



THE IMPACT OF PARENTAL ABSENCE ON ADOLESCENT PSYCHOLOGY: CURRENT SITUATION AND SOLUTIONS

Tuan Anh LUONG¹, Ha Anh Thu PHAM²

¹Open Innovation and Technopreneur Institute, Vietnam

²Hoang Mai Star School, Hanoi, Vietnam

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ABSTRACT

Parental absence can alter the emotional, behavioural, academic, and social environments in which adolescents develop, yet its consequences are not uniformly negative. This study examines psychological adjustment among 560 high school students living without one or both parents and identifies potential protective responses for schools, families, and communities. A cross-sectional, multi-mode survey design was used. The source study reports paper-based administration, online questionnaires through SurveyMonkey, Google Forms, and Qualtrics, direct interviews with students and parents, and computer-assisted telephone surveys. Quantitative responses were processed in SPSS 26.0. The reported questionnaire results cover five domains: emotional experience, behavioural regulation, learning-related psychology, social relationships, and positive adaptation. Descriptive analysis shows particularly high frequencies of loneliness (91.07%), sadness (69.10%), lack of direction (80.53%), difficulty in decision-making (71.42%), inadequate academic completion (91.07%), lack of academic support (83.57%), and over-reliance on peers for emotional support (83.57%). At the same time, respondents frequently reported independence (89.10%), faster maturity (87.32%), resilience (83.21%), and self-reliance (80.53%). The findings indicate that parental absence should not be interpreted as a deterministic pathway to poor adjustment. Rather, it constitutes a developmental risk context in which negative and adaptive responses may coexist. Effective intervention should therefore combine emotional counselling, academic monitoring, structured extracurricular participation, involvement of extended family, and sustained parent-adolescent communication where feasible.

KEYWORDS: Parental Absence; Adolescents; Psychological Adjustment; Resilience; Academic Support; Social Relationships.

1. INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is a developmental period characterised by rapid physical maturation, intensified emotional experiences, increasing autonomy, and the consolidation of personal identity. During this transition, parents commonly provide emotional security, behavioural guidance, supervision, academic encouragement, and a stable reference point for decision-making. When one or both parents are physically or emotionally absent because of divorce, labour migration, illness, family conflict, separation, or other circumstances, these functions may be reduced or transferred to other caregivers. The developmental consequences are therefore likely to extend beyond the household and influence psychological well-being, school engagement, peer relationships, and behavioural regulation.

Theoretical and empirical research offers several explanations for these associations. Attachment theory proposes that stable and responsive caregiving contributes to emotional security and later interpersonal functioning (Ainsworth, 1979; Bowlby, 1982). Research on family structure similarly indicates that parental separation and instability can be associated with lower well-being, although outcomes depend substantially on family processes, resources, conflict, and the quality of continuing relationships rather than family structure alone (Amato, 2000; Carlson & Corcoran, 2001; Demo & Acock, 1996). Studies of father absence further show associations with anxiety, self-esteem, depressive symptoms, delinquency, and developmental adjustment, while also cautioning that causal effects vary according to timing, family background, and the mechanisms through which absence operates (Luo et al., 2012; Markowitz & Ryan, 2016; McLanahan et al., 2013).

The present study analyses survey evidence from 560 high school students living without one or both parents. It addresses three questions: (1) Which emotional, behavioural, academic, and social difficulties are most frequently reported? (2) Which positive adaptive responses coexist with these difficulties? and (3) What forms of school, family, and community support are most consistent with the observed pattern of needs? By organising the original survey results within a clearer developmental framework and explicitly specifying the survey procedure and analytical limits, the study aims to provide a more rigorous basis for interpreting parental absence and adolescent adjustment.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Attachment, family processes, and emotional security

Attachment theory explains why parental availability matters during adolescence. Secure attachment supports expectations that caregivers are accessible and responsive and can contribute to emotional regulation and interpersonal trust (Ainsworth, 1979; Bowlby, 1982). Parental absence may therefore be experienced not only as a structural household change but also as reduced



emotional availability, consistent with evidence linking parental acceptance-rejection to mental-health outcomes (Rohner & Britner, 2002).

Family-process research further demonstrates that household structure alone is an incomplete predictor of adolescent outcomes. Amato (2000) argues that the effects of divorce operate through multiple mechanisms, including reduced economic resources, diminished parental contact, interparental conflict, and changes in parenting practices. Likewise, Carlson and Corcoran (2001) and Demo and Acock (1996) show that behavioural and cognitive outcomes depend on the interaction between family structure and family processes. Consequently, parental absence should be conceptualised as a risk context whose influence varies according to the quality of remaining relationships and available support.

2.2 Behavioural regulation, supervision, and peer influence

Parental involvement also provides supervision and behavioural guidance. During adolescence, increasing exposure to peers and unsupervised environments can create new opportunities for both positive and risky behaviour. Steinberg (2014) emphasises the value of parenting that combines responsiveness with age-appropriate monitoring and autonomy. Research on nonresident fathers similarly suggests that the quality and continuity of parental involvement may matter for adolescent adjustment (King, 2006; Lamb, 2010). Markowitz and Ryan (2016), using a sibling-comparison approach, found that links between father departure and delinquency may partly reflect changes in parental monitoring rather than a simple direct effect of absence itself. Thus, reduced supervision is a plausible mechanism connecting parental absence with susceptibility to peer pressure, decision-making difficulties, and behavioural risk.

2.3 Academic adjustment, social support, and resilience

Parents influence academic development through expectations, encouragement, monitoring, practical assistance, and communication with schools. Parental absence may weaken these supports, particularly when alternative caregivers have limited time or resources. At the same time, social support can be redistributed. Teachers, grandparents, siblings, mentors, and peers may partially compensate for missing parental functions. Evidence from longitudinal and systematic research indicates that active father involvement is associated with a range of favourable developmental outcomes, while the absence of involvement does not inevitably produce maladjustment (Sarkadi et al., 2008). This distinction supports a resilience perspective: adolescents can adapt successfully when protective relationships and opportunities remain available. The coexistence of vulnerability and adaptation is therefore central to the present analysis.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research design and participants

The study employed a cross-sectional descriptive survey to examine psychological and behavioural experiences among adolescents exposed to parental absence. The analysed sample comprised 560 high school students living without one parent or without both parents. The source material does not report the students' age distribution, gender composition, geographic sampling frame, socioeconomic characteristics, duration or cause of parental absence, or the number of respondents in each absence category. These characteristics are therefore not reconstructed or inferred in the present paper. The absence of a non-exposed comparison group also means that the survey can describe experiences within the parental-absence group but cannot estimate the causal effect of absence relative to adolescents living with both parents.

3.2 Survey administration

Data collection was conducted through multiple survey modes. The source study reports direct paper questionnaires, online questionnaires using SurveyMonkey and Google Forms, web-based administration through Qualtrics, direct interviews with individual students and their parents, and computer-assisted telephone surveys. This combination can broaden accessibility by allowing respondents to participate through different channels. However, the source does not provide mode-specific sample sizes, the sequence in which modes were deployed, response rates, procedures for preventing duplicate participation, or evidence of equivalence between self-administered and interviewer-administered responses. Accordingly, the present analysis treats the dataset as a single pooled sample of 560 student observations and does not make claims about mode effects.

3.3 Questionnaire structure and measurement

The reported tables indicate five substantive domains. The emotional domain contained seven outcomes: insecurity, loneliness, abandonment, lack of self-confidence, anxiety, depression, and sadness. The behavioural domain contained seven indicators: lack of direction, lack of management or supervision, difficulty in decision-making, susceptibility to others' influence, school dropout, substance abuse, and proneness to offending. The learning-related domain contained eight indicators covering study completion, learning goals, decision-making, academic support, motivation, time management, academic achievement, and encouragement to study. The social domain contained eight indicators concerning perceived support, family attention, social interaction, reliance on friends, peer pressure, potentially unhealthy relationships, and negative social behaviour. Finally, the positive-adaptation domain contained eight indicators including resilience, independence, responsibility, self-reliance, willingness to accept support from relatives, ability to overcome difficulties, and perceived maturity.



The original document reports a count and percentage for every listed indicator rather than a scale mean or composite score. Moreover, the percentages within each domain sum to more than 100%, indicating that outcomes were non-mutually exclusive and that a respondent could endorse several experiences in the same domain. For analytical purposes, each reported outcome is therefore interpreted as an endorsement indicator, with the percentage calculated against the common denominator of 560 respondents. This interpretation is consistent with the tabulation structure, although the original source does not specify the exact response scale, item wording, pilot-testing procedure, reliability coefficients, or construct-validity assessment. Consequently, the current study does not present Cronbach's alpha, factor analysis, or latent-scale scores that are not supported by the source data.

3.4 Data processing and analysis

The source study states that survey data were processed using SPSS version 26.0. The present analysis retains its descriptive orientation. For each indicator, prevalence was calculated as $P_i = (n_i / 560) \times 100$, where n_i denotes the number of respondents reporting outcome i . Indicators were then rank-ordered within each domain to identify the most frequently reported experiences. Cross-domain interpretation focused on the co-occurrence of high-frequency risk indicators and positive-adaptation indicators. No significance tests, regression models, group comparisons, or causal estimates are reported because participant-level data and relevant covariates are not available in the source document. This analytical restraint is necessary to avoid converting descriptive frequencies into unsupported causal conclusions.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Emotional experiences

Emotional difficulties were common in the surveyed group. Loneliness was reported by 510 students (91.07%), making it the most prevalent emotional experience. Sadness was reported by 387 respondents (69.10%), followed by insecurity among 360 respondents (64.28%). Depression was reported by 259 students (46.25%), abandonment by 230 (41.07%), anxiety by 210 (37.50%), and lack of self-confidence by 198 (35.35%). The ranking suggests that social-emotional disconnection and sadness were more widespread than explicitly labelled anxiety or low self-confidence. Because these items are self-reported descriptors rather than diagnostic assessments, the results should be interpreted as reported psychological experiences, not clinical prevalence estimates.

4.2 Behavioural regulation

The strongest behavioural signal was lack of direction, endorsed by 451 students (80.53%). Difficulty in decision-making affected 400 respondents (71.42%), and 380 (67.85%) reported being influenced by others. Lack of management and supervision was reported by 320 adolescents (57.14%). More severe risk behaviours were less frequent but remained noteworthy: 121 respondents (21.60%) reported substance abuse, 95 (16.96%) reported proneness to offending, and 53 (9.46%) reported school dropout. The pattern is consistent with a gradient in which difficulties involving guidance and decision-making are substantially more common than severe behavioural outcomes.

4.3 Learning-related psychology

Academic support emerged as another major area of vulnerability. A total of 510 students (91.07%) reported not completing their studies adequately, while 468 (83.57%) reported insufficient academic support and 445 (79.46%) reported a lack of encouragement to study. Failure to define learning goals correctly was reported by 420 students (75.00%). Lower frequencies were observed for lack of motivation (57.67%), difficulty in decision-making related to learning (53.75%), and problems managing study time (37.85%). Low academic achievement was reported by 97 students (17.32%). These findings suggest that the perceived disruption may be more strongly expressed through support, organisation, and motivation than through low achievement alone.

4.4 Social relationships

Social responses also showed substantial strain. Lack of support from friends or peers was reported by 510 students (91.07%), while 468 (83.57%) reported over-reliance on friends for emotional support. Inadequate family attention was reported by 420 respondents (75.00%), peer-conformity pressure by 323 (57.67%), and difficulty in social interaction by 301 (53.75%). Potentially unhealthy relationships were reported by 212 students (37.85%), and 97 (17.32%) reported negative behaviour in social interactions. Taken together, these indicators suggest that parental absence may coincide with both unmet support needs and increased dependence on peer networks.

4.5 Positive adaptation

The data also reveal substantial adaptive responses. The highest reported positive indicator was not becoming overly dependent on friends, endorsed by 521 students (93.03%). Independence when facing difficulties was reported by 499 respondents (89.10%), faster maturity by 489 (87.32%), resilience after setbacks by 466 (83.21%), and self-reliance from a young age by 451 (80.53%). Responsibility for one's actions was reported by 376 students (67.14%), the ability to overcome difficulties more easily by 355 (63.39%), and positive acceptance of support from relatives by 333 (59.46%). The simultaneous reporting of peer over-reliance in the social domain and avoidance of excessive dependence in the positive domain indicates heterogeneity in coping styles and may also reflect differences in item interpretation. It reinforces the need to avoid treating the sample as psychologically uniform.



Table 1. Selected High-Frequency Survey Outcomes

Domain	Outcome	n	%
Emotional	Loneliness	510	91.07
Emotional	Sadness	387	69.10
Behavioural	Lack of direction	451	80.53
Behavioural	Difficulty in decision-making	400	71.42
Academic	Inadequate study completion	510	91.07
Academic	Lack of academic support	468	83.57
Social	Over-reliance on friends for emotional support	468	83.57
Social	Inadequate family attention	420	75.00
Positive adaptation	Independence when facing difficulties	499	89.10
Positive adaptation	Faster maturity	489	87.32
Positive adaptation	Resilience after setbacks	466	83.21

5. DISCUSSION

The results support a multidimensional interpretation of parental absence. Emotional distress was pronounced, particularly loneliness, sadness, and insecurity. These findings are compatible with attachment-based expectations that reduced parental availability can weaken perceived emotional security (Ainsworth, 1979; Bowlby, 1982). They are also broadly consistent with evidence linking father absence to anxiety and self-esteem difficulties (Luo et al., 2012). Nevertheless, the descriptive design does not establish that parental absence caused these experiences. Family conflict, economic hardship, prior psychological vulnerability, or the circumstances leading to absence may contribute simultaneously to both family structure and adolescent adjustment, a problem emphasised in causal reviews of father absence (McLanahan et al., 2013).

Behavioural and academic results point to a second mechanism: reduced guidance and supervision. Lack of direction, decision-making difficulties, susceptibility to others' influence, inadequate academic support, and lack of encouragement were considerably more common than severe outcomes such as dropout or offending. This pattern suggests that intervention should focus upstream, before more serious behavioural problems emerge. Regular school mentoring, structured after-school activities, academic coaching, and the involvement of grandparents or other trusted adults may substitute for some lost supervisory functions. Where an absent parent remains available, scheduled telephone or video communication can maintain involvement despite physical separation.

A third finding is the coexistence of vulnerability and resilience. High frequencies of independence, maturity, self-reliance, and resilience show that adversity does not produce a single developmental trajectory. This aligns with family-process research, which demonstrates that the quality of relationships and resources often explains variation in outcomes more effectively than household structure alone (Amato, 2000; Demo & Acock, 1996). The practical implication is that support programmes should not frame adolescents experiencing parental absence only as deficient or vulnerable. Interventions should identify existing strengths and build on them while addressing emotional and academic needs.

The social findings require caution. Many respondents reported both insufficient support and reliance on peers, whereas the positive-adaptation table also records a high proportion who reported avoiding excessive dependence on friends. This may reflect distinct subgroups or ambiguous item wording; without respondent-level cross-tabulations, the tension cannot be resolved. Future surveys should use validated multi-item scales, explicit definitions of parental absence, demographic covariates, a comparison group, and preferably longitudinal follow-up to improve causal interpretation.

For schools and communities, the evidence supports a layered support model. The first layer should provide accessible counselling and trusted-adult contact for loneliness, insecurity, and sadness. The second should provide academic monitoring, tutoring, goal-setting, and time-management support. The third should strengthen structured peer environments through clubs, sports, volunteering, and mentoring rather than leaving peer affiliation unstructured. The fourth should engage extended family and maintain communication with absent parents where safe and feasible. Such a model responds to both risk and resilience and is more appropriate than a single intervention directed only at symptoms.

6. CONCLUSION

This study reorganises survey evidence from 560 high school students experiencing the absence of one or both parents and demonstrates that adolescent adjustment is simultaneously emotional, behavioural, academic, social, and adaptive. Loneliness, lack of direction, decision-making difficulty, inadequate academic support, and peer-related pressures were prominent. At the same time, many respondents reported independence, maturity, resilience, and self-reliance. Parental absence should therefore be understood as a developmental risk context rather than a deterministic cause of maladjustment.

The most appropriate response is an integrated support system combining counselling, academic guidance, structured social participation, extended-family involvement, and sustained parent-adolescent communication when possible. Methodologically, the



current evidence remains descriptive. Future research should document sampling and ethics procedures, validate the questionnaire, distinguish types and durations of parental absence, include comparison groups, and apply longitudinal or multivariable designs. These improvements would allow a clearer distinction between correlation, mechanism, and causal effect while preserving attention to the resilience that many adolescents display under conditions of family disruption.

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