

Children Raising Children in Swaneville, Kagiso

By Life Sithole

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In the heart of Swaneville, Kagiso, a quiet crisis unfolds daily. Children are being forced to shoulder the responsibilities of parenthood long before their time. With absent or neglectful parents prioritising social lives, substance use, and gambling over their children's well-being, the youngest members of the community are left to care for their siblings, sacrificing their own childhoods in the process.

Instead of enjoying playtime, learning, and carefree days, these children are cooking, bathing, and feeding their younger brothers and sisters. The emotional toll is immense. Many suffer from stress, anxiety, and exhaustion. Their education suffers as well. This is because they struggle to find time to study or even stay awake in class.

10-year-old Anathi Ngoki, a Grade 4 learner, has been caring for her four-year-old brother, Luthando, for as long as she can remember.

"My parents leave us alone to go to party and gamble," she says. "I was supposed to be in Grade 5 this year, but I failed because I had too much responsibility." Anathi dreams of playing with her friends and going to school without worrying about her brother. "But someone has to take care of him," she adds quietly.

Precious Khumalo, 12, who is in Grade 6, shares a similar story. "I'm tired of being given the responsibilities of a mother when I'm not even close to that stage," she says.

"It's hard to balance playing and being a parent to my siblings." Watching her peers play in the streets while she tends to her brother and sisters makes her very sad. "I no longer get a chance to grow like other kids," she says. "I pity the younger ones who are trapped in this same situation. I see them roaming around with crying, dirty siblings. I wish our parents would stop doing stupid things and come back to take responsibility."

The impact of this forced caregiving is devastating. These children miss out on important developmental experiences. According to child psychologists, the stress and anxiety they endure can lead to long-term emotional and social challenges. Their sense of identity and self-worth is often compromised, and their futures are put at risk.

A concerned resident, who asked to remain anonymous, believes the problem stems from a lack of accountability among parents. "It's unfair for children to be deprived of their childhood," she says. "Most of these situations happen in families with young parents, substance abusers, or those who never wanted children but had them anyway." She adds that many parents still crave freedom, to party, gamble, and enjoy life, without recognising the consequences of neglecting their children.

"These kids are doing house chores at an age when they should be playing and growing," she continues. "We need to normalise preventing pregnancies and

encourage responsible parenting. There are social programmes in our communities that address these issues, but people need to engage with them.”

The community of Swaneville, Kagiso, must now reflect on the challenges faced by these young caregivers. The burden they carry is not just physical but it's also emotional, psychological, and deeply unjust. If the community can rally together to provide support, resources, and intervention, these children might finally be able to reclaim their childhoods.

Social workers, educators, and local leaders must step in to ensure that no child is left to raise another. With proper care and attention, these young ones can be given the chance to thrive, to learn, and to play, just as every child deserves.

The time for action is now. Swaneville's children are crying out, not just for help, but for the right to be children again.

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