

Fathers are parents too

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Men are parents too and should give themselves permission to participate fully in the lives and upbringing of their children. Society should not regard them differently from mothers and female caregivers.

Research conducted by the Soul City Institute last year showed that many children who grow up without their fathers envied a poster depicting a father hugging his daughter. They remarked on how lucky the child in the poster was.

This research raised the issue of absent fathers and the important role these men could play in their children's lives. As much as there is literature on men as fathers, as well as fathers as parents, it is equally evident that the language used even when we look at early childhood development institutions like crèches and kindergartens speak to mothers and not fathers.

It's no wonder, then, that men are not seen as equal parents since parenting is seen as "soft" and "unmanly".

Without playing the blame game, it is equally society's responsibility as it is that of fathers to be parents to their children. Men should not be regarded as "weird" if they willingly participate in and co-share parental roles.

Men to whom such roles come more naturally or easily should encourage other men.

Societal norms are in a constant state of change and parental norms based on gender are also changing.

Researchers who focus on these changes have noted that as more women join the workforce, men take on more of what has traditionally been the role of housekeeping and primary parenting.

Research on changes in male parenting roles has found that many men who are "house dads" have shifted from traditional male-disciplinarian parenting styles to the emotional styles that women are better known for.

These findings confirm the positive spin-offs of a father's participation in parenting.

The impact of non-involvement of fathers in parenthood is seen in one intervention in Khayelitsha as part of the Families Matter Programme, a prerisk HIV prevention programme for parents and guardians of preteens.

A male participant told of how he grew up very angry. In turn, he was angry at his family because they protected him from the reality that he was detached from his children and his wife - who all feared him.

His experience is unsurprising since the non-involvement of males in domestic and co-sharing issues starts when men are boys in a number of cultures and traditions in Africa.

Boys are socialised to be more "macho" and "powerful" than girls, and are hugged and encouraged less than girls. The manner in which boys are raised therefore deprives them of freely expressing emotions of love and affection. It's no wonder, then, that it is challenging for fathers to be involved as parents.

But just like mothers, fathers are capable of teaching, guiding and listening to their children.

Active parenting could assist men to be better partners and role models for their children and, hopefully, inculcate elements of responsibility and help reduce the rate of substance abuse and unplanned teenage pregnancies. Fathers who are positively involved in parenting will also alleviate the unintended pressures that some children face. This includes the pressures of negotiating and navigating adult issues because children are sometimes caught in the crossfire of parents who use them as pawns in a game.

It is society's responsibility to encourage and not pour scorn, laugh at or even punish fathers who are willing to do the right thing. When fathers play an active role in the upbringing of their children, the world will be a much better place for children.

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