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Exploring the Role of Fathers in the Lives of Children in Eswatini

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ABSTRACT

The absence of fathers is a widespread issue that quietly undermines communities across the globe, and the Kingdom of Eswatini is no exception. This study aimed to explore how fathers contribute to their children's growth, identify barriers to their involvement, and propose strategies to foster greater paternal engagement in parenting. A transformative qualitative design was employed, utilizing purposive sampling to select participants. The sample consisted of four juvenile schoolteachers two males and two females, four male inmates aged between 20 and 35, four young adults aged between 20 and 25, and four parents (both fathers and mothers). Data was gathered through semi-structured and focus group interviews, which were analyzed thematically to uncover key insights. In response to our first research question, the study found that fathers contribute to their children's development by: 1) providing basic needs, 2) instilling discipline, 3) offering positive role models, 4) ensuring emotional stability, 5) showing love, and 6) protecting their children. Regarding the second research question, which explored the reasons why fathers may not be supporting their children, the following barriers emerged: 1) involvement with new partners, 2) children being used to settle parental disputes, 3) inherent negligence in some fathers, 4) lack of financial resources, 5) insufficient grooming on how to be a responsible father, and 6) disputed paternity. For the final research question, which focused on strategies to enhance father involvement, the following themes were identified: 1) awareness programs on the importance of father involvement in a child's life, 2) educating parents, especially women, to avoid using children in conflicts, 3) conducting DNA tests in cases of disputed paternity, and 4) encouraging current fathers to serve as good role models.

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INTRODUCTION

Paternal absenteeism is a global issue that has far-reaching consequences for children and society. While maternal involvement is undeniably important, the role of fathers in a child's life is equally crucial. Fathers contribute uniquely to a child's upbringing, and their absence can have significant psychological, emotional, and economic impacts. Research has consistently shown that children who grow up without a father are more likely to experience negative outcomes, including a higher risk of drug use, involvement in crime, teenage pregnancy, and other challenges.

Mitra (2014) observes that in the United States the percentage of single-mother families increased from 8% in 1960 to 24% in 2009 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009). According to Statistics South Africa (Stats SA, 2021), 42% of South African children live solely with their mothers, compared to just 4% who live only with their fathers (Moila, 2023). Freeks (2019) further

highlights that 40% of South African children do not reside with their biological fathers. The proportion of children living with both parents decreased from 39% in 2002 to 34% in 2018. In The Kingdom of Eswatini though the statistics is not readily available, there is a huge number of fathers who are not involved in the lives of their children. In a study conducted by Mpofu and Tfwala (2024) on dilemmas of children raised by single parents, there were more single mothers than single fathers. Botha and Meyer (2019) assert that the absence of a father has a significant impact on nearly all areas of a child's emotional, social, moral, spiritual, cognitive, and physical development.

Yogman (2016) point out that fathers often engage more energetically, intensely, and stimulatingly with infants compared to mothers. While mothers typically provide protection and stability, fathers encourage independence and curiosity through high-energy play. Yogman et al. (2016) also note that studies comparing father-infant skin-to-skin contact with traditional cot care in the first two hours after birth reveal that babies in the father-infant skin-to-skin group cried less, fell asleep faster, and were generally more settled.

Ruddick (2016) argues that many social issues, such as poverty, aggression, and struggles with masculinity, are often linked to the absence of fathers. He specifically underscores the negative consequences fatherless homes have on children's well-being, as well as on the behaviors of both fathers and sons. Similarly, Peyper (2015) suggests that when fathers fail to express affection, acceptance, or recognition, children often perceive them as unreliable, which can negatively affect their emotional development. In a study conducted in Zimbabwe and Bothwell (2021) found that the absence of father figures significantly impacts children's morality, cognitive growth, and emotional health. Male children face academic challenges, which can result in dropping out of school, identity confusion, low self-esteem, and a growing disrespect for their mothers. Phasha (2022) further elaborates on this, pointing out that teenage boys view their fathers as essential role models, and their absence leads to a variety of challenges, including financial strain, academic struggles, alcohol abuse, and a lack of positive female role models. Similarly, in a study of 403 teenage boys from schools in Tshwane, Pitsoane and Gasa (2018) found a strong correlation between poor father-son relationships and emotional or behavioral problems in adolescent males, underscoring the pivotal role fathers play in shaping their sons' development.

Schwartz (2020) explains that girls who experience paternal absenteeism may develop denial as a coping mechanism, leading to emotional suppression. This suppression often manifests in self-destructive behaviors and a pervasive cynicism, leaving these daughters emotionally scarred in ways that are not easily healed. Girls raised without fathers tend to engage in sexual activity at an earlier age and often display a reduced interest in marriage and parenthood (Van Brummen-Girigori & Buunk, 2015). The father-daughter relationship is essential to the mental well-being of adolescent girls (Sağkal, 2018). Additionally, Ndifor and Kirimi (2023) found that many college women in Ruiru, Kenya reported persistent sadness and depression, linked to an undefined or absent relationship with their fathers.

DelPriore (2017) suggest that girls who experience positive fathering tend to engage in lower levels of risky sexual behavior compared to their peers. While previous research has largely focused on paternal absence, emerging perspectives highlight the nuanced ways in which fathers actively shape their daughters' psychological development. Notably, fathers' interactions influence how daughters internalize feelings of dependence or submission, potentially linking to psychoanalytic concepts like masochism. These evolving dynamics not only shape daughters' sense of self and emotional boundaries but may also redefine traditional understandings of father-daughter relationships in contemporary psychological discourse (Levinson, 2020). Steinhilber (2020) emphasize that fathers play a crucial role in empowering daughters, helping them adopt egalitarian gender roles, and fostering good mental health. Granger (2018) further asserts that father-daughter relationships significantly impact a woman's ability to form successful romantic relationships, as fathers are often the first male figures in their daughters' lives, shaping their perceptions of romantic connections.

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The government of Eswatini asserts that the nation's child protection policy is guided by the Children's Protection and Welfare Act of 2012. This policy outlines the responsibilities of legal guardians in ensuring that the physical, emotional, and educational needs of children are met. It also underscores the importance of safeguarding minors' rights, especially when parents are unable to fulfill their obligations. In Eswatini, a significant number of children are vulnerable due to absent fathers, and many children's school fees are covered by the government through the Orphaned and Vulnerable Children's (OVC) fund. This study specifically investigates the role of fathers in the lives of EmaSwati children, an area where there is currently a lack of comprehensive research. By addressing this gap, the study aims to provide valuable insights that can help inform child protection policies in Eswatini, ultimately contributing to improved outcomes for children across the country.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Role of the Father in the Development of Children

According to Mavungu (2013), fathers are still primarily seen as providers. In South Africa, absent fathers remain a significant socioeconomic challenge, regularly appearing in both public and governmental discourse. Similarly, Anthes (2010) and the United Fathers of California (n.d.) explain that children with engaged fathers are less likely to drop out of school, act out in school, or engage in risky behaviors during adolescence. Granger (2018) reinforces this, noting that father-daughter relationships significantly influence women's ability to form successful romantic relationships. Since fathers are often the first male figures in their daughters' lives, they profoundly affect how daughters perceive and develop their views of romantic relationships.

Barriers to Paternal Involvement

The reasons why fathers abandon their children are complex and multifaceted. Gordon (2012) highlights several factors, such as poverty, race, ethnicity, nationality, and culture, that can act as barriers to paternal involvement. Additionally, Fagan and Barnett (2003) identify restricted access to children as another significant factor, noting that in many cases, women may deny fathers access due to unresolved conflicts between parents.

In some regions, like Eswatini, this issue is particularly prevalent. Fathers may also become absent due to mental health challenges, substance misuse, financial struggles, domestic violence, or involvement in criminal activities (O'Donnell, 1999). According to McLanahan (2013), a substantial number of children experience father absenteeism due to the premature death of their fathers.

Strategies to Enhance Parental Involvement

The existing literature offers several strategies for engaging fathers in their children's lives. Reglin (1993) highlights the importance of creating a loving and supportive environment for fathers, noting that, like anyone else, they thrive when they feel appreciated and valued. Groves (2002) recommends challenging negative media portrayals of fathers, which often depict them as neglectful or incompetent. These harmful narratives can lead to self-fulfilling prophecies, discouraging fathers from fully engaging in their parental roles.

Another key strategy is encouraging co-parenting. Pruett (2017) emphasize that children benefit when parents work together positively and cooperatively in their roles. Fostering collaborative, rather than adversarial, co-parenting can significantly enhance a child's development. Father support groups, as noted by Berlyn (2008), also play a vital role in building trust and creating a sense of community among fathers. Donnelly (2022) underscores the importance of programs that promote responsible fatherhood, which contribute to the well-being of fathers, children, and communities. Finally, Alio (2013) suggest that involving fathers during pregnancy helps establish a foundation for stronger paternal involvement once the child is born.

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Theoretical Framework: Vygotsk's Cultural-Historical Activity Theory

This study is grounded in Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT), which is rooted in the work of Lev Vygotsky from the 1920s. CHAT provides a framework to explore the interactions between fathers, mothers, caregivers, survey participants, and the wider Lobamba (Eswatini) community. Miles (2020) suggests that all human behavior is inherently social and goal-directed, with specific intended outcomes. Shachak (2024) further explain that Engeström's (1987) CHAT model comprises six interconnected elements, within which numerous interactions take place. The CHAT framework offers valuable insight into understanding fathers' roles in their children's lives and the phenomenon of paternal absenteeism. It provides a lens through which we can analyze how various factors interact to shape fatherhood behaviors. In this study, the focus is on fathers as the primary subjects, engaging in a range of activities influenced by their personal needs, motivations, and external pressures. By examining these influences, we can gain a deeper understanding of why some fathers are absent or less engaged in their children's lives.

In this context, the "object" of the activity system is the child's development, which caregivers actively nurture and shape. Paternal absence may result in this developmental process being either incomplete or altered, potentially shifting the responsibility onto other caregivers. The "tools" in this study such as resources, media, and support networks play a crucial role in determining how fathers engage with their children. Limited access to these tools can hinder a father's ability to be present and actively involved, contributing to absenteeism.

The "rules" in the study refer to the societal norms, cultural expectations, and legal regulations that shape fathers' behavior. These rules can either encourage or restrict fathers' participation in their children's lives. For instance, some fathers may adhere to traditional roles that prioritize financial provision over emotional involvement, influenced by these societal expectations.

Finally, the "community" in the study includes other parents, mentors, and social groups who collectively influence fatherhood. The broader community's views on fatherhood and its expectations regarding paternal involvement can have a profound impact on how fathers engage with their children, either fostering deeper involvement or contributing to absenteeism.

In summary, CHAT provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the complex interplay of factors that shape fatherhood, the effects of paternal absence, and how societal structures and personal circumstances interact to influence fathers' roles in their children's lives. It shapes how fathers engage with their children and either support or challenge their involvement. The division of labor in the study - which is the division of parental responsibilities within a family and community - can explain how roles are assigned to fathers or substituted by others when they are absent. When fathers are absent, other family members, such as mothers, grandparents, siblings, or community members, often take on additional roles to fill the gap left by the father.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a transformative paradigm, focusing on the experiences of marginalized groups with the goal of fostering positive change (Cram & Mertens, 2016). A qualitative approach was chosen for its emphasis on prioritizing the perspectives and concerns of participants (Leavy, 2022). The research flow began with a comprehensive literature review to identify existing gaps in understanding the experiences of marginalized groups. Next, purposeful sampling was used to select participants who could provide rich insights into the issues at hand. Data collection involved in-depth interviews, ensuring that participants' voices were central to the inquiry. This is shown in the form of a flow chart below.

The data were then analyzed using thematic analysis, focusing on identifying key themes and patterns that emerged from participants' narratives. Finally, the findings were used to inform actionable recommendations aimed at creating positive change and empowering marginalized communities. Data collection involved semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. Nonprobability sampling, specifically purposive sampling, was used to select participants. A

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total of twenty participants took part in the study (Etikan et al., 2016). The sample consisted of four juvenile schoolteachers two males and two females, four male inmates aged between 20 and 35, four young adults aged between 20 and 25, and four parents (both fathers and mothers). Ethical considerations were rigorously followed throughout the study. Permission was first obtained from the college, and using a formal letter, approval to interview four inmates and four teachers from a juvenile school was sought. A thorough explanation of the study's purpose was provided to participants, and it was ensured they understood their rights as participants. Informed consent was obtained from each participant prior to their involvement in the study. The data generated in this study was analyzed thematically.

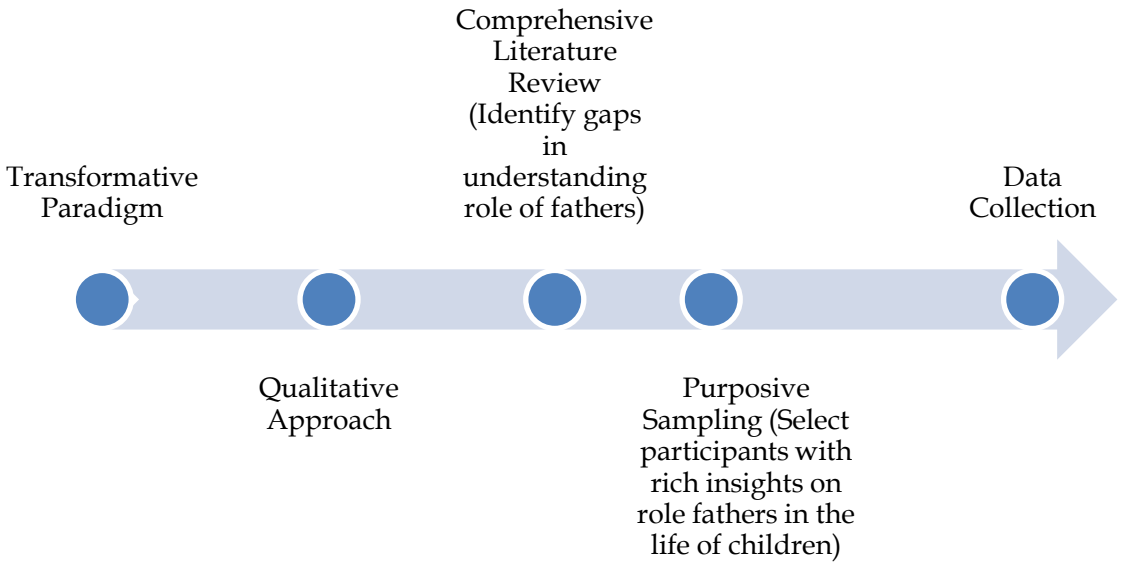

Figure 1. Showing how the research was conducted

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Research Question 1: The Role of Fathers

The first research question sought to discover the roles of fathers in the development of their children. From this research question the following six themes emerged.

Theme 1: Provision of Basic Needs

Participants felt that fathers are expected to provide their children with basic needs such as clothing, shelter and food.

> *"I feel that the fathers should provide their children with basic needs like food, shelter, and water." [TC3]*
>
> *"Fathers play a crucial role in providing for their children's basic needs. When children lack a father to meet these needs, they may be more likely to turn to crime. I personally found myself involved in criminal activities from a young age due to the absence of a father who could provide for me." [IN2]*

Based on the above excerpts, fathers are tasked with ensuring that their children's basic needs are met. This perspective is supported by Mavungu (2013), who discovered that fathers viewed themselves primarily as providers. In this role, fathers are expected to fulfill their obligation to supply their children or families with material goods and financial support. Health is a basic need to children Yogman and Eppel (2022) argue that fathers play an important role in the life of children during prenatal and postnatal. Children who are raised but are involved in fathers are likely to be healthier than those who grow up without fathers.

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Theme 2: Instilling Discipline in Children

The second role that emerged as one of fathers' most important roles in developing their children was instilling moral values. In the data generated, some participants had this to say:

> *"One of the roles of a father is to instill respect and discipline in his children."* [IN2]
>
> *"I was raised by my grandmother who could not provide discipline in us many a time due to her old age, and this led me to joining gangs, consecutively getting involved in crime."* (sic) [IN3]
>
> *"I believe a father instills discipline and provides guidance to his children."* [IN4]
>
> *"The voice of a father is important in the home. In a home that has a father, children have discipline."* [TC2]
>
> *"A father provides guidance and discipline in the lives of his children."* [TC 2]

The above citations clearly indicate that fathers play a key role in instilling discipline in their children's lives. This perspective is further reinforced by Anthes (2010) and Okorn (2022), who emphasize the significant influence fathers have in shaping their children's discipline. Additionally, Liu (2021) assert that father involvement, positive encouragement, and strong father-child relationships are closely linked to positive child behaviors.

Theme 3: Providing Positive Modelling for Children

Participants emphasized that another crucial role fathers play in their children's development is serving as positive role models. They expressed concern over instances where fathers engage in negative behaviors, such as drinking alcohol, using drugs, or physically abusing the mother in front of the children, highlighting the detrimental impact these actions can have on a child's growth and well-being. During the collection of data, participants had this to say:*"I believe that the role of a father is to serve as a 'mirror' for their child. A father often becomes a figure that a child looks up to and aspires to emulate. When a father is absent or fails to provide positive role modeling, children are left without a clear example to follow, causing them to potentially seek guidance from negative influences."* [IN4]

> *"A father's presence is crucial, particularly in the life of a boy, as it provides a model for how to grow into a responsible and mature man. Through his actions and guidance, a father teaches his son what it means to be a man and how to navigate life's challenges with integrity and accountability."* [MYA2]

The quotes above emphasize the crucial role fathers play in their children's lives, particularly in shaping their sons. Yogman (2016) reinforce this by highlighting the importance of fathers as role models. Similarly, Silvers (2021) argue that humans learn about their environment through observation, including what to fear and trust. This underscores the need for fathers to model positive behaviors in front of their children. Additionally, Garcia (2021) suggest that even parental anxiety can be transmitted to children through observational learning.

Theme 4: Providing Children with Love

Providing children with love emerged as one of fathers' most important roles in their development. In the data generated, three participants had this to say:

> *"I am of the understanding that the role of a father is to provide children with love. I have observed that many of the delinquent children at our institution are those who lack the love of a father. Many come here angry and mention that they are angry towards their fathers who are absent."* [TC2]
>
> *"I believe that the role of a father is to show love."* [MYA2]
>
> *"The role of a father is to provide his children with love. I have observed that I found myself making mistakes in life getting involved in toxic relationships because I always yearned for the love of a father. I got pregnant while still at school."* [FYA1]

The excerpts above highlight the crucial role of fathers in providing love to their children. Rohner and Veneziano (2001) emphasize the profound impact of a father's love on a child's development from an early stage. Liao (2016) argues that children should not only receive love from their parents but from everyone, further reinforcing the importance of paternal affection. Additionally,

Cardenas (2022) assert that a father's love plays a significant role even during the prenatal stage of a child's life.

Theme 5: Providing Emotional Stability for Children

The fifth role that emerged as one of the most crucial responsibilities that fathers play is providing emotional stability for their children. During data collection, participants said:

> *"I believe that the role of a father is to provide children with emotional stability. Children who have experienced the presence of a father demonstrate more confidence in the community, school, etc."* [TC2]
>
> *"According to my understanding, a father is responsible for providing security in the life of the child. Security may not only be physical or financial security, but also emotional security. When a child knows they have a father who is a protector to them, they exhibit emotional stability."* [TC4]

The excerpts above emphasize the vital role fathers play in nurturing their children's emotional stability. Nierengarten (2019) supports this perspective, asserting that a father's presence significantly enhances a child's overall well-being and emotional balance. Likewise, Purwani and Hasanah (2023) highlight the essential role fathers have in developing children's emotional intelligence.

Theme 6: Protecting Children

Protecting children emerged as the father's sixth role in a child's life. In the data generated, two participants said:

> *"I believe that one of a father's key roles is to provide protection for his children. There were times when I was bullied at school, and I often think that if I had a father who was fully present, I never would have experienced that. He would have stood up for me and protected me."*. [IN3]
>
> *"The role of a father is to protect his children. As a physically strong being in the home and community, he is feared by those who would want to take advantage of his children."* [MYA2]

Fathers are responsible for protecting their children, as the excerpts clearly demonstrate. This sentiment is echoed by Anthes (2010), who argues that fathers have a duty to protect their children in every way.

Research Question 2: Reasons why Fathers are not Involved in the Lives of their Children

The second research question sought to ascertain the reasons why fathers are not involved in the lives of their children. From this research question, the following themes emerged: 1. Parents being involved with new partners; 2. Children used by parents to settle their disputes; 3. Some fathers being naturally negligent; 4. Lack of financial resources; 5. Fathers lacking grooming on how to be a responsible father, and disputed paternity was reported in 6 cases.

Theme 1: Parents Being Involved with New Partners

Participants observed that when fathers enter new relationships, their involvement in their children's lives often becomes challenging due to the dynamics with their new partners. These new partners may feel insecure or fearful that their boyfriends might be tempted to rekindle relationships with their children's mothers, leading them to resist allowing the fathers to spend time with their children. Sometimes fathers do not tell their new partners that they have children elsewhere. Participants had this to say:

> *"Fathers find it difficult to support their children because they are afraid of the new partners. Sometimes it is because they have not disclosed to their partners that they have children elsewhere."* [IN1]
>
> *"I have noted that step-parenting can limit fathers from being involved in the life of their children. For example, when a father has parted ways with the mother of his child and is now married to someone else, that someone else could resist the child, leading to the father not being involved."* [SM2]

Loritts (1998) similarly observed that entering a new relationship can make it difficult for fathers to provide adequate care for their children. Koster (2021) echoed this sentiment, noting that parents in new relationships tend to have lower levels of engagement with their children.

Theme 2: Children Used by Parents to Settle their Disputes

Participants observed that when parents separate, it is unfortunately common for one parent to manipulate the children to settle personal scores. Often, mothers may intentionally restrict fathers from seeing their children as a form of retaliation. This behavior is driven by a desire to cause distress to the father, without considering the emotional harm it inflicts on the children. The primary concern for these parents appears to be the father's misery, with little regard for the negative impact on the children. Participants said the following:

> *"Weaponizing children during disputes between mother and father can hinder father involvement."* [IN2]
>
> *"Some mothers use children to fight fathers, and when fathers are limited, they often give up."* [TC4]

The points mentioned by participants above are supported by Fagan and Barnett (2003), who observed that mothers occasionally use their children to confront their fathers. However, using children in such conflicts is discouraged, as it can have a negative emotional impact on them.

Theme 3: Some Fathers Being Naturally Negligent

Participants also noted that the absence of fathers in their children's lives often stems from a natural tendency toward neglect. Many fathers shy away from responsibility, prioritizing spending money on girlfriends and alcohol instead. Participants noted the following:

> *"I feel men are naturally negligent, they find it difficult to support their children. They are naturally not carers. It is easier for men to spend money on girlfriends and alcohol than to support their children."* [IN2]

As evidenced by the excerpt, fathers may choose to limit their involvement intentionally. Albert (2021) noted that a father may deliberately abandon his parental responsibilities.

Theme 4: Lack of Financial Resources

A lack of financial resources has emerged as one of the key reasons some fathers are unable to support their children. While these fathers may be willing to provide assistance, they often find themselves constrained by limited financial means.

> *"I believe lack of financial resources limits father involvement."* [IN2]
>
> *"I believe that what could keep a father from being involved is limited financial resources, which leads to an inferiority complex. A father may feel ashamed to bring forth what little he has."* [MYA1]

The above views are supported by Gordon et al. (2012) who contend that some fathers may fail to support their children because of financial constraints.

Theme 5: Fathers Lacking Grooming on How to Be a Responsible Father

The fifth limitation was the absence of proper guidance on responsible fatherhood. One of the researchers in this study, for instance, learned how to be a responsible father from his own dad. Despite having 33 children, his father was able to support them all and provide them with access to quality education. Participants said the following:

> *"According to my understanding, lack of grooming leads to fathers not being involved. At times fathers do not know better. They themselves had absent fathers."* [TC2]
>
> *"Lack of preparation for responsible fatherhood leads many fathers to be limited. Many males fall into the trap of having many girlfriends, end up impregnating them, and do not have an organized family life. If males were taught better, they would avoid such traps."* [TC1]
>
> *"I believe lack of grooming on responsible fatherhood limits fathers due to poor upbringing."* [MYA2]

Groves (2002) highlighted that some fathers struggle to support their children because they were not properly nurtured to take on the role of a father. Having been raised primarily by single mothers, they may lack a clear understanding of what it means to be a father.

Theme 5: Disputed Paternity

Participants observed that many fathers are reluctant to support their children due to unresolved paternity disputes. It is understandably painful to provide for a child when there is uncertainty about whether the child is truly yours. Television programs like *Tinashe Mugabe DNA Show* highlight this issue. Many fathers choose to undergo paternity tests to gain peace of mind. However, in approximately 70% of disputed cases, the results come back negative. This reality makes it challenging for some fathers to continue supporting children when they are unsure of their biological connection.

> *"Personally, as man I find it difficult to support a child that I am doubting his or her paternity. I wish women can be honest and avoid giving us children who are not ours."* [TC3]

Paternity is often perceived as a matter of belief, whereas maternity is a biological certainty. As a result, women are encouraged to ensure that the fathers of their children are indeed their biological fathers. This approach can help reduce instances where fathers refuse to support their children due to doubts about paternity. A study by Muzingili (2024) found that discovering a child is not biologically theirs after years of providing support can be devastating for fathers. Consequently, many fathers are hesitant to support children whose paternity is in question, fearing potential disappointment.

Research Question 3: Strategies for Enhancing Father Involvement

Our last research question sought to find strategies for enhancing father involvement in the lives of children the following themes emerged: awareness programs on the importance of father involvement in the life of a child, educating parents especially women not to use children to fight their battles, doing DNA tests for disputed children and current fathers should be good role models

Theme 1: Awareness Programs on the Importance of Father Involvement in the Life of a Child

The participants felt that some fathers may be absent in the lives of their children because they are not aware of the impact this has in the life of the children. Having awareness programs can help equip the fathers with this knowledge. This is important especially to soon-to-be fathers and young fathers. It is important that as a society we fight to break absent father syndrome.

> *"I believe it is crucial for the country to implement awareness programs in Imiphakatsi (Chiefdoms) to educate men about their essential roles in the lives of their children."*[TC2]
>
> *"I am confident that having male forums or father support groups in the community and in churches could help men be active participants in child upbringing."* [TC4]

The views above are supported by Glynn and Dale (2015) who support the idea of conscientizing men about their roles in the lives of their children.

Theme 2: Educating Parents Especially Women not to Use Children to Fight their Battles

In our second research question, we observed that some mothers are preventing fathers from being involved in their children's lives. Participants highlighted the need for greater awareness among mothers regarding the negative impact this can have on the children, especially when mothers use their children as pawns in disputes with the fathers. This issue is particularly serious, as some mothers go so far as to falsely accuse fathers of grave offenses, such as rape. It is crucial for mothers to understand that, despite any personal conflicts with the fathers, children still need their fathers in their lives for their emotional and developmental well-being. This is encapsulated by the focus group in the excerpt below:

> *"Women should desist from using children to fight their battles with men. Fighting men using children is bad."* [TC4]

Theme 3: Doing DNA Tests for Disputed Children

One the reasons why some men are not supporting their children is disputed paternity. Participants felt that conducting DNA tests should be the way to go. If a father is in doubt doing the DNA tests is the best recourse. It will help them to be involved in the life of the child without doubt regarding whether the child is his or not.

> *"I suggest that if a man is in doubt about the paternity of the child, the honorable thing to do is DNA tests. DNA helps fathers to gain peace of mind."* [TC2, TC3]

According to Anjum et al. (2025), DNA tests are effective in resolving disputed paternity cases but should be closely monitored to prevent the misuse of fraudulent results.

Theme 4: Current Fathers Should Be Good Role Models

As mentioned earlier in Research Question 2, many fathers are not nurturing because their own fathers were not nurturing. Consequently, participants emphasized the importance of current fathers serving as positive role models for their sons, encouraging them to become compassionate and responsible fathers in the future. This perspective aligns with Albert Bandura's 1963 observational learning theory, which suggests that individuals often learn behaviors through the observation of others.

CONCLUSION

The study concluded that fathers play a pivotal role in a child's development. The key roles identified include providing for basic needs, instilling discipline, offering positive role models, giving unconditional love, ensuring emotional stability, and safeguarding their children. A lack of father involvement can have negative consequences for a child in multiple areas, including psychological, emotional, and economic well-being. The study also found that children who grow up without an active father figure are more likely to engage in delinquent behaviour compared to those with present fathers. Additionally, the study identified several reasons why fathers may not be involved in their children's lives. These reasons include fathers entering new relationships after separating from their children's mothers, using children as pawns in parental disputes, deliberately choosing not to engage, financial constraints, and insufficient preparation for the responsibilities of fatherhood. For intervention strategies, the study suggested DNA tests for children whose paternity is in dispute, awareness programs aimed at both parents, and current fathers being positive role models as effective approaches to fostering greater father involvement.

Recommendations

Based on the findings above, we recommend that the government of Eswatini rolls out awareness programs through the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, which is responsible for the welfare of children. These programs should primarily target parents, with a focus on fathers, to ensure the well-being of children. The initiative should aim to educate parents on the importance of being involved in their children's lives emotionally, financially, and physically. One key factor contributing to the lack of fatherly support is the uncertainty around paternity. To address this, we encourage the Government of Eswatini to offer free DNA testing services for disputed paternity cases. This could help clarify fatherhood and encourage greater involvement.

Additionally, traditional leaders, such as chiefs, should be engaged in promoting responsible fatherhood within their communities. They can play a vital role in teaching and encouraging fathers to fulfill their duties. Finally, we urge current fathers to serve as positive role models, helping to break the cycle of absentee fatherhood. By demonstrating responsible parenting, they can inspire the next generation to be actively engaged in their children's lives.

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