

A STUDY ON POSITIVE SELF-ACCEPTANCE IN STUDENTS EXPERIENCING FATHERLESSNESS

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Article Information

Received : October 9, 2025

Revised : October 17, 2025

Accepted : October 19, 2025

Abstract

This study explores the process of positive self-acceptance among fatherless adolescents in Indonesia, a phenomenon that remains underexamined within the cultural and educational context. The research aims to understand how emotional regulation, coping strategies, and social support contribute to adolescents' self-acceptance after experiencing the absence of a father due to death, divorce, or lack of involvement. Using a qualitative phenomenological design, data were collected through in-depth interviews with five students aged 15–18 from SMA Negeri 2 Purbalingga, along with guidance and counseling teachers as triangulation sources. The results reveal that self-acceptance among fatherless adolescents is a dynamic and contextual process characterized by four patterns: stable, fluctuating, struggling, and transformative. Emotional awareness, gratitude, and social relationships particularly maternal support and counselor involvement emerged as crucial factors in fostering resilience. These findings highlight that father absence does not always lead to maladjustment; instead, it may serve as a pathway for personal growth and emotional maturity when supported by relational and communal resources. This study contributes to the understanding of adolescent well-being within a collectivist culture and provides practical implications for school-based counseling programs emphasizing emotional literacy, self-compassion, and social connectedness.

Keywords: : *fatherless adolescents, self-acceptance, resilience, coping strategies, social support.*

Introduction

The presence of a father figure plays a crucial role in shaping adolescents' psychological, emotional, and social development. Beyond financial support, fathers contribute to emotional regulation, self-identity formation, and role modeling that guide adolescents toward healthy maturity (Shah et al., 2024; Zhou et al., 2024). Numerous studies have confirmed that a positive paternal role enhances adolescents' self-esteem, adaptive functioning, and psychological resilience (Azpiazu et al., 2021; Wei et al., 2023). However, current social realities show a growing number of adolescents who experience father absence commonly referred to as *fatherless* due to divorce, death, labor migration, or emotional disengagement (Culpin et al., 2022; Hidayah, 2023). The absence of a father may lead to emotional instability, identity confusion, and lowered psychological well-being, indicating a significant developmental risk.

Empirical findings consistently reveal that father absence correlates with increased depression, behavioral problems, and lower self-worth among adolescents (Culpin et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2023; Martínez-Casanova et al., 2024). In Indonesia, this condition is similarly prevalent among children of divorced parents, deceased fathers, or emotionally distant fathers. They are more likely to struggle with emotional regulation, social

withdrawal, and diminished self-concept (Suarna et al., 2025; Susana, 2024). Despite this, recent research has highlighted the existence of protective factors that enable *fatherless* adolescents to maintain positive psychological functioning. Social support, religiosity, and positive engagement in school or extracurricular activities have been shown to mitigate the negative impacts of paternal absence (Birrell et al., 2025; Rahman, 2024; Ruan et al., 2023).

Although extensive research has explored the detrimental outcomes of father absence, relatively few studies have investigated how *fatherless* adolescents achieve *positive self-acceptance* a psychological state where individuals embrace both strengths and limitations while maintaining self-worth (Ryff, 1989). The existing literature tends to emphasize psychopathology, neglecting how resilience and relational factors support self-acceptance as a developmental process (Rossall & Arianti, 2025). Moreover, most studies were conducted in Western contexts that emphasize individualistic coping, whereas Indonesia's collectivistic culture emphasizes relational-communal support. This cultural orientation provides a unique perspective for exploring how adolescents develop self-acceptance within strong social networks of mothers, peers, and school counselors (Gunawan, 2023; Qudsi & Rizkillah, 2023).

Based on these considerations, the present study aims to explore the *dynamics of positive self-acceptance among fatherless adolescents* in an Indonesian high school setting. Specifically, it seeks to describe: (1) adolescents' initial awareness and emotional responses toward father absence, (2) coping strategies employed to manage emotional distress, (3) the role of social support in strengthening self-acceptance, (4) obstacles encountered during the process, and (5) distinctive patterns of acceptance. This study employed a qualitative phenomenological approach to capture the lived experiences and subjective meanings constructed by the participants.

The novelty of this research lies in three main aspects. First, it conceptualizes *positive self-acceptance* as a dynamic process rather than a fixed outcome. Second, it integrates collectivistic cultural values that emphasize relational-communal support as a contextual strength. Third, it provides an in-depth phenomenological mapping of acceptance patterns stable, fluctuating, struggling, and transformative that have not been elaborated in previous studies. The findings are expected to enrich guidance and counseling practices by emphasizing both internal resilience and external relational support for *fatherless* adolescents.

Method

This study used a qualitative phenomenological design to explore the lived experiences of adolescents who experienced father absence (*fatherless condition*) and developed positive self-acceptance. The population consisted of students from SMA Negeri 2 Purbalingga, Central Java, Indonesia. Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on recommendations from school counselors familiar with students' family backgrounds. The inclusion criteria were adolescents aged 15–18 years who had lost paternal presence due to death, divorce, or emotional disengagement. Five students participated: one had lost a father to death, two came from divorced families, and two experienced emotional absence despite living with their fathers. A guidance counselor and a homeroom teacher were also involved as supporting informants for triangulation purposes.

The main instruments were semi-structured interviews and non-participatory observation sheets, both developed and validated by the researcher with expert input from a university counselor. The interview guide included open-ended questions focusing on emotional experiences, coping strategies, social support, and self-acceptance.

Observations were conducted in classrooms and extracurricular settings to capture behavioral expressions of adaptation.

Data collection took place from July to August 2025. Each participant engaged in one or two interview sessions lasting approximately 30-45 minutes, conducted in the Indonesian language to maintain authenticity. All sessions were recorded with informed consent and later transcribed verbatim.

Data were analyzed using thematic phenomenological analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), which included data familiarization, coding, theme identification, and synthesis to reveal the essence of participants' experiences. Although no statistical tests were used, interpretive rigor was maintained through source triangulation, and researcher reflexivity. These approaches ensured the validity and reliability of the findings within qualitative standards.

Ethical procedures were followed throughout the study, including voluntary participation, confidentiality, and informed consent from students and guardians. The research scope was limited to a single high school with five participants, which restricts statistical generalization but provides deep contextual insight into the phenomenon of positive self-acceptance among *fatherless* adolescents in Indonesia.

Result and Discussion

This study explored the lived experiences of *fatherless* adolescents and revealed that positive self-acceptance is a dynamic process shaped by emotional understanding, coping mechanisms, and relational support. The findings are discussed thematically, integrating participants' voices with relevant theoretical perspectives.

Awareness and Emotional Response

Awareness of father absence among adolescents emerged as an evolving process that began in early childhood and extended into adolescence. Emotional reactions ranged from sadness and confusion to acceptance and growth. Participant P1, who lost his father due to death, recalled his early awareness of loss: *"When I was in elementary school, I felt sad because my friends had fathers, and I didn't. I even asked my mother, where is my father?"* (P1). This statement illustrates early emotional awareness, reflecting both grief and the beginning of meaning-making. In contrast, participants from divorced families (P2 and P4) expressed ambivalent emotions between longing and resentment. P2 shared: *"When I meet my father now, it feels like meeting a stranger, even though he is my real father."* (P2). Similarly, P4, who lives with a stepfather, experienced emotional displacement: *"Since my stepfather came, my mother talks to me less often."* (P4). These reflections demonstrate the complexity of emotional adaptation, supporting (Erikson, 1994) theory of *identity versus role confusion*, where disrupted parental attachment may challenge identity formation.

Meanwhile, participants experiencing emotional father absence (P3 and P5) showed distinct emotional regulation. P3 reported: *"I don't feel anything anymore... I just accept it as it is."* (P3). This calm expression of detachment indicates early adjustment, aligning with Ryff's (1989) concept of self-acceptance as integrating both positive and negative experiences. P5, whose father works away, reflected mixed feelings of loneliness and longing: *"Sometimes it feels sad to always stay at my grandmother's house. I miss my parents, but I try to be okay."* (P5). These diverse emotional narratives indicate that the type of father absence (death, divorce, or emotional neglect) shapes adolescents' psychological responses. The findings affirm (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003) argument that the meaning of father absence is socially and contextually constructed rather than uniform.

Coping Strategies and Meaning-Making

Participants employed a variety of coping mechanisms to manage emotional distress and reconstruct self-worth. P1 engaged in sports and gaming as outlets for energy and self-achievement: *“Playing basketball or games helps me calm down; I even won first place in the district.”* (P1). This behavior reflects *problem-focused coping* channeling emotional energy into productive activities (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). P2 relied on emotional release and social interaction: *“Sometimes I cry or talk to my counsellor it makes me feel lighter.”* (P2). This aligns with *emotion-focused coping*, where expression and connection reduce psychological strain.

Other participants demonstrated *meaning-focused coping* (Folkman, 2008). P3 interpreted her condition through gratitude and spirituality: *“I’m just grateful because I still have my mother in my life.”* (P3). Similarly, P5 transformed loss into personal growth: *“I accept that I don’t have a father and want to become a better person.”* (P5). These coping patterns illustrate resilience as a developmental process (Luthar et al., 2000), not a fixed trait. Consistent with (Peng et al., 2024) and (Wu et al., 2025), the findings demonstrate that adolescents’ emotional flexibility and self-reflection foster adaptive adjustment in the face of family disruption.

The Role of Social Support

Social support emerged as a central factor enhancing emotional security and positive self-acceptance. All participants identified their mothers as primary sources of affection, guidance, and validation. P3 emphasized, *“My mom always listens to me and never complains.”* (P3). This maternal support reinforced emotional stability and compensated for paternal absence. Peers and school environments also played important roles. P2 explained, *“My friends always cheer me up when I’m quiet.”* (P2), while P5 noted, *“My counseling teacher helps me calm down and reminds me to stay positive.”* (P5). Such statements illustrate how school-based relationships function as secondary attachment systems, consistent with (Cobb, 1976) and (Sarason et al., 1990) *social support theory*.

These findings are supported by recent studies showing that perceived social connection predicts better mental health among youth (Birrell et al., 2025; Cherewick et al., 2024). Within Indonesia’s collectivist context, this *relational-communal support system* plays a vital role in fostering self-esteem and emotional regulation, confirming that well-being is socially embedded rather than purely individual.

Patterns of Self-Acceptance

The narratives revealed four evolving patterns of self-acceptance : stable, fluctuating, struggling, and transformative each reflecting a unique trajectory of emotional adaptation and meaning-making. The stable pattern appeared in P3, who displayed consistent gratitude and emotional equilibrium. She expressed little envy toward peers and saw her life circumstances as manageable. This pattern demonstrates internalized acceptance and emotional regulation, aligning with (Ryff, 1989) framework of psychological well-being.

The fluctuating pattern characterized participants like P1 and P4, whose acceptance shifted over time. P1 felt empowered by achievements yet occasionally relapsed into sadness during reflective moments, while P4 alternated between calm and frustration due to strained family dynamics. This instability suggests that acceptance is not static but continuously negotiated depending on emotional triggers and social interactions.

The struggling pattern was most evident in P2, who admitted persistent self-doubt and sensitivity to stigma: *“Honestly, I still can’t fully accept my situation, but I try to be grateful.”* (P2). Her statement reflects ambivalence a state of partial acceptance and ongoing identity conflict consistent with Erikson’s view that identity development under disrupted attachment often involves prolonged negotiation. Finally, the transformative

pattern was demonstrated by P5, who reframed loss as motivation for self-improvement: *“I try to accept it and use this situation to become a better person.”* (P5). This pattern represents post-adversity growth and resilience, showing how adolescents reconstruct meaning through agency and reflection (Luthar et al., 2000).

Collectively, these patterns affirm that self-acceptance among fatherless adolescents is multidimensional and fluid, evolving through emotional regulation, coping, and supportive relationships. Each adolescent moves between vulnerability and strength, reconstructing self-worth through personal and social adaptation.

The integration of these findings supports the idea that father absence does not solely lead to maladjustment but can foster adaptive transformation when supported by emotional awareness and relational security. Adolescents who reinterpret loss through gratitude and social connectedness exemplify *resilient adaptation* rather than victimization.

These results extend previous studies by (Liu et al., 2023) and (Rossall & Arianti, 2025), which primarily focused on negative psychological outcomes. In contrast, this study highlights the agency, cultural resilience, and relational healing that emerge from Indonesian adolescents' collective support systems. The results also reinforce (Erikson, 1994) theory that identity development depends on meaningful social bonds beyond biological family boundaries.

Practically, the findings suggest that school counselors should adopt relational and communal counseling approaches that involve mothers, peers, and mentors in the intervention process. Programs emphasizing emotional literacy, self-compassion, and gratitude training could further enhance adolescents' acceptance and well-being. In a cultural context that values harmony and togetherness, relational interventions are more likely to succeed than purely individualistic methods.

This study's scope was limited to five participants from one public high school in Central Java, which constrains the generalizability of findings. The cross-sectional design also prevents a full understanding of long-term changes in self-acceptance. Future research should include more diverse participants and utilize longitudinal or mixed-method approaches to capture the evolution of acceptance over time.

Despite these limitations, the study offers valuable insight into how *fatherless* adolescents navigate emotional challenges through resilience, gratitude, and relational connection. It emphasizes that positive self-acceptance is not a fixed state but a continual process of reconstructing meaning and belonging within one's social world.

Conclusion

This study concludes that positive self-acceptance among fatherless adolescents is a dynamic and context-dependent process shaped by emotional regulation, coping strategies, and social support. Adolescents exhibit varied patterns stable, fluctuating, struggling, and transformative reflecting different stages of adjustment and meaning-making. Support from mothers, peers, and school counselors plays a crucial role in fostering resilience and emotional balance.

These findings demonstrate that father absence does not inherently lead to maladjustment. Instead, with adequate relational and emotional resources, adolescents can transform loss into personal growth. The study contributes to existing literature by highlighting the cultural and communal dimensions of resilience among Indonesian youth. Its implications underscore the importance of family and school-based counseling programs that promote emotional literacy, gratitude, and social connectedness to strengthen self-acceptance and psychological well-being.

Acknowledgments

The author expresses sincere gratitude to SMA Negeri 2 Purbalingga for permitting this research, and to the students, teachers, and counselors who participated. Appreciation is also extended to Universitas Negeri Surabaya, Faculty of Education, for academic guidance and support throughout this study.

Author Contributions Statement

ED designed the research framework, conducted data collection and analysis, and drafted the manuscript. DS supervised the research process, provided critical revisions, and ensured the academic rigor and alignment with publication standards. Both authors reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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