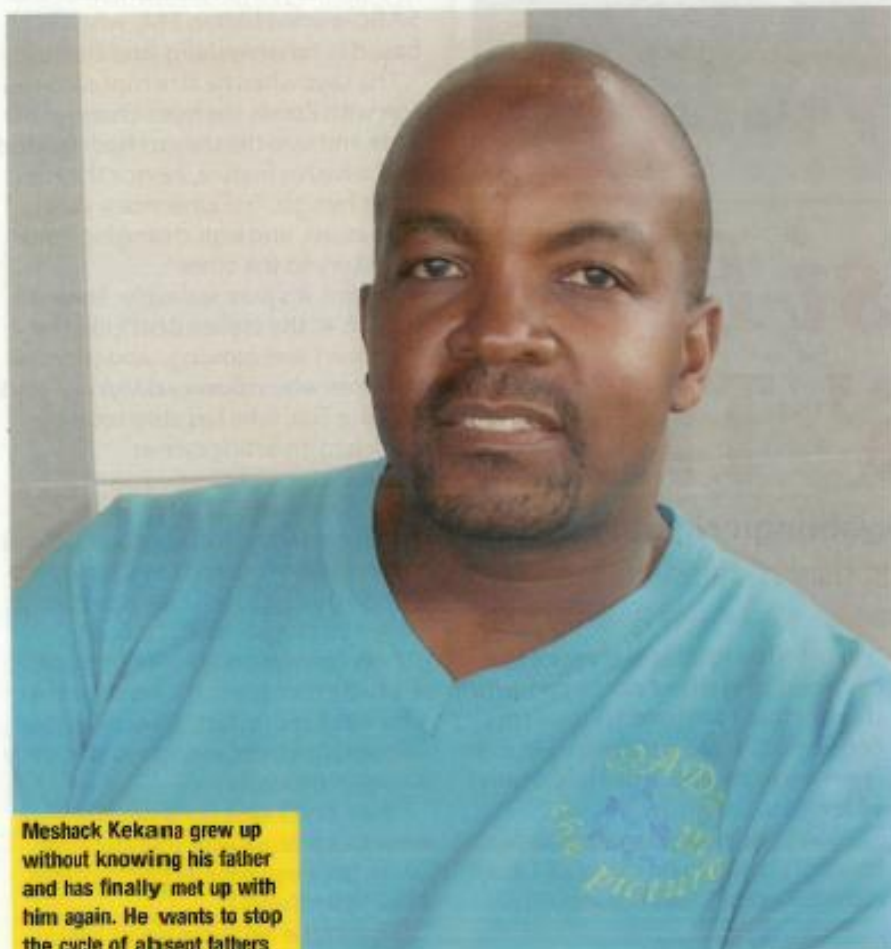




Putting dads IN THE PICTURE

Masanda Peters speaks to Meshack Kekana, who is on a mission to get fathers to play an active role in their children's lives



Meshack Kekana grew up without knowing his father and has finally met up with him again. He wants to stop the cycle of absent fathers

MESHACK KEKANA lives in Pretoria but grew up in Soweto. He's one of two children but is part of a big family. He was raised by his grandparents. His male role models were his grandfather, uncles and big brother as his father was not involved in his upbringing.

Over the years, Meshack has

reached out to his father, especially after the death of his grandfather, but there's a gap.

As they are trying to reconnect as father and son, he has not asked his father why he was not there for him and knows he may not get answers.

"I decided to hang onto what we have and not ask too many questions," he says.

He urges people to ask questions

but warns that some may not get the answers they are looking for.

DADS IN THE PICTURE

Dads in the Picture is an organisation of like-minded men who see a need for fathers to play an active role in the lives of their children.

A few like-minded fathers shared ideas about the role of males and how they can improve as dads.

"My vision for Dads in the Picture is to encourage every dad to take responsibility by bringing up their children in a safe environment," says Meshack. "I always felt the need for my father to be around, but I was lucky to have had uncles and older brothers around me. It helped fill the void as there were male figures around."

"Lessons on how to be a man came from them. These days, the family structure has changed. Things have moved from a nuclear family to single-parent households that are mostly headed by women."

"Boys and girls need validation and the fact is, not every child has access to their father."

BEING A GOOD DAD IS COOL

"I am married and a father of five children. I try to make a difference in their lives by actively participating in what interests them. There are fathers like me who are playing an active role. I'd like my organisation to be a point of contact for all of us so we can share ideas and promote active, involved, responsible fatherhood."

"Before, there was nothing cool about being a father. I want to make it cool. The organisation is



ABOVE: The logo of Meshack's new organisation, aimed at getting fathers more involved in their kids' lives

not for single men only, but all fathers, be they uncles, brothers or grandfathers."

STOP MAKING EXCUSES

"It's women who usually drop off their children at school. When a man does so, he tends to think that he's doing the mother a favour," says Meshack.

He encourages men to remove the mentality that they are helpers. "They are playing their role as much as the mothers do," he says.

"Some men act naïve about not having to be involved in their children's lives. They have a limited outlook. The fact that a man did not have his own father around does not give him the right not to look after his own child. It's no excuse. In fact, because he knows what it's like not to have a father around, he should make extra efforts with his own kids."

CARE FOR YOUR BABIES

Meshack also blames the non-participation of men on how differently boys and girls are raised. Some men are not allowed near newborns, aren't allowed to change a nappy and never do chores. This

influences their behaviour negatively. We need to make men feel more welcome to help with child-rearing from the moment their baby is born.

SPEND QUALITY TIME

Meshack holds workshops and motivational talks on the subject. Some men who attend are divorced dads who are determined to play an active role in their children's life.

Dads in the Picture holds picnics for dads and their children. It encourages divorced dads not to drop off the kids with grandma when it's their turn to spend a weekend with them," urges Meshack. "Teach your children values and communicate

The fact that a man did not have his own father around does not give him the right not to look after his own child

with their mother, no matter how hard it is. After all, your children stay with the mother and it is best that you get along for their sake."

EFFECTS OF ABSENT FATHERS

Many young girls with absent fathers tend to get involved with older men as they are looking for a father figure. Some stay in abusive relationships because they are unsure of a man's love and are always searching for validation from the men they get involved with.

Boys with absent fathers tend to look for heroes and for people who will validate them. They may find a negative role model and get into trouble in their search for a father figure.

SPREADING THE MESSAGE

Meshack's organisation plans to launch across South Africa. He's started giving workshops in Gauteng. Dads in the Picture offers a support structure and a way of sharing challenges that fathers face. It also works with organisations that offer counselling. Some of the men involved in the organisation are Theo Kgosinkwe of Mafikizolo and Neo Matsunyane, who is the organisation's secretary.

ADVICE FOR FATHERS

Meshack encourages fathers who want to have a relationship with their children to appreciate and respect the work that has been done by the mother.

"They need to consider the mother's feelings and win the mother and child's trust," says Meshack. "This can take time. Fathers need to take it slowly.

"Listen to the child. The child will tell you what kind of relationship they expect from you. Parenting is a full-time job and you have to make sacrifices for the child.

"You can't pitch up when you feel like it; check with the child's mother. Be honest when you can't make a scheduled time so the child understands."

He encourages fathers who want to rekindle relationships with their children. ■