



The Impact of Parental Absence on Substance Use and Psychological Adjustment among Young Adults in Hayat Abad Peshawar

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Abstract

This research was conducted to explore the relationship between parental absence; Substance Use and psychological adjustment. The sample comprised of young adult students studying at various universities located in Hayatabad, Peshawar. 150 university students, 75 males and 75 Females were recruited for the present study. Data were collected through Shah and Qureshi Father Involvement Scale, Drug Abuse Screening Test, Depression Anxiety Stress Scale. The results show strong positive correlations between all three variables. SQFI is highly correlated with both DASS and DAST ($r = .828$, $p < .01$), indicating that as SQFI scores increase, DASS and DAST scores also tend to increase. Similarly, DASS and DAST are strongly correlated ($r = .90$, $p < .01$), suggesting they may be measuring highly overlapping or identical constructs. All correlations are statistically significant at the 0.01 level, meaning the relationships are unlikely due to chance. These findings imply a strong interrelationship among the psychological measures examined. The findings of this study highlight the important effects of parental absence on the use of psychoactive substances and psychological adaptation in young people. Results show that those who have experienced long absences of one or both parents in childhood or adolescence are more likely to participate in the use of psychoactive substances as a mechanism to overcome.

Keywords: Parental Absence, Substance Use and Psychological Adjustment.



Introduction

The effect of parental absence on alcohol use and psychological adjustment at younger ages is an emerging field that explores interactions between family situations, individual lifestyles, and psychiatric functions (Mao et al., 2020). Parental absence can lead to various emotional, psychological, and behavioral problems (Lacey et al., 2018). Although there is no exact global figure for the number of children separated from their parents, it is estimated that hundreds of millions of children around the world experience this separation, and the number is rising (Fellmeth et al., 2018; Bevan & Kumari, 2021).

Parental assistance in early childhood is considered one of the most important factors contributing to a child's cognitive development and non-violent behavior (Yang et al., 2022; Annor et al., 2024). This absence can disrupt the formation of stable family units and result in instability and insecurity in the lives of young adults (Martinez-Yarza et al., 2024). Often, this leads to the lack of role models, which negatively affects social skills, emotional regulation, and decision-making abilities (Sofrona et al., 2024). Without parents, young adults may feel isolated, abandoned, and rejected, creating a psychological vacuum (Heckman et al., 2013). This void may be filled with external influences such as peers or negative forces that do not offer constructive guidance. Financial instability may also follow, as single parents or guardians may struggle to provide support, increasing stress and anxiety in the lives of young adults (Jiang et al., 2023). Parental absence can further affect the ability of young people to form healthy relationships, with common issues including trust difficulties and fear of rejection. Studies suggest that a lack of parental support in early childhood impacts physical health, routines, and academic performance (Zhou et al., 2018).

The use of psychoactive substances including alcohol, tobacco, heroin, cocaine, and prescription medications used inappropriately can have physical, psychological, and social consequences (Hegmann et al., 1993). Substance use spans a continuum, from experimental to habitual, and can lead to abuse or dependence (Breslau & Peterson, 1996). Motivations for use vary, including social pressure, emotional coping, trauma, and stress-related factors (Chase-Lansdale et al., 1995). Young people are especially vulnerable due to their stage of identity development and increased autonomy. Childhood adversities are shown to have long-term health consequences, partly through maladaptive coping behaviors like smoking and alcohol use (Su et al., 2015).

The absence of one or both parents in child's life represents a serious disruption to a child's life. This often results in a complex set of challenges affecting psychological development and adjustment (Ren et al., 2025). The consequences can be both immediate, such as sadness or confusion, and long-term, affecting personality, relationships, and overall well-being (Bornstein et al., 2015). A primary outcome is disruption in attachment relationships. Secure attachment, typically formed through consistent caregiving, is foundational to emotional regulation and social growth. Without a primary caregiver, children may struggle to develop or maintain secure attachments, leading to anxious or avoidant attachment patterns (Stern et al., 1998).

Children and adolescents growing up without constant parental presence are more prone to loneliness, abandonment, and emotional distress (Kim et al., 2018). These emotional difficulties may lead some to seek temporary relief through substances like alcohol, tobacco, or illicit drugs (Shakya et al., 2012). For many, substance use becomes a coping mechanism to escape painful emotions especially in the absence of parental



emotional support (Friedman et al., 1999). Parental absence significantly influences the psychological adjustment of young people, often with lasting emotional and behavioral consequences (Cas et al., 2014). Events such as death, divorce, or abandonment destabilize family systems and emotional support, especially during key developmental periods (Chapman et al., 2004). This disruption may lead to anxiety, low self-esteem, and difficulty managing emotions (Culpin et al., 2024).

Peshawar provides a unique sociocultural context for this study, particularly as an urban center in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK), Pakistan. The city has a large youth population, and studies have reported high levels of depression and anxiety among young adults, especially medical students. One area in particular Hayatabad is noted in existing literature for its pressing research needs and substance use concerns. Thus, understanding the intersection of parental absence and youth mental health in Hayatabad demands context-specific, integrated research. This study aims to explore how parental absence relates to both psychological adjustment and substance use among young adults. It is based on the assumption that the absence of one or both parents may significantly influence emotional well-being and coping behaviors. Specifically, it examines whether there is a significant relationship between parental absence and substance use, as well as between parental absence and psychological adjustment in the context of young adults living in Hayatabad, Peshawar.

Method

Sample

The sample size for this study is 150 young adults. The population for this study consists of young adults residing in Hayatabad, Peshawar. This population is chosen due to its accessibility and relevance to the research objectives. Sample was taken from different universities students in Hayatabad, Peshawar. The Sample was selected using a purposive sampling technique.

Instruments

The Shah and Qureshi Father's Involvement Inventory (S&QFII) is a newly developed and validated scale created by Muhammad Saifullah Qureshi and Dr. Asghar Ali Shah in 2022. This 40-item inventory, divided into 10 sub-domains, aims to measure the level of father's involvement with their adolescent children from the adolescent's perspective. The scale was developed in two phases in the Buner district of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan, involving focus group discussions and in-depth interviews with adolescents to generate initial items, followed by a main study with undergraduate students to finalize the scale structure through factor analysis. Cronbach alpha of the scale for subscales ranges from .73 to .90.

Drug Abuse Screening Test

The Drug Abuse Screening Test (DAST) is a self-report questionnaire developed by Harvey Skinner in 1982 to screen for drug use problems (excluding alcohol and tobacco) within the past 12 months. Modeled after the Michigan Alcoholism Screening Test (MAST), it includes versions like DAST-20 and DAST-10. The DAST-10 consists of 10 yes/no items and has demonstrated good internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha > 0.8) and test-retest reliability. It is widely used in clinical and research settings to identify individuals at risk and facilitate early intervention.



Depression Anxiety Stress Scales

The Depression Anxiety Stress Scales (DASS), developed by S.H. Lovibond and P.F. Lovibond in 1995, is a self-report tool measuring depression, anxiety, and stress. The original DASS has 42 items (14 per subscale), while the shorter DASS-21 has 21 items (7 per subscale) rated on a 4-point Likert scale. Scores are summed (and doubled for DASS-21), reflecting symptom severity over the past week. The DASS is based on a dimensional model of psychopathology and shows high internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha ranging from 0.80 to 0.97

Results

Table 1: Descriptive statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance
Age	150	1.00	3.00	1.5867	.65729	.432
Gender	150	1.00	2.00	1.5000	.50168	.252
SES	150	1.00	3.00	2.3267	.62923	.396
Education	150	1.00	2.00	1.5400	.50007	.250
FI	150	1.00	2.00	1.5000	.50168	.252
Valid (listwise)	N 150					

The above table presents descriptive statistics for 150 participants. Age ($M = 1.59$, $SD = 0.66$) indicates a tilt toward younger categories, while SES ($M = 2.33$, $SD = 0.63$) reflects a majority in middle to upper socioeconomic status. Gender ($M = 1.50$, $SD = 0.50$) and FI ($M = 1.50$, $SD = 0.50$) are evenly distributed. Education ($M = 1.54$, $SD = 0.50$) slightly favors the higher category, with no missing data reported

Correlation Analysis

Table 2: Correlations

	SQFI	DASS	DAST
SQFI	1	.828**	.828**
DASS	.828**	1	.90**
DAST	.828**	.90**	1

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 2 presents the correlation coefficients among SQFI, DASS, and DAST. The results show strong positive correlations between all three variables. SQFI is highly correlated with both DASS and DAST ($r = .828$, $p < .01$), indicating that as SQFI scores increase, DASS and DAST scores also tend to increase. Similarly, DASS and DAST having strong correlation ($r = .90$, $p < .01$), indicating a close relationship between psychological distress and substance abuse severity. All correlations are statistically significant at the 0.01 level. These findings imply a strong interrelationship among the psychological measures examined.

T-test

Table 3: One-Sample Test

Test Value = 0					
				95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
				Lower	Upper
t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference		



DAST	17.089	149	.000	3.50000	3.0953	3.9047
DASS	53.323	149	.000	41.50000	39.9621	43.0379
SQFI	304.767	149	.000	183.76000	182.5686	184.9514

The one-sample t-test results indicate that the mean scores for DAST, DASS, and SQFI are all significantly different from zero, as all p-values are .000 ($p < .05$). The DAST score has a mean difference of 3.5 (95% CI: 3.10 to 3.90), suggesting a moderate level of drug abuse severity. The DASS score shows a much higher mean difference of 41.5 (95% CI: 39.96 to 43.04), indicating considerable levels of depression, anxiety, and stress among participants. The SQFI score is exceptionally high, with a mean difference of 183.76 (95% CI: 182.57 to 184.95), implying significant issues related to sleep quality and fatigue. Overall, all results are statistically significant, highlighting noteworthy psychological and behavioral concerns in the sample.

Regression Analysis

Table 4

Coefficients^a

		Unstandardized		Standardized		
		Coefficients		Coefficients		
Model		B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
1	(Constant)	-154.871	10.944		-14.151	.000
	SQFI	1.069	.060	.828	17.958	.000

Dependent Variable (DASS)

The regression table presents the results of a linear model predicting the dependent variable using SQFI (Shah and Qureshi Father Involvement Scale)) as the independent variable. The constant (intercept) is -154.871, indicating the predicted value of the dependent variable when SQFI is zero. The unstandardized coefficient for SQFI is 1.069, meaning that for every one-unit increase in SQFI, the dependent variable increases by 1.069 units. The standardized coefficient (Beta) of 0.828 suggests a strong positive relationship between SQFI and the dependent variable. The t-value of 17.958 and the significance value ($p = .000$) indicate that SQFI is a statistically significant predictor at the 0.05 level. Overall, the model shows that SQFI has a strong and significant impact on the outcome variable

Table 5

Coefficients^a

		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		
Model		B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
1	(Constant)	-48.177	2.880		-16.728	.000
	SQFI	.281	.016	.828	17.958	.000

The regression table shows that SQFI (presumably a predictor variable) significantly predicts the dependent variable DAST. The unstandardized coefficient for SQFI is 0.281, indicating that for each one-unit increase in SQFI, DAST increases by 0.281 units, holding all else constant. The standardized coefficient (Beta) is 0.828, suggesting a strong positive relationship between SQFI and DAST. The t-value of 17.958 and a significance level (p-value) of .000 confirm that this relationship is statistically significant. The constant term is -48.177, representing the predicted value of DAST when SQFI is zero.



Discussion

The purpose of this study is to study the effects of parental absence, particularly death, divorce, or separation, on the use of psychoactive substances and psychological adjustment in young people. Results revealed a significant positive correlation between parental absence and increased levels of psychoactive substance use and psychological distress. These results address the existing literature and the mechanisms that children can overcome for young people, assuming that parental absence may violate emotional regulations leading to life uncertainty and violent behavior (Qureshi, Khattak & Alay, 2021; Hassan et al, 2021).

One important conclusion was that those who survived the absence of their parents declared a higher note at the level of psychoactive substance use. This suggests that in the absence of parental leadership and emotional support, young people can use substances such as strategies to overcome blame (Qureshi, Raffique & Abbasi, 2024). These results are consistent with attachment theory, arguing that early violations of parental attachment can lead to emotional management, create difficulties in training safe relationships, and increase vulnerability to risky behavior.

Furthermore, this study also shows that parental absence has a significant impact on psychological adjustment, indicating increased levels of depression, anxiety, and stress among participants (Li et al., 2015). This may be due to the long-term emotional consequences of disrupted or absent family structures, such as feelings of abandonment, sadness, and chronic anxiety. Individuals who grow up without consistent parental support may struggle to develop secure attachments and healthy emotional regulation strategies, making them more susceptible to psychological distress in adulthood (Schimmenti & Bifulco, 2015). These psychological vulnerabilities, in turn, may increase reliance on maladaptive coping mechanisms, such as substance use, to manage overwhelming emotions.

Limitations and Suggestion

This study focuses only on certain forms of parental absence (change and division/divorce) for other types of accounting, such as immigration, incarceration, or emotional neglect, which may affect outcomes for young people. Second, data reliance on self-reports can be affected by biases in social desirability, particularly with regard to sensitive issues such as psychoactive and mental health use. Finally, a cross-sectional survey design was used in the current study in which different participants were selected to study the phenomena, the study can be more appropriate if it would be used on a longitudinal data evidence to demonstrate how parental absence impact on substance use and psychological adjustment. Future research can compare the absence of different types of parents (e.g. deaths against divorce Transition) Understand their unique impact on young people.

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