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Original Article

The Cost of Parenting: Impacts of Parental Absence on the Holistic Development of a Child: Reflection on the Changing Structure of Families and Societies

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ABSTRACT

Parenting, a fundamental social role, has undergone significant transformations over time, reflecting changes in cultural, economic, and familial structures. Traditionally associated with nurturing and socialising children, the expectations and costs of parenting today are more complex and multifaceted. This article explores the profound impacts of parental absence on child development, focusing on domains such as self-esteem, trust building, work ethics, academic achievement, relationship formation, sexual behaviour, and substance abuse. Using a semi-systematic literature review methodology, this study synthesises research from diverse disciplines to create a meta-narrative understanding of how varying social contexts influence parenting tasks and responsibilities. Key findings reveal that parental absence has long-lasting detrimental effects on children's emotional, psychological, and social outcomes, leading to impaired trust, lower academic achievement, higher risk of early sexual activity, substance abuse, and maladjustment in adulthood. The study highlights that different cultures impose varying expectations on parents, influencing how children perceive and cope with absence or neglect. Based on the findings, the article recommends the strengthening of parental support systems, community-based interventions, educational programs to bolster parenting skills, and policy frameworks aimed at mitigating the socio-economic factors that contribute to parental absence. Future research should focus on longitudinal studies across diverse societies to better capture the evolving dynamics of parenting.

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INTRODUCTION

The concept of parenting and the way it is experienced or executed has significantly changed in modern times. This change has also had a significant impact on the functioning of society, noting that parenting dictates the quality and nature of any society, whether traditional or modern (Duuki, 2023). To have a clear reflection and understanding of this discourse, it is crucial to first understand what parenting is and how it has changed over time.

While the concept of parenting is being understood differently across societies and cultures, the most classical definition of parenting is described in The Free Dictionary, which understands parenting as the rearing of a child or children, including the care, love, and guidance given by a parent to a child. This assertion incorporates methods, techniques, and other activities that are used or required in the rearing of children or the upbringing of a child by a person known as the parent. It includes, but is not limited to, any process of raising and educating a child from birth until adulthood, which is carried out in a child's family by the mother and father or biological parents (The Free Dictionary, 2007). The word itself is believed to have originated from the Latin verb 'parere'–which means 'to bring forth, develop, or educate'. This word, from its roots, is more concerned with the activity of developing and educating than with the person who does it (Hoghughi, 2004).

Parenthood is traditionally defined as the state of being a father or mother and carrying the responsibility of nurturing, guiding, and supporting a child's physical, emotional, cognitive, and moral development. Beyond biological ties, parenthood has historically encompassed the broader obligation of safeguarding a child's well-being and facilitating their successful integration into society. In many traditional societies, this role extended beyond the nuclear family, involving a network of extended relatives and community members who collectively contributed to a child's upbringing.

Besides the classical understanding, other scholars have provided a more nuanced and contemporary understanding of parenting. It is understood as the function, role, and responsibility of the parent in the family unit that can imply the commitment of an individual or individuals to provide for the physical and psychosocial needs of a child. Parenting means the role performed by a person who possesses parental status to enhance the development suitably and positively in every aspect of their child's life (Hamner & Turner, 1996). Over time, the concept and practice of parenthood have undergone significant transformation. In tribal and agrarian communities, the communal nature of child-rearing meant that children benefited from multiple adult role models, ensuring stability even in cases of individual parental absence. However, the Industrial Revolution and subsequent urbanisation processes in the 19th and 20th centuries began to shift family structures toward smaller, nuclear units. Economic demands and geographical mobility increasingly isolated families from broader kinship networks, thus impacting the structure and form of parenting (Cherlin, 2010).

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Globalisation and modern socioeconomic pressures have further exacerbated the struggles of parenthood, with an increasing emphasis on individual responsibility and a growing prevalence of nontraditional family forms, including single-parent, blended, and same-sex households. Concurrently, rising divorce rates, changing gender roles, economic migration, and public health crises have created new challenges, often resulting in either physical or emotional parental absence. This absence significantly impacts children's holistic development, encompassing emotional, social, cognitive, and moral growth. Parental absence deprives children of the essential framework needed for resilience, emotional regulation, academic achievement, and the development of secure interpersonal relationships (Lamb, 2012). The long-term societal ramifications are profound, manifesting in increased rates of mental health issues, educational underachievement, substance abuse, and weakened societal cohesion. Thus, addressing the multifaceted implications of absent parenting remains a pressing challenge for communities and societies globally.

The responsibilities of parents extend far beyond the provision of basic needs; they encompass the holistic development of children in emotional, cognitive, social, and moral domains. However, the specific expectations placed upon parents are deeply influenced by the prevailing social, economic, and cultural context (Bornstein, 2019). Understanding these variations provides critical insight into the difficulties of parental absence across diverse societies and across different times.

This article explores the profound impacts of parental absence on child development, focusing on domains such as self-esteem, trust building, work ethics, academic achievement, relationship formation, sexual behaviour, and substance abuse

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a semi-systematic literature review methodology to comprehensively explore the impact of parental absence across various social, psychological, and developmental dimensions. The semi-systematic, or narrative, review approach is particularly suited for topics that are interdisciplinary in nature, have been conceptualised differently over time, and are studied across diverse research traditions, making a full systematic review impractical (Snyder, 2019). Unlike a traditional systematic review, which requires exhaustive identification and quantitative synthesis of all existing literature on a narrowly defined topic, the semi-systematic approach acknowledges the breadth and complexity inherent to the study of parental absence. Given that research on parental absence spans multiple disciplines—such as psychology, sociology, education, and anthropology—and adopts varied theoretical and methodological frameworks, a semi-systematic review allows for a more flexible, interpretive synthesis (Wong et al., 2013). The review process involved several structured steps to enhance scientific rigour, including:

- Research Question Formulation: The primary research focus was defined as: *How does parental absence affect children's development across different psychological, relational, academic, and behavioural domains?*
- Search Strategy and Data Sources: Relevant literature was identified through academic databases including Scopus, PubMed, JSTOR, Google Scholar, and specialised education and psychology journals. Key search terms included "parental absence," "child development," "attachment," "academic achievement," "mental health," "work ethics," "substance abuse," and "early sexual behaviour."
- Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria: Studies were included if they were: Peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, or reputable reports, published between 1980 and 2024 and focused explicitly on parental addressed measurable outcomes in children or adolescents. Grey

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literature, non-peer-reviewed articles, and studies lacking clear empirical evidence were excluded.

- Screening and Selection: An initial pool of 323 articles was retrieved. After title and abstract screening for relevance, 117 articles were selected for full-text review. Of these, 75 studies were deemed relevant for detailed analysis.
- Data Extraction and Analysis: Key themes, methodologies, populations studied, and major findings were systematically extracted into a structured matrix. Emphasis was placed on identifying patterns of evidence, theoretical frameworks employed, and areas of disciplinary convergence or divergence.
- Synthesis Approach: A meta-narrative synthesis was conducted, following the guidelines developed by Greenhalgh et al. (2005). Instead of aggregating effect sizes, the synthesis explored how different research traditions conceptualised and interpreted the impact of parental absence. This approach facilitated a nuanced understanding of how interpretations have evolved over time and across contexts.
- Analytical Framing: Based on the synthesised meta-narratives, an analytical framework was developed. This framework categorises the impact of parental absence into key domains: self-esteem, trust building, transition into adulthood, work ethics, relationship formation, sexual behaviour, substance abuse, and academic achievement.

Through this rigorous, multi-step process, the study ensured methodological transparency, critical appraisal of sources, and a comprehensive understanding of the topic across diverse research traditions. The semi-systematic approach, therefore, not only offered breadth and depth but also ensured that important interdisciplinary insights were integrated into the final analysis.

DIFFERING CONTEXTUALISATION OF PARENTING OR PARENTHOOD

As alluded to in the preceding text, the concept of parenthood and the manner it is executed is dependent on different socio-cultural factors and time periods. To start with, here are some of the key contextual factors that influence the nature and form of parenthood being employed.

***Traditional Agrarian Societies*:** In traditional agrarian settings, where communities rely heavily on agriculture and subsistence farming, parenting is largely a communal and survival-driven activity. Parents are tasked with Providing food, shelter, and safety against natural and human threats was paramount (Ember & Ember, 1994). Children are socialised early into labour roles, learning agricultural techniques, animal husbandry, and artisanal crafts through direct observation and participation (Whiting & Edwards, 1988). Parents inculcate societal values, religious beliefs, and social norms, often reinforced through oral traditions and rituals (LeVine et al., 1994). The extended family often shares child-rearing responsibilities, diluting the exclusive dependency on biological parents. Failure of parents to fulfil these tasks often endangers the child's survival and social acceptance within the community.

***Industrial and Urban Societies*:** The rise of industrialisation and urbanisation in the 18th and 19th centuries shifted parenting expectations from mere survival to preparation for participation in a structured economic system. Parents became primary agents responsible for facilitating formal schooling and valuing academic achievement (Ariès, 1962). With the family becoming a more private unit, greater emphasis was placed on emotional bonding, communication, and fostering children's self-esteem (Cherlin, 1992). Parents were expected to instil discipline, a sense of duty, and respect for social institutions like schools and

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workplaces (Laslett, 1977). Urban settings exposed children to a broader range of influences, necessitating more vigilant supervision and moral guidance by parents (Cooper et al., 2015). Parental absence in this context often resulted in educational neglect, emotional insecurity, and behavioural problems.

***Postmodern and Globalized Societies*:** The late 20th and early 21st centuries introduced even greater complexities to parental roles due to globalization, digitalisation, and shifting family structures: Parents are now expected to support children's quest for self-definition, critical thinking, and career aspirations in an increasingly fluid society (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). Within this period, the concept of child rights and the need to respect children's fundamental rights and freedoms became more pronounced. The role of the state in directing or regulating the direction of parenting, including provision, disciplining and supervision, became more prominent. Managing children's engagement with digital technologies—balancing safety with empowerment—has become a central parenting task (Livingstone & Byrne, 2015). There is heightened awareness of the need for emotional literacy, stress management, and early intervention for mental health issues (Sanders, 2008). Parents must adapt to blended families, single parenthood, cohabitation, and same sex parenting structures, necessitating flexible and inclusive approaches (Stacey, 1996). Parental absence here risks depriving children of the necessary competencies to navigate an increasingly complex and competitive world.

***Societies in Crisis and Displacement*:** In contexts characterised by war, forced migration, economic instability, or natural disasters, the parental role becomes deeply intertwined with resilience-building. Parents are expected to offer emotional constancy and reassurance amidst instability, often with limited resources (Masten & Narayan, 2012). Securing access to healthcare, education, and humanitarian aid becomes crucial, often requiring parents to engage with unfamiliar bureaucratic systems (Betancourt & Khan, 2008). Displacement often threatens cultural continuity, making it a parental task to maintain language, traditions, and ethnic identity in exile (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2011). In these scenarios, parental absence or dysfunction can critically exacerbate trauma, identity dislocation, and social marginalisation among children.

From the above assertion, it can be noted that parenting, historically and contemporarily, has been recognised as a cornerstone for child development. In traditional societies, the extended family system ensured that children received nurturing, guidance, and consistent moral instruction. Within tribal communities and agrarian societies, the collective responsibility for child-rearing allowed for multiple adult figures to contribute to a child's emotional, social, and moral education. Elders and extended family members served as supplementary caregivers, providing stability and a buffer against parental absence. However, in contemporary times, significant societal transformations have dramatically altered family dynamics. The rise of the nuclear family model, especially post-Industrial Revolution, coupled with rapid urbanisation, has fragmented these extended support networks (Cherlin, 2010). Globalisation has further exacerbated these changes, as economic migration often necessitates that parents move far from their children in search of better opportunities.

Additionally, increasing rates of divorce, separation, death, and evolving gender roles have further complicated the parental role. Research indicates that nearly half of all children in the United States will witness the dissolution of their parents' marriage, with many experiencing multiple family structure transitions throughout their childhood (Amato, 2000). Similarly, in other parts of the world, the social fabric has been strained by conflicts, economic disparities, and public health crises, contributing to parental absence. This physical or emotional absence significantly impacts

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children's holistic development (Lamb, 2012). The long-term societal ramifications are profound, manifesting in increased rates of mental health issues, educational underachievement, substance abuse, and weakened societal cohesion. Thus, addressing the multifaceted implications of absent parenting remains a pressing challenge for communities worldwide.

THE PLACE OF PARENTS IN CHILDREN'S HOLISTIC DEVELOPMENT ACROSS DIFFERENT LIFE STAGES

Parents play a critical role in the holistic development of their children, shaping their physical, emotional, cognitive, and social growth from infancy through early adulthood. At every stage, parental involvement, guidance, and support are crucial in helping children realise their full potential.

In ***infancy (0–2 years)***, a child's development heavily depends on parental care and emotional bonding. Responsive caregiving helps infants develop trust and emotional security, which form the foundation of future relationships (Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University, 2023). Additionally, parents support physical development by ensuring adequate nutrition and health care, while cognitive growth is nurtured through verbal interaction and play (UNICEF, 2024).

During ***early childhood (3–6 years)***, the role of parents expands as children begin to explore their independence. Emotional development is fostered when parents validate children's feelings and teach emotional regulation skills. Active play and healthy routines continue to support physical growth. Cognitively, parental involvement through reading, storytelling, and answering curious questions boosts language skills and critical thinking (CDC, 2023). Socially, parents help young children navigate interactions with peers by teaching empathy, manners, and cooperation.

In ***middle childhood (7–12 years)***, parents contribute significantly to a child's self-esteem and resilience. They play a guiding role in helping children manage academic pressures and social relationships (Child Mind Institute, 2023). Encouraging participation in sports and outdoor activities maintains physical health, while assisting with homework and projects enhances cognitive development. Social skills such as conflict resolution and teamwork are nurtured through parental modelling and coaching.

As children reach ***adolescence (13–18 years)***, parents shift their approach to offer more emotional support while respecting growing independence. Adolescents face complex emotional challenges related to identity, peer relationships, and future planning. Research indicates that strong parental support during adolescence is linked to lower levels of anxiety and depression (American Psychological Association-APA, 2023). Physically, parents guide teenagers through puberty-related changes and promote healthy habits. Cognitive development is encouraged through discussions that foster critical thinking and decision-making skills, while social development benefits from guidance on maintaining healthy relationships and ethical behaviour.

Finally, during ***early adulthood (19–25 years)***, parents act more as advisors and emotional anchors. Although young adults seek independence, parental encouragement remains important for emotional well-being and confidence (APA, 2023). Supporting healthy lifestyle choices and continuous learning helps young adults establish a balanced and fulfilling life. Socially, parents can model positive adult relationships and provide guidance when requested, respecting the autonomy of their grown children.

In conclusion, parents are vital partners in a child's journey towards holistic development. Their involvement at every stage—through nurturing emotional bonds, supporting physical growth, stimulating cognitive abilities, and guiding social skills—lays the foundation for a well-rounded, resilient individual ready to navigate life's challenges.

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RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Key Contributors to the Absent Parent Syndrome

Parenting is a complex and dynamic endeavour that demands emotional availability, consistent presence, and responsive engagement. However, various societal, economic, and individual factors have increasingly challenged parents' ability to fulfil these vital roles, leading to what researchers term as the Absent Parent Syndrome. This section explores the key contributors to this phenomenon, shedding light on how gaps in parenting knowledge, the pressures of single parenthood, economic demands, and technological distractions have created environments where the emotional connection between parents and children is often compromised. Understanding these contributors is critical not only for diagnosing the root causes of absent parenting but also for designing effective interventions that foster healthier parent-child relationships.

***Lack of Knowledge on Parenting Skills*:** The transition to parenthood is a major developmental milestone, yet many individuals enter this role without adequate preparation or understanding of child development principles. A lack of knowledge in effective parenting strategies can lead to inconsistent discipline, misinterpretation of child behaviours, and emotional neglect. According to Bornstein (2019), insufficient parenting knowledge is directly linked to poor child outcomes such as insecure attachment, behavioural disorders, and impaired cognitive development. Parents unaware of developmental milestones may have unrealistic expectations, leading to frustration and disengagement. For example, expecting advanced emotional regulation from a toddler can prompt undue disciplinary actions that harm the parent-child bond (Sanders et al., 2014). Additionally, a lack of understanding regarding emotional attunement—being able to correctly interpret and respond to a child's emotional needs—can lead to emotional unavailability even when parents are physically present.

Recent interventions like the parenting lessons or positive parenting sessions have shown that structured parenting education significantly improves child outcomes, reducing behavioural problems and improving parent-child relationships (Sanders et al., 2014). However, access to such programs remains uneven, often limited in low-income and marginalised communities where it is needed most. Thus, the absence of parenting knowledge continues to be a major contributor to ineffective parenting and subsequent emotional absence.

Single Parenthood: Single parenthood has seen a significant rise globally due to increasing divorce rates, non-marital childbirths, and widowhood. In the United States, about 23% of children live in single-parent households, one of the highest rates globally (Livingstone & Byrne, 2015). Single parents often face overwhelming responsibilities, balancing economic provision, emotional support, and household management without a co-parent. This heavy burden often results in less time for emotional bonding and supervision. Research by Cooper, McLanahan, Meadows, and Brooks-Gunn (2015) suggests that children of single parents are more likely to experience lower academic achievement, behavioural issues, and emotional insecurity. The absence of a second parental figure not only limits economic resources but also deprives children of additional emotional support and role modelling essential for social development.

Moreover, children in single-parent families frequently grapple with feelings of abandonment or loyalty conflicts, especially in high-conflict separations (Carlson & Berger, 2013). The psychological stress induced by single parenthood can manifest as parental depression or anxiety, which further diminishes the emotional availability necessary for nurturing secure attachments. Supportive interventions, such as community mentoring programs and social policy reforms

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providing childcare and financial aid, have been proposed to mitigate these adverse effects (Demo & Fine, 2010).

***Economic Preoccupation*:** The demands of contemporary economies compel many parents to dedicate substantial time to employment, often at the expense of family interaction. Economic pressures require dual-income households and multiple job holdings, leaving parents emotionally and physically depleted. Bianchi (2011) underscores that although increased workforce participation among parents aims to ensure better living standards, it often results in diminished parental presence. Economic preoccupation not only limits the quantity of time spent with children but also compromises the quality of interactions. Stress from financial strain often leads to less responsive and more authoritarian parenting styles. Nomaguchi & Milkie (2020) found that perceived parental time, rather than sheer hours, plays a crucial role in shaping children's academic and emotional outcomes.

Additionally, global trends such as labour migration exacerbate parental absence. In regions like Southeast Asia and parts of Africa, economic migration separates millions of children from one or both parents for extended periods. Studies by Graham and Jordan (2011) show that left-behind children often suffer from emotional distress, lower educational attainment, and weakened family cohesion. Thus, economic preoccupation, while often driven by noble intentions, remains a double-edged sword affecting children's holistic development.

***Technological Distractions: Internet, Mobile Devices, and social media*:** In the digital age, technology—particularly the internet, smartphones, and social media—has emerged as a subtle yet powerful contributor to parental absence. While technology offers unprecedented opportunities for communication, information access, and economic participation, its pervasive presence often detracts from the quality and quantity of parent-child interactions. Research by McDaniel and Radesky (2018) found that higher levels of everyday interruptions in interpersonal interactions due to digital device use in parent-child relationships are associated with greater child behavioural problems, including externalising behaviours (e.g., temper tantrums, defiance) and internalising behaviours (e.g., withdrawal, anxiety).

Parents engrossed in their devices may become emotionally unavailable, failing to respond adequately to their children's cues for attention, comfort, or conversation (Radesky et al., 2016). Over time, this emotional unavailability erodes trust, attachment, security, and the child's capacity for self-regulation. The phenomenon is not limited to "screen addiction"; even moderate but poorly timed device use, such as checking phones during mealtime or bedtime routines, can disrupt the development of strong emotional bonds (Kildare & Middlemiss, 2017). Moreover, the “modelling effect” plays a significant role. Children learn social behaviours through observation, and when they see their caregivers prioritise devices over personal interactions, they may internalise similar patterns of inattentiveness and poor communication skills (Coyne et al., 2017). This can compromise their future relational competencies and emotional intelligence. Parental social media use also adds another layer of complexity. Platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok often portray idealised images of family life, increasing parental stress, feelings of inadequacy, and even depression (Verduyn et al., 2017). These negative emotional states can further diminish a parent’s capacity to engage meaningfully with their children.

Addressing the technological dimensions of parental absence calls for intentional digital literacy and "mindful technology use" initiatives. Interventions such as establishing "tech-free" family times, promoting face-to-face interactions, and educating parents on the developmental impacts of digital distraction are essential (Hiniker et al., 2016). Thus, while technology remains an

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indispensable aspect of modern life, without conscious management, it risks becoming a pervasive barrier to nurturing, attentive, and emotionally responsive parenting.

Impact of Parental Negligence on the Holistic Development of the Child

***Self-Esteem*:** Self-esteem—the internal sense of personal worth and competence—is a foundational aspect of psychological development, and it is largely cultivated during childhood through consistent validation, support, and encouragement from primary caregivers. When parents provide a nurturing environment characterised by acceptance, positive reinforcement, and active involvement, children tend to develop a strong, resilient sense of self. According to the American Psychological Association, parental warmth and responsiveness are directly linked to higher self-esteem levels in children and adolescents (APA, 2023). Conversely, when parental presence is inconsistent, neglectful, or critical, children often internalise feelings of inadequacy and unworthiness. Orth et al. (2012) underscored that low self-esteem formed in childhood correlates strongly with heightened anxiety, chronic depression, and persistent self-doubt across the lifespan. Their longitudinal study shows that self-esteem trajectories set in early life tend to persist into adulthood, influencing mental health outcomes, interpersonal relationships, and career success.

Moreover, research from the Child Mind Institute (2023) points out that children with low self-esteem are more vulnerable to peer pressure, bullying, and risky behaviours, as they may seek external validation to fill internal gaps. Without a stable foundation of affirmation, children may struggle to advocate for themselves, set healthy boundaries, or pursue ambitious goals. This perpetuates cycles of self-limiting beliefs and self-sabotaging behaviours that can last well into adulthood. Brain development research also highlights that early relational experiences have a biological impact. Repeated experiences of emotional neglect or criticism during sensitive periods of brain development can alter stress-response systems, making children more reactive to perceived threats and less able to regulate emotions effectively (Harvard Center on the Developing Child, 2023).

Therefore, building children's self-esteem is not merely about offering occasional praise but about creating a sustained environment of unconditional acceptance, encouragement to try new challenges, and empathetic support during failures. Initiatives like UNICEF's Early Moments Matter campaign emphasise the importance of early nurturing interactions in fostering emotional security and self-confidence (UNICEF, 2024). Self-esteem built during childhood becomes the psychological bedrock upon which individuals construct their personal, academic, and professional lives. Parents' roles in consistently affirming their children's worth cannot be overstated, as the long-term implications of these early experiences influence not just emotional well-being but also life opportunities and resilience in the face of adversity.

***Trust Building*:** Trust—the cornerstone of all meaningful relationships—is most fundamentally shaped in early childhood through responsive and adapted caregiving. When caregivers consistently meet a child's emotional and physical needs with sensitivity and reliability, they lay the groundwork for secure attachment. This secure attachment teaches children that the world is safe, that others can be relied upon, and that their own needs are worthy of attention. Erikson (1963), in his seminal theory of psychosocial development, emphasised that the successful resolution of the "trust versus mistrust" stage during infancy forms the essential building block for healthy social and emotional functioning later in life.

Contemporary research continues to validate these early insights. According to the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University (2023), positive early experiences with caregivers create strong neural pathways that enhance emotional regulation, social skills, and resilience. Through

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repeated, responsive interactions, children internalise a sense of security and develop the capacity for empathy and relational trust. In contrast, when parental presence is inconsistent, emotionally unavailable, or neglectful, children often internalise deep-seated insecurity, scepticism, and guardedness. As Bowlby's Attachment Theory elaborates, inconsistent caregiving leads to the formation of insecure attachment styles, such as avoidant or anxious attachment (Bowlby, 1988). Children with insecure attachments may enter adolescence and adulthood wary of intimacy, prone to emotional withdrawal, or susceptible to forming dysfunctional relationships characterised by dependency, fear of abandonment, or avoidance of closeness. The consequences of disrupted trust can ripple throughout the lifespan. Research from the American Psychological Association (APA, 2023) notes that individuals with low trust stemming from early relational trauma often experience social isolation, lower relationship satisfaction, and higher rates of mental health disorders such as depression and anxiety. Their difficulty in trusting others also undermines the resilience that typically comes from supportive interpersonal networks, leaving them more vulnerable during times of personal or societal stress. Moreover, studies have shown that trust issues rooted in early experiences can adversely affect workplace dynamics, romantic partnerships, and parenting styles, perpetuating cycles of relational dysfunction across generations (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). Without intervention, individuals may unconsciously recreate insecure patterns, both in their close relationships and in the way they relate to their own children.

Interventions like attachment-based therapies and parenting programs focused on enhancing caregiver sensitivity have been shown to mitigate these outcomes. Initiatives such as the Circle of Security Parenting Program help parents learn how to better meet their children's emotional needs, fostering secure attachment and rebuilding trust even after early disruptions. Therefore, trust is not merely an abstract emotional quality; it is a lived relational experience, constructed from the earliest interactions between caregiver and child. Ensuring consistent, empathetic caregiving is therefore not just beneficial—it is essential for the emotional well-being, social competence, and long-term resilience of the developing child.

Transition into Adulthood: The successful transition to adulthood requires the gradual internalisation of coping strategies, autonomy, and goal-setting abilities—skills traditionally modelled and reinforced by engaged and emotionally available parents. Throughout childhood and adolescence, responsive parenting provides the "scaffolding" necessary for young people to navigate increasing complexity in social, academic, and emotional domains. Vygotsky’s concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (1978) illustrates that children learn best when supportive adults guide them through challenges just beyond their current ability, promoting skill acquisition and confidence. When parental engagement is absent or inconsistent, children are deprived of crucial developmental modelling during critical windows of opportunity. Without the chance to observe and practice adaptive coping mechanisms, independent decision-making, and long-term planning, adolescents struggle to internalise these capacities. Arnett (2015), in his theory of emerging adulthood, emphasises that young people without strong familial support systems often face prolonged identity confusion, instability in work and relationships, and difficulties achieving psychological independence.

Consequently, young adults from neglectful or disengaged backgrounds are more likely to exhibit delayed independence, poor problem-solving skills, heightened reliance on external validation, and increased susceptibility to peer pressure. They may lack the resilience needed to cope with the inevitable setbacks of adult life, leading to higher rates of unemployment, academic underachievement, and social maladjustment. A longitudinal study by Schulenberg, Sameroff, and

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Cicchetti (2004) found that inadequate parental support during adolescence predicted lower educational attainment and greater psychological distress in early adulthood. Moreover, without positive parental models for managing stress, conflict, and delayed gratification, many young adults face difficulty adapting to the demands of broader societal structures. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2020) reports that youth ageing out of foster care—many of whom experienced significant parental absence—face disproportionately high rates of homelessness, unemployment, and incarceration. This underscores the profound role that consistent, nurturing parental involvement plays in preparing children not just for personal success, but for full, productive participation in society.

Intervention strategies such as mentoring programs, life skills workshops, and cognitive-behavioural therapies have proven effective in mitigating some of these negative outcomes. Programs like Big Brothers Big Sisters demonstrate that even non-parental adult figures can significantly bolster a young person's trajectory when they provide consistent support, modelling, and encouragement (Schulenberg et al., 2004). Therefore, the transition to adulthood is not an automatic or self-sufficient process; it is a developmental journey that depends heavily on the presence of caring, engaged adults who model coping, independence, and purposeful goal setting. In their absence, young people face profound challenges that ripple into nearly every domain of adult life.

***Work Ethics*:** Parental modelling plays a pivotal role in shaping children's attitudes toward work, perseverance, and ambition. From an early age, children absorb not only what their parents say about success and effort, but, more crucially, what they do. Parents who consistently demonstrate responsibility, delayed gratification, resilience in the face of setbacks, and intrinsic motivation implicitly instil these values in their children through daily interactions. This process is a cornerstone of Albert Bandura's (1986) social learning theory, which posits that much of human learning occurs through observing and imitating others, especially authority figures. Through observing parental behaviours such as meeting deadlines, maintaining employment, pursuing personal goals, and handling frustration constructively, children gradually internalise a model for their own approach to challenges. Research by Zimmerman and Schunk (2011) highlights those self-regulatory skills, such as setting goals, persisting in tasks, and self-reinforcement, are significantly influenced by early experiences with adult models.

Conversely, in the absence of strong, positive role models, children may develop a weak work ethic characterised by low perseverance, diminished ambition, and an external locus of control—the belief that outcomes are determined by external factors rather than personal effort. Rotter's (1966) theory of locus of control underscores how children raised without consistent examples of self-efficacy are more likely to attribute successes and failures to luck, fate, or other people, undermining personal agency and initiative. Children who do not witness consistent models of diligence and goal-directed behaviour often experience erratic educational trajectories, including lower academic achievement, higher dropout rates, and decreased engagement with long-term career planning. For instance, a study by Masten and Narayan (2012) found that children exposed to unstable or disengaged parenting exhibited poorer school performance and a higher likelihood of underemployment in adulthood. In addition, these children may struggle to develop grit—a trait defined by Duckworth et al. (2007) as perseverance and passion for long-term goals. Duckworth's research shows that grit, more than intelligence or socioeconomic background, predicts success across a variety of life domains, and that this quality is often nurtured through consistent encouragement and modelled resilience during early development (Duckworth et al., 2007). In practical terms, when parents model not only the

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achievement of goals but also the process of enduring frustration, bouncing back from failures, and maintaining motivation without immediate rewards, they equip children with the psychological toolkit needed for sustained personal and professional growth. Without such modelling, children are left without a template for how to manage the inevitable challenges of academic, occupational, and relational life, placing them at a significant disadvantage in an increasingly competitive world. Thus, parental modelling is not a passive backdrop to development; it is an active, dynamic force that significantly shapes children's capacity for perseverance, ambition, and success throughout life.

Early Attachment and Future Relationships: Children construct emotional templates for future relationships based on early attachment experiences, forming what Bowlby (1969) termed internal working models—mental representations of self, others, and the world that guide expectations in interpersonal interactions. Secure attachments, typically resulting from consistent, responsive, and nurturing caregiving, foster emotional intelligence, empathy, and resilience. These individuals learn that they are worthy of love and that others can be trusted, enabling them to approach future relationships with confidence and emotional openness. Research by Ainsworth (1989) through the "Strange Situation" experiment elaborated on these dynamics, showing that securely attached children exhibit greater autonomy, better emotional regulation, and stronger social competence. As they mature, they are more likely to form and maintain healthy romantic, platonic, and professional relationships characterised by trust, mutual respect, and effective communication.

In contrast, insecure attachments—often resulting from parental absence, inconsistency, or neglect—predispose children to relational instability and emotional dysregulation. In adulthood, individuals with anxious attachment styles may experience heightened fear of abandonment, emotional overdependence, and clinginess, leading to intense but unstable relationships. Conversely, those with avoidant attachment styles may struggle with emotional intimacy, chronic distrust, and emotional detachment, often avoiding close relationships altogether (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). These maladaptive relational patterns often perpetuate intergenerational cycles of dysfunction and loneliness. Children raised by emotionally unavailable or inconsistent parents may themselves become emotionally distant or overly dependent caregivers in the future, continuing the cycle (Lupien et al., 2009). Research has shown that unresolved attachment trauma can significantly impair mental health, leading to increased risk for depression, anxiety disorders, and even somatic health issues in adulthood (Sroufe et al., 2005). Moreover, longitudinal studies such as the Minnesota Longitudinal Study of Risk and Adaptation have demonstrated that early attachment patterns predict not only social competence but also broader life outcomes such as career stability, mental health, and even physical health decades later (Sroufe et al., 2005).

Therefore, early attachment experiences lay the foundation for an individual's relational world. When these experiences are nurturing and secure, they serve as a springboard for healthy emotional and social functioning. When they are fraught with insecurity and inconsistency, they can create lifelong struggles that ripple through every domain of human connection.

Parental Supervision, Emotional Guidance, and Adolescent Sexual Behaviour: Parental supervision and emotional guidance serve as critical protective factors against early and risky sexual behaviours during adolescence. Numerous studies have shown that adolescents who experience consistent monitoring, open communication, and emotional support from their parents are significantly less likely to engage in premature sexual activity (Miller et al., 2001). When such supports are absent, adolescents often seek

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affirmation, connection, and intimacy through early and often unsafe sexual encounters as a maladaptive strategy to meet unmet emotional needs. The consequences of early sexual initiation are profound and well-documented. Adolescents engaging in early sexual activity face increased rates of unintended pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and emotionally damaging or coercive relationships (Kirby, 2002). Furthermore, the lack of parental modelling regarding healthy sexuality, consent, and boundary-setting leaves young people vulnerable to exploitation, sexual coercion, and relationship violence (Sieving et al., 2006).

Research underscores that parental openness about sexuality—characterised by honest, age-appropriate conversations—equips adolescents with the knowledge, skills, and confidence to make safer choices (Akers et al., 2011). Adolescents whose parents actively discuss sexual health and relationships are more likely to delay sexual initiation and to use contraception consistently when they do become sexually active. While comprehensive sex education programs and mentorship initiatives in schools and communities can mitigate some risks associated with adolescent sexual behaviour, they cannot fully replicate the stabilising, personalised influence of engaged, emotionally available parents (Santelli et al., 2017). Programs that combine family involvement with formal education, such as parent-teen communication workshops, have demonstrated greater effectiveness in promoting safe sexual practices than education efforts alone (Wight & Fullerton, 2013).

In essence, the parental role in shaping adolescent sexual behaviour extends far beyond surveillance; it encompasses emotional mentorship, value transmission, and relational modelling. Where parental presence is weak or absent, the vulnerability of adolescents to risky behaviours rises sharply, highlighting the irreplaceable importance of familial emotional bonds during this critical developmental period.

***Drug and Substance Abuse*:** Emotional voids left by absent or disengaged parents often propel adolescents toward maladaptive coping mechanisms, with substance use emerging as a common outlet for managing feelings of abandonment, loneliness, anxiety, and low self-worth. Research has consistently shown that the quality of parental involvement significantly predicts adolescent substance use patterns (Brody et al., 2001). Adolescents deprived of emotional support and guidance are more likely to seek temporary relief through alcohol, tobacco, marijuana, and other illicit substances, reinforcing cycles of emotional dysregulation. Steinberg (2001) highlights parental monitoring—characterised by knowledge of children's whereabouts, activities, and peer associations, as one of the most powerful deterrents to adolescent drug and alcohol use. Consistent oversight provides external regulation that helps adolescents internalise self-control and healthy decision-making strategies. In its absence, adolescents become markedly more vulnerable to impulsivity, peer pressure, and sensation-seeking behaviours (Dishion & McMahon, 1998)

Furthermore, without parental modelling of healthy emotional regulation, adolescents often lack the resilience needed to resist the social temptations of substance use (Wills & Dishion, 2004). Studies indicate that early exposure to substances during adolescence is strongly predictive of long-term patterns of dependency, chronic addiction, academic underachievement, and eventual involvement in the criminal justice system (Squeglia et al., 2009). The societal costs of adolescent substance use are staggering, not only for the individuals directly affected but also for communities and public health systems. Adolescents who begin using substances early are at a significantly higher risk for developing substance use disorders (SUDs) that persist into adulthood, often exacerbating the emotional and relational

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deficits initially rooted in early parental neglect (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2020). In conclusion, the absence of engaged parental figures not only increases the immediate likelihood of adolescent substance experimentation but also sets into motion a cascade of negative life outcomes. Prevention efforts that emphasise strengthening family bonds, enhancing parental monitoring, and promoting emotional literacy among youth are critical to mitigating these long-term risks.

***Academic achievements*:** Academic achievement is profoundly influenced by the emotional and structural support provided by parents. Active parental engagement fosters the development of discipline, motivation, self-regulation, and effective learning strategies essential for scholastic success. According to McNeal (1999), children whose parents are involved in their education, through monitoring homework, attending parent-teacher conferences, and promoting positive attitudes toward school, show significantly better academic outcomes. In contrast, the absence of such involvement often results in diminished cognitive stimulation, irregular study habits, a weakened sense of academic self-efficacy, and a lack of sustained academic ambition. Research consistently demonstrates that students with absent, neglectful, or disengaged parents are at a substantially higher risk for lower academic performance, increased school absenteeism, higher dropout rates, and reduced college attendance (Fan & Chen, 2001). A comprehensive meta-analysis by Jeynes (2005) similarly found that parental involvement, across multiple forms, correlates positively with academic success across diverse socio-economic and ethnic groups (Jeynes, 2005). The emotional turmoil stemming from parental absence compounds these educational disadvantages. Chronic stress, emotional insecurity, and anxiety impair critical cognitive processes such as concentration, working memory, and executive functioning—skills vital for academic learning (Lupien et al., 2009). Children grappling with emotional instability often find it difficult to focus on academic tasks, regulate their emotions in classroom settings, or persevere through academic challenges.

Moreover, without proactive parental advocacy, children may miss out on essential educational resources that can help bridge learning gaps—such as tutoring services, extracurricular programs, enrichment activities, and college preparatory guidance. These opportunities are crucial for developing well-rounded academic skills and for accessing higher education pathways (Hill & Tyson, 2009). In many cases, systemic inequalities compound the effects of parental absence, creating entrenched cycles of academic underachievement and socioeconomic disadvantage (Reardon, 2011). Therefore, the role of engaged parenting in shaping academic trajectories cannot be overstated. Parental emotional and structural support acts not only as a buffer against academic risks but also as a catalyst for unlocking children's full intellectual potential.

Resilience Amidst Adversity: Children Thriving Despite Parental Absence: While a wealth of literature emphasises the detrimental effects of parental absence on children's holistic development, resilience theory offers a critical counterpoint, demonstrating that not all outcomes are uniformly negative. Resilience is defined as the dynamic process through which individuals exhibit positive adaptation despite exposure to significant adversity (Masten, 2001). Some children, even in the context of absent parenting, develop strong coping mechanisms, emotional regulation skills, and robust support networks outside their immediate family structure. Protective factors such as the presence of nurturing mentors, stable school environments, access to community programs, and intrinsic personal traits like optimism and self-efficacy can mitigate, or even override, the risks posed by parental absence (Werner & Smith, 1992).

However, it is crucial to note that resilience is not an innate or fixed trait but rather an interactive, developmental process that can be nurtured or hindered by contextual factors. Overemphasising

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resilience without addressing systemic barriers risks placing undue responsibility on vulnerable children to "overcome" structural inequities (Ungar, 2011). Thus, while resilience narratives provide hope and highlight human adaptability, they must be situated within a broader understanding of social supports, policy interventions, and community responsibility necessary to foster thriving pathways for all children, particularly those experiencing parental absence.

CONCLUSION

The presence and engagement of parents are foundational to a child's holistic development across all stages of life. From the formation of self-esteem and trust in early childhood to the cultivation of autonomy, emotional intelligence, academic resilience, and healthy coping mechanisms in adolescence and adulthood, parental influence profoundly shapes every dimension of human growth. Consistent emotional support, modelling of positive behaviours, and active participation in a child's education and socialisation serve as critical protective factors against a host of developmental risks, including low self-esteem, relational dysfunction, academic failure, risky behaviours, and substance abuse.

Conversely, parental absence—whether physical, emotional, or psychological—creates voids that children often struggle to fill, leaving them vulnerable to a cascade of negative outcomes. Research overwhelmingly supports that while external interventions such as schools, mentorship programs, and therapy can mitigate some harms, they cannot fully replicate the stabilising, empowering, and nurturing role of actively involved parents.

Ultimately, fostering children's full potential requires a society-wide commitment to supporting parents through education, resources, and policy initiatives that encourage responsible, engaged parenting. By doing so, we not only nurture individual thriving but also lay the foundation for healthier, more resilient communities for generations to come.

Practical Recommendations

- ***Promote Parental Education Programs*:** Governments, schools, and community organisations should offer accessible parenting workshops focused on child development, emotional regulation, communication skills, and positive discipline strategies to equip parents with essential tools for nurturing their children's growth.
- ***Encourage Active Parental Involvement in Education*:** Schools should foster strong parent-teacher partnerships by organising regular meetings, workshops, and volunteer opportunities, emphasising the crucial role of parents in reinforcing academic achievement and lifelong learning habits at home.
- ***Support Mental Health Resources for Families*:** Providing affordable and accessible family counselling services can help parents address personal or relational issues that might hinder their ability to offer stable emotional support, reducing the long-term risks of emotional and behavioural problems in children.
- ***Implement Mentorship and Role-Model Programs*:** For children facing parental absence or disengagement, mentorship programs that connect them with responsible and caring adult role models can offer critical emotional support, guidance, and positive examples of resilience, ambition, and healthy relationship building.
- ***Advocate for Family-Friendly Workplace Policies:*** Employers should adopt flexible working hours, parental leave, and child-care support to help parents balance their professional responsibilities with active, meaningful engagement in their children's lives, reinforcing the importance of a stable and nurturing home environment.

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Areas of Further Study

- ***Longitudinal Effects of Parental Absence Across Cultures*:** Future research could explore how the long-term impacts of parental absence differ across diverse cultural, socioeconomic, and familial structures, offering a more global understanding of resilience factors and vulnerabilities.
- ***The Role of Digital Parenting in Modern Child Development*:** With the rise of technology, studying how virtual communication, remote parenting, and digital supervision affect children's emotional, academic, and social development would provide important insights for modern family dynamics.
- ***Interventions to Mitigate Developmental Risks in High-Risk Families*.** Further study is needed on the effectiveness of targeted intervention programs (such as mentorship initiatives, after-school programs, and therapeutic services) in buffering the developmental disadvantages associated with absent or disengaged parenting.

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