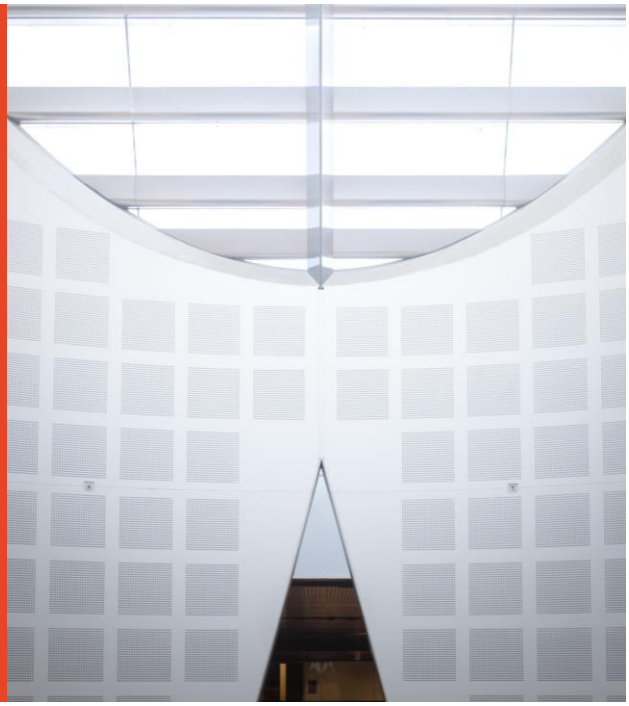
The impact of father absence in childhood on risky sexual behaviour in adolescence



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Background

- Early life exposures lay the foundation for later emotional and social behaviour
- Parental + environmental + offspring factors
- Dysfunctional family environment = adverse outcomes in later life

(Belsky, 1984; Doby, 1996; Flaherty et al., 2013; Hammond, 2013; Reinherz et al., 2003)

Background- father absence

Being raised without one's biological father has been associated with a number of adverse outcomes:

- Delinquency
- alcohol and drug use
- lower self-esteem
- psychiatric problems

(Culpin et al., 2014; Ellis et al., 2012; Langley, 2016; Luo et al., 2011; Markowitz & Ryan, 2016; Olumide et al., 2014; Ryan, 2015; Wang & Gao 2011)

Background- father absence

- Father absent daughters have more difficulty with emotional attachment and communication with intimate partners

(Mullett & Stolberg, 2002)

Background- father absence

- Fathers model secure male/female attachment
- Father-absent daughters drawn to more emotionally and sexually risky partners

(Secunda, 1992)

Background-father absence

- father absence has also been robustly linked to risky sexual behaviour in adolescence

(e.g., Ellis et al., 2012)

Background-risky sexual behaviour

- Presents significant challenges to health and wellbeing of adolescents and young adults
- Can inform upon later health and social outcomes

(Skinner et al., 2008)

Background- FSI

Early age of first sexual intercourse (FSI) is associated with significant challenges to the present and future health and wellbeing of adolescents:

- sexually transmitted infections
- unwanted sex
- unplanned pregnancy
- partner violence
- lower educational achievement

(Ellis et al., 2012; Flack et al., 2007; Skinner et al., 2008; Steward et al., 2009; Watson et al., 2007)

Aims

The aim of the present study was to elucidate whether absence of the biological father in childhood predicted early age of FSI in a large Australian birth cohort.

The Western Australian Pregnancy Cohort (Raine) Study

- Socio-demographic, individual, family and environmental data from over 2800 parents and their offspring, from the antenatal period, through to birth, and at every 1-3 years following.

- As adolescents, approximately 1200 of these children reported on sexual experience at the 16/17-year followup

Methods:

A large, representative Australian longitudinal study (The Raine study) was used to address the question of whether father absence in childhood predicts early FSI in adolescence after controlling for other known confounds of early FSI.

Methods:

From 1148 mothers who indicated absence of the father prenatally, 1065 adolescents (50.6% female) at the 16 year followup reported on whether they had experienced early FSI.

Controlled for:

- Maternal age of delivery
- Parental education level
- Family income

(Ellis et al., 2012; Lohman & Billings, 2008)

SES as a confound

- Family income (father absence may impact SES which in turn influences parental relationship)

(Ellis et al., 2012)

Results

– A logistic regression was performed to ascertain the effects of father absence on the likelihood that participants had experienced early FSI. The logistic regression model was statistically significant X_2 (6) = 46.64 p<.0005. Participants who had a father absent at baseline had 2.23 times higher odds of reporting early FSI after controlling for family income, maternal education, and maternal age.

Results

Variables in the Equation

		B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)
Step 1[a]	f_home(1)	.786	.228	11.882	1	.001	2.195
	Gender(1)	-.209	.150	1.945	1	.163	.811
	m_age_b	-.034	.014	6.145	1	.013	.966
	preg_Hincome(1)	-.048	.165	.083	1	.773	.953
	m_edlvl_r			10.259	3	.016	
	m_edlvl_r(1)	.688	.294	5.470	1	.019	1.990
	m_edlvl_r(2)	.845	.304	7.732	1	.005	2.328
	m_edlvl_r(3)	.382	.276	1.918	1	.166	1.466
	Constant	-.655	.526	1.555	1	.212	.519

a. Variable(s) entered on step 1: f_home, Gender, m_age_b, preg_Hincome, m_edlvl_r.

Discussion

- Social learning
- Attachment based
- Evolutionary/Life-stress model

(Bandura, 1977; Belsky et al, 1991; Bowlby, 1988; Fergusson & Woodward, 2000)

Discussion

- Genetics – fathers who are genetically predisposed to risky behaviour are more likely to be absent and more likely to have children who are predisposed to risky behaviour?
- Family process
  - father absence =lower parental monitoring=more RSB?
  - parental conflict =externalising behaviour=RSB?

(Ellis et al., 2012; Lyerly et al., 2013; Markham et al., 2010; Moffitt, 2005; Skinner et al., 2015)

Discussion

Past father absence positively and significantly predicted early FSI. These results are compelling due to:

- large birth cohort sample
- Age of FSI recorded close to occurrence
- length of followup
- control of multiple possible confounders

Discussion

- This research allows identification of at-risk groups and has important implications for targeted interventions, clinical care and health promotion strategies for adolescents and young people