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## Psychological Adaptation and Emotional Development among Adolescents from Disrupted Family Structures

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**Abstract:** Adolescents from disrupted family structures often face complex psychological challenges that influence their emotional development and adaptive capacities. Family disruption—such as parental divorce, separation, prolonged conflict, or loss—can alter emotional security and interpersonal relationships during a critical developmental stage. This study aims to explore how adolescents psychologically adapt to disrupted family environments and how these experiences shape their emotional development. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews and reflective narratives from adolescents who have experienced family disruption. The findings reveal that adolescents demonstrate diverse adaptation patterns, ranging from emotional withdrawal and heightened sensitivity to the development of emotional resilience and independence. Emotional development in disrupted family contexts is characterized by fluctuating self-esteem, difficulties in emotional regulation, and challenges in forming secure social relationships. However, the presence of social support, positive coping strategies, and personal meaning-making processes plays a significant role in fostering emotional maturity and psychological stability. This study highlights the importance of understanding adolescents' subjective experiences in disrupted families and underscores the need for supportive interventions that address emotional regulation, identity formation, and adaptive coping. The findings contribute to psychological and developmental research by offering an in-depth perspective on emotional growth within non-intact family structures.

### Introduction

Adolescence represents a critical developmental period marked by profound biological, cognitive, and emotional changes. During this stage, individuals actively construct their identity, regulate increasingly complex emotions, and form meaningful social relationships beyond the family unit. According to Santrock (2016), adolescence is characterized by heightened emotional sensitivity and psychological vulnerability due to rapid developmental

transitions. Consequently, environmental factors—particularly family structure and dynamics—play a pivotal role in shaping adolescents’ emotional development and psychological adaptation.

Family functions as the primary context for emotional socialization, providing security, attachment, and emotional regulation models for children and adolescents. Bowlby’s attachment theory emphasizes that stable emotional bonds within the family contribute significantly to psychological well-being and emotional security across the lifespan (Bowlby, 1988). However, when family structures become disrupted—through divorce, parental separation, chronic conflict, remarriage, or parental loss—the emotional environment that supports adolescent development may be compromised. Such disruptions often alter parental availability, emotional consistency, and communication patterns, thereby influencing adolescents’ emotional experiences and coping mechanisms.

Previous studies have consistently shown that adolescents from disrupted family structures are at greater risk of experiencing emotional difficulties, including anxiety, depression, emotional dysregulation, and low self-esteem (Amato, 2010; Lansford, 2009). Family disruption can generate feelings of abandonment, insecurity, and confusion, particularly when adolescents lack sufficient emotional support or clarity regarding changes within the family system. In this context, emotional development may become fragmented, as adolescents struggle to interpret and manage complex emotions arising from family instability.

Despite these risks, not all adolescents from disrupted families experience negative psychological outcomes. Psychological adaptation refers to an individual’s ability to adjust cognitively and emotionally to challenging life circumstances while maintaining psychological functioning (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Some adolescents demonstrate adaptive coping strategies, emotional resilience, and increased independence in response to family disruption (Masten, 2014). These adaptive processes often emerge through personal meaning-making, peer support, and the development of self-regulation skills, suggesting that family disruption does not inevitably result in maladaptive emotional development.

However, much of the existing literature on family disruption and adolescent development relies heavily on quantitative approaches that emphasize behavioral outcomes and psychological symptoms. While valuable, these approaches often overlook adolescents’ subjective experiences, emotional interpretations, and internal adaptation processes. As noted by Creswell and Poth (2018), qualitative research provides deeper insight into how individuals perceive, interpret, and emotionally respond to life events within their specific social contexts. Understanding how adolescents themselves experience and adapt to disrupted family structures

is essential for capturing the complexity of emotional development beyond statistical associations.

Therefore, this study aims to explore psychological adaptation and emotional development among adolescents from disrupted family structures using a qualitative descriptive approach. By focusing on adolescents' lived experiences, this research seeks to illuminate how family disruption shapes emotional regulation, self-concept, and adaptive coping processes during adolescence. The findings are expected to contribute to developmental psychology by offering a nuanced understanding of emotional growth within non-intact family contexts and to inform psychosocial interventions that support adolescents facing family-related adversity.

## **Research Methods**

**Research Design** This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to explore psychological adaptation and emotional development among adolescents from disrupted family structures. A qualitative approach was selected to capture adolescents' subjective experiences, emotional meanings, and adaptive processes within their real-life contexts. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), qualitative descriptive research is particularly suitable for studies aiming to provide rich, straightforward descriptions of phenomena based on participants' perspectives, without imposing theoretical interpretations beyond the data.

**Research Participants** The participants of this study were adolescents aged 15–19 years who had experienced disrupted family structures, including parental divorce, separation, prolonged parental conflict, remarriage, or the loss of one or both parents. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure that they met the inclusion criteria relevant to the research focus. Inclusion criteria included: (1) being in the adolescent developmental stage, (2) having lived in a disrupted family structure for at least one year, and (3) being willing to share personal emotional experiences. Participants with severe cognitive or communication impairments were excluded to ensure the quality and depth of data collection.

**Research Setting** The research was conducted in naturalistic settings familiar to the participants, such as their homes, schools, or community environments. Conducting interviews in comfortable and familiar settings allowed participants to express their thoughts and emotions openly. In some cases, interviews were conducted online using secure communication platforms to accommodate participants' availability and emotional comfort.

**Data Collection Techniques** Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews as the primary method. This technique allowed flexibility for participants to narrate their emotional experiences while ensuring consistency across interviews. Interview questions focused on adolescents' emotional responses to family disruption, coping strategies, changes in self-perception, and interpersonal relationships. In addition to interviews, reflective notes and observational memos were used to capture non-verbal cues, emotional expressions, and contextual factors that emerged during the interaction process.

**Data Analysis** Data analysis followed a thematic descriptive approach. Interview transcripts were read repeatedly to gain an overall understanding of participants' experiences. Meaningful statements related to emotional development and psychological adaptation were then identified and grouped into preliminary categories. These categories were refined into broader themes that represented recurring patterns across participants. The analysis process emphasized staying close to participants' original expressions to preserve the authenticity of their lived experiences.

**Trustworthiness of the Study** To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, several strategies were applied. Credibility was enhanced through prolonged engagement with participants and member checking, allowing participants to review and confirm the accuracy of the interpretations. Dependability was supported by maintaining a clear audit trail documenting research decisions and analytic steps. Confirmability was ensured by minimizing researcher bias through reflexive journaling. Transferability was addressed by providing thick descriptions of participants' contexts and experiences, enabling readers to assess the applicability of findings to similar settings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

**Ethical Considerations** Ethical approval was obtained prior to data collection. All participants provided informed consent, and for participants under the age of 18, parental or guardian consent was also secured. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained by using pseudonyms and removing identifying information from transcripts and reports. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without negative consequences. Given the sensitive nature of family disruption, emotional well-being was prioritized, and participants were offered referral information for psychological support services if needed.

## **Research Results**

**Emotional Responses to Family Disruption** The findings indicate that adolescents from

disrupted family structures experience intense and multifaceted emotional reactions following family changes. Participants commonly described feelings of sadness, anger, confusion, and emotional emptiness during the initial stages of family disruption. Several participants expressed a sense of emotional shock and disbelief, particularly when family disruption occurred abruptly; they reported feeling unprepared to process the emotional consequences of parental separation or prolonged conflict.

Over time, emotional reactions evolved into more complex patterns. Some adolescents described persistent feelings of loneliness and emotional neglect, especially when parental attention became divided or inconsistent. Others reported emotional suppression as a coping strategy, choosing silence to avoid escalating family conflict.

**Psychological Adaptation and Coping Strategies** Psychological adaptation among adolescents emerged as a dynamic and non-linear process. Participants demonstrated diverse coping strategies in response to family disruption. Some adolescents adopted avoidance-based coping strategies, such as emotional withdrawal, excessive use of digital media, or social isolation. These behaviors served as temporary emotional relief but often intensified feelings of emotional disconnection.

Conversely, other adolescents demonstrated more adaptive coping strategies, including seeking social support, emotional reflection, and goal reorientation. Adolescents who developed adaptive coping strategies described increased emotional awareness and self-regulation. Importantly, adaptation was not solely an individual process; social support from peers, teachers, and extended family members played a crucial role in facilitating emotional adjustment.

**Changes in Emotional Regulation and Expression** A prominent finding concerns changes in emotional regulation among adolescents from disrupted families. Many participants reported difficulties managing intense emotions, including anger and sadness, particularly in the early stages of family disruption. Over time, emotional regulation improved for some adolescents through reflective learning and supportive relationships, where they became more capable of identifying emotional triggers and regulating responses. However, emotional growth was often accompanied by emotional guardedness. Some adolescents became cautious in emotional expression, especially within family contexts. While this restraint was perceived as maturity, it also reflected self-protective emotional distancing.

**Self-Concept and Identity Development** Family disruption significantly influenced adolescents' self-concept and identity formation. Participants frequently reported decreased

self-worth, identity confusion, and self-blame following family disruption. Some adolescents internalized family conflict as personal failure, leading to uncertainty about their future roles and relationships. Nevertheless, several participants described positive identity reconstruction, including increased independence and emotional maturity. Adolescents reported learning self-reliance and decision-making skills, reflecting post-adversity growth.

**Interpersonal Relationships and Emotional Attachment** Disrupted family structures influenced adolescents' interpersonal relationships and attachment patterns. Participants reported difficulties trusting others and a fear of emotional abandonment. In peer relationships, adolescents exhibited either emotional dependency or emotional distancing. Romantic relationships were characterized by ambivalence toward intimacy; adolescents expressed both a desire for closeness and a fear of emotional loss. However, supportive peer and mentor relationships provided alternative sources of emotional security.

**Meaning-Making and Emotional Resilience** Meaning-making emerged as a central adaptive process. Adolescents who reframed family disruption as a life challenge rather than a personal failure demonstrated greater emotional resilience. Resilient adolescents acknowledged emotional pain while maintaining hope and agency. Emotional resilience was characterized not by emotional absence, but by emotional acceptance and regulation.

## **Discussion**

**The Interpretation of Emotional Responses** The emotional responses observed in this study, such as sadness and confusion, are consistent with developmental psychology literature, which emphasizes adolescence as a period of heightened emotional sensitivity due to ongoing neurological and psychological maturation (Santrock, 2016). The reported emotional turbulence aligns with stress theory, which explains that sudden life changes often exceed adolescents' emotional coping capacity (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Furthermore, the phenomenon of emotional suppression identified in participants has been recognized in previous studies as a common response in emotionally unsafe environments, which may increase internal distress over time (Gross, 2015). These findings support previous research indicating that family disruption significantly affects adolescents' emotional security and emotional expression (Amato, 2010; Lansford, 2009).

**Analysis of Adaptation and Coping** The variation in coping strategies aligns with transactional models of stress and coping, which emphasize individual differences in appraisal and coping responses (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The avoidant coping observed in some

participants has been widely associated with short-term emotional protection but long-term psychological vulnerability among adolescents (Compas et al., 2017). In contrast, the adaptive strategies and increased self-regulation observed in others are consistent with resilience research, which highlights adaptive coping as a protective factor in the face of family adversity (Masten, 2014). The pivotal role of social support found in this study reaffirms existing literature identifying it as a key buffer against psychological stress during adolescence (Rueger et al., 2016).

**Contextualizing Emotional Regulation** The emotional dysregulation reported in the early stages aligns with findings linking such behavior to immature executive functioning and heightened emotional reactivity during adolescence (Steinberg, 2014). The subsequent improvement in regulation supports emotion regulation theory, which emphasizes learning-based emotional control through experience and social feedback (Gross, 2015). However, the observed emotional guardedness mirrors patterns commonly observed among adolescents exposed to chronic family stress (Morris et al., 2017).

**Identity and Self-Concept Dynamics** The link between family disruption and identity struggles supports Erikson's (1968) theory that family serves as the primary reference for self-evaluation. The identity instability and self-blame mirror findings linking family disruption with identity diffusion and emotional insecurity (Crocetti et al., 2016). However, the positive reconstruction and independence reported by some participants align with resilience frameworks emphasizing growth through adversity (Masten, 2014).

**Relational Perspectives** The difficulties in trust and fear of abandonment are consistent with attachment theory, suggesting that unstable family relationships can disrupt internal working models of attachment (Bowlby, 1988). The patterns of dependency or distancing in peer relationships reflect adaptive responses to perceived emotional insecurity identified in adolescents from non-intact families (Allen & Tan, 2016). The healing potential of supportive relationships observed in the study aligns with findings that alternative sources of security can facilitate relational healing (Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2017).

**Resilience and Meaning-Making** The role of meaning-making in resilience supports Park's (2010) assertion that integrating adverse experiences into coherent life narratives is crucial for adaptation. The finding that resilience involves acceptance rather than the absence of emotion supports research emphasizing resilience as a dynamic developmental process (Masten, 2014).

## **Conclusion**

This study provides an in-depth understanding of psychological adaptation and emotional development among adolescents from disrupted family structures by exploring their lived experiences and subjective emotional interpretations. The findings demonstrate that family disruption constitutes a significant emotional stressor during adolescence, a developmental period characterized by heightened emotional sensitivity and ongoing identity formation. Adolescents experience a wide range of emotional reactions, including sadness, anger, emotional confusion, and feelings of insecurity, particularly during the early stages of family disruption.

The results further indicate that psychological adaptation among adolescents is a dynamic and non-linear process. While some adolescents initially adopt avoidant or maladaptive coping strategies, others gradually develop more adaptive emotional regulation and coping mechanisms over time. Emotional development in disrupted family contexts involves both vulnerability and growth, as adolescents learn to navigate emotional distress while constructing new emotional competencies. Changes in emotional regulation, self-concept, and interpersonal relationships highlight the complex ways in which family disruption shapes emotional development.

Importantly, the study reveals that family disruption does not inevitably lead to negative psychological outcomes. Adolescents who engage in meaning-making processes, receive adequate social support, and develop adaptive coping strategies demonstrate emotional resilience and psychological growth. Supportive relationships with peers, educators, and extended family members play a crucial role in fostering emotional stability and rebuilding trust. These findings underscore the importance of viewing adolescents not merely as passive recipients of family adversity but as active agents in their own psychological adaptation.

Overall, this study contributes to developmental and clinical psychology by emphasizing adolescents' subjective emotional experiences within disrupted family structures. The findings highlight the need for psychosocial interventions that support emotional regulation, identity development, and adaptive coping among adolescents facing family-related adversity. Future research is encouraged to explore longitudinal perspectives and diverse cultural contexts to further understand the long-term emotional trajectories of adolescents from disrupted families.

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