The Present-Absent Father: When the Body Is Home but the Heart Is Not

An awareness and guidance article for parents in Emirati society

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A Scene from Our Homes

It is seven in the evening. Abu Khalid opens the front door after a long day of meetings and traffic. He offers a quick greeting, sits in his usual place in the living room, and takes out his phone. Work messages did not stop when the working day ended, and the colleagues' group chat is still busy.

Khalid, who is ten, comes over excitedly: "Dad, my teacher praised me in front of the whole class today. Do you want to see what I did?"

Without lifting his eyes from the screen, his father replies: "Good."

Khalid waits a moment, then closes his notebook and goes back to his room.

On the other side of the room sits Maryam, who is thirteen. She wants to tell her father about something that upset her at school and has stayed with her all day. She waits for him to look up at her. He looks up for a second, then returns to the screen. She falls silent and goes to her room.

Their mother watches the scene quietly. She knows her husband is tired, and she values everything he does for the family. She also knows that tonight the children are not waiting for anything that money can buy. They are waiting for a conversation, a smile, a small sign of attention that tells them their father is with them.

Late that night Abu Khalid tells his wife: "Thank God. It was a long day, but I sat with the kids." He means it. He is not harsh, and he does not fall short in providing for his home. He loves his children and works for their future. But he has missed one simple truth: his body came home, and his mind stayed somewhere else. He was with them, but they were not with him.

This scene repeats itself in many homes around us, and some of us may have lived it as children before becoming fathers ourselves. No one falls into it on purpose. It is a habit that creeps in quietly.

Who Is the "Present-Absent Father"?

He is a father who lives at home, pays for the household, and sits with his family at the same table, yet is absent from their emotional lives. He may give his children the best schools and devices, yet not know who his son's closest friend is, what frightens his daughter, or when he last laughed with them from the heart.

There are two kinds of absence:

- **Physical absence** is visible to everyone. The father is travelling, working far away, or spending most of his time outside the home. It is an open absence: the family knows the reason and adapts to it, and a father whose heart is present can soften its effect with a daily call and genuine interest.

- **Emotional absence** is more hidden and more difficult. The father is in front of his children every day, but he does not listen, does not ask, and does not notice a change in a tone of voice or a face. Because it cannot be seen, no one complains about it. And the children grow up learning not to ask for what they are not used to finding.

This does not mean a father must be available every moment. He is a human being who needs rest, quiet and space of his own. The problem begins when being busy becomes the rule, and real connection becomes a rare event.

Children do not need a father who is present all the time. They need a father whose presence they can feel when he is with them. And they need three things from him more than money: that he is present, that he listens, and that he takes part. Money matters. It protects dignity and meets needs. But it does not meet emotional needs. A home that lacks nothing financially may still lack a great deal of warmth.

Why Is a Father Absent While He Is at Home?

The causes are not accusations. They are a reality that many fathers live with.

Long working hours. A father leaves before some of his children wake up and returns when some are asleep or nearly so. With phones and apps making everyone reachable, work stretches beyond the end of the working day. Only a few hours remain, and the children spend them on homework and sleep.

Exhaustion. A father comes home drained and looks for quiet, while his children are eager to talk and play. Two legitimate needs meet here: the father's need for rest and the children's need for closeness. The answer is not to cancel one of them but to organise time between them. Not every silent father is uninterested. Some fathers need a short while to move from work pressure to the atmosphere of home. It is better for a father to say so clearly than to leave his children to interpret his silence: "I'm a bit tired today. Let me rest for a while, and then we'll sit and talk." What matters is that he keeps his word.

Screens. The phone carries work into the living room: a message from the manager, then a news item, then a video clip, then a new notification. Sitting with the children takes effort, while scrolling takes none, so a tired mind chooses the easier option again and again until it becomes a habit. The problem is not having a phone at home. It is the phone receiving attention that the family does not receive.

The idea that a father's role is to provide. Many of us grew up believing that the father "brings home the living" and the mother "raises the children." It is an idea that is sincere in intention but incomplete in result. Providing is part of fatherhood, not the whole of it. A child needs someone to protect and guide him, and also someone to listen to him, reassure him and celebrate his small achievements. Tenderness takes nothing away from a father's standing. It gives his children more confidence to approach him. Authority does not mean silence, and tenderness does not mean weakness.

What Does This Absence Do to the Family?

The effect does not appear all at once. It accumulates. Not all children react in the same way, since their personalities and circumstances differ. But some patterns recur at each stage of life.

Early Childhood: Looking for Security

A young child does not always have the words to express his need for his father. He approaches with a toy, asks to be picked up, or keeps calling. These are not only requests for entertainment; they are his way of connecting. The World Health Organization's guidance on early childhood development stresses the importance of responsive caregiving, meaning that a child finds someone who notices him and interacts with him.[11] When he finds a warm response, he learns that approaching his father is safe. When his attempts meet repeated neglect, he initiates less, or seeks attention in other ways: crying, stubbornness, or clinging excessively to his mother.

The School Years: Waiting to Be Appreciated

At this age a child wants to be seen. He comes home happy with a grade, sad after a disagreement with a classmate, or worried about a test. He does not always need long advice. Sometimes one sincere sentence is enough: "I'm proud of you. Tell me how you did it." When the reply is a single word, again and again, he stops trying and learns to keep his news to himself. It is also important that a father's conversations with his child are not limited to grades and homework, so that the child does not come to believe that his worth to his father depends on his results.

Adolescence: Needing to Be Taken Seriously

A teenager may seem less willing to talk, but he needs a safe relationship he can return to without fear of humiliation or quick judgement. If he does not find a listening ear at home, he will look for one outside it: among friends, on social media, or with people his father knows nothing about. A father who did not build a bridge with his son in childhood finds it hard to build one later. The reverse is also true. A teenager is not always looking for someone who agrees with him, but for someone who takes him seriously. So let his father ask about his ideas, not only his mistakes, and hear his point of view before giving advice.

Young Adulthood: A Father to Consult

Children's need for their father does not end when they come of age. A young man needs his father's opinion on a study or career decision, and a young woman needs a word of support from him when she begins something new. When such moments are missing for a long time, the son respects his father but does not turn to him. One of the most beautiful pictures of fatherhood is children who grow up and whose wish to talk with their father grows with them.

The Mother

The mother is the first to pay the price of the father's absence. She carries the listening, the follow-up, the daily decisions and the endless questions alone. Over time she becomes a go-between: "Tell your father," "Your father is tired, don't disturb him." Day by day she feels she is raising the children alone, even though her husband is at home and provides everything. This is the hardest kind of loneliness, because it happens in the middle of other people. A mother does not always need someone to carry out tasks with her. She needs a husband who asks about her day and thinks with her about the children's affairs.

The Marriage

A husband who cannot find time to listen to his children rarely finds time to listen to his wife. The couple's conversation turns into an administrative schedule: expenses, schools, appointments. The simple human question disappears: "How was your day? Is anything bothering you?" Over time they become partners in an institution rather than a husband and wife in a home. The children see this, learn it, and may carry it into their own homes one day.

The Emirati Family Between Work Responsibilities and Quality of Life

A father's presence is not only a private matter for each household. The state has made the family a declared national priority, with clear policies:

- **The National Family Policy.** Adopted by the UAE Government in March 2018, its objectives include providing a healthy environment that supports families in facing life's pressures. Its six pillars include "family relations," "balance of roles" and "childcare."[1]
- **The Year of the Family 2026.** His Highness Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, President of the UAE, directed that 2026 be the "Year of the Family," to advance the goals of the National Agenda for Family Growth 2031 and to strengthen awareness of the importance of family cohesion and strong family relationships.[2]
- **The Abu Dhabi Family Wellbeing Strategy.** Launched by the Department of Community Development in Abu Dhabi, it includes initiatives to support parents in raising their children and policies to balance professional and family life.[3]

In the workplace, there are legal and administrative tools that can help a father be present:

- **Parental leave in the private sector.** The UAE Labour Law (Federal Decree-Law No. 33 of 2021 on the Regulation of Labour Relations) grants private-sector employees, fathers and mothers alike, paid parental leave of five working days, to be taken within six months of the child's birth.[4][5][7]
- **Parental leave in the federal government.** Under Article 20 of Federal Decree-Law No. 49 of 2022 and Article 82 of its implementing regulations, either parent employed by the federal government is entitled to five working days of parental leave at full pay. The leave may be taken consecutively or intermittently within six months of the child’s birth. Local governments have their own rules.[6]
- **Flexible work patterns.** The executive regulations of the Federal Government Human Resources Law (Cabinet Resolution No. 48 of 2023) introduced patterns such as hybrid work, remote work and the compressed working week.[8] The Federal Authority for Government Human Resources issued a "Back to School" policy for the 2025–2026 academic year, giving federal employees

flexible hours to accompany their children to school.[9] And the Government of Dubai applies its "Our Flexible Summer" initiative during the summer months to balance work requirements with family responsibilities.[10]

These tools matter, but they do not create presence on their own. Parental leave does not help a child if his father spends it on his phone. A flexible hour does not bring a father closer to his son if it goes on other errands. No law obliges a father to listen to his son for ten minutes a day. The state opens the door; the father is the one who walks through it.

In Emirati culture, which treasures the majlis, family ties and devotion to parents, there is a valuable opportunity to revive conversation at home. The family majlis should not be a place where everyone sits side by side, each absorbed in a screen. It is a space where stories are told, opinions are heard, and values pass from one generation to the next.

> **Note to the reader:** Leave entitlements and work patterns differ between the public and private sectors, and between entities and emirates, and they may be amended. Check with your employer, the Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratisation, the Federal Authority for Government Human Resources or the relevant local authority, and the UAE Government's official portal (u.ae), for up-to-date details before relying on them.

Ten Minutes That Make a Difference

A father may ask: how can I be present when I come home tired, with responsibilities I cannot drop? The answer is not to leave work, nor necessarily to cut working hours, but to improve the quality of the little time that remains. Ten minutes is not a scientific figure that guarantees a result. It is a practical starting point that is easy to repeat.

1. **Leave work at the door.** Before you go in, sit in the car for two minutes. Finish what work messages you can, or set a clear time to return to them. Decide that you are entering your home, not a second office.

2. **A real welcome.** Put your phone in a fixed place by the entrance for the first half hour. Greet your children with your eyes before your words, and look each of them in the eye. If your job requires you to respond, allow notifications for calls only.
3. **Ten minutes alone with each child.** Choose a fixed time, before sunset or after dinner, with no phone. Ask a specific question instead of a general one: "What was the best thing that happened to you today?" or "What upset you today?" Then listen. Pay attention to the quiet child; saying little does not mean needing little.
4. **Listen before you advise.** When your child tells you about a problem, do not start with blame or a solution. Hear the whole story and say: "I hear you, and that's a hard situation." Then ask whether he wants your opinion. Listening is itself a message of respect.
5. **A small, steady habit.** A bedtime story, a short walk around the house, or a talk in the car on the way to school. Consistency matters more than length, because a child relies on what is repeated.
6. **One screen-free meal together.** At least once a day, for everyone. And you first, because the example starts with you.
7. **Specific praise.** Do not stop at "You're great." Say: "I liked how you helped your sister today." Specific praise teaches a child that his father really sees him.
8. **Stay in touch when you cannot be there.** If you are late at work, send a short voice message or call your child and ask about something on his mind. But do not let a call become a permanent substitute for being together.
9. **Share the load with the mother.** Commit to one specific family task, such as following a school activity or attending parents' meetings. And ask your wife, in front of the children: "What can I take off your hands today?" That sentence teaches them what partnership means.
10. **Apologise when you break a promise.** If you promised your child time and could not keep it, tell him: "I know I promised and I couldn't. You're right to be upset. Let's set another time." An apology does not lower a father's standing; it teaches his children to take responsibility.

Do not try to apply every step in the first week. Choose two steps, keep to them for a month, then add others. If you miss a day because of an emergency, do not stop. What matters is that your children feel your attention to them is constant, not a reward that comes when time allows.

An experiment for this evening: When you get home, put your phone aside and sit with your son or daughter. Ask one question, listen without interrupting, and do not turn the conversation into a lesson. If your child does not want to talk, do not push. Let them know you are there whenever they want, and gently try again another day. After a few days, ask yourself: have I learned something new about my children? Do they feel they can come close to me? These questions matter more than the number of minutes.

The Author's View: Don't Let Your Family Get What Is Left of You

In my view, the most dangerous thing about emotional absence is that it happens without the father noticing. A father who leaves every morning, carries his responsibilities and returns exhausted in the evening is usually convinced that he has done everything required of him. I value that effort, and I see it as a genuine form of love. But I say it plainly: a father who limits himself to providing is doing half of his role. The other half is not done for him by the mother, the school, or the household helper.

It is not fair to expect a father to excel at work, carry pressures and social obligations, and then expect him to be perfect at home without acknowledging his need for rest and support. But it is not fair either for work and the phone to take the best hours of his attention, while his family gets whatever energy is left.

I also believe the responsibility does not rest on the father alone. Employers who expect staff to answer messages late at night take more from their homes than they give. Protecting family time is part of quality of working life, not a luxury.

Many of us give our children what we did not have as children, and then, without meaning to, pass on the same lack we lived with. We break this cycle when we admit that it exists. Fatherhood is not measured by what we buy for our children but by what we know about them. Do we know what frightens them? What makes them happy? Do they feel safe when they make a mistake and need to confide in us?

Don't let your children think that reaching your heart requires an appointment. And don't wait for them to ask for attention every time. Some of them stop asking, not because the need has gone, but because they have grown used to not finding an answer. What is postponed today until after the promotion or the next project may not wait. The child who wants his father tonight will not want him in the same way ten years from now.

Conclusion

Imagine Abu Khalid the following night. He sits for two minutes in the car, then goes in and leaves his phone by the door. He asks Khalid about his teacher's praise, and his son opens his notebook and tells him every detail. He turns to Maryam, asks what is on her mind, and listens until she has finished. He did not leave his job, and he did not take leave. He gave his children ten full minutes, nothing more. And late that night he was with them, and they were with him.

Father, your children are not asking you to give up your work or your ambitions, nor to be a father who never makes mistakes or gets tired. They need a father who knows how to come back to them, even after the most exhausting days. They may not remember everything you bought them, but they will remember how you listened to them, and how you stood by them when they needed you.

Perhaps the most beautiful moment of your day begins when you put your phone aside, look at your son, and say: "Tell me, my son, what did you want to say to me? I'm listening."

Disclaimer and Legal Rights

- This is a general awareness and guidance article that reflects the author's views and analysis. It does not provide a psychological diagnosis and is not a substitute for specialised family, educational or psychological counselling. Anyone who notices persistent difficulties with one of their children or in their family relationships should contact a family specialist or an accredited support service in the UAE.
- The practical steps are suggestions that can be adapted to children's ages and each family's circumstances. They are not a guarantee of specific results.

- Information on legislation and policies is based on official sources available as of November 2026 and is subject to change. The final reference is the official texts and the competent authorities.
- The characters in the opening scene and the conclusion are fictional and used for illustration; any resemblance to real people is unintended.
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