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The Developmental Effects on the Daughter of an Absent Father Throughout her Lifespan

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Merrimack College Honors Senior Capstone

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Abstract

Fatherless households are becoming increasingly common throughout the United States. As a result, more and more children are growing up without the support of both parents, and this may be causing developmental consequences. While there has been significant research conducted on the effect of absent fathers on children in general, there has been far less research regarding girls specifically. As discovered in this paper, girls are often impacted differently than boys when it comes to growing up without a father. The current research paper aims to discover just exactly how girls are impacted by this lack of a parent throughout their lifetimes, from birth to adulthood.

### The Developmental Effects on the Daughter of an Absent Father Throughout her Lifespan

The 21st century phrase “daddy issues” is used ubiquitously in society, particularly on social media. This colloquial term references the psychological issues that often arise in women who have grown up without a father figure. Although it is typically used in a colloquial manner, there is a lot of truth behind the phrase. There are in fact numerous challenges that inevitably come along with the lack of a father figure from one’s life, particularly a female’s. While both genders may experience detrimental consequences from growing up fatherless, this phenomenon is known to affect women differently, and debatably more drastically.

There are various potential theories to explain the reason why girls of absent fathers are impacted more than boys. One of these theories is self-in-relation-theory, which proposes that the sense of self develops differently in males and females (Brown, 2018). A male’s sense of self, according to this theory, comes about through gradual separation from the adults in his life (Brown, 2018). First he separates from the care of his mother, then from the rest of his family, and eventually from any mentors that have helped guide him (Brown, 2018). They achieve their sense of self via autonomy and independence (Brown, 2018). For women however, their identities are achieved through relationships with others (Brown, 2018). They tend to define themselves based on the quality of their relationships with family, friendships, as well as any other kind of relationship (Brown, 2018). Therefore, the lack of a father-daughter relationship for a girl may make her feel incomplete as an individual.

In any case, there are many potential reasons why a father is absent from his daughter’s life, whether that be death, incarceration, or divorce. In this paper, however, we will be

specifically focusing on circumstances in which a father actively chooses not to be part of his daughter's life. In other words, throughout this paper, the term absent father will not refer to a father who is deceased, but rather one who has an abnormal or non-existent relationship with his child. An abnormal relationship may refer to a relationship in which there is some, but very little communication and/or time spent together between father and daughter. The reason in which we will be omitting death as a form of absence in this paper is because some research indicates that the reason behind a father's absence plays a major role in how the child handles it from a social-emotional standpoint. According to O'Dwyer (2017), while the death of a parent is certainly traumatic for a child, it also comes along with "a certainty and a sense of clarity", whereas paternal absence through divorce often comes along with a sense of abandonment. Regardless of the reason behind it, the absence of a father figure alone is harmful to a child. Girls may feel unaffected by their father's absence, especially if he was never around, because you can't miss what you never had, right? Well, wrong. It has been proven that the absence of a father, whether females are aware of it or not, often has dramatic effects on their social-emotional development through adulthood. Girls may feel unaffected, especially if their father was never there, but their lives and the way they go about relationships with others may prove otherwise.

### *Infancy*

Numerous studies have concluded that the mortality rate of infants with absent fathers is significantly higher than infants from father-present homes. In fact, The National Fatherhood Initiative (n.d) found that father-absent infants have nearly twice the risk of mortality compared to infants whose fathers are present. Aside from this statistic, there is a considerable lack of

research on the effects of father absence on infants than there is on children, adolescents, and adults. One of the few existing studies regarding this topic found that there were in fact no significant differences in the development of father-absent female infants and father-present female infants (Pederson et al., 1979). This 1979 study tested 55 black infants who came from generally lower socioeconomic statuses (Pederson, et al., 1979). Out of these 55 babies ranging from five to six months of age, 28 were male and 27 were female (Pederson, et al., 1979). Sixteen of the boys and nine of the girls were considered father-absent while the rest were father-present (Pederson, et al., 1979). The cognitive, social, and motivational development of these infants was examined using 16 measures of early development, including but not limited to Bayley Tests of Infant Development (Pederson, et al., 1979). The results of these tests were compared between infants in respect to gender and classification (father-present vs. father-absent)(Pederson, et al., 1979). Pederson and colleagues (1979) found that although there were major developmental differences between father-absent and father-present male infants, this was not the case with females. Fifteen out of the 16 male infants from father-absent households scored lower in categories such as social responsiveness than father-present male infants; with three of these infants showing *significant* delays in certain categories of early development. (Pederson, et al., 1979). Female infants, on the other hand, showed no difference in developmental functioning between father-absent and father-present classification (Pederson, et al., 1979).

Despite the lack of evidence in this one study for the hypothesis that infant girls are disadvantaged by not having a father figure present, Levy-Schiff (1982) hypothesized that the earlier father absence begins, the more detrimental its impact becomes. In other words,

Levy-Schiff (1982) claims that if a girl's father is not present during her infant stage of life, she is more likely to experience worse repercussions than a girl whose father became absent later in her life. This could also indicate that the true effects of father absence do not appear until later in a girl's development.

### *Academic Performance*

Despite the lack of evidence demonstrating the effect of father absence during infancy, negative effects of father absence have been found later in development across several domains, one of those being poor academic performance during childhood and adolescence. Two studies have found that early father-absence in females is linked to both slower cognitive development and worse academic performance. Moreover, during high school, girls who lacked involved fathers tended to dislike and perform worse in mathematics than their father-present female counterparts (Adams, et al., 1984). This is thought to potentially be due to the fact that math is a traditionally masculine subject, so fathers who are involved in their daughter's life may be more likely to encourage success in the subject (Adams, et al., 1984). This information is corroborated by Scott-Jones (1984) who states that the children of involved fathers are more likely to have a more positive attitude toward school and learning in general.

Ahmad and Qureshi (2014) conducted a study in which they tested and recorded the academic achievement of 45 adolescents between the ages of 13 and 15 over the span of two years. Participants were split into three categories: those that have an "intact" family, those whose fathers were deceased, and those whose fathers were absent due to divorce (Ahmad & Qureshi, 2014). This study found that while there was no difference in the academic achievement between the children of deceased fathers and the children of divorced parents, both categories of

children of absent fathers scored significantly lower in academic achievement than those from intact families (Ahmad & Qureshi, 2014). In fact, Ahmad and Qureshi (2014) discovered a 43% difference in school performance between father-present and father-absent children. More importantly, they found that the school performance of girls was impacted far more drastically than boys when their father was uninvolved (Ahmad & Qureshi, 2014).

Despite some evidence that the absence of a father may negatively impact a girl's academic performance, some evidence suggests that most fatherless adult women, when looking back on their childhood, do not feel as though their school experience was negatively impacted (Brown, 2018). For example, Brown (2018) conducted a phenomenological study in which 20 adult women were given thorough interviews regarding their experiences growing up without a father. All of these women's fathers were absent due to divorce (Brown, 2018). The general consensus of this study was that these women did not feel as though their academic performance was significantly impacted by their father's absence, although they felt as though they would have benefitted from the assistance of a father in terms of schoolwork (Brown, 2018). In other words, while they did not feel as though their father's absence was necessarily detrimental to their academic performance, many of these women still feel as though they missed out on the parental help they deserved.

### *Self Esteem & Mental Health*

In addition to academic performance, research also suggests that father absence can impact females self-esteem and mental health significantly (O'Dwyer, 2017). O'Dwyer, 2017 interviewed five psychotherapists who have treated children with absent fathers. When asked about how growing up without a father affects boys and girls differently, she stated:

*“With girls it’s more emotional, it’s all about the feelings and they do link rejection and abandonment and those things that they feel with the dad having left, they can see the links, just with a little bit of work you can get that working ”.* (Dwyer, 2017).

As agreed upon by the psychotherapists in the study, boys tend to react externally in response to divorce and their father’s absence by acting out while girls often internalize feelings of rejection and abandonment. As noted by Sanchez, 2017, this internalization tends to be more problematic because others are often unaware of how girls are being affected mentally. Their feelings often come from a place of blame and may lead to internal mental health issues such as anxiety and depression. It is no secret that children often blame themselves for their parent’s divorce. According to the Office of National Statistics in 2015, 19% of children felt as though their parent’s divorce was their fault. This blame and guilt often manifests itself in the form of depression and low self-esteem. Culpin and colleagues, (2013) found that girls living in father-absent homes reported higher levels of depressive symptoms than girls from father-present households. Low self-esteem is also often present in girls who have grown up without a father present during early childhood (Macini, 2010). In 2005, Hendricks and colleagues conducted a study on this topic in which the Miller Self Esteem Questionnaire was distributed to 1,409 rural southern students. This study found that there was a significant difference in the self-esteem levels of both males and females who grew up without a father in the home versus those who did (Hendricks, et al., 2005). These psychological problems found in children with absent fathers may persist far beyond childhood. McLanahan and colleagues (2013) claim that the psychological harm that comes about as a result of the lack of a father has the ability to continue into adulthood.

*Relationships with the Opposite Sex*

Perhaps one of the most distinct aspects of the term “daddy issues” is a fatherless girl’s unusual relationship with men. It is no secret that many heterosexual women who have grown up without a father are prone to unhealthy relationships with those of the opposite sex. The reason why is quite simple. Because a father is typically the first man in a girl’s life, her relationship with her father serves as the basis of all her future relationships with men (“Absent father: wounded but not broken”, n.d.). Therefore, when that father-daughter relationship is abnormal or non-existent, her perception of men often becomes skewed. This concept is based on John Bowlby’s Attachment Theory. Bowlby defined attachment as the “lasting psychological connectedness between human beings” (“Attachment Theory”, n.d.) Under his Attachment Theory, a positive and loving relationship between the child during infancy and at least one parent will lead to a secure attachment (Brown, Mangelsdorf, & Neff, 2012). Bowlby claimed that children use this attachment as their secure base for exploring their world (Brown, Mangelsdorf, & Neff, 2012). Through this exploration, according to Bowlby, children will develop their Internal Working Models (Brown, Mangelsdorf, & Neff, 2012). An Internal Working Model is used as the basis for all future interactions that the child has throughout their lifetime (“John Bowlby’s Internal Working Model”, 2019). Because a secure attachment between parent and child is necessary for future healthy relationships, a lack of this attachment can lead to detrimental consequences (“Attachment Theory, n.d.); one of these consequences being a hard time forming relationships with men in general.

La Guardia and colleagues (2014) also argued that fathers have a distinct impact on their daughter’s ability to both trust and relate to males in general. Fatherless daughters often tend to

struggle to interact with males comfortably (Krohn & Bogan, 2001). It is clear that the absence of a father has detrimental effects on the social-emotional development of a female, especially when it comes to intimate relationships for heterosexual females. According to Krohn and Bogan (2001) these detrimental effects typically occur in one of two ways. First, a fatherless daughter may shy away from males completely as she is unclear of how to relate to them or interact with them. This concept aligns with the aforementioned Attachment Theory. Those who do not form secure attachments during infancy form insecure attachments instead (Joeng et al., 2017), and insecure attachments tend to manifest themselves in the form of unhealthy adult relationships (Joeng et al., 2017). One attachment style that occurs among insecurely attached adults is the avoidant attachment, which occurs in individuals who had consistent yet unresponsive caregivers as infants (Joeng et al., 2017). Those who are avoidantly attached often avoid forming relationships with others under the presumption that they will not get their needs met (Joeng et al., 2017). For fatherless women, this often means avoiding romantic relationships altogether.

Bannon and Southern (1980) conducted a study on how women feel that they can relate to men. This study recruited 57 college women aged 18-30 and categorized them based on their family composition. Categories included father-present, father-absent through death, father-absent through divorce, and father-absent through divorce with one or more older male siblings present who could potentially take over the fatherly role. Bannon & Southern (1980) provided participants with a paper-and-pencil questionnaire in which they were asked to rate on a 5-point scale how they felt when they interacted with men in terms of three different factors- sociability, nurturance, and aggressiveness. They had to rate each of these three factors twice, once in the context of men around their own age (younger men) and once in the context of older

men. Out of all six of these total combined categories, the only one that yielded significant differences between any of the family compositions was nurturance in the context of younger men. Bannon and Southern (1980) concluded that participants whose fathers were absent through death or divorce scored significantly lower in the nurturance category for younger men than those whose fathers were present or absent, but had at least one older male sibling present. Bannon and Southern (1980) asserted that this may be due to the fact that being nurturing is a traditionally feminine trait which fathers, or other male figures in a woman's life may bring out in her. Without a reciprocally nurturing father-daughter relationship to identify with, women may struggle to display nurturance toward men of their own age. Seeing as this characteristic is typically conveyed in romantic relationships, a lack of nurturance may contribute to fatherless women's habitual difficulty forming relationships.

Second, and more commonly, rather than shying away from men, a female who grew up with an absent father may desperately yearn for male attention (Krohn & Bogan, 2001). This aligns with John Bowlby's other insecure attachment style, anxious attachment. As a result of the inconsistent and unreliable care they received during infancy, those with an anxious attachment style tend to look for constant reassurance from others (Joeng et al., 2017). Women who grew up without a father may specifically search for this reassurance from men. This search comes from a desire to be accepted by men, as she has not felt this acceptance by her father (Krohn & Bogan, 2001). Oftentimes, this sense of acceptance is achieved through promiscuity. One study found that fatherless daughters are prone to partake in sexual activity at a younger age and at a rate four times higher than average (La Guardia, Nelson, & Lertora, 2014). Krohn and Bogan (2001) also found support for this finding, stating that girls without fathers usually have had more physical

contact with boys than those from “intact homes.” Such promiscuous behavior, especially at a young age, can have negative implications. For example, Ellis and colleagues (2003) found that girls from father-absent households have a greater likelihood of experiencing teen pregnancy.

Regardless of whether or not a fatherless woman seeks male attention through sexual behavior, she is still at greater risk of having trouble with romantic relationships with men. According to Krohn and Bogan (2001), various studies have found that women who grew up without a father tend to experience difficulty both forming and maintaining heterosexual romantic relationships. Perhaps this is because fathers often teach their daughters how they should be treated by men (“Absent father: wounded but not broken”, n.d.). As result, women tend to choose romantic partners that have similar characteristics to their father (“Absent father: wounded but not broken”, n.d.). Without a father figure to serve as a model of how she should be treated, women may choose poor romantic partners for themselves (“Absent father: wounded but not broken”, n.d.). Furthermore, potentially due to the fact that the first male individual in their life chose not to have a relationship with them, fatherless women tend to be more critical of men (Krohn & Bogan, 2001). This condemnatory behavior may make it significantly harder to even find a romantic partner to begin with. Ellis and colleagues (2003) also proposed that girls from fatherless households may begin dating far earlier than their peers. If the father’s absence is due to divorce, the girl’s unmarried mother may be dating around in search of a new companion. As a result, the young girl may mimic her mother’s behavior.

### *Sexual Development*

The absence of a father from the home during a girl’s youth can yield more than just social, emotional, and academic implications, however. Various studies have found that a

father's absence can actually alter a girl's sexual development as well, mainly in regard to her menstrual cycle (La Guardia, et al., 2014). Several studies have found that girls who grow up without their father tend to experience earlier menarche, or first occurrence of menstruation (La Guardia, et al., 2014).

La Guardia and colleagues (2014) surveyed 342 female undergraduate students about their age at first menarche and first sexual intercourse. For the purpose of this paper, we will solely focus on the menarche aspect of this study. Out of the 342 females ranging from ages 18 to 49, 246 grew up in father-present households while 96 grew up in father-absent households. After conducting the survey, researchers found that the mean age of menarche for women in father-present households was 12 years and 8 months, while the mean age of menarche for women in father-absent households was 12 years and 4 months. This means that there was in fact an earlier onset of menstruation in fatherless females. This 4 month difference was statistically significant at  $p < .05$  (La Guardia, et al., 2014).

A similar study was conducted by Schlomer and colleagues (2019) in which 269 female university students aged 18 to 25 were asked about their father's presence in their lives. The survey inquired about their parents' marital status, including the following options: married, separated or divorced, or never married. Those whose parents were married at the time of the study were considered father-present ( $n=201$ ) while those from the latter two categories were deemed father-absent ( $n=68$ ). Participants were asked to report their age at menarche as part of the study. Schlomer and colleagues (2019) found that the mean age of menarche of the female participants was 12.72 years. This study also found that father-absence was significantly related to an earlier age at menarche.

Some may wonder how father absence could possibly trigger the onset of an earlier menstrual cycle. Paternal Investment Theory provides a possible explanation (“Absent fathers and sexual strategies”, n.d.). Paternal Investment Theory suggests that natural selection designed the female brain to be able to detect and encode information regarding their father’s behavior and use such information to adjust their reproductive development accordingly (“Absent fathers and sexual strategies”, n.d.). Under this framework, according to (“Absent fathers and sexual strategies”, n.d.), a girl whose father is heavily present in her life will send a particular message to her brain. This message will indicate that substantial involvement from both parents is necessary, and therefore her body should invest more heavily in her own reproductive development before reaching sexual maturity. By doing so, the body will be able to produce better, more favorable offspring (Absent fathers and sexual strategies, n.d.). On the other hand, when a girl’s father is not present, her brain receives the message that she cannot rely on male investment and should, rather than investing in the quality of her offspring, invest in the quantity by reaching sexual maturity and reproducing earlier on in life (“Absent fathers and sexual strategies”, n.d.). The potential detrimental implications of early reproductive development include earlier sexual activity, increased promiscuous behavior, and consequent increased rate of teen pregnancy (“Absent fathers and sexual strategies”, n.d.).

### *Financial Strain*

Another issue that adult children of absent fathers may encounter is financial trouble. This is the case for both men and women, not just women. Oftentimes children whose fathers are absent grow up in homes ridden with financial struggle, which may persist through adulthood. If a child’s father is absent from the household, leaving the mother to provide for the child(ren) by

herself, financial trouble or even poverty may result. The Massachusetts Family Institute (2017) cites that in one particular Massachusetts town where 90% of children live with both parents, the median annual income is \$202,174. However, in a different Massachusetts town in which only a third of children live with both parents, the median annual income is only about \$30,000 (Massachusetts Family Institute, 2017). Clearly, a drastic income difference is present between single-parent households and households with both parents. In fact, 95% of children considered to be living in poverty in Massachusetts *do not* live with both parents (Massachusetts Family Institute, 2017). Moreover, the National Fatherhood Initiative states that children without fathers are 4x more likely to experience poverty (“Father Absence Statistics”, n.d.). One parent’s income alone is evidently often not enough to support a family. On top of the financial repercussions of an absent father, the majority of these fathers do not provide child support. A nationwide statistic claims that 71% of fathers of fatherless children do not pay child support (Massachusetts Family Institute, 2017).

While it is completely possible for children who grow up financially unstable to become financially stable in adulthood, this is not always the case. Mancini (2010) states that families lacking a source of income, causing a child to live in poverty, may lead to persistent poverty throughout the child’s life. This could be due to a variety of potential factors, including lack of quality education. As aforementioned, children of absent fathers may struggle academically in comparison to their peers and, as a result, may not do well enough to be accepted into college. Other factors that may contribute to a child's inability to attend college are living in impoverished areas with poor school systems or high rates of community violence, as well as a lack of role models that inspire them to seek higher education. Without a degree, some

individuals may face difficulty landing a job that pays well. A lack of a college degree is not the only factor that plays a role in adult children of absent fathers encountering financial trouble, however. As discussed earlier, individuals who do not grow up with a father present in their lives often deal with social-emotional problems throughout their life. Any lack of social-emotional skills may indirectly lead to financial difficulty for those of absent fathers. Social-emotional skills play a role in one's adult life including their "educational attainment, family formation, and labor market success" ("Yes, Father Absence Causes the Problems It's Associated With", n.d.). Therefore, the implications of growing up without a father extend far beyond personal satisfaction, fulfillment, and happiness ("Yes, Father Absence Causes the Problems It's Associated With", n.d.).

#### *Overcoming Father Absence*

Despite all of the potential developmental effects of father absence, growing up without a father does not mean that a girl is destined for failure. Much of the research regarding father absence revolves around patterns that have been found among those who have experienced it ("Absent fathers and sexual strategies", n.d.). However, these patterns do not take into account the major variability among these individuals ("Absent fathers and sexual strategies", n.d.). In other words, nobody's circumstances are exactly the same and therefore everybody's developmental outcome will differ.

There are certain steps that the other parent of the fatherless child can take to ensure that he or she is not at too strong of a developmental disadvantage. In fact, the mother can play a huge role in mitigating the negative effects of father absence for her child. For instance, surrounding the child with alternate male role models can be extremely beneficial ("Absent

fathers and sexual strategies”, n.d.). This can include other family members or even a teacher (“Absent fathers and sexual strategies”, n.d.). Just because the child may not have a father present in their life does not mean they cannot benefit from the support of another male father-figure. The mother can also avoid speaking poorly of the child’s father. It is often tempting for mothers to badmouth their ex-husband and/or father of their child, however this does nothing but hurt the child. It can make the child feel ashamed, insecure, and uncomfortable.

In conclusion, there are in fact various inevitable consequences that come along with the absence of a father from one’s life. Because growing up without a father is becoming so common, we may tend to overlook the repercussions that arise as a result. Both boys and girls will experience these repercussions, yet the effects of a fatherless childhood may present themselves differently among genders. Fatherless women tend to encounter difficulty in regards to heterosexual romantic relationships, hence the use of the term “daddy issues” which has become quite popular in the media. Other potential consequences include but are not limited to early sexual development, poor mental health, and an insecure attachment pattern. Researchers have performed numerous studies to evaluate and prove these developmental deficits that tend to emerge in fatherless individuals. However, despite factual evidence of some of these issues, growing up without a father does not indicate that a child is doomed. Children who grew up without the support of a father still have the potential to thrive and flourish.

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