

Fatherlessness as Ambiguous Relational Loss: Family Reorganization and Nonlinear Adaptation among Children in Medan City, Indonesia

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Abstract:

This study examines how children experience and adapt to fatherlessness as a form of ambiguous relational loss. The study employed a phenomenological qualitative design involving 10 children aged 9–14 years in Medan City, Indonesia, who were selected through purposive sampling. The researchers collected data through semi-structured interviews, nonparticipant observation, and field notes and analyzed the data thematically with the assistance of NVivo 12 Pro. The findings show that limited father involvement does not eliminate the emotional significance of fathers in children's lives. Longing, sadness, and feelings of loss can intensify again through comparisons with peers, school activities, and family-related events. Reduced father involvement also prompts family relational reorganization through the redistribution of emotional support, caregiving, guidance, and practical assistance to mothers and extended family members. Children develop relational coping by sharing their feelings, seeking family support, interacting with peers, and maintaining communication with their fathers when contact remains possible. However, everyday adaptation does not end the experience of loss because social triggers can reactivate it. Theoretically, this study advances the concepts of social reactivation of loss and family relational reorganization and integrates them into a model of relationally mediated nonlinear adaptation. These findings suggest that fatherlessness is better understood as a relational and nonlinear process rather than merely as the physical absence of a father.

Keywords: Fatherlessness; Ambiguous Relational Loss; Family Relational Reorganization; Relational Coping; Nonlinear Adaptation.

Abstrak:

Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis bagaimana anak mengalami dan beradaptasi terhadap fatherlessness sebagai kehilangan relasional yang ambigu. Penelitian menggunakan desain kualitatif fenomenologis dengan 10 anak berusia 9–14 tahun di Kota Medan, Indonesia, yang dipilih secara purposif. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur, observasi nonpartisipan, dan catatan lapangan, kemudian dianalisis secara tematik dengan bantuan NVivo 12 Pro. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa keterbatasan keterlibatan ayah tidak menghilangkan

makna emosional ayah bagi anak. Kerinduan, kesedihan, dan rasa kehilangan dapat kembali menguat melalui perbandingan dengan teman sebaya, kegiatan sekolah, dan momen keluarga. Berkurangnya keterlibatan ayah juga diikuti reorganisasi relasi keluarga melalui redistribusi dukungan emosional, pengasuhan, pengarahan, dan bantuan kepada ibu serta keluarga besar. Anak mengembangkan relational coping melalui bercerita, dukungan keluarga, interaksi dengan teman, dan komunikasi yang masih tersisa dengan ayah. Namun, adaptasi sehari-hari tidak mengakhiri pengalaman kehilangan; pemicu sosial dapat mengaktifkannya kembali. Secara teoretis, penelitian ini mengembangkan social reactivation of loss dan family relational reorganization serta mengintegrasikannya dalam relationally mediated nonlinear adaptation. Temuan ini menunjukkan bahwa fatherlessness lebih tepat dipahami sebagai proses relasional dan nonlinear daripada sekadar ketidakhadiran fisik ayah.

Kata Kunci: Ketiadaan Figur Ayah; Kehilangan Relasional yang Ambigu; Reorganisasi Relasi Keluarga; Koping Relasional; Adaptasi Nonlinier.

INTRODUCTION

Fatherlessness has become an increasingly important family issue in Indonesia because it involves not only the physical absence of fathers but also limited emotional involvement and caregiving in children's lives. Data from the 2024 National Socioeconomic Survey (Susenas) show that 2.6% of children aged 0–17 years, or approximately 2.48 million children, do not live with their fathers because of death, divorce, or labor migration. However, when fatherlessness is defined more broadly as limited paternal involvement in daily caregiving, the 2025 Family Data Collection estimated the prevalence at 25.8%, with 25.4% in urban areas and 26.3% in rural areas (Faharuddin, 2026). The distinction between physical absence and limited caregiving indicates that fatherlessness cannot be adequately understood through a binary classification of fathers as either “present” or “absent.” Father involvement is multidimensional and includes interaction, caregiving responsibilities, accessibility, and emotional support (Diniz et al., 2021). Conversely, fathers who live apart from their children can still maintain meaningful involvement and high-quality relationships with them (Adamsons & Johnson, 2013). Therefore, researchers should understand fatherlessness in terms of the quality and continuity of the father–child relationship rather than solely on the basis of residential status. Fatherlessness should thus be conceptualized as a multidimensional condition that encompasses physical, emotional, and relational dimensions of the father–child relationship.

The complexity of fatherlessness increases because changes in family structure do not necessarily end the relationship between fathers and children. Divorce, labor migration, residential separation, and limited emotional involvement can produce different configurations of father–child relationships (Osinga et al., 2024; Reuven-Krispin et al., 2021; Türker & Çimşir, 2025). In 2024, Indonesia recorded 394,608 divorce cases, indicating the substantial scale of family-structure changes that may affect the continuity of caregiving relationships between children and parents (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2025). However, residential separation does not automatically eliminate opportunities for paternal involvement. Kemendukbangga/BKKBN emphasizes that fathers who live apart from their children can continue to perform caregiving functions through regular communication, involvement in addressing children's problems, and sustained attention and support in daily life (Faharuddin, 2026). This perspective aligns with the growing literature that no longer evaluates father involvement solely on the basis of physical presence. Puglisi et al. (2024) showed in their systematic review that the relationship between father involvement and children's emotion regulation is neither simple nor direct; instead, the quality and form of involvement, characteristics of fathers and children, and the family context shape this relationship. Therefore, the central issue in fatherlessness concerns not only whether a father is physically present or absent, but also how children experience and interpret limitations or changes in that relationship in everyday life (Adamsons, 2018; Adamsons & Johnson, 2013). The more important question is therefore not simply “Is the father present?” but rather “How do children experience paternal absence, and how do other relationships around them help them live with that experience?”

Research on fatherlessness has developed along at least three major lines. The first line treats father absence as a factor associated with children's psychological and developmental outcomes. Culpin et al. (2022) found that father absence during childhood was associated with trajectories of depressive symptoms through adolescence and young adulthood, while Luningham et al. (2021) showed that father presence and family conflict dynamics were associated with adolescents' psychological adjustment. However, these associations do not necessarily reflect a simple causal relationship. Rodríguez Sánchez (2022) demonstrated that estimates of the effects of father absence may be influenced by life-course selection bias and preexisting socioeconomic vulnerability, while Reuven-Krispin et al. (2021) found that the consequences of divorce-related father absence varied according to the continuity of

the father–child relationship. Overall, this line of research establishes an association between father absence and various outcomes, but it does not adequately explain how children experience, interpret, and manage the loss of a father in everyday life.

The second line of research moves beyond the present–absent dichotomy and focuses on the quality and forms of paternal involvement. Diniz et al. (2021, 2023) showed that father involvement is multidimensional and includes interaction, caregiving responsibility, monitoring, and paternal functions shaped by family and social contexts. In relation to emotional development, Islamiah et al. (2023) emphasized the importance of emotional modeling, parenting practices, and the emotional climate of the father–child relationship, while Rodrigues et al. (2021) found that paternal sensitivity was associated with several cognitive and emotional outcomes in children. Puglisi et al. (2024) further showed that the relationship between father involvement and emotion regulation is not always direct because characteristics of fathers, children, and families, as well as the way researchers conceptualize involvement, shape this relationship. Thus, the literature has increasingly emphasized relationship quality and variations in paternal involvement, but it still tends to treat these factors primarily as predictors of child outcomes rather than as subjective experiences that children themselves navigate.

The third line of research conceptualizes fatherlessness as a relational experience from the perspective of children and other individuals who experience it. Arditti et al. (2019) showed that nonresident father involvement follows diverse patterns ranging from disengaged to engaged and that relationship quality, distance, and family dynamics shape these patterns. Osinga et al. (2023) found that growing up without a biological father can generate longing, feelings of loss, and social comparison, while mothers, grandparents, siblings, and other figures may perform some paternal functions. Wagner et al. (2022) similarly showed that physically absent fathers can retain an important place in children's family representations and expectations. Mkhwanazi et al. (2024) found that social fathers can provide support and guidance without fully replacing the emotional meaning of biological fathers. Osinga et al. (2024) further demonstrated that continuity of contact and socioeconomic context shape the quality of father–child relationships more strongly than residential status alone. Thus, the literature has increasingly addressed subjective experience, relational continuity, and compensatory support, but it has not sufficiently explained how loss, social triggers, the reorganization of family support, and coping interact within children's adaptation processes.

Despite the rapid development of the fatherlessness literature, three major gaps remain. First, previous studies have focused more heavily on psychological and developmental consequences than on the everyday experiences of school-age children and early adolescents. Second, qualitative studies have identified longing, social comparison, family support, and adaptation, but they have generally presented these findings as separate themes rather than as interconnected process mechanisms (Mkhwanazi et al., 2024; Osinga et al., 2023; Wagner et al., 2022). Third, researchers often conceptualize father absence through physical presence or levels of paternal involvement, even though fathers who do not live with their children may remain psychologically present, while other family members may assume some paternal functions without fully replacing the father's emotional meaning (Puglisi et al., 2024). Therefore, the literature has not sufficiently explained how fatherlessness operates as an ambiguous relational loss, triggers the reorganization of family relationships, and shapes an adaptation process in which experiences of loss may re-emerge.

To address these gaps, this study uses Ambiguous Loss Theory and Family Systems Theory as complementary theoretical foundations. Ambiguous Loss Theory explains forms of loss with unclear boundaries, including situations in which a person is physically absent but remains psychologically present in family life (Boss, 2007, 2016). This perspective is particularly relevant to fatherlessness because limited paternal presence does not necessarily end children's emotional attachment, memories, or expectations regarding their fathers. Family Systems Theory, in turn, conceptualizes the family as an interdependent relational system in which changes in one relationship can produce adjustments in other relationships, functions, and patterns of interaction among family members (Cox & Paley, 1997). In the context of nonresident fatherhood, support from fathers and grandparents has also been associated with variations in children's socioemotional adjustment, indicating that children develop within broader family support networks (Parkes et al., 2021). Drawing on these two perspectives, this study develops the analytical concept of family relational reorganization to explain how families redistribute emotional, caregiving, guidance, and support functions to mothers, extended family members, or other relational figures when father involvement declines. Accordingly, this study analyzes fatherlessness not only as an individual experience of loss but also as a relational change that reshapes how the family system organizes support for the child.

This study examines how children aged 9–14 years in Medan City experience fatherlessness as an ambiguous relational loss, how specific social contexts can reactivate that experience, and how family relational reorganization and coping strategies shape children's adaptation. Conceptually, the study seeks to explain the relationships among ambiguous relational loss, family relational reorganization, relational coping, and children's adaptation as an integrated psychological-relational process.

This study argues that fatherlessness does not constitute a completed experience of loss once children accept their fathers' absence. Instead, it represents an ambiguous relational loss that can remain psychologically present and become reactivated through particular social experiences. Children's adaptation therefore depends not only on individual capacities but also on family relational reorganization, defined as the redistribution of emotional, caregiving, guidance, and support functions to mothers, extended family members, and other relational figures when father involvement declines. However, these forms of support may replace some paternal functions without fully replacing the father's emotional meaning for the child. On this basis, this study proposes that adaptation to fatherlessness unfolds relationally and nonlinearly. Theoretically, the study extends Ambiguous Loss Theory through the concept of social reactivation of loss and specifies Family Systems Theory through the concept of family relational reorganization. The study integrates these two mechanisms into relationally mediated nonlinear adaptation, a process in which relational networks mediate children's adaptation while still allowing experiences of loss to re-emerge in particular situations.

METHOD

This study analyzes the lived experiences of children aged 9–14 years who experience fatherlessness in Medan City, Indonesia. The study operationalizes fatherlessness as a condition in which fathers have very limited physical, emotional, and/or day-to-day caregiving involvement in their children's lives. Rather than treating fatherlessness merely as a family status, the analysis focuses on how children experience and interpret limitations in their relationships with their fathers within family and social contexts. The study examines experiences of loss and longing, social situations that reactivate feelings of loss, changes in relationships with mothers and extended family members, alternative sources of support, coping strategies, and children's adaptation processes. The study also considers variations across children because forms of father involvement and family support configurations differ among participants. Accordingly, the unit of analysis centers on children's relational experiences as they confront, interpret, and adapt to limited father involvement.

This study employed a qualitative design with a phenomenological approach to understand the subjective experiences of children who experience fatherlessness. Phenomenology focuses on lived experience, particularly how individuals directly experience and interpret a phenomenon (Dodgson, 2023; Neubauer et al., 2019). The researchers selected this approach because the study does not seek to measure effect sizes, test statistical relationships, or generalize findings to a population. Instead, it explores how children experience and interpret limited father involvement in their lives. The phenomenological approach allows the researchers to understand experiences of loss, changes in family relationships, coping strategies, and adaptation processes from the children's own perspectives while preserving variation across participants. Therefore, this approach provides an appropriate framework for explaining how children experience, negotiate, and adapt to fatherlessness as a relational process that may change over time and does not necessarily follow a linear course.

The primary data came from 10 children aged 9–14 years who experienced fatherlessness and lived in the Medan Kota, Medan Petisah, and Medan Helvetia districts. The researchers used purposive sampling to recruit children with direct experience of the phenomenon under investigation. The inclusion criteria required participants to be 9–14 years old, reside in Medan City, experience limited paternal presence or involvement, communicate their experiences and feelings, and agree to participate after obtaining permission from a parent or guardian. Because all participants were minors, the researchers also obtained parental or guardian consent and child assent during recruitment. Participants experienced different forms of fatherlessness, including parental divorce, fathers living separately, work-related separation or migration, and very limited emotional and caregiving involvement. The researchers assigned codes to participants to protect their identities and maintain confidentiality. The study determined the number of participants based on the relevance of their experiences to the phenomenological focus and the depth of information they could provide rather than on statistical generalizability.

The researchers collected data primarily through semi-structured interviews and supported the interviews with nonparticipant observation and field notes. They used open-ended questions with language appropriate to each participant's age. The interviews addressed relationships with fathers, experiences of paternal absence, emotional responses, relationships with mothers and extended family members, experiences at school and with peers,

strategies for managing sadness or longing, and supportive figures in the participants' lives. The semi-structured format allowed the researchers to probe experiences that participants considered important. The researchers used nonparticipant observation selectively to document expressions, nonverbal responses, pauses, emotional changes, and the interactional context during interviews. They also used field notes and reflective memos to record contextual information and researcher reflections throughout data collection. Because the study addressed a sensitive topic and involved children, the researchers explained the study's purpose and procedures in age-appropriate language. Participants could decline to answer any question or stop the interview at any time. The researchers also presented sensitive questions carefully and removed all identifying information from the data.

The researchers analyzed the data using thematic analysis to identify patterns of meaning across participants' experiences. They first transcribed all interviews verbatim and read the transcripts repeatedly to develop a comprehensive understanding of each child's experience. They then assigned initial codes to relevant data segments and compared the codes across participants to identify similarities, variations, and experiences that diverged from dominant patterns. Next, they grouped related codes into categories and developed broader themes, which they reviewed against the original quotations and the complete dataset. The researchers interpreted relationships among the themes to explain a process that moved from experiences of loss to the social reactivation of loss, family relational reorganization, coping strategies, and adaptation that did not always follow a linear trajectory. They used NVivo 12 Pro to organize transcripts, codes, and categories, while the researchers themselves conducted theme development and interpretation. To strengthen the trustworthiness of the findings, the researchers compared interview data with observational notes, conducted member checking, maintained reflective records, used direct quotations, and examined variations and negative cases so that the interpretation did not represent only dominant patterns of experience.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study involved 10 children aged 9–14 years who had diverse experiences of fatherlessness. This diversity reflected not only the context of paternal absence but also the form of fatherlessness, the continuity of contact with the father, and the caregiving arrangements and supportive figures available to each child. Therefore, this study did not treat fatherlessness as a homogeneous family experience. Instead, it approached fatherlessness as a relational condition with distinct characteristics across participants.

Table 1. Participant Characteristics and Fatherlessness Configurations

Participant Code	Age	Sex	Context of Fatherlessness	Form of Fatherlessness	Contact with Father	Primary Caregiver	Supportive Figure
HA	10	Male	Parental divorce	Physical absence + intermittent contact	None	Mother	Mother
RA	9	Female	Parental divorce	Physical absence + intermittent contact	None	Mother	Mother
MR	13	Female	Parental divorce	Physical absence + intermittent contact	Limited	Mother	Mother
MH	11	Female	Father's labor migration	Physical absence, but emotional involvement remains	Limited/infrequent	Grandmother	Grandmother/grandfather
MRA	13	Male	Parental divorce	Physical absence + intermittent contact	Limited/infrequent	Aunt	Aunt's family
MA	10	Male	Limited father involvement	Physical + emotional + functional absence	None	Uncle	Uncle's family
HAH	10	Female	Divorce, with a very limited relationship	Physical + emotional + functional absence	Limited/infrequent	Mother	Mother
ASA	14	Female	Divorce, with a very limited relationship	Physical + emotional + functional absence	None	Mother	Mother
ZAR	9	Female	Parental divorce	Physical absence + intermittent contact	Limited/infrequent	Grandmother	Grandmother
BEE	11	Male	Father's labor migration	Physical absence, but emotional involvement remains	Limited/infrequent	Mother	Mother

Source: Primary data from participant interviews, February 2026.

Table 1 demonstrates the heterogeneity of fatherlessness among the participants. Seven children experienced fatherlessness in the context of parental divorce, two experienced separation because of their fathers' labor migration, and one experienced very limited paternal involvement. Four participants had no contact with their

fathers, while six maintained contact at a limited level. Caregiving arrangements also varied. Mothers served as the primary caregivers for six participants, while grandmothers, an aunt, or an uncle cared for the others. These variations show that paternal absence does not produce a uniform experience. Differences in relational continuity and the availability of relational support subsequently shaped three major patterns examined in this study: experiences of loss and their social reactivation, family relational reorganization, and relational coping with nonlinear adaptation.

Loss That Does Not Fully End: Paternal Absence and the Social Reactivation of Loss

Findings across participants show that children experience fatherlessness not only as a change in family structure but also as a relational change that retains emotional significance. Participants repeatedly described feelings of loss, longing, sadness, and a need for closeness with their fathers. HA, for example, described longing for the physical closeness that the child had previously experienced with the father (interview, February 5, 2026), while RA associated paternal absence with sadness when comparing personal experiences with those of peers (interview, February 6, 2026). However, participants differed in the intensity and form of their emotional responses because some children still maintained limited contact with their fathers, whereas others no longer had any contact. These differences indicate that paternal absence does not automatically remove the father from the child's emotional experience. Instead, the father retains emotional significance in varying degrees and forms depending on the continuity of each participant's relationship with him.

The father's absence from everyday life does not eliminate the child's emotional need for a paternal relationship that the child once experienced or expected to experience. HA described this experience directly: "I feel sad because I miss being carried by my father" (interview, February 5, 2026). This statement shows that the child's longing does not focus only on the father as an abstract figure but also on specific forms of emotionally meaningful interaction, including physical affection, companionship, conversation, and shared time. Other participants expressed similar patterns as they continued to remember or hope for experiences with their fathers despite reduced contact. Thus, declining father involvement does not necessarily erase the father's emotional position in the child's experience. Memories of and needs for paternal closeness can remain even when everyday relationships have changed.

The experience of loss did not emerge with the same intensity in every situation. Instead, it became more salient when participants encountered social situations that emphasized the father's absence. Seeing peers with their fathers, receiving school report cards, participating in school activities, celebrating religious holidays, attending family events, and discussing parents could reactivate feelings of longing, sadness, or loss. In these situations, children not only remembered their fathers but also compared their own relational experiences with those of other children who still received direct paternal companionship. This pattern shows that the experience of fatherlessness is contextual. Feelings of loss may remain in the background of everyday life and then intensify when the social environment presents forms of father-child relationships that participants do not have or no longer experience.

Comparisons with peers represented one of the clearest situations that heightened participants' awareness of paternal absence. RA stated, "Sometimes I feel jealous and sad because I cannot spend as much time with my father as they can" (interview, February 6, 2026). MH expressed a similar experience: "Of course, I feel sad and jealous every time I see my friends laughing and going out with their fathers" (interview, February 9, 2026). These statements show that children recognize limitations in their relationships with their fathers not only through their own family circumstances but also through social experiences that they observe in other families. Fathers' presence in the lives of peers provides a relational point of comparison that makes the absence of paternal closeness more visible. Therefore, sadness and jealousy in experiences of fatherlessness do not arise solely as individual emotional responses; they also develop through the interaction between children's personal experiences and their social environments.

For some participants, emotions related to family circumstances also intersected with engagement in everyday and academic activities. MRA, who experienced fatherlessness following parental divorce, described the experience by saying, "When my parents divorced, I felt like there was nothing that could make me feel motivated to live" (interview, February 10, 2026). MA also acknowledged that sadness sometimes affected motivation to study, stating, "Sometimes, yes, when I feel sad" (interview, February 11, 2026). These experiences indicate emotional spillover into everyday and academic engagement, in which emotions associated with family relationships coincide with reduced motivation to participate in activities or study. However, this pattern did not appear with the same intensity across all participants, and the data do not support the conclusion that fatherlessness directly causes

lower academic achievement. Instead, the findings indicate that, under certain conditions, experiences of loss can extend from the emotional domain into children's engagement with everyday life.

Participants' experiences also revealed important variations from the dominant pattern of loss. HA, RA, MA, and ASA no longer had contact with their fathers, whereas MR, HAH, ZAR, MH, MRA, and BEE maintained limited contact. For MH and BEE, for example, physical separation caused by labor migration did not completely eliminate their fathers' emotional involvement (interviews, February 9 and 25, 2026). Their experiences differed from those of participants who experienced physical, emotional, and caregiving disconnection. In addition, some children received broader support from mothers, grandmothers, grandfathers, uncles, aunts, or other extended family members. These variations indicate that fatherlessness does not produce a uniform level of loss; continuity of contact with the father and the availability of relational support shape how children experience paternal absence. Cases in which fathers maintained emotional involvement function as negative cases relative to patterns of complete disconnection and demonstrate that physical absence does not necessarily equal relational loss.

Overall, the first finding shows that limited paternal presence does not mean that fathers disappear from children's psychological experiences. Longing, sadness, and the need for paternal closeness can persist, although their intensity varies across participants. These experiences also do not remain constantly salient; they can intensify when children encounter social situations that emphasize paternal absence, such as interactions with peers, school activities, or family events. At the same time, variations in relational continuity and social support show that children do not experience fatherlessness in a relational vacuum. When father involvement declines, the support structure around the child adjusts through the increased involvement of mothers, extended family members, and other supportive figures. These changes provide the basis for the next finding concerning family relational reorganization and the redistribution of caregiving functions.

Participants' experiences of loss were related not only to paternal absence itself but also to situations that made the absence emotionally salient again. Several social contexts functioned as emotional triggers because they reintroduced experiences, expectations, or comparisons related to father-child relationships. Table 2 summarizes the most salient contexts, the emotional responses they elicited, and their empirical meanings in participants' experiences.

Table 2. Contexts That Reactivate Experiences of Loss

Context/Moment	Emotional Response	Empirical Meaning	Participant/Evidence
Seeing peers with their fathers	Sadness, jealousy, longing	Social comparison makes limitations in the father-child relationship more salient	RA, MH
School activities/report card distribution	Sadness, renewed feelings of loss	Situations that expect parental involvement make paternal absence more salient	Needs to be matched with the interview transcripts
Religious holidays/family events	Longing, sadness	Moments of family togetherness reactivate the need for the father's presence	Needs to be matched with the interview transcripts
Remembering interactions with the father	Sadness, longing	Memories of paternal closeness remain emotionally significant	HA
Changes in family circumstances	Sadness, reduced motivation	Emotions related to family changes intersect with everyday and academic engagement	MRA, MA

Source: Primary data from participant interviews, February 2026.

Table 2 shows that experiences of loss are contextual and do not remain continuously salient. Comparisons with peers, activities involving parents, family occasions, and memories of interactions with fathers can make paternal absence emotionally prominent again. Therefore, participants' experiences of fatherlessness are shaped not only by family circumstances at home but also by social situations that periodically reactivate the meaning of the father-child relationship.

Family Relational Reorganization: Redistribution of Support and Caregiving Functions

Reduced father involvement changed the configuration of support available to the children. Attention, caregiving, guidance, and everyday assistance no longer centered on the father but shifted to other family members according to each household's circumstances. Mothers emerged as the most consistent providers of emotional support and caregiving, while extended family members, including grandmothers, grandfathers, uncles, aunts, and other relatives, assumed more prominent roles for several participants. However, these patterns varied because each family had different relational resources and caregiving arrangements. These findings indicate that reduced father involvement prompted a redistribution of family functions rather than the simple replacement of the father by a single figure.

Mothers became the most consistent source of emotional support for several participants after father involvement declined. HA described a close relationship with the mother through regular conversations and daily interactions that made the child feel more comfortable sharing personal experiences (interview, February 5, 2026). RA similarly indicated that this closeness developed because the mother most frequently provided companionship and attended to daily needs (interview, February 6, 2026), while MR described the mother as the closest person who remained consistently present in daily life (interview, February 8, 2026). These patterns show that mothers simultaneously performed several functions as primary caregivers, confidants, sources of security, and companions during periods of sadness. However, greater closeness with mothers did not eliminate the children's emotional need for their fathers. Instead, closeness with mothers and longing for fathers could coexist, indicating that the redistribution of family support did not necessarily replace the father's emotional position.

Extended family members also formed important support networks when father involvement declined. RA explained that an uncle and grandfather regularly offered advice and assistance when the child needed guidance (interview, February 6, 2026). MA likewise reported that an uncle helped the mother meet daily caregiving needs (interview, February 11, 2026). These patterns show that extended family support included not only emotional assistance but also guidance, companionship, practical help, and reinforcement for the primary caregiver. In this context, uncles, grandfathers, and other male relatives did not necessarily function as complete "father replacements." Instead, they served as supportive figures who performed particular paternal functions. Their involvement broadened the children's sources of support and demonstrated that families could distribute caregiving functions across a wider relational network when father involvement became limited.

MRA's experience most clearly illustrated the redistribution of paternal functions because the extended family explicitly attempted to fill the support gap created by the father's absence. MRA recalled that the family's *pakde* emphasized, "Here, all of your *pakde* are your fathers; once again, we are your fathers too" (interview, February 10, 2026). This statement shows that several family members could collectively perform functions previously associated with the father, including guidance, protection, companionship, and support. However, this redistribution did not automatically erase the biological father's emotional position in the child's experience. The previous findings showed that longing and the need for paternal closeness could persist even when alternative support was available. Thus, extended family members could assume particular paternal functions without necessarily replacing the father's emotional significance for the child.

For some participants, family reorganization also involved changes in economic activities and the distribution of everyday responsibilities. HAH observed that the mother had to begin selling goods early in the morning to meet the family's needs (interview, February 11, 2026), while MRA explained that the family had to rebuild their lives "from the beginning" after the parents divorced (interview, February 10, 2026). These experiences show that reduced father involvement involved not only emotional changes but, in some cases, also adjustments in economic roles, the primary caregiver's activities, and household responsibilities. However, this pattern did not occur among all participants and therefore cannot support a generalized conclusion about uniform economic consequences. Instead, the findings indicate that family relational reorganization can operate across emotional, caregiving, practical, and economic dimensions.

Family relational reorganization did not follow a uniform pattern because each participant had a different support configuration. RA and MA received relatively strong support from uncles and grandfathers, whereas HA, MR, HAH, and ASA relied more heavily on their mothers for caregiving and emotional support. Grandmothers and grandfathers played important roles in the daily lives of MH and ZAR, while MRA received support from an aunt and the wider extended family. Participants also differed in the continuity of their relationships with their fathers; some maintained limited communication, whereas others had no contact. These differences show that family

reorganization did not produce a single new family arrangement. Instead, it developed according to the availability of supportive figures, caregiving patterns, and the continuity of the father–child relationship. Therefore, families configured support functions differently after father involvement declined.

The findings on family reorganization show that reduced father involvement did not produce a uniform form of substitute caregiving. Families distributed emotional, caregiving, guidance, and practical functions across different figures according to their relational configurations. Table 3 summarizes these patterns of redistribution.

Table 3. Patterns of Family Relational Reorganization and Redistribution of Caregiving Functions

Support Configuration	Redistributed Functions	Empirical Forms of Support	Key Participants	Empirical Meaning
Mother as the central source of support	Emotional support, daily caregiving, communication, sense of security	Provides a space for sharing, companionship, daily care, and support during sadness	HA, RA, MR, HAH, ASA	Reduced father involvement increases the mother's central role in the child's everyday life
Uncles/grandfathers as paternal support figures	Guidance, advice, protection, companionship, practical assistance	Provide guidance, assist with caregiving, and support the primary caregiver	RA, MA	Extended family members can perform specific paternal functions without fully replacing the father
Extended family as a collective support network	Caregiving, protection, companionship, social support	Grandmothers, grandfathers, aunts, uncles, and other relatives assume roles according to the child's needs	MH, MRA, ZAR	Support after reduced father involvement can be distributed across several figures rather than concentrated in a single "replacement father"
Collective redistribution of paternal functions	Guidance, protection, emotional support, paternal identification	Several family members explicitly express their willingness to perform functions associated with the father	MRA	Families can distribute paternal functions collectively while the biological father retains emotional significance
Adjustment of economic and household responsibilities	Economic provision, work activities, distribution of responsibilities	Mothers increase economic activity; families reorganize daily life after changes in family structure	HAH, MRA	Family reorganization can include practical and economic dimensions in addition to emotional changes
Different support configurations across families	Combined emotional, caregiving, practical, and relational functions	Some children rely on mothers, others on extended family, while some maintain limited contact with their fathers	Across participants	Family reorganization is heterogeneous and depends on the relational resources available to each family

Source: Authors' analysis of in-depth interviews with 10 child participants experiencing fatherlessness in Medan City, February 5–25, 2026.

Table 3 shows that family relational reorganization occurred through the redistribution of functions rather than through the replacement of the father by a single new figure. Mothers generally became the central source of emotional support, while extended family members provided guidance, protection, companionship, and practical assistance according to each family's needs. In some cases, these changes also involved adjustments in economic

responsibilities. These patterns demonstrate that support structures following reduced father involvement were collective and heterogeneous, while the presence of supportive figures did not necessarily erase the biological father's emotional position in the child's experience.

Overall, the second finding shows that reduced father involvement did more than remove one source of caregiving; it prompted families to reorganize the distribution of support among available members. Mothers generally became the primary source of emotional support and everyday caregiving, while uncles, grandfathers, grandmothers, aunts, and other relatives provided guidance, protection, companionship, and practical assistance according to the child's needs. These arrangements did not create a single substitute father figure. Instead, they produced support networks in which different family members performed different functions. The findings therefore reveal an empirical pattern of family relational reorganization, in which families redistribute functions and support after father involvement declines. This reorganization provides children with alternative sources of support while allowing the biological father to retain emotional significance in their experiences.

Relational Coping and Nonlinear Adaptation

Participants not only experienced fatherlessness as a form of loss but also actively developed ways to live with the condition. Their responses included talking with their mothers, interacting with peers, seeking support from extended family members, maintaining communication with their fathers when possible, redirecting attention through everyday activities, and attempting to accept changes in their family circumstances. These strategies show that children did not remain passive in response to paternal absence. Instead, they used available social relationships and daily routines to regulate their emotions and maintain everyday functioning. Although participants employed different strategies, their responses generally indicate that adaptation involved actively learning to live with fatherlessness rather than merely enduring its consequences.

Talking with a trusted person emerged as one prominent coping strategy. HA reported feeling more comfortable talking with the mother because of their close relationship and daily interactions (interview, February 5, 2026). In this context, the relationship with the mother served not only as a source of support but also as a relational space in which the child could express feelings, seek comfort, and receive emotional responses to difficult experiences. This pattern shows that some children managed their emotions through interpersonal relationships rather than solely through individual emotional regulation. They used closeness with trusted people as a resource for understanding and managing their experiences of fatherlessness. Empirically, this pattern reflects relational coping, in which children manage emotional experiences through the social relationships available to them.

Peers and the broader social environment did not serve a single function in participants' experiences of fatherlessness. On the one hand, interactions with peers allowed children to redirect their attention, play, talk, and remain socially engaged in everyday life. On the other hand, the same social environment could reactivate feelings of loss when participants saw their peers experiencing closeness and shared activities with their fathers. RA and MH, for example, reported that seeing friends with their fathers could evoke sadness and jealousy, even though interactions with peers also helped them remain active and manage their emotions (interviews, February 6 and 9, 2026). This pattern shows that the social environment could simultaneously help children regulate emotional experiences and remind them of limitations in their own relationships with their fathers. Therefore, sources of support and triggers of loss did not necessarily emerge from separate environments; they could coexist within the same social relationships.

The continuity of the father-child relationship also shaped how participants managed fatherlessness. For MH and BEE, physical separation did not completely disrupt the relationship because they still communicated with their fathers, although contact remained limited (interviews, February 9 and 25, 2026). This remaining contact allowed the children to preserve some aspects of the paternal relationship that were still available to them. Their experiences differed from those of HA and RA, who no longer had contact with their fathers and therefore relied more heavily on their mothers and surrounding relational networks to manage their experiences (interviews, February 5 and 6, 2026). This comparison demonstrates that fatherlessness exists along a relational continuum, ranging from more complete relational disconnection to limited involvement and intermittent contact. Thus, children's ability to maintain relationships with their fathers depended not only on physical presence but also on the extent to which communication and involvement remained possible in everyday life.

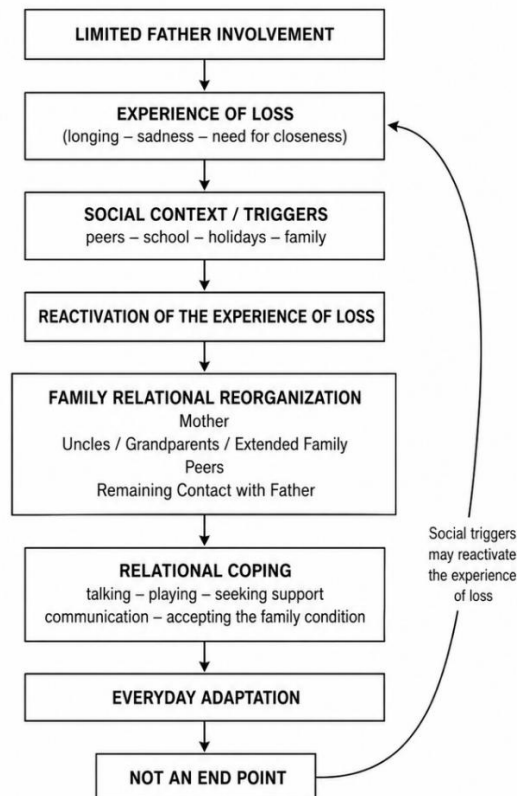
Participants also demonstrated adaptation through their ability to continue everyday routines even though feelings of loss had not fully disappeared. Some children continued attending school, interacting with peers, accepting changes in family arrangements, and finding comfort in relationships with mothers, extended family members, or other supportive figures. These patterns suggest that acceptance did not necessarily mean that

feelings of loss had ended. Instead, acceptance reflected children's ability to continue living within their existing family circumstances. Therefore, these experiences are more appropriately understood as everyday adaptation rather than as evidence of resilience. The data do not provide sufficient evidence to characterize resilience as a long-term developmental process, but they do show that children maintained social and everyday functioning while continuing to carry emotional experiences associated with paternal absence.

The adaptation that participants demonstrated did not eliminate the possibility that sadness and longing for their fathers would return. HA, for example, had developed a close relationship with the mother and used that relationship as a source of comfort, yet the child continued to long for closeness with the father (interview, February 5, 2026). RA and MH showed a similar pattern. Both continued to participate in everyday social life but experienced renewed sadness and jealousy when they saw peers interacting with their fathers (interviews, February 6 and 9, 2026). These findings show that acceptance of family circumstances and experiences of loss can coexist. The process did not follow a linear sequence of loss → coping → acceptance → resolution. Instead, participants' experiences reflected a more dynamic sequence: loss → coping → adaptation → social trigger → reactivated loss → renewed coping. Thus, adaptation to fatherlessness followed a nonlinear pattern in which children could move forward in everyday life while still returning to earlier emotional experiences under certain conditions.

Overall, adaptation to fatherlessness occurred through the relationships available around the child. Mothers, extended family members, peers, and, in some cases, continued communication with fathers provided resources that participants used to manage emotional experiences and maintain everyday functioning. However, the ability to sustain routines and accept family circumstances did not eliminate the experience of loss. Certain social situations could still reactivate longing, sadness, or awareness of limitations in the father–child relationship. The three findings therefore form an interconnected process: loss can remain psychologically present and become reactivated; families redistribute supportive functions; and these relational networks help children cope and adapt without fully ending the experience of loss. These findings demonstrate that children's adaptation to fatherlessness is relational, dynamic, and nonlinear.

Figure 1. Empirical Process of Relational and Nonlinear Adaptation to Fatherlessness



Source: Authors' analysis of in-depth interview data from 10 child participants experiencing fatherlessness in Medan City, February 2026.

Figure 1 summarizes the empirical pattern that emerged across the three major findings. Limited father involvement generated experiences of loss characterized by longing, sadness, and a need for closeness, which could intensify again in particular social contexts, including interactions with peers, school activities, religious holidays, and family events. Under these conditions, children did not experience fatherlessness in a relational vacuum because families reorganized support through mothers, extended family members, peers, and, in some cases, continued contact with fathers. These relational networks provided the foundation for relational coping and helped children maintain everyday adaptation. However, adaptation did not represent a final stage that fully resolved the experience of loss because specific social triggers could reactivate the emotional significance of paternal absence.

DISCUSSION

Overall, the findings show that fatherlessness is better understood as a relational process than merely as a condition of paternal absence. First, paternal absence retains psychological significance through feelings of loss, longing, and the need for closeness, which can re-emerge in particular social situations. HA's statement, "I feel sad because I miss being carried by my father," shows that the father retains emotional significance even after the everyday relationship has changed. Second, reduced father involvement prompts family relational reorganization by increasing the roles of mothers, extended family members, and other supportive figures in providing emotional support, caregiving, and guidance. Third, children develop coping strategies through available social relationships, but their adaptation does not follow a linear course. MH, for example, continued to participate in social life but experienced renewed sadness and jealousy when seeing peers with their fathers. The variations across the 10 participants show that fatherlessness is not a homogeneous psychological condition; rather, children's experiences depend on the continuity of the father-child relationship, the configuration of family support, and the social contexts surrounding their daily lives.

Ambiguous Loss Theory helps explain why feelings of loss persist even after children continue with everyday life. Boss (2007) explains that a person may be physically absent while remaining psychologically present, meaning that changes in family structure do not necessarily end emotional attachment. This pattern appears among participants who retained memories of their fathers, expectations regarding paternal roles, or limited communication with them and is consistent with Wagner et al.'s (2022) concept of the presence of the absent father. This study extends that perspective by showing that the father's psychological presence does not remain constant (Palkovitz & Hull, 2018). Feelings of loss can intensify again when children encounter peers, school activities, or particular family occasions. This mechanism represents social reactivation of ambiguous loss, in which relational cues and social situations reactivate previously less-salient experiences of loss.

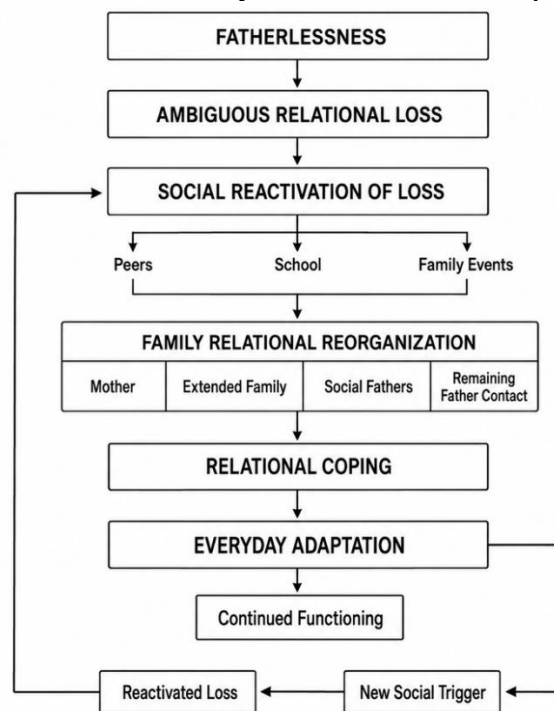
Social situations reactivate loss because children experience paternal absence through relational comparison with their surroundings. Culpin et al. (2022) demonstrated an association between father absence and trajectories of depressive symptoms, but the present findings reveal a more specific mechanism. For RA and MH, seeing peers with their fathers heightened awareness of paternal closeness that they did not have and reactivated sadness, longing, or jealousy. This pattern is consistent with Osinga et al. (2023), who emphasized the importance of sociocultural context in shaping the meaning of father absence, and with Puglisi et al. (2024), who showed that the relationship between father involvement and emotion regulation depends on relational and contextual factors. Thus, the mechanism identified in this study follows the sequence father absence → relational comparison → heightened awareness of relational absence → emotional reactivation. Fatherlessness is therefore better understood as a contextually activated relational experience than as a static exposure.

Family Systems Theory helps explain changes in the configuration of family support because it views changes in one relationship as processes that can trigger adjustments throughout the wider family system (Cox & Paley, 1997). In this study, reduced father involvement increased the roles of mothers, uncles, grandfathers, and other extended family members in providing emotional support, guidance, companionship, and, in some cases, practical and economic assistance. This pattern aligns with Pu and Rodriguez (2023), who emphasized the interdependence of family components. MRA's statement, "Here, all of your pakde are your fathers; once again, we are your fathers too," illustrates not the replacement of the father by a single person but the redistribution of paternal functions across several family members. This finding complements Mkhwanazi et al.'s (2024) discussion of social fathers and supports the concept of family relational reorganization, defined as the redistribution of emotional, caregiving, guidance, protective, and supportive functions across the family network when father involvement declines.

Children primarily coped with fatherlessness through social relationships. They talked with their mothers, sought support from extended family members, interacted with peers, maintained communication with their fathers when possible, and continued their everyday activities. This pattern reflects relational coping, or the use of interpersonal relationships to manage emotional experiences, and aligns with Diniz et al. (2021) and Puglisi et al. (2024), who situate child development within relational and family contexts. However, the same relationships can serve dual functions. Peers can provide support while also triggering feelings of loss when children observe their closeness with their fathers. This finding is consistent with Osinga et al. (2023), Mkhwanazi et al. (2024), and Zharima et al. (2026). Social support therefore does not function as a “replacement” that removes fatherlessness. Instead, it operates as a relational resource that helps children manage a form of loss that retains emotional significance.

Adaptation to fatherlessness does not follow a linear trajectory. Children may attend school, interact socially, receive family support, and use coping strategies while still longing for their fathers or experiencing renewed sadness in particular situations (Culpin et al., 2022; Sarkadi et al., 2008). The findings therefore do not support a simple sequence of loss → coping → acceptance → resolution. Instead, they indicate a more dynamic pattern: loss → relational coping → adaptation → social trigger → reactivated loss → renewed coping/adaptation. This pattern represents nonlinear adaptation, in which everyday functioning and acceptance can develop without eliminating the possibility that loss will re-emerge. Theoretically, this study extends Ambiguous Loss Theory (Boss, 2007) and specifies Family Systems Theory (Cox & Paley, 1997) through the concept of relationally mediated nonlinear adaptation, in which family reorganization and relational support shape children’s adaptation while allowing experiences of loss to become emotionally salient again.

Figure 2. Theoretical Model of Relationally Mediated Nonlinear Adaptation to Fatherlessness



Source: Authors’ conceptualization based on the empirical findings and theoretical synthesis of Boss (2007), Cox and Paley (1997), Wagner et al. (2022), and Mkhwanazi et al. (2024).

The findings have both theoretical and practical implications for understanding and addressing fatherlessness. Theoretically, researchers should not classify fatherlessness solely through a father-present versus father-absent dichotomy. Instead, future studies should distinguish physical absence, emotional availability, frequency of contact, children’s perceived relationship quality, caregiving involvement, and the availability of alternative relational support. This approach aligns with Diniz et al. (2021), who conceptualized father involvement as multidimensional,

and Osinga et al. (2024), who showed that nonresidential fatherhood does not by itself determine the quality of father–child relationships. At the family level, mothers or guardians, nonresident fathers, and extended family members should maintain father–child communication when it is safe and feasible, distribute support so that mothers do not carry the entire emotional burden, and recognize situations that may reactivate children's sadness (Cabrera, 2020; Diniz et al., 2021). At the school level, teachers and counselors should avoid designing activities that assume all children live with both parents and should provide support during sensitive events and access to counseling when emotional distress persists (Cabrera et al., 2014; Diniz et al., 2021). Practitioners can assess available support through indicators such as access to supportive adults, continuity of family communication, school engagement, access to counseling, and children's ability to identify sources of help. Accordingly, interventions for children experiencing fatherlessness should not focus only on reducing negative emotions; they should also strengthen relational networks that help children manage loss over time without assuming that successful adaptation requires the disappearance of longing for the father.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that fatherlessness constitutes a dynamic relational experience rather than merely the physical absence of a father. Even when father involvement is limited, children can retain strong emotional meanings associated with their fathers, allowing feelings of loss, longing, sadness, and jealousy to re-emerge when particular social situations trigger them. At the same time, reduced father involvement prompts families to reorganize support through mothers, extended family members, and other supportive figures. Children then use these relationships as coping resources that help them maintain everyday functioning. However, adaptation does not follow a linear process because children can function adaptively while simultaneously experiencing renewed feelings of loss.

Scientifically, this study shows that fatherlessness among children aged 9–14 years does not produce homogeneous experiences. Instead, children's experiences depend on the continuity of their relationships with their fathers, maternal support, extended family involvement, alternative paternal figures, peer relationships, and social contexts that can reactivate loss. Conceptually, the study integrates loss, family relational reorganization, coping, and adaptation within a single relational process. Theoretically, the study extends Ambiguous Loss Theory through the concept of social reactivation of loss and specifies Family Systems Theory through family relational reorganization. The integration of these processes produces the proposition of relationally mediated nonlinear adaptation, in which children adapt through available relational networks without necessarily reaching a final state in which loss has fully disappeared. Thus, the study's main contribution lies in shifting the understanding of fatherlessness from an absence–outcome model toward a relational-processual model that explains how loss, family reorganization, and coping interact to produce nonlinear adaptation.

This study has several limitations. First, the study involved only 10 children aged 9–14 years in Medan City, so the findings are not intended for statistical generalization to all children experiencing fatherlessness. Second, the analysis primarily relied on children's perspectives and did not systematically incorporate the perspectives of fathers, mothers, extended family members, teachers, or counselors. As a result, the concept of family relational reorganization primarily reflects how children observed and experienced changes in family relationships. Third, the study collected qualitative data within a specific period and did not follow changes in participants' experiences longitudinally. Therefore, nonlinear adaptation represents a pattern identified in participants' narratives rather than a demonstrated long-term developmental trajectory. Future research should use longitudinal and multi-informant designs, compare different forms of fatherlessness across sociocultural contexts, and quantitatively test the relationships among social reactivation of loss, the quality of relational support, and psychological adaptation. Researchers should also develop and evaluate family- and school-based interventions to assess the practical relevance of this model. Future studies should determine whether relationally mediated nonlinear adaptation also occurs across different age groups, forms of fatherlessness, and social contexts so that researchers can strengthen, revise, or delimit the conceptual model more precisely.

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