



Father absence as a risk factor for child neglect and abuse: A biblical and multidisciplinary approach to transform broken families in the South African landscape

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Abstract

This paper aims to address father absence as a key contributory factor to child neglect and abuse and a cause of disrupted and unstable families by means of an explorative literature review. The study follows a biblical and multidisciplinary approach and collaboration between scholars from the fields of social work and theology in an effort to transform broken families. The Children's Act, 38 of 2005, stipulates that children in need of care and protection refer to children who face social issues such as abuse, absent parents, and children who abuse alcohol and drugs, among other things. These children require adequate care, love, and security. A stable family or home environment can provide stability, security, and a caring environment where children can develop to become emotionally healthy and pro-social. God can transform families, especially the families of children who receive the ministry of his Word. The Scripture in Jeremiah 31 verse 29 proclaims: "The fathers have eaten a sour grape and the children's teeth are set on edge". This quote refers to the involvement of the father as the primary leading figure in the family. It illustrates that proper fathering has a much broader significance than just the biological production of children. South Africa has experienced rapid changes, including shifts in family composition. There are many broken relationships, and father absence is a salient issue. Countless numbers of children in the South African landscape are being raised without their biological fathers. Many experiences no fatherly presence at all as they lack an alternative figure. Children are often humiliated for being fatherless and many families are challenged by father absence, and this creates in children a sense of loss and confusion. Hence, the aim of this article to reciprocate to father absence as social ill from a biblical point of view and to suggest a transformative ecclesial praxis.

Keywords: child neglect, abuse, father absence, transformation, families.

Introduction

Overview of father absence

This paper proposes a biblical and transdisciplinary approach involving the field of social work and theology and sets out to assist to the knowledge of both disciplines regarding the absent father phenomenon, by means of a literature review. The absent father phenomenon is relevant to both disciplines. The long-term aim is to transform families who are broken and affected by father absence and children who become vulnerable and who forfeit all the benefits due to an absent father (Freeks, 2019:685-686). The findings of this study may further



contribute to assisting both disciplines (Social Work and Theology) in engaging with father absence. Literature indicated that absent fathers may contribute to children being exposed to violence, crime, substance abuse, sexual abuse, suicide, and behavioural and emotional problems (Reuven et al., 2021:453; Thompson, 2018:6).

What is father absence in this context? Father absence can be defined as the financial, physical and emotional absence of a biological father over the lifespan of his child(ren) due to the breakdown of a parental relationship (Meyer, 2018:4). Father absence also refers to situations where fathers do not interact with their children on a regular basis and do not play an important role in their children's development (Makofane, 2015:22–24).

Father absence is a stark reality all over the world, as in South Africa (Mavungu, 2013:65). It is estimated that South Africa has the second highest rate of father absence in Africa (Khan, 2018:18; Richter, Chikovore & Makusha, 2010:360). Although father absence as a destructive social ill is not unique to the South African context, but it is one of South Africa's greatest dilemmas (Freeks, 2020:2; Mc Gee, 1993:19). South Africa is currently experiencing great shifts in family composition, resulting in many broken relationships. This has led to the noticeable prevalence of father absence (Kesebonye & P'Olak, 2020:1).

In some cases, the fathers do not live in the same home as their biological children (Richter, Chikovore & Makusha, 2010:360), in other cases, there is no father at all (Richter & Makusha, 2018:np). Many children from fatherless homes are bullied or shamed for being fatherless. This creates in them a sense of loss and confusion (Richter *et al.*, 2010:360). Cases of child abuse and child neglect linked to father absence are evident in family life (Londt, Kock & John-Langba, 2017:151–155).

Various reasons for the absent father figure have been cited, for example, unemployment, divorce, poor socio-economic circumstances, and cultural beliefs (Eddy, Thompson & Mpaka, 2013:np). The widespread and tenacious nature of father absence in South Africa is exacerbated by undisclosed fatherhood, denial of the responsibility of fatherhood, dissolution of households, and divorce (Albert, Edwards, Pence, Speizer, Hills, Hahn, Gomez-Olive, Wagner, Twine & Pettifer, 2021:2). The absent father figure has a negative effect on the overall development of their children (Pougnet, Serbin, Stack & Schwartzman, 2011:173). Smit, Khunou, Nathane-Taulela (2014:np) also state that the absence of a father figure in a child's life is associated with adverse psychological effects such as lower self-esteem, lower self-perception, poor academic performance, and lack of good interpersonal relationships with the opposite sex. With respect to the psychological effects, father absence is associated with factors such as poor academic performance and poor self-perception (Magqamfana & Bazana, 2020:169). This may be attributed to the fact that there is no support from the father-figure. These children frequently suffer the consequences of mood disruptions and less access to health and educational support services (Holborn & Eddy, 2011:4).

With reference to family dynamics, families without fathers are associated with differences in child abuse and behavioural problems (bullying, risk behaviour, uncontrollable behaviour) (Amato, 2010: np). Father absence influences family life and society at large and creates a vicious cycle of poverty in many households, and many children suffered as a result (Carstens, 2014: 11–12; Mutegi, 2015: xiv). Magqamfana and Bazana (2020:169) also indicated that numerous fathers are the breadwinners in the house and the lack of income of a father can contribute to financial strain and eventually poverty.

In conclusion, the current literature indicates that there is a link between father absence and the development of children (Pougnet *et al.*, 2011:173). Father absence leads to changes in the family structure, family roles, and financial circumstances of the family. This has a negative effect on the socio-economic state of the family and the socio-emotional state of the child,



often leading to behavioural problems in children (Gray & Anderson, 2016:np; Mncanca & Okeke, 2016:np).

Research methodology

An integrated literature review was utilized as a focal point to familiarize oneself with the knowledge surrounding the research problem. (McLaughlin (2012:118; Patton, 2002:455-472). By identifying patterns and themes, differentiating, comparing, finding intervening factors, and creating a logical chain of evidence, the integrative literature review helped the researchers to identify local and international literature pertaining to the absent father phenomenon and the effect thereof on children. The study adhered to the ethical guidelines as approved by the Health Research Ethics Committee (HREC) of the Potchefstroom Campus of the North-West University, (NWU-00120-15-A6).

The negative impact of father absence on children: A Social Work Perspective

According to the Children's Act, 38 of 2005, social workers are key role players in providing services to children in need of care and protection. One of the social problems that social workers have to address is father absence and its implications for a child's life.

Many social workers try to create opportunities to work with fathers and help them maintain a healthy relationship with their children. A healthy relationship between parents and children illustrates a caring relationship for the normal development of the child. Furthermore, it contends that a child's future social, cognitive, and emotional development is influenced by the quality of their nurturing relationships with their parents (Popov & Ilesanmi, 2022:253). Unfortunately, a great number of fathers in South Africa still do not get to have a lasting relationship with their children as they grow up (Eddy et al., 2013:np; Smit *et al.*, 2014:433-436). Richter and Morrell (2006:2) state that one out of two fathers are absent from his child's life in South Africa.

To a child, the word "father" can conjure up several images, such as for example a powerful man who will love, protect, and provide for their needs (Mafokana, 2015:22). Fathers are traditionally seen as providers and defenders of their wives and children (Clare, 2000:184–185; Marsiglio & Pleck, 2005:253). The father is therefore a basic anchor for the family. A healthy family environment is the best place for children to develop as they can be nurtured to reach their full potential. Families remain the world's oldest, most basic relationship form. However, in the 21st century, families and the family construct are facing multiple challenges for example high divorce rate, poverty, gender-based violence (GBV), and father absence (Richter & Makusha, 2015:32). This contributes to the number of children in need of care and protection in South Africa (Richter & Makusha, 2018; Smith *et al.*, 2014:433-436; South Africa, 2005:np).

It is pivotal for children to bond with their primary caregivers (Zastrow, 2016:335). A strong early bond for children to grow up to become contented and independent adults. They need loving, secure relationships to help forge individual resilience, and to give them the ability to cope with many challenges and recover from setbacks that are faced in life. This bonding process already begins at birth and if it is disrupted for some reason, it may have serious psychological implications for the child (Schultz, 2002; Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2016:335). Problems can include a lack of self-confidence and trust, and poor interpersonal relationships (Ward, 2007:246; Zastrow, 2016:335). Literature confirms that children who do not receive love and care from one or both parents, often struggle with basic life skills such as handling their emotions, trusting, maintaining interpersonal relationships, and a lack of self-knowledge, ultimately leading to risky behaviour (Louw & Louw, 2014:360; Zastrow, 2016:335).



Research has shown that if children have good relationships with their fathers, they are less likely to become involved in deviant behaviour such as crime and drug abuse (Thompson, 2004:np). Literature confirms that broken families and the absent father figure cause children to turn to the streets and engage in delinquent activities such as drug abuse (Idemudia, Kgokong & Kolobe, 2013:162-164; Wargen & Dreshem, 2009:np). Father absence can therefore lead to children needing care and protection.

The positive involvement of a father has been seen to promote positive health practices and coping strategies in youths, resulting in a lower risk of negative health outcomes for the youths (Holborn & Eddy, 2011:np; Richter, Desmond, Hosegood, Madhavan, Makiwane, Makusha, Morrell & Swartz, 2012:np; Smith *et al.*, 2014:433-436). Nord and West (2001:np) found in their study that children whose fathers were more actively involved in their schoolwork were more likely to do well academically. They were in turn less likely to have ever repeated a grade or be expelled compared to children whose fathers are less involved in their schools. This effect held for both two-parent and single-parent households and was distinct and independent from the effect of mother involvement (Richter & Morrell, 2006:18). The presence of responsible, caring, and supportive fathers can have hugely positive effects on children, families, and society (Yogman & Eppel, 2022:15). The high numbers of physically absent fathers are therefore an obstacle to the achievement of broader father involvement (Yogman & Eppel, 2022:15).

Every child has the right to adequate parental care (Children's Act, 38 of 2005). If children have the right to appropriate parental care in the eyes of the law and fathers fail to provide it in this way, then it can be argued from social work and theological perspectives that they are guilty of child neglect. Not only can absent fathers be regarded as neglecting their own children, but they also contribute to the risk of their children being abused (Malherbe, 2015: np). Gray and Anderson (2016: np) support this by associating fathers' absenteeism with child abuse, child neglect and depression (Yogman & Eppel, 2022:21).

The social work perspective clearly shows that an absent father is not in the best interest of the child and that the absent father figure is still a major social issue in South Africa. This problem needs more attention because of the negative effect it has on children. It is important to appropriately address the problem of the absent father figure, not only because of the negative effects on a child's overall development but also because it is likely to be transmitted to the next generation.

The negative impact of father absence on children: A Theological Perspective

According to Jeremiah 31: 29, *'the fathers have eaten a sour grape and the children's teeth are set on edge'*. This scripture reference shows the dominion of the father as the crucial support, assistance, and authority of the family. The phrase is an emendation of the proverbial saying that *fathers shall pay the forfeit of the sins of their fathers* (Freeks, 2021a:2). As shown above, father absenteeism is detrimental for most children in South Africa. Uninvolved and absent fathers are negligent parents who respond to no or little demands from their children for example lack of contact (Reuven, et al., 2021:453); moral development such as honesty and aggression (Yi & Nel, 2020:2); involvement in the child's life (Magqamfana & Bazana, 2020:172). They also have little emotional involvement with their children and only provide in basic needs such as shelter and food. One should understand that the lack of a father figure means that the child has no positive male role model in the home context (Freeks, 2021b:2–3), unless there are other significant adult male role models and mentor figures in the child's life, for example, the extended family members. This social ill ultimately causes children to become vulnerable to abuse but single mothers and/or their partners, or siblings can also abuse the fatherless child. It also contributes to the great number of child-headed households in South Africa (Freeks, 2019:686).



Children become vulnerable when they do not receive the care and love of both parents. They may struggle with basic skills such as how to handle emotions, how to trust, and how to navigate interpersonal relationships. Father absence and broken families contribute to children's risk of being harmed, self-harming, having suicidal thoughts, engaging in risky behaviour, and lacking self-knowledge (Freeks, 2019:685). Children who experience father absence are at a higher risk of becoming the victims of risky sexual involvement, acquiring human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), drug and alcohol abuse, crime, and violence (Gould & Ward, 2015:2-3; Makusha & Richter, 2015:30-33). Popenoe (1996:12–16) also indicates that father absence may lead to premature engagement in sex, early pregnancy, depression, poverty, and substance abuse among children. These problems are devastating to most families. Salami and Okeke (2018:2) describe father absence as a societal malice that challenges nations at the heart of their communities and holds enormous risks and dangers for children.

Integrating the Fatherhood of God as transformative ecclesial praxis to father absence

Becoming an effective father to a family is not easy and very challenging. It takes time and effort. God should be a part of the efforts to enable fathers to make the crucial choice toward good fatherhood (Huerta, 2020:np). From a Social Work perspective, the aim will be to enhance positive relationships between fathers and children by means of prevention and awareness of fatherhood programs, workshops, seminars, and conferences. The authors propose the integration of two significant components as a possible solution to father absence. These components are the fatherhood of God with the family and the essence of biblical values and faith as a strength within the family context for example love, respect, honour, worship, prayer, sanctification, obedience, faith, forgiveness, and hope (Freeks, 2020:4).

Integrating the Fatherhood of God with the family context

The first component of integrating the fatherhood of God within the family context can be explored at the hand of a number of questions.

What message does the Bible offer about the father and his role within the family, and how do families feel about the fatherhood of God?

According to Fry (2016:np), God presents himself as a father throughout the entire Bible. Jesus makes more than 150 references to God as a father, and he invites people to address God as their Father in heaven (Matthew 6:9). It is also through the work of Christ on the cross that people are adopted into this family relationship (Ephesians 1:5). God the Father is not distant, an impersonal ruler; rather he is the warm and welcoming Father. He is best understood as a loving and intimate father. The Bible indicates in Psalms 68:5 that God is the Father to the fatherless and the protector of widows. This truth is relevant to all families, whether broken, destroyed, dysfunctional, or confronted with the cycle of father absence. It is important that all families realise that there is hope for them only in God. This includes the orphans, widows, and lonely people; they are not outside of him. Numerous Social Work scholars identified many social ills including high unemployment rate, high crime rates, poverty, broken families, disorganised communities, street children, child drug addicts, and the different and diverse cultures, beliefs, and religions within the family units in South Africa (Chuong & Opearo, 2012:42-57; Lotter, 2016:343-361; Yogman & Eppel, 2022:21-25). From a biblical viewpoint, the authors conclude that the above-mentioned social ills were never in the plan and will of God because families are one of the paramount units that God instituted in society.



Fry (2016:np) proposes that God is the literal Father to families. He lists five truths that paint a profound picture of the heavenly Father. Firstly, God is the source of life. Earthly fathers play a key part in contributing to and providing for the life of children, but God the Father is the source of life. He makes it possible for the earthly father for providing for his family. God's plan for families is the path to abundant life (John 10:10), but families have to recognise him and integrate him into their earthly affairs. Secondly, God lovingly corrects us. God always offers his discipline and correction out of love (Hebrew. 12:3–11). Earthly fathers should help their children to recognise the ways in which God's Spirit corrects them in their everyday decisions and interactions with others. Thirdly, God provides for our needs. Father God provides for the needs of the family according to Matthew 7:7–11. The earthly father should show his children all the ways in which God provides for their needs. Fourthly, God the Father gives wisdom. The earthly father should help his children learn life skills, and he should encourage them in their talents and gifts. He should also help them see that truth and wisdom comes from the heavenly Father, and his inspired Word is the ultimate source of wisdom and truth (2 Timothy 3:16–17). Fifthly, God always welcomes his people back when they move away from him. God is the ultimate model of forgiveness. All people have sinned and are still doing wrong, but God the Father is constantly on the watch for his people to return to him. He runs towards them with joy when they turn back to his family (Luke 15:11–32).

According to Kelly (1996:np), the fatherhood of God is perhaps the most overlooked attribute of God in the Christian world. Christians worldwide pray to God by uttering the familiar words, "Our Father who art in heaven." "Father" is here the most familiar term for God in the Christian tradition, and perhaps the most theologically significant title for God in all of Scripture. Even from the Social Work perspective, the father figure in a child's life is very crucial. The Children's Act, 38 of 2005 advises that the child's best interest is the most important aspect in all matters pertaining to the well-being of children. Positive relationships between fathers and children should be encouraged as it can only be in the child's best interest Children's Act 38 of 2005: np).

How does God demonstrate his fatherhood to human beings?

In the Greek language, the term for father literally means nourisher, protector, or upholder (Freeks, Peters & Louw, 2022:3-4). Scripture presents the concept of fatherhood in several ways: (1) headship – generating and establishing a household; (2) feeding – nourishing or protecting his offspring; (3) maintenance – upholding that which he established. Only two of these are discussed for the purposes of this paper. God also showed his fatherhood to people in a direct manner by creating all things and establishing man, and by establishing a covenant with his offspring. God also shows his fatherhood in an indirect or mediated manner. Man is truly to know himself and his place by knowing God. Man must know God and his fatherhood before he can fulfil his own role as a father to his family and to the world. Adam's task was to be a father to the world. He generated his own kind, and he was given a wife to assist him in the work and to produce other "fathers" to fulfil the cultural mandate that God has given to his children. God mediates his fatherhood through Adam and reflected his fatherhood to the world through the mediated divine order of his creation. According to the Children's Act 38 of 2005, both parents (fathers and mothers) have certain parental responsibilities and rights toward their children. It is thus the responsibility of fathers to care and provide for their children, however, the sad reality is that numerous children in South Africa experience father absence (Yogman & Eppel, 2022:15) and are exposed to social problems such as abuse, poverty, sexual exploitation and emotional and problems (Freeks, 2019:685; Kesebonye & P'Olak: 2020:1-13; Popenoe, 1996:12-16)

The Essence of Biblical Values for the Family Context

The following discussion deals with the importance of biblical values (also called Christian values) for the family context. Fathers can be successful and involved, available and



committed in their roles if they adhere to biblical values. Values in the Social Work domain are integrity, non-discrimination, social justice, ubuntu, equality, participation and democracy, and social change (Nicholas, Rautenbach & Maistry, 2010:11-12). If fathers practice some of the mentioned values such as integrity and *ubuntu* which is align with a Christian perspective and ethos then father absence can be curbed. Such values constitute a way of living and are applicable to all walks of life. Values ensure order, stability, and love. In present-day society, the concept of values has become an increasingly relevant subject for many researchers, perhaps due to the rise of postmodernity where everything goes, and discipline is ritually challenged. Especially “old values”, as portrayed by grand narratives, are rejected. The current generation is even described as the “*post-everything generation*” (Handler, 2007: np). These values can be applied in the family and society, e.g., adoration, trust, certainty, obedience, respect, duty, peace, and discipline. Other writers (Lepholletso, 2008; Challens, 2008; Rens, 2005; Abdool, 2005; Freeks, 2007; Heenan, 2004). take a more specific stance and refer specifically to biblical values.

What are values in this context?

There is no universal definition for values, mainly because of the complexity of the concept (Carl & De Klerk, 2001:22). The different ways in which the concept is generally used makes it difficult to capture a precise meaning. Values are often conflated with other terms e.g., *attitudes, norms, faith, ideals, needs, goals, importance, and interests*. The word *value* is derived from the Latin word *valere* and the French word *valoir*, which means “*that which is truly valuable, which is worth striving towards, that which truly makes life worthwhile*” (De Klerk, 2004:3). *Values* also means “*to be strong and powerful*” but values are also an expression of a deeper truth beyond and less ephemeral than our material lives. In short, they provide ideals (Odendaal & Gouws, 1994:1257; Rens, 2005:12). Values can also be seen as *cherished beliefs and standards for right or wrong* and, as such, serve as determinants that influence a person’s choices in life for a sustained period of time (Davies, 2001:1).

One should understand that values connect with beliefs, which in turn determine one’s attitudes and behaviour (Freek, 2020:4-5). An individual generally has to make a decision concerning a certain behaviour or behavioural pattern. In the case of the father in the home context, he should strive in life and work towards ensuring that good values are part and parcel of his child’s behavioural pattern. It is essential to see that values can serve to give life purpose, but it is also important that these values contain a religious or spiritual element if they are meant to give meaning or direction or to help a person make sense of their life (Freek, 2020:4). This is especially true of a father’s transmission of biblical values (or Christian values) to his children. Although other values exist inter alia besides biblical values, it is crucial to point out that the Bible provides us with a clear description of the origin of values (Freek, 2020:4). For one, some of the general values already mentioned above clearly correspond with biblical values. God governs his creation through the principles inherent in values and these spiritual laws are valid and binding for all created beings, and so much more for the father in the domestic context. Keep in mind that values are interconnected in a value system; a system that, in Christian terms, holds the Bible as the authoritative Word of God. It holds that faith springs from the belief in the Trinity. Father absenteeism may contribute to broken and dysfunctional homes, abuse, and street children (Simeon, 2016:80).

The authors have already emphasised the fact that people’s values flow from their beliefs. In other words, one develops a world and life view based on one’s religion or a similar belief system. A human being is born with the potential for *value consciousness* but without specific values. Humans are likewise born with the ability to internalise values. As people become conscious of values, so they evaluate and form opinions about certain elements of life such as religion, ethics, culture, economics, and the law. Biblical values can be better understood as forming a worldview that emphasises that one’s choices can either be bad or good; can have positive or negative consequences, which either light up one’s life or darken it. Father’s involvement from birth is beneficial and can contribute to the well-being of children. Hence,



the need for a father-figure is highly valued within a family unit (Yogman & Eppel, 2022:18). These values do not exist by themselves; they have a meaning that is firmly based on God's ordinations for life. A worldview refers to a comprehensive framework of basic beliefs about things and through which values are activated. We should keep in mind that Christians are required to shape and test their worldview against the Bible. This Christian worldview can, we believe, be instrumental in bringing about change, especially in the family. Any father will desire to see a change of behaviour in the lives of his children. The Bible often refers to such change as the fruit of the Holy Spirit, which engenders aspects (or fruit) such as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control; all biblical values (*cf.* Galatians 5:22, Philippians. 4:8). The father should also see to it that biblical values relating to faith (trust, devotion, and surrender) are also inculcated: the adoption of these values can make a huge contribution to his children's spiritual lives. The same applies to moral values, such as integrity, honesty, and forgiveness: it is vital for the father to see that his children live honest lives, have integrity, and have forgiving spirits. Biblical values also include political-judicial values, i.e., justice and fairness. The father should prioritise these values as part of his mentoring process: he should teach his children to be just and fair in life, for example in school, in their tests or examinations. The father must make sure that every inclination towards unfairness or injustice is eliminated from his children. All the above either overlap with or should also be seen in the light of the traditional biblical cardinal values such as justice, courage, temperance, and practical wisdom. More generally, the theological values of faith, hope, and love (*cf.* 1 Corinthians 13:13) should be modelled by the father (and the mother or other caregivers) so that his children can observe, emulate, and apply these values in their own lives. Other key values that the father should grow in his children include for example diligence, justice, kindness, generosity, gentleness, purity, and patience. These values are vital and deserve careful attention as they can contribute to positive father involvement with children (Alport et al., 2018:746-753). The next section discusses three essential tests of biblical values:

Values determine behaviour and actions

There are different kinds of values, but whatever they are, they determine the behaviour and actions of individuals (De Klerk, 2003:37). This highlights the importance of values when thinking about a father's role as a mentor. Values determine actions and even attitudes, and these attitudes and actions shape hearts and thoughts (Freeks, Peters & Louw, 2022:2-3). They shape who we are as individuals, how we live from day to day, as well as how we view and treat others. People are sensitive to and influenced by their environment, events, and society and constantly construct values on the basis of this influence. If values make life worthwhile and are as such worth striving for, these values or virtues can be described as *convictions* that people embrace and prioritise and around which they arrange and shape their lives (Green, 2004:108; Rhodes & Roux, 2004:25). It is at this level that the father can have a major positive impact on his family. In reality these values are the highest priorities in life and thus cannot and should not be ignored. A worldview is the comprehensive framework of one's basic beliefs about things. In the case of Christians, this worldview will be shaped and even tested on the basis of Scripture, particularly when it comes to values (De Klerk, 2004:3; Van der Walt, 2008:2-3). Here the father's approach to and perspective on his children are crucial and his own life should be constantly tested against the worldview implied in Scripture.

Values as directives

Values, strengths, and faith are directives, especially when an individual is faced with making a decision. A certain group of values will influence each decision that a person has to make. A good example of this would be a learner who has to choose to either obey the instructions of an educator in a classroom or not. This scenario highlights specific values, such as moral and authoritative values. For the father, it is both necessary and desirous to include direction, strategy, and authority in the mentoring process itself so as to influence his children with positive values (Freeks, Peters & Louw, 2022:2-3).



Values give meaning and function

Values give meaning to life and help to solve social problems. These problems often stem from situations relating to others or from relationships with others. Conflict is inevitable and decisions have to be made to solve these challenges. Thus, biblical values play an essential role in decision-making in the family context where the father should play a leading and exemplary role (Kok, 1999:2). Values are not only meaningful in the sense described above, but they, also play a big part in reaching goals, in how people experience things on both a verbal and non-verbal level. They inform our perspectives and even contribute to our concept of what it means to be human. Human values generally form a *value system* that serves as a guideline for behaviour. It offers criteria against which one can evaluate people, objects, events, and other facets of reality. Values thus form an internal structure on the basis of which human beings make decisions (Carl & De Klerk, 2001:22; De Klerk, 2004:3). The father should explain to his children that life is all about choices and that choices the children make can influence and determine their future and, in fact, their entire life. Thus, in the case of children without fathers, it is not the ideal situation as outlined in the Bible for example if the father is not present, there is no guidance and mentoring. Therefore, fathers are obligated to lay the foundation of biblical values because they have the unique opportunity to make an external investment in the lives of their children (cf. Munroe, 2008:7).

Faith as strength perspective within the family context

Father absence is a big social problem in South Africa, and it is often social workers who have to deal with it. The consequences of absent fathers include among others child abuse, poverty, and disrupted family systems that require intervention from social workers (Yogman & Eppel, 2022:15-18). In a study done with vulnerable children, the findings indicated that 70% of the children who ended up on the streets did not have a father figure in their lives (Simeon, 2016: 90).

Social workers often rely on the strength perspective for intervention with their clients. The strengths perspective in social work is based on the empowerment of an individual by drawing on his inherent strengths (Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2016:14).

Individual resilience is acknowledged from the strength perspective (Scerra, 2011:np). Resilience is the drive to succeed in the face of adversity (Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2016: 14; Scerra, 2011:np). Another benefit of the strength perspective is its adaptability; it may readily be used with a range of practice interventions from many disciplines, including social work and theology. Social workers can use the strength perspective when working with children who experience father absence (Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2016:14). For example, the social worker will focus on other support systems in the child's life rather than the absent father. Also, support systems such as extended family members and church leaders can offer valuable support in the form of emotional and financial assistance.

Although the strengths perspective is not new, there is limited research available on how the strengths perspective can be used to empower fathers to play an active role in their children's lives. When social workers and human service providers engage with the natural capabilities of individuals, families, and organisations, the authors believe they can achieve remarkable results. Social workers will use the strength perspective by focusing on people's support systems, resources within the community, and their resilience to address issues relating to father absence such as poverty, abuse, poor parental bonds, and anti-social behaviour.

The strengths perspective also gives the opportunity for disciplines such as social work and theology to work together. Research has shown that people often rely on their faith or trust in God in difficult times (Freeks, 2020:4; Koenig & Spano, 2007). They often believe that God will carry them through the situation. This can be seen as a strength because the person



believes and has faith that things can get better. Koenig and Spano (2007) also state that social work practitioners can rely on spirituality to create hope in their own lives and that of their clients. Spirituality refers to a human desire for meaning that is satisfied by ethically acceptable interactions among people, families, communities, cultures, and religions.

Over the last decades, the strengths perspective in social work has urged a move away from a focus on client problems to a focus on children's capacities and potential. This shift is mainly caused due to the fact that the strength perspective procedurally encourages a sense of self-efficacy, making children and families more successful partners in working towards a change and well-being they accept. The strengths perspective is based on the following assumptions. According to Saleebey (2006:np), the strengths perspective is based on nine assumptions:

- Regardless of how difficult their circumstances are, all children possess strengths that may be used to enhance their lives. This also applies to children without fathers.
- Even the most desolate environments offer resources that may be used to solve problems and improve children's lives.
- No one knows what a child's maximum potential for growth and transformation is.
- Trauma, abuse, disease, and other difficulties may be both a source of challenge and an opportunity for progress, despite their potential for devastation.
- A continual emphasis on the child's qualities promotes their motivation.
- Self-efficacy, personal power, choice, control, and commitment may all be used to help children feel empowered.
- Professionals are not experts on children's needs, but collaborators towards empowerment.
- Discovering children's strengths requires a process of cooperative exploration by clients and professionals.

In summary, values, strengths, and faith are crucial components to curb this social ill. The absent father phenomenon can possibly be addressed if social workers apply the strengths perspective with the children involved. All children have inherent strengths and can improve their circumstances, no matter how bad the circumstances. It is possible to look at what causes there are that give rise to the absent father phenomenon and how the resources available in the environment can be used to address it.

Recommendations

Since the problem of father absence can have such a decisive effect and so many negative consequences, including the abuse of children and their negative experience of fatherhood, the following recommendations and suggestions can be made:

- The local churches should play a prominent role regarding to families so that children can be safe and live more on the advantaged edge of society.
- The church should arrange, organise, and plan workshops and seminars so that fathers can be trained, equipped, and empowered in terms of their fundamental roles in the family context such as availability, commitments, presence, provision, etc.
- Collaboration with local organisations such as FAMSA (Families South Africa) is paramount. It is crucial to train and equip families with children as the focal point.
- Different disciplines inter alia Social Work, Theology, Psychology and Education should work together in an effort to promote healthy relationships between fathers and their children.
- More research should be done on the correlation between absent fathers and the abuse of children.
- Many parenting guidance programs are available for mothers. These programs should be adapted and made available to fathers.



- Opportunities for social work and religious institutions to work together to address problems such as absent fathers and child abuse should be prioritised in communities.
- Community-based programs that actively involve fathers should be considered.
- A need analysis should be done in communities to identify specific needs to address child abuse and the absent father figures in the communities.

Conclusion

It is clear from the literature study that father absence is a great concern in South Africa and of course also globally. The absent father phenomenon possibly contributes to social problems such as child abuse. The inference that can be made is that father absence can give rise to children in need of care and protection. The phenomenon of absent fathers may hinder the emotional, spiritual, and physical growth of children. To grow up without a father in their life is not in the best interest of children because especially boys look up to their fathers as role models to lay down the rules and enforce them. Fathers and mothers provide a sense of security for boys and girls, in both the physical and emotional aspects. In addition, an involved father promotes inner growth and strength in his children. This article emphasised the serious consequences of father absence in families and communities. In particular, this article sought to lay the foundation for an approach based on the fatherhood of God, with biblical values and faith as a strength for families as possible solutions to the problem of father absence. Furthermore, the article points out that God calls fathers to live out these roles and calling within the context of the family. Efforts to train, equip and empower can help numerous families in South Africa who are facing this growing social ill of father absence. Therefore, it is pivotal for different disciplines to collaborate to address this social issue in society as in the case of theology and social work.

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