

BOYS' EXPERIENCE OF AN ABSENT FATHER— A GESTALT  
THERAPEUTIC DESCRIPTION

By

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“I declare that ‘Boys’ Experience of an Absent Father - A Gestalt Therapeutic Description’ is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.”

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## **Summary**

With the rise of the divorce rate and the decline of the nuclear family, boys are more frequently being deprived of a father-presence in their homes.

The aim of this study was to qualitatively explore and describe boys' experiences of their relationships with their absent fathers. Three boys from different racial and cultural groups were chosen as case studies and worked with from a Gestalt Play Therapy Perspective. Data was gathered from the therapeutic sessions, as well as from semi structured interviews with the childcare workers of the boys. The findings of the study appear to concur with existing literature, namely that boys with absent fathers experience difficulties in the areas of emotional, social, cognitive and moral development. Recommendations are made as to how boys with absent fathers may best be supported.

## **Key Concepts**

Divorce; absent father; emotional experience; boys; middle childhood; Gestalt Play Therapy; emotional development; social development; cognitive development; moral development.

## **Opsomming**

Met die toename in egskeidings en die afname van nukleêre gesinne, word daar gevind dat seuns meer dikwels die teenwoordigheid van die vader in die huis ontnem word.

Die doel van hierdie studie is 'n kwalitatiewe ondersoek en beskrywing van seuns se ervaring van hulle verhouding met hulle afwesige vaders. Drie seuns van verskillende rasse- en kulturele groepe is gekies vir die gevallestudies en vanuit 'n Gestalt Speltherapeutiese perspektief is met hulle gewerk.

Data is versamel vanuit die terapeutiese sessies sowel as vanuit semigestruktureerde onderhoude met die seuns se kinderoppassers.

Die bevindinge van die studie blyk ooreen te stem met bestaande literatuur, naamlik dat seuns met afwesige vaders probleme ondervind ten opsigte van emosionele, sosiale, kognitiewe en morele ontwikkeling. Aanbevelings word gemaak oor hoe om dié seuns ten beste te ondersteun.

### **Sleutelwoorde**

Egskeiding; afwesige vader; emosionele ervaring; seuns; middelkinderjare; Gestaltspeltherapie; emosionele ontwikkeling; sosiale ontwikkeling; kognitiewe ontwikkeling; morele ontwikkeling.

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## **CHAPTER ONE: BACKGROUND INFORMATION AND METHODOLOGY**

### **1.1 INTRODUCTION**

With the decline of the nuclear family, men are being drawn from families in an increasing measure (Dobson, 2002:142). According to the researcher, families do, however, survive this loss. The question then begs whether father-presence really makes a difference in the life of a boy.

There is much evidence to support the notion that father presence has a significantly positive impact on both boys and girls, but especially on boys. The following statistics reflect the effect that the absence of a father could have on a child. These statistics apply to the nearly 22% of American children who live in fatherless households:

- 63% of youth suicides are from fatherless homes;
- 90% of all homeless and runaway children are from fatherless homes;
- 85% of all children that exhibit behavioural disorders come from fatherless homes;
- 80% of rapists motivated with displaced anger come from fatherless homes;
- 71% of all high school dropouts come from fatherless homes;
- 75% of all adolescent patients in chemical abuse centres come from fatherless homes;

- 70% of juveniles in state-operated institutions come from fatherless homes;
- 85% of all youths sitting in prisons grew up in a fatherless home.

The above statistics translated, mean that children from a fatherless home are:

- 5 times more likely to commit suicide;
- 32 times more likely to run away;
- 20 times more likely to have behavioural disorders;
- 14 times more likely to commit rape (This applies to boys);
- 9 times more likely to drop out of high school;
- 10 times more likely to abuse chemical substances;
- 9 times more likely to end up in a state-operated institution;
- 20 times more likely to end up in prison (Statistics about 'deadbeat dads'..., 1994).

Dobson (2002:44) cites similar statistics that apply specifically to boys, and says that boys today are experiencing what he aptly describes as a *"crisis of confidence that reaches deep within the soul."*

The researcher found that statistics on absent fathers and sons in South Africa were scarce and a good database of information on the topic appeared to be lacking. The researcher did, however, find the following information on the plight of children and boys in South Africa:

According to Richter (2004) South Africa's Central Statistics Services show that:

- 42% of children in 1998 lived only with their mother compared with only one percent who lived with the father. This could indicate that in single-parent households, it is fathers who are more commonly absent;
- where parents are not married, father support is weak and continues to decrease over time;
- only 20% of fathers who were not married to the mothers of their children had contact with their children once they had reached age eleven;
- children living only with their mothers experienced lower levels of education and socio-economic circumstances;
- Demographic and health surveys done in a number of African countries showed that South Africa has the lowest rate (41%) of maternal orphans of AIDS living with their fathers.

In addition to this, Barker and Ricardo (2005) state that young men in some settings in sub-Saharan Africa participate in conflict and violence as a means to gain power and in order to find camaraderie, male role models, surrogate fathers and substitute families with their male peers. This could mean that boys with absent fathers in sub-Saharan Africa lack a sense of power and masculinity and are searching for it in conflict and violence.

According to Smit (2001) research done by Jones (1992:264) shows that, children of migrant males in South Africa had been separated from their fathers for an average of 55% of their childhood years and that this could have led to lack of parental authority, disruption of domestic life, problematic father-child relationships and the prevalence of poverty.

Morrell and Richter (2006), furthermore, state that most men in South Africa seldom attend the birth of their children and often do not acknowledge their children as theirs. They say that fathers in South Africa frequently fail to be involved in their children's lives and that in the 1990's, of the 22 000 children born in the Chris Hani Baragwanath hospital, 50% of them had no male support. They concur with Dobson (2002:44) that within South Africa, literature on men shows that there is a crisis of masculinity. This is measured by the high rates of suicide among men, declining academic performance of boys and changes in the workplace that challenge the hierarchical entitlement of men. They assert that especially young men in South Africa are in trouble.

Noting the plight of boys today, the researcher questions the kind of men that society is raising and the effect that this will have on society as a whole. The researcher is interested in the unique experiences of boys with absent fathers in order to gain a better understanding of the needs of such boys. Increased understanding will allow for the empowerment of boys that will equip them to function optimally in society.

For the purposes of this study, the term "absent father" refers to a father that is not emotionally involved with his son. This includes the father not living at home or living at home but showing no emotional involvement with his son. Qualitative case studies with boys who have absent fathers are described as part of the empirical research.

## 1.2 MOTIVATION AND PROBLEM FORMULATION

Prior to conducting this study, the majority of the boy clients that the researcher had seen had emotionally absent fathers. The researcher developed an interest in exploring and describing the experience of absent-fathered boys in terms of their functional and emotional environment. The researcher has a personal interest in seeing boys become fully equipped in each developmental stage in order to produce strong-charactered, confident and competent men.

The researcher was of the opinion that the Gestalt framework would provide an ideal framework within which to conduct the research, as it allows for the empathic inclusion of the subjects and thus, for an authentic and rich exploration of the social situation. The Gestalt approach does not seek to control, manipulate or change the respondent's experience, but rather attempts to increase awareness of the experience. This approach also encourages the respondents to take responsibility for their experience and empowers them to meet their individual needs (Yontef, 1993:214-217). The researcher's intention in this study was to create awareness in an empathic and empowering manner and thus, Gestalt proved to be a suitable framework within which to explore the topic.

From the above motivation the following problems were formulated:

The breakdown of the nuclear family has resulted in an increase in woman-headed households (Dobson, 2002:142). This correlates with an increase in absent fathers. Dobson (2002:144), Whitehead (in Dobson, 2002:144) and Harper and McLanahan (in Dobson, 2002:144) all agree that this will have a negative impact on boys. According to Kostlenik, *et al.* (1993:240) boys who have absent fathers tend to have relational difficulties in social situations. The researcher formulated the problem as an increase in absent fathers, which has a negative impact on boys in their functional and emotional environment.

### 1.3 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The aim of this study was to explore and describe the experience of boys with absent fathers in order to gain a deeper understanding of how they view the absence of a father in their lives and what their emotional experience of this absence is. The following objectives were formulated in order to reach the above aim:

- To conduct a pilot study, including three case studies and a literature study as background information;
- to make contact with experts regarding the viability of the study;
- to carry out Gestalt therapeutic intervention, including observation, video recordings and field notes;
- to carry out literature control by looking at the findings of the study in the light of existing literature on the topic;

- to make recommendations as to how society can best support fathers who have been unwittingly absent and boys who have been abandoned by their fathers.

#### 1.4 PARADIGMATIC PERSPECTIVE

The researcher approached this study from a Gestalt phenomenological perspective. This perspective relies on the notion that phenomenology is the search for understanding based on what is presented by the situation, rather than the observer's interpretation thereof (Yontef, 1993:186). The researcher approached the study with an understanding of Field Theory and therefore saw all things as being interconnected and affecting each other. The researcher believed that this perspective would allow for the most holistic and comprehensive observation and exploration of the chosen topic. The Gestalt paradigm also guides a client to self-awareness, self-responsibility and the meeting of one's own needs and it was the researcher's hope that all participants would be guided to this point. During the course of therapy, the researcher found that all three respondents had an increase in their self-awareness as they began to recognize emotions that they experienced and were able to express them. Two of the respondents began to show signs of becoming self-responsible as they began to see the part that they had to play in their circumstances. One of the respondents showed signs of beginning to meet his emotional needs independently as he identified alternatives for how to handle the disappointments that come with having an absent father.

## 1.5 ETHICAL MEASURES

Ethical measures were taken to ensure the anonymity and protection of all respondents. The researcher obtained informed consent from the respondents and made certain that they were psychologically and legally able to give consent. The researcher made sure that the premises used for therapy was easily accessible and safe for the respondents. The goal of the research, procedure to be followed, possible advantages and disadvantages of involvement in the study and the competence of the researcher were clearly explained to the respondents. The researcher tended to the emotional safety of the respondents by working at their pace and treating their needs as a priority. The respondents were given the freedom to withdraw from the study at any stage. The researcher did not withhold information from the respondents or mislead them in any way. The respondents were ensured anonymity and pseudonyms are used in the research report. The researcher made use of notes, dictaphone recordings and video footage for gathering data. All are kept in a locked cupboard to which only the researcher has access. The information stored on the researcher's computer is password protected. The researcher has reported the findings of the study as accurately and objectively as possible.

## 1.6 THEORY GENERATING AND PILOT STUDY

Literature that was consulted prior to conducting the study indicated that boys with their fathers absent are generally less well-adjusted than boys with their fathers present. The researcher made use of the case study as the strategic approach to the research. This was studied as part of the pilot study to gain an understanding of how best to conduct the research. Experts were contacted regarding the viability of the study.

Prior to conducting the study, the researcher had had the opportunity to observe and work therapeutically with a few boys in middle childhood who have absent fathers. The boys were given the opportunity to express their emotional experiences of their functional environment. The observations that were made during three of these case studies were used as background information for the proposed study.

The researcher believed that this would be a trustworthy study as the researcher had had previous experience in implementing play therapy, and had a rich understanding of the Gestalt theoretical paradigm. A pilot study was conducted in order to gain a deeper understanding of how the research should be approached. The researcher conducted semi structured interviews with the childcare workers of the respondents and a literature control in order to ensure the trustworthiness of the data gathered. During therapeutic intervention the researcher made use of video camera and dictaphone recordings and took extensive, detailed notes of what was observed. The researcher made every attempt to make the study as applicable, consistent and neutral as possible.

## 1.7 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The following research methodology was followed:

- A pilot study (Strydom & Delpont, 2002:337) was conducted that included a literature study for background information, contacting experts regarding the viability of the study and using information gathered from previous therapeutic sessions with boys who have emotionally absent fathers.
- The universe (Strydom & Venter, 2002:198) that this study focused on was South African boys in middle childhood who have absent fathers. The specific population (Strydom & Venter, 2002:198) from which a sample was drawn was that of middle childhood to early adolescent boys from Girls & Boys Town S.A. Macassar who have absent fathers, as well as their childcare workers.
- The respondents that the researcher worked with were from three different racial and cultural groups, those being: Xhosa-speaking black, Afrikaans-speaking white and Afrikaans-speaking coloured. All the respondents that were chosen were thirteen years old which theoretically does not fall into the developmental phase of middle childhood, but the social workers were of the opinion that the boys, although age wise in early adolescence, were emotionally delayed and therefore still in the emotional developmental phase of middle childhood. The participants were chosen by purposeful sampling (Strydom & Delpont, 2002:334).
- The researcher conducted semi structured interviews with the childcare workers of the participants (Greeff, 2002:302).

- Therapeutic intervention was conducted with the chosen participants. The researcher worked within a Gestalt Play Therapy framework. The intention was to make use of Gestalt techniques to create awareness of the participants' experience of an absent father. This was done by giving the children an opportunity to explore and express their emotions. The researcher used the information and observations gathered to describe the experience of the participants. Child-appropriate mediums and equipment were utilised in the therapy sessions.
- A literature control was conducted.
- Data analysis was conducted by means of management of data, reading and memo writing, description, classification and interpretation of data, and representation and visualisation of data (De Vos, 2002:343).
- Based on the findings of the research, recommendations were made for therapeutic intervention and treatment of boys who fit the description of the participants in the study.

## 1.8 DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Data was collected by means of semi-structured interviews with the childcare workers of the participants (Greeff, 2002:302). The researcher also made use of unstructured observation in the therapeutic setting to gather data. Once gathered, the data was analysed through the following process: The data was managed by capturing voice recorded files of each of the sessions that the respondents attended. The data was then organized and filed on the researchers computer and any articles that the respondents produced in therapy, such as pictures, were stored in

physical files. Each child had a separate file and all data collected on the child was stored in their respective files. Each file was coded to organize the data into sections depending on the type of data gathered. Reading and memo writing was then done as the researcher thoroughly read the data gathered to get a holistic picture of the database. The researcher made memos and lifted the key concepts from the data in order to categorise the data into workable themes. Once the data was categorized and classified, the researcher interpreted the data by describing what was found in order to make sense of the data. (Compare De Vos, 2002:343.)

#### 1.9 LITERATURE CONTROL

The researcher consulted literature on the following subjects or concepts: the nature of boys in middle childhood; single-parent families; woman-headed households; absent father households; social behaviour of boys with absent fathers; Gestalt Play Therapy; emotional development and expression. This was purely to gain background information in the initial stages of the study, but was not used to draw any conclusions from. The observations made and recorded during therapeutic intervention, as well as data gathered from semi structured interviews were checked in the light of a more thorough review of the relevant literature.

## 1.10 CHAPTER LAYOUT

A brief description of the remaining chapters follows:

**Chapter one** serves as an orientation for the reader of the study that was conducted. It includes: background information on the topic, a description of the formulated problem, the ethical measures taken, the perspective from which the problem was approached, how the study was carried out and how data was gathered, interpreted and reported.

**Chapter two** gives background information on child development in middle childhood; explains the concept of an absent father and the factors that contribute to this phenomenon; gives a description of Gestalt Play Therapy and looks at a pilot study conducted prior to the study which includes the consulting of experts on the viability of the study.

**Chapter three** gives a detailed description of the therapy that was conducted with the participants and the data gathered in the process.

**Chapter four** provides the reader with a comparison of the findings of the study with existing literature on the topic; recommendations and a conclusion.

## **CHAPTER TWO: THEORY AND PILOT STUDY**

This chapter gives an overview of information on the developmental phase of middle childhood. Existing literature is explored to give background information on absent fathers. The researcher then describes the findings from work already done with boys with absent fathers. Lastly, expert opinions are looked at in terms of the viability of the study.

### **2.1 MIDDLE CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT**

In order to fully engage the children that were worked with, it was essential for the researcher to have a thorough understanding of the developmental phase of middle childhood. This developmental phase includes children between the ages of approximately six to twelve years. The child was looked at in the areas of physical, cognitive, personality, social and moral development. The researcher notes that each child's developmental path is unique and may not adhere strictly to the developmental averages that follow. Additional factors such as race, nationality, socio-economic status and environment may affect each child's developmental path.

#### **2.1.1 Physical Development**

This section is of importance as it relates to the connection between the physical needs of a boy and the role of the father. According to Berk (2000:430) fathers tend to interact with their sons in a way that is exciting and highly physical. Play of this nature fulfils a boy's need to be physical

and active at a time when they have testosterone surges and bursts of physical energy that need to be expressed. Physical development allows for the expression of this energy (Biddulph, 2003:63). The researcher feels that if boys do not have a social environment or interactive relationship with a father that is conducive to the expression of their physical abilities and needs, boys may be deprived of the opportunity to exercise and expand their physical abilities. It could hamper their physical development and, as a result, reduce their feeling of competence and positive self-esteem.

Physical development in middle childhood can be observed in the following general areas:

- Rapid growth of arms and legs when compared with the body;
- slower growth rate than in early childhood or adolescence;
- height may vary between approximately 1,20m and 1,50m and mass increases from approximately 20kg to 40kg between ages six and twelve;
- body proportions gradually take on an adult form;
- the brain reaches adult size and weight;
- breathing becomes deeper and slower as the respiratory tract functions more economically;
- development of the heart and the circulatory system slow down;
- milk teeth are replaced by permanent teeth;
- the growth rate for girls in terms of height and weight is more rapid than that of boys.

### 2.1.2 Psycho-motor Development

During middle childhood the most prominent development can be seen in the area of psycho-motor skills. The acquisition and refinement of motor skills during this time can be attributed to an increase in strength, coordination and muscular control. Balance and fluidity of movement also increase during this period. Children in this phase often become extremely skilled at motor activities and although they do not have the speed, stamina and strength of adolescents and adults, they may match them in coordination, timing and concentration. Boys usually develop faster in activities such as running, jumping and throwing than girls do. Physical development in this phase, in turn, affects development in other areas. It affects cognitive development in terms of being able to write, draw or play a musical instrument. It affects social development in terms of participation in sports and social activities and it affects personality development in terms of improving self-esteem when a child becomes successful in the acquisition of skills and completion of tasks (Louw, Van Ede & Louw, 1998:326). According to Elium and Elium (2004:242) middle childhood is a time when boys are developing a sense of their competence in their world. They seek approval and confirmation of their competence from their fathers. The researcher is of the opinion that when boys are deprived of a father who can act as a masculine “soundboard” for their competence, it could have a negative impact on their self-esteem and sense of masculinity. The researcher realizes that affirmation and positive feedback can come from other sources in a boy’s life, but when boys at this age specifically seek out the approval of fathers, they will be at a disadvantage if it is not received.

### 2.1.3 Cognitive Development

When looking at cognitive development it is important to note that there are certain factors that may affect the cognitive development of any child which will, in turn, affect their ability to communicate and ultimately express their experience of an absent father. In Louw, *et al.* (1998:330) the following factors are mentioned as being influential on the cognitive development of children: schooling versus no schooling, quality of schooling and level of parent education. The researcher feels that these factors could affect a boy with an absent father in the following ways:

Considering the earlier-mentioned statistic of 90 percent of homeless and runaway children coming from absent-father homes, the researcher would argue that this could reduce the level of schooling that boys with absent fathers receive and, thus, their cognitive development. When a father is absent from the home, often the family income is reduced and the researcher feels that this may affect the choice of school that a boy is sent to and possibly the quality of schooling. This, in turn, would affect the boy's cognitive development. Lastly, if the level of parent education is influential in the cognitive development of a boy, the researcher feels that a boy would be at a disadvantage if he did not have the skill and knowledge of a father to draw from.

For the purposes of this study cognitive development in middle childhood is looked at in terms of memory, theory of mind and language development. Memory has been selected in order to gain understanding of a child's ability to accurately recall information relating to his father. Theory of mind has been selected in order to understand a child's ability to

reflect on his own mental processes and those of his father. Language development has been selected in order to understand the child's ability for verbal expression of the experience of his relationship with his father.

### 2.1.3.1 *Memory*

According to Louw, *et al.* (1998:331) the following aspects of memory improve during middle childhood:

- A child's ability to retain and process information to perform complex tasks. If a word, a number or a collection of words or numbers that form a concept were to be measured as a chunk, the memory span of a seven year old would be five chunks, that of a nine year old would be six chunks, while the memory span of an adult is approximately seven chunks;
- processing speed;
- the amount of information that a chunk contains, increases with age;
- semantic memory or the ability to remember rules, concepts, facts and meanings;
- episodic memory or the recall of personally experienced events.

Children's capacity for recall is influenced by use of memory strategies, knowledge base and metamemory (thinking about what they know in order to remember it). They become more proficient at retaining and recalling information as their processing speed and working memory capacity increase. The researcher feels that this increased ability to retain and recall information and think about their own thoughts and the thoughts of their father may increase the potential for a boy to feel the loss or a

longing for a father that he has memories of. It may allow a boy to reflect on his thoughts about his father and his father's thoughts about him. The researcher is of the opinion that if a boy's cognition about his absent father's thoughts about him are negative, it could adversely affect the boy's self-esteem. On the other hand, if his thoughts about his father are overly positive, he could be rationalizing an idealized view of his father, thereby creating inner conflict (Balcom, 1998:283).

#### 2.1.3.2 *Theory of Mind*

Louw, *et al.* (1998:339) describe children's theory of mind as being their understanding of how the mind functions, an awareness of their own and others' minds and how the mind affects behaviour. Louw, *et al.* (1998:339) state that this theory of mind becomes particularly refined during middle childhood and attribute it to the following factors:

- Improved metacognitive abilities;
- improved metamemory;
- improved ability to reflect on their mental processes.

The researcher is of the opinion that the increased ability of a boy to reflect on the thoughts of others and to connect their behaviour to their thoughts, may lead a boy to draw conclusions about his father's behaviour and his thoughts about his son. For example, a boy may experience his father as absent or withdrawn and draw the conclusion that his father has negative thoughts about him, causing his father to behave in this way.

### 2.1.3.3 *Language Development*

This area of cognitive development has particular significance for this study as the boys' experiences of an absent father will be conveyed through verbal as well as nonverbal expression, and it is therefore necessary for the researcher to understand what the boy's capability for verbal expression may be.

Louw, *et al.* (1998:339) cite the following as advances in language development in the middle childhood years:

- The length and complexity of sentences improves;
- vocabulary increases;
- understanding of metaphorical language improves;
- understanding of irony improves;
- understanding of humorous language improves;
- the ability to adapt language to suit a specific context increases.

Having discussed all the advances in cognitive development, perhaps it is important to mention a limitation of cognitive ability during middle childhood. According to Berk (2000: 268), children's logical reasoning in middle childhood is restricted to concrete, tangible information and they have difficulty with abstract concepts. The researcher is mindful of the fact that this may prove an impediment to the respondents' understanding and expression of abstract concepts and feelings related to their experience of their absent fathers.

## 2.1.4 Personality Development

### 2.1.4.1 *Self-concept*

According to Louw,*et al.* (1998: 344), a child's self-concept develops rapidly during middle childhood. They develop a good sense of their real and ideal self and they tend to see themselves quite accurately when compared with how friends and teachers see them. At this stage, children base their knowledge of themselves on their achievements, their needs and others' expectations of them. Children's self-concept is also built, in part, on their ability to regulate their own behaviour. It is therefore important that children develop trust in their own ability to fulfil their own personal as well as their social needs. ( Charles & Harsh, 1959:186.) In a study conducted by Coopersmith (in Louw,*et al.*, 1998:345), it was found that an important factor in the development of self-esteem is how the child is treated by adults and, in particular, the parents of the child. The findings of another study done by Visser (in Louw, *et al.* 1998:347) showed that a factor that has a profound effect on a child's self-concept is that of a broken home where the mother is a single parent and the child is unsure of his/her relationship with the father. In the light of these research findings it is evident that boys in middle childhood would be particularly vulnerable to the development of a poor self-concept if they have absent fathers or fathers who are present, but do not give them affirming, positive feedback on themselves. According to Elium and Elium (2004:248), it is around the age of nine or ten that a boy starts to make a transition from his mother to his father. He continues to need, but no longer identifies with his mother and craves attention from his father. Fathers are vital for the

development of a strong, positive self-concept as they serve as positive role models and ought to encourage and praise their sons in their successes.

#### 2.1.4.2 *Emotional Development*

This section is of importance to the researcher because of the particular interest as to how boys with absent fathers are emotionally affected by the absence of their father. The data that is to be gathered in this study will rely on the child's ability to express his emotions as accurately as possible.

According to Louw, *et al.* (1998:345) the following features of emotional development can be observed in middle childhood:

- Children become less helpless, more self-sufficient and more independent;
- emotional flexibility and differentiation increase which allows children to express a variety of emotions;
- the ability to attribute emotions to internal causes increases;
- they learn to read facial expression of emotion better;
- they begin to understand that thought processes can alter emotional states;
- they understand that people can experience different emotions at the same time;
- they understand and can attribute their feelings to emotional labels, for example, fear;

- they gain greater control over their emotions and develop the ability to hide their emotions;
- they develop sensitivity to the needs and feelings of other people.

In addition to this, Berk (2000:413) states that children's strategies for emotional self-regulation increase in variety, become more internal and can be adjusted to the needs of a specific situation. The researcher feels that, although the above points are the developmental norm for middle childhood, boys would need to be exposed to an environment and relationships (such as that with a father) in which emotional experiences could be expressed, in order to fully develop their emotional intelligence. An absence of this environment and relationship would, in the researcher's opinion, put boys at a disadvantage.

#### 2.1.5 Social Development

The social development of children in middle childhood will be looked at through the role of the family, the school and peers. For the purposes of this study, the role of the family will be of great importance and, in particular, the role of the father.

##### 2.1.5.1 *The Role of the Family*

During middle childhood children tend to spend much more time away from their home and parents than before, but the family remains the child's main source of support and security (Louw, *et al.*, 1998:350). (Compare Elium & Elium, 2004:250.) As a result of children's increased involvement

outside of the home, parents are required to protect their children from potential harm in the community. In addition to this the role of the parent includes:

- Moral, religious and cultural value training;
- The instilment of respect for authority;
- The teaching and modelling of how to handle interpersonal relationships;
- The teaching of how to handle conflict situations (Louw, *et al.*, 1998:350).

According to Louw. *et al.*, (1998:351) the following factors are influential in the social development of children in middle childhood: Parenting styles; the composition of a family or birth order of a child; stepfamilies; divorce; and single-parent families. The researcher is of the opinion that if the family is a boy's model of how to conduct oneself in social situations, but the family is disintegrated, this may hamper a boy's social integration.

#### 2.1.5.2 *The Role of the Father*

The researcher would like to outline the role of a father as this may give insight into areas where the experience of the boys in this study could be deficient.

Biddulph (2003:66) suggests that fathers can offer a unique and irreplaceable contribution to parenting. He explains the role of the father as being important in the areas of:

- Teaching attitudes;

- teaching children to feel and give expression to their feelings, to match their inner sensations with their outer behaviour;
- teaching boys to “rough and tumble,” with the specific intention of training boys to be able to have fun, get noisy and angry, but also know how to handle their testosterone and know when to stop. Essentially, this is the training of self-control. Berk (2000:601) concurs with this by adding that “rough and tumble” play is a characteristic of peer interaction that becomes common during middle childhood. Berk asserts that this kind of play originates from father-son interaction and possibly has the social functions of the development of fighting skills and dominance relations where boys need to show their strength;
- teaching boys to respect women;
- to affirm a boy and give him the confidence to know that he has what it takes to be a man;

According to Eilum and Eilum (2004:26), a father’s absence or presence has a powerful effect on his son. Regardless of the father’s level of involvement, his son will observe him and soak up his every movement in a process of learning what it means to be a man. If the father spends much time away from home, leaves child-rearing to the mother, is emotionally detached, abusive, an alcoholic or deserts his family, statistics show that his son is quite likely to follow in his footsteps.

### 2.1.5.3 *The Role of the School*

The role of the school during middle childhood is very important as it is at this stage of development that children begin school, spending a significant amount of time in that environment. While the parents and the family remain very influential in the child's life, the child now has a whole new social arena to become familiar with and learn to function effectively in. The child has the challenge of adapting to a new and unfamiliar environment, acquiring the basic scholastic skills of reading, writing and arithmetic, becoming successful in task completion, building new relationships and developing new behaviour patterns (Louw, *et al.*, 1998:360). The mastering of these tasks is essential for a child to develop into a healthy, productive member of society. The teacher plays a pivotal role in this development. According to Elium & Elium (2004:242) the development of self-esteem at this developmental stage is focused on doing. It is described by Erik Erikson (in Elium and Elium, 2004:242), as a struggle between industry and inferiority, competence and incompetence, productivity and inadequacy. Boys at this stage need to feel that they are competent and have skills that allow them to contribute to their environment in a productive way. Where a boy lacks a father figure to give his approval and help a boy to feel successful, perhaps this is the area where schools could fill the gap. The researcher does not feel that schools could ever replace the role of a father, but they could certainly contribute positively to the development of a boy's self-concept.

#### 2.1.5.4 *The Role of Peers*

This section is important as middle childhood is a phase in which children begin to shift their focus from their parents towards their peers. The peers may become a significant source of support for children who experience difficulties at home, particularly where there is an absence of a positive male role model.

According to Louw,*et al.* (1998:366), children interact with other children for the sake of friendship, affection and fellowship. During middle childhood there is an increase in solidarity and cohesion in interaction. The peer group clearly becomes a very important agent in socialisation and fulfils the following functions:

- It provides love, affection and camaraderie;
- it provides the opportunity for trying out new behaviour;
- it facilitates the transfer of information and knowledge;
- it teaches a child to adhere to rules and regulations;
- it reinforces gender roles;
- it weakens the parent-child emotional bond;
- it provides an environment for competing on equal footing.

Considering the importance of the role of peers in middle childhood, the researcher is of the opinion that peer relationships play a profoundly important role in the life of a boy with an absent father. The researcher feels that boys who do not receive love, affection and masculine role-modelling from a father figure, may seek to satisfy these needs in their peer relationships. This could be positive and supportive for boys but

could also have negative results, for instance when boys seek to satisfy their needs by involving themselves in gangs.

#### 2.1.6 Moral Development

It may be useful to briefly look at the moral development of children in middle childhood as this may give insight into the child's ability to recognise and differentiate between "good" and "bad" behaviour. This may be relevant when looking at how a boy perceives the behaviour of an absent father.

When looking at *Kohlberg's Stages of Moral Development* (Louw, *et al.*, 1998:378) it is clear that children in middle childhood are generally found to be at the preconventional level of moral development. This is the first level of moral development and is characterised by the evaluation of behaviour based on its consequences. That is, children will conform to rules in order to receive rewards and avoid punishment. They find it hard to view a moral dilemma from different angles and therefore do not take a person's motives into account when judging whether behaviour is good or bad. The researcher believes that if a boy at this stage of moral development cannot consider his father's motives for being uninvolved or absent, it may lead the child to feel that his father's absence is due to some wrongdoing of his that he is being punished for.

## 2.2 THE ABSENT FATHER

This section deals with the definition of an absent father as the researcher understands it for the purposes of this study. The possible causes for a father being emotionally absent from a boy's life are also considered.

### 2.2.1 The Emotionally Present Versus the Emotionally Absent Father

Perhaps it is easier to describe what the researcher understands by an emotionally present father and allow for the lack of this in a boy's life to serve as a description of the absent father.

Much has been said in the previous section about a boy's need for physical interaction with his father. (Compare Pollock, 1998:114.) This serves the threefold purpose of meeting a boy's physical need to be active, his need for affirming touch and male affection, and the necessity of developing a boy's understanding of his masculinity. According to Dobson (2002:69), around the age of three to five years boys go through a critical time of disconnecting and differentiating themselves from their mothers and developing a craving for the attention and involvement of their fathers. Dobson asserts that if fathers are absent, inaccessible, distant or abusive at this time, boys have a hard time understanding what it is to be male. He further states that boys living in female-headed homes are left to develop their masculine identity out of thin air. A present father would therefore be characterised by one who shows physical love and affection towards a boy through rough and tumble play, hugs and positive, uplifting, encouraging and affirming words. In addition to this he would be

a good role model for masculinity, assertive and secure in his manhood, and will affirm his son's masculinity.

A present father will be aware of and will accept his responsibility in conveying and modelling positive values, morals and attitudes to his son. A present father will model the sincere expression of emotion and thereby teach his son awareness of emotions and foster an environment in which the child will feel the freedom to express his emotions.

Lastly, a present father will model strong leadership and respect for women. (Compare Pollock, 1998:123) He will instill firm, consistent boundaries, thereby fostering a sense of security for the child.

The lack of these characteristics would, in the researcher's view, constitute an absent father.

## 2.2.2 Contributing Factors to the Absence of Fathers

### 2.2.2.1 *Divorce and Single-parent Households*

With the divorce rate rising and more and more children growing up in single-parent households, where in the majority of cases the mother heads the home, fathers are becoming increasingly absent. According to Berk (2000:577), currently about half of American marriages end in divorce, three fourths of which involve children. (Compare Gillis, 2000:226.) This translates to the fact that one in four children live in single-parent homes, 85% of which are mother-headed.

Biddulph (2003:70) suggests that divorce is a big blow to a father's hopes and dreams for his children, with the result that they are so devastated that they "cut and run". He mentions talking to fathers who thought it would be simpler to just discontinue contact with their children after divorce, but has found that all have regretted the decision profoundly. Another way in which divorce draws fathers away from their children is explained by Dobson (2002:47). He says that when divorce occurs, parents are so caught up in their own emotional turmoil that they are not able to focus on the needs of their children.

Much research has been done on the effects of divorce on children, and the researcher has found that the findings of various studies consistently report that boys are worse off in divorce situations than girls. One such study by Amato, Keith and Wallerstein (in Louw, *et al.*, 1998:356) found that boys showed more negative and antisocial behaviour and experienced more academic problems. One of the reasons given for this is that boys seem to experience the separation from their father more negatively than girls.

Another factor contributing to the absence of fathers in children's lives is the growing trend in modern society for women to have or adopt and intentionally raise children single-handedly.

#### 2.2.2.2 *Stepfamilies*

Dobson (2002:145) points out an important factor in stepfamilies that could, in the researcher's opinion, contribute to the absence of a father. He states that the tasks at hand for reconstituted families are not easy. When two families are blended, it is common for the children to see the new husband as a usurper and, because of this perception, to solidify their loyalty to the missing parent. When conflicts of any nature arise, it is also common for the parents to remain loyal to their biological children. This, in the researcher's opinion, would cause another situation in which a boy may feel emotionally unsupported by a father-figure, in this case a step-father.

According to Louw, *et al.* (1998:357), research findings show that when stepfamilies are formed, it adversely affects the children's ability to build a relationship with the parent who does not have custody over the children. Since it is the mother that is more frequently granted custody of the children, the researcher believes that this could increase the incidence of fathers being absent by pure virtue of the fact that fathers have less easy access to their children than the mothers.

#### 2.2.2.3 *Occupational Demands*

The current prospects for job opportunities in this country are generally poor. This is pushing people to seek employment beyond the borders of South Africa. Often, it is the husbands and fathers that are making this move. This could also contribute towards the absence of fathers (Gillis,

2000:233). This does not necessarily mean that the father chooses to be emotionally unavailable to his son, but the reality of being so far removed from him, lessens the father's may not have the opportunity to interact with his son in the way of a present father as defined in this chapter.

#### *2.2.2.4 The Cycle of Emotional Absence and Inadequate Role-models*

According to Biddulph (2003:66), fathering in the twentieth century does not have a good track record. He describes what the researcher understands as emotionally absent fathering, as being the model that today's generation of fathers has to draw from. This is a model of fathers who fulfilled their role by working and not playing, cuddling, teaching or talking to their children. Many were violent, scary, drank too much or were traumatised by war and difficult to get close to. Many abandoned their families and never returned. When men today are faced with the task of fathering, they go with what they know best. For most men the model of fathering that they had was largely inadequate and so the cycle of emotionally absent fathering is perpetuated.

Fathers continue to provide for their children on a practical, functional level and get so involved doing so, that they have no time and energy left to devote to the emotional needs of their children.

From the literature referred to above, it is clear that fathers play a vital role in the cognitive, physical, social, personality and moral development of their sons, and thus that boys with absent fathers are at a distinct disadvantage.

With the foundation of background information laid, the following section looks at a pilot study done with boys with absent fathers.

### 2.3 PILOT STUDY

The researcher has had the opportunity to work play therapeutically with a few boys in middle childhood who have absent fathers. This opportunity has been used to make observations on the boys' behaviour and emotional expression of their experience of their general environment. The initial focus was not the absent fathers, but symptomatic problem behaviour. The boys were, however, given the opportunity to express their feelings around their relationships with their fathers. Observations were made that indicated a need for research into the area of how boys experience the absence of their fathers. A description of the general observations made in three separate case studies follows.

#### 2.3.1 Case One

Boy X was a six year old preschool child when referred. The reason for referral was that the family had moved on numerous occasions in the recent past and the sister used to behave violently the night before a school day, as well as every morning at the anticipation of going to school. The concern was that the brother was suffering as a result of the sister's behaviour. The family composition at the time of referral was: mother, maternal grandmother, twin sister and boy X. The father and mother had

never been married and, for the most part, the father had been physically absent from the time of the boy's birth. He had only visited them occasionally and spoken to the children on the phone. The children had photos of them with their father, but could not tell where he was at a given point in time (he had lived in various locations abroad). He occasionally sent money for birthdays and made promises about coming to visit, but seldom kept them.

The therapist experienced boy X in therapy as being relatively quiet and passive. His capacity for emotional self-expression was very poor. He spoke about his father very often and clearly had an overinflated view of him. He hero-worshipped his father, but when it came to telling anything about him he had very little to say and clearly did not really know his father. Towards the end of the therapist's time with boy X, the therapist was given reports of his behaviour at home where he became increasingly aggressive. The therapist also had the opportunity to observe very disrespectful, aggressive behaviour towards his grandmother, who was his caregiver at the time, while his mother was working full-time.

### 2.3.2 Case Two

Boy Y was a six year old preschool child at the time of referral. The reason for referral was violent outbursts and inappropriate levels of aggression at home and at school. The mother was undergoing treatment for depression at the time. There was a history of suicide in the family and the parents were experiencing severe marital problems. During the

therapist's time with boy Y the parents separated and reunited twice, and on one of the occasions the father took an overdose of pills in a manipulative attempt to prevent his wife from leaving. This was the father's third marriage.

The therapist experienced boy Y in therapy as being an extremely loving and animated child. He was very expressive about the things that he was comfortable talking about. However, when he was guided to take ownership of any issue that presented in therapy, he would become very resistant and verbally aggressive at times. He had a great lack of physical, as well as verbal and social boundaries. He was, at times, verbally abusive towards his mother, as well as physically aggressive towards her. Her responses were mostly soft and lenient. The therapist also found boy Y to be very aggressive during play in therapy. He would smash figurines into walls for extended periods of time with his body appearing to be highly energized towards the behaviour. Boy Y also seemed to have a great need to build himself up and would often tell and show the therapist how strong and powerful he was. He seemed preoccupied with winning and being the best at all times, and when he was made aware of this, he would become angry. The therapist experienced boy Y as having an almost obsessive need to be in control of others.

Boy Y had, on occasion, expressed fear of his father. He was, however, simultaneously defensive of him. This was especially so when his father left the home for a period of time and divorce proceedings had begun.

### 2.3.3 Case Three

Boy Z was also a six year old preschool child at the time of referral. The reason for referral was inappropriate levels of aggression towards people and things. The child had threatened his mother with a pair of scissors and broken a car window in anger, which led to the mother seeking help. Boy Z's parents were never married and live in different towns. Boy Z goes to visit his father over weekends and school holidays. The mother is a successful, independent, responsible woman and has tried to accommodate these visits to the best of her ability. The father, however, has shown himself to be irresponsible and unreliable in adhering to the conditions for visiting set by the mother. For example, he has failed to always return the child at the times agreed upon and, on occasion, has sent the child home with people that the mother had not agreed upon. He offloads inappropriate emotional burdens on his son and constantly paints boy Z's mother in a bad light. He tries to control the mother's interaction with male friends and has tracked down and threatened a potential partner of the mother.

The therapist experienced boy Z as an extremely loving and affectionate child. He was also well mannered and intelligent. He did, however, tend to be manipulative and, in the beginning of therapy, without boundaries. The therapist had the opportunity to observe great disrespect for his mother on the one hand, but an immense amount of love and affection shared between the two on the other. The therapist did not observe any inappropriate aggression in therapy sessions. The reports that came from the mother seem to describe a situation of impulse-control and lack of

emotional self-regulation or self-control, as boy Z was reported to lose control, become aggressive and show complete remorse afterwards.

Boy Z's opinion of his father in the beginning of therapy was totally distorted. He hero-worshipped his father, despite being present to hear his father's verbal attacks on his mother and claims that he never wanted to see the child again. He would talk about his father incessantly and tell in overexaggerated terms how wonderful he was, as if compensating for the truth and trying to convince himself of the lie. He would also paint his mother in a bad light and express the desire to go and live with his father.

If the researcher is to look at common features in these three case studies, it appears that the three boys shared the following characteristics:

- Inappropriate levels of aggression— either verbal or physical;
- admiration and defence of their fathers;
- underdeveloped ability in emotional expression and self-regulation;

The researcher had an interest in discovering whether the observation and exploration of three more case studies would produce similar or differing findings. This led to the conducting of the current research.

## 2.4 GESTALT PLAY THERAPY

The purpose of this study is to focus on the child's projections of his experience of his relationship with his father, within the framework of Gestalt Play Therapy. The researcher focused specifically on the three

defining principles of Gestalt Therapy: phenomenology, dialogic existentialism and field theory (Yontef, 1993:203).

**Phenomenology** includes both the environment and the organism and is a search for understanding based on what is revealed by the situation, rather than the observer's interpretation of it (Yontef, 1993:205). The task of the researcher was to consider the child within his total functional environment and through awareness creation, allowing for an awareness of his total experience to emerge.

The researcher intended to implement a process of contacting the children within a **dialogic relationship** (Yontef, 1993:131). (Compare Axline, 1993:127.) This meant that the therapist was fully inclusive, entering into the child's frame of reference, and, by completely accepting the child, fully present, in the child's phenomenological experience. The children were observed according to the principle of **field theory**, that is to say, that they were observed within a systematic web of relationships and with an understanding that everything in the child's phenomenological environment affects and is affected by each other (Yontef, 1993:130). The children were, therefore, not observed in isolation, but in relation to all things in their functional environment.

## 2.5 EXPERT OPINIONS ON THE VIABILITY OF THE PROPOSED STUDY

All the experts that were contacted about the viability of the proposed study were positive about the endeavour. Their motivations were as follows:

- Sanet Schoeman, educational psychologist, Promed Centre, Durbanville:

It was this expert's opinion that the findings would be valuable in view of the growing trend in South African society for men to leave their homes and country for long periods of time to seek employment abroad, as employment opportunities in this country become bleak. She also felt that it would be helpful to look at father absence due to divorce and death situations.

- Karen Bursey, vice- principal, Girls & Boys Town S.A. Macassar

This expert felt that the study may be helpful in gaining insight into how boys feel about their absent fathers, in order to know how best to support boys into their teen years. This expert expressed that this age group is where she has observed much negative emotion coming out where their absent fathers are concerned.

- Lyn Thijsse, educational psychologist, Tableview

This expert felt that the study is certainly very topical at present and that it would be valuable to see to what extent the boys will be able to express themselves.

- Natalie Cunniffe, resident psychologist at Focus on the Family, South Africa, Durban

It was the understanding of this expert that the majority of the studies done on absent fathers have focused on the effects of absent fathers on boys. She felt that this study would contribute a fresh perspective by looking at the child's own experience of the absent father.

In the light of the observations made in work previously done with boys with absent fathers, expert opinions that this is a viable area of research, background information on absent fathering and on a developmental context for the boys' experiences, the researcher continues in the following chapter with a description of how three boys experience their relationship with their father.

## CHAPTER THREE: EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

The data gathering phase of this research project was conducted at Girls & Boys Town S.A. Macassar. The methods of data collection included individual therapy sessions with three boys and semistructured interviews with the child-care workers assigned to each of these boys. In addition to this, the researcher had regular contact with and feedback from the resident social workers before and after the therapy sessions in order to gain background information on the boys and to keep the researcher informed of any changes or updates in the boys' progress. This data was gathered in an informal manner and the researcher has incorporated the information into the discussion that follows. Biographical information is given before a description of the therapy. The boys' names have been altered in order to ensure anonymity.

### 3.1 BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Boy one: Peter

Date of birth	:	18 July 1992
Age (at the time of therapy)	:	13 years
School grade	:	seven
Race	:	Caucasian
Home language	:	Afrikaans

Peter has a mother and a father who are divorced and have no contact with each other at all. Peter's file indicates that there was great marital conflict before the divorce. Peter's mother was treated for anorexia and depression and admits to emotional neglect of Peter during this time. Peter no longer has contact with his mother and does not like to talk about her. Peter was previously in a children's home in Robertson. He recalls being there from the age of four. The researcher's understanding is that just prior to Peter's admission to Girls & Boys Town S.A. Macassar, he had returned to his father and lived with him for a while. Peter has fears of his father dying and desperately wants to live with his father and cannot understand why he cannot. Both his parents report difficulties in handling him. They describe him as a "gemors". They report much tension between themselves and their son and there appears to be no emotional connection between them. According to the social work report, Peter's father is more concerned with the physical care of Peter, while the emotional care of his son is neglected. The father is withdrawn and emotionally distant from Peter. Peter has one male sibling who, according to the report, is younger than Peter, but Peter gave the researcher the impression that he was older. There is apparently no emotional bond between the brothers. Peter is described as talkative, open, honest and cooperative, self-sufficient, generally well-mannered, but occasionally disrespectful and argumentative. He likes sports and sees himself as happy, especially when he is with his father. His scholastic abilities are described as being average to above average and he has not experienced any academic difficulties. He was, however, involved in a fight at school and was suspended as a result. It would appear that Peter was placed at

Girls & Boys Town S.A. Macassar due to his aggression at school and at home, as well as his father's inability to handle him.

Boy two: John

Date of birth	:	28 September 1992
Age (at the time of therapy)	:	13 years
School grade	:	seven
Race	:	African (Xhosa)
Home language	:	Xhosa and Afrikaans

John is an orphan whose father died when he was very young and whose mother died from tuberculosis in July 2003. He has been in foster-care with his older sister since the death of his mother. John never really knew his father as he did not have much contact with him prior to his death. John has a good recollection of his mother and in a group report it was said that he is still in mourning for his mother. It appears that he has a good relationship with his older sister who takes care of him and his siblings. Apart from this older sister, he has one older and one younger brother and two younger sisters. According to the information in his file, John experiences nocturnal enuresis. He is on a program in which he is woken every two hours to go to the bathroom and in this way remains dry, but not if he is left to sleep. He has not been for a medical examination and the social worker is not certain whether there is a medical or emotional cause for this problem. The social worker did, however, express her doubts that it is a medical problem as he had gone on a camp in the holidays and had remained dry for five nights without assistance.

John was admitted to Girls & Boys Town S.A. Macassar due to aggressive behaviour at school. He was reported to be uncontrollable in the classroom during class and was hitting girls in the playground with sticks. Despite his aggressive behaviour, John does not appear to have any academic difficulties. He is quiet and withdrawn in group sessions and is reluctant to talk about his feelings. He appears to have the following positive characteristics: he completes chores well, takes good care of himself, has formed good relationships with the people he is close to in his life and he has goals for his future.

Boy three: Mark

Date of birth	:	11 February 1992
Age (at time of therapy)	:	13 years
School grade	:	seven
Race	:	Coloured
Home language	:	Afrikaans

Mark's parents are divorced and he lives with his mother in an informal settlement on the Cape Flats. His father does not live far away, but they have little contact. His mother is remarried. The mother is the sole financial support to Mark apart from a little help that she receives from her new partner. Mark's father does not contribute at all to the care of his son. A report written by the external social worker cited the following as being contributory to Mark's behavioural problems: the separation of his parents, consequent instability in living arrangements, loss of a father figure in the home environment and the replacement of his father with a stepfather who

perhaps did not fulfil his needs like his father could. Mark has one older full-brother and two younger half-sisters. Mark's older brother was also at Girls & Boys Town S.A. Macassar, but is no longer in the program as he ran away from the facility. Mark was admitted after a court appearance for trespassing and theft. He was also using drugs and was acting out aggressively at school and was expelled from school in 2004. Mark is described as being an introvert who communicates only when spoken to. He is impatient when interrupted and has bad manners. He is disobedient, noncompliant and does not respond to discipline. His interaction in group sessions at Girls & Boys Town S.A. Macassar is inconsistent, depending on his relationship with the group facilitator. At the time of the researcher being there, Mark had been removed from school as he was playing truant and smoking dagga during school hours. His scholastic and social development were reported to be very delayed at the time.

### 3.2 THERAPY

For the purposes of this study, three boys were chosen from three different racial and cultural groups. This was done to obtain a more representative view of the experience of a boy with an absent father. The researcher was aware that the findings of this study could not necessarily be able to be generalized to all racial and cultural groups, just as the findings of one boy's experience could not be generalized to all boys in similar circumstances. The researcher felt that including more than one racial and cultural group may provide a broader perspective and a richer

description of a boy's experience of an absent father. The researcher did, however, set out with the hope of finding some common characteristics within the diverse experiences of the boys, that would allow for a better understanding of how boys with absent fathers experience their world. The purpose of this was to make recommendations as to how society can best support these boys and help to nurture them and grow them into well-adjusted men who can contribute positively to the society in which they find themselves.

The boys were each given the opportunity to attend ten therapy sessions. The sessions were semi-structured in that each was approached with a specific topic in mind that related to the broader topic of absent fathers. Within each structured topic, the boys were, however, given the opportunity to project and express any feelings or thoughts they experienced.

### 3.2.1 Therapy sessions one, two and three: Relationship Building

The researcher spent the first three sessions on focused relationship building with the boys. The researcher's intention here was to create an environment of acceptance and trust so that the boys would feel comfortable, cared for, unjudged and willing to participate. The researcher was also interested in discovering the process of each child in order to adapt to the interactional needs of each boy. In the course of the three sessions the researcher was able to get a feel for each boy in three main

areas: nature and style of interaction; self-awareness; and significant others in their lives.

#### 3.2.1.1 *Nature and Style of Interaction*

##### **Peter**

Peter appeared to be polite and well-mannered as he would greet the researcher well, show gratitude and on occasion would pull out a chair for the researcher to sit on. The researcher experienced him as extrovert in his personality, talkative and animated in his facial expressions and body movements. Peter mentioned that he does not find it hard to talk to strangers. He was enthusiastic and would initiate discussions on topics other than those the researcher brought up. He seemed to have a good sense of humour and showed a desire to please the researcher. Peter appeared to be rather structured in his thinking and manner of operating. He showed a desire to stick to rules and to ensure fairness. He was pedantic at times and showed a need to be mature. He came across as placing high value on material possessions. He showed creativity and artistic talent, but in a structured way. He showed forward thinking vision for his life in the expression of his life goals, which will be elaborated on at a later stage. He showed low self-responsibility in terms of his anger management and an expectation that others should be working harder for him to improve.

## **John**

The researcher experienced John as being very shy and reserved. He would not initiate conversation and often responded just with head movements. The researcher became aware of a language barrier that existed between the respondent and the researcher. John would switch between English and Afrikaans and it was often obvious that he did not understand the researcher and the question or statement had to be re-explained or translated until he had a better idea of what was being said. Despite this, he came across as a sweet-natured, polite and well-mannered boy who was not perturbed by the language barrier. He is a very smiley boy who seemed to have a sense of humour and was playful and excitable during the activities that the researcher had planned. He expressed remorse over the behaviour that led to his admission to Girls & Boys Town S.A. Macassar and seemed grateful for the help received. He showed a desire for fairness, a love for animals and goals and dreams for his future.

## **Mark**

The researcher experienced Mark as being very resistant from the outset. His body language was closed and his emotional expression very flat. He would speak only when spoken to and would respond in a muffled, monotone voice or head movements. He also showed a severe lack of imagination in the activities that the researcher had planned. For example, he could not come up with things that he would take with him on a trip to the moon. He was willing to participate in the activity but was

unable to imagine himself going to the moon and what he would take with. The researcher got a sense of false fearlessness and a daredevil, rebellious attitude from Mark. He seemed to be on the attack at times, in that he would try to trick the researcher. When given a situation in play where he could be attacking or defensive, he was more attacking than the other two boys. When the researcher takes into account the gang background of this boy, it is not surprising that he would naturally behave in a way that is suggestive of exposure to a culture of aggression and revenge. Despite all these negative observations, the researcher found that Mark has a soft side to him. During the physical activities that the researcher had planned he became more open, animated and receptive. He showed a sense of humour, perhaps more child-like than the other boys, and would play in a child-like manner with fewer inhibitions than the other boys. He showed a capacity for compassion in his expression of a desire to help others in danger and his great love for animals.

#### 3.2.1.2 *Self-awareness*

##### **Peter**

Peter appeared confident in general discussion, but when he was directly addressed or made aware of himself he would lose this confidence and avoid eye contact. He would get shy if there was a moment of contact and would try to break the contact. When complimented he would either dismiss the compliment or put himself down in some way. He expressed pride in the fact that he is white and then was defensive about his feelings. The researcher was often aware that his body language did not support

his verbal expressions. For example, he arrived at one session clearly upset and expressed his feelings relatively well. At the end of the session the researcher went back to this and asked whether he would like to discuss anything else about the issue that caused him to arrive upset. He said that he was better and did not need to talk about it anymore, but he said this while slouched over with his head buried in his hands. When made aware of this he said that he is not shy or tired and that he speaks to his father in the same way.

### **John**

John struggled from the outset to make or maintain eye contact with the researcher. The researcher was curious about this as the researcher felt that this could indicate low self-esteem in the respondent. The researcher mentioned this to his social worker and it was brought to the researcher's attention that this could be a cultural action aimed at showing respect for elders. She did, however, say that there is a possibility that the younger generation of Xhosa people no longer have this as part of their cultural norms. The researcher asked John whether that was the reason for little eye contact and John did not seem to know this to be a norm of his culture. He said that he did not mind looking at the researcher. Despite saying that he does not mind looking at the researcher, John struggled to make eye contact with the researcher and often covered his face while talking to the researcher. In addition to this he would become very shy when complimented or if the researcher spoke words of empowerment to him. John is a physically fit and strong boy and he had told the researcher that he exercises and lifts weights at the gym at Girls & Boys Town S.A.

Macassar, but when the researcher tried to use his physical strength and fitness as an empowerment tool, he would put himself down, saying that he is not strong.

### **Mark**

It was clear to the researcher that whenever Mark was encouraged to talk about himself, he would become very resistant. His body language would shut down and the researcher would not be able to get much further with him. When the researcher would make him aware of his body language he would smile or laugh and continue to ignore the researcher. Much like John, Mark struggled to make eye contact with the researcher. He would, however, make eye contact during the fun activities that the researcher had planned, but as soon as he would have to interact on a personal level he would become resistant and disengage himself.

#### *3.2.1.3 Significant Others*

In the third session the researcher was still interested primarily in building the relationship with the boys, but included an activity in which the boys had to imagine themselves going to the moon in a spaceship. They then had to choose a few things that they would take with and the people in their lives that they would and would not like to have accompany them to the moon. The researcher did this with the intention of getting an idea of what support systems they perceive to have in their lives and which people they included in that. The following emerged:

## **Peter**

In the sessions prior to this, Peter would volunteer much information on his family. He spoke about them frequently and his father occupied most of the discussion. In this activity, he first said that he would take his father and that his father is the most important one that must be there. He then mentioned all his friends, but only mentioned friends at home and not at school or Girls & Boys Town S.A. Macassar. Following this, he said that he would take the SARS people and, from what the researcher can gather, these are charity workers that would come visit the children in the children's home in Robertson where he had been staying. Next, he mentioned his father's female friend (the researcher suspects that this is the father's girlfriend, but Peter flatly denies that she is anything more than a friend). He had no sooner said her name than he changed his mind and said that she is angry with him for his past behaviour, so she may not come with him to the moon. Then he mentioned his brother, but said that he hardly knows him because they only get to see each other in the September holidays each year. Lastly, he said that his mother may definitely not come with because she is not nice. When the researcher asked Peter to elaborate on this he said that it is personal and he will talk about her when he is ready to do so.

## **John**

As John progressed through the sessions he would respond to many of the sensory awareness activities with memories or reminders of his family. His thoughts seemed focused on his older sister who he has been in

foster-care with since his mother's death. In the spaceship activity he chose only to take family members with him and mentioned his older sister, younger sister and baby brother first. He showed positive body language while talking about his family, except when he told the researcher about his mother's death. At the time of the research being conducted, John's mother had been deceased for two years. He did not seem to have all the facts about the cause of her death, but explained the events leading up to her death in vivid detail. He expressed his sadness over her death and that he missed her very much. John does not seem to remember much about his father, as he died when John was very young. John had not had much contact with his father prior to his death. John could express that not having a mother and father is something that he experienced as bad, but not finding it hard to talk about. As he said this, it became clear to the researcher that his body language and verbal expressions contradicted each other. He made no eye contact, had his head dropped down and he was distracting himself by drawing on a piece of paper.

## **Mark**

In the spaceship activity given, Mark was very quick to say that there is nobody in his life that is bad and everyone that he knows may come with on his spaceship. In a later session, it would become clear that he contradicted himself, identifying many people that are a threat to him. Mark chose to take his family with him to the moon, but excluded his step-father and did not mention him at all. When the researcher asked Mark to tell her about his mother, he shook his head and said that he did not want

to talk about her. He then covered his face and lent back with his head back and remained in this position. The researcher then asked if it would be alright for him to tell her about his father and his response was the same as with his mother. Mark then shut down altogether and the researcher could not get him to respond to anything, including a total change of topic to something light-hearted. When the researcher said that he may leave if he wanted to, he got up and left the room. This was the first time since discussing his parents that he removed his hands from his face and the researcher was then able to see that he had been crying. Mark chose not to attend his session the following week.

The researcher was hoping that the impressions described above would provide a richer reference, before the remaining six sessions are discussed.

### 3.2.2 Therapy session four: The Family

The researcher approached this session with the intention of discovering more about how the boys view their family. The boys were given the options of representing their families through a drawing, building them out of play dough or choosing toy figurines to represent each person in the family. The researcher began each session with a sensory awareness activity and then moved on to their projection of their families. The researcher will describe the boys' responses in the sensory awareness activity and then describe who the boys included in their families, as well as their representation of their feelings regarding each person.

## **Peter**

During the sensory awareness activity, Peter became aware of a dilemma that he had. This dilemma was that he was given the opportunity to play in a rugby tournament that weekend, but it was also his weekend to go home. He desperately wanted to play in the tournament because he had never had this opportunity before and it was something that he wanted to experience. On the other hand, he also desperately wanted to go home to see his father. The researcher gave Peter the opportunity to talk through his dilemma to determine his primary need. Peter was able to work through it and come to a conclusion on his own. His decision was to go home to be with his father as he felt that this was more important. The researcher could see from this that Peter has a certain amount of awareness of his conflicting feelings and was able to work through them in prioritising his most pressing needs, thereby showing that, in this instant, he had the capacity for a certain degree of self-regulation.

For the projection, Peter chose to represent his family members with toy figurines, using the following characters:

Father— a fireman:

The figurine chosen to represent the father was the biggest one available to him. When the researcher asked if there was a reason that he chose this one he said that his father is big. On a previous occasion, Peter had told the researcher that his father is short so there seemed to be inconsistency in his view of his father. In addition to this, Peter told the researcher that his father is a good example to him. When asked what constitutes the good example that he is, Peter said that he is a good dad,

he listens to him, he is always there for him and his father likes him. The researcher asked if he knows how his father feels about him and he replied that his father feels good about him, but added that this is only when he is not naughty. Peter told the researcher that his dad is very important to him and that he wants to go home to be with him. The researcher was perturbed by Peter's idealistic view of his father as it did not line up with the information that the researcher had from the social worker. The researcher decided to pose a polarity to Peter and asked how it would be for him if his father was not all the things he had mentioned. His body language became hostile and he said that he would be very angry and would never go visit his father. The researcher asked what he would do if his father did not listen to him. He said that he is honest with his dad and would tell him to listen. He then said that his dad always listens to him, so they do not have this problem. He was shaking his head while saying this, but laughing simultaneously. His body language became more telling as he pierced the figurine of his father in the stomach with a sword. When the researcher enquired about this he replied that he was only playing. Peter then diverted the focus from his father and returned to aggressive actions with the figurine for Jill (his father's female friend), letting sharks attack her and knocking her off the table.

Himself— Hercules:

When the researcher asked Peter why he chose Hercules for himself he said that he likes that kind of thing and wants to be strong like Hercules.

Brother— a strong male character from Beauty and the Beast:

Peter told the researcher that he does not really know his brother because they only see each other in the September holidays. He told the researcher that his brother was removed from them because he is naughty. He then told the researcher that his father thinks he is naughty. When asked how he feels about this he replied that he is no longer naughty so that he can leave Girls & Boys Town S.A. Macassar and go home to his father.

Mother/ Father's female friend— female gladiator:

Peter first said that this figurine was his mother and then changed his mind and made it his father's female friend. (For the purposes of the study she will be named Jill.) Peter then began to tell how Jill makes him angry and then he does things that make his father angry. While he was telling the researcher this he was tying the figurine representing himself up in a net. The researcher asked him if he feels like he is tied up when he is angry with her. He replied that he does feel like that and showed the researcher, knocking over the figurine, what he would like to do to her. When the researcher clarified that this is what he wanted to do to Jill, he said that he would not actually do that. He then knocked her off the table and said that she is not in the picture. The researcher asked if he felt that she was put in his life against his will. He said yes, and elaborated that he does not like her and that his father knows how he feels and does not seem to mind. The researcher asked Peter to explain what she does to make him angry and he replied that she tries to rule. He adds abruptly that he does not talk to her anymore. He then puts her on a cannon launcher and sends her flying across the room. He uses another figurine

to help launch her and when asked who the helper is he replies “*the little voice*”. The researcher tries to get an elaboration on the “voice” but Peter breaks contact. When pushed a little to respond, he said that it was probably just his thoughts. He added that Jill has known him since he was eleven and probably just wants to help, but he does not want her help. He then ended the discussion with her saying that she does not bother him anymore.

Once Peter had described each person, the researcher asked whether he had left anyone out. He replied that he had not. The researcher then asked about his mother. Peter immediately shook his head, had a dismissive look on his face and said that she is not in his picture. The researcher asked if this is how it is in his life, and he replied that he speaks to her sometimes, but that is all. He said that he was not ready to talk about her.

The researcher felt that there were inconsistencies in the information that was received from the social worker and the information that Peter gave, particularly about his father. Peter seemed to have a positive experience of his father, or at least, this was his verbal expression, but his unconscious communication, in the form of his actions with the toys and his body language and facial expressions, appeared to tell another story. The researcher felt that Peter may be in denial, out of a need to create an idealistic view of his father in order to remain emotionally intact.

## John

John began the session by telling the researcher that he did not go home the previous weekend, but that he would be going home for the coming weekend. This was obviously on his foreground, and going home is an important event that he looks forward to. John's response to the sensory awareness activity was that he felt "*lekker*" on all levels. The researcher felt at this point that John could either really have been all right on all levels, or that he could quite possibly have been blocking his unconscious needs from arising into his consciousness.

For the projection, John chose the toy figurines and chose to represent his family using the following characters:

Older sister— a princess:

The researcher asked John to tell about his older sister and he replied that she is pretty, a good person and that he likes to talk to her. He kept his head down while saying this and was rocking on his chair.

Baby brother— a baby figurine:

When asked about his younger brother, all he could say was that he is three years old and that he loves him.

Younger sister— a nondescript female figurine:

John's description of his younger sister is that she is eleven years old and that he likes to play with her at home. He added that he misses her.

Youngest sister— a nondescript female figurine:

John's response to this sister was a little different from the others. He seemed to have more to say about her. He said that she is naughty because she does not help at home. He said that she does her own thing and does not care. He said that she makes him cross.

Older brother— a nondescript male figurine:

John did not make eye contact with the researcher while talking about his older brother. He said that they play soccer and pool together at home. He is seventeen years old. John told the researcher that his brother is strong (muscular) and that he is proud of him.

Himself— a black gladiator:

When the researcher asked John if there was a reason that he chose to be the gladiator he said that he likes to exercise in the gym. The researcher asked to feel his muscles and he allowed her to, but then became embarrassed when the researcher made a fuss of how strong he is.

Once John had given a description of each person, the researcher asked if there was anyone that he had left out. He added a few friends, mostly people from home. The researcher then remarked that there were no parents and John replies by saying that he has already told the researcher about them. The researcher asked John whether his life was fine without them, or if he would prefer to have them in his life. He replied that he would prefer to have parents. He acknowledged that it is difficult for him to talk about them. When the researcher asked specifically how he feels about his mother not being in his life, he said that he was not sure. When

the same question was posed about his father, he said that he does not want to talk about him. While he said this, he was leaning on his fist, looking away from the researcher. The researcher could not go any further with John in this particular session.

It appeared to the researcher that John reported that all is well in his life until the absence of parents in his life was brought into his awareness. When he was made aware of this and was asked to express his feelings surrounding the matter, he became very sad and closed. He did not become resistant in a hostile way, but there was more a sense of being overwhelmed with sadness.

### **Mark**

Mark's response to the sensory activity was that he did not want to discuss the feelings that he had during the activity. This could indicate awareness of his emotions, but a resistance to share and explore them. It could also indicate that he experienced something, but had the need to block it out of his consciousness in order to limit the experience to what he could handle.

For the projection Mark chose the toys and played with them for a while like he had never seen toys like this before. His play resembled that of a child younger than his age. This could suggest a lack of exposure to play at a younger age and possibly developmental immaturity. Mark set up a scene in which his parents were in a coach and were going to their animal farm and drinking beer along the way. He added his brother and sisters

and a cannon to protect them from people who would want to come and steal from them. The researcher asked him to choose toys to represent the enemies in his life and asked him to tell about them. He said that he had lots of people like this in his life (contradicting what was mentioned earlier when he said there are no bad people in his life), but that he did not want to tell the researcher anything about them. He added that they are in gangs. The researcher made allowance for the fact that Mark might not necessarily view gang activity as a bad thing and that theft is not necessarily bad, but rather a reality of life. The researcher made this allowance on the basis of the insight given on Mark's gang mentality that is later described in the childcare worker interviews. As Mark continued to play out his scene, the researcher made the following observations about how Mark views his family:

Parents:

Mark played out the scene with his parents living in the same house. The researcher knew that his parents were divorced and that the mother has remarried. When the researcher asked about this, Mark told the researcher that his parents live together and that he lives with them. Mark seemed to reinforce this desire for his parents to live together in his scene as he put the whole family together in the farmhouse. When the researcher asked Mark how he felt about his father, he replied that he felt "*all right*" about him. He told the researcher that his father lived in Mannenberg and that he had not seen him for a long time, but that he felt good about his father. When asked about his mother, Mark said that he loved her and that she was good to him. At one point the researcher asked Mark who teaches him things about life and he replied that his

parents did. The researcher asked Mark whether it was difficult to talk about his family and he did not respond verbally, but averted his eyes away from the researcher and started throwing a block up repeatedly and looked moved in a sad way.

#### Siblings:

When asked how he felt about his siblings, Mark replied that he felt “*all right*” about them. The only one that he elaborated on was his older brother. He told the researcher that they spend time together at home playing games and that he is a good person. The researcher is not sure when they have this contact, as it is the researcher’s understanding from the social worker that his brother lives in Macassar since he ran away from Girls & Boys Town S.A. Macassar.

#### Himself:

He chose a knight to represent himself, and when asked if there was a reason for that he said no. Despite having said earlier that he lives with his parents, he chose to have his own house in the projection. When asked about this, he told the researcher that he would like to have his own house far away from his family because that would be nice, but he said that he would go and visit them.

Following this, the researcher asked Mark who the most important person was in his scene. He picked up the figurine that he chose to represent the people in gangs who would come and steal from them, but then said that he could not say. The researcher asked Mark if there was anyone in his life who had a negative influence on him and he said no. He then told the

researcher that he did not want to talk about his family anymore and ended the session.

The researcher's general impression was that the boys felt strongly about their families and that their families were very important to them. The researcher felt, however, that much of what the boys said about their families did not line up with what the social workers and childcare workers reported. The researcher also felt that the boys saw their family members, in particular their parents, in a far more positive light than the researcher would have expected for children who have little or no physical and/or emotional contact with their families.

### 3.2.3 Therapy session five: View of the Father

In this session the researcher was interested in hearing from the boys how they perceive and experience their fathers. Once again, the researcher started this session with a sensory awareness activity and then moved on to a projection of their father. The researcher will describe each boy's response to the sensory awareness activity and will follow that up with a description of the information gathered on how the boys perceive their fathers.

#### **Peter**

Unlike the previous session, Peter was unaware of his feelings in this sensory activity. He could not verbalise what he was feeling, apart from saying that he was unsure of his feelings and generally unsure about things in his life.

In the projection, Peter gave the researcher much information on his father and the researcher was able to identify a few main topics of interest that gave the researcher an idea of how Peter perceives his father. These topics are as follows: general information; father's anger; Father's attitude toward women; reason for being at Girls & Boys Town S.A. Macassar; death; and Peter's ambivalent feelings towards his father.

#### General information:

Peter told the researcher that his father owns a house, his own business and a car. He lives alone, has a beard and is friendly.

#### Father's anger:

Peter told the researcher that his father is a good person, but gets angry when Peter talks back to him. He said that when his father gets angry, "*you must just wait for your smack*". He said this with an expression that the researcher would interpret as fear and trepidation. Peter said that his father gets angry when he does not listen to him, and told the researcher of an incident when his father became very angry when he discovered that the video machine's plug had been removed from the wall. When the researcher asked how often they fight, Peter said that they have not fought for ages, so he could feel that something bad was going to happen in the upcoming holidays. He said that a long time of peace is never a good thing.

#### Attitude towards women:

At one point, Peter told the researcher that he is glad that his parents got divorced because women only bring problems for men. When asked what

makes him think that, he replied that it is just how women are and that that is what people say. The researcher finds this attitude interesting and would venture a guess that this is an attitude that Peter has picked up from his father, since he again mentioned this in a later session, saying that it is what happened to his father with his mother. He added that he did not like women and would always have something against his mother.

Reason for being at Girls & Boys Town S.A. Macassar:

The researcher asked Peter why he thought his father had sent him to Girls & Boys Town S.A. Macassar. He replied that it was because of his aggression. When asked if he thought this was a good reason to come to Girls & Boys Town S.A. Macassar he said no, unless they could help him. When the researcher pointed out that he had not yet had any aggressive outbursts at Girls & Boys Town S.A. Macassar, he said that he had controlled himself so that he could go home to his father. The researcher has heard this response in Peter on various occasions and felt that Peter would comply with any of his father's conditions for approval and acceptance, in order to be able to go home to his father. It seems to the researcher that Peter had been so deprived of time with his father in the past that he was craving it.

Death:

The topic of death dominated the conversation in this session. It became clear to the researcher that Peter had an intense fear that his father would die before he got to see him again. When the researcher asked how it would be for him if his dad had another heart attack and died, he said that

he would go mad. He would have to take pills and be put in an asylum. The researcher asked how it would make him feel, and he said that he would be cross and sad and that he would feel all feelings except for happiness. He said that there is nobody that he would want to go to if something happened to his father, because his father is the most important thing in his life. Peter kept returning to this topic even when the conversation took another direction, and told the researcher that he would become stressed when he had not heard from his father for a while and would get scared that his father would die like one of the other boy's dads did. He told the researcher that he had had a dream that his father died, and he felt that that was perhaps a sign or clue as to something that would happen. It was clear that he experienced fear of abandonment and loss of his father. The researcher wondered whether this had not been fuelled by his father's absence from his life for the last nine years, and when given the opportunity to be with his father, he would do anything to keep it.

#### Ambivalent feelings:

Despite Peter's adoration for his father, he seemed to have mixed feelings about him. The researcher found that he would often say something negative about his father and then go on to defend him or say something positive, contradicting himself. When he told the researcher about how angry his father gets, he said that he has said many nasty things to his father that he would take back if he could, and in the very next breath told the researcher that when his father gets angry he laughs at him to spite him. Peter told the researcher that his father would not share his cool drink with him or give him hugs, and then defended his father by saying that his father has not lived with him for nine years and that he needs to

get used to him again. Peter told the researcher that his father first wants to get a bigger house and establish his business before he takes his sons back. When the researcher asked how this makes him feel, he said that he understood because it is hard to look after two boys. Towards the end of the session, the researcher asked Peter if his father is really there for him, and he replied, only sometimes, but not when he is angry. He then said his father is there for him because he gives him toiletries, but then added that his father thinks he does not appreciate it.

At the end of the session the researcher asked Peter if he thought there was anything missing in his relationship with his father, and he said, patience, on both their sides. He said that all he needed to do was listen to his father more to improve their relationship.

The researcher felt that this father imposes on Peter conditions for love and acceptance, and that Peter would try to do what he could to please his father. Peter seemed to have an idealistic view of his father and was determined to defend this view. It was, however, evident that his true feelings emerged from time to time.

## **John**

In the sensory awareness activity, John only reported that he felt relaxed and happy to be in the session.

This session was clearly a very difficult session for John. His responses were minimal and he ended the session feeling very emotional and not able to recover. Since the researcher knew that John did not have a father, he was asked to build or draw what he would like to have in a father. He built a man, but told the researcher that he did not remember his father and was not sure what he wanted or could have in a father. When the researcher asked if it was sad for him that he did not have a father, he shook his head, but could not speak and remained looking at the floor with his body slouched over. The researcher later asked the same question and he nodded his head. The researcher tried to determine whether John had any other male role models that could replace a father figure in his life, but John could not identify one. When the researcher asked about his older brother he said that they did not talk about his father at home, and John did not seem to consider his brother as a replacement role model. The researcher asked John whether he would like to have had a father, and he replied that he would have. At this point, the researcher could see that John had become very sad. The researcher commented on this and asked John whether he wanted to talk about how he felt. John began to cry silently and, despite all efforts on the researcher's part to comfort him and focus on the positive things in his life, John was overwhelmed with emotion and the session had to be ended.

## **Mark**

Mark arrived at the session in an angry mood because he had been accused of sniffing petrol when he said he had not. He was resistant and aggressive in his verbal expressions and body language. The researcher

guided him to do aggressive work with swords in order to release his feelings and act them out in a safe environment. He was allowed to slice the air or foam blocks and was encouraged to verbalise his aggressive feelings and thoughts as he performed the action. He gave good physical expression to his anger, but needed modelling to express his feelings verbally. At the end he said that he felt relieved. Despite feeling relieved, Mark was visibly agitated and distracted and said that the researcher should hurry up because he wanted to leave.

The sensory awareness activity that the researcher did with Mark focused on the sense of smell and what feelings different smells evoked in him. One of the things to smell was a tube of glue. When Mark smelled it, he immediately got a smile on his face, but denied that he thought it was a good smell and claimed that it did not remind him of anything. Eventually he told the researcher that he sniffs glue because it lets him feel his emotions more intensely and does not allow him to get angry with people that easily (the researcher did not have knowledge of this habit prior to the introduction of the glue. If the researcher had had this information, the glue would not have been used in the activity). The researcher understood this to mean that sniffing glue helps to dull his negative emotions and heighten positive emotions. At this point the session was interrupted, and while the researcher was talking to the person, Mark tried to remove the glue from the container that the researcher had packed it away in, in order to inhale it. Later in the sensory awareness activity, Mark's response to smelling Dettol was to tell the researcher that he had a gunshot wound in his side, but that the bullet had been removed and it had been seen to. The researcher suspected that this was a fabrication,

but was also aware of the fact that he had been reported to doing gang “dirty work”. That is, he had been used by gangs to do shootings and robberies on their behalf. The researcher asked whether the childcare workers knew about the wound and he said yes, but laughed and shook his head when the researcher asked if he would show the wound.

When the researcher moved on to the projection and asked Mark to draw a picture of his father, he became instantly resistant and aggressive in his tone of voice. His body language became closed as he developed a frown on his face, folded his arms and looked away. When asked how he felt, he told the researcher that he had talked about this already and did not want to talk about his father. He then told the researcher in an aggressive way that the researcher should hurry up because he had work to do. The researcher gave Mark the option of choosing anything else to do or talk about, or leaving. Mark got up and left the session without saying anything or looking at the researcher. It was clear to the researcher that Mark was very angry at having to talk about his father. The researcher felt that Mark was idealistic about his father and became very negative and resistant when he had to confront this.

#### 3.2.4 Therapy session six: Emotions

Session six was focused on exploring the emotions of the respondents. The researcher kept it generalized, so that the boys could express any emotion that they felt regarding any topic. The researcher did, however, remain focused on present emotions, that is, what the boys felt in the session.

In order to assist the boys to represent and express their feelings, the researcher gave each boy a picture of a body and a few examples of emotions that they could experience. The boys were then asked to choose a colour for each emotion and to colour in sections of the body to represent where the feeling was located in the body and how much of the feeling they experienced (see Addenda 4.5.2-4.5.4). A discussion on the feelings that each boy identified and their description of those feelings follows.

### **Peter**

(See Addendum 4.5.2)

Anger:

Peter indicated that he felt anger in his whole body. When asked if he knew what made him angry, he said people, but could not tell exactly who. He told the researcher that he did not get angry without reason. The researcher asked Peter to describe how the anger felt and, with a smile on his face, he said it felt “cool”. He said that he liked the feeling because it gave him power. When the researcher asked whether he usually felt powerless in his life, he said yes, but that when he became angry, he felt that he had power. The researcher asked Peter if he became aggressive when angry and whether he liked that feeling too. Peter said that he did become aggressive, but that he did not like that feeling because it would upset his father. The researcher asked Peter what he did with the anger, and he replied that he would use it and it would use him. He added that it was like a superpower and it made him feel stronger. The researcher asked Peter how he was when he was not angry, and he said that he was

normal and happy, and when he is normal and happy he does not feel powerless. When asked which feeling he would prefer to feel, he said the happy, normal feeling. Peter continued by telling the researcher about an incident at school that had happened recently, in which he became angry and chose to walk away from the fight. The researcher asked him how it felt and if he was happy with the choice he had made. He was clearly proud of himself and said that he did not want the anger in his life because it would upset his father and his father would like it to go away. The researcher asked how he thought his father would react if he managed to get rid of his anger, and he said that his father just wanted it gone. He said that if he could get it to go away, then he could go back to his father quicker. The researcher asked if he wanted his father to be proud of him and if he thought he was. He replied that he was not sure and that he did not know what was going on [with his father]. The researcher then asked how it would be for him if his father was not proud of him. He said that "*it's nothing*" and he would just have to get it right for himself then.

#### Sadness:

Peter put a bit of sadness in his heart, but then said that he did not know what to say about it because he had never really been sad before and did not have anything in his life to be sad about. He told the researcher that he did not cry easily and that the only things that would make him cry were his parents. He then changed his mind and said that only his father and his brother would make him cry.

Love:

Peter said that this was the feeling that he felt the least because he is not that kind of person. The researcher asked who was receiving the most love from him. He first said, his parents, then said, only his father and brother and finally said, only his father. When asked if he was receiving love in return and whether he thought he was receiving enough love, he replied that he did receive love in return, but that he did not want too much. He said that he and his father were the same, in that his father was also not that type of person. By “that type” the researcher deduced that he meant a person who would give love and physical affection. Peter told the researcher that that was the reason he would never take a wife because that was what messed up his father’s life. He then added that he had never been good with women. As he said this, the researcher could not help feeling that these were mature words that sounded like he had heard them elsewhere. The researcher, therefore, asked how his father felt about women, and he replied that he would not know, but added that even if his father found the right woman, his father would never trust her. He then said that they (presumably Peter and his father) did not need women to complicate their lives. Once again, the researcher felt that these words could possibly not have been his own. The researcher asked Peter what he would like for his own life, and he replied a house, a nice life. When the researcher asked whether that included a wife and children someday, he said maybe, but that he would think carefully about it first.

Towards the end of the session the researcher asked Peter what feeling he felt the strongest and he said “*happy*”. The researcher gave Peter the opportunity to put “*happy*” in the empty chair and speak to it. Peter did

this without a problem and told happiness to fight hard to stay there. He then said that he was not happy at that moment, but rather tired. The researcher encouraged Peter to put “*tired*” in the chair and talk to it. He did this and congratulated “*tired*” for breaking him down quickly.

The researcher could see that it was emotionally taxing for Peter to explore his emotions. It appeared that topics similar to those seen in previous sessions continued to come up, topics such as Peter’s attitude towards women; wanting to please his father; his ambivalent feelings towards his father; and the need to defend his father.

## **John**

(See Addendum 4.5.3)

Sadness:

John drew sadness on his chest, but then said that he did not know the meaning of sad.

Happiness:

This emotion had the largest area of representation on the body. It was shown to be felt in John’s face and he coloured the whole face in. John chose to discuss his happy feelings first. The researcher asked John if he could describe the things that made him happy and he said that he was happy to be there with the researcher and was looking forward to going fishing when he was finished with the researcher. At this point the researcher used the zoom function of the video camera to have some fun

looking at their happy, smiling faces. John engaged well and really looked happy.

Love:

The researcher asked John who he felt love for in his life. He said that he felt love for his school teacher and his social worker at Girls & Boys Town S.A. Macassar because she told him that he is going home over the coming weekend. When asked how love felt, he replied that it felt good. The researcher then asked whether there were any other people that he felt love for and he included his family, but did not elaborate. John was asked whether he felt that he was receiving love in return from anyone and he said that he was receiving love from the researcher, his childcare workers and his social worker. When asked whether he felt that he receives enough love, he replied that he did.

Worry and anger:

John told the researcher about a play-fight that he and another boy had had in their cottage that morning and that it had got a bit rough and the childcare worker had to come and break them up. He said that he felt worried that they would be reprimanded for their rough play and when they were, he felt angry at the childcare worker because they were only having fun. He said that the anger was felt in his heart. The researcher then gave John the opportunity to put any person or feeling in the empty chair and talk to them. He chose to put the childcare worker who reprimanded them in the chair and told him that what he did was not right and that it made him angry.

The researcher felt that John's emotional repertoire was quite limited and that his description of his emotions was basic and underdeveloped for a child his age.

## **Mark**

(See Addendum 4.5.4)

From the beginning of the session the researcher could see that Mark had very limited awareness of emotions. He said that he did not know what it meant to be angry or to love, and yet could say later that there are people in his life that he has love for. He struggled to explain to the researcher what it meant to be worried and asked what sadness was. The researcher was concerned that Mark's academic delay was a hindrance to his understanding of the activity, as the feelings were all represented in written text. Much of the session was then spent helping Mark to talk through and explain each emotion. The researcher then allowed him to draw a picture to represent each emotion in order for him to be able to relate to it.

Love:

Mark chose to talk about love first. He said that he felt it the strongest, but in his drawing, love was only represented on one leg. He struggled to grasp the concept of feeling an emotion in your body, so this representation could have been inaccurate in terms of how he felt in reality. When asked whom he felt love for and whom he received love from, he said that he had love for his parents, but said that he only

received love from his mother. Mark did not want to tell the researcher about the love he felt, apart from saying that it felt “*all right*”. The researcher asked if there was anyone apart from his family that loved him and he said that God loved him. The researcher tried to get Mark to explain how it felt for him to be loved by someone, but he struggled. With the researcher’s help, he was eventually able to say that it was a good feeling. The researcher used this to empower Mark and told him that the researcher can see that he tried to act macho and did not want anyone to see how soft and loving he really was inside. The researcher asked if that was correct, and Mark replied that it was. The researcher praised and encouraged Mark and he began to smile, but could not look at the researcher and was staring down at the table. Mark then began to cry, first silently, and then he became overwhelmed with emotion and the session was ended.

### 3.2.5 Therapy session seven: Emotions (continued)

The purpose of this session was to allow the boys to express any emotions that had not been covered in the previous session, as well as any new emotions that had arisen. This was their first session after the holidays and the researcher was curious to explore their emotional state after having been at home for a week.

## **Peter**

The researcher was able to gather more information on Peter's emotions out of the following broad topics that came up continually in the session: Peter's father's female friend (Jill); Peter's desire to please his father; and Peter's aggression.

Jill:

Peter told the researcher that he had made peace with Jill in the holidays. He told the researcher that they had spoken about things and she had told him that she had just been disappointed in his behaviour, but that that was all in the past. He told the researcher about a dream that he had had in which he had died and everyone had come to see him, but then went running off screaming with disapproval. He said that he had told Jill about the dream and she had suggested that that was how they all saw him in the past, but that things had changed. The researcher asked Peter how he saw it, and he said that she must have been right. He said that that could be the only message that he could get from the dream.

Aggression:

When Peter told the researcher about his dream and how people saw him in the past, the researcher asked Peter how his dad saw him in the past. He replied that he was angry about his aggression. When asked how his father felt about him at that time, Peter said that his father felt good about him then because he had not given him any problems yet and he helped his father. The researcher asked how Peter experienced his father at that time, and he said his experience was good because there was no

aggression in him. The researcher then asked how he thought it was that he still needed to be at Girls & Boys Town S.A. Macassar and not with his father. The researcher asked this question not with the intention of upsetting Peter, but rather because the researcher knew that before the holiday this was the question that was foremost in Peter's mind. Peter began to tug aggressively at his tracksuit top because it was a new top and he was upset that it did not have pockets. The researcher suspected that the feelings that were present before the holiday were resurfacing and causing Peter distress. Peter told the researcher that it was still too early to go home and that they could not know how long it would take before he could go home. These words sounded to the researcher like the rehearsed words of someone else, because a week prior to this, Peter felt that he was doing well with his anger management and that he did not understand why he could not be with his father. Peter told the researcher that he should stay until his aggression is gone. When the researcher asked if Peter thought there was still aggression in him, he said that although he did not feel it at the time, there must have been because every now and then it would just pop out. The researcher asked Peter if he knew what had put the anger there in the first place. At first he said that he did not have a good reason, and then said that it had started at the children's home. He said that there was lots of fighting, and there were adults that he would never understand. While he told the researcher this, Peter was clearly irritable and short of temper. Peter then told the researcher that even though that had happened, he had still had the choice to be aggressive or not. The researcher commented that his words sounded like someone had told him that. Peter said that his father had told him that and that he agreed with him. The researcher was interested

in Peter's body language while he was speaking, as he said he agreed with his father, but as he told the part about making the choice to be aggressive, he was shaking his head.

Desire to please:

From the above description of Peter's dilemma with his aggression, it was clear to the researcher that Peter had a very strong need to please his father. It appeared that Peter's father approved of him conditionally, and Peter would do anything to gain his approval. Peter clearly had underlying anger that he was fighting to suppress in order to please his father. He was not always successful in suppressing his anger and this caused him distress.

## **John**

John gave the researcher little additional information on his emotions, but that which he gave was centred around the emotions of love and sadness.

Love:

John reiterated all that he had said in the previous session, but added emotional information on his family. He told the researcher that he had spent time with his grandmother in the holidays (he had never mentioned her before) and that she had given him money. He told the researcher that she had made him happy. When asked about his parents and his father in particular, John said that he still had love in his heart for them. He said that he still thought about his mother.

### Sadness:

John's sadness appeared to be linked to his thoughts about his parents, as he said that he thought his life would be better with parents. He told the researcher that sometimes he felt like crying and that he then had sadness in him. When asked to show where in his body he felt the sadness, he showed his chest. The researcher tried the empty chair technique with him again, to allow him to work through the sadness, but he said that he did not want to say anything to the sadness and wanted to continue.

### **Mark**

Mark was present at the seventh session, but the researcher had to return to the topic of the view of the father (done in session five), as Mark had refused to attend session five.

Based on the responses of the boys in sessions six and seven, the researcher felt that the boys were not particularly aware of their emotions. In so far as they were aware, the verbal expression of their emotions was not always congruent with their body language. In addition to this, the researcher felt that in the case of John and Mark, their emotional development appeared to be delayed for children of their age.

### 3.2.6 Therapy session eight: Self-image

In this session the researcher was interested in exploring how the boys view themselves. To begin with, the researcher asked the boys to look at themselves in the mirror and then draw a picture of themselves.

#### **Peter**

Peter's description of himself began with him looking in the mirror and putting himself down. He drew a picture and then said he did not like it, crumpled it up and asked for a new page. He then drew a picture that resembled a character from Dragonball Z. The picture did not look anything like Peter. When the researcher remarked on how strong the person looked and asked whether that was how he viewed himself or if that was an ideal self, he replied that it was how he wanted to be. He said that it was not him but only a picture, the way he liked to draw. While drawing the picture, Peter asked the researcher if it was wrong to talk to yourself because he talked to himself all the time. The researcher replied that it was not necessarily bad and asked whether it bothered him. He said that it did not bother him, but helped him to sort things out.

The researcher asked Peter whether there was anything that he would change about his life, and he said he would go back and undo what he had done that got him to Girls & Boys town S.A. Macassar. He then added that perhaps it happened for a purpose, but he could not tell what that purpose was. Peter told the researcher that he had dreams for his life and that those were to become an architect, have a good life and to live

long. The researcher asked what his definition of a good life was, and he replied that he would like to be healthy, have a family and be able to provide for them. This was a change of attitude from a previous session. When the researcher brought this to his attention, he said that one could not be alone forever. He said that no matter what happens he would always get married. The researcher felt that this was sincerely his feeling as opposed to merely repeating someone's opinion.

The researcher asked Peter whether there was anything about himself that he would like to change, and he said no, except that he needed to exercise more to build muscles so that he could look better. When the researcher asked about his personality, he said that he would only change his aggression. Apart from that, he said that he was happy with himself. When the researcher asked him what he thought he had within himself that could help him to achieve his goals for his life, he said that he had his talents, his will and himself.

Peter's discussion naturally drifted towards his father, and when the researcher asked whether there was anything that Peter would like to change about his father, he said that his father was perfect as he was. He would only change his heart and health. The researcher decided to confront the idealistic view that he has of his father and asked how he would explain the fact that his father often does not want him at home. He defended his father, saying that it was right that his father chose work over him sometimes because he had to work to make money and be able to at least look after himself and have a life. The researcher asked him how he thought it was that other children's parents work and still have them at

home, and he responded by saying that he did not worry about other children, only about himself.

The researcher purposefully asked whether Peter would change anything about his mother, because throughout the sessions he had been very negative and closed about his mother, but this day when he arrived, he told the researcher that his mother had phoned and he had had a wonderful time talking to her. Peter had shown similar inconsistent, fluctuating emotions with Jill as well. His response was that his mother was "O.K.". The researcher asked whether he could say what was responsible for the change in his feelings towards his mother, and he said that he was always positive about her. The researcher asked about all the times that he was not positive about her, and he said that it was nothing, and moved on in the discussion.

At the end of the session, the researcher gave another opportunity for Peter to look in the mirror and say something to himself. He looked and told the researcher that he liked what he saw and laughed at himself.

## **John**

The researcher's general impression of John's view of himself was that he was quite content with himself. He said that there was nothing that he would change about his physical appearance and had some positive things to say about the way he looked, for example, that he liked his eyes and his body. The most pertinent positive attribute that he gave himself was that he liked his heart, but could not elaborate on that. He seemed

shy when attention was drawn to him, but the researcher did not feel that this was due to a negative self-image. The researcher experienced it more as a lack of confidence than a dislike of himself. When asked whether he would change the fact that he did not have parents, he said that if he could bring them back he would, but his life was fine the way it was. He said that he was happy to be at Girls & Boys Town S.A. Macassar because he liked it as much as home. He said that there was nothing he would change about his life.

### **Mark**

Mark's response to what he liked about himself, was to say that he liked his whole body and his face. He added that he could work well in the garden and played soccer well. The researcher asked what he would like to do one day, and he said that he would like to work on a farm where there are lots of animals and plants. When the researcher asked if there was anything else that he liked about himself, he said that there was nothing, and began to play with a pencil box, looking agitated or bored. The researcher asked about his circumstances and whether there was anything that he would change. He said that he would rather not be at Girls & Boys Town S.A. Macassar if he could change that. (It is interesting that he ran away from Girls & Boys Town S.A. Macassar the following week). He said that he would rather be with his people. When asked about his parents, he said that his mother was perfect the way she was, but as he said this, his body language clearly indicated that he was resistant to talking about his parents again. He said that if he could change something about his father, he would see him more often and get

to know him better. The researcher commented on the fact that he seemed quite happy with his life the way it was, and he shook his head and said there were lots of things that he wanted that he did not have, but could not elaborate on that. Mark told the researcher about a man who came to give a talk on believing in yourself and reaching for your dreams. The researcher asked whether he believed in himself. Mark replied that he did not believe in himself. The researcher asked what he thought would help him to believe in himself and, he could not say. When the researcher asked if it would help if he knew that others believed in him, he only identified his brother, mother and father as those who would have an impact on him.

The researcher felt that the boys generally did not appear to have entirely negative views of themselves, but did appear to be lacking in self-confidence.

### 3.2.7 Therapy sessions nine and ten: Closing off

The researcher used the last two sessions to talk to the boys about their future and to encourage and empower them to reach for their dreams and to believe in their potential. The researcher felt that for both Peter and John, something additional came up in these sessions that may be relevant to understanding the experience of these boys. The researcher did not get the opportunity to close off with Mark as he ran away from Girls & Boys Town S.A. Macassar.

## **Peter**

Peter arrived at his ninth session having had a bad weekend at home with his father. From the information that the researcher could gather from the social worker, it appeared that Peter had not completed a chore that his father had given him to do over the weekend, and his father sent back a negative weekend report and indicated that he did not want Peter to come home over weekends if he behaved in that way again. Peter knew that his father was dissatisfied with him and for the first time in eight weeks the researcher saw his aggression emerge. He said that he felt very aggressive and knew that he was going to have a huge fight at school that day. He told the researcher that the last time he was at his session, everything was in place, but now he felt like everything was falling apart. When the researcher asked him to explain what things in his life felt like they were falling apart, he broke off contact and started talking about the pencils.

## **John**

At the end of the last session, John spontaneously broke down crying, and when the researcher asked why he was crying, he replied that he was sad because he would never see the researcher again. The researcher felt that this was significant, because throughout the researcher's time with John, the researcher was not aware of the significance that the researcher had for John. He appeared to be limited in his emotional connection or openness to the researcher, and yet there was evidently more emotion underlying than the researcher had realised. This could indicate that John

has the capacity to form attachments and experience his emotions more deeply than the data revealed.

### 3.3 CHILDCARE WORKER INTERVIEWS

The researcher did semi structured interviews with the childcare workers of the boys who participated in the study. The childcare workers live and work in close contact with the boys, and thus have the opportunity to develop very close relationships with them. Each boy has a childcare worker specifically assigned to them. One of the childcare workers that the researcher interviewed, was a Girls & Boys Town S.A. Macassar old boy, while the other is a reformed gangster. Due to their background, they are able to understand the boys better and they carry much credibility with them. The researcher worked according to an interview schedule which consisted of eight questions— broad and specific (see Addendum 4.5.1). The childcare workers were given the freedom to deviate from the questions and elaborate in any way they deemed necessary to adequately describe their experience of the boys. The researcher will give a description of each boy from the information gathered from each response in the interviews.

## **Peter**

1. The nature of the relationship between the childcare worker and the child:

Peter's childcare worker said that they get on well, but that Peter tends to be attention-seeking and impatient. If he is made to wait until he can be attended to, he gets angry.

2. A description of the child's general behaviour:

Peter's childcare worker reported that Peter participates in activities, is loving to work with and is appreciative when they go on outings. He added that he is impatient.

3. A description of the child's interaction with other children:

Peter is said to be very sociable and interactive with the other children. Peter's childcare worker reports bullying, but this does not happen often. He said that he had not seen any aggressive behaviour towards the other children yet, but that Peter is still in the "*honeymoon*" phase. He said that Peter does not instigate fights, but will respond to being irritated.

4. Scholastic progress:

Peter's school progress is said to be good and he has no academic difficulties. Peter's childcare worker did, however, say that his integration

into his school had been difficult, as he is the only white child in the school, but he has the respect of his schoolmates. He participates in extramural activities at school and enjoys it.

5. The child's view of himself:

Peter's childcare worker was of the opinion that Peter likes himself, but that he cannot tell for sure, as they have not explicitly spoken about this.

6. The child's relationship with his family:

Peter's childcare worker was of the opinion that his grandmother and his father are spoiling him. He said that Peter talks very little about his mother. He said that he and his father get on well and that Peter has much respect for his father, but that he is also scared of his father. Apparently, Peter talks a lot about his father and is the only child in his cottage that talks about his family. Based on this, the childcare worker thinks that he and his father have a good relationship. He did, however, say that Peter gets angry when his father does not allow him to go home. He feels pushed aside, and feels as if his father does not want to make time for him. The childcare worker said that Peter controls himself well, despite his anger.

7. The nature of the child's relationship with his father and the effect that it has on the child:

The childcare worker's response to this question yielded similar information to the previous question.

8. The child's greatest lack or need:

The childcare worker said that Peter's greatest need is attention. He said that he needs more time from his father and for his father to listen to him.

The following additional information was provided by the other childcare worker that the researcher interviewed who also has close contact with Peter:

The childcare worker said that he experiences Peter as an idealistic boy who has created his own distorted view of the world and that, whether it be reality or not, he lives it. In terms of his self-image, the childcare worker felt that Peter views himself as fun-loving and popular, but tends to overstep people's boundaries. He said that Peter borders on vanity and enjoys the spotlight. He said that he is easily influenced, but also attracted to the positive role model that the childcare workers provide for him. As far as Peter's aggression is concerned, the childcare worker said that Peter's aggression is, to an extent, a natural occurrence with the boys at Girls & Boys Town S.A. Macassar. He said that the boys use aggression in a process of natural selection in order to establish a hierarchy. He did, however, say that Peter also becomes aggressive

when he does not get his way. With regard to his relationship with his father, the childcare worker said that Peter's father is a distortion of his reality and that he has an idealistic view of his father.

## **John**

1. The nature of the relationship between the childcare worker and the child:

John's childcare worker said that at first his relationship with John resembled a nanny situation. There was a language barrier and they did not have much of a bond. He said that this has now changed, and they have what he described as a big brother relationship. He said that they talk about the past and John's feelings. The childcare worker expressed that his goal for their relationship is that he would become a positive adult role model for John, but that there are still trust issues that hinder the development of this. He said that the cultural difference between them and John's lack of exposure to a father figure are factors impairing the development of a replacement father-son relationship between the two of them.

2. A description of the child's general behaviour:

The childcare worker described John as intelligent, introspective and independent. He said that others are drawn to his strong, silent nature, but that he does not build strong bonds. He said that at some stage in John's life he must have had good role models because he is ethical, has

a sense of right and wrong, does not lie and is generous. John is said to be protective of others, as he stands up for others. He works out difficulties on his own, but lacks some problem-solving skills, in that he is quite stubborn. The childcare worker pointed out that John's understanding of "*Ubuntu*" is strong and that this could be where his skills come from.

### 3. A description of the child's interaction with other children:

The childcare worker said that John loves to fight, but seeks out positive ways to be aggressive. The researcher asked whether the childcare worker thought that his need for aggressive play came from a need to replace lost male contact. The childcare worker said that he thought that John's need was rather one of establishing himself as a masculine figure in the pecking order and not out of deprivation of male contact.

### 4. Scholastic progress:

According to the childcare worker, John places high value on education. He is conscientious, never bunks class, is involved in school activities and loves school. His academic progress was said to be good.

### 5. The child's view of himself:

According to the childcare worker, John sees himself as a leader. He is not afraid to speak up and stand up for others. He is comfortable with who he is and finds confidence in his physical ability and the mastery of skills,

such as boxing and soccer. Despite his confidence, he has a need to prove himself in order to belong.

6. The child's relationship with his family:

The childcare worker said that John does not share easily and keeps personal things to himself. He said that John becomes emotional when they talk about family, and felt that because of a lack of a father figure, John does not know how to express his feelings. The childcare worker got the feeling that the message that has been sent to John about sharing feelings is that "*men don't cry.*"

7. The nature of the child's relationship with his father and the effect that it has on the child:

The childcare worker said that John has very little information on his father and does not talk much about him. He said that John sees his older sister as the authority figure in their home. When the researcher asked how the childcare worker thought the absence of a father has affected John, he said that John does not know how to handle an adult male figure and is sometimes disrespectful towards male authority figures. He said that John is in the process of figuring out the concept what it is to be male as opposed to what it is to be a man and the difference between the two.

8. The child's greatest lack or need:

The childcare worker was of the opinion that John mostly needs to be cared for and to be provided with positive male role models in his life.

**Mark**

1. The nature of the relationship between the childcare worker and the child:

Mark's childcare worker described his relationship with Mark as being like law enforcement. He said that Mark views him as the law and that Mark hides things from the care worker and lies to protect himself. Mark is said to be disrespectful of the law, adults and any authority figure. He attributes this to the lack of positive role modelling by parental figures and a lack of discipline. The childcare worker said that they do not get time to connect because, with Mark, there is always a fire to be put out.

2. A description of the child's general behaviour:

The childcare worker described Mark as attention-seeking, disruptive and manipulative. His interaction is needs-based and he is distrustful of everyone. He is very resistant and unable to form attachments.

### 3. A description of the child's interaction with other children:

The childcare worker told the researcher that Mark shows love towards inanimate objects such as the garden rather than towards people. He said that Mark is a bully, manipulates the other boys and steals from them. He lives by "*gang mentality*" and is loyal to his clique, but not to his peers. According to the childcare worker, Mark has not been branded or initiated into a gang, but has been used by gangs to carry out robberies and shootings. This is said to give him status in his group.

### 4. Scholastic progress:

In the childcare worker's opinion, Mark is academically low-functioning and does not read or write properly. This has bred insecurity in him and has motivated him towards negative mastery. The childcare worker feels that Mark has been trying to compensate for his poor scholastic performance with the mastery of negative skills. He is evidently motivated to master skills that are deemed important in his clique.

### 5. The child's view of himself:

The childcare worker said that Mark has given up on achieving significant goals in life, does not have hope in his future and has identified with criminals. He is protective and defensive of himself in broader society, but defines himself within his clique. Within this clique he is important, has initiative, and is clever and creative.

### 6. The child's relationship with his family:

According to the childcare worker, Mark does not have a stable home background. His parents are divorced and he has had to move from place to place to find accommodation. His parents are described as inconsistent and unreliable, and, as a result, Mark struggles to trust anyone or form attachment bonds. He has no sense of belonging where a family is concerned and does not talk about them much.

7. The nature of the child's relationship with his father and the effect that it has on the child:

According to the childcare worker, Mark does not talk about his father at all. When the researcher asked what the childcare worker thought the effect of the breakdown in Mark and his father's relationship was, he replied that Mark has no sense of boundaries. He said that Mark has been negatively socialised and does not know how to function appropriately in society. He has developed a warped worldview that is characterised by gang mentality.

8. The child's greatest lack or need:

The childcare worker felt that Mark's greatest needs are positive role models and a stable, caring relationship with his primary caregivers.

### 3.4 SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The researcher has been able to identify similar problem areas in the three respondents, as well as the boys that were observed in the pilot study. These observed difficulties are as follows:

- Ambivalent feelings towards the father;
- incongruence in verbal and nonverbal expressions;
- hardened emotions;
- anger and aggression;
- a feeling of powerlessness;
- limited emotional repertoire;
- limited capacity for the verbal expression of their emotion;
- lack of self-confidence and insecurity;
- low self-esteem and an improperly formed identity;
- the desire for approval (especially from their father);
- defence of their father;
- idealistic view of their father;
- negative attitude towards women;
- difficulty in developing strong attachment bonds;
- difficulty trusting people;
- lack of boundaries;
- lack of respect for male authority;
- difficulty in delaying gratification;
- difficulty in social integration;
- intellectual and educational difficulties;
- the need for positive role model replacements.

Having carefully described the data that was gathered from the respondents, the researcher will endeavour to examine existing literature for information that either supports or refutes the findings of this study.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: LITERATURE CONTROL**

The focus of this chapter is to consider the observations made in this study in the light of existing literature on the research topic.

### **4.1 COMPARISON OF FINDINGS AND EXISTING LITERATURE**

On careful examination of the summary of the findings from the previous chapter, the researcher has identified four broad areas of developmental problems. These four areas of development will serve as the context for the discussion on the existing literature. The areas are as follows: emotional development, social development, cognitive development and moral development. The researcher does not consider these as distinctive components of development, but rather as areas that have an interplay in the overall development of a child. For the purpose of this discussion, however, they will be handled distinctively.

#### **4.1.1 Emotional Development**

The researcher found that the area of emotional intelligence (that is, the ability to know, express and manage one's emotions) was the greatest area of lack in all the boys that participated in the study. This finding appears to be supported by Balcom (1998:283) when he states that boys who have been abandoned by their fathers have difficulty in recognizing their emotions and, later on in life, have difficulty in being expressive with their spouses and children. Balcom says that it is common in families with

absent fathers for the family not to talk about the father. This is said to reinforce the society's expectation of boys not to be emotionally or verbally expressive. This is something that the researcher found in the cases of both John and Mark. Popenoe (1996:12) asserts that children learn valuable lessons in regulating their emotions and recognising the emotions of others in the context of play with their fathers. (Compare Pollock, 1998:114.) Boys who do not have the benefit of this interaction with a father would, therefore, be less likely to develop these skills. Perhaps one of the most supportive studies to look at would be one discussed by Phares (1999:62). This study was conducted by Emmy Werner from the University of California at Davis and was aimed at discovering the factors in the lives of 698 children, over a 35 year period, that would protect them from developing problems. One of the factors identified for boys, was coming from a family that supports emotional expression while maintaining structure that is often offered by a father-figure.

One of the emotional difficulties that was particularly noticeable to the researcher was that the verbal expressions of the boys often were incongruent with their nonverbal responses. This is supported by Pollack, *et al.* (in Broude, 1999:3) where it is said that boys who say that they are fine, often are not. (Compare Cooper, Smith & Upton, 1994:60.) Those that appear to have a positive self-esteem are most likely hiding very low self-confidence, and those who look like they are doing well, could be living in quiet desperation.

The researcher was aware of a sense of powerlessness conveyed by the boys. According to Biller (1993:63), a sense of power is derived, not from controlling the behaviour of others, but from the ability to make decisions and influence the course of one's life. He asserts that boys are able to gain a feeling of shared strength and power in play interaction with their fathers. Once again, a boy deprived of this opportunity may feel powerless.

One of the most compelling areas of difficulty for the boys who participated in the study was that they clearly had ambiguous feelings towards their fathers. They would either idealise their fathers and be fiercely defensive of them, while in denial about the reality of the relationship, or they would be dismissive about their fathers. This notion of ambivalent feelings towards the father appears to be supported by Balcom (1998:283) when he says that boys often have intense feelings towards their fathers and typically either become rejecting of their fathers, or overidentifying with the father and creating a fantasy of an ideal, worshipped father, despite the father's lack of interest, contact, commitment or feelings for his son. (Compare Wineburgh, 2000:255; Ott, 1997:40; Herzog, 2001:53; Jones, Kramer, Armitage & Williams, 2003:74; Canada, 1998:35.)

Low self-esteem, low self-confidence, insecurity and the desire for approval were other areas of difficulty that the researcher observed in the boys. Biller (1993:3) states that closeness with a father can be important in developing positive self-esteem and confidence, while paternal deprivation is associated with a poor self-concept and insecurity. Balcom

(1998:283) concurs with this and states that paternal deprivation severely affects the abandoned son's capacity for intimacy and development of a positive self-esteem. Cooper, *et al.* (1994:59) say that when a boy only experiences conditional acceptance of his emerging self, there will be problems in his self-esteem. Conditional acceptance was something that the researcher observed in the case of Peter. It is believed by Klinger (1998:30) that fathers build their sons' self-confidence through support and approval.

The researcher had the opportunity to observe and hear from the childcare workers that the boys who participated in the study find it very difficult to put their trust in anyone. Klinger (1998:30) explains that through rough and tumble play with his father, a boy learns to take risks and, based on this, is able to form trusting relationships outside the family. Balcom (1998:238) concurs with this by saying that when a boy is abandoned by his father he loses his trust in the continuity and stability of relationships.

The childcare worker indicated that some of the boys had difficulty with their identity. Biller (1993:57) suggests that a positive gender identity is developed in a boy when his father is a competent model, but also allows the boy to assert himself. (Compare Seutter & Rovers, 2004:46; Bly, 1999:93.)

Another area of difficulty mentioned by the childcare workers was that of attachment. The childcare workers felt that the boys showed an inability to form strong attachment bonds with others. This seems to be consistent

with writings of Balcom (1998:283) in which he states that many adult males who were abandoned by their fathers develop an inability to form lasting emotional attachments.

#### 4.1.2 Social Development

The area of social interaction yielded some interesting observations for the researcher. The researcher did not have the opportunity to observe the boys in their peer interactions and, in order to gain information in this respect, had to rely on reports from the childcare workers and social workers who interact with the boys on a regular basis and have the opportunity to observe their social interactions. The boys were all reported by the childcare workers to get along well with their peers at Girls & Boys Town S.A. Macassar. In the case of Mark, he was reported to clash with his peers, but gets on very well with his "*clique*." The researcher found this curious, as it was their aggressive interaction with others that led to their admission to Girls & Boys Town S.A. Macassar. According to Biller (1993:180), boys with absent fathers tend to be less popular and have less satisfying relationships with their peers than boys with involved fathers. (Compare Cabrera & Tamis-Lemonda, 2002:143) They have trouble maintaining friendships because they lack self-confidence and self-esteem, they struggle to assert themselves and are either extremely passive or overly demanding. This is consistent with information gathered from Peter's case in that he was reported to be extremely demanding and impatient and to lack boundaries with others. Biller (1993:180) asserts that fathers who are warm, active in decision-making and childcare, emotionally expressive and supportive of the mother-child relationship, are

likely to facilitate the development of competent patterns of social interaction in their sons. This is confirmed by Ladd (1999:333) when he writes that children with secure parent-child relationships, both maternal and paternal, were generally more engaging and cooperative in their peer interactions than children in disrupted families. (Compare Johnson & Thomas, 1998:11.) He says that parental warmth, agreeableness and responsiveness were positively linked to social competence in children. (Compare Bishop & Lane, 2000:105.) On the other hand, directiveness, disagreeableness, coercion and permissiveness on the part of the parents were linked to behaviour problems and deficits in social skills in their children. In addition to this, Ladd asserts that play interaction between boys and their fathers affects children's social skills and interaction with peers. He says that boys who experience a negative affective relationship with their fathers were found to have negative reciprocations with peers. They tended to be avoidant, aggressive and less prosocial towards their peers.

The researcher found that aggression and impulse control were problems in all the boys that were part of the study, including the pilot study. This finding appears to be consistent with the available literature. According to Popenoe (1996:12), father absence is linked to some of our most serious social issues such as juvenile delinquency which currently has the fastest growing crime rate. (Compare Pfiffner *et al.*, 2000:357-367; Lykken, 2000:681-682.) Phares (1999:53) confirms this in asserting that delinquent behaviour in teens is related to fathers who are defensive of themselves and unsupportive of their children, lacking in their supervision of activities and who have a poor relationship with their children. Phares

further states that aggressive behaviour in teens is related to the level of physical aggression in the father. According to Klinger (1998:30) boys who were guilty of violent misbehaviour at school were eleven times more likely to come from father-absent homes. (Compare Mackey & Mackey, 2003:63-75; Friedman, Ali & McMurphy, 1998:80.) In addition to this Ladd, (1999:333) states that children who have difficulty in regulating their emotions or emotionally directed behaviour are more prone to aggressive behaviour, and that this is even more applicable to children who experience their emotions intensely. The researcher found this to be true for all three boys that participated in the study. They showed an inability to regulate their emotions and had all been admitted to Girls & Boys Town S.A. Macassar as a result of aggressive behaviour. With regard to impulse control, Biller (1993:88) suggests that children with absent fathers may have less mature impulse control as a result of difficulty in trusting adults to follow through on commitments. Popenoe (1996: 12) strengthens this argument, asserting that children's play interaction with their fathers has an essential role in developing self-control in the child. The child learns what actions are unacceptable and when to stop. The researcher feels that it is necessary to mention that the mother-son relationship was also implicated in the development of aggressive behaviour in boys.

The last area of social development and interaction in which the researcher observed problems, was the area of respect for authority figures and women. In relation to this topic, Biller (1993:2, 181) states that societies with an expectation of father involvement with childcare routines generally have a positive attitude towards the rights of women and

children, but that father absence may result in boys having problematic relationships with women. (Compare Biddulph, 2003:76.) With regard to respect for authority figures, Biller (1993: 76) suggests that when a father is nurturing and caring, he will be effective in establishing boundaries for the child. The child will also be more likely to accept parental limits and will pay attention to the concerns of other adults. The researcher observed this in the case of Mark who had no regard for boundaries or limits and no respect for the authority figures who instilled them.

#### 4.1.3 Cognitive Development

The majority of the boys that were observed in the study, including the pilot study, either had difficulties at school or were coping but not excelling in their academic efforts. It was, therefore, not surprising to find links in literature between difficulties in cognitive functioning and absent fathers. In addition to the previously mentioned benefits of play interaction with fathers, Popenoe (1996:12) asserts that boys can develop their intelligence and academic achievements through this type of interaction with their fathers. He adds that father involvement has a positive impact on quantitative and verbal skills, problem-solving skills and higher academic achievement. Positive links were also found between father nurturance and the son's verbal intelligence, and father involvement and a son's mathematical abilities. Phares (1999:24) confirms this by stating that a greater level of father involvement has a positive effect on a son's intellectual development. Biller (1993:3, 111) agrees that a strong bond with a father facilitates greater intellectual competence in a boy. He says that this happens because the child is exposed to a different style of

verbal and problem-solving behaviour than with the mother. When a father is nurturing, it develops a child's curiosity, cognitive creativity and problem-solving skills.

#### 4.1.4 Moral Development

Biller (1993:86) describes moral development as decision-making according to a sense of right and wrong, feeling appropriate guilt after wrongdoing and the desire to maintain one's integrity. He adds that morally mature people are motivated to consider the rights and welfare of others. Martin Hoffman (in Biller, 1993:87) found that boys with absent fathers showed less adequate conscience development, weaker moral judgment, moral values and conformity than their present-fathered counterparts. Other research cited by Biller (1993:76), suggests that children with nurturing fathers are more likely to be generous and altruistic, as well as empathetic and caring towards others. They are also more likely to be tolerant and understanding of others. Biller believes that moral development is a multidimensional process and includes being able to consider others, as well as the development of self-control. He says that in order to become responsible one has to gain patience to delay gratification. Biller states that parental deprivation may hamper the ability to delay gratification and, in so doing, stifle moral development. Patience goes hand in hand with the delay of gratification, and Klinger (1998:30) states that when a father is patient and has realistic expectations of his son, the son will learn to persevere and develop patience himself. The development of self-control is crucial to this process, and Popenoe (1996:12) believes that these skills can be learned by a boy in his play

interaction with his father. Patience, self-control and delayed gratification were areas of definite difficulties for almost all the boys who participated in this study. The researcher was able to observe this in the sessions with the boys, as well as through feedback from the social workers and childcare workers on incidences where the boys showed a lack in this area.

#### 4.2 RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study and a review of existing literature, the researcher would make the following recommendations for helping fathers who have been absent and sons who have been emotionally abandoned:

- Embracing and empowering well-meaning fathers.

According to Fry (2001:288), there are well-meaning fathers who have not been given much education and opportunity to be involved with their children, despite their desire to do so. The result is that men feel inadequate and unsure in their role in the parenting process and have inadvertently become absent fathers. In addition to this, Popenoe (1996:12) asserts that, with the rise of feminism, men have been expected to show more feminine characteristics and abandon their aggression and competition when healthy levels of both are intrinsic to the male make-up and have a beneficial role to play in a child's development (Compare Gillis, 2000:227.) The researcher feels that if well-meaning fathers were given the opportunity to be educated in their beneficial role as a father, as

well as encouragement to contribute a masculine dimension to parenting, the benefits to children, wives, marriages and society in general would be far-reaching.

- Therapy for fathers to deal with their own abandonment and a strategy for the reunification of fathers and sons.

Fathers often abandon their sons out of simply following the model that was set for them by their own fathers. The researcher feels that in order for fathers to move on from their own loss and abandonment and become involved fathers, they would have to work through their own emotional healing. This view is supported by Balcom (1998:283), who proposes a strategy which includes marital therapy, a focus on the absent father-abandoned son dyad (with a focus on grief work), and the reunification of fathers and sons through family therapy. (Compare Elium & Elium, 2004:100)

- The re-establishment of marriage as a valuable social institution.

Marriage is no longer seen in the same light as years gone by (Gillis, 2000:232). It has become purely contractual as opposed to covenantal, and is fast becoming a disregarded social institution. Divorce is cited as one of the contributing factors to the absence of fathers. The researcher believes that if the plight of marriages in society could be addressed and the importance of parenting within a team (Biller, 1993:4) re-established, this would help to avert a disaster for the boys of our nation. (Compare Spruijt *et al.*, 2004:77-90.)

- Community commitment to addressing the needs of fathers and sons.

Klinger (2004:30) suggests that it will take the cooperation of entire communities to turn around the situation with absent fathering. He says that community leaders, policymakers, businessmen, the media, women's and men's groups, educators and religious organisations all have a role to play in finding the solution to this social problem. The researcher feels that if communities could work together to highlight the importance of fathers and put processes in place to support fathers, the number of boys being abandoned might be reduced.

- Corporate education on the importance of the role of a father.

Corporate companies need to be educated in the importance of father presence in the home. Business trips and work agendas should be arranged to take this into account in order to afford well-meaning fathers the opportunity to be involved in the lives of their children.

And where fathers choose to remain absent or cannot be reunited with their sons:

- The empowerment of mothers

Research indicates that mothers have a vital role to play in the development of their children, and the researcher feels that, although it is not statistically preferable for mothers to parent alone, they are still able to

raise well-adjusted children if given the right kind of support. (Compare Dunn *et al.*, 2004:563.)

- Role model replacement figures or mentors for boys.

The researcher recommends that, where a boy does not have an involved father, replacement male role models be placed in his life to aid him in his transition into manhood. Eium and Eium (2004:29) suggest that the presence of male mentors and the strength of a boy's alliances with these males are crucial in a boy's transition into manhood. (Compare Munroe, 2001:324.) The boy's observations of these mentors will become a subconscious model for what the boy will become.

- Further research

It appears that there is an ample amount of literature available on the topic of absent fathers, yet, little of this literature focuses on prevention strategies or recovery strategies. The researcher feels that it is all very well knowing how a boy is affected by the absence of his father, but it is proactive strategies and recovery strategies that will serve boys (and fathers) more adequately.

### 4.3 CONCLUSION

Much research has been conducted on the effects of an absent father on a boy, but the specific intention of this study was to explore the topic from a novel angle. This angle was to explore the boy's expression of his experience of his relationship with his father. The researcher found that the exploration yielded very similar observations as those found in existing literature. The researcher could find no existing literature to refute nor contradict the findings of this study. The study did not appear to contribute any novel information in the area of absent fathers and sons, except to say that, from the researcher's point of view, the verbal expressions of a boy's experience of his absent father are often incongruent with the observations and experiences of credible witnesses to the relationship. This has, to a certain extent, been discussed in existing literature where it relates to the fantasising about an ideal father and the denial of the real father. The researcher finds that this is valuable information for therapists working within a Gestalt framework, as it highlights the need to work in polarities with such boys in order to create awareness of the reality that they deny. The creation of awareness will allow for and empower the boy to access his denied feelings of abandonment, loss, anger and resentment in order to work through and successfully overcome them.

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## 4.5 ADDENDA

### 4.5.1 Childcare Worker Interview Schedule

1. Describe the nature of your relationship with the child in question.

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2. Describe the child's general behaviour.

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3. Describe the child's interaction with other children.

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4. Does the child experience any difficulties at school? If so describe.

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5. How do you think the child views himself?

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6. Describe the nature of the child's relationship with his family.

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7. Describe the nature of the child's relationship with his father and the effect of this relationship on the child.

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8. What would you say is the child's greatest lack or need?

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#### 4.5.3 Therapy session six: John

- Kwaad / Cross 
- hartseer / Sad 
- gelukkig / happy 
- bang / scared 
- liefde / love 
- bekommerd /  
worried 



#### 4.5.4 Therapy session six: Mark

- Kwaad 
- hartseer 
- gelukkig 
- bang 
- liefde 
- bekommerd 

