

## Non-Resident Parenting and the Psychological Well-being of Adolescents

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**ABSTRACT** This study sought to explore the influence of distant parenting on the cognitive and emotional development of adolescents at a secondary school in the Masvingo Province of Zimbabwe. A sample of twenty Form 2 adolescents took part in the study. A quasi-experimental research design was used to minimize threats of external validity. Data were collected using the Burns Anxiety Inventory. Analysis of data was done using descriptive statistics and the paired samples t-test. The study found that the presence of parents had a significant impact on the psychological wellbeing of adolescents. It was also established that the absence of parents increased the stress levels of adolescents on the Burns Anxiety Inventory. The study recommends that parents should try as much as possible to stay with their adolescents as the value of the family unit has no substitute.

### INTRODUCTION

The role of parents in the academic performance of their children has always been practically indispensable; however globalisation of production and labour flows coupled with the economic meltdown which has affected Zimbabweans since the mid-1990s has increased the frequency of migrating people. This forced many Zimbabweans to leave the country in search of better opportunities in countries like Botswana, Mozambique, South Africa, Zambia and the United States of America (Herald Newspaper 2009). The authors observed that although most of them destined in the United Kingdom, United States of America and South Africa, thousands are still crossing the Limpopo for South Africa and some to Tanzania and some, elsewhere in Zimbabwe but leaving children alone because they will be moving from place to place buying and selling to earn a living.

When parents cross the border for greener pastures or business trips, it creates a major source of stress for adolescents because they have to adjust to new life situations without parents for there will be no more attachment and parental guidance. Norton and Moorman (1986) and Skar et al. (2013) argue that the effects of distant parenting on children are more directly related to the emotional atmosphere of the family before, during and after the departure than the event itself. Moreover, the ramifications of distant parenting depend on the child's age and

gender. Rose et al. (2001) argues that school children are much more inclined to suffer from loneliness, mischievous behaviors and poor academic performance. She further argues that the situation can be compounded if there are no parents to guide adolescents especially when the adolescent is still at school level.

The plight of adolescents left behind by one or both migrating parents in developing countries has attracted growing attention in recent years, surfacing as news headlines in different countries. The heightening awareness is timely in this globalised era when increasingly uneven development and porous borders are encouraging more people, particularly labour migrants from rural regions and or developing countries to cross borders in search of better job opportunities. Many of these labour migrants, both men and women have left their own children behind with extended families, friends or even alone in the home countries in their quest to improve livelihood circumstances for themselves and their families through migration. While improved economic circumstances after migration have been noted in a range of studies, the psychological costs of their departure especially those left behind have often been omitted from the migration balance sheet.

Parents provide a source of support for children and their absence leaves a vacuum which breeds a plethora of psychological and social problems (Asis 2006; Criss et al. 2013; Luyckx et al. 2011; Skar et al. 2013). Chief among these

problems is poor behaviour which sometimes are symptoms of the psychosocial challenges posed by the absence of parents. The relationship between parents and adolescents changes if the parent is no longer staying with the adolescent child (Fusternberg and Cherlin 1991; Hoskins 2014). The child also feels lonely and starts to behave in an awkward manner. However, some literature reveals that the migration of parents to the Diaspora leads to improvement in the quality of health for adolescents left behind (Yeoh and Lam 2006).

Parents should stay with their children in order to motivate them in everything they do, encourage them in their school work and also encourage them to portray good behaviors. However, most adolescents are living without parents because parents migrated to other countries for greener pastures. This may lead to psychological and educational problems for the child left behind.

Adolescents who have an involved father, from birth, are more likely to be emotionally secure, be confident to explore their surroundings and as they grow older, they have better social connections with peers (Criss et al. 2013; Lamb 2002; Luyckx et al. 2011; Skar et al. 2013). These adolescents are less likely to get in trouble at home, school or in the neighborhood. Infants who receive high levels of affection from their fathers, for example babies whose fathers respond quickly to their cries and who play together, are more likely to be securely attached, that is they can explore the environment comfortably when a parent is nearby and can readily accept comfort from their parent after a brief separation. A number of studies suggest they are more sociable and popular with other children throughout early childhood (Criss et al. 2013; Hoskins 2014; Yeung et al. 2000).

The way fathers play with their children also has an important impact on children's emotional and social development. Fathers spend a much higher percentage of their one on one interaction with infants and pre-scholars in stimulating playful activity than do mothers (Leidy et al. 2011; Yeung et al. 2000). From these interactions, children learn how to regulate their feelings and behavior. Rough-housing with dad, for instance, can teach children how to deal with aggressive impulses and physical contact without losing control of their emotions. Fathers also tend to promote independence and an orientation to the

outside world. Fathers often push achievement while mothers stress nurturing, both of which are important to healthy development. As a result children who grow up with involved fathers are more comfortable explaining the world around them and more likely to exhibit self-control and pro-social behavior (Goldstine 1982; Skar et al. 2013).

A study of school aged children found that children with good relationships with their fathers were less likely to experience depression, to exhibit disruptive behavior or to lie and were more likely to exhibit anti-social behavior. This same study found that boys with involved fathers had fewer school behavior problems and that girls had stronger self-esteem. In addition, numerous studies have found that children who live with their fathers are more likely to have good physical and emotional health and to achieve academically (Lamb 2002; Skar et al. 2013). Moreover, fathers have a powerful and positive impact upon the development and health of children.

Fathers influence their children in large part through the quality of their relationship with the mother of their children (Leidy et al. 2011; Yeung 2000). A father who has a good relationship with the mother of the children is more likely to be involved and to spend time with the children and also to have children who are psychologically and emotionally healthier (Gable and Belsky 1994; Skar et al. 2013). Similarly, a mother who feels affirmed by her children's father and who enjoys the benefits of a happy relationship is more likely to be a better mother. Indeed the quality of the relationship affects the parenting behaviour of both parents (Goldstine 1982; Hoskins 2014). They are more responsive, affectionate and confident with their infants, more self-controlled in dealing with defiant toddlers and better confident for teenagers seeking advice and emotional support (Skar et al. 2013; Yeung et al. 2000).

There are also benefits of a positive relationship of parents to their children. One of the most important benefits of a positive relationship between father and mother is the behavior it models for the children. Fathers who treat mothers of their children with respect and deal with conflict within the relationship in an adult and appropriate manner are more likely to have boys who understand how they are going to treat their partners and who are less likely to act in an ag-

gressive manner (Palkovitz 2002). However, other studies show that husbands who display anger to their wives are more likely to have children who are anxious, withdrawn or antisocial. Thus, parents who stay with children should be good role models so that children emulate the good they practice (Hoskins 2014; Palkovitz 2002).

The expansion of single father families is due to the rapidly increasing divorce rates, cross-border trading and migration to the Diaspora. An increasing interest in personal and career goals by women and greater reliance on the wishes of the children in custody have all led to the increase in the number of adolescents with one parent (Gable et al. 1994).

Children in single father households may display better behaviour toward their parent and be more likely to express their appreciation of the parent than in single mother households (Grief 1995; Leidy et al. 2011). Also satisfaction with the experience of parenting was greater for single fathers than single mothers. In addition, single fathers expect less from children in the way of housework (Stewart and Craig 1996). Thus children growing up in single father families may participate less in housework as they grow up.

In order to concisely explore and unravel the issues belying this investigation, the study adopts a two-pronged approach where it draws from the attachment theory by Bowlby (1969) as well as the Social Learning theory by Bandura (1977). Attachment, according to Bowlby (1969), is an emotional bond with another person. He also describes it as a lasting psychological connectedness between human beings. Bowlby believed that the earliest bonds formed by children with their caregivers have a tremendous impact that continues throughout life. Attachment also serves to keep the infant close to the mother, thus improving the child's chances of survival (Bowlby 1969).

According to Ainsworth (1978), however, suggests that failure to form secure attachments early in life can have negative impact on behavior in later childhood and throughout life. She goes on to say that children diagnosed with oppositional-defiant disorder, conduct disorder or post-traumatic stress disorder frequently display attachment problems, possibly due to early abuse, neglect or trauma. However, clinicians suggest that children adopted after the age of

six months have a higher risk of attachment problems. Thus those left behind tend to be retrogressive because of lack of attachment.

The Social Learning Theory propounded by Albert Bandura has become the most influential theory of learning and development. Bandura (1977) believed that direct reinforcement could not account for all types of learning. His theory added a social element arguing that people can learn new information and behaviors by watching other people. This is known as observational learning (modeling).

This study is important as it will boost existing body of knowledge regards absent parenting. Whilst there is plenty of literature which shows the impact of migrating on children left behind in Asia, Europe and America, there is little to no literature which shows the same here in Africa and worse still in Zimbabwe. The study is important to the parents, school, society and the country as a whole. The parents will be highlighted on the importance of staying with their children concerning the behavior they portray and their academic performance. The research will also help the children themselves for they will be aware of the challenges met when left behind and what they should do in order to perform well in their studies and how to behave.

In this context, this paper seeks to focus on the impact of migration on one distantly immobile, yet vulnerable group, namely adolescents who are left behind by one or both of their migrating parents. The researcher also examined in detail the circumstances of those adolescents left behind and how their lives has been reshaped in a complex manner by the departure of key household members as their motivators and role models. This particular study will focus on revealing the psychological and educational ramifications of leaving adolescents behind whilst the parents leave in search of better opportunities either in the Diaspora or in distant cities. The study sought to assess the effects of distant parenting on academic performance and psychological well-being of adolescents left behind.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

The quasi-experimental design was adopted. It involves selecting groups upon which a

variable is tested, without any random pre-selection process. The advantage of using the method is that utilizing quasi-experimental designs minimizes threats to external validity as natural experiments do not suffer the same problems of artificiality as compared to a well-controlled laboratory setting (Linda et al. 2001).

### **Sample**

The researchers used systematic sampling while adopting a quota system in selecting the participants. The researchers were gender sensitive, so they sampled ten girls and ten boys. Those with present parents were equal to those without parents in both sexes. The sample comprised fifteen percent of all Form Two students at the school. Form two students were chosen because their participation was not going to interfere with their classes.

### **Research Instrument and Data Collection**

The researchers sought permission from the school head first. The teachers responsible were also informed and gave the researchers permission. The researchers also asked for records used to keep children's background information and assigned the class teachers to administer the tests while the researchers monitored the children writing to avoid cheating.

The Burns Anxiety Inventory and the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children- Revised (WISC-R) standardized tests used throughout the world were used in this research. The WISC-R was designed by Wechsler consisting of 13 subsets divided into two parts that include the verbal and performance scales. The Burns Anxiety Inventory, on the other hand, is a checklist of thirty three symptoms related to anxiety. They are broken down into three categories, anxious feelings, anxious thoughts and physical symptoms. It was developed by psychiatrist David Burns. To determine the accuracy of the instruments, a pilot study was conducted. To improve validity and reliability, the researcher administered the WISC-R and Burns Anxiety Inventory questionnaire to Form Twos at Mucheke High School in Masvingo. The aim of this test was to cater for possible mishaps in the instrument used so that respondents would face no difficulties in going through the test. After the pilot study the tests were administered without difficulties.

### **Data Analysis**

Data collected was presented on simple graphs and tables. Results from the standardized tests were analyzed using the t- test for related samples, using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) application. The t-test allowed the researcher to compare any differences between the two groups of adolescents, that is, those with absent parents and those with both parents.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical principles were observed in carrying out the study. No intimidation or harassment was used to get the responses. The researchers also informed participants on what they were going to do. In a bid to deal with ethical dilemmas in research, the researchers ensured participants of confidentiality and privacy. More so, debriefing was also carried out.

## **RESULTS**

The major issues and findings emanating from the research are presented below:

### **Comparison of Psychological Well-being of Adolescents with Absent Parents and Those Staying with Both Parents**

#### ***Category I: Anxious Feelings***

There is a striking similarity in anxiety feelings of adolescents staying with parents and those staying without parents. 40 percent of those staying without parents showed anxiety feelings that is nervousness, feeling tense, stress and uptight.

#### ***Category II: Anxious Thoughts***

As for this category, it could be observed that while 40 percent of those adolescents staying with parents showed moderate to lots of fear of criticism or disapproval, none of their counterparts staying with parents manifested such behavior.

#### ***Category III: Physical Symptoms***

Less significant differences can also be seen on this category. It could be noted that 70 per-

cent of adolescents staying with parents do not experience butterflies or discomfort in the stomach while only 50 percent of their counterparts who stay without parents do not experience such symptoms.

The t-test analysis showed no significant difference on the expressed anxiety levels between children living with both parents and those staying without parents. ( $t=1.489$  and significant value $=.171$ ). In addition, there was no significant difference on the overall scores of children staying with both parents and those staying without parents on the Burns Anxiety Inventory. ( $t=.545$  and significant value $=.599$ ).

### DISCUSSION

This study revealed that adolescents staying with parents slightly perform better than those without parents. This may be because they are well sponsored by their parents. Some of the parents would be gainfully employed, which puts them in a better position when compared to their counterparts staying without parents. This concurred with findings by Klein and Pellerin (2004) who found out those children in families which mothers are present have an academic advantage over children in families with absent mothers, independent of socio-economic resources, educational expectations and parental involvement in their schooling.

Moreso, the study found out that adolescence with both parents performed well in their academic activities as shown by their better performance in WISC-R. This may be because parents have ample time to supervise and monitor their children's homework and all their school work. This is in line with Bowlby's (1969) and Skar et al.'s (2013) assertion that mothers who are available and responsible for their children or infants' needs established a sense of security in their children. Thus the attachment that children have with their parents especially mothers boosts their self-esteem and increases their motivation. However, these research findings contradict with the study carried out in Bangladesh by Yeoh et al. (2005). It indicated that immigration of parents from rural areas to urban areas resulted in improvements in the academic studies of left behind children (Thomas et al. 2001).

This study, however, revealed that adolescents staying with parents performed extremely well in WISC-R on the similarities subset as com-

pared to their counterparts staying without parents. This is shown by total raw marks of 153 versus 86. This could be attributed to the fact that they have good role models in their parents, for some of these parents are of the working class. This is in line with the social learning perspective which argues that children learn from observing adult models who in this instance are possibly parents. Thus adolescents observe and learn from their parents who act as role models (Bandura 1977; Leidy et al. 2011).

The study also confirmed that adolescents with both parents performed slightly better in WISC-R on the vocabulary subset as compared to their counterparts staying without parents. This may be because they were nurtured in a conducive environment which allows them to explore and experiment with different play materials. This confirms Hoskins's (2014) and Yeung et al.'s (2005) assertion that a number of studies suggest that fathers who are involved in nurturing and play with their infants have children with higher IQs as well as better linguistics and cognitive capacities. Numerous studies for instance, a 2001 United States Department of Education Survey found out that an active and nurturing style of fathering is associated with better verbal skills, intellectual functioning and academic achievement among adolescents. It also found out that highly involved biological fathers had children who were 43 percent more likely than other children to earn mostly A's and 33 percent less likely than other children to repeat a grade (Gibson et al. 2003).

The current study also found out that there is a striking similarity on the Burns Anxiety Inventory on Category 1 on anxious feelings. This could mean that adolescents left behind have learnt to adjust and are coping with their situation. While 60 percent of adolescents left behind showed no stress, 40 percent of them showed stress similar to those staying with parents. This stress may be due to the loss of attachment from their parents who migrated elsewhere. Due to the inborn need for attachment, they could become stressed and nervous as they try to navigate through life on their own. This confirms Hoskins's (2014) and Lamp's (2002) assertion that children who live with their fathers are more likely to have physical and emotional health and are likely to achieve academically.

The study also revealed that 50 percent of adolescents staying with parents showed moderate to lots of fear of criticisms or disapproval on the Burns Anxiety Inventory Category 2, on anxious thoughts, while none of their counterparts staying without parents manifested such thoughts. This may be because parents have too much expectation of their children and want them to be successful in everything they do. Adolescents may face criticism or disapproval from their parents whereas their counterparts staying without parents may not face any of such criticism or disapproval since their parents will be absent.

Moreover, this study found out that 70 percent of adolescents staying with parents experience butterflies or discomforts in the stomach while only 30 percent of their counterparts staying without parents experience such symptoms. It may be because they get stressed up with meeting the demands of their parents when compared with those left behind. The findings contradict Lamp's (2002) finding that adolescents with involved fathers are more patient and can handle the stresses and frustrations associated with schooling more readily than adolescents with less involved fathers.

### CONCLUSION

This study found out that the presence of parents has a significant impact on the psycho-educational performance of adolescents. Communication and guidance from parents led the adolescents to excel in their academic studies. It also found out that adolescents staying with parents experience stress more than their counterparts left behind. The study also revealed that adolescents with parents performed better than those without parents, suggesting that parents had a role to play in the academic performance and psychological well-being of their children. More so, strong family ties assisted adolescents to perform better in their academic performance. Based on the analysis above, the researcher accepts the null hypothesis and concludes that there is no significant difference in the psychological well-being of adolescents with absent parents and those staying with both parents.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

Parents need not to expect too much from adolescents, since this causes anxiety and gives undue stress to these adolescents. Lastly, par-

ents should try as much as possible to stay with adolescents as nothing could substitute the value of the family unit. Future researchers should focus on explaining the effects of absent parenting on adolescents' later life, which is adult life.

### LIMITATIONS

The researchers used standardised tests to collect data. The use of standardized tests in collecting data has inherent weaknesses in that some of the questions on the test might either be too difficult or too simple for the sample group. The sample was small and this makes the generalisability of the findings impossible.

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