMPLIFYING CHILDREN'S UNFILTERED PERSPECTIVES ON FATHERHOOD



Formative research conducted in South Africa by HEARTLINES

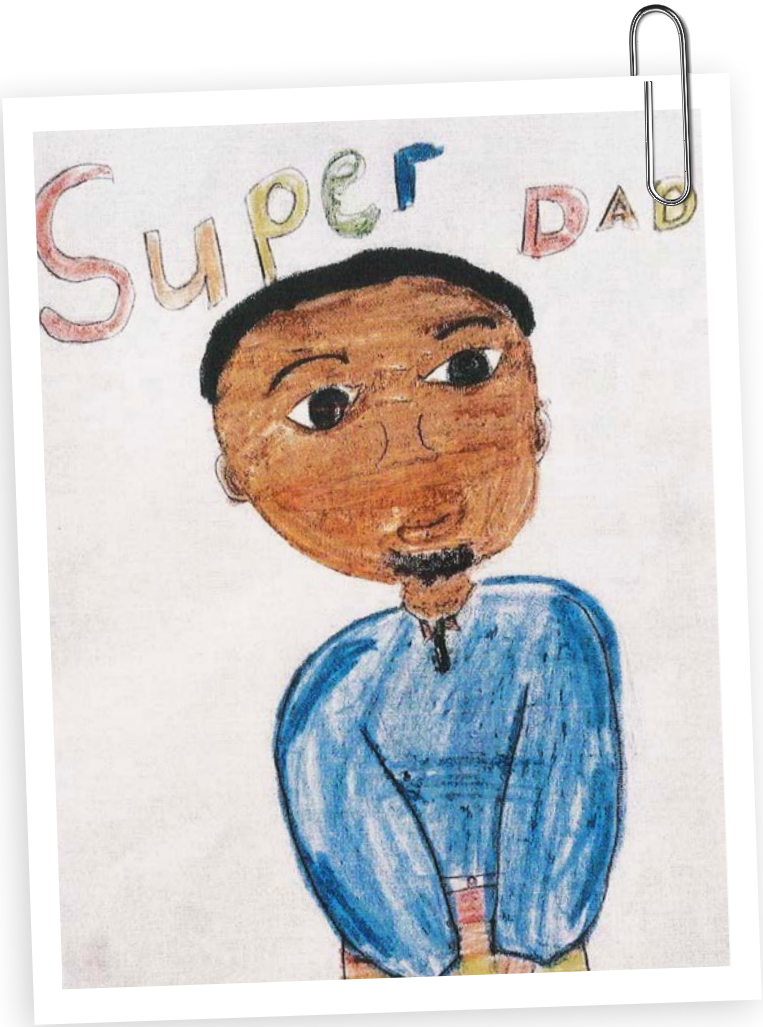
Heartlines is a non-governmental, values-promoting organisation based in South Africa. It is a social change organisation that specialises in “edutainment”-based mass media and aims to impact society at the individual, community and socio-political levels.

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.

Fathers Matter is a Heartlines programme that promotes the positive, active presence of fathers and men in the lives of children.

FATHERS MATTER

Amplifying children's unfiltered perspectives on fatherhood



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www.fathersmatter.org.za

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Foreword

Prof. Malose Langa
University of the Witwatersrand

"Daddy, I want you to hear me out."

These were the words of my daughter during a heartfelt conversation. I wanted to say something to her, but she gently interrupted, asking me to listen. She was asserting her voice, her right to be heard as a child. This report echoes that sentiment: children, too, have a voice. They long to be heard, especially on matters as profound as fatherhood, a subject that shapes their identities and experiences in life.

As a writer, researcher, activist, and psychologist at the University of the Witwatersrand, I have devoted significant time to studying and writing about fatherhood. I have supervised numerous postgraduate students on this topic, yet this report from Heartlines stands out for its unique focus on children's voices. It represents a pivotal shift in fatherhood research, moving beyond adult perspectives to include what children themselves have to say about their fathers, their father figures, and their experiences of presence or absence.

The context of fatherhood is changing globally, as has been highlighted in the *State of the World's Fathers* report. These changes reflect evolving social, familial, cultural, and economic dynamics that directly or indirectly impact fatherhood. In South Africa, the *State of South Africa's Fathers* report reveals similar complexities, including the varying roles of fathers – biological, social, and otherwise – and the structural barriers that contribute to father absence. Research by scholars such as Robert Morrell, Deevia Bhana, and Linda Richter further underscores the profound psychological, emotional, and cultural benefits of positive fatherhood in children's lives. Yet, as this report reminds us, fatherhood extends far beyond biological ties. Teachers, uncles, grandfathers, brothers, and other male figures often play significant and nurturing roles.

This report captures voices from diverse communities, ranging from urban to semi-rural contexts, emphasizing that the challenges and dynamics of fatherhood are not confined to a single racial or socio-economic group. It challenges harmful stereotypes, particularly those that portray Black fathers as predominantly absent, and broadens our understanding of the multifaceted nature of fatherhood. At the same time, it recognises that fatherhood is not a panacea to all social ills; some fathers, through abusive or neglectful behaviours, can cause more harm than good.

One of the most poignant aspects of this report is its acknowledgment of children's honesty. When given safe and supportive spaces, children often provide truthful and insightful accounts that go beyond socially desirable responses. This authenticity is what makes this report special and groundbreaking. It sheds light on the complex spectrum of fatherhood: fathers who are present, those who choose to be absent, and those who are forced into absence by circumstances beyond their control. The report also moves beyond traditional gendered narratives, addressing the experiences of both boys and girls and their interactions with father figures. This inclusivity is vital, as girls' experiences with fatherhood have often been marginalised in past research where fatherhood studies have generally focused on the experiences of boy children.

Ultimately, children's voices can guide us to a deeper understanding of fatherhood. What does it mean to be a "good" father? Is it about financial provision, emotional presence, love and care, or a combination of these factors? This report allows children to provide answers that challenge and enrich our perceptions of fatherhood. It also underscores the impact of fatherhood – or its absence – on children's identities and development, potentially shaping their roles as parents themselves.

In my other work, I have explored how fatherhood is not always normative. Non-gender-conforming issues must also be addressed in research, as they remain underexplored. This report's inclusion of diverse narratives lays the groundwork for a more comprehensive understanding of fatherhood in all its forms.

Listening to children's voices is not only important, but a practical value as well. Their insights can inform policies and interventions that strengthen families and communities. This report by Livhuwani Maphorogo and her colleagues is a rich contribution to this important field, and I am confident that readers will find it as enlightening and thought-provoking as I did. Let us listen carefully, not just to the findings, but to the children who remind us, like my daughter did, "Daddy, I want you to hear me out."

Prof. Malose Langa

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.

01

CHAPTER 01

INTRODUCTION

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 foundational research informed the programme's development, initially targeting an audience aged 18+. As a result, six films and additional resources on fatherhood were produced.

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. Though Heartlines recognises the need for programming that addresses both younger and older age groups, the decision to 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.

Objectives of This Research

The overarching objectives of the formative 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 (TV, film, radio, written resources, etc.). 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 for their healthy development.

OVERVIEW OF THE 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.

02

CHAPTER 02

METHODOLOGY

Methodology

Research Design

KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS WITH ORGANISATIONS AND EXPERTS

First, 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. A total of 10 interviews were conducted in March 2023. These interviews aimed to provide an extensive understanding of the challenges faced by children raised without fathers. By including these key informants, the research was able to incorporate organisational and expert perspectives on the impact of father absence on children. 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.

This literature review reveals several critical findings related to the impact of father absence and the influence of father figures on children's development.

The key findings show:

- **Emotional and psychological impacts of absent fathers:** The absence of a positive and present father figure leads to significant emotional and psychological effects for children, manifesting as insecurity, uncertainty, and negative developmental outcomes such as poor academic performance. These effects are further exacerbated by societal expectations and the idealisation of the nuclear family structure. (Corneau, 2018; Morrell et al., 2009; Richter & Morrell, 2006; Timaeus & Boler, 2007)
- **Father absence and its impact on boys' development:** The absence or negative influence of fathers particularly hinders the healthy development of boys, affecting their sense of masculinity, social acceptance, and future roles as fathers. This impact is shaped by a combination of sociocultural, economic, and individual factors, highlighting the need for comprehensive interventions and the presence of positive male role models. (Govender & Bhana, 2022; Spjeldnaes & Moland, 2011)
- **Father absence and its impact on girls' development:** For young women and girls, the absence or negative presence of fathers profoundly influences identity formation, emotional well-being, and their experiences of safety. This often leads to increased vulnerability to emotional struggles, sexual violence, and turbulent identity development, underscoring the significant role fathers play in shaping their daughters' lives. (Bhana, 2012; Zirima & Gadzikwa, 2017)
- **Positive fathering and healthy masculinities:** Research detailing the connection between healthy masculinities and positive fathering is sparse. The research conducted indicates that positive fathering – defined by involvement beyond mere financial provision and exposure to healthy masculinities – is crucial in shaping boys' expectations of masculinity and fatherhood. In situations where positive father figures are absent, other male figures often step in as essential role models, helping to fill the void and guide boys towards healthier expressions of masculinity. (Langa, 2020; Morrell, 2006; Richter & Morrell, 2006)
- **Father presence and psychosocial benefits for girls:** Research shows that father presence has significant psychosocial benefits for preteen and teenage girls, particularly in areas such as self-esteem, academic success, and social

development. Girls with involved fathers tend to have higher self-esteem, a healthier body image, and better emotional regulation. They are also more likely to excel academically and have higher career aspirations, often viewing their fathers as role models. Furthermore, a strong father-daughter relationship contributes to the formation of healthy romantic relationships in the future, helping girls develop resilience and avoid risky behaviours. (Eddy & Holborn, 2011; Morrell & Richter, 2006)

- **Negative fathering and toxic masculinity:** Negative fathering experiences, whether through absence or destructive presence, are closely linked to the development of toxic masculinity. These experiences significantly impact boys' understanding of masculinity and their own future fathering practices, often leading to increased violence, risky behaviours, and emotional difficulties. (Bhana & Nkani, 2014; Morrell, 2006)
- **Cultural norms and gender roles' impact on fatherhood:** Cultural norms and gender roles, deeply entrenched across generations, heavily influence perceptions of fatherhood and impact men's experiences as fathers. Egalitarian masculinity, which challenges traditional toxic masculinity and encourages emotional openness, is shown to promote positive fathering. In contrast, rigid gender roles and performative masculinity place pressure on men to conform to the provider expectation, adversely affecting their fathering practices and overall experiences. (Barker & Lowenstein, 1997; Peacock & Botha, 2006; Spjeldnaes & Moland, 2011)
- **Father absence and violence:** The absence of father figures is also linked to increased violence among children, who may become both victims and perpetrators. This is influenced by factors such as poverty, instability, emotional distress, and exposure to violence. However, the risk can be mitigated by supportive mothers and other positive influences, including peers and teachers. (Bhana, 2012, 2013; Botèro, 2012; De Lange, Mitchell, & Bhana, 2012; Gelles, 1989; Mayeza & Bhana, 2017; Mayeza, Bhana, & Mulqeeny, 2021; Thiara & Humphreys, 2017)
- **Healing from negative fathering:** Healing from negative fathering experiences involves the development of a positive identity through deliberate reflection on one's own fathering style, individuation from the negative father, and forming relationships with positive father figures. This healing process, which includes rejecting harmful patterns and adopting healthier behaviours, helps both men and women build robust identities independent of their absent or negative fathers. It also promotes non-violent expressions of masculinity and femininity, emphasising the importance of supportive relationships and community interventions. (Corneau, 2018; Langa, 2010; Miller, 2013)

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 utilised focus groups and key informant interviews as the primary data collection methods. These approaches 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 with young people (10–16 years): Gauteng, Limpopo, and the Western Cape. This decision was based on the established and trusted relationships that Heartlines has with key organisations within these regions. These partnerships facilitated a smoother and more efficient process for recruiting research participants, as the organisations' established networks and rapport with the local communities provided a reliable and effective means of outreach and engagement. The focus groups were conducted in urban, peri-urban and rural areas in order to consider possible similarities and differences across these.

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. Consequently, the findings of this research cannot be considered fully reflective of the South African population.

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. This is represented in the table below:

FOCUS GROUP	NO. OF GROUPS	RACIAL GROUP	AREA	URBAN/RURAL
GAUTENG				
Pre-Teen Girls (10–12)	1	Black	Soweto	Urban
Pre-Teen Boys (10–12)	1	Black	Soweto	Urban
Pre-Teen Mixed (10–12)	1	Black	Soweto	Urban
Teen Girls (13–16)	1	Black	Soweto	Urban
Teen Girls (13–16)	1	Black	Soweto	Urban
Teen Mixed (13–16)	1	Black	Soweto	Urban
Pre-Teen Girls (10–12)	1	White	Birdhaven	Urban
Pre-Teen Boys (10–12)	1	White	Birdhaven	Urban
Pre-Teen Girls (10–12)	1	Black	Orange Farm	Peri-urban
Pre-Teen Boys (10–12)	1	Black	Orange Farm	Peri-urban
Pre-Teen Mixed (10–12)	1	Black	Orange Farm	Peri-urban
Teen Girls (13–16)	1	Black	Orange Farm	Peri-urban
Teen Boys (13–16)	1	Black	Orange Farm	Peri-urban
Teen Mixed (13–16)	1	Black	Orange Farm	Peri-urban
WESTERN CAPE				
Pre-Teen Girls (10–12)	1	Coloured	Mitchells Plain	Urban
Pre-Teen Boys (10–12)	1	Coloured	Mitchells Plain	Urban
Pre-Teen Girls (10–12)	1	Coloured	Mitchells Plain	Urban
Teen Girls (13–16)	1	Coloured	Mitchells Plain	Urban
Teen Boys (13–16)	1	Coloured	Mitchells Plain	Urban
Teen Girls (13–16)	1	Coloured	Mitchells Plain	Urban

LIMPOPO				
Pre-Teen Girls (10–12)	1	Black	Mashamba	Rural
Pre-Teen Boys (10–12)	1	Black	Mashamba	Rural
Pre-Teen Mixed (10–12)	1	Black	Mashamba	Rural
Teen Girls (13–16)	1	Black	Mashamba	Rural
Teen Boys (13–16)	1	Black	Mashamba	Rural
Teen Mixed (13–16)	1	Black	Mashamba	Rural
TOTAL	**26**			

KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS	NO. OF PEOPLE	RACIAL GROUP	URBAN/RURAL
FREE STATE			
Primary School Female Teacher	1	Black	Urban
High School Female Teacher	1	Black	Rural
Educational Psychologist	1	Black	Urban
GAUTENG			
Primary School Male Teacher	2	White	Urban
Primary School Female Teacher	2	White	Urban
Child Psychologist	1	White	Urban
Clinical Psychologist	1	Black	Urban
Youth Organisation Facilitator	1	Black	Urban
WESTERN CAPE			
Counsellor	1	Coloured	Urban
KWAZULU-NATAL			
Youth Organisation Facilitator	1	Black	Rural
Social Worker	1	Black	Rural
TOTAL	**13**		

In total, 26 focus groups were conducted in Limpopo, Gauteng, and the Western Cape. 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 researchers facilitated discussions in environments where participants felt comfortable and encouraged open and honest communication. The focus group discussions were conducted between January and April 2024.

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. By concentrating on generalised attributes and behaviours associated with positive and negative fatherhood, the framework aimed to gather insightful data while ensuring the comfort and emotional well-being of the participants. This method allowed for less intrusive means of understanding children's viewpoints on fatherhood and was supported by child and adolescent psychiatrist Dr Brendan Belsham.

The study utilised focus groups and key informant interviews as the primary data collection methods.

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.

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. This process involved coding the data, identifying themes, and interpreting the findings in the context of the research questions.

This methodology provided a robust framework for exploring the perceptions of children across different regions and demographic groups in South Africa. Despite limitations in the sample's representativeness, the qualitative approach enabled the collection of rich, detailed data that contributed valuable insights to the understanding of this complex issue.

Following the research, Heartlines conducted follow-up psychosocial awareness workshops in Soweto and Orange Farm, facilitated by trained counsellors and psychologists. These sessions, aligned with our child safeguarding policy, provided psychological support to focus group participants and fellow students, offering a safe space to explore and manage emotions. Additional workshops are planned for Mitchells Plain and Mashamba aimed at both focus group participants and other local youth. These sessions emphasise emotional regulation and coping strategies, equipping children with essential tools to enhance mental resilience and community well-being.

Participant Demographics and Characteristics

In terms of the demographics of the research participants, as illustrated in the accompanying graphs, 59% were girls and 41% were boys. For racial demographics, 71% of participants were Black, 19% Coloured, and 10% White. The age distribution included 129 participants classified as tweens (10–12 years old) and 104 participants classified as teens (13–16 years old).

Regarding group dynamics during the focus group discussions, we had 6 mixed-gender groups, 8 groups consisting only of boys, and 12 groups consisting only of girls. Combining mixed-gender and gender-specific focus groups allowed for a comprehensive exploration of attitudes and perceptions. Mixed groups provided a broad view of interactions, simulating real world dynamics between boys and girls, making the findings more applicable to mixed-gender settings and interventions. The gender-specific groups delved deeper into unique perspectives and concerns because participants may have felt more comfortable and open in gender-specific groups.

Figure 1: Gender of research participants

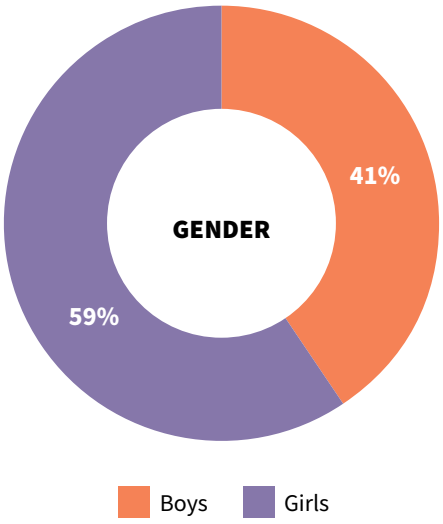


Figure 2: Demographics of research participants

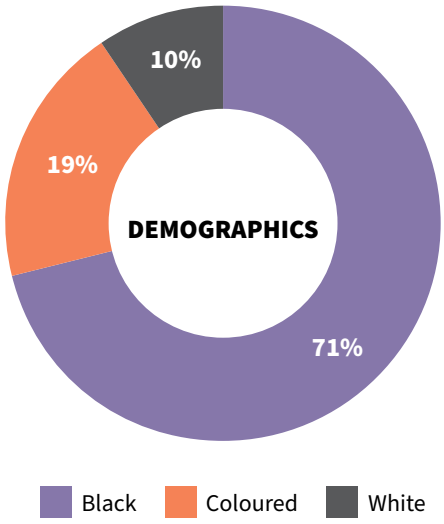


Figure 3: Age groups of research participants

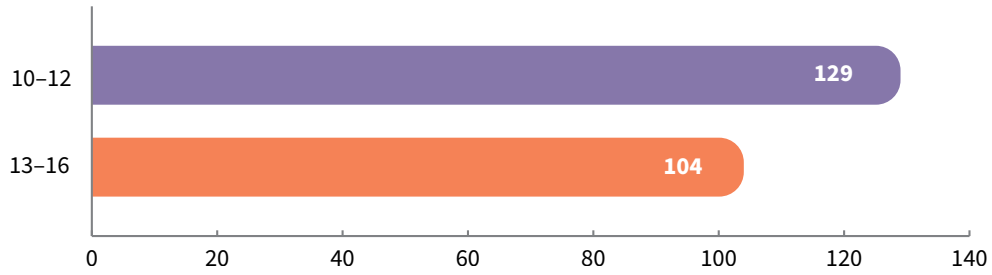


Figure 4: Groups dynamics

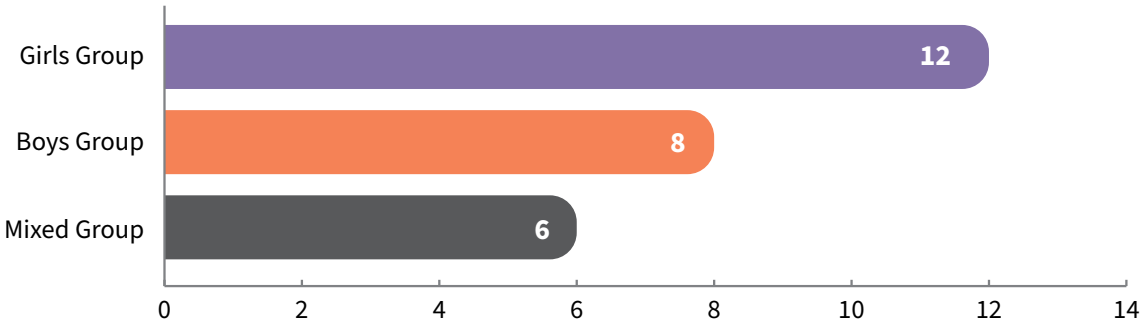


Figure 5: Areas covered

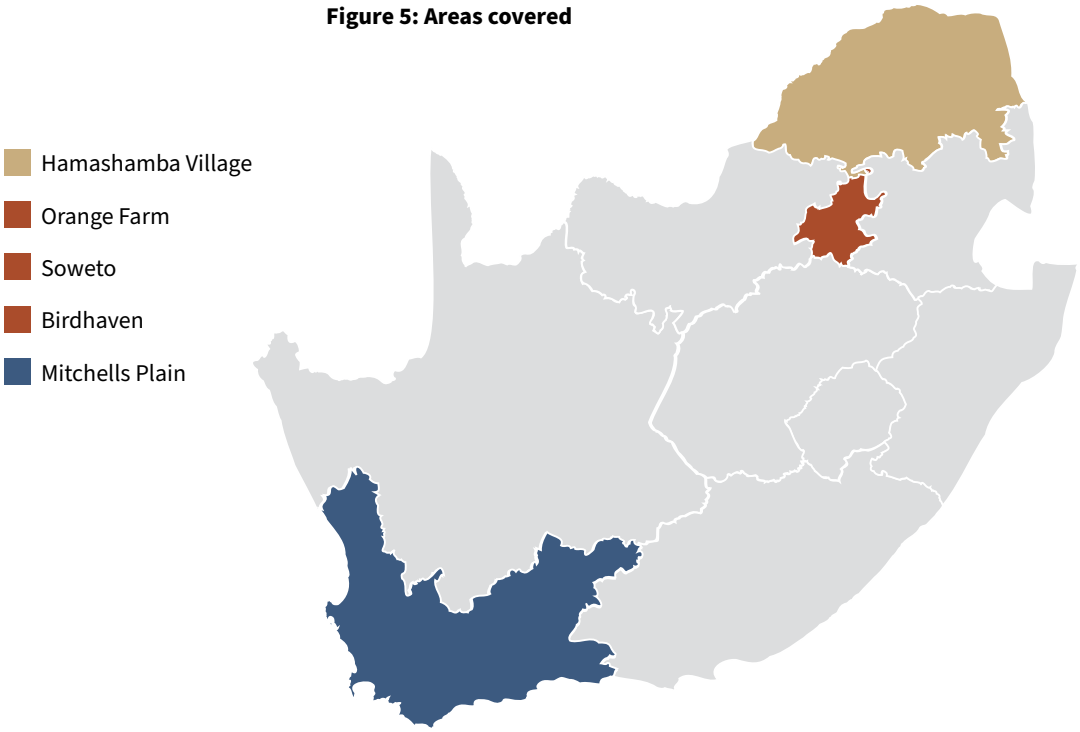


Figure 6: Rural vs Urban vs Suburban

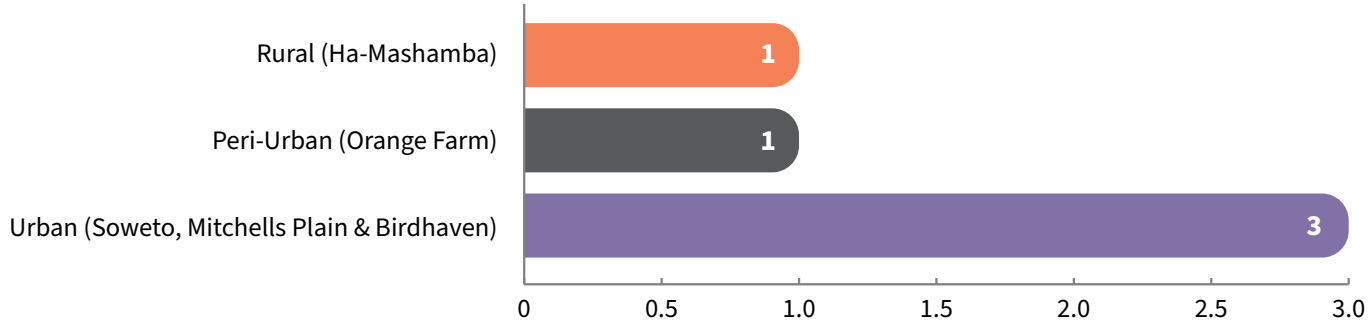
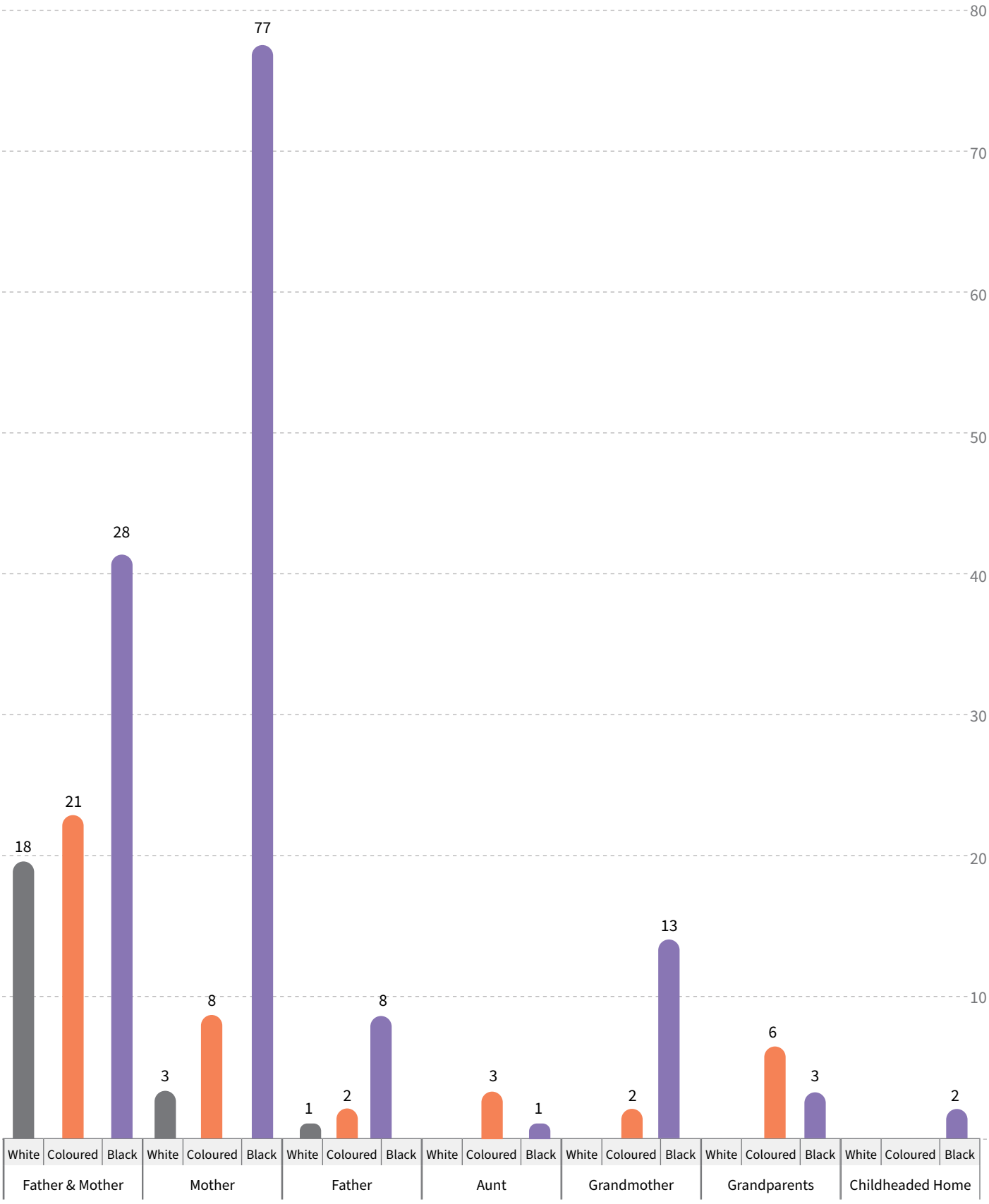
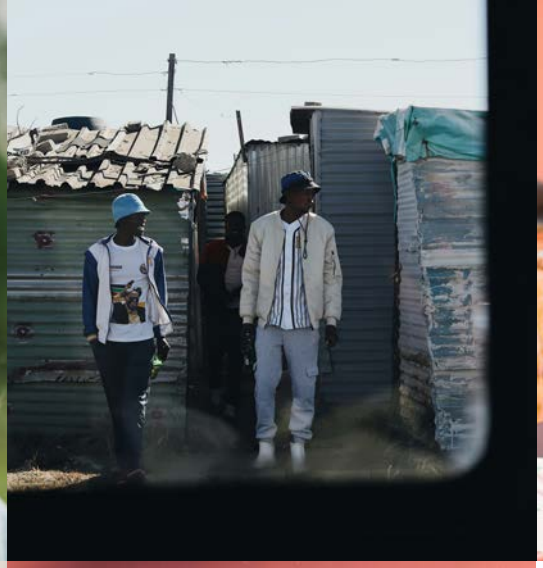
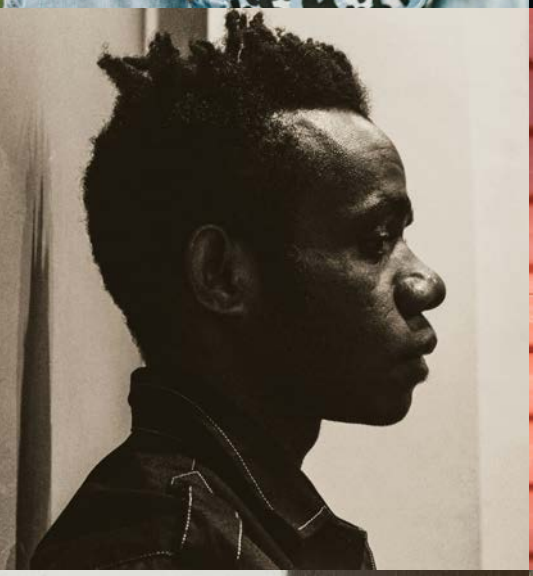


Figure 7: Who do you live with at home?



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.



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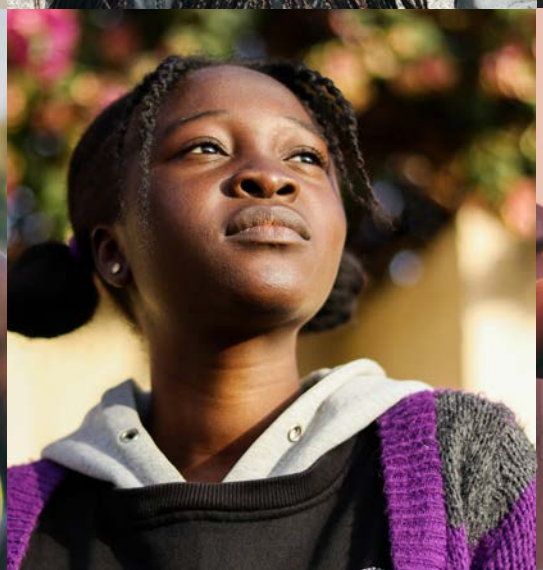

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03

CHAPTER 03

FORMATIVE RESEARCH FINDINGS

Formative Research Findings

QUOTATION KEY:

PROVINCES:	GENDER:	LOCATIONS:
GP – Gauteng Province	**M** – Male	**O** – Orange Farm
LP – Limpopo	**F** – Female	**S** – Soweto
WC – Western Cape		**B** – Birdhaven

Section A: 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 delve into 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.

A good father, in the eyes of children, is one who actively cares for them by fulfilling these basic needs:

> M: **You are able to see that someone is a good father if he takes care of his children and when he is in Gauteng, he calls home and checks if there is food.** (LP, Boys, 13–16)

> 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: **He always makes sure that there is electric in the house, food and he always make sure that we have a good time and that we eat.** (WC, Boys, 10–12)

> M: **When we talk of ukunakekela [care for] we mean that a father is a breadwinner; he makes sure that they have everything they need, food and other needs.** (GP (O), Boys, 10–12)

When children articulate a desire for a father who "cares" and "takes responsibility", they often mean a father who ensures their basic needs are fulfilled. Chief among these needs is ensuring that the family has enough to eat and that children don't go to bed hungry:

> M: **He buys me mealie meal and tshisevho [meat] to eat so I can be full.** (LP, Boys, 13–16)

> F: **They make sure that children are not hungry.** (GP (S), Mixed, 10–12)

> F: **He must make sure that his children don't go to bed hungry.** (LP, Mixed, 13–16)

> F: **You sleep with a full stomach, you do not sleep with an empty stomach full of water because you don't have a father.** (GP (O), Mixed, 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. Children expressed that fathers have to work to support their families:

> M: **He goes to work so that he can buy food for his children.** (GP (S), Mixed, 13–16)

> F: **A father is someone who has to work for his kids and his wife so that they can eat good and healthy food.** (LP, Girls, 13–16)

> M: **Makes sure he goes and works, buys food in the house and make sure there's water and make sure there's lights.** (WC, Boys, 10–12)

> F: **Sometimes a mother can't provide for her children but if a father goes out to work, he is able to buy food for his family.** (GP (O), Girls, 10–12)

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)

> F: **Some fathers try to get money so that they can buy you some food and you can eat before you sleep.** (GP (S), Girls, 10–12)

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

> M: **He abandons his family duties. He doesn't look after the family and doesn't see to the children's needs and wife's needs.** (WC, Boys, 13–16)

> F: **A bad father is someone who is not responsible, he is careless. He procrastinates all the time and pretty much useless in the family because he doesn't do anything for his family, he is not the breadwinner.** (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:

> F: **A mother can play both roles of a mother and a father and can provide for her children.** (GP (O), Girls, 10–12)

> 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)

> F: **I don't think fathers are important because sometimes mothers are like fathers, you ask everything from your mother. Although you don't have a father you can't tell because your mother has closed the gap of a father.** (GP, Mixed, 13–16)

In essence, these research findings reveal that children value a father's economic contribution as a core aspect of his role within the family. The expectation that a father should be a provider is deeply ingrained, highlighting the significant impact of a father's financial stability, as it directly influences their children's perceptions of care and responsibility.

There is a dichotomy between children's ideal perception of fathers as providers and the reality of some fathers' financial behaviours. Although children have expressed that, ideally, fathers should be the primary providers of basic needs for their families, the reality for some is that fathers spend money, which children feel should be allocated to household necessities, on buying alcohol:

> M: **They prefer to buy alcohol even though there is no food at home.** (LP, Boys, 13–16)

> F: **He doesn't care if his children are hungry but buys alcohol.** (GP (S), Mixed, 10–12)

> M: **When he gets paid, he prefers to buy alcohol with that money and won't think about buying groceries for his family.** (GP (O), Boys, 13–16)

> F: **He doesn't provide his family's needs because he spends all his money on alcohol**

and is always borrowing money from loan sharks. (LP, Girls, 10–12)

> F: **Someone who leaves his burdens onto your mother. All he does is drink alcohol but doesn't buy anything in the house and for your mother.** (GP (S), Girls, 13–16)

> M: **He cares more about himself than his family and you can see that by how he spends his money on alcohol.** (WC, Boys, 13–16)

Children value a father's economic contribution as a core aspect of his role within the family.

FATHERS AS EMOTIONALLY PRESENT AND LOVING

Despite the focus on fathers as providers outlined above, a common view amongst children was the understanding that fatherhood involves more than money. Findings underscore the nuanced views children have regarding the role of fathers in their lives, and while children recognise the importance of a father's role as a provider, they equally emphasise the significance of having a positively involved father.

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. These 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)

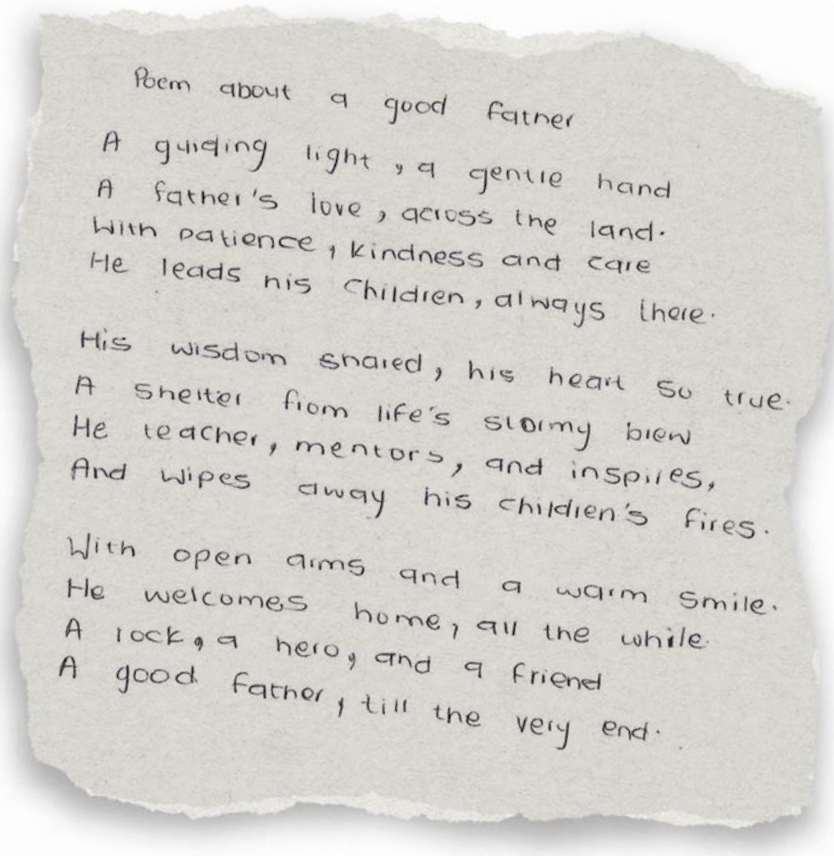
> F: **He must show you a love that is strong and must love you as his child. He also does everything that you want him to do for you.** (LP, Girls, 10–12)

> M: **They guide us and tell us that there are consequences for every bad decision that a person takes. For example, if we are encouraged to focus on our schoolwork and decide to be busy with drugs it will ruin our future and we'll end up unemployed.** (LP, Boys, 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, telling you not to rush into trying things while still too young.** (GP (O), Boys, 10–12)

> M: **He encourages his boy child to be a good man when he grows up and teaches him that a man takes good care of a wife.** (LP, Boys, 13–16)

> M: **He teaches you what is right and what is wrong.** (GP (O), Boys, 13–16)



Poem about a good father

A guiding light, a gentle hand
A father's love, across the land.
With patience, kindness and care
He leads his children, always there.

His wisdom shared, his heart so true.
A shelter from life's stormy blew
He teacher, mentors, and inspires,
And wipes away his childien's fires.

With open aims and a warm smile.
He welcomes home, all the while.
A lock, a hero, and a friend
A good father, till the very end.

> F: **He counsels you and brings you back on the right path when you lose sight of the path. Like if you come back home late, he will speak to you and tell you that this is not the right time to come back home. There are dangerous things out there.** (GP (S), Girls, 13–16)

> F: **I feel like for a dad to be a good father, he should be like your number one cheerleader. He should be there if you did a race and you came last, he should still be there cheering you on. And he shouldn't say 'Get in the car, we're gonna talk at home, why did you come last? Why did you do this?! You could have run faster'. He should be telling you 'Well done, you did good, let's go get ice cream or something.'** (WC, Girls, 13–16)

"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:

> 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)

> F: **If he works far away from home, he should come home during the holidays so he can see and spend time with his children.** (LP, Mixed, 13–16)

Conversely, a bad father is characterised by a lack of love and care:

> F: **Someone who doesn't love his children and is abusive towards his wife.** (GP (O), Girls, 10–12)

> F: **He doesn't care what his children eat or where they sleep, whether or not they go to school and if they are performing well.** (LP, Girls, 13–16)

> F: **A bad father doesn't care for his family.** (GP (S), Girls, 10–12)

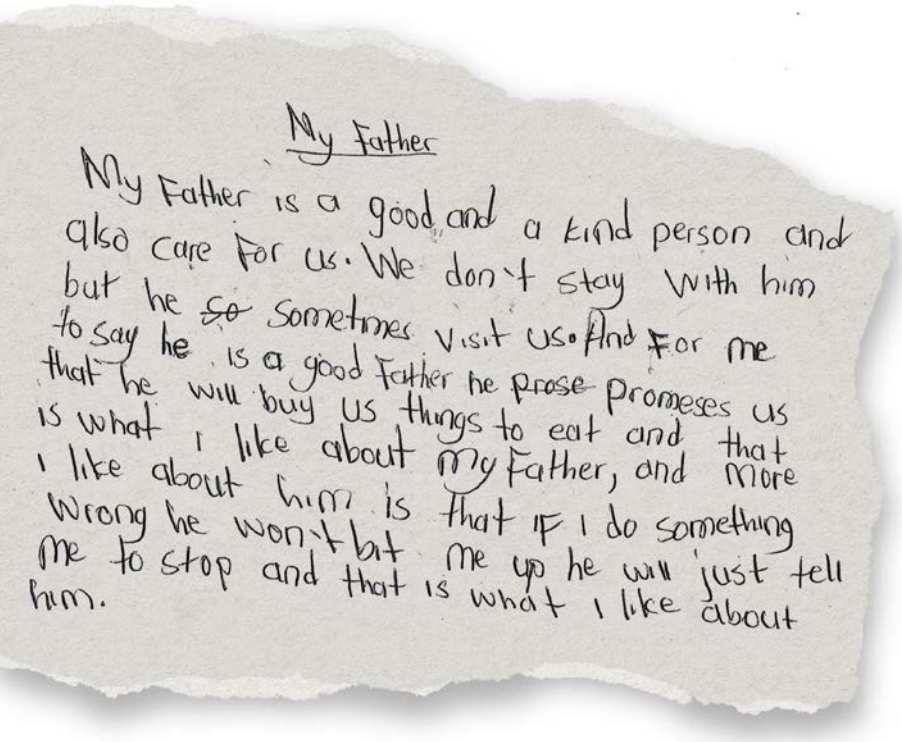
> M: **They concentrate too much on the outside world and ignore their families.** (LP, Boys, 13–16)

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:

> F: **My father is my role model because he cares for me and he gives me more love than I expect.** (GP (S), Girls, 10–12)

> M: **My father is the one who shows me love and guidance.** (GP (O), Boys, 13–16)

> M: **My father always looks after us, he makes sure that we have food in the house and makes sure we wash and go to school. He teaches us to have manners and respect for other people.** (WC, Boys, 10–12)



My Father

My Father is a good and a kind person and also care for us. We don't stay with him but he ~~so~~ Sometimes visit us. And for me to say he is a good father he prose promeses us that he will buy us things to eat and that is what I like about my Father, and more I like about him is that if I do something wrong he won't bit me up he will just tell me to stop and that is what I like about him.

> M: **My father is my role model because he supports me in everything I want to do and can do, and he tells me to keep trying when I fail at something.** (LP, Boys, 13–16)

> F: **My father because he takes care of me and takes care of our family and his grandchildren.** (LP, Mixed, 13–16)

> F: **My dad because we are similar and we like similar things, he likes to cook and I like to bake. He usually helps me and every Saturday I bake with him. I just spend a lot of time with him a lot.** (GP (B), Girls, 10–12)

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.

> F: **My dad cooks when he has a chance, and he enjoys playing with us. We have cooking competitions or play games like who can make the prettiest ice block or something.** (GP (B), Girls, 10–12)

> M: **When I hear the word father I think of daddy because he is my father and he loves me.** (WC, Boys, 10–12)

These 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. The findings indicate that even if a father struggles to provide materially at times, his presence, love, and efforts to nurture the relationship truly matter to the children.

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)

> M: **Yes because I still love him and he still loves me and whatever happens to me he will ask why and what happened.** (WC, Boys, 10–12)

> F: **Yes because love comes from the bottom of your heart, if you love your children then your children can love you the same way with or without money.** (GP (S), Girls, 10–12)

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

> F: **It depends because if he thinks he needs to work all the time to get more money and not spend time with you, then I think that's a problem.** (GP (B), Girls, 10–12)

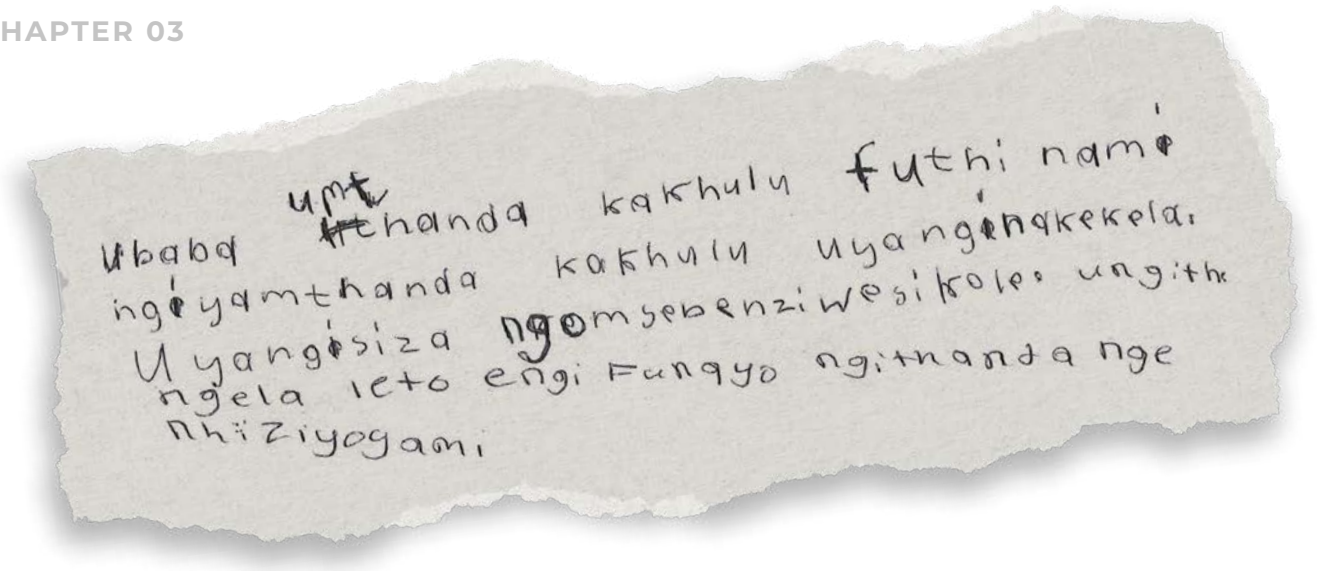
The reality for some is that although their fathers are physically absent due to work commitments these fathers maintain a relationship with their children

topic: What I Love about my father

1) the most thing I love about my father is as follows:

* he is always there for me
* he sing to me, and dance's with me
* he plays Soccer with me.
* he is the Best father figure
* he is the best Person I have ever seen.
* he is always asking about life or the way I feel.
* we Sometimes Share our food in the Same Plate of
* he Supports me
* he talk's to me about boy's and that's. I Should Stay away from them.
* I love my DADDY!!!❤

2) there is no father better than the father I have and I do not need! another father like him coz his the Best



through communication, emotional availability, and financial support:

> M: **My father helps me to buy clothes and he also sends pocket money for me to take to school.** (LP, Boys, 13–16)

> M: **He is trying his best to give us a better life than himself…he sends us money for food…he is always there for us; when he comes home to visit us, he helps us with homework, and he takes us out to buy groceries and he makes sure we are never without food.** (GP (S), Boys, 10–12)

> M: **He makes sure that you are at home safe and he makes sure that there is always petrol in the car. He makes sure that he gets money because my dad is always on the road.** (WC, Boys, 10–12)

Even if a father struggles to provide materially at times, his presence, love, and efforts to nurture the relationship truly matter to the children.

Many children across the groups expressed a desire for fathers who demonstrate love, provide encouragement, and spend quality time with them. Some expressed that their fathers fulfil these needs, however, it was clear that the reality for others is starkly different.

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

> F: **Even those who are not present in our lives, while they are still alive.** (GP (O), Girls, 13–16)

> 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)

> 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…he knows you when he is drunk, showing off to his friends 'this is my child.'** (GP (O), Mixed, 13–16)

> F: *You know, it's painful growing up without a father.* (GP, 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 in your life.** (GP (S), Boys, 10–12)

> F: **If my dad comes home early, instead of really spending time with us, he just goes to sleep because he went to gym, so I never really get to see him.** (GP (B), Girls, 10–12)

> M: **My father hardly asks me about my schoolwork; all he wants to know is who did I fight with today.** (GP (O), Mixed, 13–16)

> F: **Not always supportive, not always there. There was this one time I had a talent show, it was very important to me so I wanted all of my family to come to that talent show. I saw that my father wasn't there and I felt so sad.** (GP (S), Girls, 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:

> F: **Sometimes he doesn't come home and comes back drunk in the morning.** (LP, Girls, 10–12)

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

> M: **He puts friends and alcohol before his children.** (GP (S), Mixed, 13–16)

> F: **Smoking and arriving late at home.** (GP (S), Mixed, 10–12)

> M: **They don't spend the night at home, they sleep at the tavern.** (LP, Boys, 13–16)

> F: **Some fathers have no care for their children because they live for liquor, they spend time and money in the taverns.** (GP (S), Girls, 13–16)

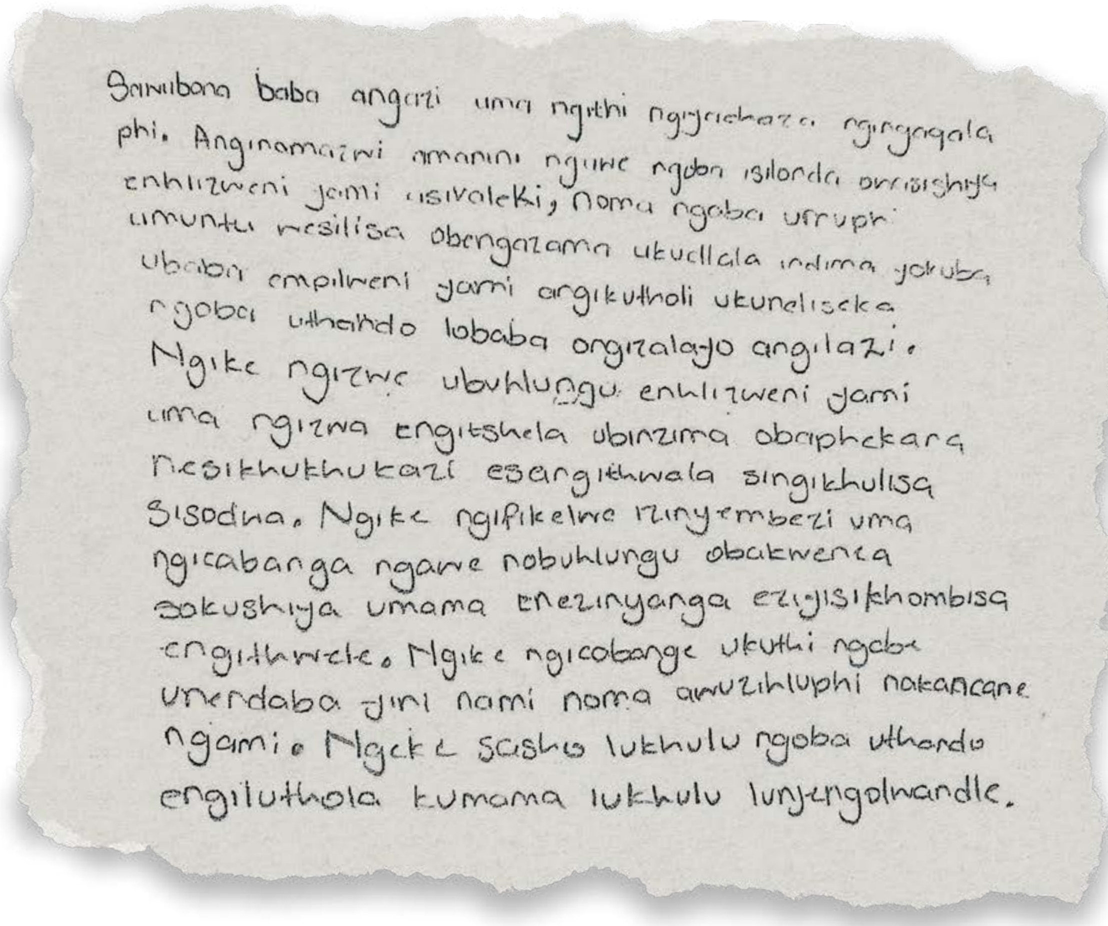

Sawubona baba angazi uma ngithi ngiyachaza ngingaqala phi. Anginamazwi amanini ngiwe ngoba isilonda onisishiya enhliziweni jami usivaleki, noma ngaba umuphi umuntu wesilisa obengazama ukuvalala indima yobaba empilweni yami angikutholi ukunelisekа ngoba uthando lobaba ongizalayo angilazi. Ngike ngizwe ubuhlungu enhliziweni yami uma ngizwa engitshela ubinzima obaphekana nesikhukhukazi esangithwala singikhulisa sisodwa. Ngike ngifikelwe izinyembezi uma ngicabanga ngawe nobuhlungu obakwenza sokushiya umama enezinyanga eziyisikhombisa engithwele. Ngike ngicabange ukuthi ngabe unendaba yini nami noma awuzihluphi nakancane ngami. Ngeke sasho lukhulu ngoba uthando engilutholа kumama lukhulu lunjengolwandle.

Figure 8: Positive vs negative words used to describe fatherhood

The essence of fatherhood lies in a balance of provision and emotional engagement.

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. Comments included:

> M: **I think a father is not as caring as a mother…your mom would never let you go hungry, but your father would do it. Your mother will always show compassion and share her plate with you. Mothers show love but fathers don't care; it's easy for them to be harsh to their children.** (GP (O), Mixed, 13–16)

> F: **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 I 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)

> F: **A bad father is always keeping to himself and is not approachable…you are afraid to get close to him, avoiding stepping on him.** (GP (O), Mixed, 13–16)

> F: **When I hear the word father, I feel uncomfortable because when your mother dies, you don't know what your father will do to you.** (GP (S), Girls, 10–12)

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.

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:

> M: **I think fathers are important because they have more power to protect and also take care of us by protecting us.** (LP, Boys, 13–16)

> F: **A father is important because he can protect his children from danger and make sure that the children always get food.** (GP, Mixed, 10–12)

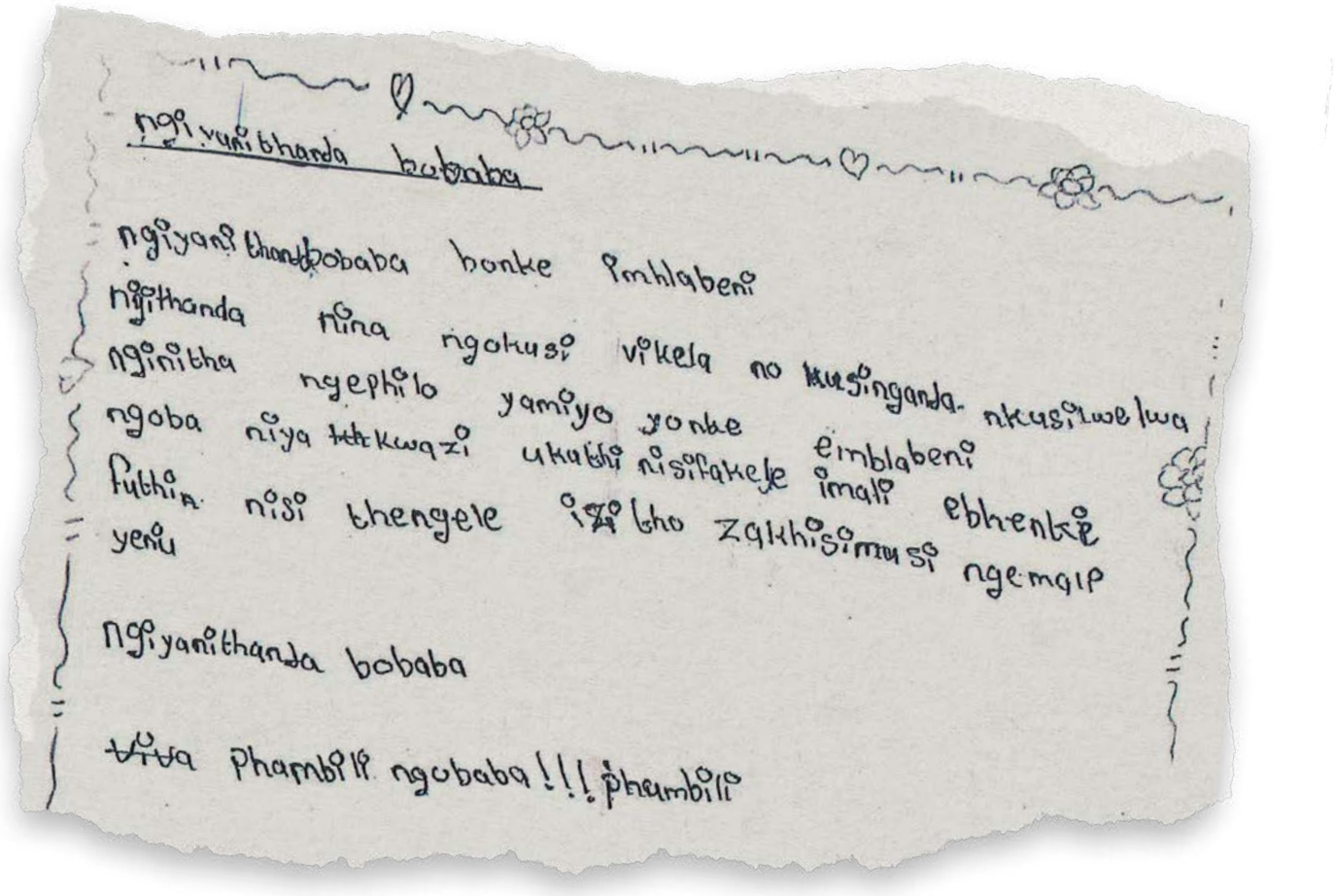
> M: **Fathers are needed in the home to protect his family, say now someone breaks into the house and the father isn't there and it's just the mother and the children, the chance of the whole family dying is high. If the father is there, then he's gonna get up and do something.** (WC, Boys, 13–16)

> F: **Fathers are supposed to be there for their children and their families and they are the ones who should protect them.** (GP (S), Girls, 10–12)

Children often equate being a good father with the ability to provide safety and security. Descriptions such as "a good father protects his family" and "a real man protects his family" reflect the strong association between fatherhood, masculinity, and the duty of protection:

> M: **He is the head of the family. For instance, if someone hits you, he'll be there to protect you and keep you safe. Even when there's a robbery, he's the first one to go out and see what's going on.** (GP (O), Mixed, 13–16)

> F: **A good father provides for the family, not make them feel uncomfortable. He is the one who is supposed to protect the**



family and make them feel comfortable. (GP (S), Girls, 10–12)

> M: **[A father] is a person or a guy who can protect a family.** (LP, Boys, 13–16)

> F: **If you are a real man you will stand up for your family when they are in danger.** (GP (S), Girls, 10–12)

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 I 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)

> F: **You need to feel safe around him and he doesn't get angry at you all the time or putting his anger on you.** (GP (B), Girls, 10–12)

> F: **A father is responsible for taking care of the child and protecting her, but sometimes there are these stories like in life skills where a father is asking for soap while he is having a bath, and he sends that girl to go and fetch the soap.** (GP (S), Girls, 10–12)

> F: **A bad father is always keeping to himself and is not approachable…you are afraid to get close to him, avoiding stepping on him.** (GP (O), Mixed, 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. Some respondents suggested that fathers force and support the habits of drinking and smoking in their children by encouraging this behaviour and/or not reprimanding their children when they drink and smoke:

> F: **Fathers force children to drink alcohol.** (GP (S), Mixed, 10–12)

> M: **A bad father lets you do all the wrong things, he can even lead you into substance abuse; he makes you smoke, drink, and do drugs because he does the same, and he does not see anything wrong in it.** (GP (O), Boys, 10–12)

> F: **A person who doesn't love his children. When they [children] go to the tavern, he just keeps quiet, he doesn't discipline them and doesn't want them to go to school.** (LP, Girls, 13–16)

> M: **A bad father introduces bad habits to children, like crime and drugs.** (GP (S), Boys, 10–12)

CHILDREN'S PERCEPTIONS OF FATHERS THROUGH THE LENS OF ABUSE

The ideal image of a father for children is that of a protector, someone who ensures the safety and well-being of his family. Fathers are expected to provide a sense of security, making 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.

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.

Fathers as abusers of substances

Our research findings further illustrate children's perceptions of good and bad fatherhood by emphasising the impact of substance abuse. 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. For many respondents, a bad father is defined as someone who drinks smokes and abuses drugs:

> F: **What I can say, my uncles used to like drinking a lot on weekends, from Friday to Sunday and on Monday they drink.** (GP (O), Girls, 13–16)

> F: **Getting drunk and using alcohol as a way to drown all his thoughts out, and doesn't take a break from it.** (GP (B), Girls, 10–12)

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 contrast, a good father is viewed as abstaining 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:

> F: **A good father doesn't smoke weed/dagga and stays away from drugs.** (LP, Girls, 10–12)

> M: **A good man must not involve himself in drugs and alcohol because it is not simple to quit and he will do the wrong things while under the influence.** (LP, Boys, 13–16)

> M: **He doesn't drink alcohol, because if he drinks, he'll beat his family.** (LP, Boys, 10–12)

> F: **Someone is a good father If they do not smoke and drink in front of their children.** (WC, Girls, 10–12)

> F: **You won't find him in a tavern drinking alcohol late at night.** (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:

> *You'll find that 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)

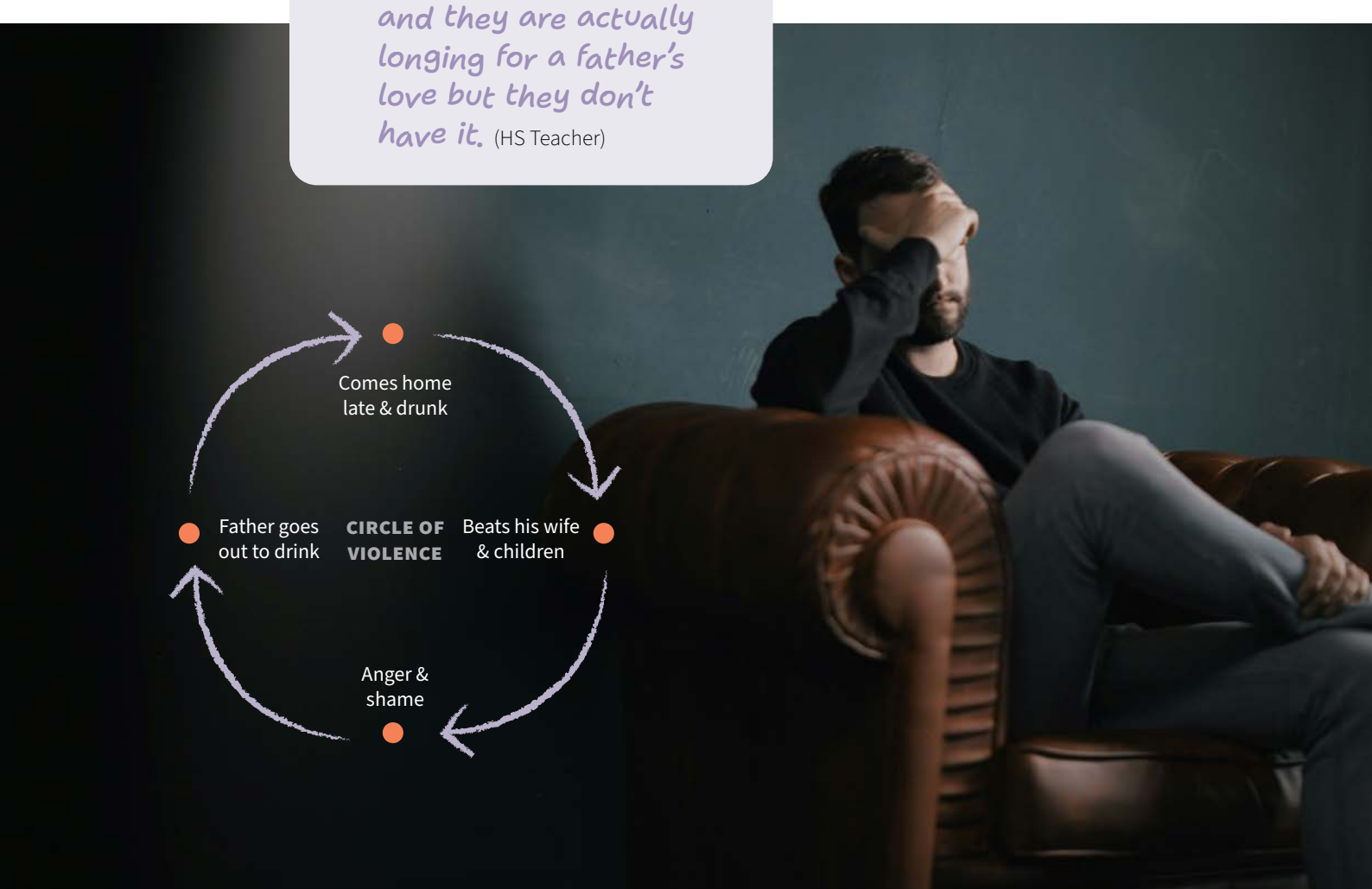
Fathers as physical abusers

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:

> F: **He will mistreat your mother; he will abuse her and say things to his children that will degrade them and will take them a while to recover from what he said. He will lay his hands on you in a certain way that you will feel trauma. You physically feel like you're scared of that person and you can't come near them and the minute you hear their voice you feel some type of way and fear towards that person.** (WC, Girls, 13–16)

> M: **He doesn't support his children and is always beating them up. When he come**



home drunk, it's his way or the highway. (GP (O), Boys, 13–16)

F: **He abuses his family, when he comes home drunk, he beats his kids and wife.** (LP, Girls, 10–12)

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:

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

F: **They break everything in the house and then beat up their wife and sometimes kill her.** (LP, Mixed, 13–16)

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)

F: **I feel like when they're angry they do stuff out of the anger they're feeling so they wouldn't think straight and they would like hit you and then they would feel guilty because 'I didn't mean to do that, that's not the kind of person that I am.' So, I feel like they definitely don't think straight when they're angry.** (WC, Girls, 13–16)

M: **I think of a father who beats up his wife… many fathers have anger, and they take it out on their wives…they come back from where they drink alcohol…you find that he comes back angry and he kicks his wife, takes anything close to him and throws it on top of her.** (GP (O), Boys, 10–12)

In contrast, 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. The notion of a good father encompasses not only the provision of basic needs and an emotionally stable home but also the maintenance of a safe and respectful home environment. 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.

M: **A good father is someone who doesn't abuse his family.** (LP, Boys, 10–12)

F: **A good father doesn't beat your mother in front of the children.** (GP (S), Girls, 13–16)

M: **A real man doesn't hit his wife.** (WC, Boys, 10–12)

F: **A real man doesn't beat up his wife and children.** (LP, Mixed, 13–16)

Fathers as sexual abusers

For some, reported mostly in Black communities, 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)

M: **He abuses children and does sexual activities with his children.** (GP (O), Boys, 13–16)

M: **A bad father is a father who kidnap children and then at night sleeps with the children and rapes them.** (GP (O), Mixed, 10–12)

F: **I know of a father who sleeps with his own daughter…the wife died of a heart attack after she found out and then after her death this man continued living with his daughter and she now has a child…that's a bad father.** (GP (O), Girls, 13–16)

M: **Someone who makes a habit of raping women.** (LP, Boys, 13–16)

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)

> F: **A good father never rapes other people in the streets, he doesn't steal and he provides for his family.**

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:

> M: **He calls his wife the 'B' word, I'm not gonna say the word.** (WC, Boys, 13–16)

> F: **He is disrespectful. He will mistreat your mother; he will abuse her and say things to his children that will degrade them and will take them a while to recover from what he said.** (WC, Girls, 13–16)

> F: **When he shouts, he's scary.** (GP (B), Girls, 10–12)

Additionally, children note that men often shout at their children or wives when they are angry:

> M: **They shout at us so that they can feel better.** (LP, Boys, 13–16)

> F: **He goes into the room, slams the door and when my mom is on the bed she cries because my dad literally yells at her for whatever he did and he's very scary when he shouts.** (GP (B), Girls, 10–12)

> M: **They get angry and just shout at you for no reason.** (GP (O), Boys, 13–16)

> F: **They will scream and break stuff.** (WC, Girls, 13–16)

The research findings indicate that the perception of fathers as verbally abusive, physically abusive, and substance abusers is a widespread concern among children across various demographics. This perception underscores the prevalence of abusive behaviours that negatively impact children's views of father figures. Notably, the mention of fathers as sexual abusers emerged predominantly among Black children, highlighting a specific and deeply troubling pattern within this subgroup.

CHILDREN AND THEIR PERCEPTIONS 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:

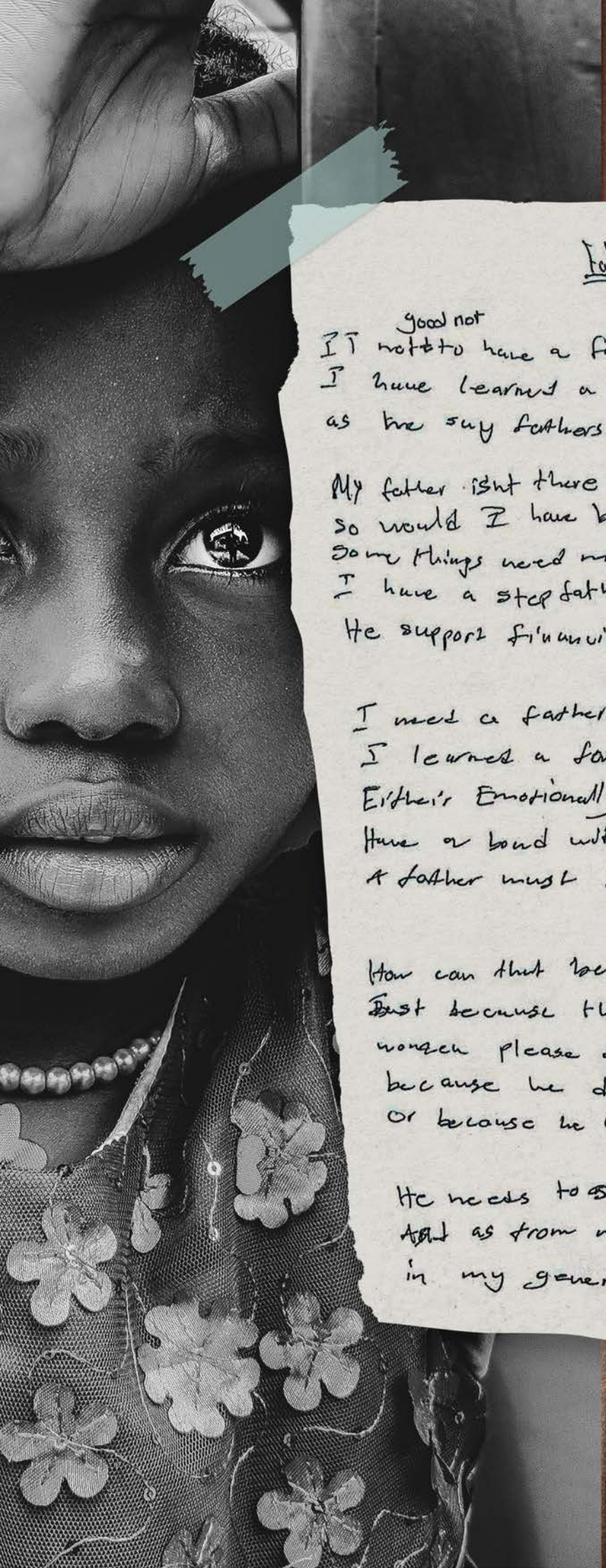
> F: **He's not important because once he's impregnated you, he leaves you and goes to another woman who doesn't have a child.** (GP, Girls, 13–16)

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

> M: **I don't think a father is important because wherever he is, he is aware that he has a child but still makes the decision to leave them to be raised by their grandmother.** (LP, Boys, 13–16)

Furthermore, some children 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. These children assert that a mother can perform all the functions typically associated with a father, thereby rendering the father's role less critical in their eyes. This perspective stems from their reliance on and admiration for their mothers, who have single-handedly provided care, support, and guidance. Consequently, these children perceive a mother as more important than a father, given their lack of experience with their father:

> M: **A father is not important because your mother can do the things that your father can do.** (GP (O), Boys, 13–16)



Father Matter

good not
I I not to have a father
I have learned a lot,
as the say fathers matter

My father isnt there in my life
so would I have been supported by my mother
Some things need men
I have a stepfather, but that not enough
He support financially
n not

I need a father who can guide me
I learned a father needs to be the
Either Emotionally or Financially
Have a bond with your father
A father must support you

How can that be if men run away
Just because they dont have money
women please dont chase men
because he doesnt have money for the child
or because he never paid for the child

He needs to see the child
And as from me I wish boys
in my generation can be better fathers

> F: **I feel like my mom is the most important because she is the one I live with, my father doesn't live here, he lives in Dobsonville. He sometimes comes but not that much. 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)

> F: **I don't think fathers are important because sometimes mothers are like fathers, you ask everything from your mother. Although you don't have a father you can't tell because your mother has closed the gap of a father.** (GP, Mixed, 13–16)

> 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)

> F: **Ma'am if he was present in my life, I would have said something better and he would have played a good role in my life.** (GP (O), Girls, 13–16)

> 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)

> F: **I think fathers are important because in life when he is not present you think that life would be easier if he was around.** (GP, Mixed, 13–16)

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: **It is important to have a father so that he can support you and satisfy your needs and wants if he is working. If you don't have a father, everything relies on your mother, and your mother cannot do it alone.** (GP (O), Boys, 13–16)

> F: **Yes, they are important because if a mother at home doesn't work and the father works, then obviously we'll want money from the father to take care of us.** (LP, Girls, 13–16)

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

> F: **Because like in a family, the mother also needs someone they can lean on.** (WC, Girls, 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. These individuals provide guidance and exemplify alternative ways of being, offering children a vision of stability and positive behaviour.

Father figures

My grandfather

> 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)

> F: **My grandfather, he takes care of his children and grandchildren.** (LP, Mixed, 13–16)

> F: **My grandfather because he was just a really good person.** (GP (B), Girls, 10–12)

My uncle

> 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)

> F: **My uncle, because he provides food for his family and is always there.** (GP (S), Mixed, 13–16)

> M: **My uncle because he acknowledges his mistakes and learns from them.** (GP (S), Mixed, 13–16)

My brother

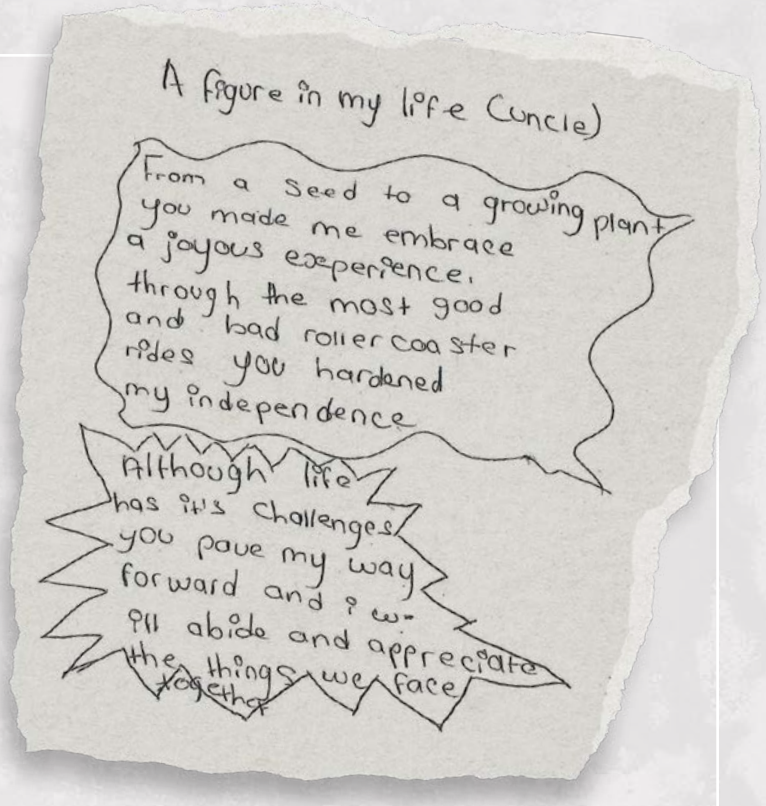
> M: **My brother, he encourages me and when I come back with my school report, he tells me that he knows I can do better.** (GP (O), Boys, 13–16)

> F: **My brother, he cares for me and buys me everything that I want.** (GP (S), Girls 10–12)

My cousin

> M: **I look up to my cousin because there are some Friday nights that we go to youth and when we come out of youth, we go to his bedroom and sit with the Bible and read some verses. He always takes care of me and encourages me.** (WC, 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)



My teacher

> 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. He will make learning more fun. He's a teacher I never want to forget.** (WC, Girls, 13–16)

> M: **Sir, he's really funny but when it's time to work, he encourages us to do our best.** (GP (O), Boys, 13–16)

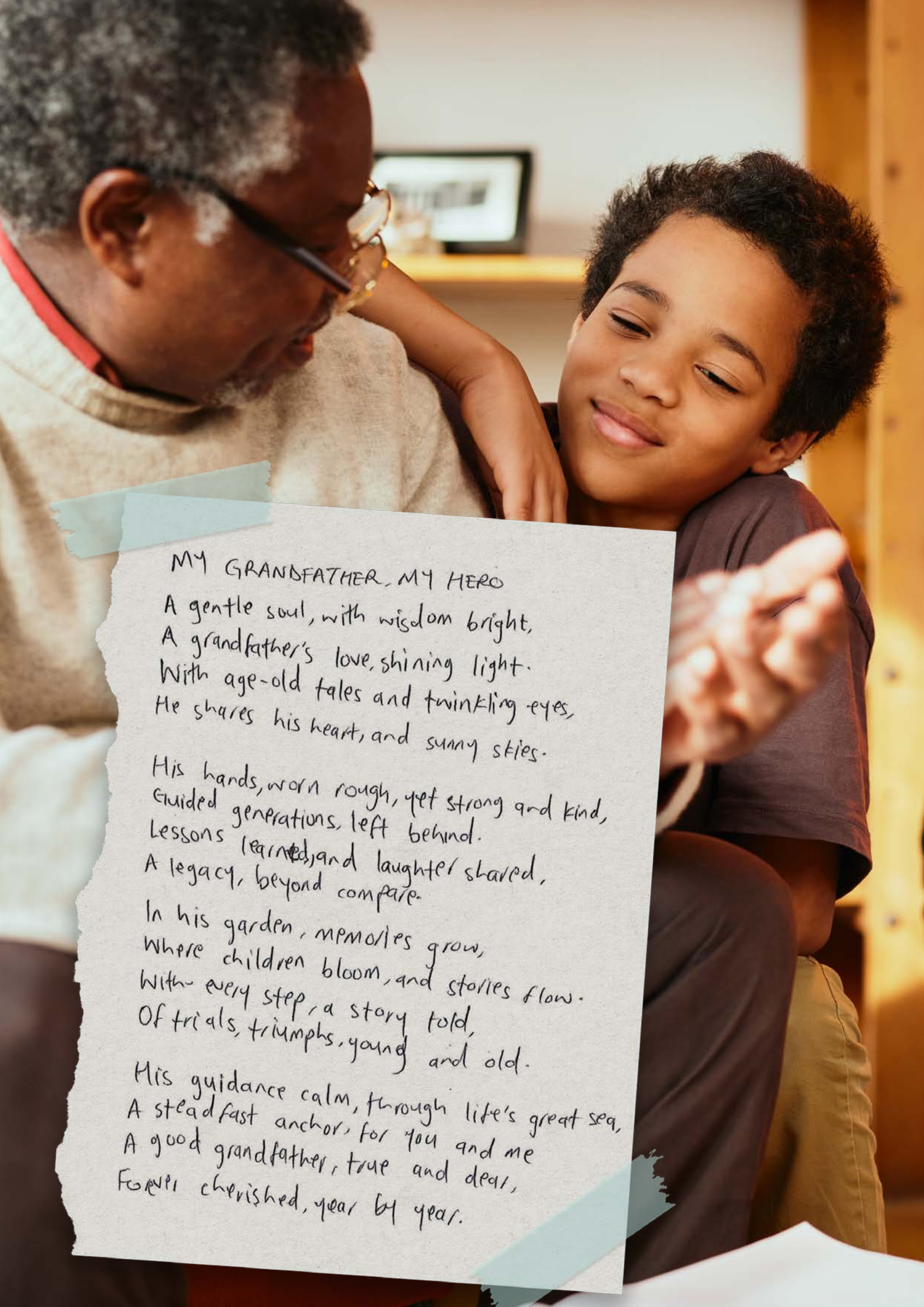
> F: **My teacher from last year, he taught us about life and how to be a good person.** (GP (S), Girls, 10–12)

Men in my community

> F: **My best friend's dad because his personality is cool, that man, everyone loves his personality. He helps his wife around the house he never expects her to do everything, sometimes you can see him spring clean while his wife sits outside drinking juice.** (GP (S), Girls, 10–12)

> M: **My pastor is my role model because he guides me and tells me not to use drugs and drink alcohol.** (LP, Boys, 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)



MY GRANDFATHER, MY HERO

A gentle soul, with wisdom bright,
A grandfather's love, shining light.
With age-old tales and twinkling eyes,
He shares his heart, and sunny skies.

His hands, worn rough, yet strong and kind,
Guided generations, left behind.
Lessons learned, and laughter shared,
A legacy, beyond compare.

In his garden, memories grow,
Where children bloom, and stories flow.
With every step, a story told,
Of trials, triumphs, young and old.

His guidance calm, through life's great sea,
A steadfast anchor, for you and me
A good grandfather, true and dear,
Forever cherished, year by year.

Section B: 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. There are three key headings: "boy" means future provider; boys as future fathers; and children's perceptions of the role of girls in the home and marriage. Each of these captures some of the complexities of gender expectations shaped by societal norms.

"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. Some of the children interviewed have already started taking on the responsibility of being a provider:

> M: **Being a boy means you need to work hard to satisfy the needs and wants of your family.** (GP (O), Boys, 13–16)

> F: **A boy is someone who grows up to be the head of the family, they take care of everything, the needs and the wants of the family.** (LP, Girls, 10–12)

> M: **A boy will try hard to provide if the family is poor… he goes out to the neighbours and offers to wash their bins, and cars and clean their yards to earn money to support the younger siblings.** (GP (S), Boys, 10–12)

> F: **I think some of the boys are led into crime because of the situation in their homes, bayaphanda [they fend for family]…in some homes, no one is working, and the children fend for themselves or even for others in the home.** (GP (S), Girls, 13–16)

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. They have witnessed firsthand the impact of a father's love, guidance, and support on their development and well-being:

> M: **I want to be there for her or him and show her or him the right way just like my father did to me.** (GP (O), Boys, 13–16)

> M: **I want to raise them to be educated just as my father has pushed me to be educated.** (LP, Boys, 13–16)

> 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. These boys expressed a deep longing for the emotional support and presence they missed out on during their formative years. Despite the pain and challenges associated with such

experiences, many of them are turning their hardships into motivation. They want to be the fathers they wished they had and are determined to provide their future children with the love, attention, and guidance they yearned for. 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 emptiness:

> 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)

> M: **I want to give them the life that I never had, not just give them love and kindness but a life where they can have more opportunities than I have and have more doors open for them than I have had.** (WC, Boys, 13–16)

> M: **As we grow, we are aware of the mistakes our fathers are making, and I would make sure I don't repeat that with my child.** (GP (O), Mixed, 13–16)

> M: **A parent that will spend quality time with their children and make them happy and buy them clothes.** (LP, 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:

> M: **I will make sure l am working so that I can be able to provide for him.** (GP (O), Mixed, 13–16)

> M: **I want to be a parent who will take good care of their child and buy him/her clothes.** (LP, Boys, 13–16)

> M: **Provide food to eat and take them to school.** (GP (S), Mixed, 10–12)

> M: **I give it a home away from poverty.** (GP (B), Boys, 10–12)

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

> M: **A good parent who will love and support his child in everything that he does and also encourage him to work hard on the things that he is not excelling at.** (LP, Boys, 13–16)

> M: **I'll be there for my children, I'll show them support, I'll show them love and motivate them.** (GP (O), Boys, 13–16)

> M: **Be the best father I can. Supportive, kind and protective.** (GP (B), Boys, 10–12)

> M: **I want to be the best father, I want to love him, I want to buy him stuff, I'm gonna spoil them but not too much, and I'll be there for him.** (WC, Boys, 10–12)

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.

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. They want to teach their children manners so that they can be respectful children and show them the right way:

> M: **I will spoil him so, so, I'll teach him manners and make sure he goes to school and listens to his teacher.** (WC, Boys, 10–12)

> M: **I want to discipline them because the way your children treat other people shows what kind of parent you are.** (WC, Boys, 13–16)

> M: **A good parent, who will reprimand his children when they do wrong.** (LP, Boys, 13–16)

> M: **Teach them good behaviour, wish them well and build them a good home.** (GP (S), Boys, 10–12)

Overall, the study reveals that boys do not see fatherhood solely as a duty of provision but as a role encompassing emotional involvement, nurturing, and guidance. Their expectations of fathers, whether present or absent, mirror their aspirations to be attentive, supportive, and loving fathers. This nuanced understanding of fatherhood highlights a shift towards a more holistic and engaged model of parenting, reflecting broader societal changes in perceptions of paternal roles.

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

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:

> M: **They do the washing, clean the house and take care of the children when the mother is sick.** (GP (O), Boys, 13–16)

> F: **Girls wash dishes and are always cleaning.** (GP (S), Girls, 10–12)

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

> M: **They wash up and cook and clean, they don't have a choice.** (WC, Boys, 13–16)

This definition extends beyond just chores, encompassing broader caregiving roles such as taking care of younger siblings and attending to anyone who may be ill at home:

> M: **Girls take care of their families and their children.** (GP (O), Boys, 13–16)

> M: **A girl child is the one who helps at home when an older woman is sick because it is not easy for a boy child to enter the room and take care of a mother when she is sick.** (LP, Boys, 13–16)

> F: **They cook, they clean and if the mom is at work, then they will bathe the baby.** (GP (S), Girls, 13–16)

> F: **Someone who is expected to do everything in the household.** (LP, Girls, 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)

> F: **A girl is someone who gives birth to children.** (GP (S), Girls, 13–16)

> M: **They help to expand the family and make a home for someone.** (GP (O), Boys, 13–16)

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.

Boys envision their future wives as homemakers who will handle the domestic duties and support the family by creating a nurturing environment for their children. This perspective is influenced by their observations of their own mothers or other female figures in their lives who fulfil these roles.

Many expressed a desire for a future partner who possesses traditional homemaking skills, such as cooking and cleaning, and who will also take care of the children and the family.

> M: **Someone who supports around the house and helps.** (GP (B), Boys, 10–12)

> M: **She must make me food; she must make sure the house is clean when I come out of work and she mustn't be after my money.** (WC, Boys, 10–12)

> M: **She must be nice, she must look after our children, she must wash up. She must make food, she must make sure the house is clean every day, she must make sure that the children go to school.** (WC, Boys, 10–12)

> M: **When she wakes up in the morning she must clean and wash the dishes.** (LP, Boys, 13–16)

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.

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. Despite recognising the conventional expectations that women are primarily responsible for cleaning, cooking, and childcare, children advocate for a more balanced approach where men also engage in these domestic duties.

> 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: **When the mommy makes food and has dished up and everyone is done eating, he can wash up.** (WC, Boys, 10–12)

> F: **They just sit around and do nothing; they expect for everything to be done by the mother. They should be helping their wives by cleaning the yard and taking care of the kids if the wife is busy with other things.** (LP, Girls, 13–16)

> 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)

> F: **They should take on more house chores like cleaning the house. You can do anything like maybe sweeping or mopping, like you don't have to be doing heavy-duty work all the time. You can slow down and take the easy stuff like washing the dishes, cooking, cleaning, and all those things.** (WC, Girls, 13–16)

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. Children communicated a progressive perspective that challenges traditional norms and promotes a more egalitarian family dynamic.

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:

> M: **A woman should look after the kids, clean and cook…she can work but she must make sure that she looks after the home…mina, I will bring isishebo [meat] for her to cook meals for the family.** (GP (S), Boys, 10–12)

> M: **Some women expect to have a dishwasher and washing machine, yet she is always at home.** (GP (O), Mixed, 13–16)

> M: **I want a wife who will wake up and make me food so that when I wake up, I find the food ready.** (LP, Boys, 13–16)

> M: **I want a woman who will be a housewife…when she is working, she will stress me…she will keep on telling me that she too is providing for the family.** (GP (S), Boys, 10–12)

> M: **I don't want a lazy woman…I would never tolerate coming home from work and finding the house dirty.** (GP (S), Mixed, 13–16)

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. This differential treatment manifests in the expectation that girls take on most, if not all, of the domestic responsibilities within the home. Tasks such as cooking, cleaning, and caregiving are predominantly assigned to girls, while boys are typically exempt from these duties. Instead, boys are often allowed to go out and play or relax around the house without contributing to household chores:

> F: **In our homes, our brothers go out to play soccer while we stay at home washing the dishes and cleaning the house and babysit the babies as well. When we're given chores by our mothers, the boys tell us that they don't do chores that are meant for girls.** (GP (O), Girls, 10–12)

> M: **They are not treated the same because everything is done by the girls.** (GP (O), Boys, 13–16)

> F: **I feel like society wants girls to do more things than boys, they want your personality to change. They want you to do all the chores and everything else just because you are female. Boys don't cook, they'll say real boys don't cry, but everyone should be equal, it doesn't matter what gender you are.** (GP (S), Girls, 10–12)

> M: **They are not treated the same, a lot of the times the girl is the one who does everything in the house while the boy just wakes up and goes to play on the street.** (GP (O), Boys, 13–16)

> F: **Girls are always cleaning and making sure that everything is in order, but boys just wake up and bath and go out. If we wake up late, we get shouted at. If we go out in the afternoon, they tell us what time to come back. Boys can go out and come at 23h00 they (parents) don't care. It's not fair.** (LP, Girls, 13–16)

> F: **When it comes to families and they have a son and a daughter, the daughter will be given so much chores but when it comes to the son, they will be treated so differently like they don't do any chores, they just sit while the daughter is just doing everything in the house.** (WC, Girls, 13–16)

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, emphasising the importance of financial stability in their future relationships, and the traditional role of the husband as the breadwinner.

Girls want a future husband who can provide for them:

> F: **I want to marry a man who is employed and who will support his family. He should not even think of drinking alcohol.** (LP, Mixed, 13–16)

> F: **He must support me and do everything for me. Buy me clothes and food.** (GP (O), Girls, 10–12)

> F: **I want a sugar daddy, I want the money.** (WC, Girls, 10–12)

> F: **Someone who supports the family in every situation and who works for his family and makes sure that he provides everything that is needed in the home.** (GP (S), Girls, 13–16)

> F: **Me, I want a man who has money.** (GP (O), Girls, 13–16)

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 within the marriage. This perspective challenges traditional gender norms and supports the idea of both partners working together to achieve financial and domestic balance, thus promoting a more equitable distribution of roles and responsibilities.

Some girls want to marry a man who wants an equal partnership:

> F: **I want to marry a man who supports me, we contribute 50/50 in everything, food, cars, we both pay for our things, there is no 70/30.** (LP, Girls, 13–16)

> F: **He must be supportive, protective, lovable, generous, and intelligent. If we are working, we are both working, I don't want to be anyone's housewife.** (LP, Mixed, 13–16)

> F: **A man who will treat me well and who will listen to me and I him. We contribute the same money and no one is abusing anyone financially.** (LP, Girls, 13–16)

> 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)

The research indicates that while some children associate the gender role and identity of girls with the expectation of eventually getting married and having children, others challenge this conventional notion. When children were asked about their aspirations regarding marriage, a few of them 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)

> F: **I want to be single for the whole of my life. Men don't know how to treat their wives with respect.** (WC, Girls, 10–12)

> F: **Because marriage is complicated, and I am referring to how our makoti [wife] is being treated in our family; they do not treat her well.** (GP (O), Girls, 13–16)

> F: **Because I don't want a man because they a skelm [naught/unworthy], and I don't think no one loves me, no one cares.** (WC, Girls, 10–12)

> F: **I'd rather die with my 100 cats than have a husband.** (GP (B), 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)

> F: **No, because I don't want to be beaten up by a man.** (GP (O), Mixed, 10–12)

> F: **I will not get married because he will beat you and you will have to stay in that marriage, and once he has slapped you once, then it means the next time he will not just slap you but beat you up very bad.** (GP (O), Mixed, 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.

Section C: Consequences of Father Disconnect: Replication of Negative Behaviours

This section of the report delves into the consequences of father disconnect, focusing on how the absence or lack of positive father involvement can lead to the replication of negative behaviours among children. The analysis reveals a range of harmful behaviours that manifest in both boys and girls, including substance abuse and various forms of violence. The various sub-sections highlight the 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. Research from a South African cross-sectional study of 704 adolescents aged 16 to 18 found that teens from single-parent households, particularly those without a father, were more likely to consume alcohol and start drinking at an earlier age (Hoque & Ghuman, 2012). Similarly, Mandara and Murray (2006) found that boys with absent fathers were significantly more likely to use drugs than boys with present fathers or girls from either household type. These trends persisted even when controlling for factors such as socioeconomic status, neighbourhood crime, parental monitoring, and peer drug use. While peer influence was the strongest predictor of drug use among girls, the absence of a father had a greater influence on boys.

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:

> M: **They fight over zol [marijuana], if one doesn't want to share his zol, then the other boy will get angry and they will start to fight.** (GP (O), Boys, 13–16)

> F: **Some boys smoke at our school, they even smoke dagga [marijuana] at school and vape, they come with it to school.** (WC, Girls, 10–12)

> M: **Most of us have become addicted to intsangu [marijuana] we can't do without; every R10 you get, goes straight to get izolo.** (GP (O), Mixed, 13–16)

> F: **They are always smoking, its either cigarettes, izolo [marijuana] or the pipe… sometimes they add marijuana in the pipe, and they add other things in the zol, like the crystals and charcoal; that's why they are always in need of money.** (GP (S), Girls, 13–16)

Girls are said to be involved in selling drugs, consuming them and stealing to sustain their habit:

> F: **Some girls in our community sell drugs and steal from other people.** (GP (S), Girls, 10–12)

> M: **Girls of nowadays involved themselves in drugs and alcohol and forget about their future.** (LP, Boys, 13–16)

> F: **They drink alcohol, and sit with the boys and smoke.** (GP (S), Mixed, 10–12)

The involvement of both boys and girls in these activities underscores that substance abuse and its associated behaviours are not confined to one gender but are a widespread issue affecting young people broadly. Teachers have observed worrying trends in children's drinking behaviour. One primary school teacher remarked:

> **Some things are very hard to deal with in teenagers; some of them will be drunk on Fridays and dirty. When you ask them what is happening with you when you are**

like this, these children do not take care of themselves.

This highlights the visible neglect and self-destructive behaviour among students who drink. Another primary school teacher shared a troubling anecdote:

> **There is one girl [student], who asked me what I drink so that she can bring me the alcohol: 'We go out with our men, who are police officers.'**

This indicates not only the normalising of alcohol consumption at a young age but also the involvement of authority figures in facilitating such behaviour. These observations point to a broader cultural and social issue where children are exposed to and influenced by negative adult behaviours.

PHYSICAL ABUSE AT SCHOOL

Research by Sikweyiya et al. (2016) indicates that boys growing up in homes where fathers are absent or disconnected are more likely to engage in aggressive behaviours, including inflicting harm on girls and others. In South Africa, father absence has been linked to an increase in GBV. Boys in father-absent homes may replicate the aggressive behaviours they witness or experience in their 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 indicates 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)

While peer influence was the strongest predictor of drug use among girls, the absence of a father had a greater influence on boys.

> M: **They chase the girls, and if they catch them, they hit them.** (WC, Boys, 10–12)

> F: **They hit female teachers with papers.** (LP, 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:

Girls fighting over boys

> M: **Girls fight for boys and the boys will encourage them to fight and say 'show me how much you love me.'** (GP (O), Boys, 13–16)

> F: **They always fight for things that don't make sense. Most of the time they fight over boys and pull each other's hair.** (LP, Mixed, 13–16)

> M: **I say girls are the ones who fight a lot at school, they fight over men.** (WC, Boys, 10–12)

> F: **This year, so far there's been fights between girls. And when you observe [the reason] for the fight it's because of something stupid, it's because of a boy.** (GP (S), Girls, 13–16)

Boys fight over girls

> F: **In my school boys fight a lot and usually it's about a girl. One of the boys screamed to another boy and said 'I chowed your girl last week' and they started fighting.** (LP, Girls, 13–16)

> M: **Boys will beat each other up after school over a girl.** (GP (O), Boys, 13–16)

> F: **They fight because they are sharing girls.** (GP (S), Mixed, 13–16)

> M: **Boys fight other boys because of girls, they are always fighting over a girl.** (LP, Mixed, 13–16)

> F: **Most of the boys at my school fight over girls.** (WC, Girls, 10–12)

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. One report from a South African context emphasised a strong correlation between absent fathers and GBV, particularly within communities where boys lack positive male role models. Such environments foster a higher likelihood of these boys replicating aggressive and harmful behaviours, including sexual violence, later in life (Ajayi et al., 2021).

Similarly, girls who grow up in homes where fathers are absent are at a greater risk of experiencing sexual abuse. The absence of a protective male figure often makes them more vulnerable to predators within and outside the home (Ngidi, 2022). The lack of positive fatherly influence is seen as a contributing factor to increased risks of victimisation, as seen in both South African and international studies focusing on the prevalence of sexual abuse among girls in father-absent households.

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:

> F: **They touch our private parts. They force us into corners and touch us.** (GP (O), Girls, 10–12)

> M: **They do things to girls that probably make girls feel uncomfortable, like, they touch the girls.** (WC, Boys, 10–12)

> F: **Boys corner girls into the toilet so they can touch their private parts.** (LP, Mixed, 13–16)

> M: **They spank the girl's bums.** (GP (O), Boys, 13–16)

The findings show that 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:

> M: **They treat them as sex objects.** (GP (S), Mixed, 13–16)

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

> F: **When boys see girls, they have bad thoughts, they say: 'She can be my girlfriend,' or, 'If I try to sleep with her, I think she'll say yes.'** (LP, Girls, 10–12)

> 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)

> F: **They treat girls sexually and make sexual jokes.** (GP (S), Mixed, 10–12)

> F: **They'll talk about a girl that maybe has big boobs and stuff and they will say they wanna have sex with her and see her naked and stuff. Especially in my high school because I'm in an older grade so there's a lot of those guys that act like that and have that mindset of like yeah, I just wanna use a girl for like sex and my pleasure and all that stuff.** (WC, Girls, 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 are people who rape.** (LP, Girls, 10–12)

> M: **Always forcing girls to have sex with them.** (GP (S), Mixed, 13–16)

> 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)

> M: **They drug them or they'll say to the girls come let's smoke hubbly and then they put drugs and then when they sleep, they rape them and leave them.** (GP (S), Mixed, 13–16)

> F: **So boys will make you do things you don't think of doing, like if they force you; if you are a virgin, they tell you the way he needs to break your virginity, so they will make you do things.** (GP (O), Girls, 13–16)

Our research respondents reported a concerning and pervasive culture of sexual abuse in school settings.

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. A qualitative study conducted by the University of KwaZulu-Natal identified instances where boys displayed bullying behaviour, often involving forceful actions such as taking possessions from girls and threatening them with violence (Morrell, et al., 2012). The absence of a father figure can heighten aggressive tendencies in boys, contributing to these behaviours in school environments (Richter, 2006).

Father absence not only impairs emotional regulation in boys but also fosters the replication of harmful gender norms learned outside the home. This perpetuates problematic gender dynamics, exacerbating school-based violence and harassment (Clowes, 2020). These findings emphasise the role of positive male influence in mitigating violent and abusive behaviours among boys in South Africa.

Findings indicate that 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)

> M: **If a girl passes a group of boys, one of the boys might call her 'sfebe' [prostitute].** (GP (O), Boys, 13–16)

> F: **In my school, we have gentlemen but there are those who feel themselves and treat you like trash. They'll come up to you and say 'hey, I like you'. If you say 'nahh I don't feel the same about you', then they'll say 'it's not like you're beautiful' and stuff. After that they are more like bullies, they toss you around and do whatever they want with you.** (LP, Girls, 13–16)

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:

> F: **I think it's a trend for them that when they court you and you say 'no I don't want you near me', they just say 'anyways, you are ugly' and they tease you and say bad things about you. The words that they say make us feel like…we lose our self-confidence.** (GP (S), Girls, 10–12)

> F: **And if you don't agree to it then it's 'yho but she looks better and you could have had her bum'. Then they will bully you about your looks, acting like a minute ago they didn't just wanna have sex with you.** (WC, Girls, 13–16)

> F: **If a boy comes and asks you out and you say no, they'll say 'I never wanted you anyway, you are so ugly.'** (LP, Girls, 13–16)

> F: **I think that boys are selfish…they don't consider our feelings; they just force the girls to do what they want…recently, a taxi driver shot and killed a girl only because she refused makamshela [his advances for a relationship with her].** (GP (S), Girls, 13–16)

Boys raised in households without active father figures are more prone to engage in bullying and verbal abuse.

> F: **Sometimes they will swear at you, like 'they won't beg you, you're ugly, there are plenty fish in the sea.'** (GP (S), Mixed, 13–16)

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:

> M: **Other boys don't treat them well because they even take their lunch box by force, they bully girls.** (LP, Boys, 13–16)

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

> F: **They bully us, they take our lunch and eat it.** (GP (S), Girls, 10–12)

> F: **They take my pocket money.** (LP, Girls, 10–12)

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

> F: **Yoh, they are sooo abusive. Let me give you an example of what happened to me. There is this guy who bullies me in class and he is always saying 'You are so ugly I don't know why you even think you are beautiful.' This other day he picked me up and made me face the floor and I was from eating, I was even wearing a skirt, no one helped me and I was just like okay, it's fine. I was so embarrassed because he was spanking me.** (LP, Girls, 13–16)

> F: **Terrible, we are like nothing to them. They'll pick on you, all they care about is how you look, if you don't have big boobs, you are off the list. They rank us in class and will say: 'She's pretty, she's not pretty.' They make us feel insecure, we're actually so scared of them because they make us so insecure.** (GP (B), Girls, 10–12)

> M: **Yoh, they use them as a mop, they tip her over and put her head on the floor and they also make jokes about them.**
> (WC, Boys, 13–16)

> M: **If a girl passes a group of boys, one of the boys might call her 'sfebe' [whore/ prostitute].** (GP (O), Boys, 13–16)

> 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)

Furthermore, respondents reported that some boys also force girls to perform tasks for them, such as completing their homework, and will become violent as a means of asserting dominance:

> F: **Some of the boys come with knives to school and point that knife at you and ask you to do their homework.** (LP, Girls, 10–12)

> F: **When they haven't done their homework, the go through our school bags and take our books and copy our homework.**
> (LP, Girls, 10–12)

When asked if they felt they could report the bullying to the principal or teachers, they indicated that:

> F: **When we report an incident to a teacher, he or she will tell you that they are not a principal and can't handle the matter or you will be referred another teacher.**
> (GP (O), Girls, 10–12)

> F: **You might as well start a fight; he is not someone you can rely on."**
> F2: **"A principal will just ask why did you do that and that will be the end of that.**
> (LP, Girls, 13–16)

> F: **If I tell the principal about it, the boy will just get a verbal warning because the principal fears him.** (GP (O), Girls, 10–12)

> F: *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.

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. Swartz and Bhana (2009), in *Teenage Tata: Voices of Young Fathers in South Africa*, highlight how the absence of paternal influence drives

many young males to seek identity and belonging in gangs, filling the void left by their fathers. Similarly, Eddy and Holborn (2011), in their report *The first steps to healing the South African family*, emphasise the heightened risk of criminal activity among boys from father-absent homes, linking this absence directly to increased gang involvement.

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.

Boys join gangs because they want to be feared and respected:

> M: **They joined gangs because they wanted students to fear them.** (GP (S), Mixed, 13–16)

> F: **Because they wanna be big. They wanna show that they're perfect, but no one is perfect. They wanna show others how they can kill people.** (WC, Girls, 13–16)

> M: **They feel that they will be respected if they join a gang.** (LP, Mixed, 13–16)

> M: **Some people think that being a gangster is kwai [cool], they think robbing and stealing is kwai and if you shot someone in the head, it's kwai apparently, so they will want you to know that you can't touch them.** (WC, Boys, 13–16)

Some boys join gangs because of peer pressure from friends and because it is a family business:

> F: **Sometimes they join gangs because of peer pressure, they join because their friends belong to those gangs already.** (LP, Mixed, 13–16)

> M: **Sometimes our friends tease us and say we don't know how to fight.** (GP (O), Boys, 13–16)

> F: **Because of their friends. Their friends push them to join and that time they are not used to these things but they join because their friends tell them to.** (GP (S), Girls, 13–16)

> M: **Some of them do it because they want to fit in, they feel like if you are not part of the gang, you are not part of the school.** (GP (O), Boys, 13–16)

> F: **I mean some boys are in the gangs, or pressured to be in gangs because it is like a family thing, if you don't join it would be like you not caring at all, so for some, they don't have a choice.** (WC, Girls, 13–16)

> F: **I think that mostly, boys do wrong things because of influence from their friends… they get into crime because of peer pressure; he would not do umshikashika [crime] out of his own will, there is always pressure from friends, wrong friends.** (GP (S), Girls, 13–16)

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

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:

> F: **These days, even girls join the gangs, especially those who are from the initiation schools…they come back speaking the language spoken by only those who have been to the mountain and they seem to think they have the power to do anything.** (G (O), Mixed, 13–16)

> F: **Yes, there are also girl gangs, and they have knives, okapi [small knives], they are violent here at school, and they like causing fights, and instigating fights, they can start threatening you and even if you want to**

fight back, they take out the knife and you end up running away so yes there are.
(GP (O), Girls, 13–16)

F: **Most girls who join gangs are those girls who look like boys and act like boys, and they join the gang for protection.**
(WC, Girls, 10–12)

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: **When they were children, they did not get the love that they wanted.**
(GP (S), Mixed, 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. But then after a few months of being in the gang he noticed that he doesn't need to kill people to feel loved by other people.**
(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.

M: **A boy should be nice and tough. Don't be a chipmunk. Don't be a tiny chip, you might just look weak. You don't want them to say 'He's just like a stick. He can't even punch.'**
(GP (B), Boys, 10–12)

> 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: **You must be somebody who can beat people up.** (GP (O), Boys, 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: **I'll beat them up with my own two hands.** (GP (O), Boys, 13–16)

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

> M: **Yoh, I have limits, so if they make me angry then I'll leave them but if they make me too angry then I'll give them a warning but if I get angrier and angrier then I have to klap [hit] them.** (WC, Boys, 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)

> M: **I feel like beating them to a pulp until they are unrecognisable.** (GP (S), Mixed, 13–16)

> M: **I fight and deal with whoever makes me angry…I beat you up now, not tomorrow… If someone makes me angry, I resolve the issue right there and then. When I'm angry, it is usually directed towards the person who made me angry…I hit him immediately. I fight.** (GP (O), Mixed, 13–16)

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: **When someone swears at me and mention my parents in the same breath, I threaten them, but something stops me from hitting them.** (GP (O), Girls, 10–12)

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

> M: **I just laugh it off, because I know it's unnecessary. Of course I get angry, but when I do, I always think how will this benefit me. What do I get out of this?** (WC, Boys, 13–16)

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

Additionally, 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:

> F: **I cry and listen to sad music so I can let everything out, get into bed, sleep and if I'm still feeling down, I literally find a pillow and squish it.** (LP, Girls, 13–16)

> F: **I go to my room and cry alone.** (GP (O), Girls, 10–12)

> F: **"I get in my room, lock the door and sleep, sometimes I listen to music or go for a walk."** (LP, Girls, 13–16)

> M: **I sit down and cry because crying helps me to release the pain.** (LP, Boys, 13–16)

> M: **When I am angry, I drink water after that I sleep, it helps me to calm down. If I don't**

sleep, I might end up beating up the person who made me angry. (LP, Boys, 13–16)

M: **I sleep and take out that stress.** (GP (S), Girls, 10–12)

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.*

This sentiment is echoed by another teacher, who stated:

They [men] choose to sleep with women who are next-door neighbours, so it affects children in a bad way, because you find the child does not perform well at school. Majority of these kids, if I can say 80% of these kids, have anger issues.

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 some instance you would find that in other schools, because of anger, a child has done something to a principal or stabs another child. That is because we deal with so much anger in these children; so much that teaching is no longer nice anymore or even safe, because these children have lost respect for us.

The psychological toll of this anger extends beyond school boundaries as a clinical psychologist stated:

...one of the biggest ones is just anger. This extreme sense of anger and not knowing how to deal with it and where to put it. How they outwardly express that anger but also the self-harm that comes with it. And we talk about self-harm, it's not in the way it presents with girls. A lot of the time you'll find women will cut or whatever, because it's easier to deal with physical pain than emotional pain. But when it comes to men, self-harm is in behaviour, it's in drinking behaviours, it's in sexual promiscuity, that's the self-harm behaviour that they get into. But there's a lot of anger and resentment that they hold but they don't know where to put and how to resolve.

04

CHAPTER 04

DISCUSSION

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. This perception aligns with long-standing social narratives that position fathers as primary material providers and protectors within the family unit (Corneau, 2018; Miller, 2013). 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, echoing the conclusions of Swartz and Bhana (2009) that children often value their father's time and attention more than financial support. Furthermore, when children's views on their fathers' presence or absence were investigated, children (cohorts aged 10–12 and 10–20) were observed to experience a longing for a secure, constant and loving father figure (Richter and Morrell, 2006)

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.

Research 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 addition to their perception of fathers as providers, children in this study also emphasised the importance of fathers as protectors. Children believe that a key role of a father is to shield their families from danger within the home and, by extension, in the community. However, the paradox in this perception is that while fathers are ideally seen as protectors, 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. Children reported that some fathers engage in physical, verbal, and even sexual abuse against their wives and children. Observations and personal experiences shared by the children highlight a disturbing cycle of violence in both their homes and communities. 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.

The children's accounts suggest that substance abuse and time spent in taverns with friends lead to fathers spending more time away from their children, which not only diminishes their protective role but also weakens their overall involvement in the family. A study by Richter and Morrell (2006) highlights that substance abuse among fathers often results in neglect and inconsistent parenting, leaving children vulnerable to emotional, behavioural, and academic problems. Research by Eiden et al. (2007) supports this, demonstrating that substance abuse is associated with higher levels of aggression

The absence or inadequacy of a father figure leads boys to compensate through violence and toxic displays of masculinity...perpetuating gender inequality and the harmful socialisation of boys into aggressive roles.

and emotional difficulties in children. The chaotic environments created by addicted fathers often lead to cycles of violence, trauma, and perpetuated substance abuse within families, contributing to a breakdown in healthy parent-child relationships and long-term psychosocial issues.

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, making it more difficult for educators to manage and support them effectively in the school environment. These behaviours reflect the findings of Mayeza and Bhana (2019), who highlight the school playground as 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. Mayeza and Bhana (2021) highlight that 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 (Bhana & Pillay, 2018). 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. This aspiration aligns with Langa's (2010) concept of "idealised representations" of fatherhood, where young men seek to become the fathers they wish they had, rejecting violence and risk-taking in favour of a more nurturing and involved form of fathering. 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. Richter and Morrell (2006) highlight the importance of

these social father figures, noting that they are often positive role models in children's lives, guiding them toward more constructive and adaptive behaviours. 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. Father figures can also play a role in shaping the expectations of male children around masculinity and fathering (Langa, 2020; Richter & Morrell, 2006). Teachers also emerge as key figures in this dynamic, given their unique position to influence children and adolescents daily. By promoting ideals of gender equality and challenging sexist and discriminatory norms, educators can help shape the perspectives and behaviours of young people in ways that foster non-violent and respectful gender relations.

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. Despite the limitations of the study, such as its unintended focus on Black, Coloured, and White children and, excluding Indian children due to recruitment difficulties, the findings are still representative of the broader perceptions of fatherhood among these groups. The results of this research can inform the development of targeted programmes and interventions addressing the complex issues surrounding fatherhood and its influence on young people's lives, ultimately fostering healthier and more supportive environments for the next generation.

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.

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.

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. By offering children the tools and support they need to understand and reject the destructive behaviours they have witnessed, it is possible to foster a generation that prioritises empathy, respect, and non-violence, ultimately breaking the cycle of abuse for future generations.

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.

Moving forward, and supported by the literature review, research should focus on identifying factors that mitigate the impact of father absence on children in South Africa while addressing existing barriers. By centring children's experiences and promoting positive forms of fathering, interventions can pave the way for a more nurturing and supportive environment for future generations.

Conclusion

In 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. Fathers are valued regardless of their financial status, underscoring that 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. We hope that it also encourages men to step up as positive male role models and father figures.

Next Steps

As the formative research process concludes, the insights gained from this study will play a pivotal role in the continued development of resources aimed at supporting youth, fostering positive fatherhood and promoting the active positive presence of father figures. These findings will be integrated into resources for use in groups designed to resonate with the core messages that emerged during the research and the message brief workshop held in Johannesburg on 9 and 10 April 2024.

The workshop was a significant and successful event, bringing together over 50 organisations and individuals who work closely with young people. Their contributions were invaluable, offering fresh ideas and insights that have shaped the campaign's direction. The key messages that arose from this collaboration are centred on both awareness and social norms, as well as family and community support.

Awareness/social norms:

1. A father is more than just a provider. While mothers matter, so do fathers. Why?
2. A father can still fulfil his role even if he cannot provide financially.
3. Regardless of your experience with your own father, you have the power to decide the kind of parent you will become.
4. A father is not worthless if he cannot provide materially.
5. You have the right to maintain a relationship with your father, even if he cannot provide materially.
6. Both your father and mother should work to build your confidence and self-esteem.
7. You have the right to feel safe at home and school. Seek help if you do not.

Family/community support:

1. Mothers should encourage and support men in being positive and active fathers, even if they cannot provide financially.
2. Boys need safe spaces where they can be vulnerable and express themselves without judgement.
3. Boys – as future fathers – and girls need positive role models of fatherhood.
4. Boys require healthy coping mechanisms and support to manage challenging emotions like anger.
5. It takes a village to protect a child.
6. Boys and girls can both learn to share caregiving responsibilities.
7. If anyone, including your father, is hurting you, it is important to seek help. Positive father figures and supportive social figures can be found in your community, church, sports club, school, or other local settings.

Heartlines is committed to further synthesising these messages and exploring diverse avenues of communication to ensure they reach and resonate with the youth. By doing so, we aim to empower young people to build stronger, healthier relationships with themselves and others, fostering environments where positive fatherhood and supportive family dynamics can thrive.

I come from freedompark youth club and I also live in freedompark. This letter is about how fathers matter program helped me and enlighten me.

My father was never present in my life. He ran away when I was not even born. My father did something that most fathers don't do when they have abondened their children, he came back. He took the effort to look for me and make things right. The day I saw him walk through the door I did not react in any way because I did not know him. As soon as he said "SANDILE mfana wam ngiyaxolisa" my world paused for a minute. I was confused then he took me out of my misery and told me that he's my father. I'm not a person who shows emotions easily because I grew up being told that indoda ayikhali but at that moment I broke into tears. I was angry at the same time happy So I gave him one tight and long hug. He told me the reason he left is because he didn't want to fail me as a father. He told me that its not my mothers fault but she kept pressurizing him asking what kind of a father would he be because he grew up with no father. This made me realise that sometimes our fathers do the things cause of the challenges they face. So i say don't blame your father for the bad things he put you through get in terms with your past and then work on improving your future

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