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Father Child Relationships in the Qur'an: Prophetic Narratives as a Response to Fatherlessness

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Abstract

This article investigates father child relationships in the Qur'an through prophetic narratives and develops a relational framework for responding to fatherlessness. Employing qualitative library research and thematic Qur'anic exegesis (tafsīr mawḍūʿī), it examines the narratives of Abraham and Ishmael, Jacob and Joseph, Noah and his son, Zechariah and John, David and Solomon, and Abraham and Azar, together with Qur'anic accounts of alternative care. The analysis identifies ten interrelated principles: generational intention, meaningful presence, emotional accessibility, dialogic communication, protection, spiritual education, shared activity, respect for children's agency, reconciliation, and the transmission of values. The proposed framework extends Lamb's dimensions of paternal engagement, accessibility, and responsibility through spiritual purpose, mutual moral accountability, and intergenerational continuity. Five configurations of fatherlessness are distinguished, with corresponding preventive, curative, and protective rehabilitative responses. The study argues that paternal involvement should be evaluated in terms of relational practices and children's welfare rather than household structure alone. These findings offer a Qur'an-informed ethical framework for family education and continuity of care; they do not constitute an empirically tested intervention.

Keywords: *fatherlessness; father child relationships; prophetic narratives; thematic exegesis; paternal involvement*

Introduction

The family is the earliest relational environment in which children encounter security, boundaries, responsibility, and social interaction. Fathers and mothers do more than provide material necessities: their interactions help shape the child's understanding of self and others. Scholarship on paternal involvement emphasizes direct engagement, accessibility, and responsibility rather than reducing fatherhood to financial provision (Lamb, 2010).

The term fatherlessness is often used to describe physical absence, emotional disconnection, or an erosion of paternal functions. These circumstances should not be treated as interchangeable. A father may share a household without being emotionally available; conversely, geographical separation does not

necessarily extinguish meaningful involvement. Indonesian public discussions have circulated a claim that the country ranks third globally for fatherlessness, but the source text correctly cautions that this ranking cannot be treated as a verified comparative statistic. Divorce and child-welfare data similarly indicate family vulnerability without independently measuring the prevalence of fatherlessness (Fajriyanti et al., 2024).

Islamic discussions of fatherhood have traditionally considered maintenance, lineage, leadership, and religious education. Although indispensable, such categories do not fully explain the reciprocal quality of the relationship: how fathers listen, manage disagreement, repair ruptures, safeguard children, and recognize their developing moral agency. Studies of Qur'anic parenting demonstrate the importance of educational dialogue and exemplarity (Bahri et al., 2024; Hardiyanti et al., 2015).

This article addresses that conceptual gap by examining selected prophetic narratives as sources of relational ethics. It does not presume that one family structure automatically guarantees healthy development. Instead, it seeks to identify paternal functions and the ways in which care may continue when the biological father is unavailable. Qur'anic interpretation is brought into conversation with developmental and family studies without claiming to substitute for clinical or sociological evidence (Lamb, 2010; Walsh, 2016).

Theoretical Framework

Paternal Involvement and the Meaning of Fatherlessness

Lamb (2010) organizes paternal involvement around engagement, accessibility, and responsibility. Engagement concerns direct interactions; accessibility describes availability even when interaction is not occurring; and responsibility concerns the arrangements through which the child's needs are met. This distinction makes it possible to analyze household arrangements without assuming that physical co-residence is equivalent to relational quality. The present article uses these three constructs as a comparative framework rather than a substitute for Qur'anic categories.

Qur'anic Relational Ethics and Family Resilience

Qur'anic narratives portray parental care in contexts of cooperation, difference, separation, and loss. Their interpretative significance lies not only in prescriptive statements but also in modes of address, shared activity, expressions of concern, and the limits placed upon authority. Family resilience, understood as relational adaptation in adversity, further suggests the importance of maintaining protective functions through available caregivers and support networks (Walsh, 2016).

Research Methods

This study adopts a qualitative, descriptive analytical library-research design using thematic Qur'anic interpretation (tafsīr mawḍūʿī), comparative reading, and contextual synthesis (Mustaqim, 2014). The material corpus includes

Qur'an and 28:7–13. Other related verses, including 31:13 and 2:132–133, inform the synthesis of spiritual education.

The primary interpretative materials comprise the Qur'an and major commentaries by al-Rāzī (1999), Ibn Kathīr (1999), Ibn ʿĀshūr (1984), Hamka (2015), al-Zuḥaylī (2009), and Shihab (2002). Conceptual dialogue is developed with Lamb's (2010) work on paternal involvement, Ulwan's (1992) approach to Islamic child-rearing, and relevant scholarship on family relationships. The text was subjected to qualitative content analysis, proceeding through thematic identification, comparison of interpretative emphases, and integration into a relational model (Krippendorff, 2019).

The unit of analysis is the narrated father–child interaction or the continuity of caregiving functions. The study does not collect interviews, survey responses, or intervention outcomes. Accordingly, its typologies and response model are conceptual findings that require contextual evaluation before practical implementation.

Results and Discussion

Five Configurations of Fatherlessness

Analysis of the conceptual literature and the original research corpus produces five analytically distinct configurations. These are heuristic categories, not mutually exclusive clinical diagnoses. Distinguishing them helps prevent structural absence from being conflated with neglect or emotional disconnection.

Table 1. Typology of Fatherlessness and Indicative Characteristics

Type	Definition	Illustrative indicators
Structural	Father does not reside in the household	Death, divorce, separation, migration, incarceration, abandonment
Functional	Paternal functions are not exercised despite physical presence	Minimal interaction; financial provision without participation
Emotional	Warmth, responsiveness, or emotional validation is lacking	Conversation only during conflict; reluctance to disclose experiences
Educational–spiritual	Limited involvement in learning and moral development	Absence of guidance, religious modeling, or educational support
Intermittent–ambiguous	Unpredictable involvement and uncertain availability	Repeatedly broken promises, inconsistent contact, relational insecurity

Ten Dimensions of Qur'anic Paternal Relations

Reading the narratives across their respective contexts reveals ten overlapping relational dimensions. A given passage may illuminate more than one dimension; their presentation in Table 2 is therefore analytical rather than a claim that each verse has a single meaning.

Table 2. Ten Dimensions Derived from Prophetic Narratives

Dimension	Relational emphasis	Qur'anic illustrations
Generational intention	Prayer and moral intention before birth	37:100; 19:5–6
Meaningful presence	Time, attention, and direct participation	37:102; 3:37
Emotional accessibility	Availability to hear and respond to children	12:4–5; 28:26
Dialogic communication	Listening, explanations, and room to respond	37:102; 19:42–45
Protection	Safeguarding against foreseeable risks	12:5, 13, 67
Spiritual education	Example, counsel, and religious habituation	31:13; 2:132–133
Shared activity	Cooperation and responsibility through practice	2:127–128
Child agency	Recognition of children's judgments and voices	37:102; 28:26
Reconciliation	Repair after conflict or wrongdoing	12:87, 97–98
Value transmission	Intergenerational continuity of faith and knowledge	27:16; 19:5–6

Prophetic Narratives and Relational Functions

Abraham and Ishmael: Intention, Shared Work, and Child Agency

Abraham's prayer for a righteous child in Qur'an 37:100 places moral aspiration before the child's birth. Its emphasis is the hoped-for quality of the next generation rather than biological continuity alone. In 37:102, the expression describing Ishmael as having reached an age when he could work alongside his father establishes a context of shared experience. The ensuing conversation is significant because Abraham communicates and Ishmael responds, even in a narrative whose prophetic setting must not be equated with ordinary parenting decisions (al-Rāzī, 1999; Shihab, 2002).

In Qur'an 2:127–128, the two raise the foundations of the Kaʿbah together. Their cooperative undertaking illustrates education through participation: the child observes decisions, effort, prayer, and responsibility rather than receiving instructions alone. The narrative therefore links paternal engagement with meaningful common purpose (Ibn Kathīr, 1999).

Jacob, Joseph, and His Brothers: Trust, Safeguarding, and Reconciliation

Joseph's decision to share his dream with Jacob (Qur'an 12:4–5) illustrates a relationship in which intimate experiences can be disclosed. Jacob's warning about revealing the dream to his brothers is framed as precaution rather than a call to hostility. His later counsel to enter through different gates (12:67) similarly represents prudent protective action accompanied by acknowledgment of human limitation (Shihab, 2002).

Jacob's grief does not negate his role as a father; rather, the narrative presents affection and vulnerability alongside perseverance. The brothers' eventual request that Jacob seek forgiveness for them (12:97–98) establishes an important pattern of moral repair: wrongdoing is recognized, an appeal is made, and a relational avenue toward reconciliation remains open (Hamka, 2015).

Noah and His Son: Affection in Crisis and the Limits of Authority

In Qur'an 11:42, Noah addresses his son affectionately during a life-threatening flood and invites him to safety. The narrative joins clear warning with tenderness. The son nevertheless rejects his father's invitation. Thus, sustained paternal concern cannot be equated with absolute control over a child's decisions or their consequences (Ibn Kathīr, 1999).

Noah's appeal in 11:45 reveals the emotional weight of kinship, while the divine response qualifies assumptions that lineage guarantees moral alignment. This passage is especially important for avoiding simplistic attribution of every adverse outcome to paternal failure: responsibility can be exercised without determining another person's moral agency (Ibn ʿĀshūr, 1984).

Abraham and Azar: Respectful Disagreement and Moral Reciprocity

Qur'an 19:42–45 depicts Abraham addressing Azar repeatedly and respectfully while questioning his beliefs. The child here speaks to the parent, demonstrating that moral communication can also move upward across generations. Respect does not require uncritical assent, and disagreement need not begin with humiliation. When the exchange turns threatening, Abraham withdraws without abandoning courteous speech (al-Zuḥaylī, 2009).

Zechariah and John: Spiritual Continuity

Zechariah's requests for righteous offspring (Qur'an 3:38; 19:5–6; 21:89) portray generational responsibility as an intention preceding birth. The requested inheritance is interpreted within a prophetic context involving religious knowledge, moral service, and continuity of a sacred trust rather than reducible simply to material property (al-Rāzī, 1999; Ibn Kathīr, 1999).

David and Solomon: Knowledge, Judgment, and Intergenerational Leadership

Solomon's inheritance from David in Qur'an 27:16 foregrounds the continuity of knowledge and leadership. Qur'an 21:78–79 further indicates that a younger generation can be granted a distinctive understanding without rendering the preceding generation worthless. The intergenerational relation need not treat the child's competence as a threat to paternal authority (Ibn ʿĀshūr, 1984).

Continuity of Care Beyond the Biological Father

Zechariah and Mary: Guardianship without Erasure of Identity

Qur'an 3:37 describes Zechariah's guardianship (kafālah) of Mary. This care involves security, provision, and a supportive spiritual setting without replacing Mary's own lineage. The narrative distinguishes maintaining care functions from replacing a child's identity (Shihab, 2002).

Moses and His Care Network: Distributed Protection

Qur'an 28:7–13 presents coordinated protective actions by Moses' mother, his sister, Pharaoh's wife, and the subsequent return of his biological mother as caregiver. Rather than placing every responsibility upon one person, the narrative shows how continuity of protection can depend on several contributors under conditions of danger (Hamka, 2015).

Mary and Jesus: Dignity Beyond a Two-Parent Household

The absence of a biological father in the narrative of Mary and Jesus is miraculous, not a case of paternal negligence. The account therefore should not be instrumentalized to stigmatize mothers raising children without a resident father. It instead foregrounds the protection of dignity and the child in the face of social accusation (Qur'an 19:27; Shihab, 2002).

The Two Orphans and al-Khiḍr: Protection for the Future

Qur'an 18:82 presents two orphaned children whose future resources are preserved through an intervention associated with their father's righteousness. The protective action is circumscribed and directed toward the children's later independence, providing an example of continuity of care without the imposition of substitute parenthood (Ibn Kathīr, 1999).

A Qur'anic Relational Model of Fatherhood

Figure 1 synthesizes the dimensions into six connected relational domains. This sequence is a conceptual representation of mutually reinforcing functions,

not a chronological measurement scale or an empirically validated causal model.

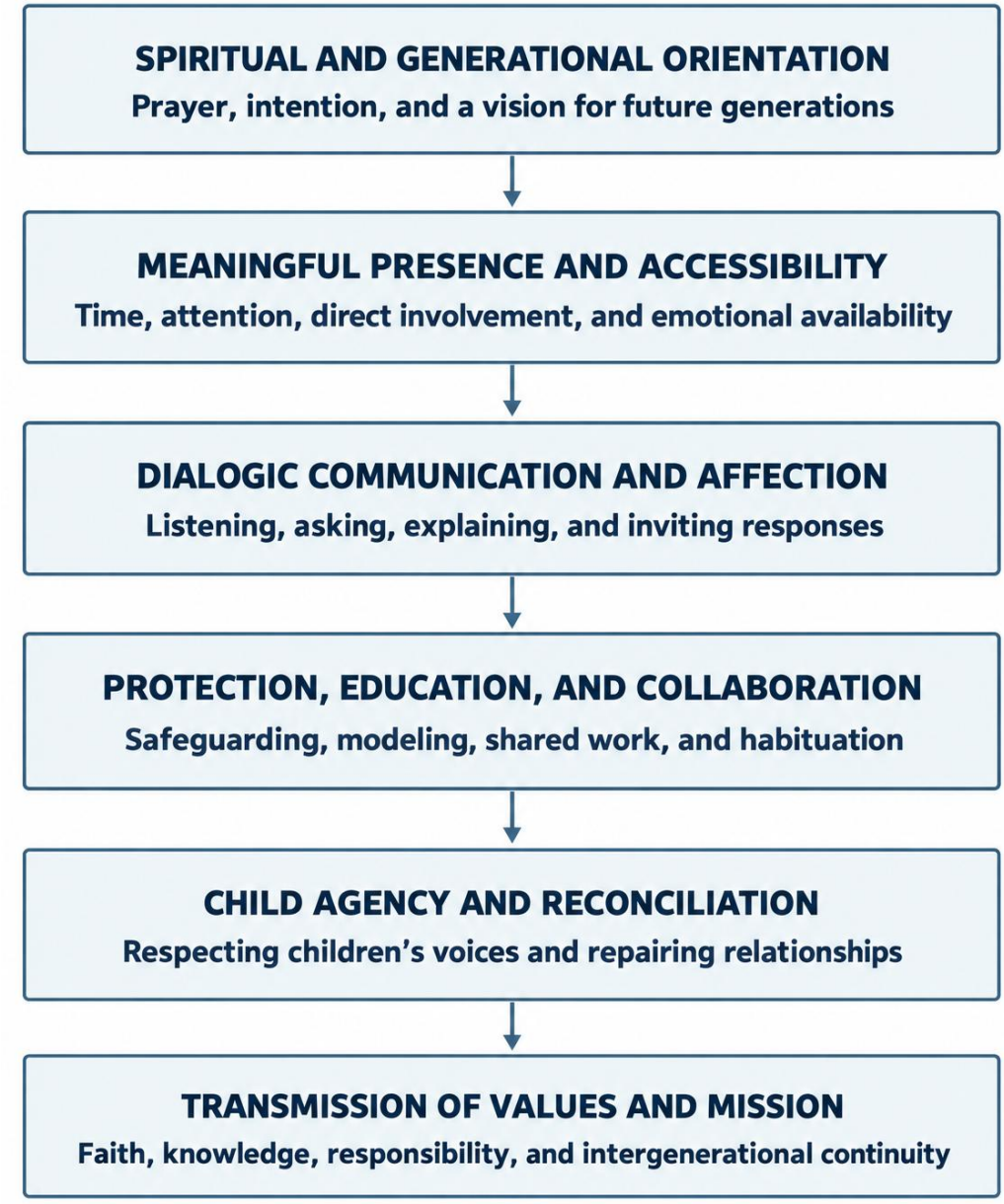


Figure 1. Conceptual Qur'anic Relational Model of Fatherhood. Source: Authors conceptual synthesis of the Qur'anic corpus.

The model integrates generational intention, active presence, emotional availability, dialogue, protection and teaching, shared responsibility, children's agency, reconciliation, and the transmission of values. Its function is formative and evaluative: families and institutions can identify strengths, relational gaps, and areas requiring practical support without assuming that every household must have the same structure.

Critical Dialogue with Lamb's Framework

Lamb's (2010) dimensions clarify why fatherhood cannot be measured solely through residence or financial support. The Qur'anic narratives contribute particular moral emphases to these functions, as summarized in Table 3. These extensions should be understood as an interpretative comparison, not as a revision empirically tested against Lamb's original measurement model.

Table 3. The Qur'anic Relational Model in Dialogue with Lamb's Framework

Lamb's dimension	Analytical meaning	Proposed Qur'anic enrichment
Engagement	Direct care, conversation, shared tasks	Spiritual purpose, meaningful collaboration, formation of responsibility
Accessibility	Physical and emotional availability	Emotional safety, openness to correction, attention to children's voices
Responsibility	Ensuring needs are anticipated and met	Protection, moral transmission, reconciliatory duty, limits of authority

In the Abraham Ishmael narrative, engagement takes the form of participation in shared work and meaningful dialogue rather than instruction at a distance. Accessibility is illustrated when Joseph feels able to disclose his dream to Jacob and when children participate in consequential conversations. Responsibility is evident in Jacob's safeguarding, Noah's invitation to safety, and Zechariah's orientation toward the next generation. Importantly, paternal responsibility does not confer unlimited control over a child's faith or decision-making (Lamb, 2010; Shihab, 2002).

Responses Differentiated by Type of Fatherlessness

The proposed intervention logic differentiates prevention, relational repair, and protective continuity of care. These response types are normative proposals derived from the analysis; their effectiveness has not been tested in the present study.

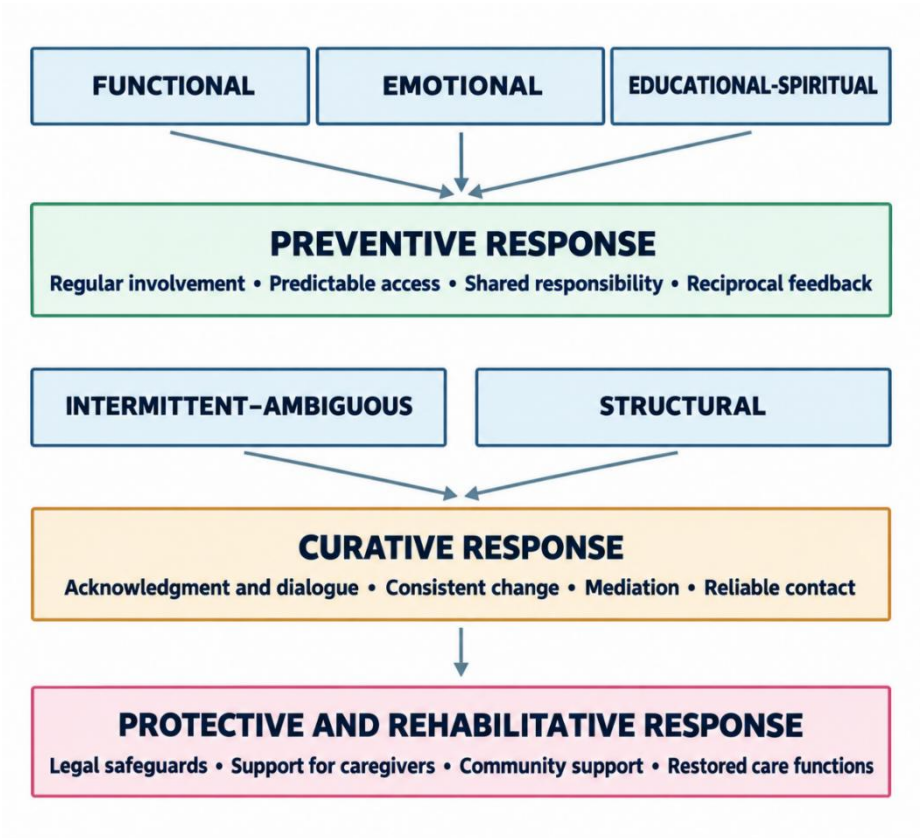


Figure 2. Typology-Based Framework for Responses to Fatherlessness. Source: Authors conceptual synthesis.

Preventive responses address functional, emotional, and educational–spiritual risks when a father is structurally present but relational participation is limited. These include regular shared time, predictable accessibility, educational participation, responsibility beyond financial provision, and mechanisms through which family members can provide respectful feedback (Lamb, 2010).

Curative responses are relevant when relational distance has already developed but renewed contact is feasible and safe. Intervention begins by identifying the specific injury neglect, repeated broken commitments, conflicts, or low emotional availability followed by acknowledgment, dialogue, consistent behavioral change, and, when needed, professional mediation. Reconciliation is not synonymous with compelled contact or the suspension of safeguarding.

Protective and rehabilitative responses become essential in circumstances of death, abandonment, prolonged separation, violence, or unsafe contact. Here, the objective is to secure the child's rights to safety, identity, material support, education, and emotional care through available caregivers, extended family, schools, community resources, and lawful protection. The Qur'anic accounts of Mary, Moses, and the orphans support attention to continuity of caregiving rather than the automatic privileging of biological presence (Walsh, 2016).

Conclusion

The Qur'anic father–child relationship emerges from prophetic narratives as active, reciprocal, protective, and morally accountable. Abraham and Ishmael emphasize intention, dialogue, and shared endeavor; Jacob and Joseph foreground trust, safeguarding, and reconciliation; Noah and his son illuminate the limits of parental authority; Zechariah and John as well as David and Solomon address intergenerational continuity; and Abraham's conversation with Azar demonstrates that respect can coexist with moral disagreement. Accounts of guardianship and collective care further show that a child's welfare must not be reduced to the presence or absence of a particular household arrangement.

The resulting relational model identifies ten interacting principles and places them in dialogue with Lamb's categories of engagement, accessibility, and responsibility. The article distinguishes structural, functional, emotional, educational–spiritual, and intermittent–ambiguous fatherlessness, proposing preventive, curative, and protective–rehabilitative responses matched to different relational circumstances. Because the findings arise from library research and thematic interpretation, further fieldwork is required to establish their transferability, operational indicators, and the effectiveness of any proposed program. The overarching ethical objective is sustained security, affection, education, dignity, and moral agency for every child.

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