

# Growing Up Without Father: Fatherless and Adolescents' Stress Coping in the Context of Sustainable Development Goals

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**Abstract.** Fathers play a crucial role in the emotional development of adolescents and their ability to cope with life's pressures. The absence of a father, or a fatherless condition, may lead adolescents to experience difficulties in regulating their emotions and managing stress. This study aims to examine the influence of fatherless conditions on adolescents' coping stress abilities. The research employed two measurement instruments: the Fatherless Scale (20 items;  $\alpha = 0.925$ ) and the Coping stress Scale (16 items;  $\alpha = 0.716$ ). The sampling technique used was purposive sampling, targeting adolescents aged 15 to 20 years who were willing to participate. A total of 380 respondents were included in this study. Hypothesis testing utilized Spearman's rho correlation analysis, yielding a correlation coefficient of -0.166 with a significance value of 0.001 ( $< 0.05$ ). These findings indicate that higher levels of fatherless are associated with lower stress coping abilities among adolescents, highlighting the importance of paternal involvement and the need for family, school, and counseling based interventions to strengthen adaptive coping.

## 1 Introduction

Adolescence is a developmental stage characterized by intense emotional changes and increasing developmental demands, such as the ability to manage emotions, establish social relationships, and cope with academic and social pressures. These changes place adolescents in a psychologically vulnerable condition, making them more susceptible to stress, anxiety, and emotional distress. When adolescents have not yet developed adequate emotional regulation skills, their responses to stress tend to manifest through maladaptive coping strategies [1], including problem avoidance, escapism through alcohol consumption [2], and even suicidal ideation or behaviors as a way to relieve emotional pressure [3].

This condition is supported by preliminary findings obtained through interviews with three adolescents. NAW (18 years old) reported calming themselves through smoking and alcohol consumption when facing overwhelming problems, followed by avoiding problem resolution. AR (17 years old) described withdrawing from stressful situations and diverting

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attention to entertainment without seeking solutions, while MF (19 years old) reported suppressing emotions and avoiding problems due to a perceived lack of support.

Empirical studies further confirm that coping difficulties among adolescents are a significant issue both globally and in Indonesia. Adolescents who employ adaptive coping strategies, such as problem-solving and seeking social support, tend to show better psychological well-being, whereas reliance on maladaptive coping, particularly avoidance, is associated with poorer psychological outcomes [4]. Maladaptive coping is also linked to heightened negative emotions, difficulty managing daily stressors, and increased risk of suicidal ideation [3]. Recent findings indicate that difficulties in stress coping increase adolescents' vulnerability to maladaptive social behaviors, including early marriage, suggesting that ineffective coping may lead adolescents to make premature life decisions under psychosocial pressure [5].

To understand this issue more comprehensively, it is important to first examine the fundamental concept of stress coping strategies. Coping stress is defined as the strategies used by individuals to manage internal or external pressures that are perceived as exceeding their personal capacities. Coping does not solely focus on problem resolution but also encompasses how individuals manage their emotional responses to stressors [1]. During adolescence, coping becomes an essential skill for dealing with various demands, including academic, social, and family-related challenges. Coping strategies are generally categorized into problem-focused coping, which is oriented toward solving problems, and emotion-focused coping, which is oriented toward regulating emotional responses [6]. Furthermore, coping strategies can be differentiated into adaptive and maladaptive coping. Adaptive coping helps individuals confront stress constructively, such as through problem-solving and seeking social support, whereas maladaptive coping tends to involve avoidance and may negatively impact an individual's psychological well-being [7].

Strengthening adolescents psychological resilience and coping capacity has become an important concern within the global agenda for sustainable human development. International organizations increasingly emphasize the importance of promoting mental health, emotional well being, and life skills among young people as essential foundations for healthy and productive. Developing effective coping abilities during adolescence is therefore not only important for individual well being but also contributes to broader efforts to foster resilient and capable future generations.

The development of coping strategies does not occur in isolation but is strongly influenced by environmental contexts, particularly the family. The family functions as the primary system through which individuals learn values, communication patterns, and ways of dealing with problems [8]. Within this system, parental roles are central to adolescents' psychological development. While mothers are often associated with caregiving, fathers are commonly positioned as figures of authority, protection, and emotional as well as instrumental support. Nevertheless, the phenomenon of fatherlessness, defined as the absence of a father either physically or psychologically, has become increasingly prevalent, including in Indonesia. Fatherlessness does not only refer to the physical absence of a father due to divorce, death, or labor migration, but also includes situations in which fathers are physically present yet minimally involved emotionally and in caregiving [9].

This phenomenon is reinforced by statistical data indicating a high number of children growing up without a father figure. According to UNICEF data (2021), approximately 20.9% of children in Indonesia grow up without a father figure due to divorce, death, or fathers working away from home. A survey by Statistics Indonesia (BPS, 2021) also shows that only 37.17% of children aged 0-5 years live with both biological parents simultaneously. Of the approximately 30.83 million young children, it is estimated that around 2.99 million do not live with their fathers or have lost direct access to a father figure. These data highlight that fatherlessness is not merely an emotional issue, but a real condition experienced by millions

of Indonesian children and one that has the potential to affect their psychological development [10].

Consistent with these data, studies in Indonesia demonstrate that fatherlessness is associated with various psychological difficulties in adolescents. Fatherlessness is linked to lower self-control, increasing vulnerability to impulsive behavior, emotional dysregulation, and difficulties managing daily stressors [11]. Other findings show a significant negative association between fatherlessness and psychological well-being, reflected in heightened negative emotions, adjustment problems, and reduced positive social relationships [12]. In the Indonesian context, fatherless is often psychological in nature, where fathers are physically present but emotionally unavailable, leading to low self-esteem, emotional instability, and aggressive behavioral tendencies among adolescents [9].

Fatherless also influences how adolescents cope with stress. Adolescents experiencing fatherlessness tend to have weaker emotional regulation and greater difficulty employing adaptive coping strategies. Limited paternal emotional support encourages reliance on emotion-focused and avoidance-based coping, such as distancing and distraction, rather than problem-focused coping [13].

Despite growing evidence on the effects of fatherless on self-control and psychological well-being, research specifically examining its relationship with stress coping among Indonesian adolescents remains limited. Most studies emphasize emotional or behavioral outcomes without directly addressing coping mechanisms, indicating a research gap in understanding how fatherlessness shapes adolescents' responses to stress.

Based on this gap, the present study examines the relationship between fatherlessness and stress coping among adolescents. This study focuses on how physical and emotional paternal absence affects adolescents' ability to cope with stress. Rather than treating fatherlessness solely as a social issue, this study highlights its role in shaping adolescents' coping strategies. The novelty lies in its direct examination of the association between fatherlessness and coping stress, extending beyond the commonly studied outcomes of psychological well-being and self-control.

The primary objective of this study is to determine the extent to which fatherlessness influences adolescents' coping stress abilities. Using questionnaire-based measures of paternal involvement and coping strategies, this study aims to identify levels of fatherlessness and coping stress and analyze their relationship. The findings are expected to contribute to a deeper understanding of the father figure's role in adolescents' psychological development, particularly in stress coping.

## **2 Methods and materials**

### **2.1 Research design**

This study employed a quantitative method with a correlational approach. This approach was selected to examine whether there is a relationship between fatherless and coping stress among adolescents.

### **2.2 Participants**

The participants consisted of 380 adolescents aged 15-20 years residing in various provinces in Indonesia. A purposive sampling technique was employed, targeting adolescents who met the inclusion criteria. Recruitment was conducted online by distributing a survey link through social media platforms and educational networks. Adolescents who agreed to the informed consent voluntarily participated in the study. The inclusion criteria for this study were as

follows: (1) adolescents aged 15-20 years; (2) residing in one of the provinces in Indonesia; and (3) willing to complete the questionnaire in full after reading and agreeing to the informed consent provided at the beginning of the survey, which allowed respondents to proceed with filling out the distributed scales.

### 2.3 Data collection

The data were collected online using Google Forms. The research instruments consisted of two psychological scales. First, Fatherless Scale. The Fatherless Scale was used to assess paternal absence, both physically and emotionally. In this study, the scale was adapted from the instrument used in a previous study [14]. The instrument was reviewed prior to its use among Indonesian adolescents to ensure clarity and suitability for the research context. The scale originally consisted of 20 items. Validity testing indicated that two items (items 2 and 18) were removed because they did not meet the acceptable item total correlation criteria, resulting in 18 valid items representing emotional, cognitive, behavioral, and intentional absence indicators (**Table 1**). The scale demonstrated very high reliability (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.925$ ), as can be seen in **Table 2**.

**Table 1.** Validity test of the fatherlessness scale

No	Indicator	Initial Item Numbers	Invalid Items	Valid Items	Final Number of items
1	Emotional	1-6	2	1, 3-6	5
2	Cognitive	7-12	-	7-12	6
3	Behavioral	13-17	-	13-17	5
4	Intentional Absence	18-20	18	19-20	2
Total		20	2 items	18 items	18

**Table 2.** Reliability test of the fatherlessness scale

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
0.925	20

Second, Coping Stress Scale. The Coping Stress Scale was adapted from the CSI-SF (Coping Strategies Inventory Short Form) [15], which originally consisted of 16 items. Validity testing indicated that four items (items 3, 6, 8, and 13) were removed because they did not meet the statistical validity criteria, resulting in 12 valid items representing engagement and disengagement coping strategies (**Table 3**). The scale showed acceptable reliability (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.716$ ), as can be seen in **Table 4**.

**Table 3.** Validity test of the coping stress scale

No	Indicator	Initial Item Numbers	Invalid Items	Valid Items	Final Number of items
1	Engagement Coping – Problem-Focused	1,2,8,9	8	1,2,9	3
2	Engagement Coping – Emotion-Focused	11,13	13	11	1
3	Disengagement Coping – Problem-Focused	4,7,12,14	-	4,7,12,14	4
4	Disengagement Coping – Emotion-Focused	3,5,6,10,15,16	3,6	5,10,15,16	4
Total		16	4 items	12 items	12

**Table 4.** Reliability Test of the Coping Stress Scale

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
0.716	16

## 2.4 Data Analysis

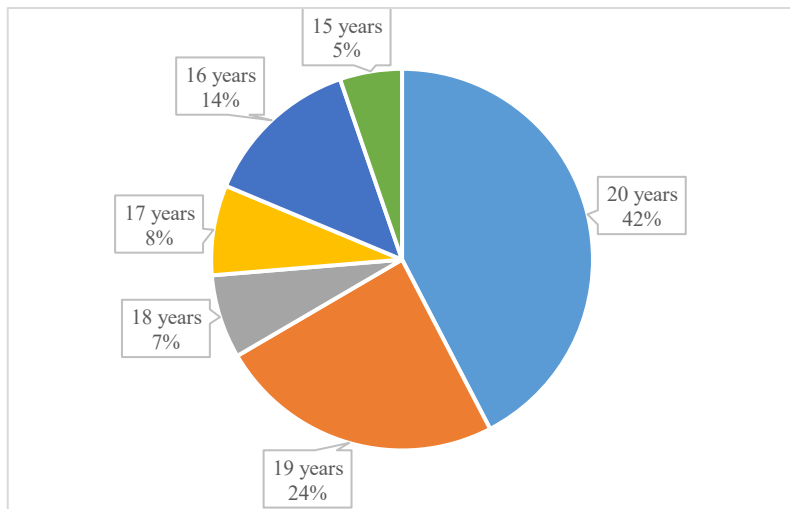
The data were analyzed using SPSS version 25. The analysis was conducted through several stages, including descriptive analysis to examine participant characteristics, normality testing to assess data distribution, and Spearman’s Rho correlation analysis to examine the relationship between fatherlessness and coping stress. The non-parametric correlation test was chosen because one of the variables did not meet the assumption of normal distribution.

## 3 Results and discussion

### 3.1 Results

#### 3.1.1 Descriptive analysis of participants

The descriptive analysis indicates that the majority of participants were female (84.5%), while male participants accounted for 15.5% of the sample. In terms of age, respondents were in the age range of 15–20 years as can be seen in **Fig. 1**. This finding indicates that most of the participants were in late adolescence, and therefore the results mainly reflect the stressful conditions faced by adolescents at this stage of development in the context of fatherlessness as can be seen in **Table 5**.



**Fig. 1** Age distribution

**Table 5.** Distribution of participants by gender and age

	N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance
Gender	380	1	1	2	1.85	0.360	0.130
Age	380	5	1	6	4.59	1.639	2.686
Valid N (listwise)	380						

### **3.1.2 Assumption testing and correlational analysis**

The assumption testing indicated that the fatherlessness variable was not normally distributed, whereas the coping stress variable was at the threshold of normal distribution. Therefore, the relationship between the two variables was analyzed using Spearman's Rho correlation as a nonparametric technique.

The correlational analysis revealed a significant negative relationship between fatherlessness and coping stress among adolescents. The correlation coefficient was -0.166 with a significance value of 0.001 ( $\rho = -0.166$ ;  $p = 0.001$ ). These findings indicate that higher levels of fatherlessness are associated with lower coping stress abilities. However, the correlation strength was weak, suggesting that adolescents' coping stress is also influenced by factors beyond fatherlessness. In addition, the coping strategy that appeared to be more dominant among respondents was emotion-focused disengagement coping.

## **3.2 Discussion**

The findings indicate a significant negative relationship between fatherless and coping stress among adolescents, suggesting that higher levels of fatherlessness are associated with lower coping abilities. This result does not imply a direct causal effect; rather, it reflects that the physical or emotional absence of a father figure may hinder the development of adaptive coping strategies.

Adolescence is characterized by intense emotional changes and increasing developmental demands, placing individuals in a psychologically vulnerable state to stress [2]. When coping skills are underdeveloped, stress responses tend to manifest through maladaptive strategies such as avoidance, emotional suppression, and denial [1]. In contrast, adaptive coping, particularly problem-focused coping, supports more constructive management of academic, social, and familial demands, while maladaptive coping negatively affects psychological well-being [6]. The present findings reinforce these patterns among adolescents growing up in fatherless conditions.

Previous studies have shown that maladaptive coping is associated with increased negative emotions, difficulties in managing daily stressors [4], and a higher risk of maladaptive behaviors, including suicidal ideation [3]. In this context, reduced coping ability among fatherless adolescents can be understood as a consequence of limited emotional support and guidance typically provided by fathers.

From a family perspective, these findings support the view that the family serves as the primary system in shaping individuals' abilities to cope with problems. The family represents the initial environment in which children learn life values, communication patterns, and stress management strategies [8]. Fathers play a crucial role as authority figures, protectors, and sources of emotional and instrumental support. When these roles are not fulfilled optimally, adolescents are at greater risk of experiencing difficulties in emotional regulation and coping stress development [9].

Consistent with prior research, fatherlessness is associated with lower self-control, increased stress vulnerability [11], and reduced psychological well-being, which in turn weakens both problem-focused and emotion-focused coping abilities [12]. Fatherless adolescents are also more prone to hostility due to limited paternal emotional support encouraging the use of maladaptive coping strategies such as distancing and distraction [13]. Long-term father absence has further been linked to depressive symptoms and poorer stress-coping abilities during adolescence and early adulthood [12]. These coping difficulties increase adolescents' vulnerability to maladaptive decisions under psychosocial pressure, including early marriage, as reported in previous research in Magelang Regency [5]

Although the observed correlation is statistically significant but weak, this finding indicates that fatherlessness is not the sole determinant of adolescents' coping abilities. Coping stress is also influenced by other factors, including maternal relationships, social and peer support, school environment, and internal psychological resources such as emotional regulation and resilience. Adolescents without fathers may still demonstrate effective coping when supported by their environment, while those living with fathers but experiencing low-quality relationships may also face coping difficulties.

From a broader perspective, the findings of this study highlight the importance of strengthening adolescents' psychological resources during a critical stage of development. Adolescents who grow up with limited paternal involvement may experience reduced emotional guidance and support, which can influence how they respond to stressful situations. The negative relationship found between fatherlessness and coping stress abilities suggests that the absence of supportive family dynamics may hinder the development of adaptive coping strategies. Strengthening adolescents' ability to manage stress is therefore an important aspect of promoting their psychological well-being and helping them navigate the complex challenges that often arise during the transition to adulthood.

The findings also underline the significant role of the family environment in shaping adolescents' emotional regulation and coping capacities. Families serve as the earliest context in which young people learn how to interpret stressful experiences, regulate emotions, and seek support when facing difficulties. When supportive parental relationships are present, adolescents tend to develop stronger problem-solving skills and greater resilience in dealing with life challenges. Conversely, limited parental involvement may reduce opportunities for adolescents to learn effective coping strategies, increasing their vulnerability to maladaptive responses when encountering pressure.

In this context, efforts to support adolescents' coping development should extend beyond individual-level interventions and consider the broader social environments surrounding young people. Schools, counseling services, and community programs can play a complementary role in providing emotional support and life skills education that help adolescents develop healthier ways of responding to stress. Providing access to supportive environments that foster emotional regulation, problem-solving, and resilience may help adolescents build the psychological capacities necessary to face future social and developmental challenges more effectively.

Several limitations of this study should be acknowledged. First, data were collected online, which prevented the researchers from ensuring the respondents' conditions while completing the questionnaires. Second, the fatherless and coping stress scales relied on participants' subjective perceptions, which may introduce bias in assessing paternal conditions and coping abilities. Third, this study did not include other supporting variables such as social support, family dynamics, school and peer environments, emotional conditions, or maternal parenting styles, all of which may substantially influence the results. Fourth, the findings should be interpreted as indicating a meaningful association rather than a direct causal relationship.

Despite these limitations, this study contributes significantly to the literature on fatherlessness in Indonesia. Most previous studies have primarily focused on psychological well-being, behavior, or self-control. This study offers a novel perspective by directly examining how fatherlessness is related to adolescents' coping stress abilities. The findings may serve as a basis for schools, counseling institutions, and parents in providing psychological support for adolescents who grow up without a father figure, particularly in fostering more adaptive coping strategies.

Future research is recommended to employ mixed-method approaches to explore the experiences of fatherless adolescents in greater depth. Additionally, incorporating variables such as social support, resilience, or the quality of the mother-child relationship may help

clarify factors that strengthen or weaken the relationship between fatherless and coping stress. Through these approaches, future studies are expected to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how adolescents cope with stress when growing up without a father's presence.

## 4 Conclusion

This study demonstrates a negative relationship between fatherless and coping stress among adolescents. The findings indicate that adolescents who experience the absence of a father figure, either physically or emotionally, tend to have lower abilities in managing stress. The absence of a father may limit the emotional support and guidance needed by adolescents to develop adaptive coping strategies when facing daily life stressors.

Although the observed relationship falls within the weak category, the results highlight that fatherless is an important factor to consider in understanding adolescents' coping stress. This study contributes to the literature by extending the discussion of fatherlessness beyond psychological well-being to include how adolescents cope with stress. Future research is recommended to incorporate additional factors such as resilience, social and family support, school and peer environments, emotional conditions, and maternal parenting styles to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the coping stress process among adolescents.

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