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Fatherlessness, Maladaptive Coping, and Problem Management: An Islamic Education Review

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ABSTRACT

This critical integrative review examines fatherless upbringing, maladaptive cognitive coping, and problem management through developmental research and Islamic family education. It distinguishes physical paternal absence from limited emotional involvement and separates cognitive emotion regulation from executive functioning. Selected peer-reviewed studies, evidence syntheses, and Islamic educational scholarship are interpreted thematically by population, study design, exposure, and outcome. Reviews of father involvement report heterogeneous associations with children's emotion regulation; evidence does not establish a uniform pathway from paternal absence to executive dysfunction or decision paralysis. Research on parental neglect and coping suggests plausible associations involving rumination, catastrophizing, and emotion regulation, but most studies do not directly test complex problem-management performance. Qur'an 31:13–19 and 66:6, together with Islamic scholarship on parental responsibility, inform an ethic of responsive guidance, care, and moral example. These normative sources are distinguished from empirical evidence. The synthesis proposes researchable pathways and context-sensitive educational responses without claiming proven treatment effects. Longitudinal, father-specific studies with validated coping and problem-solving measures are needed

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Introduction

Father involvement has received increasing attention in developmental research, yet the term covers several distinct experiences. A father may live with a child while participating little in emotional care, whereas another may live separately and remain available, responsive, and engaged. Treating both situations as identical obscures potentially important variation in

family processes. The present review therefore uses structural father absence for residential or legal separation and functional paternal disengagement for persistently limited emotional or caregiving participation. These are descriptive categories rather than clinical diagnoses (Puglisi et al., 2024; Islamiah et al., 2023).

Cognitive coping refers to the ways individuals interpret difficulties, direct attention, and select responses when facing stress. Emotion regulation includes monitoring and modifying emotional responses, while executive functioning refers to cognitive processes such as inhibition, working memory, and shifting between tasks. These constructs overlap but should not be treated as interchangeable. A correlation between father involvement and reported emotion regulation cannot, by itself, demonstrate impairment of prefrontal networks or failure in complex problem solving (Compas et al., 2017; Zitzmann et al., 2024). Conceptually, attachment, transactional appraisal, emotion regulation, and schema perspectives provide complementary interpretive lenses (Bowlby, 1982; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Gross, 2014; Young et al., 2003). The developmental role of fathers must also be considered in the context of wider family relationships (Lamb, 2010). The conceptual distinction is informed by stress appraisal (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), emotion regulation (Gross, 2014), attachment (Bowlby, 1982), and the developmental role of fathers (Lamb, 2010); schema-based interpretations remain theoretical possibilities (Young et al., 2003).

Contemporary studies address several related but nonidentical outcomes. Some focus on early childhood regulation, others on adolescent emotional well-being, resilience, psychological security, or difficulties in regulation. A separate literature examines parental emotion socialization and intervention engagement. Their contributions are relevant to an integrative framework, but study populations and measures differ substantially (Puglisi et al., 2024; Zhou et al., 2024; Greene et al., 2026; Pine et al., 2024).

Islamic family education adds a normative account of parental responsibility and children's dignity. Qur'an 31:13–19 presents Luqman advising his child on faith, conduct, patience, and humility, while Qur'an 66:6 addresses responsibility within the household. The prophetic teaching that each person is responsible for those in their care (Sahih al-Bukhari, no. 893) reinforces accountability in caregiving. These texts support attentive guidance and moral example; they are not experimental evidence of a father-specific neurocognitive effect. Islamic educational studies discuss parental participation, family guidance, and religious responsibilities (Faoziah, 2025; Rahmatullah et al., 2024; Jaafar, 2024).

This review asks three questions: (1) how are physical father absence and limited paternal engagement associated with cognitive appraisal and emotion regulation; (2) what evidence connects these experiences with rumination, catastrophizing, avoidance, or other maladaptive

coping during problem management; and (3) what educational implications can be responsibly developed from the empirical evidence and Islamic family-education principles? The review assesses proposed pathways rather than presuming that all three have been empirically demonstrated.

Method

This study adopts a critical integrative literature review of purposively identified peer-reviewed empirical articles, systematic reviews, conceptual scholarship, and foundational books concerning paternal involvement, cognitive emotion regulation, coping, problem management, and Islamic family education. Relevant sources were identified through targeted bibliographic discovery, DOI/publisher-page checks where accessible, and citation tracing; the corpus was selected for topical relevance and diversity of evidence rather than as an exhaustive database search. Sources were compared by population, exposure (residence, engagement, or neglect), measured outcomes, study design, and limitations; conclusions were drawn by thematic comparison and assessment of convergence and disagreement. No documented reproducible database search log, deduplication record, full-text screening register, or risk-of-bias scoring is available for the original claimed 22-study PRISMA corpus. Consequently, this paper makes no PRISMA-compliant systematic-review claim, no pooled effect estimate, and no causal or treatment-efficacy inference. Islamic educational texts are interpreted as normative guidance rather than as quantitative evidence of psychological effects.

Results and Discussion

1. **Differentiating father absence from the quality of involvement**

A central finding of the literature is that physical residence alone is an incomplete measure of paternal engagement. Reviews of father involvement distinguish quantity of contact from quality of interaction, emotional responsiveness, and support. This distinction matters because a father may be physically present yet minimally engaged, and because children living apart from their fathers may have other dependable caregivers (Puglisi et al., 2024; Islamiah et al., 2023).

Puglisi et al. (2024) systematically reviewed ten studies of children aged 0–5 years. They did not identify a consistent direct link between father involvement and emotion regulation, although some associations emerged under specific measurement and contextual conditions. Their evidence concerns early childhood and cannot be generalized automatically to adolescent problem management.

Islamiah et al. (2023) systematically reviewed studies on fathers and children's emotion regulation. Their findings motivate attention to emotional responsiveness and paternal emotion socialization, while heterogeneity limits causal interpretation.

The contrast between structural absence and functional disengagement is useful for organizing research questions, but it should remain a hypothesis-generating framework. It is not yet a validated binary predictor of distinct neural or coping pathways. In particular, assigning avoidance exclusively to structural absence and rumination exclusively to functional disengagement would overstate the available evidence.

2. **Cognitive emotion regulation, coping, and contradictory findings**

Beyazit et al. (2024) studied 265 primary-school children in Antalya, Turkey (mean age 10.27 years) and examined maternal and paternal neglect, trait emotional intelligence, and cognitive emotion regulation. Their mediation analysis reported significant indirect pathways for several models, but the paternal-neglect pathway to maladaptive cognitive emotion regulation was an exception ($p > .05$). Thus, the study does not justify a general claim that paternal neglect directly causes maladaptive coping.

The findings also illustrate a common interpretive mistake: a statistically significant correlation between two variables does not establish a direct effect in a mediation model, and an association for maternal neglect cannot be silently transferred to paternal neglect. The analysis should state the model, variables, and comparison being discussed. Broad language such as "fatherlessness causes cognitive breakdown" exceeds what this study measured (Beyazit et al., 2024).

Compas et al. (2017) offer a valuable synthesis of coping and psychopathology in childhood and adolescence. Their work helps explain the distinction between coping responses and psychological symptoms. However, it does not serve as a father-absence experiment, and it should not be cited as proof that children without resident fathers fail Flanker or working-memory tasks. Similarly, reviews of parental emotion socialization examine family processes that may be shared across caregivers (Zitzmann et al., 2024; Edler & Valentino, 2024).

Indonesian studies provide context but do not converge on a single effect. Khofifah et al. (2023) investigated father involvement and emotional regulation among late adolescents in Makassar, whereas Kristianto and Kusumiati (2026) examined adolescents in North Jakarta and reported a non-significant relationship. Their different samples and measures do not warrant a pooled conclusion.

Additional studies address adolescent girls' resilience and psychological security (Zhou et al., 2024), paternal emotional support and well-being (Pancawati & Wicaksono, 2025), and emotion beliefs in a longitudinal adolescent study (Xu et al., 2026). These outcomes are adjacent to, but not interchangeable with, maladaptive cognitive coping. Sample-size comparisons are not used as evidence of causal strength.

3. **Age, measurement, and family-context limitations**

Age is not a minor methodological detail. Early childhood studies observe emerging regulatory behaviors in interaction with caregivers, whereas adolescent research often relies on self-report about emotional difficulties, resilience, or school experiences. Combining these outcomes into one "executive deficit" variable would erase developmental differences. Puglisi et al. (2024) specifically call for more observational and physiological measures and attention to family variables.

Studies of parenting and emotion socialization suggest that family processes may operate indirectly. Edler and Valentino (2024) reviewed parental self-regulation and emotion socialization; Zitzmann et al. (2024) synthesized 23 studies concerning emotion regulation among parents with mental health problems and parenting. Neither review isolates the causal contribution of father absence. Their findings therefore inform the wider family context rather than proving father-specific mechanisms.

Longitudinal work can improve temporal ordering, but longitudinal association alone still requires attention to confounding. Xu et al. (2026) address father presence, emotion beliefs, and depressive symptoms; depression is not interchangeable with cognitive coping. The article is useful for discussing plausible pathways while leaving causal certainty open. A robust future study would measure paternal warmth and availability separately from

residential status and would account for maternal involvement and socioeconomic conditions.

The studies differ in whether they measure paternal contact, warmth, neglect, coping style, emotional symptoms, or cognitive performance. Consequently, a coefficient from an emotion-regulation questionnaire cannot be interpreted as an effect on executive functioning or complex problem management. This review reports only findings that can be described with the necessary qualification and does not construct an aggregate estimate from non-comparable outcomes.

4. **Islamic family education as an interpretive framework**

Islamic family education places moral responsibility on caregivers and emphasizes the quality of guidance offered to children. The account of Luqman (Qur'an 31:13–19) provides an educational sequence that includes explanation, relational address, religious practice, ethical conduct, and patience. In the present synthesis, these are interpreted as pedagogical principles rather than variables measured by the psychological studies. Contemporary Islamic education scholarship similarly discusses parental responsibility and educational participation (Jaafar, 2024; Suyono, 2025). Contemporary Islamic education scholarship also treats parental guidance as a combination of moral example, participation, and responsive educational support (Jaafar, 2024; Suyono, 2025; Rahmatullah et al., 2024).

The injunction concerning family responsibility in Qur'an 66:6 can inform a duty of care that includes safeguarding children's dignity and development. It should not be used to blame widowed mothers, divorced families, or young people whose fathers are absent. A constructive educational response focuses on the actual support available to the child, including mothers, extended family, teachers, and trusted mentors. In Indonesian settings, parental participation in Islamic school culture and gendered patterns of caregiving have also been examined (Fahruddin & Astutik, 2024; Faoziah, 2025; Rachman & Mariyati, 2025). The Prophet's teaching that every person is accountable for those entrusted to their care, including the responsibilities of a man toward his family and a woman toward her household, offers a complementary ethical principle (Sahih al-Bukhari, no. 893; https://sunnah.com/bukhari:893). This hadith addresses accountable caregiving rather than proving a psychological effect of father absence.

From an educational standpoint, fathers can contribute through reliable communication, listening, shared decision-making, and respectful responses to mistakes. Where direct father involvement is unavailable or unsafe, support should be organized around the child's welfare rather than insisting on a single family form. This is consistent with the normative concern for responsible care and with the empirical caution against equating family structure with child outcome. Rahmatullah et al. (2024) provide a related Islamic educational discussion of fathers' participation in children's education. Research on Muslim parental participation and family-school relations provides contextual support for collaborative educational responsibilities (Faoziah, 2025; Fahruddin & Astutik, 2024; Rachman & Mariyati, 2025).

5. **Implications for schools, families, and research**

For schools, a defensible application is to assess students' actual coping resources and relationships rather than to assume a deficit based on family structure. Emotional-literacy activities, opportunities to request help, and predictable adult mentoring may be useful educational practices. Their effectiveness for father-absent youth specifically remains to be tested, and the present review does not present them as proven clinical treatments.

For families, father involvement can be operationalized as the reliability of contact, responsiveness to distress, constructive conflict resolution, and age-appropriate autonomy

support. Programs should invite participation without treating mothers as inherently deficient or fathers as uniquely capable of cognitive scaffolding. In a meta-analysis of 20 trials, Pine et al. (2024) found a small overall benefit of adding parent involvement to adolescent psychological interventions (g = −0.18); this was not an intervention study specifically targeting father-absent adolescents.

For future research, studies should preregister clear exposure definitions, measure paternal and other caregiver variables, use validated coping and emotion-regulation instruments, and report both significant and non-significant results. Mixed-method approaches could explore how young people understand help-seeking, autonomy, and religious expectations. Qualitative interviews would enrich interpretation but should not be converted into unsupported numerical effect claims.

A key limitation of the present synthesis is that it is purposive rather than exhaustive. Source heterogeneity, cross-sectional designs, variation in age and exposure definitions, and the limited number of studies directly measuring problem-solving performance restrict causal inference. Accordingly, the proposed links among attachment, coping, cognitive appraisal, and executive function should be tested rather than treated as established mechanisms.

The evidence also covers distinct populations: Greene et al. (2026) studied emotion socialization in trauma-exposed families, while Fauzan and Claudia (2026) studied substitute father involvement among Indonesian emerging adults. Neither should be treated as interchangeable with a study of school-age children's executive task performance.

6. Practical implications for Islamic educational settings

The integration of developmental research and Islamic educational principles has practical implications, provided the limits of each evidence stream remain clear. The Qur'anic account of Luqman's advice (31:13–19) can inform an educational ethos of attentive dialogue, moral example, and age-appropriate guidance. These principles should be operationalized as observable practices rather than used as proxies for measured psychological outcomes. For example, a parent might invite an adolescent to describe a difficult decision, ask what alternatives were considered, and discuss consequences without ridicule. A teacher can similarly make help-seeking legitimate and allow students to revise a plan after a setback. Such practices are plausible educational applications, not interventions whose effectiveness has been demonstrated by the present review.

Family circumstances must be considered carefully. A child whose father has died, works far away, or is separated from the household should not be presumed to have deficient emotional regulation. Supportive mothers, grandparents, other relatives, mentors, and community relationships can provide stability and opportunities to practise coping. Conversely, living with both parents does not by itself guarantee responsive caregiving. Research and school records should distinguish residence, contact, warmth, conflict, economic conditions, and access to other reliable adults rather than reducing these circumstances to a binary fatherless label.

An ethically sound school response begins with listening to the young person and protecting confidentiality. Staff may ask how students respond when plans fail, whom they consult, and whether they feel able to seek help. If a student experiences persistent distress, the school should follow safeguarding and referral procedures rather than infer a diagnosis from family structure. These procedures are consistent with a duty of care and with the developmental evidence that coping is shaped by multiple interacting contexts. Any school-

based program derived from this framework would require its own feasibility testing, outcome measures, and safeguards before claims of effectiveness could be made.

Contribution and limitations. This review proposes a conceptual link among paternal residence, relationship quality, coping, and problem management while distinguishing psychological evidence from Islamic educational norms. Because this is a purposive synthesis rather than a PRISMA systematic review, it cannot establish causal effects, prevalence, or intervention efficacy. The proposed relationships require direct empirical testing.

Conclusion

The evidence supports distinguishing physical father absence from the quality of paternal engagement. Associations with emotion regulation and coping vary across age groups, measures, and family settings. Existing studies do not establish that fatherlessness inevitably produces rumination, cognitive avoidance, executive dysfunction, or decision paralysis. These remain questions for direct empirical testing using appropriate problem-management measures.

Islamic family education contributes principles of parental responsibility, attentive advice, moral example, and protection of children's dignity (Qur'an 31:13–19; 66:6). These principles can guide non-stigmatizing family and school support but do not replace psychological evidence. The practical priority is reliable, responsive caregiving and access to trusted adults; effectiveness of specific programs must be evaluated rather than presumed. The prophetic account of household stewardship (Sahih al-Bukhari, no. 893) reinforces reciprocal family responsibility without establishing a causal psychological claim.

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