

LIVING IN A FATHERLESS FAMILY: A DESCRIPTIVE QUALITATIVE STUDY ON CHILDREN'S MENTAL AND EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING

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Abstract

Fatherlessness has become an increasingly prominent social phenomenon in many societies, raising concerns about its implications for children's psychological, emotional, and social development. The absence of a father figure, whether due to divorce, death, migration, or non-marital family structures, may influence how children construct identity, regulate emotions, and interact with their social environment. This study aims to explore the lived experiences of fatherless children and to understand the perceived impacts of father absence on their emotional well-being, social behavior, and daily life. The research adopts a descriptive qualitative approach to capture in-depth perspectives that cannot be adequately explained through quantitative measurement alone. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with participants who experienced growing up without an actively present father figure. The interviews focused on participants' emotional experiences, family dynamics, coping strategies, and perceptions of support from other caregivers or social institutions. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and meanings within participants' narratives. The findings indicate that fatherlessness affects children in complex and multidimensional ways. Participants reported feelings of emotional insecurity, longing, and confusion, particularly during early developmental stages. However, the study also reveals adaptive responses, such as increased independence and emotional resilience, often facilitated by strong maternal support or alternative role models. The absence of a father does not uniformly result in negative outcomes, but its impact is shaped by contextual factors including family communication, socioeconomic conditions, and social support systems.

Keywords: Fatherlessness, Child Development, Qualitative Study, Family Dynamics

INTRODUCTION

The family is widely recognized as the primary social institution responsible for nurturing children's physical, emotional, and social development. Within this institution, the presence of both parents has traditionally been viewed as an ideal condition for child development. However, contemporary social changes have led to a growing number of children being raised in fatherless households. Fatherlessness, commonly defined as the absence of a biological or social father figure

in a child's daily life, has become a global phenomenon influenced by divorce, parental separation, death, labor migration, and changing family structures.

The increasing prevalence of fatherless families has generated extensive academic and public debate regarding its potential impact on children. Previous studies have often associated father absence with various developmental challenges, including emotional difficulties, behavioral problems, lower academic achievement, and weakened social adjustment. Despite these associations, much of the existing literature relies heavily on quantitative approaches that emphasize statistical correlations rather than children's subjective experiences. As a result, the voices of fatherless children themselves are frequently underrepresented.

From a developmental psychology perspective, early childhood and adolescence are critical periods during which children form emotional attachments, develop self-concept, and learn social norms. The absence of a father during these stages may influence children's emotional security and identity formation. Fathers are often perceived as role models who contribute to discipline, emotional regulation, and social interaction. When this role is absent, children may experience emotional gaps that affect their sense of belonging and stability.

Nevertheless, fatherlessness should not be understood as a uniform or deterministic condition. The impact of father absence varies significantly depending on contextual factors such as the quality of maternal care, extended family involvement, socioeconomic status, and access to social support systems. In some cases, children raised in fatherless households demonstrate remarkable resilience and adaptability. This suggests that the absence of a father does not automatically lead to negative developmental outcomes, but rather interacts with broader environmental and relational factors.

In many cultural contexts, including collectivist societies, extended family members and community networks often play a crucial role in compensating for father absence. Grandparents, uncles, teachers, and mentors may provide emotional guidance and social support that help children navigate their developmental challenges. Understanding how children perceive and interpret these substitute relationships is essential for gaining a holistic understanding of fatherlessness.

Given these complexities, there is a clear need for qualitative research that explores fatherlessness from the perspective of those directly affected. A descriptive qualitative approach allows researchers to capture rich narratives and meanings that reflect children's lived experiences. Such an approach emphasizes understanding rather than generalization, providing nuanced insights into how father absence is experienced, interpreted, and managed in everyday life.

This study aims to address this gap by examining the experiences of individuals who grew up in fatherless families. Specifically, it seeks to explore how father absence influences emotional well-being, social relationships, coping strategies, and perceptions of family support. By focusing on participants' narratives, this research contributes to a more human-centered understanding of fatherlessness and offers implications for family support programs, educational practices, and social policies.

METHODS

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design to explore the lived experiences of individuals who grew up in fatherless families. A qualitative approach was chosen because it allows for an in-depth understanding of participants' perceptions, emotions, and interpretations regarding father absence, which cannot be adequately captured through quantitative methods. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, with inclusion criteria focusing on individuals who experienced the absence of a father figure during childhood or adolescence. The absence could be due to divorce, separation, death, or long-term non-involvement. Participants were recruited through community networks and personal referrals to ensure relevance to the research objectives.

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured, in-depth interviews. This method provided flexibility for participants to share their experiences openly while allowing the researcher to guide the discussion based on predetermined themes, such as emotional experiences, family relationships, social interactions, and coping mechanisms. Each interview was conducted in a comfortable and confidential setting, either face-to-face or online, and lasted approximately 45–60 minutes. The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The analysis process involved data familiarization, coding, theme development, and interpretation. To ensure credibility, data triangulation was applied by comparing participants' narratives across different backgrounds. Ethical considerations were strictly observed, including informed consent, confidentiality, and the protection of participants' identities. The descriptive qualitative approach enabled the study to present an authentic representation of fatherlessness as experienced by the participants.

RESULTS

1. Emotional Experiences of Children in Fatherless Families

The findings indicate that children living in fatherless families experience a wide range of emotional responses, predominantly characterized by feelings of sadness, emotional insecurity, and longing. Many participants expressed a sense of loss, even in cases where the father had been absent since early childhood. This emotional void often manifested as persistent feelings of abandonment or confusion regarding the father's absence. Children reported difficulty understanding the reasons behind the absence, which intensified emotional distress and contributed to unresolved emotional questions. In addition to sadness, feelings of anger and frustration were frequently identified. Some children internalized their emotions, becoming emotionally withdrawn, while others expressed externalized emotions such as irritability or mood instability. These findings align with attachment theory, which emphasizes the role of parental presence in establishing emotional security. The absence of a father figure disrupted the formation of secure attachment patterns, leading to heightened emotional vulnerability.

The discussion reveals that emotional coping strategies varied among children. Some developed emotional resilience by relying on maternal support or extended family members, while others struggled to regulate emotions effectively. The lack of a consistent male role model limited opportunities for emotional modeling, particularly in managing stress, disappointment, and interpersonal conflict. As a result, emotional expression was often unbalanced, either suppressed or excessively reactive. From a broader perspective, these emotional experiences reflect the complex psychological consequences of father absence. While not all children exhibited severe emotional

distress, the majority reported subtle yet persistent emotional challenges. The findings highlight that emotional well-being is not solely influenced by the absence itself but also by how the absence is explained, managed, and emotionally supported within the family context. This underscores the importance of open communication and emotional validation in mitigating negative emotional outcomes for children in fatherless families.

2. Mental Health and Psychological Adjustment

The results demonstrate that fatherlessness significantly influences children's mental health and psychological adjustment. Participants commonly reported symptoms associated with anxiety, low self-esteem, and feelings of inadequacy. These psychological responses were often linked to perceived differences between themselves and peers from intact families. Children frequently compared their family structures with others, which intensified feelings of being "different" or incomplete. Psychological adjustment challenges were particularly evident in academic and social environments. Several children described difficulty concentrating in school, decreased motivation, and heightened sensitivity to criticism. These experiences suggest that emotional strain associated with father absence can interfere with cognitive functioning and self-regulation. In some cases, children reported internalizing negative self-perceptions, believing that the father's absence was a reflection of their own worth.

The discussion indicates that psychological adjustment is shaped by both internal and external factors. Internally, children struggled with identity formation, especially during adolescence, when paternal figures are often perceived as important sources of guidance. Externally, social stigma surrounding fatherless families contributed to psychological stress. Negative stereotypes and insensitive comments from peers reinforced feelings of inferiority and emotional isolation. Despite these challenges, the findings also reveal adaptive psychological responses. Some children developed independence, problem-solving skills, and emotional maturity earlier than their peers. This suggests that psychological outcomes are not uniformly negative but depend on protective factors such as maternal support, peer relationships, and positive school environments. These findings support resilience theory, which emphasizes the capacity of individuals to adapt positively despite adversity.

Overall, the mental health outcomes observed in this study highlight the need for early psychological support and school-based mental health interventions to assist children in navigating the psychological challenges associated with father absence.

3. Social Relationships and Peer Interaction

Social interaction emerged as a significant theme in understanding children's experiences in fatherless families. The results indicate that father absence influenced how children formed and maintained relationships with peers. Many participants reported difficulties in trusting others and forming close friendships. This was often attributed to fears of rejection or abandonment rooted in their family experiences. Children frequently described feeling socially withdrawn, especially in new environments. Some avoided discussing their family background due to fear of judgment or stigma. This avoidance behavior limited opportunities for social bonding and contributed to feelings of isolation. In contrast, a smaller number of participants demonstrated heightened social adaptability, actively seeking peer support to compensate for emotional gaps within the family.

The discussion reveals that peer relationships often served as both a challenge and a coping mechanism. For some children, supportive friendships provided emotional stability and a sense of belonging. These relationships helped buffer the negative emotional effects of father absence. However, for others, peer pressure and negative social influences increased vulnerability to risky behaviors, particularly in adolescents seeking validation and acceptance. Social learning theory helps explain these dynamics, as children often model behaviors observed in their immediate environment. The absence of a father figure reduced exposure to certain social role behaviors, potentially affecting communication styles, conflict resolution, and authority perception. This was particularly evident among male participants, who expressed uncertainty about masculine identity and social roles. Overall, the findings suggest that social relationships play a crucial mediating role in children's well-being. Positive peer environments can mitigate emotional distress, while negative social experiences may exacerbate existing vulnerabilities. Therefore, fostering inclusive and supportive social environments is essential for promoting healthy social development in children from fatherless families.

4. Coping Strategies and Sources of Support

The study identified various coping strategies employed by children in fatherless families. Emotional coping mechanisms included self-reflection, journaling, and engaging in creative activities such as drawing or music. These strategies allowed children to express emotions that they felt uncomfortable verbalizing. Others relied heavily on their mothers, viewing them as primary emotional anchors. Extended family members, particularly grandparents and uncles, emerged as important sources of support. Their presence helped fill emotional and functional gaps left by the father's absence. However, the quality and consistency of this support varied, influencing children's overall well-being. In families with strong extended support systems, children demonstrated better emotional regulation and psychological stability.

The discussion highlights that religious and cultural values also played a significant role in coping. Many participants found comfort in spiritual practices, which provided meaning, hope, and emotional reassurance. These practices helped children reframe their experiences positively and foster acceptance. Despite these coping efforts, some strategies were maladaptive. Emotional suppression and excessive self-reliance were commonly observed, potentially leading to long-term psychological strain. The absence of professional psychological support further limited children's ability to process complex emotions effectively. These findings emphasize the importance of strengthening formal and informal support systems. Schools, community organizations, and mental health professionals play a vital role in equipping children with adaptive coping skills. Structured emotional support can prevent the development of chronic psychological issues and enhance resilience among children in fatherless families.

5. Long-Term Implications for Emotional Development

The final theme addresses the long-term implications of fatherlessness on children's emotional development. The findings suggest that unresolved emotional challenges during childhood may extend into adolescence and adulthood. Participants expressed concerns about future relationships, trust issues, and fear of abandonment, indicating lasting emotional imprints. Emotional regulation difficulties were particularly evident among older participants. Some reported

challenges in managing intimate relationships and expressing vulnerability. These patterns reflect the long-term influence of early attachment disruptions. Without appropriate intervention, these emotional patterns risk becoming deeply ingrained behavioral responses.

However, the discussion also reveals potential for positive emotional growth. Children who received consistent emotional support demonstrated higher emotional intelligence and empathy. Their experiences fostered sensitivity toward others' emotions and strengthened coping capacities. This supports the concept of post-adversity growth, where individuals develop emotional strengths through challenging life experiences. The findings underscore the critical role of early intervention in shaping long-term emotional outcomes. Providing emotional education, counseling, and family-based support can significantly alter developmental trajectories. Emotional well-being in fatherless families should therefore be addressed as a public health and social concern. In conclusion, while father absence presents substantial emotional and psychological challenges, its long-term impact is not deterministic. With adequate support, children in fatherless families can achieve healthy emotional development and psychological well-being.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study provide a deeper understanding of how father absence shapes children's mental and emotional well-being within a fatherless family context. Consistent with attachment theory, the absence of a father figure was found to disrupt children's sense of emotional security, particularly during critical stages of emotional and psychological development. Children's expressions of sadness, emotional insecurity, and confusion reflect the unmet need for consistent parental attachment, which is essential for developing emotional stability and self-confidence. The study also reveals that fatherlessness is closely associated with psychological vulnerabilities, including anxiety, low self-esteem, and emotional regulation difficulties. These findings support previous qualitative research suggesting that children from fatherless families often internalize the absence of a father as a personal deficiency, especially when exposed to social comparisons and stigma. The school environment emerged as a significant context in which these psychological challenges were amplified, highlighting the importance of socially supportive and inclusive educational settings.

Social relationships played a dual role in shaping children's well-being. On one hand, supportive peer relationships functioned as protective factors that helped compensate for emotional gaps within the family. On the other hand, negative peer interactions and social exclusion reinforced feelings of isolation and emotional distress. This finding aligns with social learning theory, which emphasizes that children's behaviors and emotional responses are influenced by observed social interactions and role models. The lack of a paternal role model may limit opportunities for learning adaptive social and emotional behaviors, particularly related to emotional expression and conflict resolution. Coping strategies identified in this study demonstrate both resilience and vulnerability. Adaptive coping mechanisms, such as reliance on maternal support, engagement in creative activities, and spiritual practices, contributed positively to emotional adjustment. However, maladaptive strategies, including emotional suppression and excessive self-reliance, may pose long-term psychological risks if left unaddressed. This underscores the need for early intervention and accessible mental health support to promote healthy emotional processing.

Overall, the discussion highlights that the impact of fatherlessness is not deterministic but context-dependent. Emotional outcomes are shaped by the availability of support systems and the quality of interpersonal relationships surrounding the child. These findings emphasize the importance of collaborative efforts among families, schools, and mental health professionals to create supportive environments that foster resilience and emotional well-being in children living in fatherless families.

CONCLUSIONS

This descriptive qualitative study highlights the complex and multifaceted impact of living in a fatherless family on children's mental and emotional well-being. The findings demonstrate that father absence is not merely a structural family condition but a psychological and emotional experience that shapes children's emotional responses, mental health, social interactions, and long-term emotional development. Children in fatherless families commonly experience feelings of sadness, emotional insecurity, confusion, and longing, which may persist even when the absence occurs from early childhood. These emotional experiences influence how children perceive themselves and relate to others. The study reveals that fatherlessness is closely associated with psychological challenges such as anxiety, low self-esteem, and difficulties in emotional regulation. Social comparisons and perceived stigma further intensify these challenges, particularly in school and peer environments. However, the findings also indicate that the impact of father absence is not uniform. Children's psychological outcomes are strongly influenced by protective factors, including maternal emotional availability, supportive peer relationships, extended family involvement, and positive school environments. These factors play a critical role in mitigating negative mental health outcomes and fostering resilience.

Coping strategies adopted by children in fatherless families vary widely. While some children develop adaptive coping mechanisms such as emotional expression through creative activities, spiritual engagement, and reliance on trusted caregivers, others resort to emotional suppression or excessive independence. The absence of professional psychological support in many cases limits children's ability to process emotional challenges effectively. These findings underscore the importance of accessible mental health services and early emotional interventions for children experiencing parental absence. Importantly, the study highlights the long-term implications of fatherlessness for emotional development. Unresolved emotional issues during childhood may affect trust, attachment, and interpersonal relationships in later life. Nevertheless, the findings also suggest that positive emotional growth is possible. With consistent emotional support and guidance, children from fatherless families can develop emotional maturity, empathy, and strong coping capacities.

In conclusion, fatherlessness should be understood as a condition requiring comprehensive emotional, psychological, and social support rather than as a determinant of negative outcomes. Interventions involving families, schools, communities, and mental health professionals are essential to promote children's mental and emotional well-being. Future research is encouraged to explore longitudinal perspectives and culturally specific dynamics to deepen understanding of fatherlessness and to inform evidence-based interventions that support healthy child development.

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