

Review Article

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Absentee Fathers and Female Child Development in Jamaica: Cognitive Psychosocial and Sexual Behavioural Outcomes

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ABSTRACT

Absentee fatherhood in Jamaica has emerged as a salient psychosocial factor influencing female children's cognitive, emotional, and social development. While extensive research has examined paternal absence among male offspring, fewer studies have rigorously explored its impact on girls, particularly regarding executive functioning, emotional regulation, and sexual risk behaviours. This study integrates behavioural, developmental, and sociocultural perspectives to examine how father absence correlates with cognitive delays, psychosocial maladjustment, and high-risk sexual behaviour among female children in Jamaica. The research utilises a conceptual-analytical design supplemented by documentary and literature analysis, drawing on regional family studies, longitudinal research, and psychosocial theory. The findings indicate that paternal absence is associated with diminished executive functioning, elevated emotional distress, and increased vulnerability to early sexual debut and risky sexual behaviour, while outcomes are moderated by maternal support, extended kin networks, and community mentorship. Policy recommendations include early childhood screening, female-focused mentorship programmes, parenting support interventions, and public education campaigns promoting responsible fatherhood. The current study contributes to the Caribbean discourse on gendered developmental risk, offering culturally grounded strategies for mitigating the psychosocial consequences of father absence.

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Introduction

Absentee fatherhood represents a persistent structural feature of Caribbean family life, with substantial implications for child development [1,2]. In Jamaica, paternal non-residence is often intertwined with matrifocal family systems, economic precarity, and social norms surrounding father involvement [1,3]. While research has documented cognitive and behavioural impacts of father absence on boys, less attention has been paid to female children, creating a notable gap in the literature regarding gender-specific developmental trajectories [4,5]. Female children may experience distinct psychosocial consequences, including disrupted emotional regulation, attachment insecurity, and increased vulnerability to high-risk sexual behaviour [6]. Cognitive domains such as executive functioning, attention, and working memory may also be affected by the absence of paternal scaffolding and role modelling [7]. Furthermore, developmental outcomes are influenced by a constellation of ecological factors, including maternal support, extended kin networks, and community engagement, highlighting the necessity of context-sensitive analysis [8]. This study addresses these gaps by examining the multidimensional effects of father absence on girls in Jamaica, with attention to cognitive, psychosocial, and sexual behavioural outcomes, and by proposing

culturally appropriate policy and intervention strategies.

Research Objectives

- To examine the influence of absentee fatherhood on executive functioning and cognitive development in female children.
- To analyse the psychosocial outcomes associated with paternal absence, including emotional regulation, self-esteem, and social adjustment.
- To assess associations between father absence and high-risk sexual behaviour during adolescence.
- To identify protective factors that mitigate adverse developmental outcomes, including maternal engagement, extended kin support, and community-based mentorship.
- To propose evidence-based policy and intervention strategies aimed at supporting female children in father-absent households.

Literature Review

Absentee fatherhood has been consistently associated with altered cognitive outcomes in children, with notable gender-specific effects. Research indicates that girls raised without consistent paternal involvement may exhibit delays in executive functioning, including working memory, attentional control, and problem-solving skills [3,4]. These cognitive deficits are often mediated by environmental stressors such as economic instability, household chaos, and community violence [9]. Maternal compensation can

buffer some of these effects; however, the absence of paternal scaffolding reduces exposure to alternative cognitive modelling, which is particularly relevant for complex problem-solving and goal-directed behaviour [1,2]. Longitudinal studies show that father presence contributes to academic achievement and higher-order cognitive skills, even when controlling for socioeconomic variables [5]. Neuropsychological evidence suggests that attachment disruptions in early childhood can influence prefrontal cortex development, with potential long-term effects on decision-making and impulse control [7]. Therefore, absentee fatherhood represents a multifactorial risk factor for cognitive underdevelopment in female children, requiring contextual and culturally sensitive interpretation.

Psychosocial development is similarly affected by paternal absence, with increased risk of emotional dysregulation, lower self-esteem, and social adjustment difficulties [6,10]. Attachment theory posits that secure paternal bonds support emotional regulation, resilience, and the internalisation of social norms [11]. Girls without consistent father figures may experience heightened anxiety, depressive symptoms, and difficulties in peer relationships [8,12]. Social learning theory suggests that fathers contribute uniquely to modelling interpersonal behaviours, conflict resolution, and adaptive coping strategies [13]. Jamaican studies indicate that extended kinship networks can partially mitigate emotional risks, particularly when grandmothers or maternal uncles provide consistent guidance [1,2]. Nevertheless, the absence of paternal engagement may still lead to elevated psychosocial vulnerability during adolescence, a critical period for identity formation [4,6]. These findings underscore the importance of evaluating father absence within an ecological framework that considers individual, family, and community moderators.

Evidence from Caribbean and international contexts also links absentee fatherhood to early sexual debut and high-risk sexual behaviour among female adolescents. Girls raised in father-absent households may initiate sexual activity earlier, engage in multiple sexual partnerships, and exhibit lower contraceptive use [5,6,11]. Such patterns are often interpreted as behavioural responses to attachment insecurity, emotional neglect, or the absence of paternal monitoring [9,12]. Sociocultural factors, including peer influence, media exposure, and community norms, further shape sexual decision-making in adolescents [7,10]. Jamaican research suggests that high-risk sexual behaviour is more strongly associated with paternal absence when maternal supervision is inconsistent or when household poverty is severe [1,3]. Importantly, these behaviours should be understood as psychosocial outcomes rather than moral failings, avoiding stigmatising language [4,6]. Interventions aimed at delaying sexual debut and promoting healthy sexual decision-making must therefore integrate family, school, and community-based strategies.

Cognitive, psychosocial, and sexual outcomes are interrelated, reflecting complex biopsychosocial mechanisms. Executive functioning deficits may reduce problem-solving and risk-assessment abilities, increasing vulnerability to psychosocial stress and sexual risk-taking [9,7]. Emotional dysregulation can exacerbate impulsivity, influence peer group selection, and heighten susceptibility to coercion or exploitation [11]. Social learning and attachment processes operate simultaneously, such that absent fathers limit observational learning of adaptive social behaviours [12,13]. Poverty and structural inequality often amplify these pathways, producing cumulative disadvantage [1,10]. Evidence suggests that protective factors, including maternal warmth, extended kin support, school engagement, and community

mentorship, can mitigate these risks [2,6]. Effective intervention, therefore, requires a holistic approach addressing individual, familial, and structural determinants.

Table 1: Cognitive Psychosocial and Sexual Outcomes of Female Children in Father-Absent Households

Domain	Observed Outcomes	Moderating Factors	Key References
Cognitive	Executive functioning deficits, lower working memory, and academic underachievement	Maternal support; school engagement; extended kin support	[3,4,10]
Psychosocial	Emotional dysregulation, anxiety, low self-esteem, and social adjustment difficulties	Maternal warmth; kinship networks; community mentorship	[5,8,11]
Sexual Behaviour	Early sexual debut; multiple sexual partners; inconsistent contraceptive use	Maternal monitoring; community programs; peer influence	[4,6,9]

Studies further demonstrate that Jamaican girls in father-absent households are disproportionately exposed to environmental stressors that interact with psychosocial risk. Chronic exposure to neighbourhood violence, limited educational resources, and economic hardship compounds the developmental impact of paternal absence [1,3,7]. Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory provides a useful framework for conceptualising these multi-level influences, emphasising how microsystem (family), mesosystem (school), and exosystem (community) factors shape outcomes [14]. Social support and mentorship programmes serve as critical protective mechanisms, mitigating risk by enhancing self-efficacy, emotional regulation, and social competence [2,6]. Jamaican public health and educational initiatives increasingly recognise the need to integrate fatherhood engagement, female mentorship, and psychosocial support into community programming. Early intervention strategies, particularly during pre-adolescence, appear most effective in preventing high-risk sexual behaviour and enhancing psychosocial resilience [10,11]. Collectively, the literature underscores that absentee fatherhood interacts with broader structural and social determinants, necessitating multi-level intervention approaches.

Research indicates that absentee fathers have measurable impacts on the cognitive, psychosocial, and sexual development of female children in Jamaica. While maternal support and extended kinship networks provide partial protective effects, the absence of paternal engagement increases vulnerability to executive functioning deficits, emotional dysregulation, and high-risk sexual behaviour. Interventions must integrate family, school, and community strategies to mitigate these risks, recognising the influence of structural poverty and ecological stressors. Culturally grounded, evidence-based approaches are required to support healthy development in father-absent households, promoting both psychosocial resilience and academic success.

**Methodology
Research Design**

This study employs a conceptual-analytical approach supplemented by documentary and literature review methods to examine the

effects of absentee fatherhood on female children in Jamaica. The design is appropriate because the research questions focus on cognitive, psychosocial, and sexual behavioural outcomes that are not easily captured through experimental methods. Primary sources include Jamaican family studies, longitudinal research on child development, and public health reports, while secondary sources comprise peer-reviewed literature in psychology, sociology, and developmental neuroscience [1-4,6]. The study triangulates evidence from multiple disciplines to enhance analytical validity and to situate findings within a culturally grounded Caribbean context. Comparative analysis of international studies allows for evaluation of generalisable mechanisms and locally specific mediators. This methodology integrates normative analysis with empirical documentation, enabling rigorous exploration of risk and protective factors. Ethical considerations were maintained by relying solely on publicly available and published research, ensuring participant confidentiality and research integrity.

Data Sources and Selection

Documentary data were drawn from studies focusing on female child development, paternal involvement, and psychosocial outcomes in Jamaica and the wider Caribbean [1,2,5,6]. Inclusion criteria required studies to report measurable cognitive, psychosocial, or sexual behavioural outcomes in father-absent households. Exclusion criteria included studies without gender-specific analysis or without sufficient methodological rigour. Secondary sources were selected using databases such as PubMed, PsycINFO, and Google Scholar, with search terms including “father absence,” “female child development,” “Jamaica,” “psychosocial outcomes,” and “sexual behaviour.” Reference lists of retrieved articles were also examined to identify relevant literature. Data were extracted systematically, including study design, sample size, measured outcomes, and key findings. The analytical process emphasised cross-validation across multiple studies to reduce bias and enhance the reliability of synthesised conclusions.

Analytical Framework

The study integrates three theoretical frameworks: attachment theory, social learning theory, and ecological systems theory [12-14]. Attachment theory elucidates how paternal absence may disrupt secure emotional bonds and influence psychosocial outcomes. Social learning theory explains the role of fathers in modelling behaviours and guiding socialisation. Ecological systems theory situates child development within interconnected microsystem, mesosystem, and exosystem influences, capturing maternal, kinship, and community effects [14]. Coding categories for analysis included cognitive performance, emotional regulation, social adjustment, sexual behaviour, and protective factors. A thematic approach was used to identify recurrent patterns across studies, highlighting both risk and resilience pathways. Tables were created to summarise cognitive, psychosocial, and sexual outcomes, along with associated moderators, providing a visual synthesis of the literature. This integrative approach allows for both conceptual clarity and empirical grounding of the findings.

Findings and Discussion

Cognitive Development

Absentee fatherhood is associated with measurable deficits in executive functioning and academic performance among female children in Jamaica [3,4,10]. Girls in father-absent households frequently demonstrate reduced working memory, attentional control, and problem-solving abilities, which are mediated by increased exposure to stress and environmental instability [9].

Maternal support and school engagement can buffer these deficits but cannot fully replace paternal scaffolding [1,2]. Cognitive outcomes are further moderated by socioeconomic status, with poverty amplifying the effects of absent fathers [10]. Longitudinal research indicates that paternal engagement contributes uniquely to higher-order cognitive skills, including planning, goal-setting, and adaptive reasoning [5]. Neurodevelopmental evidence suggests early attachment disruptions influence prefrontal cortex maturation, impacting long-term decision-making and executive function [7]. These findings emphasise the need for early cognitive screening and educational support for girls in father-absent households.

Psychosocial Development

Psychosocial outcomes include emotional dysregulation, social adjustment difficulties, and reduced self-esteem [6,8]. Secure attachment with fathers supports emotional regulation, stress resilience, and positive peer relationships [12]. Girls without consistent paternal figures may experience heightened anxiety, depressive symptoms, and vulnerability to peer influence [11]. Extended kin networks, including grandmothers, maternal uncles, and older siblings, partially mitigate these effects by providing supervision and emotional support [1,2]. Community mentorship programmes have been shown to enhance social competence and resilience in father-absent girls [2,6]. Behavioural modelling through male mentors can also provide normative guidance in navigating adolescence. Overall, psychosocial outcomes are determined by the interaction of family structure, maternal support, and broader social context.

Sexual Behavioural Outcomes

Absentee fatherhood has been linked to early sexual debut and increased engagement in high-risk sexual behaviour among adolescent girls [5,6,11]. Mechanisms include attachment insecurity, lack of paternal monitoring, and modelling of relational norms [9,12]. Sociocultural factors such as peer pressure, media influence, and neighbourhood norms further modulate these behaviours [7,10]. Studies suggest that girls in father-absent households may have multiple sexual partners and inconsistent contraceptive use, increasing vulnerability to teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections [5,6]. Maternal supervision and community-based programmes are protective factors that reduce high-risk behaviour. Importantly, sexual behaviour outcomes should be interpreted as psychosocial responses rather than moral failings. These findings highlight the need for evidence-based sexual health education integrated with family and community support systems.

Protective Factors

Protective factors include maternal warmth, extended kin involvement, school engagement, and community mentorship [1,2,6]. Maternal support mitigates emotional and cognitive risks, providing consistent care and monitoring. Extended family members supplement supervision, discipline, and guidance, buffering against developmental deficits. School programmes offering female mentorship and skill-building improve resilience and social competence. Community interventions, including youth clubs and mentorship initiatives, reinforce pro-social behaviour and reduce engagement in risky sexual activity. Socioeconomic support, including conditional cash transfers or educational assistance, further strengthens protective environments [10]. These findings underscore the importance of multi-level interventions addressing family, school, and community domains simultaneously.

Table 2: Cognitive Psychosocial and Sexual Outcomes of Father-Absent Female Children in Jamaica

Domain	Observed Outcomes	Moderators/ Protective Factors	Key References
Cognitive	Executive function deficits, attention problems, and lower academic achievement	Maternal support; school engagement; extended kin	[3,4,10]
Psychosocial	Anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and social adjustment difficulties	Extended kin support; community mentorship; maternal warmth	[5,8,11]
Sexual Behaviour	Early sexual debut; multiple sexual partners; inconsistent contraceptive use	Maternal monitoring; peer support; community programmes	[4,6,9]

Policy Recommendations

Early Childhood Screening

Early identification of cognitive and psychosocial risk in father-absent girls is essential. Schools and health clinics should implement executive functioning and emotional regulation assessments for at-risk children. Screening can enable targeted interventions before deficits escalate into chronic academic or behavioural problems. Collaboration between educational psychologists, social workers, and primary care providers is recommended. Screening protocols should integrate culturally appropriate measures validated in Caribbean populations. Early detection allows resource allocation to high-risk girls, maximising intervention efficacy. Such approaches align with evidence demonstrating that cognitive and emotional deficits are malleable in pre-adolescence [3,10].

Female-Focused Mentorship Programs

School- and community-based female mentorship initiatives should be expanded to provide consistent role models for girls in father-absent households. Mentors can support social skills, emotional regulation, and academic achievement. Programmes should emphasise both personal development and sexual health education. Evidence suggests sustained mentorship improves resilience and reduces engagement in high-risk sexual behaviour [2,6]. Partnerships with local NGOs, faith-based organisations, and schools can enhance programme reach. Mentorship interventions should be regularly evaluated to monitor outcomes and improve effectiveness. Female-focused programmes complement family support, providing critical relational scaffolding absent in father-absent households.

Parental Education and Co-Parenting Support

Parenting programmes should engage both mothers and non-resident fathers to enhance co-parenting and communication. Guidance on consistent supervision, emotional support, and monitoring of sexual behaviour is critical. Evidence indicates that even limited paternal engagement can positively affect cognitive and psychosocial outcomes [5,8]. Programmes should address conflict resolution between parents to avoid adversarial

dynamics that may exacerbate risk. Culturally tailored curricula improve acceptance and sustainability. Community workshops and home-based support interventions can reinforce messaging. Strengthening co-parenting supports the holistic development of female children.

Community-Based Mental Health and Sexual Health Interventions

Community centres should integrate mental health screening with sexual and reproductive health education. Interventions should target high-risk urban areas with elevated rates of absentee fatherhood, poverty, and adolescent pregnancy [7,10]. Group counselling, mentorship, and skills-building workshops can provide protective social networks. Collaboration with local schools, NGOs, and healthcare providers enhances accessibility. Programmes should emphasise empowerment, resilience, and evidence-based sexual decision-making. Monitoring and evaluation systems should measure psychosocial, cognitive, and sexual outcomes. Such community interventions reinforce familial support, mitigating developmental risks associated with paternal absence.

Research and Monitoring

Longitudinal research on female children in father-absent households in Jamaica should be prioritised. Data should capture cognitive, psychosocial, and sexual outcomes across developmental stages. Research funding should support culturally relevant measures and multi-level analysis. Monitoring trends enables evidence-based policy adjustment. Collaborative networks between universities, public health agencies, and NGOs can enhance research capacity. Results can inform targeted intervention strategies and resource allocation. Continuous knowledge generation ensures that interventions remain responsive to evolving societal contexts.

Conclusion

Absentee fatherhood in Jamaica exerts significant multidimensional effects on female children, influencing cognitive, psychosocial, and sexual developmental trajectories. Cognitive deficits primarily manifest in executive functioning, attentional control, and academic performance, compounded by environmental stressors such as poverty and household instability [3,4,10]. Psychosocial outcomes include emotional dysregulation, low self-esteem, heightened anxiety, and social adjustment challenges, with partial buffering provided by maternal warmth and extended kin networks [1,2,6,8]. Absence of paternal engagement also correlates with early sexual debut, multiple sexual partnerships, and inconsistent contraceptive use, often mediated by attachment insecurity, reduced supervision, and peer or community influences [5,6,15,16]. Protective factors, including school-based mentorship, community support, and structured female role models, can mitigate some of these risks but require sustained intervention and culturally grounded implementation [2,6,17]. Evidence underscores the importance of adopting an ecological framework that integrates family, school, and community interventions to enhance resilience and developmental outcomes [14,18]. Collectively, these findings emphasise that absentee fatherhood is not merely a familial concern but a public health and societal issue requiring evidence-based policies, early interventions, and longitudinal monitoring [19-21].

Appendices

Appendix A: Summary Table of Jamaican Studies on Female Children in Father-Absent Households

Study	Sample	Outcomes Assessed	Key Findings	References
[1]	N/A	Family structure, psychosocial outcomes	Father absence linked to emotional vulnerability; extended kin mitigates some risk	1
[2]	N/A	Psychosocial outcomes, identity formation	Girls reported identity confusion and emotional distress in father-absent households	2
[3]	2000 US/Caribbean cohort	Cognitive and academic performance	Father absence correlated with lower executive function and academic achievement	3
[6]	Jamaica, n=500	Sexual behaviour and supervision	Early sexual debut more common; maternal monitoring reduced risk	6
[10]	Jamaica, n=150	Executive functioning, poverty interactions	Poverty amplified cognitive deficits associated with father absence	10
[5]	International meta-analysis	Paternal involvement & developmental outcomes	Father engagement improved cognitive and psychosocial outcomes	5

Appendix B: Screening Guidelines for Cognitive and Psychosocial Risk

Domain	Recommended Screening Tools	Age Range	Purpose
Executive Function	Behaviour Rating Inventory of Executive Function (BRIEF)	6–18 yrs	Assess working memory, planning, inhibitory control
Emotional Regulation	Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ)	4–17 yrs	Identify internalising and externalising behaviours
Social Adjustment	Child Behaviour Checklist (CBCL)	6–18 yrs	Assess social competence, peer relations, and behavioural problems
Sexual Behaviour	Sexual Risk Behaviour Assessment (customised for Jamaica)	12–18 yrs	Monitor early sexual activity, number of partners, contraceptive use

Appendix C: Mentorship and Community Intervention Framework

School-Based Female Mentorship

- Pair at-risk girls with trained female mentors.
- Focus on academic support, emotional resilience, and social skills development.
- Weekly sessions and monthly family engagement activities.

Community Programmes

- Youth clubs and safe spaces offering psychosocial support.
- Skills-building workshops (communication, leadership, decision-making).
- Integrate sexual and reproductive health education.

Parental Education

- Support for mothers and non-resident fathers on co-parenting.
- Guidance on monitoring, emotional support, and conflict resolution.
- Periodic workshops and home-based follow-ups to reinforce practices.

Monitoring and Evaluation

- Collect pre- and post-intervention data on cognitive, psychosocial, and sexual outcomes.
- Adjust interventions based on outcome trends and feedback.
- Engage local stakeholders for sustainability.

Appendix D: Policy Intervention Checklist

Intervention Area	Action Steps	Target Outcome
Early Screening	Implement executive function and psychosocial assessment in schools	Early detection of risk
Mentorship	Develop structured female mentorship programmes	Enhanced resilience, academic performance
Parental Engagement	Deliver co-parenting and maternal support workshops	Improved supervision and emotional support
Community Support	Establish youth clubs and safe spaces	Reduced sexual risk behaviour and emotional distress
Research	Fund longitudinal studies in Jamaica	Data-driven policy and intervention

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