

**Title:** A qualitative study of men's recollections of growing up with father absence: childhood father figures and family resilience

Associate Professor Leah East BN (Hons) PhD  
Associate Professor in Nursing (Primary Health Care)  
University of New England  
Armidale, NSW 2350 Australia  
Email: [leah.east@une.edu.au](mailto:leah.east@une.edu.au)

Associate Professor Marie Hutchinson RN PhD  
Southern Cross University  
School of Health & Human Sciences PO Box 157,  
Lismore NSW 2480 Australia  
Email: [marie.hutchinson@scu.edu.au](mailto:marie.hutchinson@scu.edu.au)

Dr Tamara Power BN (Hons) PhD  
Senior Lecturer, Director, Health Simulation  
Faculty of Health,  
University of Technology Sydney (UTS)  
Broadway NSW 2007 Australia  
Email: [Tamara.Power@uts.edu.au](mailto:Tamara.Power@uts.edu.au)

Professor Debra Jackson RN PhD  
Director, Oxford Institute for Nursing and Allied Health Research (OxINAHR)  
Professor of Nursing, Faculty of Health & Life Sciences, Oxford Brookes University  
Associate Chief Nurse (Research), Oxford University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, UK.  
Oxford OX3 0FL  
United Kingdom  
Email: [djackson@brookes.ac.uk](mailto:djackson@brookes.ac.uk)

## **Abstract**

**Background:** Families come in many forms and single parent women headed households are common with nurses being well positioned to provide support for these women and their children. For children growing up in lone parent households, the nature of family relationships and the availability of a social support network are important factors in reducing developmental risks. **Aim:** The aim of this study was to explore adult men's recollections of growing up in a father absent home. **Design:** This study utilised a qualitative methodology. **Methods:** Semi structured interviews were conducted with 21 adult men who grew up in a father absent home due to family discord. Interview transcripts were thematically analysed using an inductive approach. **Findings:** Analysis of the interview transcripts revealing two themes relating to childhood father figures and family relational networks. For some men, ambivalent, violent or unavailable father figures stepped into the void created by the absent father. Others experienced positive father figures or multigenerational relationships, which provided positive relational supports and attachments. **Conclusion:** The findings illuminate the dynamics of family resilience and provide important insights for nurses and other family healthcare workers.

**Keywords:** Nursing, resilience, fathers, family, single parent, qualitative research

## **Impact Statement**

Drawing on extended relational support networks available to single parent families headed by women can foster family resilience

## **Introduction**

Children's attachment to significant people in their lives' provides a secure base from which they explore, experience, and make sense of their world (Bonanno, Romero, & Klein, 2015; Bowlby, 2005). These relational attachments within families create bonds that ensure the care and protection of children: when broken or disrupted, these attachments can become insecure, avoidant or ambivalent (Bowlby, 2005). Early literature on infant and child attachment focused upon dyadic relationships formed with parents, often without adequately accounting for the relational family network available to children. Over the last decade, researchers have given attention to moving beyond child-parent interpretations of attachment and have examined the broader entity of family relational networks and the influence of these relationships on childhood attachment and wellbeing (Masten & Monn, 2015).

Systematic review evidence identifies that networks of supportive family or social supports are important protective factors for children and parents experiencing adversity (Benzies & Mychasiuk, 2009). Both lone parents and their children face unique challenges and life stressors. These can include limited economic resources, reduced social support, increased rates of parental depression, and attachment difficulties with the absent parent (Allen & Daly, 2007; Attar-Schwartz, Tan, Buchanan, Flouri, & Griggs, 2009). Although literature has highlighted the potential negative effects of an absent parent on children, less attention has been given to the strength of these families particularly in the context of the extended family network and family resilience.

Regardless of the family structure, family is the foundation for developing physical and psychosocial wellbeing (Darbyshire & Jackson, 2005). Often within the context of health and wellbeing, healthcare professionals focus on solving the problems and difficulties within a family rather than their positive attributes and characteristics (Allison et al., 2003). From a strength-based perspective, healthcare professionals can draw on family strengths and positive attributes, which has the ability to promote resilience in the time of family adversity (Allison et al., 2003). Family resilience refers to the ability to face, overcome and experience growth from adversity, with family relations and/or extended members being an imperative component of family resilience (Black & Lobo, 2008).

Throughout the decades, family health nurses are increasingly caring for lone parent families. In the absence of a parent, children may have multiple step parents or extended family members playing significant roles. Research has found that involved inter-generational family members such as grandparents can offer support to families and promote a child's development and wellbeing. Grandparent involvement with adolescents can buffer emotional and behavioural problems in step parented and single parented homes (Attar-Schwartz, Tan et al. 2009); in addition to offering practical support, such as through the provision of childcare, enabling the parent to undertake study or paid work outside the home (Mitchell, 2007). Considering the support extended relational networks can provide to single parented families and their children and the pivotal role they have in promoting family resilience, the aim of this paper is to report the experiences of men growing up in a father absent environment and their associations with extended family members (step parent, grandparents and other extended family members). In particular, we sought to understand the roles and influence of father figures and other family members on the early lives of these men.

## **Methods**

In this qualitative semi-structured study, 21 interviews (either face to face or via telephone) were conducted with men residing in Australia and who had grown up in father absent families due to parental discord. Following approval from the relevant institutional Human Research Ethics Committee, men were recruited through media and local advertisements. All interviews were conducted with either a male or female research assistant appointed for this study. Employing semi-structured interviews consenting men were asked to describe their childhood experiences of growing-up without a father. The interviews were not prescriptive, with interviewer probing responses to elicit detail or the context of issues raised to explore how the men made sense of their experiences (Creswell, Fetters, & Ivankova, 2004). The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, de-identified and labelled with a pseudonym. Data continued to be collected until data saturation was achieved.

Initially, two researchers independently reviewed the interview narratives and open coded relevant sections that illuminated the experience of growing up in a father absent home. Descriptive codes were assigned to words or short phrases that captured the essence of the experience (Miles & Huberman, 1994). As similarities emerged, codes were clustered to create emerging patterns on the basis of similarity, frequency and sequence of events (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). Clustering involved both data summation and integration to derive an increasingly detailed interpretation (Coffey and Atkinson 1996). The emergent analysis was reviewed by team members independently and discussed collectively to reach consensus on the final analysis.

Previously we have reported findings on the emotional, mental health and self-esteem issues emerging from the analysis (xxxx,2014). In this current paper we report two emergent themes

related to relational support: *Experience of father figures; Ambivalent or indifferent, good or bad*; and, *Beyond the father: the family relational network*. Each theme and the constituent subthemes are discussed below.

### **Experiences of father figures: Ambivalent or indifferent, good, or bad**

In the context of an absent biological paternal father, some men recalled a series of ambiguous or indifferent father figures. These ambiguous or indifferent father figures were present, but did not always meet the boy's expectations of fathering. For some, the experience of a father figure was positive, and they described themselves as *fortunate*, *grateful* and *lucky* to have had these *good* men fill the voids created by the absent father. Others were less fortunate. These men recounted indifference or abuse from *bad father* figures.

#### ***The ambiguous or indifferent father figure***

Ambiguous or indifferent father figures were described to offer little in terms of parenting. Nathanael recounted *He wasn't much of a man, I must say, but he was there*. Likewise Greg shared *I would hesitate to call him a stepfather. He was not someone who ever took on a parenting role*. Similarly, recalling the void created by an ambiguous father figure, Bill remembered his stepfather who fell short of his expectations:

*It's a bit hard in a way, because it honestly is an idea I don't know what I missed.*

*'Cause we had a stepfather for a short time 'til he moved out and he was by no means a father and, at first, to his credit, I think, he tried to pretend to be.*

Charles revealed that although his stepfather provided some financial support, he did not fulfil the role of a caring father. Charles spoke of the disdain he had for his indifferent stepfather, even though he provided schooling and stayed in Charles's life after his mother passed away:

*He's not a part of my life; I hated him ... I just hated him. ...Probably when I was 12 to 15, 16 sort of thing, I want no association with him. 'Cause my mother died a year sooner, me about a 12- to 15-year-old. But he was, he'd come up here to my grandmother's place, like a bloody school teacher, he'd hold my hands out and he'd give me a hit with a strap. I really detested that crap. And ... well, whether he provided for my schooling or not, I wouldn't have a clue but it didn't really interest me.*

### ***The good father figure***

Other men recounted positive or *good* father figures (uncles, grandfathers, stepfathers) who were positive male role models, providing support and guidance and in a sense promoted personal and family resilience. These men were characterised as: a *great man*; a *very nice fellow*; a *really handy fellow*; and *real men*. Frank described his uncle as a father figure:

*He was a great man ... a big influence on me... he'd say, "You must learn something every day". I always remembered that ... I don't think that having a father is necessarily important as long as you've got somebody in your life who is stable and is there and is caring.*

Although some men expressed gratitude towards these father figures, their stories were also coloured by a strong undercurrent or shadow of *missing out* on what a biological father would

have provided. This dichotomy of *lucky* to have a father figure, but still missing out on what the absent father may have provided is reflected in the following comment:

*... Even though I missed out on certain things growing up — where a real father should been there, I was lucky to have him (stepfather) there you know, that he come along.*  
(Sam)

Similarly, on reflection of his experience with foster fathers, Kambara expressed gratitude towards the mentorship provided by a man who married his foster mother:

*... It was only in the last, probably, ten years that I finally accepted him and come to realise what a wonderful person he was and he became a great mentor to me.*

Tim spoke fondly of his relationship with his stepfather, and reflected on the guidance his stepfather provided. He recalled reciprocating this care through looking after his stepfather until his passing:

*I was very fortunate that I did have a very good stepfather. ... He was a very good guardian ... I looked after him 'til the day he died ... I looked after him all the way through 'cause I was always thinking he did the right thing by me.*

### ***The bad father figure***

In contrast other narratives revealed a strong sense of potential risk posed by father figures. In some instances, this was an eventual reality, with participants recounting abuse at the hands of violent men. Others described their stepfather or father figure in terms of their *worst enemy* or



a procession of *cruel* men in their mothers' lives. In this vein, Ross recounted how his stepfather offered no protection and allowed him to be beaten by his drinking buddies:

*When I was getting the shit beaten out of me ... He listened to them down at the hotels, bragging about how they used to have to belt everything out of me. And he never ever went out and punched him in the face. He never went out and say "You're a fucking asshole." Is that the best you can do is belt up a kid?*

Ross recounted how he was not viewed as a son, but instead, as *a whipping boy, that's what you become*. Hugh disclosed that his stepfather would become violent when he drank alcohol, recalling a time that he was so frightened he tried to block this experience from his mind:

*... he got drunk one night and threatened to kill all us ... I think I probably blocked quite a bit [out] ... That particular event when he was threatening to kill us all was pretty horrendous and very frightening for me and ... I remember things of being absolutely shit scared ... memories of things, of being scared ...*

Like Hugh, Jake recalled attempting to stop alcohol-fuelled violence towards his mother perpetrated by her boyfriends. Unfortunately, Jake was frequently abused physically by these men:

*And mum's boyfriends – look, the hostility and anger that I feel towards some of them I can't quantify. ... I've been in hospital a few times trying to get between mum and one of her drunk, drug-affected boyfriends. ... I remember one particular guy ... he slammed the door closed, and my arm was on the door, so it smashed my arm.*

*The issue of that is, that thing, these are guys that in some ways, shape or form— I don't know if I thought of them as father figures or not but realistically they probably were in some ways supposed to be a father figure. And what they were showing was that alcohol, drugs, and violence against men and women, against children is all okay.*

### **Beyond the father: the family relational network**

For many participants, extended family played an important role in their childhood. The network of connected family and friends provided a positive developmental environment for their family, which supported the boys to develop, grow and mature. Frank described the network of relationships and support provided by family members acted as a buffer: *despite the traumas of my father, there were stable parts of my life*. Positive experiences of the extended family included being cared for, receiving financial support, love, and a sense of security, providing support to their mothers, and offering guidance and guardianship.

### ***Reliance on grandparents***

For a number of respondents, grandparents played an important role in their childhood. In contrast to the variable outcomes of father figures in the form of stepfathers and mother's boyfriends, extended family members embraced and included the men when they were boys. Reflecting on his childhood experiences, Bill recalled how his grandmother who lived with the family for long periods provided parental support and *"would help in babysitting and stuff like that"* for himself and three siblings. On further reflection, Bill told how his grandmother:

*Instilled, just, values and morals ... she was good that way. ... Nana was a great storyteller, as well, forever telling stories about the family ... I think my grandmother's probably my second parent, although that was not the same as a father.*

Like Bill, Charles recounted the positive impact his grandparents had on his development. In discussing his experiences, Charles felt that the impact of father absence had been minimised because:

*I had really good grandparents. ... I love my grandparents ... My grandmother's always, to me, I think the strongest influence on what I was doing.*

Aaron recalled living with his grandmother until around the age of five. After which his mother moved into a flat. She worked... and my brother and me virtually took care of ourselves. Whereas Jake, who later in his childhood lived with a violent stepfather, fondly recalled his early years' experience of his grandfather:

*I did swimming, my grandfather used to have me swimming training, I used to walk to from Primary School up to the swimming pool every afternoon after school and do swimming. I can swim like nothing else.*

### ***Reliance on extended family members***

In addition to grandparents, other extended family members were pivotal to these men's lives in terms of the provision of support and providing a nurturing family environment. Jake discussed how his aunts and uncles took on roles around the home to support his mother. On recollection he spoke tenderly of these childhood memories:

*Going to the beach with my grandparents, my aunts and uncles, or just going out with my aunts and uncles. Because we walked to the beach and they'd just take this six year old, four year old for a walk with them. There's photos of me at the beach ... it was love I got it from my grandparents and my aunts and uncles.*

Similarly, Frank recalled treasured childhood memories he had of extended family members who provided support in terms of social outings and a sense of belonging:

*... [We] would stop in a hotel on the way back for a few drinks. We'd be left in the car with soft drinks and chips and whatever. I have very fond memories of that.*

Frank also alluded to the importance and support extended family members can offer a child growing up in an absent father home, stating:

*I think the other thing that was helpful for us was that there was this family, close-knit family, on my mother's side where she had two sisters living fairly close. So I had cousins fairly close at hand ... It was a fairly extended family around us, which helped.*

Similar to Frank, David remembered other family members with whom they had a close relationship and *who looked after them like their own*. David spoke of his godmother offering encouragement, in addition to providing financial support to his mother:

*... my godmother built a very successful [business] she had the income to be able to service a loan and managed to buy a small cottage ... and they [mother and*

godmother] *went on to buy two more properties ... So she was a very inspirational woman and person in my life, so I was lucky...*

Other participants also spoke of the financial assistance provided to them by extended family members, which allowed some of these men to attend and fulfil schooling requirements. For example Hugh stated ... *my granddad was paying for my schooling ... and those sorts of things.* Likewise, in speaking of his uncle, Pierce shared how he provided support to his mother and himself:

*Well he helped my mother as far—with money, all the school fees, not just money but school fees, and that sort of thing make sure there is enough for uniforms and that sort of stuff. He had sort of her welfare at heart, and mine and my brother as well. He's the nearest thing probably I've sort of had to a father figure.*

The family relational network provided constancy, tradition, love, feelings of security and belonging as well as financial aid. In the absence of the father this relational attachment network played a significant role in providing opportunities for the boys to form secure attachment bonds and provided a supportive environment for the men in addition to their mothers.

## **Discussion**

It is clear from our findings that the experience of growing up in a father absent household is not homogenous; the themes and narratives presented describe a varied tapestry of family relations that formed the social microsystems of growing up in a father absent household. Though the absent father was a catalyst for significant disruption within the family

microsystem, substantial variation existed across the participants. Some participants resided in family contexts where parents or father figures displayed resilience and positive parenting, whilst others experienced extensive abuse at the hands of unrelated men in father figure roles, with maternal choice of subsequent partners having an enormous influence on the boys. This variation underscores the importance of developing diversity in nursing and other healthcare services and supports for children and their families, and in attending to the unique needs of parents and their children. Further, an important focus of working with children and parents experiencing adjustment to parental absence is strengthening, not only the parent-child dyad and immediate family unit, but also the relational network that buffers the parent and child/ren. The buffering effect of extended family has been identified in other studies of family adversity, and is a defining factor in healthy families (Martin & Yurkovich, 2014).

In our study, positive father figures, grandparents and members of the extended family played an important and influential role in providing practical support, nurturance, love, wisdom, and recreational opportunities. Their presence and support aided young boys, and later these boys when they were men, to appraise and make sense of the events of their childhood by providing frameworks rooted in shared meanings and beliefs, through which the boys could interpret their father's absence and the impact on their mothers and themselves. Darbyshire and Jackson (2005) noted that family strengths models present descriptions of characteristics and outcomes, but they do not illuminate the process of why some families are more resilient than others. Rather than a trait or skill, resilience is a process and the narratives from the men in our study illustrate many aspects of the strategies and processes of family resilience. For example the men's stories illuminated the affection, acceptance and commitment extended families demonstrated to the men themselves as well as their mothers, in addition to the shared time and

togetherness these men experienced, with these qualities being recognised as family attributes which promote strength and resilience (Black & Lobo, 2008; Silberberg, 2001).

Other research indicates that primary attachment to a parent figure assists infants and children to up-regulate emotional states by engaging in activities that are joyful (Schorer & McIntosh, 2011). For the boys in our study, secure attachment to key family members, particularly grandmothers, positive father figures and uncles, appeared to provide opportunities for both of these forms of positive emotional regulation. In addition, within the relational network of the family, these attachments provided opportunities for boys to engage with shared family belief systems, express emotions, and develop relational closeness in a dependable family or kin network. This further resonates with theories of family resilience processes (Walsh, 2002), with family cohesiveness and positive affect buffering the negative effect of insecure childhood attachment to fathers (Demby, Riggs, & Kaminski, 2015).

It has also been postulated that family resilience processes that are available to individuals may be more powerful in shaping resilience than a single relationship (Walsh, 2002). Although a number of men in our study recounted some dysfunctional and damaging family experiences, others illuminated strengths within many families. A number of families functioned as multigenerational systems that responded to adversity while continuing to nurture children. The positive relational and often multigenerational supports and networks available to some boys assisted them to develop the personal resources and attributes required for resilience. Though the findings from this study have limited generalisability, family nursing practice that considers interventions that can increase and connect relational and supportive networks has the ability to promote family strength and resilience in the face of lone parenting and father absence.

## **Impact Statement**

Findings from this study highlight the importance of extended relational networks. Through women drawing on the support of extended relational networks, emotional, economic and psychosocial support can be received, which promotes nurturing environments for lone mothers and their children. Furthermore, the provision of support from extended relational networks and the environment in which this promotes, has the ability to overcome challenging personal circumstances and foster family resilience to facilitate both mother and child/ren wellbeing.

## **Conclusion**

The narratives of these men revealed their experiences of growing up in a father absent home within the context of father figures and supportive relational networks. Findings highlighted that despite some men felt they were missing out on what a biological father can offer with some experiencing adversity at the hands of father figures, they expressed being fulfilled and supported by their extended family network. In addition to offering relational networks offering women and children financial support, non-tangible support such as social opportunities, a sense of belonging, generational knowledge and traditions, positive self-regard and experiencing love and belonging, can foster strength and resilience in father absent households. Thus, family health nurses can help lone parents to identify sources of relational support in father absent households and when working with men who have grown up in a father-absent household, by asking them to reflect on sources of strength in their childhoods can help them overcome negative experiences and feelings of helplessness. Through nurses working with families using a strength based approach and promoting recovery from adversity associated



with family breakdown, family resilience can be fostered, which can have long-term positive effects. Moreover, considering the men in this study significantly benefited from the supportive father figures available to them, nurses working with single parented families headed by women can guide them to reflect on extended relational networks to provide support for their families, which can also provide nurturing relationships in the father absent home.

## References

- Allen, S., & Daly, K. (2007). *The effects of father involvement: an updated research summary of the evidence inventory*. Retrieved from University of Guelph, Canada: <http://www.fira.uoguelph.ca/>
- Allison, S., Stacey, K., Dadds, V., Roeger, L., Wood, A., & Martin, G. (2003). What the family brings: gathering evidence for strengths-based work. *Journal of Family Therapy*, 25, 263-284.
- Attar-Schwartz, S., Tan, J.-P., Buchanan, A., Flouri, E., & Griggs, J. (2009). grandparenting and adolescent adjustment in two-parent biological, lone-parent, and stepfamilies. *Journal of Family psychology*, 23(1), 67-75.
- Benzies, K., & Mychasiuk, R. (2009). Fostering family resilience: a review of the key protective factors. *Child & Family Social Work*, 14(1), 103-114. doi:10.1111/j.1365-2206.2008.00586.x
- Black, K., & Lobo, M. (2008). A conceptual review of family resilience factors. *Journal of Family Nursing*, 14(1), 33-55.
- Bonanno, G. A., Romero, S. A., & Klein, S. I. (2015). The temporal elements of psychological resilience: An integrative framework for the study of individuals, families and communities. *Psychological Inquiry*, 26(2), 139-169.
- Bowlby, J. (2005). *A secure base: Clinical applications of attachment theory* (Vol. 393): Taylor & Francis.
- Coffey, A., & Atkinson, P. (1996). *Making sense of qualitative data: complementary research strategies*: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Creswell, J. W., Fetters, M. D., & Ivankova, N. V. (2004). Designing a mixed methods study in primary care. *The Annals of Family Medicine*, 2(1), 7-12.
- Darbyshire, P., & Jackson, D. (2005). Epilogue: Using a strengths approach to understand resilience and build health capacity in families. *Contemporary Nurse*, 18(1-2), 211-212.
- Demby, K. P., Riggs, S. A., & Kaminski, P. L. (2015). Attachment and family processes in children's psychological adjustment in middle childhood. *Family Process*, 56(1), 234-249.
- East, L., Jackson, D., Power, T., & Woods, D. (2014). Holes in my memories": A qualitative study of men affected by father absence, . *Issues in Mental Health Nursing*, 35(8), 604-612.
- Martin, D., & Yurkovich, E. (2014). "Close-knit" define a health Native American Indian family. *Journal of Family Nursing*, 20(1), 51-72.
- Masten, A. S., & Monn, A. R. (2015). Child and family resilience: a call for integrated science, practice, and professional training. *Family Relations*, 64, 5-21.
- Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook*: Sage.
- Mitchell, W. (2007). Research review: The role of grandparents in intergenerational support for families with disabled children: A review of the literature. *Child & Family Social Work*, 12(1), 94-101.
- Schore, A., & McIntosh, J. (2011). Family law and the neuroscience of attachment, Part 1. *Family Court Review*, 49(3), 501-512.
- Silberberg, S. (2001). Searching for family resilience. *Family Matters*, 58, 52-57.
- Walsh, F. (2002). A family resilience framework: innovative practice applications. *Family Relations*, 51(2), 130.