

father loves my mother. He gives her money. He cares for us. He takes us to the doctor when we are sick. He gives us money to go to town. He always says that we must eat healthy food. He always buys fruit for us. He wants to see us doing well at school. He checks my exercise book every afternoon. He helps me to do my homework. He is so sweet.

Grandfather

My father's name is Simphiwe. I don't live with him. He is not married to my mother and he works far away. A person who plays the role of father is my grandfather. My grandfather loves me because when my mother is away he cooks food for us. I love him because he helps me to do homework. He is a good man and he gives me pocket money to carry to school. My grandfather becomes happy when I speak English. If I'm going away he stays at home and washes dishes. He is a special friend to me because we talk a lot when we are together. He loves his family so much. I see his happy face when I make him a cup of tea. He gives us fruit and food. He sweeps the floor. He likes to drink water. He doesn't like to see me walk with boys and he doesn't like to see me crying. He likes to hug me if I did well at school. He doesn't want me to smoke like other children do. He tells me to walk with girls only. My grandfather teaches me good things and I trust him. My grandfather usually cleans the house. He checks my homework. He is a kind man.

Mother's boyfriend

I call him uncle because he is not married to my mother, yet he is a father to me in all respect. He is a



Child's photo of father

nice person to my family. My mother calls him Nicolas. Though he lives in town he supports our family in every possible way. He buys food for us and also gives my mother our transport money. He buys us proper school uniform. He plays a very important role in my family. When my mother is not okay we just wish father could come. When he comes we can see my mother's smiling face. He is a loving person. When he comes home he hugs and kisses us but not the way he kisses mom, he holds her for a long time. I can see that they are in love. He is a responsible man. He cleans the yard when he is at home and he makes sure that I am there to see how it is done. He teaches me how to say a prayer every night. He says that the prayer is the best way to communicate with God. He helps me with my homework. He is my best friend. I talk, I play, I laugh with him. I will be happy if he marries my mother then build the house to accommodate the whole family. He is my hero.

GOOD AND BAD FATHERS

In their fathering role, people may think men are 'good' or 'bad' fathers. What is regarded as good fathering

depends on particular social and cultural contexts. However, central to most concepts of fathering, at least in market-oriented as opposed to subsistence economies, is the notion of 'providing' for children. This means paying for children's food, clothing, health care, schooling, and some treats. This is clearly illustrated in what children write about their fathers. Provision for children is often equated with fatherhood, and thus an important part of many men's self-worth.

But the relationship between fathering and provision is not simple.

Many men struggle to find stable employment so that they can support their families. But long distances between work and home, long hours of work, and exhaustion from the demands of work, can separate men from their children. This is an irony because for many men work shows their commitment to their family. This is what was found in a study of fatherhood issues amongst mineworkers. For most of these men, stable work that enabled them to provide for children was an essential part of being a father, and they were willing to make the sacrifice of

being migrants to have work.

Caring for the family, not being aggressive, such as beating children, and guiding children towards acceptable behaviour and setting an example, were also aspects of fathering mentioned by men as important.

But what about men without the financial means to support children? The many men who can't find work, or who can't find consistent work to provide for their families. Fathers are expected to be successful providers without the opportunity to earn a living. Mamphela Ramphele suggests that many men flee responsibilities for their children because of their shame at not being able to support their family. They escape into alcohol or drug abuse, they neglect their children, or they abandon their family to live elsewhere.

But what we learnt from children is that some men without work or other financial resources continue to give their children and their families support, love and guidance. "My father's name is Mlungwane.

He is not working. It is only my mother who is working. My father stays at home and he does house chores every day. He cleans the house. He cooks the food and washes clothes. My mother doesn't have to come back from work and do the house. He is a caring father, when we come back from school he checks our exercise books and he helps us with our homework. At school we were asked to collect kiwi polish tins. He helped me to collect kiwi polish tins. I remember when my mother was sick she was admitted in the hospital. My father used to wake up in the morning and prepare our lunch boxes and he checked if we were clean. When we go to school he helps us combing our hair. My father is a very good teacher. He teaches us to be faithful to others. He said that we must not steal other people's things. He teaches me to pray and to respect other people. I love him so much."

For children, "being there" is important, as is doing things with their father and their father's

interest in them and their activities. Of course, provision for their needs is important, but this can come also from people other than their father.

Social factors, such as high unemployment, the casualisation of work, the increase of women in the labour force, as well as men's desire to spend more time with their family and children, are changing social norms and expectations of men. 'New' fathers are men who are involved with their children and spend time with them. They support family life and help out in the home.

WHAT IS IT ABOUT A FATHER?

Research from most parts of the world shows that fathers are very beneficial for children.

For one, households with men are better off than those without, mainly because of men's higher wages and also because men tend to have wider networks of support when it is needed. Some South African research suggests that children may be safer when a man is in the household. According to one study, children without a father figure, are vulnerable to sexual and other exploitation by men in the surrounding community.

But children who have a father figure tend to do better at school than children who don't. There are several reasons for this. For example, men usually control resources in households, and therefore children are dependent on men's decisions to support them in school. Also, because of men's social status in a largely patriarchal society, children value what men regard as important. If a father helps with homework or shows interest in a child's schooling, children take their work more



Child's photo of father

seriously and try harder.

Children also do better in other ways when they have a caring father. Girls tend to be more self-confident because being appreciated by her father raises her self-esteem. And boys tend to be less aggressive. Having an adult man to model rational ways of approaching life's problems appears to help boys contain their aggression more than those who don't have such role models.

NOT ALL ROSY

Not everything is rosy about men and fathers, however. A lot of women struggle to get regular maintenance from men for their children. South Africa also has very high levels of physical and sexual abuse of children.

The majority of abuse is perpetrated by men, and the greatest proportion of abusers are family or household members or men in their neighbourhood known to the child. Abuse by a father is particularly damaging for a child, as Zazah Khuzwayo's moving account of her childhood in *Never been at home* shows. Children are also pained when men insult or beat their mother, or when men put their own needs above those of their family,

"He beats my mommy a lot. When he beats mommy I feel sad. When he is too angry no one can stop him from beating. He doesn't do a lot of things that make me happy."

"My father hurt me in the back and I feel unhappy, and he eat meat but we don't eat meat every day. I feel so very very very worried of him and he do not want us to visit other place and I don't want to do wrong thing and my father hurt us



Child's photo of father

and we feel unhappy and we started to stay away from him and I feel so very very sad and I started to cry and I play quietly every day and I go to sleep. And he do not buy toys for me."

Fatherhood is a mental concept. It consists of ideas we have of men who protect, encourage and guide us. In a country where so many fathers are absent from homes and from the lives of their children, fathers nonetheless feature strongly in the minds and yearnings of young people. It is a sad truth that many South African children grow up without knowing their fathers.

CHILDREN ARE GOOD FOR MEN

Every man knows how good it feels to be a child's hero. Children can be an important source of self-esteem and emotional closeness for men. In stressful working conditions, happy relationships with children are a significant source of support for men.

Research in the US shows that connecting young men with their

children has an effect on men's sense of responsibility for themselves and others. Young men at high risk of joining gangs and getting involved with drugs, were more likely to keep a job, stay off the street and clean of drugs if they were close to, and felt responsible for caring for their child. In this sense, children can help to keep men safer, happier and healthier!

LB

Linda Richter heads The Fatherhood Project at the Human Sciences Research Council which aims to promote men's care, support and protection of children through research and advocacy. The South African Men's Forum and Men as Partners, amongst others, are partners of the Project. "Baba: Men and fathers in South Africa", edited by Linda Richter and Robert Morrell, is the first work on fatherhood in South Africa. It is on sale in bookshops and can be downloaded from the HSRC Press <http://www.hsrc.ac.za>