

Reducing Sexual Offences Amongst Youth:

A case study of how the Support Programme
for Abuse-Reactive Children (SPARC) changes
participants' lives

Thabo's Story



TEDDY BEAR CLINIC
FOR ABUSED CHILDREN

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Thabo's Story:

The Talk of the Township

“...Bullying [women] to me was a signal that I am a man”.

Thabo* is 19 years old and lives with his father and mother and two siblings in a township in Johannesburg. The area they live in has poor housing and infrastructure, high levels of HIV infection and high levels of unemployment. Thabo's father is unemployed and his mother relies on contractual work. His brother is still in school and his sister has recently started working. The family struggles financially and, as Thabo's mother explains, they live “hand to mouth”.

Thabo would often bunk school to drink alcohol and smoke marijuana with his friends. His mother notes that he was “pushy and aggressive” to girls and Thabo admits that he used to harass his girlfriend. He did not see anything wrong with this and explains that “for me it was normal and I thought that is how they should be treated. Bullying them to me was a signal that I am a man”.

One day, towards the end of 2010, Thabo was at his friend's school drinking alcohol and taking drugs with some other learners. When Thabo's friend disappeared with an older woman, Thabo went to look for him. He found them having sex at the back of the school field and the woman told Thabo to have sex with her.

He was feeling drunk and explains that “it was easy to accept the offer”. While they were having sex, other learners came and watched, and took a video of them.

The incident was reported to the school principal by some of the learners and the story made the television news. The woman wanted to open a case of rape against Thabo and he remembers that he felt “surprised because I did not force her. I was frightened and confused”.

Thabo was the “talk of the township”. This was the most frustrating time of his life and everyone in his community knew what he had done. He was ashamed and felt isolated. His relationships with his family and friends changed, and Thabo felt that they had deserted him and saw him as an embarrassment. His mother was shocked when she heard what he had done and, indeed, she was embarrassed because it was all over the news. She says that at that time, “I felt like disowning Thabo”.

Thabo went back and forth to court until the end of the year (2010). The court found him innocent of rape, but he was still referred SPARC at the Teddy Bear Clinic in 2011.

*All names have been changed in the interests of anonymity, and all quotes are taken from interviews

How my life changed

From participating in the SPARC programme, Thabo developed the courage to speak freely and honestly about what happened to him: *"I accepted what I have done and I am not afraid to talk about the incident"*. He felt relieved once he had discussed the incident honestly, and this allowed him to deal with it constructively and move forward with hope for his future. His mother attests to this: *"He told me that he always felt relief after the discussions. In fact, they made him heal quickly"*.

The programme also improved Thabo's self awareness and he describes it as *"a really fascinating time. I enjoyed myself at Teddy Bear Clinic"*. He learnt about impulse control and how to think before he acts. He understands that this is a skill which he was missing: *"I vowed that I am not going to repeat the same mistake again. I have learnt the hard way"*. His attitude towards girls has changed too, and he respects them and regards them as equally important to boys. His mother has witnessed this change in Thabo and she is happy that he now shows more respect to girls.

The biggest change for Thabo was that he learnt how to cope with challenges and to be goal-orientated. Through exposure to dance, one of the alternative therapies provided by the SPARC programme, Thabo found a way to express his emotions, and an enjoyable and constructive way to escape some of the problems that he faces in his life. Dancing leaves him feeling revived and energised to tackle his challenges. His mother notes that *"this [dancing] keeps him busy and puts him away from engaging in evil things"*.

“ Thabo has high hopes for the future. He is grateful for the SPARC programme and believes “I wouldn't be the person I am today without it”.

Thabo has decided to prioritise his studies and focus on his career. He went back to school and finished Grade 10, which he passed, and he is now registered for Mechanical Engineering at a Further Education and Training College. A SPARC facilitator and Thabo's mother reported that they have noticed Thabo's new dedication to his work as a real change in him.

Thabo has high hopes for the future. He is grateful for the SPARC programme and believes *"I wouldn't be the person I am today without it"*. He sees himself as a successful hip hop dancer in the future and feels supported by his family and community in working towards this goal. His SPARC facilitator observed that Thabo enjoys making others happy by entertaining them and believes that he will be successful in this goal.

Thabo also intends to pursue his academic career so that he can be a responsible member of the community who is able to give back: *"I want to be an asset in this community. I owe them a lot. I want to give back to them by training their children to be hip hop stars"*. His mother is proud of his goals and how Thabo now lives his life with passion.



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