

By Ketra Kizito Kisekka Ntale

DNA paternity tests in Uganda are commonly used to verify biological fathers and ensure that children are placed within their rightful families. However, in the one out of three cases where results turn out negative, the consequences can be severe — disrupting families and deeply affecting the child. While DNA tests can provide important benefits, such as relief and a stronger sense of belonging when the presumed father is confirmed, it is crucial to examine the psychological harm that negative results can cause:

#### DISTRESS AND GRIEF

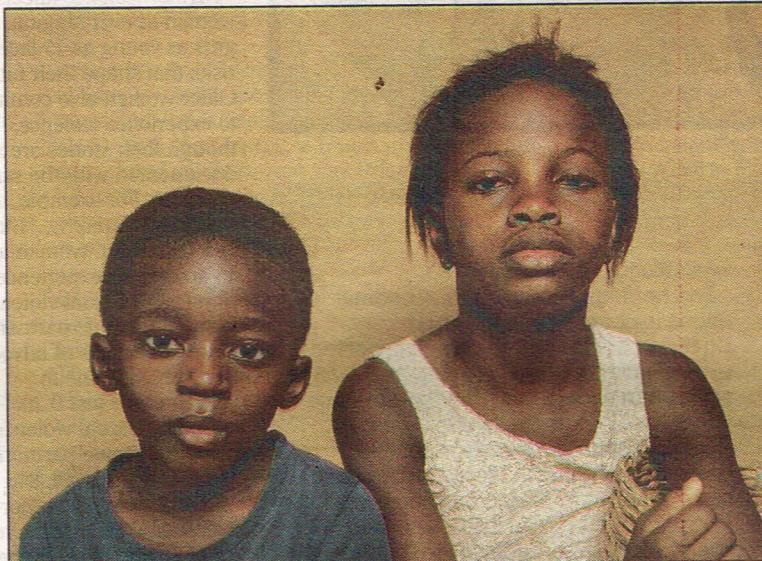
Children affected by misallocated paternity often experience intense anger, confusion and frustration. The shock of discovering that they were denied the truth about their origins can be perceived as betrayal. If this emotional turmoil is not addressed, it can cause long-term psychological damage.

Misallocated paternity represents a real loss — the loss of a biological connection to the man they believed was their father. Children may grieve the time they never shared with their newly discovered biological father and his family. The imagined life they "should have had" can replay in their minds, leading to prolonged grief and emotional instability.

#### FEAR OF REJECTION

Children may fear rejection from both their newly discovered biological relatives and the families who raised

# How DNA tests impact children's mental health



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them. This threat is real among those dealing with misallocated paternity.

One child, Sarah, who attends my counselling centre, described her experience: "My former and new family pretend that none of this existed, but for me, my entire world got disrupted. They operate from a place of privilege where their identity did not get extinguished."

Feeling like the "other" diminishes a child's sense of belonging — especially for those who were

already being mistreated by a parent who suspected non-paternity. Such feelings can lead to loss of emotional attachment and severely damage a child's self-worth.

#### RESENTMENT AND HATRED

Children, especially boys, who discover they were misassigned a father may begin questioning their identity, appearance and sense of self. This can lead to resentment toward the parents who raised them,

#### FOOD FOR THOUGHT

1. Should there be an age limit for conducting paternity tests on children?
2. How are parents — both fathers and mothers — affected by a negative paternity test result?

whom they may blame for robbing them of the truth.

Some may perceive their mother as promiscuous or unfit, deepening emotional wounds. Sam, a boy brought to my counselling centre recently, expressed his pain this way:

"I no longer want to see my mother again, as she is the cause of all my troubles. I'm now unstable because of her. In fact, I'm starting to believe she doesn't care about me, and I want a DNA test with my mother as well."

Such sentiments reflect not only anger but also deep emotional vulnerability and the breakdown of trust brought about by non-paternity.

#### STIGMA AND DISCRIMINATION

Children with misallocated paternity often face social stigma once DNA results reveal they are not biologically related to the presumed father. They may be treated differently by the community and become the subject of neighbourhood gossip. When

children overhear people whispering about them or notice conversations abruptly ending when they appear, it shatters their sense of belonging.

Clare, a secondary school student I treated, shared: "I feel deep pain when I hear people discussing my issues and saying, 'This is the intruder who has been masquerading.' Friends who know my situation no longer want to associate with me."

Being labelled as "non-paternity" by society severely affects children's emotional stability, hinders healthy social interaction, and can lead to profound loneliness.

Children affected by misallocated paternity experience complex negative emotions — anxiety, depression and low self-esteem — which can hinder their development. Some resort to alcohol, drugs, and substance use as a coping mechanism. This highlights the urgent need for comprehensive aftercare systems that acknowledge the psychological challenges children face after receiving non-paternity results.

In the next article, I will discuss effective strategies to protect children's mental health following DNA paternity test outcomes.

The writer is a teen mental health expert and psychological well-being practitioner