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DIRECTIONS

The Role of Black Fathers in the Lives of Children in South Africa

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Child protection for Black South Africans is often a collective responsibility

There is no theoretical or cultural agreement on the roles fathers play in children's lives. Although most families throughout the world include men, arrangements in which men live and the roles that they play in the family and with their children are diverse, complex, and changing. These changes originate in part from the changing nature of employment associated with post-industrial economics and globalization, changes in the nature and composition of families, and changes in personal and group identities. Indeed, in South Africa, as in many other parts of Africa, fatherhood has been shaped by complex social, historical, political, and economic processes, including but not limited to the socially disorganizing and discriminating effects of Apartheid.

This article outlines what is known about fathers and fatherhood in South Africa, future research directions, and policy and program suggestions to promote the involvement of fathers in their children's lives. We argue that the role of Black fathers in children's lives is and has always been important, but also acknowledge that children, women, and men could benefit from greater paternal involvement in children's lives.

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History of Fatherhood in South Africa

In the pre-colonial and early colonial era, Black men's success was judged by the amount of agricultural labor they controlled. A man who fathered many children was a respected household head because he could draw on his large family for labor and thereby increase agricultural output. Fathering was centered on men's ability to build a homestead through marriage, having children, and continuing patrilineal lineage through a male heir. Respect (*inhlonipo*) was conferred on men who fathered a child or were supporting children.

The biological father was seen as an authoritative figure that represented the family in public matters. He was to be consulted on important household decisions, even in his absence. He was viewed as a leader, provider, and protector of children and women from the potential predatory behavior of men from outside the household. He was also seen as a source of moral guidance and emotional support who brought the family together. Women's primary roles, particularly in the rural areas, were largely to satisfy their husbands sexually, cook for them, bear children, and work the fields.

Colonization and then Apartheid, however, strengthened the economic and political power of the ruling white minority and enforced racial segregation through oppressive laws. These actions shifted the nature, possibilities, and constructions of fatherhood. In their book entitled *Baba: Men and Fatherhood in South Africa*, Linda Richter and Robert Morrell pointed out that Apartheid fundamentally shaped what was possible for *Black*, *Colored*, *Indian*, and *white* fathers. (Note that these are all Apartheid appellations. None are *neutral* adjectives.)

Migrant labor, rural isolation, urban poverty, and other vestiges of Apartheid continue to influence Black fathers and patterns of fatherhood. Many Black men live apart from their biological children (see Table 1) and may assume fathering roles in households where some or all of the children are not their biological offspring.

Table 1
Fathers deceased or absent, 1993–2002 (statistics South Africa).

Children 15 years and younger	1993 Project for Statistics on Living Standards and Development	1996 October Household Survey	1998 October Household Survey	2002 General Household Survey
African				
Deceased father	8.4	10.0	10.6	12.8
Absent (living) father	40.0	45.5	–	50.2
Indian				
Deceased father	1.7	4.8	3.1	5.0
Absent (living) father	10.6	16.6	–	8.4
Colored (mixed race)				
Deceased father	5.6	7.3	5.3	7.4
Absent (living) father	31.1	34.3	–	37.2
White				
Deceased father	2.1	3.4	3.0	2.4
Absent (living) father	7.5	12.8	–	10.9

Note: Data is not available on fathers alive but absent for the year 1998 because the question was not asked in the survey.