

# Father Absence: Exploring the Experiences of Young People in Regional Western Australia

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This article describes the experiences of four young people aged 18 to 25 years whose fathers were absent during their adolescent years. The study, located in regional Western Australia, sought to investigate how young people experience father absence, their needs and preferences in regard to any help seeking, and their evaluation of the effectiveness of supports used. Participants were found to share a combination of risk factors which were linked to negative psychosocial outcomes. Problems identified by young people included no one to talk to about problems and a lack of available services. Participants disclosed involvement in substance use, school misconduct and anti-social behaviour, and all reported early home leaving. Male and female participants reported using similar coping styles and a hierarchy of preference in help-seeking was found with friends and family preferred over counselling. Counselling was considered helpful when offered online or via drop-in services not requiring an appointment. Ethical constraints, however, were found to limit young people's participation in research.

■ **Keywords:** fathering, adolescence, help-seeking

## Living without a father

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data show that in Australia in 2009 more than 1.1 million children aged 0–17 years lived with one biological parent following family separation. Of these, 24% see their absent parent, typically a father, less than once per year or never (ABS, 2011, Tables 10.1 and 14.1). These children are described as experiencing 'father absence'. Given that family violence is acknowledged to be a factor in many cases of family breakdown, one area of growing research and discussion is the impact of such violence on post-separation family relationships (Bagshaw et al., 2011). It is clearly not the position of this paper that father presence or shared parenting is always positive. Rather, this study sought to engage with young people directly, to begin to address a gap in knowledge about their needs and experiences of father absence during childhood, and the types of interventions that they perceive may help (Dickerson, 2011; Shapiro & Krysik, 2010). This is particularly important in rural and regional Australia, where knowledge of the specific experiences and support needs of young people is even more limited.

Middle adolescence has been found to be a time when increased problem behaviour is most likely to be triggered by family instability (Walper & Beckh, 2006), which can be caused by risk factors such as family violence, socio-

economic disadvantage, parental substance use or mental illness, and lack of family and community supports. Due to a lack of research, it is difficult to determine if the separation itself or risk factors present in families prior to or after separation, or a combination of these, influence outcomes for children post separation. Research does, however, suggest that young people generally adjust to family separation, depending on ongoing risk and protective factors (Hetherington, 2006; Kelly & Emery, 2003; Leon, 2003). A unique impact of father absence on children post-separation is indicated in the review of the literature by Dickerson (2011), and is further supported by the findings of Ahrons (2007), Amato (2006), Hetherington (2006), and Pagani, Japel, Vaillancourt, Cote and Tremblay (2007), with father involvement with children being shown to foster their development independently of mothers. In rural communities, geographic isolation can be an added risk factor for young people in an environment where there are fewer available services. This can increase a sense of social exclusion, young people's risk of mental health problems, or other negative

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outcomes. This study makes an initial contribution by examining the coping styles and preferred helping options of young people whose fathers are absent in a small regional centre in rural Western Australia.

### Existing knowledge about father absence

Over the past 50 years research into the outcomes of father absence has focused on a range of different factors and approaches. Early studies were psychological in orientation, often focusing on masculine identity, sex role stereotypes, and personality development. Later studies looked at family dynamics and connections to other, broader, problems such as poverty and social disadvantage. More recently the focus of research has moved to applied knowledge with an orientation towards helping to address problems which arise generally for children and adolescents, as well as for particular cohorts of children, such as those who experience family violence.

Two large North American studies (Hetherington, 2006; Pevalin, Wade, & Brannigan, 2003) note that children experiencing family instability are more likely than children in more stable families to exhibit problem behaviour during adolescence. While girls were found generally to be more competent and less avoidant in coping than boys, who typically exhibit more externalising behaviour, both studies found that by adolescence girls from separated families had a higher level of externalising behaviour than girls from intact families. A third study comparing 520 girls in New Zealand with 242 girls in the USA (Ellis et al., 2003) developed this idea further and reported girls' externalising behaviour as including engaging in early sexual activity, rendering them five times more likely to experience an adolescent pregnancy than girls whose fathers were present. This may indicate that a young person's gender can bring different challenges. Whatever the circumstances of the absence, children who lose contact with their father have been found to be more likely to leave school early, to engage in externalising or delinquent behaviour, have problems with social skills development, and to have more psychosocial adjustment problems than children whose fathers maintain a relationship (Baum, 2006; Bokker, 2006; Glynn & Addaction, 2011; Harold, Aitken, & Shelton, 2007; Sarrazin & Cyr, 2007; Stone, 2006).

These issues for young people often come at a time when they cannot, or do not want to, talk to their parents about their problems. Face-to-face therapeutic services specifically available to young people from separated families in youth-friendly environments are limited (Kelly, 2007; Lowenstein, 2007), particularly in rural and regional areas. This lack of accessible services has been found to leave children without someone to talk to about their feelings (Bagshaw, 2007).

### Young people's help seeking behaviour

Sawyer et al. (2000) found that those young people with more serious problems, including those who had experi-

enced family separation, had low levels of help-seeking due to perceived stigma, a preference for managing their own problems, thinking nothing could help, or not knowing where to access help. Two qualitative studies, one in Canada (Ehrenberg, Stewart, Roche, Pringle, & Bush, 2006) and the other in the UK (Smart, Neale, & Wade, 2001) investigated the preferred coping options of adolescents gathered from a broad range of family compositions and post-family separation arrangements, and their opinions on available interventions following family separation. Both reported a hierarchy of support preferences: (i) to talk to immediate family members including parents; (ii) to talk to members of the wider family or close friends; and (iii) as a last resort, to seek professional help. Both studies also found that children do not generally perceive adults outside of their families as a reliable source of support, help or empowerment. Interestingly, despite this outlook, there is some indication that young people do engage with support services which are designed with their specific needs in mind (Goss & Anthony, 2009; Nicholas, Oliver, Lee, & O'Brien, 2004; Shaw & Shaw 2006). However, current support services specifically for separating families appear limited and insufficient to meet young people's needs, particularly in rural areas in one of the most isolated states of Australia.

One service strategy that responds to geographic isolation is online counselling, which is a growing medium. Research involving young people from a range of settings – Australia (King, Bambling, Reid, & Thomas, 2006), the UK (Hanley, 2006, 2009; Richards & Tangney, 2007), Ireland (Richards, 2009), Israel (Barak & Dolev-Cohen, 2009) and Greece (Efstathiou, 2009) – has found that online counselling can improve service availability and accessibility to matters of relevance to rural young people. In Australia, national online counselling services such as e-HeadSpace (HeadSpace, 2012) launched in 2011, and Kids Help Line (King, Bambling, Lloyd, Bomurra, Smith, Reid, & Wegner, 2006) launched in 2006, have increased the options available. There is also an interactive website specifically targeting children and young people whose parents have separated or divorced called ChaT First (Children and Families in Transition Project; ChaT First 2006–2011). The Child Support Agency provides a downloadable booklet called 'A Guide for Teens' (Child Support Agency, 2007) with information about separating families and links to services, but it is currently not known how well these are utilised. There remain gaps in knowledge, specifically what problem areas need to be addressed and how best to provide available, accessible and youth friendly services. This study sought to build early knowledge in this area.

### Methodology

This study, located in a regional city in Western Australia, sought to investigate how young people experience father absence, their needs and preferences in regard to help seeking, and their evaluation of the effectiveness of any supports

accessed. This is an important area given that previous research has indicated the limitations in our knowledge about outcomes for young people experiencing father absence in its various forms after parental separation, and the lack of services which are available to young people. This study was exploratory in nature (Marlow & Boone, 2005), seeking to generate detailed data. A review of recent qualitative research investigating sensitive issues of relevance to adolescents of a similar age (Aymer, 2008; Herrick & Piccus, 2005; McCarthy, Downes, & Sherman, 2008; Unrau, Seita & Putney, 2008) affirmed the use of an exploratory semi-structured interview method with a small sample group.

Data were gathered in the period from July to September 2008. For ethical reasons, participants needed to be aged 18 to 25 years to be eligible for the study, and to have experienced father absence between the ages of 14 and 18 years. Contact with their father must have ceased prior to the age of 12 to allow for the normative one to two year timeframes suggested by research on post-family separation adjustment (Hetherington, 2006; Kelly & Emery, 2003). The commencement recall age of 14 years (Young & Ehrenberg, 2007) was chosen to allow sufficient recall of events, together with supporting evidence that middle adolescence is a time when increased problem behaviour is most likely to be triggered by family instability (Walper & Beckh, 2006).

Young people were recruited via youth support agencies, posters in shopping centres, and advertisements in local newspapers. A range of literature from Australia (D'Cruz & Jones, 2004) and other countries (Christensen & James, 2000; Eder & Fingerson, 2002; Hendrick, 2000; Scott, 2000) reports the constraints which ethical considerations can impose on research with adolescents. These considerations, which may have affected the number of participants who ultimately volunteered to join this study, are found to discourage adolescents from research participation due to the amount of detailed paperwork, such as explanatory statements, and negatively influence their perception of the research topic and the researcher.

Four participants (3 males and 1 female) opted to join this study, all with early childhood family separation and little subsequent knowledge of their fathers. This creates a very particular sample group, with participant experiences potentially reflecting the most extreme forms of father absence, given its duration, or having its impact mediated by a range of social, economic and other factors occurring during this extended period. The study sample also includes one participant who, although experiencing father absence, was alienated from both parents; this may also contribute to a skewing of the results in a negative direction. As such, the authors clearly acknowledge the restricted application of these findings. Whilst the sample size was sufficient to allow for commonality of themes to be identified, broad application of findings was not the aim of this study; rather it was to establish a basis for more extensive, locally informed research. All interviews were conducted, audio-taped and fully transcribed by the first author. Thematic analysis was the

chosen analytic method to identify specific themes. Trustworthiness was addressed by participants reviewing their transcripts and the second author engaging in peer review of the data.

## Results

Three males and one female aged 18–25 years participated in this study. They are referred to in this article by the pseudonyms Richard, Alex, James and Stella (see Table 1). They each describe knowing very little about their fathers and none had current contact. This pattern is not unexpected, given the findings from the literature which suggest that fathers who left when the children were very young, or who perpetrate family violence, are less likely to maintain contact with their children post-separation (Ahrons & Tanner, 2003; Pryor & Rodgers, 2001). Richard is atypical of the target group broadly and in the sample specifically, in that he 'left home' at the age of 7 years to live 'on the street'.

### Perceived relationship with the father after separation

All the participants described minimal or no contact with their fathers following parental separation, except Richard who, at the age of 7 years, lived with his father for six months. At the end of this period, for unknown reasons, he was to be returned to the care of his mother. Richard, however, reported that he ran away and became estranged from both parents. Stella severed contact with her father in primary school following letters from him 'saying weird things' that upset her. James stated that he 'never saw him [father] as my old man. I used to write him a few letters and that, but he didn't write back.' Alex reported no relationship with his father; it is unknown whether this might have been different had he known of his father's whereabouts, and/or if his father had not been in prison.

### Feelings about father absence

Only Stella reported that she 'never ever felt that I needed a Dad'. She attributed this to her understanding of her father's violent behaviour. Richard simply stated: 'It was difficult in a way, but it was all I ever knew.' Alex and James, however, both reported feeling unwanted and rejected as younger children, with feelings of intense sadness around the age of six to nine years. James stated: 'I felt unwanted because he lived in the same town for a while . . . I just wanted him. I felt rejected over and over . . . when he just wouldn't turn up.' This may suggest that when an individual father is seen to be a threat, as for Stella (and Alex, when he became aware of his father's crime), his absence is able to be understood as being in the best interests of the family. Conversely, when a father is seemingly available but does not engage, as for James and Alex (until the latter was 12 years old), it can result in feelings of rejection and intense sadness, particularly for boys in their formative years.

**TABLE 1**  
Participant and family of origin matrix

Family Descriptor	Stella	James	Alex	Richard
Age at interview	25 years	23 years	20 years	18 years
Sex	F	M	M	M
Age at which parental relationship ended	4 years	In utero	1 year	6 months
Contact with Father during childhood	Weekly letters in early primary school	Extended family events such as funerals	No contact	No further contact after age 7 1/2 years
Knowledge of Father	'Schizophrenic' Violent to partner and step-sons Sexual abuse of daughters	Nothing, a photo	Found out at 12 years that father was in prison for sexual assault of 2 year old step daughter (Alex's sister)	'Was rich', 'Always working'

**Family separation and ongoing risks**

All participants described the negative impact of family separation, particularly in terms of the loss of social and economic resources. However, owing to the specific circumstances and their fathers' violent behaviours, Stella and Alex both concluded that their fathers' overall absence was a positive factor. All participants described feelings of loss and exclusion resulting from not having a father figure while growing up. The male participants reported that during primary school they desired a father to do things with, to be a 'normal' family. Three mothers and one father of the male participants re-partnered, with two of these three participants living in households including step-siblings. All three reported difficulties adjusting to their step-fathers' disciplinary styles. The presence of a step-father who maintained contact with his own children exacerbated a sense of loss of their own father. Alex had multiple maternal relationship transitions and describes adjustment problems at each transition. James felt he suffered economic stress and found it hard to ask for money to meet legitimate needs.

**Outcomes in adolescence**

All four participants had left home by the age of 17. Alex described externalising his distress in childhood but by adolescence internalising his concerns. He described himself as feeling isolated and alone much of the time. In contrast, Alex describes his older sister and younger brother as both 'going off the rails with drugs and alcohol, wrong people . . . got into a bit of a mess'. Stella, James and Richard also noted their involvement with anti-social peers and reported coping through externalising behaviour, including drug use, by the time they were 14 years old. Interestingly, Stella also offered the observation that some of her girlfriends, reportedly due to their own experiences of father absence and father re-partnering, had multiple sexual partners at an early age and were coping by self-harming. Although Richard's circumstances were extreme due to his early homelessness, both he and James described similar repeat offending behaviour. None of the four participants described coping well.

**School performance**

All four participants described academic underachievement due to psychosocial problems including feelings of not belonging. None completed secondary education and all believed they could have done better. For three participants, disengagement from school included behaviour such as drinking in public places and socialising with disengaged peers. Three of the four participants re-engaged with post-secondary school training in older adolescence. For Stella and Alex this has given them a pathway to more skilled employment.

**Help seeking**

Because of the retrospective nature of this study, online counselling may not have been available as a support modality when the participants were in middle adolescence. The option of internet chat lines was added to the list of support types after being raised by the first interview participant. The respondents reported using informal supports, relying on friends and sometimes family for support. All participants stated that during adolescence they held negative views of formal counselling due to the perceived stigma. Richard was the only participant to have had contact with a counselling service; this was mandated and a negative experience. The perceived helpfulness of close family support varied; Alex was the only participant who described a step-father relationship as being helpful to him when he was a child: 'he'd take me out and do all the things that I thought my Dad was supposed to do'. The involvement of extended family, however, was a major mitigating factor for father absence for all participants, particularly an uncle for the males. This extended family involvement ameliorated feelings of self-blame for their father rejecting them. Stella, James and Alex describe the importance of spending time at friends' houses with more children and resources. Both Alex and Stella used internet chat lines, but only Alex found them helpful. Richard found nothing to be helpful.

**What might have helped?**

Counselling was strongly endorsed by participants, dependent on the modality and service design. Three of the four

participants stated they would have found counselling either very helpful or extremely helpful if provided outside of school in confidential, easily accessible drop-in settings with a counsellor possessing good interpersonal skills and having time to build a relationship. For Alex and Stella, the fear of being 'found out' outweighed the desire for counselling at the time. Stella suggested counselling would only be very helpful if provided 'from this person who never will see you'. The male participants strongly supported mentoring and all participants advised regular check-ins, phone calls or face to face, from professionals who could show interest. Stella suggested regular SMS check-ups for 'kids who are cutting or doing the Emo kind of thing', linked to an online counselling site. As James' mother was mostly 'emotionally unavailable', he advised that having another family member to talk to would have been very helpful. The three male participants responded positively to a male mentor for social support, particularly Alex who also suggested one-on-one help at school.

### Long term outcomes for participants

All four participants were in paid employment at the time of their interviews, but only Alex had full time work. There was a trend of relationship instability for Stella and James which might be normative due to their developmental stage. Alex and Richard both formed long-term relationships at an early age which could be non-normative due to the young age at which they found their partners. Richard, as a young teenage parent, reported having significant conflict in his relationship, while Alex identified significant difficulty in building trust. Among the participants there was either a fear of forming relationships or an over-reliance on relationships, including remaining in relationships which may not have been healthy. Both Richard and James expressed a strong intention that their children should have a father.

## Discussion

Overall, it is difficult to ascertain definitively from this and other research whether negative outcomes for young people experiencing father absence are solely due to that experience, or the presence of other preceding or resultant risk factors, or a combination of all these factors. The findings from this small exploratory study seem to suggest that, whether viewed positively or negatively by the young person, father absence was perceived to be associated with negative psychosocial outcomes by the study participants. This general trend supports the finding of Glynn and Addaction (2011) that even though the causes of father absence are varied, effects show considerable commonality, and young people typically perceive the effects to be negative. In the current study, these negative outcomes appear to stem more from the young person's thwarted desire for a 'normal' family, to feel wanted, and for broader social acceptance (which included an involved and safe male figure) than for the direct presence/absence of a particular person. The contin-

uing involvement of both maternal and paternal extended families was subsequently found to help mitigate father absence. As in other studies (Cummings & O'Reilly, 1997; Hetherington, 2006), ongoing parental relationship transitions were found to occur alongside severe psychological and behavioural problems for children. Some study participants report long-term relationship problems, such as conflict and an impaired capacity to trust, as a perceived result of their family outcomes. The emotional availability of mothers was found to be affected by new maternal relationships which, although found to be negative in the short term, can be positive in the longer term if the new family household remains stable.

As suggested in the literature (Hetherington, 2006; Pevalin et al., 2003), study participants were found to use both internalising and externalising coping strategies to manage their emotional problems. However, by middle adolescence most were found to have considerable involvement in substance use, school misconduct and antisocial behaviour (Glynn & Addaction, 2011; Sawyer et al., 2000; Sears, 2004; Walper & Beckh, 2006). Problems identified by young people in this study include a lack of communication with parents, no-one to talk to about problems, and a lack of available services. A hierarchy of preference in help-seeking was found with friends and family being preferred to formal supports, similar to that noted by Ehrenberg et al. (2006) and Smart et al. (2001). Generally, a negative perception of professional counsellors is reported but counselling was recommended via drop-in centres and online, with the quality of the relationship with the counsellor being paramount.

The findings from this literature review and small exploratory study have implications for future research and policy development. This study concurs with the international research on new technologies which suggests that online and drop-in counselling can address some of the problems with conventional service delivery (Barak & Dolev-Cohen, 2006; Hanley, 2009; King, Bambling, Reid, & Thomas, 2006; Richards, 2009; Richards & Tangney, 2007). e-Headspace is an exciting new initiative which would benefit from further research into providing information and counselling online in its own right and as a gateway to other supports. Less formal supports were also found to be of interest to young people. Helping responses such as male mentoring, regular 'check-ups', facilitating engagement in activities that interest young people, and help at school in the classroom would benefit from more extensive study with a view to replicating those which demonstrated positive outcomes for young people.

To undertake this recommended research for future policy development young people need to be consulted. One of the challenges that remain for practitioners and researchers is how to engage in this consultation. It was evident in this study that the ethical considerations designed to protect young people may actually have excluded them from contributing to research. This finding suggests a need to examine current ethical constraints which preclude

researchers from building a relationship of trust with participants as part of the recruitment process.

The findings of this study are limited by the small and non-representative sample; despite this, it is hoped the insights gained from this study will contribute to developing knowledge about appropriate responses to a vulnerable group. Further research into the outcomes from father absence and the impact on adolescent psychosocial development would provide better understanding about this situation which currently affects significant numbers of children from separated families who have no contact with their fathers.

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