

## The Teenage Boys' Experiences of the Effects of Biological Father Absence on Their Well-being: A Descriptive Phenomenological Inquiry

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**ABSTRACT** Father absence is a global social phenomenon that has a detrimental social, economic and behavioural effect in the lives of children. The purpose of this paper is to explore and discuss the negative effects of biological father absence on teenage boys. A qualitative descriptive phenomenological design was used to conduct a study involving learners from two high schools situated in Northern KwaZulu-Natal, in South Africa. Twenty participants from the age of 13 to 19 years were recruited through a purposive sampling method. The ecological systems theory was adopted as an explanatory lens. Data was collected through interviews and analysed through thematic analysis. The main findings of the study were that teenage boys experienced emotional and financial challenges, misused drugs and other substances, became involved in criminal activities, and displayed poor academic performances. The study concluded that the father absence contributes to negative outcomes on teenage boys.

### INTRODUCTION

The family is the basic unit of society and the setting in which children naturally develop and are at their healthiest (Leonard et al. 2022). Chivhenge and Herbert (2019) lament that paternal and maternal love is important as both have great impact on a child's health, cognitive and social adjustment. South Africa has the lowest marriage rate on the continent, the second highest rate of father absence in Africa, and low rates of paternal maintenance (Tyali 2018). Children in South Africa live in non-standard family structures with mostly one of their biological parents. Patel and Mavungu (2016) state that there is an exceptionally high prevalence of father absence in South Africa. South African statistics viewed that between 74 percent and 92 percent of children lived with their mothers only across all four race groups, Africans, Indians, Coloureds and Whites (Hatch and Posel 2018). Salami and Okele (2018) confirmed these findings endorsing the prevalence of biological father absence in South Africa and their poor participation in the development of their children. Although biological

father absence is said to affect teenage boys and girls, Nisen and Sagatun (2015) report that boys are more negatively affected than girls due to the loss of a gender role model. Salami and Okeke (2018) argue that the absence of fathers has an impact on identity - affecting children from receiving and giving love. Lack of biological father involvement is characterised by the absence of a father-child bond is therefore viewed as intensifying the suffering that boy children experience. Darmody et al. (2022) argue that just one-third of pre-schoolers are believed to have both parents living in the same home, leaving two-thirds of the population to be raised by single parents. The traditional household setup no longer exists in communities as various families are disrupted and found to exist in the absence of one parent. The fathers' absence in the lives of the boy children results from various causal factors and has multiple consequences.

A study by McLanaha et al. (2013:1) points to several studies that focus on "a negative association between living apart from a biological father and multiple domains of offspring well-being, including education, mental health, family relationships, and labor market outcomes". Most of studies are quantitative and tend to attribute the father absence in the family on factors like working away from the family, alcoholism, divorce, separation, and

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death. Darmody et al. (2022: 69) acknowledge that while “cognitive development and achievement in school are important aspects of childhood development and integration”, they are not the only ones. Even though the majority of fathers support their children and keep on interacting with them regardless of staying away from them, adversities like crime, truancy, poverty, drug use and dealing, poor academic achievement, delayed psychological and cognitive development, and emotional disturbance can all be linked to father absence (Lugay 2019).

It is worth indicating that this paper did not overlook the complexity of the concept of fatherhood and, in particular, the significant role that single mothers and other significant others play in occupying that space in the absence of biological fathers (McLanaha et al. 2013; Morrell and Richter 2006). Notably, in relation to this observation is the acknowledgement of the concept “social fathers”, mainly applicable in various African families. Social fatherhood is defined as caring by other persons who are not necessarily biological fathers to children but actually take the responsibility of caring and playing the role of a father for children (Mkhize 2006). The phenomenon of “social fatherhood” gained momentum in depicting fatherhood as an ascribed, as opposed to an attained status and that childrearing is not limited to biological parents (Richter et al. 2010; Nathane and Khunou 2021). This study focused on the experiences of teenage boys’ father absence, described as *ame-e* parent absence (Clark 2013).

## Objectives

This paper focuses on the discourse of father involvement and the lack thereof in the lives of the boy children. The main purpose is to explore and discuss the effects of biological father absence on teenage boys. It is aimed at contributing to the body of knowledge of fatherhood. Its focus is therefore on the experiences of teenage boys who grow up without the involvement of their biological fathers.

## Literature Review

### *Socio-emotional and Behavioural Impact of Absent Fathers on Boy Children*

The number of children growing up in homes where their fathers are absent is increasing every

year across the globe (Hall and Mokomane 2018). Mbabazi (2019) states that children who lack parental affection suffer from a variety of effects because of this lack. Evidence from the literature suggests that fatherly absence impairs children’s socio-emotional and behavioural development (O’Dwyer 2017). While the uniqueness of each child may suggest that the impact may vary and not be uniform for all children, it suffices to note that the majority of children are susceptible.

A gendered approach to “fatherhood as being social rather than natural” provides a significant recognition of the fluidity of fatherhood across gender disparities (Mkhize 2006:186). This assertion serves to explain the systematic nature of father absence, and acknowledges the rearrangement of the parts of the system in ensuring the maintenance of equilibrium in the absence of one party of the system. The loss of one party is likely to contribute to hardships in the households. Despite the efforts of the other party to buffer the severity of the impact, the father absence in the family context may not be without its effects. Phasha (2021) argues that teenagers in single-mother families are four times more likely to be poor. Cross et al. (2022) concur by stating that poverty is one of the identifiable negative consequences of growing up without a father, since living with a single parent increases a child’s chances of living in poverty. Despite the ongoing debate and democratic government efforts, the interconnectedness of poverty, inequality and unemployment remains a challenge in the South African context (Chibba and Luiz 2011). Economic hardship has a particularly negative effect on children’s development since it can limit their chances of graduating from high school, finding work as adults, and avoiding poverty, which contributes to the persistence of economic hardship across generations (Bierman et al. 2019). While the labour market patterns acknowledge the increased participation of women, men are still reported to be consistently more likely to participate in the labour market and this differential is to be expected as women are still comparatively serving the motherhood, caregiving and homemaking roles.

Children who live in poverty are also reported to be more likely to be exposed to violence or have a chaotic home life (Crouch et al. 2019). Living in a household with an absent father has also been linked to behavioural difficulties like depression, delinquency, and both internalizing

and externalizing behavioural difficulties (Antle et al. 2020). Kraus and Wojtas (2021) proposed that left-behind children may develop socio-emotional maladjustment and behavioural difficulties in the absence of a father. Wickramage (2015) discovered that abandoned adolescent boys were substantially more vulnerable to psychosis. According to Mbabazi (2019), childhood maltreatment and neglect can have an impact on a child's emotional development. Mbabazi (2019) also claims that traumatic conditions like abuse and neglect have a harmful impact on children's development. Additionally, they miss their fathers' love, which affects their level of kindness towards others. Father absence can be challenging for teenagers as they seek their identity, but it often alternates with their need for more independence and a desire to be away from their parents (Sanders 2022). The absence of a father has been linked to behavioural issues in children aged seven and under, as well as adolescent delinquency (Flouri et al 2015; Markowitz and Ryan 2016).

### ***Psychological and Emotional Challenges***

A teenage boy's psychological and emotional well-being might be harmed by growing up without a biological father. Preston and Rew (2022) observed that teenage boys growing up without biological fathers often lacked self-esteem and confidence. Children with absent fathers are reported to feel angry frequently and abandoned (Zhang et al. 2019). Furthermore, Dowling and Barnes (2020) argue that teenage boys with absent fathers may blame themselves and assume that something is wrong with them when, for one reason or another, their fathers are missing. The study conducted by Kesebonye and Amone-P'Olak (2021) found that a biological father plays an important role in the lives of his children by giving financial support, reliability, and presence and/or emotional support. While literature acknowledges that the absence of a father does not always have the same influence on a boy child, it highlights that living in a household without access to the social status, labour, and financial assistance that men offer, compounds the challenge of father absence (Poeze 2019). Poeze (2019) continues by stating that children with absent fathers often lead unpleasant lives. Given the significance of financial assistance, the father has traditionally played a significant role in raising the child.

According to Mbabazi (2019), teenage boys who lack fatherly sentiment and affection, frequently become violent and baited. Their emotional childhood isolation has an unintentional impact on their adult behaviour. If a boy does not express his anger in a way that leads to ill-discipline he is likely to develop low self-esteem attributed to the perceived feeling of abandonment by his father.

### ***Risky Behavioural Patterns***

Risky behaviour among youth is often demonstrated through behavioural patterns like smoking, criminal involvement and gangsterism. Boys raised by single mothers are reported to be comparatively at risk of being involved in criminal activities as indicated by studies which showed that 80 percent of rapists and 85 percent of juvenile offenders come from absent-father homes (Bierman et al. 2019; Mwangangi 2019). Mwangangi (2019) further argues that every year a boy spends apart from his father increases his chance of ending up in prison by 5 percent. Since fathers can educate boys on how to become men, single mothers are less effective at raising boys than they are at raising girls (Randles 2018). Sons with single mothers may experience disobedience and outbursts because they receive less love and attention from them than do daughters, especially at school (Wambua 2022). Teenage boys may readily join gangs in such situations because of their need for a male role model and a feeling of identity. Ibabe (2019) went on to say that the issue is the increase in the number of fathers who are not present, which has an adverse effect on boys' circumstances, both functionally and emotionally. The likelihood of crime is higher among teenage boys lacking parental figures. Additionally, they are more likely to experience parental abuse and neglect, particularly at the hands of live-in boyfriends who are not their biological dads and are more likely to have children of a young age (Pearce et al. 2018). These incidents therefore affect them as adults. Consequently, adolescent males develop an intolerant, angry, and hate-filled personality as they mature into men.

### ***Academic Performance***

Teenage boys who lack access to supportive father figures and live in households with absent

fathers usually perform worse academically than those who have father figures who are actively involved in their lives or at home (Bayaz-Öztürk 2022). Bayaz-Öztürk (2022) further asserts that teenage boys without resident fathers, often exhibit greater behavioural problems and perform worse in school than kids who live with both of their biological parents. Children who are left behind are much more likely than children who are not left behind to receive poor academic results (Fu et al. 2017). Absent fatherhood is described as likely to result in several negative outcomes among teenage males, such as poor academic performance and delayed social and emotional growth (Dowling and Barnes 2020).

O' Neill (2020) points out that teenage boys separated from their fathers are more likely to skip school and leave before completing their studies. This suggests that lack of father involvement in the academic situation of teenage boys can contribute to low academic performance. When the father is absent in the lives of his children, the youngsters often experience a struggle in school, do poorly in academic work, lack critical thinking abilities, and are less likely to achieve academic and professional qualifications as adults.

It is important to mention that the negative effects do not affect all teenage boys raised in households without fathers but rather, the dangers are higher for them (Brown 2022). The experiences, attitudes, and responses of the teenage boys to their fathers' absence differ but there is available evidence on negative outcomes which cannot be ignored. Rather, further investigation into the children's developmental experiences from the children themselves if they are raised solely by their mothers could make a major contribution to the field. As a result, the purpose of this study is to learn more from the teenage boys themselves about their experiences of being teenage males who are raised without a biological father.

### Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation used in this study is ecological systems theory, which was advanced by renowned developmental psychologist, Urie Bronfenbrenner. The ecosystems theory is broken down into five systems, namely microsystem, mesosystem, exo-system, macro-system, and chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner 1977). Bronfenbrenner's ecological

systems theory views child development as a complex system of relationships affected by multiple levels of the surrounding environment, from immediate settings of family and school to broad cultural values, laws, and customs (Bronfenbrenner 1977).

Lau et al. (2022) state that underlying the establishment of the ecological systems theory are the three behavioural concepts: exchange balance, internal consistency, and dialectical transformation. Pickett et al. (2020) further explain that ecological theory incorporates and adds human and dynamic components to general and social system theories. It focuses on human interaction in physical space and time within territorial ecosystems. Teenage boys, the circumstances of their lives and the healthy or unhealthy behavioural patterns that ensue from their interaction make up the study's ecological system. The ecological systems theory allows everyone to describe their lived experience from their own view and perspective.

According to Parsons (2017), the ecological systems theory describes human behaviour as the junction of the influences of numerous interconnected systems. Families, groups, cultures, and other systems are integrally implicated in difficulties that affect one person, and they must be considered while trying to comprehend and help the person. This ecological systems theory is used to create a comprehensive understanding of people within a context and works best when multiple systems are intimately connected to and influencing one another. It can be used in situations where behavioural contextual understandings will result in the best practice solutions. Additionally, this systems theory in this study enables participants to articulate how growing up without a biological father affected their behaviour and their adolescent years.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### Qualitative Approach

A qualitative research approach was adopted with the purpose of establishing the effects of biological father absence on boy children's well-being. Tuffour (2017) argues that a qualitative approach is appropriate when the study seeks to understand the participants' own viewpoints and to provide an interpretive understanding of human experience.

This approach was appropriate for this study since its aim was to explore the experiences of teenage boys and their views on their absent fathers. Furthermore, to elicit the experiences of teenage boys on father absenteeism, a phenomenological research design was employed.

### Descriptive Phenomenological Design

In this regard, a descriptive phenomenological design was used as a methodological approach to bring to the fore the experiences of the boy children. Alhazmi and Kaufmann (2022:1) describe the individual's experience as a complex, multidimensional phenomenon that is, "psychologically oriented, culturally driven, and socially structured". Alhazmi and Kaufmann (2022) describe the bracketing mode as essential in the descriptive mode, as it enables the observation and listening of the lived experiences without any preconceived ideas or prejudgement.

### Study Participants

A total of twenty participants made up of teenage boys were recruited through non-probability purposive sampling. The sample was drawn from two high schools, namely School A and B, which are both situated in an urban area in the Northern part of the KwaZulu-Natal Province.

Table 1, reveals a sample of twenty participants in the study and that their identities were concealed through the use of codes (Participant 1, 2, 3, up to 20). Notable, is that for the purpose of maintaining the principle of confidentiality, the names of the two schools could not be divulged. Again, considering that there was no comparison between the two schools and that there were no inherent factors that differentiated learners from both schools, there was no separation of learners from each of the schools.

### Data Collection Process

The two school social workers from the two selected schools were instrumental in identifying the potential participants, based on the predetermined inclusion criteria. Data in this study was collected through semi-structured interviews. The use of a voice-recording device was negotiated with the participants prior to recording of interviews. This was supplemented with field notes to see to it that the

**Table 1: Participants' profile**

<i>Participant</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Race</i>	<i>Grade</i>	<i>Reason for father absence</i>
1.	15 years	Black	08	Separated
2.	16 years	Black	08	Death
3.	15 years	Black	09	Death
4.	13 years	Black	08	Death
5.	14 years	Black	08	Death
6.	14 years	Black	08	Death
7.	17 years	Black	11	Death
8.	19 years	Black	12	Death
9.	19 years	Black	12	Death
10.	17 years	Black	11	Death
11.	18 years	Black	12	Death
12.	18 years	Black	12	Death
13.	17 years	Black	12	Death
14.	13 years	Black	08	Death
15.	15 years	Black	08	Death
16.	13 years	Black	08	Death
17.	14 years	Black	08	Death
18.	13 years	Black	08	Death
19.	15 years	Black	08	Death
20.	16 years	Black	11	Whereabouts unknown

non-verbal cues, in particular, were captured in the process. The inclusion criteria to be met by participants were as follows:

- Each participant had to be a boy learner in one of the selected schools
- The participant was required to be aged between 13 and 19 years
- The participant must be living in a household with an absent father

### Data Analysis

Raw data recorded from interviews was transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis method. The five themes that emerged from this process are elaborated upon under results section, below.

### Ethical Considerations

The study received ethical clearance from University of Zululand Higher Degrees Committee with reference number (UZREC 171110-030 PG M 2017/360). Furthermore, the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education, and subsequently the principals of School A and B served as gatekeeper

authorities that gave permission for the study to be conducted. Additionally, written informed consent was sourced and obtained from the parents/guardians of the children who participated in the study. Lastly, the participants gave verbal and written consent regarding their willingness to participate in the study.

In the main, confidentiality was ensured in several ways, from data collection stage to findings reporting stage. In this way, the participants were guaranteed confidentiality in the reporting of the findings, both in terms of their identities and any personally identifiable information. The research participants' information and subsequently data were saved in a computer filing system protected through a password.

From the planning stage and throughout the research process, the researchers were mindful that the sensitive nature of this study was likely to trigger some emotions for some of the participants. The researchers therefore prepared measures for the psychosocial support. Prior to participating in the study, the participants were assured that should they feel uncomfortable, they had the right to withdraw. During the interviews and when emotions of discomfort were evoked, the researchers as trained social workers provided debriefing sessions with the participants. Those who needed further intervention were referred to another social worker who was arranged and was readily available for such a responsibility.

## RESULTS

Firstly, this paper provides an outline and a brief analysis of the participants. Then the findings are presented using themes that emerged from the experiences of teenage boys on biological father absenteeism. In this regard, five thematic areas that are elaborated upon below include extent of father absence, emotional effects, substance abuse and involvement in criminal activities, buffering the poverty experience, and poor academic performance.

### Analysis of Biographical Data

The participants' details were solicited based on four variables, namely age, race, school grade and reason for father absence.

**Table 2: Biographical information of participants**

<i>Variable</i>		<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Age	13 years	4	20
	14 years	3	15
	15 years	4	20
	16 years	2	10
	17 years	3	15
	18 years	2	10
	19 years	2	10
Race	Black	20	100
Grade	08	11	55
	09	1	5
	11	3	15
	12	5	25
Reason for father absence	Separation	1	5
	Whereabouts unknown	1	5
	Death	18	90

### Age

Table 2 showed that the participants were aged between the ages of 13 to 19 years. This showed a distributed from early adolescent stage depicting entry into adolescence, to late adolescent stage representing transitioning into adulthood. The use of chronological age construct is conventionally used among researchers to compare different cohorts' behavioural patterns (Kuppelwieser and Klaus 2020). In the South African school system, the school going age ranges from six to eighteen years. Although it was beyond this study to explore the rationale behind the over age learners, it should be noted with concern that two (10%) of the teenage participants were above the age of eighteen.

### Race

All twenty teenage boys who participated in the study were Black. This came as no surprise, considering that the two schools from which the participants were sampled predominantly service learners from Black race. According to Mndende (The News 24, 2021), in South Africa only 31 percent of Black children are raised with their biological fathers at home, compared to children from other races, namely Coloured, Indian and White children at 51.3 percent, 86.1 percent and 80.2 percent, respectively.

## Grade

More than half of the participants were learners from grade 8 (55%), followed by grade 12 (25%). The least participants were from grade 11 followed by grade 9, with 5 percent and 15 percent, respectively.

## Reason for Father Absence

Except for two participants who attributed the reasons for father absence to separation, and unknown whereabouts, the researchers found that the biological fathers of eighteen participants (90%) were absent due to death. Thus, death was identified as the main reason for father absence in the lives of the majority of the boys. Literature depicts that “most frequently mentioned causes of paternal absence are divorce and separation, death and career demands” (Qureshi and Ahmad 2014:2). It is on a similar basis that the meaning of losing parents for children and teenagers is regarded as being diverse and happening over a long period of time, even for years (Wijayanti and Suatini 2019).

## Themes that Emerged from the Study

Based on the study objective, five themes emerged from this process, namely extent of father absence, emotional effects, substance abuse and involvement in criminal activities, buffering the poverty experience and poor academic performance.

### Theme 1: Extent of Father Absence

From the ecological theory perspective, raising a boy child in a father absent home requires numerous adjustments on the part of the family. Evident in the below assertions, is the notion that even though death of a father was a common factor among them, the extent of father absence happened at different levels.

For instance, the following participants reported to have not seen their fathers because they had passed on before they were born.

*“I do not know my biological father. My mother told me that he passed on while she was still pregnant with me. I have asked my mother to at least show me his photo, but she refused without explaining to me. She just keeps on promising to show me the photo, but she has not”* (Participant 15).

*“I was told by my aunt that my father was deceased before my birthday. My aunt also told me that my father shot himself using my grandfather’s gun. I have no idea how he looked like and what kind of person he was”* (Participant 5).

Unlike the above, the below participants reported that they knew their biological fathers and that they had played a role in their lives before passing away.

*“I know my biological father as I was staying with him before he was deceased in 2003. Most of the time, I feel bad of not having him around anymore because I believe that things would have been better at home if he was still alive”* (Participant 4).

*“My biological father was deceased in February 2012. He was originally from Pongola and worked for an insurance company in Durban. Life was good back then as I used to visit him on weekends. My father was married to another mother but was very supportive and responsible towards me”* (Participant 3).

The below participant alleged that, even before the death of his father, he only heard about him, but had no relationship with him at all.

*“I heard that before my father was deceased, he was working in the taxi industry. I honestly do not know him, and I also heard that he has fourteen other children from different mothers. I do not care and feel nothing about my father due to the fact that we had no relationship. To me, he never existed”* (Participant 11).

*“I knew my father although there was no communication between us. He worked for Engen garage somewhere in Johannesburg. The fact of knowing that my father was out there but not supporting me in any way as he should, makes me feel very angry, especially at him. My mother is currently the only one who supports me in my required needs. This makes me feel bad because I can see that my mother is struggling a lot”* (Participant 1).

*“I do not want to talk about my father because I do not know his whereabouts. I heard that he works in a taxi industry and had many other children. I tried to ask my mother about my father, but she also refused to talk about him. Not knowing my father makes me not care and do not get hurt because I do not even know how he looks like. I basically get all the support from my mother”* (Participant 20).

### **Theme 2: Emotional Effects**

The findings of the study showed that the absence of a father had an impact on emotional domain of teenage boys, as most participants expressed their sadness, loneliness, and longing for their fathers. Although fathers are often perceived and judged by their provisioning and protection roles, emotional development aspect shows that there are several other roles that fathers fill. As Wilson and Prior (2011:406) assert the influence of “fathers on childhood emotional and behavioural disorders may be particularly relevant for boys, given fathers’ potential to act as role models to sons”. “The change in role of fathers makes it interesting to ask how young men whose own fathers are absent think about their future role as fathers” (Nilsen and Sagatun 2015:114).

*“I miss my dad so badly and I feel like crying occasionally because of the misery I’m in. I have the impression that I am lost and empty at times. Having no father is horrible to me”* (Participant 2).

*“It’s always been difficult for me; my father was never there for me. Since I know how difficult it is to grow up without a father, I will be a responsible father to my own children”* (Participant 3).

*“I’m sad that my father isn’t here with me. I don’t remember much about him because I was too little when he died, but I did miss him. This is because my mum said he was a kind guy”* (Participant 5).

Nevertheless, some participants demonstrated that they were unconcerned with their fathers’ absence. This was since they barely knew each other and, as a result, their relationship was non-existent. Two of the participants said:

*“I have no feelings for my father.” In my life, he was never present. I don’t want to be like my father because he was irresponsible and had a large family of fourteen children from several mothers”* (Participant 10).

*“My father is someone I don’t know. I haven’t heard from him in a long time. My mum has also passed away. As a result, I am unconcerned about his disappearance. I have a stepfather who treats me like his own kid, and my current focus is on a brighter future”* (Participant 8).

### **Theme 3: Substance Abuse and Involvement in Criminal Activities**

More than half of the participants mentioned that they had a history of substance abuse which

was linked to being involved in criminal activities such as robbery and selling of stolen goods. Three participants said the following:

*“Losing my father when I was young caused me to participate in wrongdoings. I believe I had too much freedom because I spent the most of my time outside with my buddies. We’d become bored and try to persuade each other to try new things, such as smoking and drinking alcohol. It became a habit for me to return home angry, yelling at my siblings and demanding food and money”* (Participant 6).

*“After my father died four years ago, I began abusing drugs. My stepmother’s treatment made me mourn my father so much that I went to drugs as a response. The torture of living a terrible life was too much for me to bear. My future was slipping away in front of my eyes”* (Participant 9).

*To meet my personal requirements, I also turned to criminality by stealing and selling other people’s stuff. My wrongdoings landed me in a year-long rehabilitation programme”* (Participant 8).

### **Theme 4: Buffering the Poverty Experience**

Many of the participants stated that the financial assistance they received from their families was insufficient, and as a result, they encountered challenges such as a lack of school fees and stationery, as well as food, cosmetics, and clothing. Some of the participants mentioned that they usually did not have breakfast before going to school. Some participants also stated that they walked long distances from home to school since they did not have enough money to pay for transportation. As a result, they were always late for school, and they would be reprimanded at school by their teachers. Despite the developments in families, fathers are still predominantly viewed as providers and protectors of their wives and children (Makofane 2015).

*“At home, my older sister and I are the only ones who live with us. My mother, too, is no longer with us. My stepfather used to be alive, then he passed away. My grandma, who does not live with us, provides financial support for me. Because my grandmother does not always send us money, my sister looks after me. Because the school principal is aware of my circumstances, she has instructed me not to pay the school fees. Clothing, toiletries, and a school uniform are among the items I battle to get. I have to wait a long period most of*



*the time to receive what I require” (Participant 7).*

*“Before my father died four years ago, I was residing with him. Life was fantastic, and we were in proximity. My stepmother sent me to my uncle’s house when he died, and that’s when things started to get difficult. There is a scarcity of financial assistance. Because my uncle only works part-time, he had to look after me. Things aren’t looking good, but life must carry on” (Participant 9).*

*“As a result, he decided not to assist in my financial demands. As my father and I do not get along, I do not remain with him. I stay at a friend’s house, which is likewise without parents. My sisters and brothers assist me financially. It takes me a long time to get assistance from them because I must constantly remind and ask them. They’re a long way from where I stay, so it’s more challenging for me” (Participant 18).*

*“In 2008, my father was killed in a vehicle accident. My mother is now my sole source of support. She is not employed on a long-term basis. She’s having a hard time because there are four of us to look after. To be honest, life at home is difficult, but my mother is doing her best” (Participant 16).*

### **Theme 5: Poor Academic Performance**

Most of the participants stated that they were repeating their school grades. Some of these participants said that they were being abused by the family members. As a result, they did not have enough time to complete their schoolwork. Some stated that they were unable to concentrate in class. Further, some participants indicated that they were being bullied by other learners because of not having a father who was present as a result they were unable to communicate with other children or establish friendships.

*“My aunt is a horrible person. She always picks on me for no apparent reason. Every morning, she wakes me up by pouring a glass of icy water over my face. She yells at me while I’m completing my homework, urging me to go wash the dishes and tidy the house. I honestly can’t concentrate in class since my mind is constantly wondering why my aunt is torturing me. I just sit in class and pretend to be paying attention. As a result, I am now in my third year of repeating the same grade. I’m always upset and get into fights with the other youngsters” (Participant 19).*

*“Because I don’t have a father, some children treat me cruelly. I’ve even dropped out of numerous*

*school activities, such as debate and sports. During break time, I no longer associate with people. I’d rather be alone now. I’m not happy because I’m having trouble with my schoolwork right now. I’m repeating the same grade for the second time, and I’m not optimistic about my prospects” (Participant 13).*

*“My father passed away in 2015. At first it was hard because I had just known him. Although it was not easy at the beginning but I have finally come to a point of accepting that he is no more. I still have unanswered questions but life has to go on. I am now not dwelling in the past but focusing on the future. I try not to let this distract me in my school work” (Participant 15).*

It is worth noting that, as outlined in the literature section, Poeze (2019) emphasises the role of other related factors as compounding the impact of father absence on boy children’s well-being. In tandem with this notion, a number of participants’ mention that in relation to father absence, there are other factors experienced by the boy children. Significant in the above themes, is the notion that the relationship between father absence and boy child’s well-being is rarely random and isolated. These factors include the abuse, emotional effects, substance abuse and involvement in criminal activities, financial effects, and poor academic performance.

## **DISCUSSION**

As a point of premise, this study acknowledged that father involvement influenced children’s development in various ways and at various developmental stages. On the flip side of the coin, father absence became a discourse worth noting. Mafokane (2015:23) asserts that “magnitude of father absence could have serious repercussions on the development of a country in relation to education, health services and social services”. It became apparent from the study that there are various reasons for father absenteeism, the most important of which was death. The study found that there were different reasons for children living without their biological fathers, and that the death of fathers was the most prevalent factor. The findings presented in this paper highlight the negative experiences of twenty teenage boys who were growing up in the absence of their biological father mainly due to death with only two participants whose parents had separated and who did not know the whereabouts of their fathers.

The findings of the study are in line with previous research that suggests that when teenage boys do not have a father role in their lives, a variety of things might go wrong. Dalton et al. (2019) conducted a study on the experiences of a group of teenage boys with absent fathers and discovered that the young boys experienced many social issues since their fathers were not active in their lives. The findings of this study revealed that the teenage boys who did not have a present biological father suffered an emotional void and were dissatisfied with their condition. This indicates that children, and boy children in particular, are usually at the receiving end of the negative impacts of father absence.

Exposing children to a poor fathering experience is also viewed as imposing negative effects on their holistic development, including emotional development. Anger, loneliness, sadness, and hurt were among the emotions mentioned by the teenage boys. The findings of the study suggested that the teenage boys required the engagement of their fathers for their emotional and mental well-being. The results of a study by Dowling and Barnes (2020) indicate that a boy starts to switch from his mother to his father at around age 9 or 13. It is safe to say, that as the boy-mother connection becomes diminished, the father role becomes even more significant. Since they serve as role models and must support and applaud their sons' successes, fathers play a crucial role in the formation of a strong, positive self-concept. Fathers are expected to have a much more successful and engaged relationship with their children in this situation, one that goes much beyond provision and punishment.

The findings in this study have shown that teenage boys with absent fathers struggled with behavioural issues. As a result, the participants were engaged in drugs and substances misuse and in criminal activities. This is so because they spent majority of their time outdoors with gangsters and substance abusers. As argued by Wood and Brownhill (2018), boys in their adolescence blame the absence of a father figure in their lives for involvement in criminal activities. Findings from the Markowitz and Ryan (2016) study are in line with this study that children living in absent-father households are significantly more delinquent than those living in two-parent families.

Furthermore, Peguero et al. (2021) state that father absence is linked to some of the most important

societal challenges, such as juvenile delinquency, which has the fastest-growing crime rate in the country. Coates et al. (2019) also agree, claiming that the absence of a father contributes to the higher levels of delinquency experienced by adolescents in single-mother households, and that parental gender is related with delinquency in single-parent families. The findings of this study show that the lack of a parent in general, and specifically the absence of a father, contributes to greater rates of delinquency among adolescents in single-parent homes.

The findings of the current study are in line with previous research that suggests that when teenage boys do not have a father role in their lives, it may interrupt their school education (Horwitz 2022). This study has shown poor academic performance among the participants. Langa (2020) claimed that academic issues, teen troublemakers, and school dropouts are all consequences of a biological father's absence, even for children living with step-fathers. Furthermore, it is argued that the children are also more likely to perform poorly in reading, maths, and cognitive skills tests, as well as have difficulties with teachers (Langa 2020). Therefore, it has been proven in this study that having an absent father might cause a child to struggle in school and this can have a negative impact on a child's future.

Schoppe-Sullivan and Fagan (2020), argue that many financial issues associated with the missing father are caused by a lack of parental attention and social resources. This view concurs with the findings of this study, in relation to insufficient financial support. A child in a single-parent household is likely to get less attention however, what matters most is the type of care received. The impact a father being present tends to serve a long-lasting role, considering that his financial support often provides payment for various necessities, namely study fees, food, clothing, and housing, to name a few. In a study by Kesebonye and Amone-P'Olak (2021), the biological father has a significant impact on the children's lives in terms of providing them with emotional and/or financial support, reliability, physical presence, and/or financial assistance. It is evident from these results that teenage boys' lives may be impacted by a lack of financial support as financial difficulties are one of the numerous challenges with which single mothers who are raising their sons alone are likely to be faced.

## CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of adolescent boys who had been separated from their biological fathers. While under certain circumstances the role of the father is often undervalued and regarded as subordinate to that of the mother, this study has revealed that it is crucial in the lives of children. This is so because the teenage boys who participated in this study showed that the absence of a biological father in their lives is linked to several negative outcomes psychologically, emotionally, financially, and socially.

Despite the recognised endeavour, by the mother or other significant others, the role of the father in the life of the boy teenager remains significant. The father absence tends to leave a vacuum in the family system, with the boy child regarded as severely affected. Although, it is beyond this study to establish how the boy children feel compelled to step up to try and play the roles of fathers, the study showed that the boy children do seek some ways to provide for themselves. The teenage boys resorted to a variety of undesirable behaviours in trying to cope with their feelings. Other emotions mentioned by the participants included helplessness, demotivation, and no longer caring. Hardened emotions, wrath and violence, a sense of powerlessness, limited capacity for verbal expression of their emotions, lack of self-confidence and insecurity, low self-esteem, and an imperfectly formed identity are also a result. A desire for a father to be a part of their life exists.

Therefore, it is worth noting that children require their biological fathers. As a result, the researchers believe that fathers have a role in guiding their children's development, while also contributing significantly to the establishment of their individual identities. As a child grows older and prepares for an independent life and career, the role of a father in his child's life becomes increasingly crucial. Verbal skills, problem-solving skills, and academic accomplishment all benefit from father engagement. However, one should not ignore the fact that having a father present is not always possible due to a variety of reasons.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

There is no doubt that there is a need for restoration of fatherhood. While traditionally there

has been measures for preparing men for fatherhood, the contemporary societies appear to fall short in this regard. In line with the ecological systems approach, this paper came up with few recommendations.

Firstly, schools and helping professionals in the school system play a crucial role among learners. It is on this basis that more practitioners like social workers and educational psychologists are needed to intervene in supporting boy children who are experiencing challenges relating to the father absence. The effects of father absence should be brought to the attention of emphasised with teachers and parents. This will entail additional public awareness efforts as well as the provision of services and resources as needed. This could assist in detecting issues timeously or prevent them from arising. Secondly, teenage boys require positive role models who can inspire them and increase their self-esteem. Male educators and other male volunteers could provide mentorship training in the absence of strong male role models. Communities should encourage male role models playing a part in the life of teenage boys. Thirdly, social fatherhood may not necessarily entrusted to biological fathers to take the responsibility of caring and playing the role of a father for children. In this regard and where applicable, certain role players may be encouraged to serve the role in supporting boy children. Lastly, it is also suggested that fathers who lack the necessary knowledge to fulfil their responsibilities as parents seek counselling. Initiatives to encourage older men, such as grandfathers or uncles, could be organised to help replace the gap created by the absence of fathers. Teenage boys also require training in relationship building, as they appear to lack the necessary ability to form successful partnerships.

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