

Effects of Father's Absence on Child Growth and Development During Early Years

Sana Lakhani*

Sanobar Nadeem**

Abstract

Presence of both mother and father are crucial for optimum emotional, spiritual and physical development of children. The main purpose of this study was to explore mother perceptions regarding the effects of father's absence on child growth and development. The qualitative approach was used to explore this phenomenon with mothers of 1 to 8 years old children, where father was absent since last six months. Two focus group discussions and five In-depth interviews were conducted in three middle class communities of Karachi, Pakistan. Each FGD involved 10 mothers who were recruited through purposive sampling and consented to participate. Findings of the current study have been categorized into four main themes as father's role in child development, Problems mothers face while nurturing their children and the support systems of mothers and family. Study concluded that physical absent of father contributed in negative outcome on child emotional, social, psychological and physical development. Mother experienced stress and depression while handling many responsibilities on everyday lives. Girl child and boy child both suffers equally and need their father presence in social and academic activities and daily life. While making programs for holistic child development policy maker should consider this issue.

Keywords: early child development, absence of father, effective parenting.

*Human Development Program of Aga Khan University; Email: lakhani.sana787@gmail.com

**King Saud bin Abdul Aziz University for Health Sciences;
Email: sanobar.nadeemkhan@gmail.com

Introduction

During early years children make tremendous strides in all aspects of development, physical, linguistic, social emotional ethical and mental. However, this development is vulnerable to adversity, risks, and critical windows of time. (Cynthia & Harper, 2013). Both parents play an important role in achieving each milestone of child. Where mother is essential for love, care and affectionate, father is a key person who is responsible to make the family picture complete by giving comfort and belonging to their children (Shenk, 2001). In every case a father plays a positive role in the child's development (Mona, 2013). The father hungering that often occurs in children of absent fathers must be considered less detrimental to the child than the effects of a present father in such cases. Herzog (2001) contends that father hunger is a tragic consequence of father absenteeism.

Over the past years, researchers suggested that fathers not only benefit the co-parent in sharing and setting responsibilities but fathers can also bring something very specific to the parenting role. Roles that have historically been designated to fathers cast them as protectors, providers, and male role models. (Barajas, 2011).

If we talk about children in early years (1-8), Sons learn how to develop masculine identity, how to become assertive and independent, and relate appropriately to the opposite sex from fathers while girls always take their fathers as protector and best guider (Elizeath Thomson, 2000). The father involvement is correlated with children's overall well-being which effects their later years of life (Alam, 2013).

A variety of consequences will perceive as a result of having an absent father children generally lacked manners and respect for their elders which also include their mothers. Children lacked respect for traditional customs (UNICEF, 2013). Anteon & Beard (2007) also found that children from divorced or single parent family have higher risk behavior of promiscuity, substance use, and crime involvement. National Fatherhood Initiative, (2010) reported that many people intuitively believed that fatherlessness is related to delinquency and violence. 60% of rapists, 72% of child murderers, and 70% of prison inmates come from fatherless homes. Research conducted in District Bunner in 2013 proved that children with absent fathers had low academic results as well as low concentration span in sports. The father involvement is correlated with children's overall well-being which effects their later years of lives (Alam, 2013).

There were also some cross-cultural researches on father absence and child development. South American girls were found with delayed

maturation and were associated with late pregnancy while modern urban Indian girls were found with early marriages and pregnancy (Shenk, 2012). On this aspect researchers debated that American girls were have late maturation because of improper diet and Indian girl's early pregnancy was due to less educated life partners but still absence of father matters because without father, good nutrition and education is somehow not possible ideally.

There is a mix of opinion regarding the absence of father on children, some researchers identify that children of father absent are more independent than the children who are living with the father (Anderson, 2000). Children who are living with divorced mothers are more decision makers and early earners for their families (Shoak & Cremon 2006).

This is very important topic to be researched and reviewed because the fatherless children spend all their lives with the emptiness of love for their father. At one point not only a child, family affected but also society have to paid the loss because these children will involve in the criminal acts afterword and put thousands of lives in danger. (Sara McLanahan, 2013). Therefore, a qualitative exploratory study was planned to better understand mother's perception regarding the effects of father absence on child growth and development. The aim of this study was to explore the role of father in child growth and development and to identify factors that support single mothers and hindrances face by her accounts of the parents' experiences of a PICU admission of their child.

Methodology

Exploratory research design was used to understand the experiences of the mother in its true sense. Two focus group discussions (FGDs) and five In-depth interviews (IDI) were conducted to facilitate the description of retrospective parental experiences, in that way expanding the general understanding of the mothers' experiences of their child's growth and development. The FGDS and IDIs were conducted between September 2015 and February 2016. The study was approved by the ethical review committee of the Aga Khan University.

Study Setting

The research was conducted in three colonies (Salimabad, Rahimabad and Karimabad) of an urban area called Federal B area located in city Karachi, Pakistan.

Participants

Mothers of children aged 1 to 8 years were selected by using purposive sampling and who fulfill the following inclusion criteria: 1) Single mothers who were living with their children and residents of one of three colonies located in Federal B area, 2) Families where father were absent since 6 months or more than 6 months, 3) Family where father migrated temporary due to some reasons i.e. Job, Business, 4) Separated parents, where child lives with mother and 5) Divorced mother and where child custody given to mother due to legal decision. Excluded were single mothers whose child has any type of disability, did the second marriage or widow. Access to communities was arranged through health board area committees. Through health centers, mothers were recruited for FGDs and IDIs. To avoid selection bias, mothers were given a written invitation with consent form including information about the study, privacy, right to withdraw and contact detail of study investigator. Participants were asked to voluntarily sign the consent form. After provided informed consent by then mothers, researcher planned the FGDs and IDIs on the mutually decided day, place and timings. IDIs were conducted until the point of data saturation

Data Collection and Analysis

A semi structure guideline was used to conduct FGDs and IDIs. All interviews were audio-taped with prior permission of mothers and field notes were written in conjunction with the interviews for which two key note takers accompanied the investigator for FGDs specifically; who previously guided appropriately regarding their task preceding the interviews. Field notes and recorded data were transcribed into MS Word. Thematic analysis was performed by using qualitative data analysis software, Nvivo. Version 3. All the information of the participants both notes and soft copies were protected with a password and the recorders were kept in a safe custody. The codes were developed. The coded transcriptions were then used to develop themes and sub-themes. There were no attempts to quantify the responses. The team work and interactivity that characterized the coding process increased the level of reliability of the data analysis process. Direct quotes chosen from

the transcripts were used to illustrate the findings and support the interpretation of the themes. Some quotes may be grammatically incorrect as the data was not changed during transcription and translation. The idea was to keep the expressions as close as possible to those of the participants (Connor & Gibson, 2003).

Findings

The mothers in this study were predominately Urdu speaking with intermediate to master level of education. The age range of the mothers was between 25 years to 45 years. The mean interview duration was 40 minutes (range 26-55 minutes) (Table 1).

Table 1

Sample of the Study

Field site	IDIs	FGDs	Number of women in FGDs	Range of mother age	Education level
Salimabad Colony	3	-	-	25 to 35	Inter-Masters
Karimabad Colony	2	-	-	25 to 35	Masters
Rahimabad Colony	-	1	6	30 to 45	Inter-Masters
Salimabad Colony	-	1	6	25 to 35	Inter-Masters

Thematic analysis identified four main themes and subthemes as: 1) Father's role in child development 2) Problems mothers are facing while nurturing their children 3) The support systems of mothers and family and 4) Voice of mothers who feel that father absence doesn't matters a lot.

Majority of the mothers highlighted the importance of both parents and described father as important as mother in the life of child and family. Most mothers described father primarily as "Bread earner" of the family. They believed that fathers have obligations to supply his family with material goods and financial means, like one mother stated: "*Fathers are important in child life because he is the one who is*

responsible for earning for the whole family. He went in morning and comes at night, father work very hard for his family". Another mother said, *"Child nurturing is a parent's duty. Mother is responsible for feeding, bathing, cooking and all the home stuff and father work whole day, earn money for family and support the family financially. Fathers are as important as mothers"*.

Second emerging role of father that mother seen along provider role is performer of caregiving activities. Mothers also highlighted that children seen their father as "hero" who provided them emotional support, who resolve their issues and problems in practical way and children learn problem solving skills from fathers, they want their father should stay with them and fulfill their need for example, *"Children need father's hugs and kisses when they pass in their exams. Fathers are like buddy to the son. Children expect the love and care from father. Although my husband is in Africa right now, he called us daily but still children missed them a lot"*. Another verbatim of mother was, *"Daily in evening children wait for the time when their papa is supposed to come from the office and then they want to share their whole day activities with him. Children think fathers as a first hero for them although he came once in a year and he spends many hours in a day with children so they enjoyed a lot"*.

Many mothers stated that child's social development affected due to father's absence. Many of the child's outgoing activities are dependent on father presence, due to his absence children faced difficulty to participate in social activities for example mothers said: *"Fathers take the children out for outings. Even one round on motorcycle with dad will make the child's day. Father plays a big role in socialization of child. How I gave them ride on motorcycle? Not possible for mother"*.

Discussion

Researchers on fatherhood have argued that the presence of a father is associated with positive outcomes such as children's improved access to resources in the community, increased protection, and higher levels of academic grades (Richter & Morrel, 2006). Fathers are seen as bringing monetary resources into the household as shown by Desmond and Desmond's (2006). Mothers also agreed on this notion and verbalized

that presence of father figure decrease the financial stress and provide comfort and peace in their lives. In this time there are many homes where fathers are far or not present at all. A father's physical presence alone however, is not necessarily a desirable outcome in itself. Fatherhood goes beyond a father's mere physical presence because a father might well be physically present, but emotionally absent, or physically absent but emotionally supportive"(Richter & Morrell, 2006). Father presence can also be negative in some cases, as is the case when it is characterized by abusive conduct (Richter & Morrell, 2006). One mother said that in the presence of his husband, the home environment was full of negative vibes because he always shouted on her son on every little thing. Now she is managing home and her career very well and home is not full of luxurious things but there is peace and happiness. There are some mothers who totally disagree that father presence really matters. They said that mothers can perform all the duties very well.

The presence of responsible, caring and supportive fathers however, can have hugely positive effects on children, families and society and thus the high numbers of physically absent fathers is an obstacle to the achievement of broader father involvement.

The reasons of father absent were reported in this study i.e. divorced, separation, migration to other country for business purposes but the effects are somehow same on children. Literature revealed that military and arm forces jobs are also the reason of absence of father in eastern and western world but this is not included in this study. Mother verbalized that the children physical, social, emotional and psychological development affected due to the absence of paternal love. Men's participation as father can positive for the health and well-being of mother and child in many ways. One way is economically as research in Central America shows that women with children are more vulnerable to poverty if fathers are physically absent.(Peacock, 2008). Around the world, work related to care giving of children is predominantly carried out by women and thus efforts for increased involvement of fathers in the lives and care of children constitute a significant contribution to the advancement of gender equality. Women who are in equitable and healthy relationships with men who contribute to care work experience lower levels of family stress, are less likely to suffer mental health problems and derive greater satisfaction from their roles as mothers

(Richter, 2011). One of the astonished findings of this study is that, mother discuss their personal feelings about the absence of father figure. Mothers verbalized that they often feel exhausted, tired and lonely because of handling work and home single handed. They want to cry on their spouse shoulder but he is not there for the support. Mothers feel helpless because they couldn't cry in front of their children. Loneliness in the predominant feeling, especially amongst single mother (Alam, 2013). On the other hand, children need their fathers in play. Mothers shared that in outdoor play sons specially demand the father presence. Cricket, football, badmintons are the play where children missed their father presence. Girls are princess of their papa. They also need their papa in everyday life. Children who are living without the father are good in academics but less active in sports as verbalized by their mother. Children often get irritated and became quiet many times.

Children often heard sarcastic comments from their friends regarding their father which made them sad and irritable. These comments made them emotionally weak. Mother verbalized that children often kept quiet and feel lonely especially on their birthdays. They want their father to celebrate.

Fathers who are far from their families usually connect with their children with different smart phone applications, but no technology can replace the physical presence of father. The touch, hugs, kisses are precious which children get from their father.

Children socialization also compromised because mothers are often busy in job and work responsibilities. Children are with their grandparents and they couldn't take them out for fun and enjoyment purpose. According to Dr. Nargis, who works as an assistant professor of psychiatry at Aga Khan University Hospital in Karachi, "The typical Pakistani joint family set up can aggravate the effects on the children who are brought by single mother parent. Despite this no one can replace the role of ideal father". One mother in IDI stated very important point that "Even though our expenses have risen, and things are steadily becoming less affordable, mothers need to start concentrating on spending quality time with their children instead of working all the time".

No any mothers believed that absence of father give the positive effects on child development. Thus, this area should be explored more so the interventions can make difference in the lives of children and mother.

Conclusion

This study proved that physically absent father contributes in the negative outcome on child emotional, social, psychological and physical development. Mother experienced negative stress and depression while handling many responsibilities on everyday lives. Girl child and boy child both suffers equally and need their father presence.

References

- Ahmad, M. S. (2013). Effects of father absence on children's academic performance. *Journal of Educational, Health and Community Psychology*, 3(1). DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.26555/jehcp.v3i1.a3728>
- Shenk, M.K., Starkweather, K., Kress, H.C. & Alam, N. (2013). Does absence matters? *Human Nature*, 24(1), 76-110.
- Barajas, M. S. (2011). Academic achievement of children in single parent homes: A critical review. *The Hilltop Review*, 5(1), 13-21.
- Blundell, S. (2002). Fatherless sons: Psychoanalytic psychotherapy with bereaved boys. In Etchegoyen, A. & Trowell, J. (Ed.). *The Importance of Fathers: A Psychoanalytic Re-evaluation*. Hove, East Sussex: Brunner-Routledge.
- Child Development Institute. (2009). Social emotional development in children with absent father. *Child development*, 671-680.
- Cynthia C. Harper & McLanahan, S. S. (2004). Father absence and youth incarceration. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 14(3), 369-397.
- Cynthia Osborne, S. M. (2007). Partnership instability and child well-being. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 69(4), 1065-1083.
- Eastin, J. F. (2003). Impact of absent father-figures on male subjects and the correlation to juvenile delinquency: Findings and implications [doctoral dissertation]. Retrieved from <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/2668/4818350e43e37d63e64d2930e0444b32f888.pdf>
- Ellis, B. J., Bates, J. E., Dodge, K.A., Fergusson, D. M., Horwood, L.J., Pettit, G.S. & Woodward, L. (2013). Does father absence place daughters at special risk for early sexual activity and teenage? *Child Development*, 74(3), 801-821.
- Elizeath Thomson, T. L. (2000). Family structure and child wellbeing. *Social Forces*, 1(73), 221-42.

- Jane Mendle, C. A.-G. (2009). Associations between father absence and age of first sexual intercourse. *Child Development*, 80(5), 1463–1480.
- Fomby, P. & Osborne, C. (2013). *The relative effects of family instability and mother/partner conflict on children's behavior*. Retrieved from <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.539.5121&rep=rep1&type=pdf>
- Jones, K. (2004). Assessing psychological separation and academic performance in nonresident-father and resident-father boys. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, 21(4), 333-354.
- Kimani, E. (2000). Challenges faced by nuclear families with absent fathers in Gadundu, Central Kenya. *The African Symposium*, 10(2), 11-25.
- Mancini, L. & Briggs. (2010). Father absence and its effects on daughters. *Child Development*. Retrieved from <http://library.wcsu.edu/dspace/bitstream/0/527/1/Final+Thesis.pdf>
- Svanum, S., Bringly R.G. & McLanahan, J. E. (1982). Father absence and cognitive performance in a large sample of six- to eleven-year-old children. *Child Development*, 53(1), 136-143.
- Santrock, J. W. (1972). Relation of type and onset of father absence to cognitive development. *Child Development*, 43(2), 455-469.
- Sara McLanahan, L. T. (2013). The casual effects of father absence. *The Annual Review of Sociology*, 39, 399-427.
- Sigle-Rushton, Wendy and McLanahan, Sara. (2004). *Father absence and child wellbeing: a critical review* In Moynihan, D.P. and Rainwater, L. and Smeeding, T., (eds.) *The Future of the Family*. Russell Sage Foundation, New York, USA.
- McLoyd, V. C., Jayaratne, T. E., Cebalo, R. & Borquez, J. (1994). Unemployment and work interruption among african american single mothers. *Child Development*, 65(2), 562—589.

Citation of this Article:

Lakhani, S., & Nadeem, S. (2017). Effects of father's absence on child growth and development during early years.. *Journal of Early Childhood Care and Education, 1*, 31-42.