

FATHERING care

A new book on fatherhood in South Africa was launched in Durban this week and looks at many aspects of what it means to be a dad. **Lindsay Ord** spoke to the editors

HIV/Aids has had a profound effect on fatherhood. Many fathers (and mothers) will be or have already been infected, are progressing to illness and will eventually die as a result of Aids if they don't receive antiretroviral treatment. The epidemic has serious implications for children, write Chris and Cos Desmond in the book. While the issue of orphans is often highlighted in the media, children living with ill parents will endure long periods of suffering as their parents' health deteriorates.

Research shows that fathers are present in only 48% of homes with children under 18, while mothers are present in 80% of those homes. There are a number of reasons – migrant labour where fathers come home infrequently though, importantly, the absence of a father does not mean that he is uninvolved. Many absent fathers are involved and supportive while some who live with their children are not.

Greater involvement of men may seem like a pipe dream, write the Desmonds. Reasons range from social and accepted roles for men and women in the home.

The response to HIV/Aids is just one area where greater male involvement would be beneficial – and while the task seems huge, the potential may well be worth the effort.

□ For more information, see www.hsrc.ac.za/fatherhood
□ *Baba Men and Fatherhood in South Africa* (HSRC Press) available for R160 from Adams Bookshops.

FATHERHOOD is different things to different people. In an ideal world, a father is a loving figure and involved in his children's lives ... but the negative image of men portrayed by the media, coupled with the talk of everyday South Africans, suggests that men are at best neglectful and uncaring and at worst monsters and abusers.

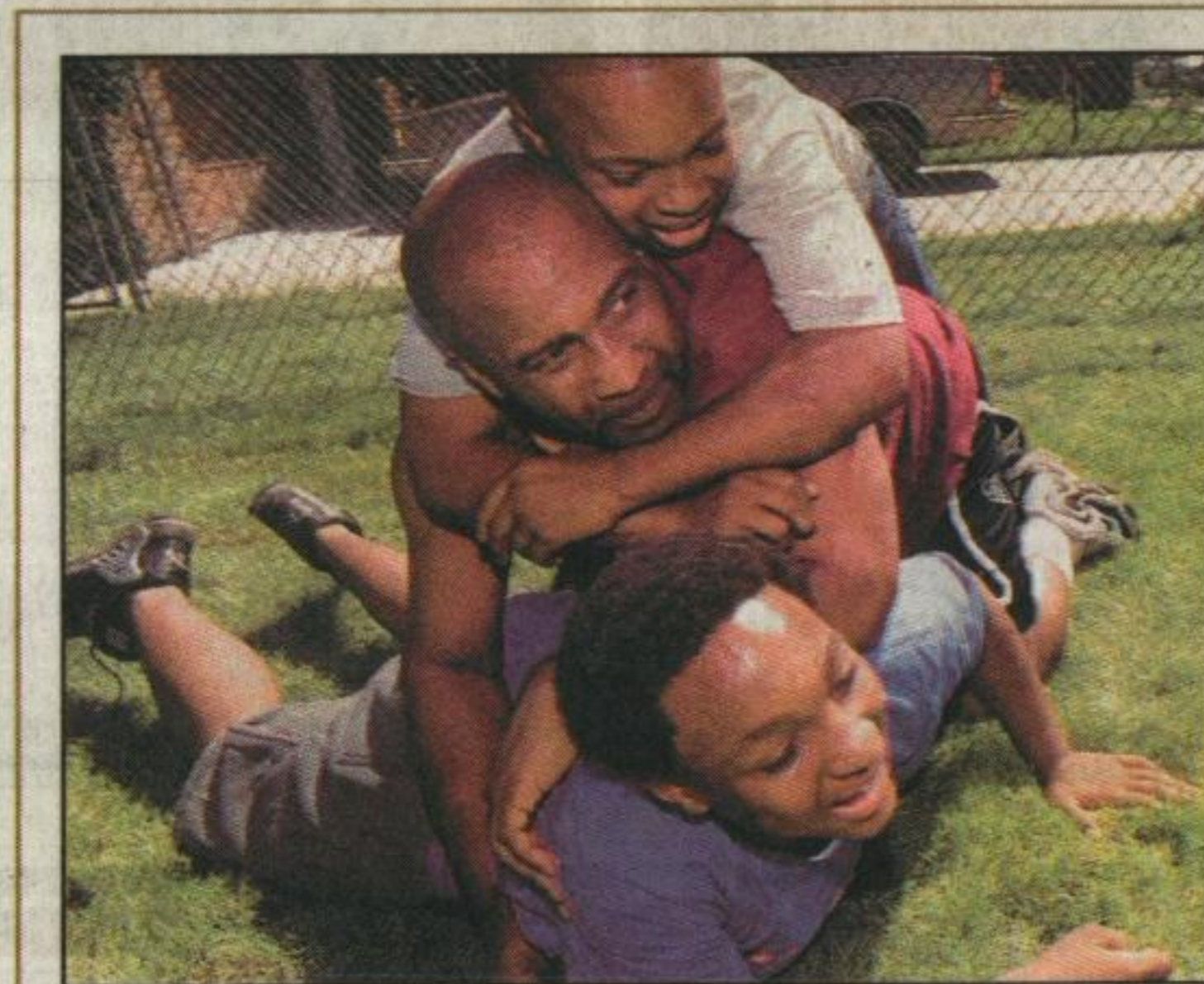
It is this perception that prompted the Human Sciences Research Council to establish the Fatherhood Project to highlight the fact that not all men are abusive, uncaring and neglectful and to recognise and appreciate men who care about and for their children.

Last year, an exhibition featuring photographs of men in caring and protective relationships with their children went on a countrywide roadshow, to great acclaim.

This week marked the publication of *Baba: Men and Fatherhood in South Africa* – a book of research and experience by numerous South African and international authors, edited by Linda Richter and Robert Morrell. Richter is executive director of the Child Youth and Family Development Programme at the HSRC and Morrell is professor of education at the University of KwaZulu-Natal.

"We wanted to affirm, record and study fatherhood in South Africa," said Richter at the book's launch in Durban this week. "Despite the negative public perception, ordinary, solid men make up the majority of fathers."

The book looks at issues like: Who is a father? What does it mean to be a father? Is it important for fathers to do more for children in a world that assumes that mothers take the primary parenting role? Do different people understand fatherhood in different ways? Are new



Rough 'n tumble ... Children interviewed in research said they loved it when their dads played with them

PICTURE: DAILY NEWS ARCHIVES



Celebration ... Prof Robert Morrell, Prof Linda Richter and James Mtimkulu, co-ordinator of the Fatherhood Project, celebrate the launch of *Baba* in Durban this week

PICTURE: KHAYA NGWENYA

fatherhood styles emerging in South Africa?

Authors from a range of backgrounds and disciplines explore fatherhood in the lives of men and the experiences of children and show how fathers' involvement contributes to the wellbeing of their children. The authors argue that men can make a major contribution to the health of South African society by caring for children and producing a new generation of South Africans

for whom men will be a positive presence in their lives.

According to the book, the family has never been a stable social unit in South Africa. In the late 19th and 20th centuries, the African family was invariably a fluid structure, affected by colonial and apartheid labour processes, by urbanisation and industrialisation and shaped by gendered forces that pressed more heavily on women than on men.

In the last two decades, a

new trend has emerged with the rise of single parent households headed by women. This means that the majority of black children are born out of wedlock and a minority live in two-parent households, according to researchers Posel and Casale – the nuclear family is not the norm.

What saddened children, according to research, were the difficulties surrounding separation, divorce and hostilities between parents.

Living apart from a parent

was disturbing for some children, less so for others, depending on the quality of their contact with their father. The greatest problems seem to arise for children in this situation from conflicts between parents around access frequency and arrangements.

Apart from abuse and violence, not having time with their father or not having their father's attention was one of the issues that most disappointed or distressed children.