

# Key insights on fatherhood in South Africa

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"There is no typical father in South Africa". So begins the introduction of the inaugural *State of SA's Fathers Report*<sup>(1)</sup>. Released by Sonke Gender Justice (Sonke) and the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), the report provides insights into the status quo of fatherhood in South Africa, highlighting the importance of father involvement in family life, irrespective of marital or residence status. The traditional and somewhat restricted definition of 'father' as being defined by biological connection and living with a child is redefined and realistically expanded to reflect South African culture in the report. This shows fatherhood beyond simplistic models of the so-called norm of the nuclear family, encompassing the entire spectrum of fatherhood from social fathers such as maternal and paternal uncles, grandfathers, older brothers, to mother's partners who play a role in providing livelihood, education, guidance and paternal love.



"As a parenting platform that focuses on family and parenting lifestyle, the report brings up an interesting question of what actually makes someone a father. Whether or not a man is the actual biological father is often superseded by a person's involvement in childcare (financially and/or emotionally). The report shows that absence is not necessarily defined by physical distance. You may have a situation where a man has a biological connection and lives with a child but is not actively involved in the child's life, doesn't care or may be emotionally absent," says Amanda Rogaly, the founder of the No. 1 parenting portal, BabyYumYum

The report documents that<sup>(1)</sup>:

- Women are the primary caregivers of most of the children in South Africa. These women are usually their biological mothers or maternal grandmothers.
- 36% of children in South Africa live in the same household as their biological father.
- 35% of children in South Africa live in the same household with another man who is not their biological father.
- Biological father non-residency does not necessarily equate to fathers being uninvolved. When non-resident fathers are involved, it is usually financially by paying for school fees and groceries.
- When fathers are the primary recipient of the Child Support Grant, they use it for the same child care expenses that

mothers do.

- Despite high levels of father non-residency, reported violence and neglect by men, the role of caring fathers in the lives of children and families is very important and undisputed.

“Both men and women are often restricted by our predefined roles. Mothers are regarded as the primary caregiver and the fathers often historically have less involved roles,” comments Amanda. *The State of SA Fathers Report* has far-reaching implications for the physical, emotional and psychological well-being of our society.

The report cites the impact of having a father figure as providing higher esteem in girls, lower levels of risky sexual behaviour and greater ease forming romantic relationships later in life. A father’s presence also reduces likelihood of early pregnancy, marrying early and divorce. Boys growing up without a father are more likely to display ‘hypermasculine’ behaviour including aggression. Additionally, the report documents that early paternal attachment has been associated with reduced risk of future child abuse by the father. The report also shows how active involvement in the first 1000 days facilitates greater gender equality. It also counters expressions of masculinity emphasising male control, lack of emotional availability and limited involvement in the family and home environment. Involved fathers provide practical support which mitigates against post-natal depression. This supportive role adds to a mother’s enjoyment of her parenting and promotes psychological and physical well-being of pregnant women and women with small children.



Amanda Rogaly

The report provides insights into different strategies to create awareness of the significance of a father’s role, recommending key intervention points for policymakers to improve a father’s involvement in childcare. These include father-friendly mobile apps (DadConnect52), social media promotion, advertising of positive fatherhood messages on billboards, and taking fatherhood messages and services to places and events where fathers frequent, such as football matches and car washes. These messages need to acknowledge a father’s impact in child development and growth, and maternal health – including mental and emotional health. The report suggests an inspirational focus on the positive impact of fatherhood on men themselves – through avoidance of harmful or risky behaviours such as binge drinking, engaging in risky sexual behaviours, drug abuse and violent behaviour towards children, women and other men.

“As a platform that strongly believes in nurturing one’s unique inner voice – for both men and women –we value the findings of the report which introduces a fresh narrative of fatherhood. While there are many challenges in the current state of fathers in South Africa, this report sheds light on the vital role of the father figure and shows the starting point of a way forward in addressing issues and contesting popular misconceptions. In this way we can start to create new possibilities for the fathers of our children and future generations of families in South Africa,” concludes the BabyYumYum founder.

## References<!>

1 State of SA Father’s Report: <http://genderjustice.org.za/publication/state-of-south-africas-fathers-2018/>

2 <http://genderjustice.org.za/news-item/first-state-of-sas-fathers-report-highlights-the-importance-of-father-involvement/>

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