



CONFERENCE  
Strategies to Overcome Poverty & Inequality  
"Towards Carnegie III"  
University of Cape Town, 3 - 7 September 2012



This paper was presented at "Towards Carnegie III", a conference held at the University of Cape Town from 3 to 7 September 2012.

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# **ID 322 Fathers and other men in the lives of children and families**

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Submitted to:

**Strategies to overcome poverty and inequality: Towards Carnegie III**  
Cape Town  
3-7 September 2012

## Introduction

South Africa has one of the highest rates of father absence in the world. Only about a third of South African preschool children live in the same homes as their fathers and mothers (Statistics South Africa, 2011). Nonetheless, many fathers support their children and remain in contact with them despite living apart. For some other children, maternal uncles and grandfathers, as well as older brothers, assume the role of social fathers, supporting their mothers, providing for children's livelihood and education, and giving them paternal love and guidance.

Migrant labour and the resulting fluidity of family life, delayed marriage due to *lobola* requirements, gender-based violence and a growing autonomy amongst South African women are cited as contributors to father absence from households (Posel & Devey, 2006; Richter, et al, 2010). Father absence is associated with adverse consequences for children, women, families and men. However, where work patterns and employment have been favourable, there is evidence of even working class men embracing an engaged form of fatherhood, reading to their children and taking an interest in their schooling (Rabe, 2007).

International research and some studies from South Africa indicate that children whose fathers are present achieve better at school, have higher self-esteem and are more secure in their relationships with partners of the opposite sex (Carslon, 2006; Flouri & Buchanan, 2002; Richter et al., 2011; Schacht et al, 2009). Women who are supported in stable bonds with men experience lower levels of family stress, are less likely to suffer mental health problems and derive greater satisfaction from their roles as mothers (Richter et al., 2011). Importantly, men not only contribute to women's wellbeing and happiness, but in several studies men have also been found to buffer children against neglectful or harsh parenting by a distant, demoralized or overburdened mother (Martin et al, 2010).

Households headed by men tend to be financially better off than female-headed families (Desmond & Desmond, 2006) In addition to money, men usually have access to other community resources which may not be available to women, including loans, mutual support and influence. To illustrate this, Townsend (2002) concluded from a study in Botswana that "Children are not necessarily disadvantaged by the absence of their father, but they are disadvantaged when they belong to a household without access to the social position, labour and financial support that is provided by men" (p. 270). In many parts of the world, a father who

acknowledges and supports his children confers social value on them, enabling children to become members of a wider circle of family and kin. Men also provide a household with protection which includes shielding women and children from potential exploitation and abuse by other men (Dubowitz et al., 2004; Guma & Henda, 2004).

With respect to benefits for themselves, men who assume fatherhood have less likelihood of engaging in high risk behaviour and are more likely to retain steady employment (Magruder, 2010). Interviews with men, including men who are separated from their children, suggest that men highly value their status as fathers, they express deep affection for their children and often endure extreme hardship in work and through separation from their families in order to be able to provide financial support for their children (Rabe, 2007). Similarly, shame and alienation is experienced by some men who can't secure employment and are unable to support their families (Ramphela & Richter, 2006; Wilson, 2006). Grown men who never knew their fathers, or who experienced violence, neglect or abuse at the hands of their fathers, communicate deep sadness about their experience and a longing to have had a father or a better father than they had, and to be themselves better fathers to their children (Lindegger, 2006).

That said, levels of substance abuse among South African men, as well as neglect of and violence towards female partners and children is unacceptably high (Morrell & Jewkes, 2011). Notwithstanding the fact that female headed households are invariably worse off in resource terms than male-headed households, mothers in these households are much more likely to invest in children's wellbeing, including health and education. Some fathers neglect their obligation financially to support their children (Lloyd & Blanc, 1996). Also, in recent grim testimony of the destructive role of fathers, McIntosh Polela (2012) describes how his father murdered his mother and then turned his back on him and his sister (at the time aged 3 and 5 years old). The story, set in KwaZulu-Natal in the 1980s, is an account of heartlessness and indifference to the welfare of children as well as a callous disregard for legal obligations of care.

This paper lays out what is known about men in the lives of families and children, policy and programme lessons, including from other countries, and options for South Africans to promote the engagement of men in rearing children and participation in family life. We argue that the role of fathers in the lives of children and families was and remains important and, where it is well enacted and performed, fatherhood is an highly important and valuable function.

## **History and context**

To take some liberty with the anti-monarchist saying that 'The king is a man, and every man is a king', a father is a man and every man is a father. The biological centrality of a father for a child is fairly obvious even as it is historical, though not entirely universal. Yet there is no direct correspondence between being a biological father and discharging the roles of a father. In fact, men who are not the biological father often play critical roles in the lives of children. These are social fathers who may provide financial support, constancy, presence and/or emotional support (Engle, 1997; Mkhize, 2006). Yet the position and role of men in families, particularly as fathers, has drawn feminist critique, noting fathers and fatherhood as a literal and metaphorical sign of patriarchy, of men's power over women. Nevertheless, fatherhood is not only about power nor can it be reduced to its occasional corollary, responsibility. We argue that fatherhood is a relationship between a man and children, between a man and his biological (and perhaps adopted or fostered) children as well as a relationship with his notions of himself.

Becoming a man, on leaving adolescence, involves for some men "being banished from and returning to family life" (Adams & Coltrane, p. 238), and this process often involves being schooled in male power by same-sex initiation processes in schools and gangs (Adams & Coltrane, 2005). Yet, if in a life cycle this may generally be true, it is not the case that all boys have this experience nor that this experience trumps all other experiences. Some boys are brought up to care, they are not expelled from the family but remain tied to it, either because their own fathers have died, left or never been present, or because they have received affectionate care, been socialised to understand men's roles in an alternative sense or chosen to take on the role of being a father, looking after siblings, parents and/or grandparents (Morrell & Jewkes, 2011). But ideas about fatherhood are critical and in South Africa, fatherhood is most often equated with being a provider (Richter & Morrell, 2006).

But the role of the father has historically reached beyond that of being simply a provider, decision-maker and disciplinarian even though many African societies have accepted that fathers should be providers and disciplinarians first and foremost. In Senegal, for example, Perry (2009) writes that "harsh disciplinary measures .... are integral to Wolof conceptions of child rearing." (p.60). "Wolof people compare children with a pliant piece of green wood that can and should be bent by force, given a shape that it will retain forevermore when it dries" (Perry,

2009, p. 50). By contrast, liberal conceptions of education evident both in national South African curricula and in middle class parenting styles infuse ideas of parenting and fathering which grant centrality to the emotional health of the child and seek to build the child's agency. In these contexts, fathers are expected to have a much more affective and engaged relationship with children, going far beyond provision and discipline.

### **Fatherhood roles in households**

Most of the available literature on fatherhood acknowledges that the roles of fathers are influenced by the structure of families (including marriage, paternity and co-residence); the quality of primary relationships (including the quality of the marital relationship; the relationship with the child's mother, relationship with the father's own father, the type of fathering relationship with the child, individual skill levels and motivation, the range and types of involvement, and the supports for and obstacles to involvement including those arising from the workplace); financial status (employment and income); and personal qualities (personality, health, educational level, parenting style, beliefs about the father's role, and cultural background) (Day & Lamb, 2004; Hauari & Hollingworth, 2009; Rabe, 2007; Richter et al., 2011).

Although this is changing, a father's role has traditionally been defined as that of provider or breadwinner, having responsibility as well for moral oversight over children, and gender role-modelling (Lamb, 2000). In traditional African and other families, the father still constitutes the authority figure, and in consequence he shoulders the major responsibilities for the members of his family (Nosseir, 2003; Nsamenang, 1987). In many low- and middle-income countries, the provider role was also framed by colonialism (Hunter, 2006; Rabe, 2007). By levying monetary taxes that required people to earn money, colonial powers forced men to migrate to farming and mining areas to seek work in order to meet these levies with their earnings and provide for their families (van Onselen, 1976).

Important social trends have fundamentally changed the sociocultural contexts in which this conception of fatherhood prevailed (Cabrera et al., 2000; Tamis-LeMonda & Cabrera, 1999). With the increasing commitment of men to their families and the well-being of their children, the turn of the twenty-first century is seeing the emergence of the "new father" (Marsiglio & Roy, 2012; Roy, 2008), a man who is both provider and caregiver for his children (Day & Lamb,

2004). Men are beginning to share household chores with their employed female partners and are providing care for children. Informal observations in South Africa indicate that, because their female partners are employed, often in non-standard hours of work, men are increasingly attending health centres with children who require immunization, walking and driving children to and from school, and providing care at home (Richter, 2006).

### **Co-residence between children and their fathers**

Using data from several national household surveys, Posel and Devey (2006) estimated that 55% of rural Black African children (age 15 years and younger) in 2002 did not live with their fathers.. The Africa Centre Demographic Information System (ACDIS) of demographic and health data in 11,000 households in northern KwaZulu-Natal provides detailed longitudinal data about the social and residential arrangements of biological fathers and children, came up with similar findings (Hosegood et al., 2007). In 2005, 51% of the 22,732 resident children with living biological parents (non-orphans) lived in a household where their biological father was not considered to be a member (Hill et al., 2008). Of the 49% of children whose fathers was considered to be a member of the household, 44% of these children were not co-resident with their fathers because the father was living primarily somewhere else (i.e. he was a non-resident household member). Among children whose mothers had died (maternal orphans), the proportion of children whose fathers do not belong to the same household is significantly higher than among non-orphans - 68% compared to 49% among non-orphans.

Using more recent data from the South African General Household Survey (2010), 31% of children aged 0-9 years do not reside with either of their biological parents even though only 19% of children not residing with either of their parents are double orphans. It has also been found that many children move between households and often live separately from their parents. Nationally, only one third of children live with both their biological parents, while 40% live with their biological mother but not their father and 3% of children live with their biological father but not their mother. These results are similar at national and provincial levels (Hall & Wright, 2010, p. 50). Even though a large proportion of children are not living with one of their parents, one of their biological parents is often alive.

Most sources of nationally representative or large provincial household surveys are cross-sectional, providing little or no insights into any changes in the arrangements between children

and their fathers over time (Hosegood & Madhavan, 2012). Not only can fathers initially present become less socially and residentially connected to their children over time but young children - not only fathers - are very mobile in South Africa (Ford & Hosegood, 2005; Hosegood & Madhavan, 2010; Madhavan, 2010). The migration of a child may in some cases facilitate the child joining their father elsewhere and becoming more residentially connected to their fathers (Madhavan & Roy, 2009; Madhavan & Townsend, 2007).

### **Marriage in South Africa**

In the nationally representative October Household Surveys, the proportion of women 15-49 years currently married declined from 35% in 1995 to 30% in 1999 (Budlender et al, 2005) – see Table 1.

**Table 1. Per cent distribution of women aged 15 – 49 by marital status, 1995 -1999**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Married</b>	<b>Never married</b>	<b>Living together</b>	<b>Widowed</b>	<b>Divorced/ separated</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>1995</b>	35	58	4	1	2	100
<b>1996</b>	34	58	4	2	2	100
<b>1997</b>	32	59	5	1	2	100
<b>1998</b>	31	58	7	2	2	100
<b>1999</b>	30	60	6	1	3	100

Source: October household surveys, 1995 – 1999 (Budlender et al., 2005)

A recent paper by Posel and colleagues (2011) updated the analyses of the national household surveys available for the period 1995-2008. They compare marriage and cohabitation rates among young White and African women (20-30 years old) and show that marriage rates have fallen for both groups but are greatest in absolute and relative terms for African women, as illustrated in Figure 1 below.



**Figure 1: Marriage and cohabitation rates among women (20 - 30 years), South Africa**

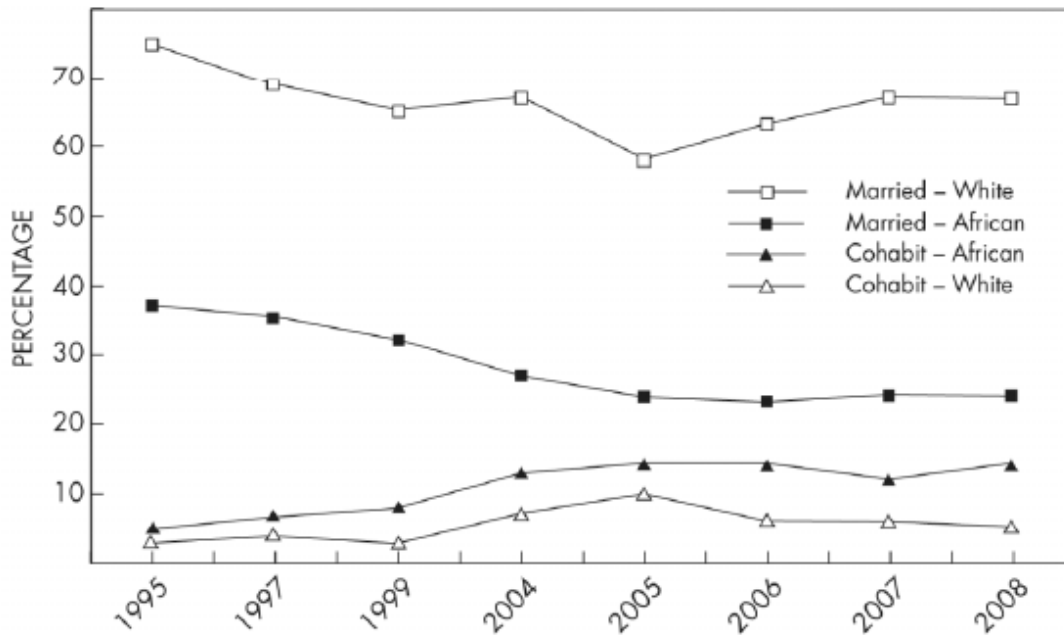


Figure is reproduced from Posel et al (2011). Marriage and cohabitation rates are based on surveys: 1995, 1997 and 1999 OHS; September 2004-2007 LFS; and 2008 NIDS.

The paper by Posel and colleagues (2011) focuses on marriage trends in KwaZulu-Natal as marriage rates among African women are substantially lower and declining faster in the province than for the country overall. In KwaZulu-Natal, marriage rates among African women 20-45 years declined from 31% in 1995 to 12% in 2008. Further evidence of low and declining rates of marriage in KwaZulu-Natal is found in the ACDIS data. A recent analysis examined the marriage data from 2000 to 2009. Among women aged 18-44 years resident in the surveillance area, 17%, 14% and 10% were currently married in 2000, 2006 and 2009 respectively (Hosegood, 2012; Hosegood et al, 2009).

Not only has the rate of marriage declined in recent decades but there have been substantial changes in the types of marriages registered. In 1998, the South African Marriage Act recognised marriages enacted in customary law and permitted retrospective and prospective registration (Budlender, Chobokoane, & Simelane, 2005). It has been argued that marriage

rates are stabilising and that the low and declining rates of marriage are associated with poverty and the impact of *Apartheid* policies, rather than being the effect of female empowerment.

As a whole, the South African divorce rate is 15 per 1,000 marriages and varies by population group with the highest rate among White married couples (35 per 1 000 marriages) and lowest among Africans (11 per 1,000 marriages) (Richter & Amoateng, 2003, p. 257). Part of the explanation for these differences is the complex nature of securing a divorce within customary marriages, the majority of which occur among Africans. Widowhood rather than divorce continues to be the main reason that marriages end. Widowhood levels and patterns are influenced by the increases in young adult deaths due to AIDS in the period prior to public HIV treatment.

### **Remittances as part of income in South Africa**

Traditionally in South Africa, women, the aged and children in rural areas received remittances from their spouses, fathers and sons working in urban areas. In return, migrants were expected to benefit from the investments made in rural areas by their remittances during times of economic and social distress. Men as traditional breadwinners, moved from rural to urban areas supporting a number of people back in the rural areas. Thus, many rural households in South Africa were sustained by remittances from the meagre salaries of low skilled workers.

In study by Hill and colleagues (2008) conducted in northern KwaZulu-Natal, ACDIS data was used to investigate who paid for children's school fees. In 2009, the biological father was the person primarily responsible for paying the school fees for 47% of children 6-17 years with both biological parents alive. The findings of this study demonstrates that, in many cases, children are being supported by fathers who were not only living elsewhere but are outside the household in the sense of not being considered to be members of the same household. Among maternal orphans the proportion supported primarily by their biological fathers with respect to school fees was lower (33%). However, this data highlights challenges in interpreting data about remittances to children. The question asks only about the main person responsible and therefore, not all fathers who are contributing will be identified. Furthermore, the report is made by a member of the household in which the child is living and there may be a tendency to under-report contributions by people outside the household, exacerbated in the case of fathers who

are no longer in a relationship with the child's mother and/or is not considered to be meeting his financial obligations towards the child (Hill et al., 2008).

Currently, it is estimated that 26.1% of the South African population derive at least some of their income from family members working elsewhere and just over half of remittances are sent on a monthly basis. Thus about 11 million individuals in South Africa are receiving remittances (Finmark Trust, 2011). Female-headed households are more likely to be dependent on remittances than male-headed households. We estimate from the General Household Survey conducted in 2010, that 11% and 26% of male- and female-headed households received remittances.

On a global scale, areas with lower economic activity are less likely to attract remittances than affluent areas, as they are generally economically depressed (Kaufman, 1997). For instance, in spite of the Eastern Cape having a large rural population, the lack of a vibrant economy in the region has a knock-on effect on remittances. Furthermore, there has been a dramatic reduction in the volume of remittances reaching rural areas mainly because of massive loss of jobs for the bulk of unskilled workers. To illustrate this, between 1985 and 2000 employment in South African mines, which have been the main employers of rural men in South Africa, fell by 50% (Bailyn & Harrington, 2004).

### **A longitudinal perspective: Birth to Twenty as a case study**

Data from the Birth to Twenty Cohort study (Bt20) in the greater Johannesburg area has been used to examine three aspects of fathering: 1) the multidimensionality of father involvement; 2) survival probabilities of father involvement in the life course of children, and 3) the extent to which maternal and family factors explain why some children face the experience of losing father involvement sooner than others (Madhavan et al. 2012). Bt20 was initiated as an observational, systematic study of human development, health and well-being, from birth extended through to young adulthood. Data collection has covered a broad range of topics including anthropometric measures, nutrition, family composition, socioeconomic circumstances, childcare, parenting, cognitive development, and social experiences at home, school, and in the community. Prospective data collection began in the antenatal period and continued with approximately 23 follow up visits until age 20. Children were enrolled in 1990 and attrition over the course of the study has been about 30%, mostly occurring during infancy and

early childhood when women moved back to their rural homes after giving birth (Norris, Richter & Fleetwood, 2007). A small number of children were lost to follow-up as a result of death. There have been very few withdrawals from the study. The sample in the analysis is 1557 girls and boys followed up from birth to age 18.

Lamb and colleagues (1985) proposed a conceptualization of father involvement with three critical dimensions: access or time spent in the presence of the child, paternal engagement or direct interaction with the child, and taking responsibility for the child's welfare or actively making sure that the child is taken care of. In Bt20 we are able to examine two of the three dimensions across every year of a child's life, from birth to 18 years of age: access or time spent in presence of the child and responsibility for welfare. Access in this context includes both co-residential and non-residential contact which takes into account high levels of mobility for employment as well as frequent change in union status. Responsibility refers to the provision of financial support, which is a key determinant of a father's ability to take responsibility for his child's welfare. One limitation of the model, in the Black South African context, is its focus on biological fathering when we know that social fathers and other kin play an important role in child rearing (Mkhize, 2006). Therefore, we incorporated a measure of kin support in our analysis.

We examined survival probabilities of father involvement to determine the likelihood of children experiencing "not being co-resident with father"; "not having contact with fathers" and "not having financial support from fathers." We also examine correlates of father involvement to determine the influence of selected mother and kin involvement on the risk of children experiencing not being in contact with their fathers and not receiving financial support from fathers. The maternal characteristics include mother's age at birth of child, mother's education at time of birth, mother's union status at time of birth and survival. Two hundred and twenty eight (228) children became maternal orphans before the age of 18. Kin involvement is measured by 1) number of co-resident non-parental adults and 2) whether the main breadwinner is someone other than a parent. We controlled for sex of child, birth order; paternal attributes, including father's age at birth of child, father's educational level at time of birth, and social class at time of birth; and household wealth at time of birth

The majority of children in this cohort have at least some contact with their fathers and enjoy some financial support from their fathers fairly consistently throughout childhood though there is variation across ages. Nearly 60% of children experience not co-residing with their fathers, 30% not having contact with non-resident fathers and 40% not receiving support from their fathers in their first 5 years of life. Children whose mothers were older and in a formal union at the time of birth face lower risks of experiencing a “non-contact” and “non-receipt of financial support” from their fathers. The presence of non-parental adults in the child’s household increases the risk of children not having contact with their fathers. If the child has access to a non-parental breadwinner, he/she faces substantially elevated risk of experiencing both non-contact with and non-support from fathers. Maternal orphans face higher risks of losing contact with and not receiving support from the surviving father than non-orphans. However, this effect is dependent on the number of co-resident kin. Maternal orphans who live in households with a large number of kin face lower risks of experiencing both an episode of non-contact with and non-support from fathers than maternal orphans who live with fewer numbers of kin. The analysis indicates the influence of contextual factors, particularly a man’s relationship with his child’s mother and her kin, on his continued involvement in his children’s lives.

### **Interventions for fathers and young fathers**

Over the past two decades there has been a growing focus on young, teenage or adolescent fathers, balancing to some extent the attention given to young mothers (Anthony & Smith, 1994; Lesser et al., 2001). As important as is a focus on young women, the need to engage also young fathers is essential. Given South Africa’s high rate of absent father’s (Colman, 1993; Lerman, 1986; Posel & Devey, 2006), and its serious consequences on household poverty and poor outcomes for children (Jaffee et al., 2001), ensuring that fathers connect with and remain connected to their children over the life course is critical. But what strategies and interventions exist to facilitate this? This section explores these strategies and interventions but begins by focussing on young fathers and why an ‘epidemic of absence’ might be curbed by focussing on the hindrances to men’s engagement with their children, as well as on the factors that facilitate engagement.

#### *Beginning with young fathers*

An ‘epidemic of absence’ is bad for children, but also bad for young fathers in numerous ways. International studies show clearly the links between early fatherhood and life outcomes such as

increased poverty and dependence on welfare among young fathers (Giddens & Birdsall, 2001; Mollborn, 2006; O'Connor, 1998); delinquency and repeat offending by young fathers (Breslin, 1998; Florsheim et al., 1999; Wei et al, 2002); lower levels of education (Marsiglio, 1986); and diminished employment opportunities and performance in the work place (Bunting & McAuley, 2004; Giddens & Birdsall, 2001; ESRC, 1997; Pirog-Good, 1996); and poorer health, educational and behavioural outcomes for children born to teenage parents (Thornberry et al, 1997). These intersecting issues of poverty, unemployment, absent fathers and criminal involvement are especially serious issues amongst young men and their children in the South African context.

In a recent study of the experiences of a group of young fathers in Cape Town and Durban, it was found that young fathers face multiple challenges to remaining involved in the lives of their children (Swartz & Bhana, 2009). Overall, the study highlights the desire of young men to be involved in parenting their children and raises awareness of the barriers presented by cultural traditions, their family and the family of their child's mother. The factors that hinder young men's involvement with their children include the fact that money is equated with responsibility; for example, that the young man's involvement in a child's life is compensated for with so-called "damages" paid to appease the family for impregnating their daughter; young men's view of being able to support the child financially dominating over other aspects of their involvement; frequent rejection by the mother of their child's family because young men cannot provide financially; high unemployment rates leading to an inability to provide financial support with related feelings of shame; and the common geographical and residential separation between a young father and their child.

However, features that show young men's willingness to be involved, and that could be built upon in interventions, include many young fathers' strong but silent sense of responsibility; their often unheard accounts of emotional engagement with their children; the motivating power of young fathers' own absent fathers on their parenting intentions; their clear ability to articulate the qualities of good fathers and practices of good fathering; the strong and supportive roles of their mothers; the positive effects of being welcomed by the mother of their child's family; the desire for mentoring by peers and family members (especially male family members); young fathers strong aspirations for future involvement with their child; a clear recognition of the help they need; and the frequency and willingness with which young fathers participate in HIV testing and

begin to use contraceptives following the birth of their child, indicating a turn to “responsible” sexual, reproductive and parental behaviour. The lack of services to encourage these positive behaviours and attitudes were starkly noted by both researchers and participants in the study.

This *Teenage Tata* study is especially useful in the markers it offers with potential to be turned into policy and programmatic interventions. Young fathers’ stories need to become known, and narrow stereotypes abandoned. Young fathers need help accessing meaningful employment, although this is only one aspect of what it takes to be a father. Young fathers need to be helped to talk – to each other, to their children, to the mother of their child and her family, to service providers, and to educators – in order to address attachment and mental health issues that reduce risk. Sex education and services for young men need a radical overhaul. Young men’s own ability to develop strong social networks needs to be encouraged. Male family members and peers need to take greater (and perhaps joint) responsibility for ensuring that these young fathers grow up to be respected *babas* (fathers) in their communities and in the lives of their children. Finally, young fathers need interventions that will help them make and retain lifelong connections with the mother of their child and her family, regardless of the nature of their romantic relationship, to ensure that they become the engaged and present fathers they both admire and to which they aspire.

#### *Interventions to help fathers stay involved in their children’s lives*

The *Teenage Tata* study described the experiences of young, impoverished fathers in South Africa and offered practical suggestions for interventions. However, the limited, even non-existent services for all fathers perpetuate the ‘epidemic of absence’. In order to ascertain what interventions are currently available, we conducted a brief review of the literature focussing on interventions for fathers including the extent and availability of parenting skills for fathers. Our findings suggest that interventions for the involvement of fathers in the lives of their children fall into five categories, namely early identification of paternity, fathers’ involvement in the early years, activity-based programmes for fathers and children, programmes involving fathers and others, and context-specific interventions. These are dealt with in turn below.

#### *Early identification of paternity*

With an increase in interest in involving fathers in the care of children, Maxwell et al., (2012) undertook a literature review to understand interventions that help fathers engage with their

children's wellbeing. They found that establishing paternity at birth, for example in Sure Start in the UK, increased the chances of a father's involvement in a child's life, be it through financial support, father-child contact and/or overnight stays. In addition, Maxwell et al found further evidence corroborating the importance of early identification of paternity from the US Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study. This study assessed the capabilities of unmarried parents, especially fathers, through interviews with fathers and parents at the birth of their child as well as through assessments of children from age one to five years.

### *Involvement in the early years*

To understand whether interventions can be useful in enhancing fathers' involvement in the lives of their children, Doherty et al (2006) used a randomized trial design to evaluate a theory-based educational program that began during the third trimester of pregnancy and ended approximately five months after birth. Observations of child-play and father and mother diaries indicated that brief interventions for fathers in the early stages of their becoming parents can be useful in enhancing fathers' involvement in the lives of their children and also give fathers skills that help them improve their fathering skills. Other suggestions for early involvement interventions include positive inclusion of adolescent parenting in high school curricula (Anthony & Smith, 1994) and early skills training for adolescent fathers (Kiselica & Andronico, 1996; Mazza, 2002).

### *Activity-based programmes*

Canada is one of several countries with a growing field of programmes aimed at promoting fathers' involvement in their children's lives. According to the "2011 Canadian Fathers Survey", 41% of respondents said father-child activity programmes are helpful and popular among both fathers and children. These programmes are mainly oriented around father-child development, take place in a supportive environment, and are frequently run on Saturday mornings as part of 'Dad and me' programmes, giving the father and child a chance to meet and play as well as interact socially (Hoffman, 2011, p. 45). In addition, the survey found that respondents also favoured peer-group support programmes and parenting skills programmes.

### *Not just fathers alone*

While interventions that bring the father and the child together in a supportive environment are imperative, it was also found that it is important to target interaction between the parents of a



child. An evaluation study conducted by Rienks et al (2011) targets father involvement through educational workshops with both parents. This study of 'Supporting Involvement' investigated fatherhood involvement among a group of ethnically diverse, low-income men who participated in a 14-hour educational programme to teach them skills and principles involved in building "where participants learned communication, coping, problem solving, and parenting skills ... rooted in research on how couples communicate and handle conflict ... to help participants create safer, more stable couple relationships and better environments for their children ... [including] coping with economic strengths" (Rienks et al, 2011, p. 195).

### *Context-specific interventions*

There are some circumstances under which men parent that require special attention and carefully crafted interventions. According to Schwartz (1999), effective programmes must take into account ethnic and cultural differences that, for example in the US, are sensitive to the past experiences of African-American men, many of whom may still mistrust agents of authority (Kiselica, 1995 cited in Schwartz, 1999). This applies equally in the post-Apartheid South African context, where social control under *Apartheid* and child welfare programmes arbitrarily found adults 'unfit to parent'. Other context-specific interventions include incarcerated young fathers and reunion with children upon their release (Unruh et al, 2003; 2004).

### **Three NGO programmes fostering fatherhood**

While space precludes a comprehensive review of programmes working to foster fathers' engagement with their children, three NGOs focused on fatherhood or men more broadly, provide some examples of what is possible. One is based in the UK, the other in South Africa, and the last is an Africa-wide initiative based in Zimbabwe.

#### *The Fatherhood Institute*

The Fatherhood Institute (<http://www.fatherhoodinstitute.org/>) is a UK-based organization that aims to improve children's chances of interacting with, and getting to know their fathers and the father figures in their lives. They do so by providing father-inclusive training that targets staff in children's centres, managers, schools, nurseries and crèches and providing information on different ways to engage fathers and encourage father-involvement. The Institute also disseminates the results of intervention research and acts as a consultancy for public and private sector agencies. Examples of changes in law and policy for which they advocate are

parental leave that encourages sharing of parental roles among mothers and fathers, and equal parental engagement in schools. Programmes include 'Early Years', engaging men in the education and care of children; a mentoring programme for health workers to deliver to expectant fathers called 'Hit The Ground Crawling'; and 'Staying Connected', a workplace resource which aims to help fathers develop better relationships with their partners, take care of their own mental wellbeing and stay connected to their children. Finally, the Institute runs a campaign entitled 'Dads Included' which aims to transform children's health care services to be able to foster father involvement, and 'The Dads Test' - an online assessment tool that helps workers in family services identify ways in which they can make their services more inclusive for fathers.

#### *Sonke Gender Justice*

In the context of low-income families in South Africa, Sonke Gender Justice (<http://www.genderjustice.org.za/en/>) run a project called "My Dad Can" - part of their One Man Can campaign – that focuses on the engagement of fathers in the lives of their children and families. This project aims to celebrate fathers 'who care' by profiling them in local media. Positive local role models are identified and their stories circulated as examples of involved fathers, and to change children's ideas of fathers, not only as 'strong' people in their lives but also as 'supportive' and 'caring' figures. Sonke Gender Justice also runs *MenEngage South Africa*

([http://www.menengage.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=103&Itemid=91](http://www.menengage.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=103&Itemid=91)), part of *Men Engage Africa*, which tries to strengthen advocacy and policy agenda for engaging men and boys to promote gender equality, prevent and address gender gender-based violence, promote reproductive health and rights, and gender equality.

#### *African Fathers Initiative*

African Fathers (<http://www.africanfathers.org.zw/>) is a continent-wide initiative for the generation, collection, and dissemination of knowledge and skills about fatherhood in Africa. African Fathers in conjunction with Sonke Gender Justice, Instituto Promundo in Brazil, the South African National Department of Social Development and MenEngage launched a project known as Men Care, which aims to engage men to improve maternal health and birthing outcomes of children as a way of involving men in parenting roles and the developmental outcomes of their children. They do this by running programmes that encourage father and child

interactions and getting fathers involved through educational activities, encouraging shared work and campaigning for fathers' involvement.

### **The importance of structural interventions**

The work of these three NGOs and the five approaches to interventions are largely individual and social in nature; but programmes and interventions that focus on both policy and structural factors are also important. One key structural intervention for fathers' engagement concerns financial provision. Since this is frequently the gatekeeper to other activities and emotional involvement, interventions also need to focus on increasing the earning ability of fathers, especially those in impoverished circumstances. In an Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) study (1997), it was found that by the age of 26, a quarter of young fathers were unemployed and only 4% had professional or managerial jobs compared to 25% cent of young men who had become fathers in their twenties. Thus, along with the aim of increasing financial earning ability amongst fathers, is the need for increasing education levels and career-pathing opportunities (Schwartz, 1999).

Helping men to become and stay engaged with their children is a priority of several government policies and programmes run also in collaboration with civil society organizations (CSOs). The South African policy environment acknowledges the need to prevent unwanted pregnancy, and the challenges that young people experience trying to access services. It also acknowledges the role men can and do play in childbearing (Department of Health, 2001)..

The South African constitution provides for modest paternity leave and acknowledges the need to increase this in order to facilitate greater involvement of men in children's lives. By law, South African fathers are currently entitled to three days paid family responsibility leave. Although similar to days granted in Algeria, this is less in comparison to Cameroon, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Gabon, and Togo, where fathers are entitled to ten days paid family responsibility leave. The average number of days allowed for family responsibility leave in Africa lags behind the number granted in most European countries (Fatherhood Project Newsletter, 2006).

South African policy further acknowledges the desirability of including men as fathers. While a mother can register the birth of a child without the biological father, she can only do so with a person who acknowledges that they are the father of the child. Acknowledgement of paternity, while not making it

obligatory to use the father's surname, does place a legal obligation on the father to maintain his child. There is also provision for punitive action towards men who do not comply.

## **Conclusions**

Children benefit from the financial support, care and protection of men. A man can make all the difference to a child's life by preventing or stopping abuse perpetrated by other men. Men need to protect children in their neighbourhood, at school, on public transport systems and in the home. Supportive fathers give girls self-confidence and help boys develop healthy masculinity and a clear identity. One of the biggest impacts of an involved father is that he gives credibility and encouragement for educational achievement. Children stay longer at school and achieve more if their fathers support them in education.

To add to this, increased involvement in fatherhood can also benefit men's own health and well-being, and may facilitate their own growth, bringing them stability and gratification, and fostering a more nurturing orientation in general. Fathers who are active in the domestic sphere and engage with their children also develop fewer negative health behaviour and have lower risks of ill health and premature death.

There is clearly a need for a strong fatherhood research agenda that is informed by local social, cultural, and structural dynamics. Relevant to this agenda is, for example, the issue of what dimensions social fatherhood takes, and how it is being influenced by processes of social, economic and cultural change. Also important to promoting fathers' involvement are father-friendly services at facility and community levels (Beardshaw, 2006). Information needs to be made available to men about child care, hygiene, disease prevention, recognition, and treatment of child illness, nutrition and access to health services (Richter & Morrell, 2008). Services must be tailored to be convenient to men, both in terms of staff attitudes and opening hours.

The early years are a vulnerable time for father-child ties. The early recognition and acknowledgement of paternity and involvement in the early years of a child's life solidify men's ties to their children regardless of their relationships with their child's mother. Opportunities for contact and communication, as well as activities together, are important in addition to financial support. The engagement of men in groups is essential to change norms, including those held

by women, and to increase demand for policy changes and modifications to services to make them more inclusive of men and the important roles they play in the lives of children.

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