



MUSLIM FAMILY COMMUNICATION IN DEALING WITH FATHERLESSNESS AND ITS IMPACT ON CHILD GROWTH IN MEDAN JOHOR CITY

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze Muslim family communication in dealing with fatherlessness and its implications for children's psychosocial development and communication behavior in Medan Johor City. The study uses a qualitative approach with a phenomenological method to understand the subjective experiences of mothers, children, and father substitute figures in everyday life. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation, then analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña through the stages of data condensation, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. The results show that fatherlessness not only represents the physical absence of a father, but also the weakening of the father's communicative and affective function in the family. In this context, the mother becomes the main center of interaction, emotional management, and transmission of family meaning, while children form diverse interpretations of the father figure according to the cause of fatherlessness, such as death, divorce, migration, or work commitments. The novelty of this study lies in its placement of fatherlessness as a communicative reality in Muslim families, not merely as a psychological or social problem, but as a process of negotiation of meaning, role substitution, and the formation of children's identities through symbolic interaction. Theoretically, this study expands the study of family communication by demonstrating that father absence alters the architecture of domestic communication, attachment patterns, and children's emotional validation. Its scientific implications emphasize the importance of a family communication approach sensitive to Islamic values to understand Muslim families' adaptation strategies in maintaining relationship stability and child development in the face of fatherlessness.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of fatherlessness in Indonesia has become a social issue that can no longer be understood solely as an individual case within a household. Data referenced in this paper indicates that millions of Indonesian children live in situations of reduced father presence, either due to physical absence or minimal relational involvement due to work pressures and changes in family structure. This situation suggests that the primary problem of fatherlessness is not simply the absence of a biological father figure, but rather the weakening of communication, affection, and emotional validation within the family. In this

context, children not only lose the presence of a parent but also lose a crucial source of security, self-recognition, and relational orientation within the domestic environment (Sazali et al., 2023; Daulay & Sazali, 2024).

From a communication science perspective, fatherlessness should be understood as a disruption in the family's communication architecture. When a father is absent or not meaningfully involved, the distribution of symbolic roles within the family shifts, and the mother or a substitute figure tends to take over the affective, informative, and authoritative functions that were previously shared. These changes have made family communication more centralized, more vulnerable to emotional stress, and more dependent on a single primary figure for managing daily relationships. Therefore, the issue of fatherlessness in this study is positioned primarily as a family communication issue, rather than solely a child development issue or a family moral issue. The focus of the analysis is directed at how relationships, affection, and meanings about fathers are negotiated in domestic interactions (Kartika, 2025; Putri & Tiatri, 2023; Rahma Fitri Dayana & Bunyamin, 2021).

Although studies on fatherlessness have developed in Indonesia, the majority of previous research has focused on the psychological impacts, juvenile delinquency, identity crises, or children's emotional development. Astagini et al. (2024) view fatherlessness as a multidimensional phenomenon that impacts children's education and psychology; Zulkarnaini and Nio (2023) confirm a significant relationship between fatherlessness and juvenile delinquency; Wulandari et al. (2023) link it to patriarchal culture; and Fajriyanti et al. (2024) and Awallia and Kuswanto (2024) highlight the identity crisis and emotional disturbances in children. However, these studies have not adequately positioned family communication as a primary arena for understanding how the meaning of fatherlessness is shaped, how the father's role is symbolically substituted, and how mothers and children negotiate loss in everyday life. This is where this research gap lies: shifting the focus from mere impact to the communication processes that shape the experience of fatherlessness itself (Astagini et al., 2024; Zulkarnaini & Nio, 2023; Wulandari et al., 2023; Fajriyanti et al., 2024; Awallia & Kuswanto, 2024).

To understand this process, this study uses the symbolic interaction perspective developed by Mead and Blumer. This perspective emphasizes that family reality does not exist as something fixed, but rather is shaped through the ongoing exchange of symbols, language, explanations, and emotional responses. In fatherless families, children do not automatically interpret the father's absence as a uniform experience. This meaning is shaped by how the mother talks about the father, how the family explains the loss, how the environment responds to the family situation, and how the child interprets his or her own position amidst changing relationship configurations. Therefore, symbolic interaction theory is relevant to explain that fathers who die, divorce, migrate, or are present but neglectful will be interpreted differently by children, and these differences in meaning influence the child's psychosocial development, sense of security, and communication behavior (Permana & Parlindungan, 2023; Wulandari et al., 2023; Awallia & Cahniyo, 2024; Putri Fajriyanti & Saputri, 2024).

The Muslim family context also provides an important dimension that distinguishes this research from general studies of fatherlessness. In Muslim families, the father's role is understood not only as a breadwinner but also as a leader, educator, and holder of moral-spiritual responsibilities within the household. Therefore, fatherlessness impacts not only the structure of domestic relations but also the process of transmitting values, authority, and role models in children's lives. At the same time, Medan Johor, as an urban area with economic pressures, high job mobility, and changing family patterns, presents an important empirical context for examining how Muslim families respond to fatherlessness through everyday communication practices. In this context, the research does not position Islamic teachings solely in a normative manner, but rather as a horizon of meaning that influences how families understand the responsibilities of fatherhood, loss, and caregiving (Indainanto et al., 2023; Mailin et al., 2023; Sazali et al., 2022; Rahmadhani et al., 2024).

Based on this description, this study aims to analyze how Muslim family communication in Medan Johor City manages the condition of fatherlessness and how this communication process shapes children's psychosocial development, especially in aspects of security, self-identity, and communication behavior. More specifically, this study asks three main questions: how the dynamics of family communication occur in situations of fatherlessness, how children construct the meaning of father through available interactions, and how these conditions affect children's psychosocial development in the context of urban Muslim families. With this formulation, this article is expected to make a theoretical contribution to the study of family communication by positioning fatherlessness as a communicative reality, while enriching empirical discussions about Muslim families amidst urban social change.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach with a phenomenological approach aimed at deeply understanding the subjective experiences of families facing fatherlessness and how the meaning of fatherlessness is constructed, negotiated, and lived through everyday communication within the family. Therefore, the focus of the study lies not on measuring variables, but rather on exploring the meanings, emotions, and interaction practices that shape the social reality of children and mothers in Medan Johor City (Iskandar, Prasetyo, and Mulya 2023).

The data sources in this study consisted of primary and secondary data, used in a complementary manner to strengthen the meaning of the phenomenon under study. Primary data was obtained from mothers as primary caregivers, children living in fatherless families, and other family members who act as substitute father figures, such as grandparents or uncles. Secondary data was obtained from family documents, school records, policy archives related to families and children, and relevant scientific literature to provide theoretical and empirical context for the field findings (Puspita and Setiadarma 2024).

Data collection techniques included observation, interviews, and documentation, complementing each other to capture the phenomenon of fatherlessness in its entirety. Observation was used to record patterns of interaction and emotional expression in family communication, in-depth interviews to explore the subjective meanings and experiences of mothers and children, while documentation such as family photos, school records, and communication records served as symbolic traces that enriched understanding of the construction of the reality of fatherlessness (Putri Diana and Agustina 2023).

Data analysis techniques followed the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, which began with data collection through interviews, observation, and documentation, conducted simultaneously with analysis. This allowed each piece of information to be directly read, sorted, and connected to the context of family communication and the experiences of fatherlessness faced by the research subjects (Dewantari, Humairah, and Kharisma 2023).

Data condensation was carried out by coding and grouping information into themes such as the meaning of fatherhood, role replacement strategies, children's emotional expressions, and mothers' communication patterns (Kurnia, Yudha Aryanti, and Gustina Zainal 2024). The displayed data was then organized into narrative and relational matrix forms to demonstrate the relationships between themes. Conclusions were drawn through a reflective and interpretive process to understand how family communication shapes children's psychosocial development in fatherless situations (Hidayat, Selina, and Kuswanto 2025).

Data validity was tested through data triangulation and source triangulation, comparing interview results, observations, and documentation, and matching the narratives of mothers, children, and other family members to ensure that the resulting meaning accurately represents the social reality experienced by fatherless families in Medan Johor.

3. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Family Communication Dynamics in Managing the Absence of a Father Figure

Research results indicate that family communication dynamics in fatherless families undergo significant structural changes, particularly in the distribution of domestic communication roles. The mother becomes the primary focus for exchanging messages, managing emotions, and stabilizing family relationships. One mother informant stated, *"Since their father is no longer at home, the children share everything with me. From school matters to friend problems, I'm the one who has to listen and explain everything."* This statement indicates that family communication has become more centralized and dependent on a single primary figure. In this context, fatherlessness not only creates a void in the father figure but also creates a concentration of communication roles on the mother as the dominant actor in daily family interactions.

These changes impact the intensity and quality of communication between children and other family members. Children tend to develop a more intense emotional closeness with their mothers or surrogate father figures. One child informant stated, *"If there's a problem, I feel more comfortable talking to my mom, because she's always there. Dad is rarely available to talk to."* This quote demonstrates that communication has shifted not only structurally but also emotionally. The resulting closeness is intense but unbalanced, as one partner must bear a greater emotional burden. This situation has the potential to create emotional dependency and vulnerability within family relationships.

In terms of causes, research has found that fatherlessness takes diverse forms and results in different communication patterns. In cases of divorce, one mother informant stated, *"When it comes to my father, I rarely discuss it. I'm afraid the child will be sad or confused."* Meanwhile, in the case of a father who lives away from home, a child informant stated, *"My father often calls, but usually just to ask if he's eaten, and*

not for long." These findings suggest that communication about fathers is often limited, selective, or even avoided, depending on the circumstances of the father's absence. Thus, fatherlessness is not a single phenomenon but rather contextual, and each context produces different communication dynamics within the family.

Theoretically, these findings can be explained through a family communication perspective, which emphasizes the importance of communication patterns in shaping relationship quality. Fitzpatrick and Ritchie assert that family communication patterns determine how family members build attachments and manage conflict (Putri & Tiatri, 2023). In fatherless situations, the initially two-way communication pattern between the father and mother becomes more monolithic, resulting in an imbalance in the distribution of affection and authority. Furthermore, the interpersonal communication perspective suggests that healthy relationships require openness, warmth, and continuity of interaction (Caughlin in Carlson, 1985). When a father is absent communicatively, one of the primary sources of emotional closeness is lost, thus impacting the quality of the child's relationships with their social environment.

Furthermore, the findings of this study align with symbolic interaction theory, which emphasizes that meaning is constructed through social interaction. In fatherless situations, meaning about the father is not formed from his direct presence, but rather from the narratives, attitudes, and communication patterns available within the family. One child informant stated, "I know Dad is busy working, but sometimes I feel like I don't have a father because I rarely talk." This statement demonstrates that fatherlessness is interpreted not only as a physical absence, but also as a lack of symbolic interaction. Thus, the father is present as a symbol that is interpreted through limited communication experiences, which ultimately shapes the child's perception of relationships, attachment, and self-worth (Blumer in Putri Fajriyanti & Saputri, 2024; Awallia & Cahniyo, 2024).

The implications of these dynamics indicate that the quality of family communication is a key factor in managing the impact of fatherlessness. Families that foster open, supportive, and empathetic communication tend to be better able to maintain children's emotional stability. Conversely, closed communication or avoidance of discussions about the father has the potential to reinforce feelings of loss and identity confusion in children. Therefore, fatherlessness in this study is understood as a communicative phenomenon determined not only by the presence or absence of the father, but also by how family communication is managed to build meaning, affection, and relationships that remain adaptive in these circumstances (Rahma Fitri Dayana & Bunyamin, 2021; Sazali et al., 2023).

Constructing the Meaning of Fatherhood for Children in Fatherless Situations

The results of this study indicate that the meaning of fatherhood for children in fatherless situations is not solely shaped by the father's biological status, but also by the intensity of communication, emotional closeness, and involvement in their daily lives. Based on interviews, the children of the informants interpreted their fathers as missing, distant, incomplete, or physically present but emotionally absent. Informant 1, for example, described his mother as the primary source of confidants, but a void remained because he lacked a father figure to share his views with. Meanwhile, Informant 2 described a more solitary experience, as the loss of his father led to many feelings being kept to himself. This finding confirms that the construction of the meaning of fatherhood is shaped by concrete relational experiences, not simply the formal label of "father."

At the domestic communication level, the majority of informants indicated that the center of family interaction had shifted to the mother. Informant 3 described the relationship with his father as strained due to distance, while Informant 4 indicated that the father was still present in the family structure, but communication was more formal due to his busy work schedule. Even for Informant 5, his experience of family was constructed almost entirely through interactions with his mother, as the father was not actively involved in daily meaning exchanges. Thus, children construct their meaning of fatherhood not from a stable presence, but from the limited residual communication, from the mother's explanations, and from the empty spaces left unfilled in family conversations. This shift also demonstrates that the meaning of fatherhood is largely determined by the quality of communicative participation, not simply physical presence.

The way the family describes the father figure also influences the formation of these meanings. The manuscripts show that discussions about the father tend to be cautious, limited, and not always open. Informant 1 only received discussions about his father when he asked first, Informant 2 received more of his father in the form of memories, and Informant 3 received a brief explanation that his father worked and was tired, so limited communication was considered a situation that had to be accepted. Meanwhile, Informant 4 received an explanation that his father worked for the family, but this explanation did not

automatically build emotional closeness. These findings suggest that language, silence, and the selectivity of information within the family are the main media that shape the image of the father in the minds of children.

Table 3. Construction of the Meaning of Fatherhood in Children Based on the Type of Fatherlessness and Its Impact on Communication Behavior

No.	Type of <i>Fatherless</i>	Family Communication Patterns	The Construction of Fatherhood's Meaning in Children	Impact on Children's Communication Behavior Outside the Home	The Most Meaningful Form of Support
1	Father passed away	Family communication tends to be built around memories, narratives of loss, and conversations that arise at specific emotional moments.	Fathers are interpreted as figures who are lost, missed, and irreplaceable, so their presence remains vivid in children's memories.	Children tend to suppress their emotions, become more sensitive, quieter, and keep many feelings private.	The mother's consistent presence, emotional support, and a safe space to express loss
2	Father moved away	Communication with fathers is limited, generally by phone or text message, and the intensity is inconsistent.	Fathers are interpreted as distant figures but are still expected to be emotionally present, even though the connection is not fully fulfilled.	Children tend to appear more indifferent on the surface, but internally harbor longing, excessive thinking, and limitations in opening up.	Initiated communication from the father and the opportunity to share with the mother without pressure or judgment
3	Father busy working	Communication with fathers is more functional, formal, and focuses on practical matters, rather than emotional conversations.	Fathers are interpreted as figures who are physically present but emotionally absent, making relational closeness difficult to form.	Children tend to be withdrawn, solve problems alone, are rigid in interpersonal relationships, and are not accustomed to expressing their feelings.	Small moments of warm, relaxed, and informal communication from the father and family
4	Father divorced or broken home	Communication about fathers is often limited, selective, and in many cases not discussed in depth.	Fathers are interpreted as figures who are not fully present in children's lives, resulting in feelings of emptiness and relational uncertainty.	Children tend to be more independent, closer to their mothers, but also show a tendency to lack trust in others and fear abandonment.	The mother's stable presence, consistent attention, and a sense of security in everyday relationships
5	General or symbolic fatherlessness	Family communication focuses on the mother as the primary actor, while the father is not actively involved in the daily exchange of meaning.	Fathers are interpreted not only by their biological presence, but also by the extent to which they are present as a source of affection, perspective, and validation.	Children may have difficulty developing openness, tend to overthink, feel different from others, or mature prematurely.	Open communication, emotional acceptance, and the presence of a caregiver who listens without judgment

Theoretically, these findings can be explained through a symbolic interaction perspective. Mead and Blumer assert that meaning is not inherently attached to a person or event, but is formed through the process of interpretation within social interactions. In this context, a father is understood by a child not only as a biological individual, but as a symbol of security, recognition, authority, and attachment. When interaction with the father diminishes, this symbol is not lost but rather reshaped through the mother's narrative, the attitudes of the extended family, the frequency of remaining communication, and the child's own emotional experiences. Therefore, a father who dies, travels, becomes busy working, or divorces will produce different meanings for children, as each form of absence generates different patterns of interpretation (Permana & Parlindungan, 2023; Putri Fajriyanti & Saputri, 2024; Awallia & Cahniyo, 2024). Fieldwork findings also show that the meaning of a father is intertwined with the formation of a child's self-identity and communication behavior. Children who perceive their father as a distant but responsible figure tend to retain emotional expectations regarding the father-child relationship. Conversely, children who perceive their fathers as incomplete or emotionally absent tend to be more withdrawn, prematurely independent, or have more difficulty building trust in social relationships. Within the framework of family communication, this condition aligns with the view that family communication patterns influence how family members build attachment and relational identity. The absence of a father as a source of validation and dialogue leads children to construct their self-concept more through relationships with their mothers or substitute figures, resulting in the development of their identities within an unbalanced communication configuration (Putri & Tiatri, 2023; Rahma Fitri Dayana & Bunyamin, 2021).

Thus, the construction of the meaning of fatherhood for children in fatherless situations is the result of ongoing symbolic negotiations within family communication. A father is not always defined based on his physical presence or absence, but rather based on the extent to which he is present as a source of affection, a conversation partner, a provider of direction, and a provider of emotional validation. At this point, fatherlessness in this study needs to be understood as a communicative reality that shapes children's subjective experiences of themselves, their families, and social relationships outside the home. Therefore, the contribution of this finding not only shows the impact of fatherlessness, but also explains the communicative mechanisms through which the meaning of father is formed, maintained, or even replaced in the lives of urban Muslim families (Sazali et al., 2023; Astagini et al., 2024; Farah Afmissa Syahrani & Askurifa'i Baksin, 2025).

4. CONCLUSION

The conclusion of this study shows that fatherlessness in Muslim families in Medan Johor City does not simply represent the physical absence of a father figure, but rather is a communicative reality that directly shapes the dynamics of relationships, role distribution, and the construction of meaning within the family. The absence of a father, both physically and symbolically, causes a shift in communication structures that position the mother as the primary center of interaction, affection, and legitimacy within the family, resulting in unbalanced communication and greater vulnerability to emotional distress. In these conditions, children construct meaning about their fathers through limited communication experiences, family narratives, and daily interactions, which ultimately influence the formation of their self-identity, sense of security, and communication behavior. These findings confirm that the quality of family communication is a key factor in managing the impact of fatherlessness, where open, supportive, and adaptive communication can minimize psychosocial risks for children, while closed communication and minimal dialogue actually amplify the experience of loss and relational instability. Therefore, this study contributes to enriching the study of family communication by positioning fatherlessness as a symbolic interaction phenomenon that determines how relationships, meaning, and child development are formed in the context of urban Muslim families.

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