

DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT: HARNESSING THE FATHERS MATTER WHATSAPP COACH TO SUPPORT MEN AND FATHERS IN CAREGIVING ROLES



Introduction

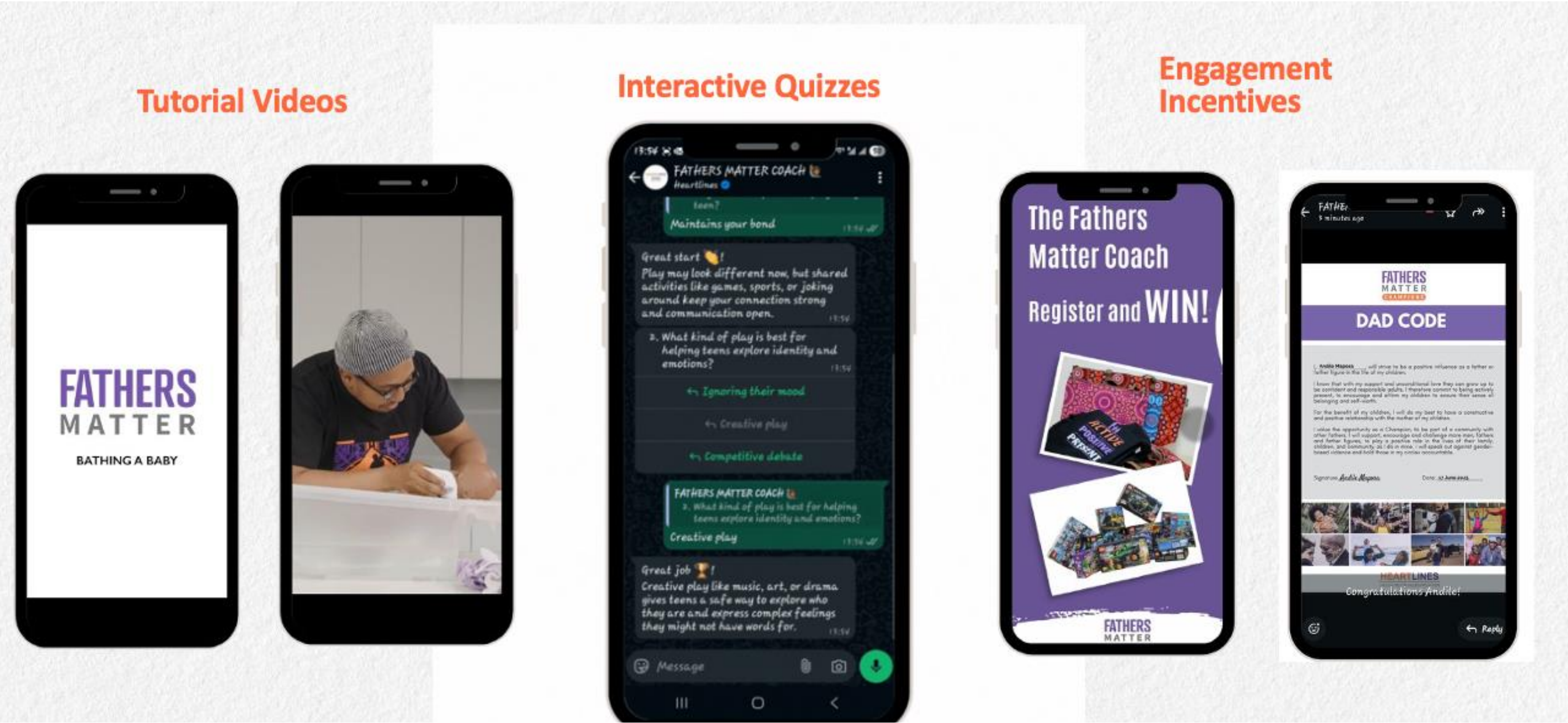
- An estimated 62% of South African children live without the daily presence of their *biological fathers* in their household (Stats SA, 2021)
- Many men want to be engaged but face barriers: Unemployment, gatekeeping, Knowledge and skills gap, lack of access and support.
- The Fathers Matter Project is one of the largest initiative on the African continent focusing on the positive active presence of biological and social fathers in children’s lives.
- The active positive presence of a fathers/man in a child’s life reduces their risk of exposure to social ills such as substance use, GBV and other forms of violence, teen pregnancy, economic and educational outcomes and Mental health challenges.
- The Fathers Matter WhatsApp Coach acts as a “dad” help-line providing real time, judgement free care giving advice and emotional support.
- This study explores research from inception of the Coach from 2022 to date 2025 and how The Fathers Matter Coach has been an innovative digital support to male caregivers



Objectives of Fathers Matter Coach

To improve knowledge, challenge attitudes and increase dialogue amongst men and women to aid understanding of WHY fathers matter to make a stronger connection between key social problems and father absence (including GBV, substance abuse, mental health and violence

To provide men with accessible information, motivation and skills and to support them on their fathering journey.



Analysis of Coach Questions

- 67% of users asked about strengthening father–child bonds.
- Fathers sought advice on bonding, discipline, communication, co-parenting.
- Many also raised issues of mental health, anger management, custody, and unemployment.
- Mothers/caregivers also engaged to encourage father involvement.
- Fathers value emotional connection guidance as much as practical tips.
- Human-like AI responses create a sense of empathy and trust.
- High engagement during midday and early evening, especially on Thursdays.
- Women are active users, showing demand for inclusive content.

Case Study of Neo: Coach a fathers trusted companion through his fatherhood journey

Neo, male South African Setswana speaker, unemployed, first-time biological father July 2024, and became step-father to 5-year-old girl. Neo becomes primary caregiver to his children, due to his wife’s c-section and inability to share in all household responsibilities. He began using coach May 2024, but frequency increased dramatically after the birth of his biological child. We documented his interactions over 850 messages, which tells a journey of a man despite his personal challenges, who grew in confidence and skill and coach became a trusted companion. Below are some of his interactions with coach:

01 >> “my baby does not want to breastfeed or take the bottle. What could be the problem?” What is the best position to hold the baby and when feeding?” Isi it normal for a 10-week-old not to sleep at all during the day?” Initial questions were ones of curiosity, panic and requesting skills.

02 >> As his daughter grew, he became increasingly curious about her developmental progress and what to expect at each stage. “At how many months to babies start getting their first teeth?” “I’ve noticed what when my infant is laid on her back, she tried to lift her head. What does this mean?

03 >> Interacting daily and being positively and actively involved in his child’s life naturally moved him from natural curiosity to attentiveness beyond routines and milestones. He remained on high alert to any signs that something might be wrong with his baby’s health. “Hi Coach, today is day 09, and the umbilical cord has not fallen off yet, should I be worries?” At her last weigh-in she weighed 4.7 Kg, and she was only 6 weeks, not two months. Should I be worried?”

04 >> Increased care for the child also meant the male caregiver became more concerned about the mother and her and in supporting his wife through postpartum recovery.. I want to know; my wife gave birth through c-section so how do I clean it?” Where they did the c-section on her I noticed some swelling and blood. Should I be worried?

05 >> Neo’s care was not limited to his newborn. HE regularly used the coach to help his step-daughter with her riddle and word puzzles. the coach has a separate journey for biological fathers and social fathers as they have different challenges and experiences. His interactions were not only skill and knowledge based but also for motivation and support, : How do I deal with parenting stress?” Sometimes I find parenting so hard, and I feel like I can just cry and give up. I have this regret whenever I look at my infant because I lost my job...how can I overcome this?”



Conclusion

By empowering men to become emotionally and practically engaged in caregiving—regardless of their biological connection to the child—the WhatsApp Coach contributes to stronger family relationships, improved child development outcomes, and more equitable parenting dynamics.

The Fathers Matter WhatsApp Coach demonstrates how digital engagement can empower men as caregivers, reduce barriers, and strengthen communities. It is a scalable, low-cost innovation in community development

Key Sources & Acknowledgements

Cabrera, N. J., Volling, B. L., & Barr, R. (2018). Fathers are parents, too! *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development*, 83(1), 7–23.

Engle, P. L., Fernald, L. C., Alderman, H., et al. (2011). Strategies for reducing inequalities and improving developmental outcomes for young children in low-income and middle-income countries. *The Lancet*, 378(9799), 1339–1353.

Jewkes, R., Flood, M., & Lang, J. (2015). From work with men and boys to changes of social norms and reduction of inequities in gender relations: A conceptual shift in prevention of violence against women and girls. *The Lancet*, 385(9877), 1580–1589.

Makusha, T., & Richter, L. (2016). Gatekeeping and its impact on father involvement. *South African Journal of Psychology*, 46(2), 191–202.

Ratele, K., Shefer, T., & Clowes, L. (2012). Talking South African fathers: A critical examination of men’s constructions and experiences of fatherhood and fathering. *South African Journal of Psychology*, 42(4), 553–563.

Richter, L., Chikovre, J., & Makusha, T. (2012). The status of fatherhood and fathering in South Africa. *Early Child Development and Care*, 182(1), 1–10.

