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When Fathers Are Absent: Substitute Father Involvement and Emotion Regulation Among Emerging Adults

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Abstract

Father absence remains a significant issue in Indonesia, with roughly one in five children growing up without a biological father, but whether substitute male caregivers can compensate for that absence remains an underexplored question. This study examined whether involvement from substitute father figures (e.g., grandfathers and stepfathers) predicts emotion regulation strategies among emerging adults who experienced biological father absence before age 12. A cross-sectional quantitative design was employed, involving 100 participants aged 18–25 years who were recruited through purposive sampling. Participants completed a modified Father Involvement Scale (FIS) and the Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ). Simple linear regression analyses showed that higher substitute father involvement significantly predicted greater use of cognitive reappraisal (β = 0.34, $p < 0.001$, $R^2 = 0.12$) and lower use of expressive suppression (β = −0.25, $p = 0.01$, $R^2 = 0.06$). These findings indicate that consistent involvement from substitute father figures is linked to more adaptive emotion regulation among father-absent emerging adults. The study emphasizes that substitute male caregivers may play an important role in fostering healthy emotional functioning in emerging adulthood among individuals who experience father absence.

Keywords: cognitive reappraisal, emerging adulthood, emotion regulation, father absence, substitute father involvement

Ketika Ayah Tidak Hadir: Keterlibatan Figur Ayah Pengganti dan Regulasi Emosi pada Dewasa Awal

Abstrak

Ketidakhadiran ayah merupakan isu yang signifikan di Indonesia, dengan sekitar satu dari lima anak tumbuh tanpa kehadiran ayah biologis, tetapi sejauh mana figur pengganti ayah dapat mengompensasi ketidakhadiran tersebut masih menjadi pertanyaan yang belum banyak diteliti. Penelitian ini menguji apakah keterlibatan figur pengganti ayah (misalnya, kakek, paman, dan ayah tiri) memprediksi strategi regulasi emosi pada dewasa awal yang mengalami ketiadaan ayah biologis sebelum usia 12 tahun. Dengan menggunakan desain kuantitatif *cross-sectional*, sebanyak 100 partisipan berusia 18–25 tahun mengisi versi modifikasi *Father Involvement Scale* (FIS) dan *Emotion Regulation Questionnaire* (ERQ). Analisis regresi linear sederhana menunjukkan bahwa keterlibatan figur pengganti ayah secara signifikan memprediksi penggunaan *cognitive reappraisal* yang lebih tinggi (β = 0,34, $p < 0,001$, $R^2 = 0,12$) serta penggunaan *expressive suppression* yang lebih rendah (β = −0,25, $p = 0,01$, $R^2 = 0,06$). Temuan ini menunjukkan bahwa keterlibatan yang lebih besar dari figur pengganti ayah berkaitan dengan strategi regulasi emosi yang lebih adaptif pada dewasa awal yang tumbuh tanpa ayah biologis. Hasil penelitian ini menegaskan bahwa figur pengganti ayah dapat memenuhi peran yang penting dalam membangun keberfungsian emosional yang sehat pada tahapan dewasa awal bagi individu-individu yang mengalami ketidakhadiran ayah.

Kata kunci: *cognitive reappraisal, emerging adulthood*, keterlibatan figur pengganti ayah, ketidakhadiran ayah, regulasi emosi

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INTRODUCTION

Emerging adulthood is a distinct developmental period between adolescence and adulthood, spanning ages 18–25 (Arnett et al., 2014). It is characterized by uncertainty and stress related to higher education, work, and establishing one's life trajectory (Arnett et al., 2014; Settersten, 2012). As emerging adults face various developmental stressors, emotion regulation has emerged as an important protective factor against negative mental health outcomes, including suicidal ideation, depression, and eating disorders (Brewer et al., 2016; Colmenero-Navarrete et al., 2022; Thomas & Zolkoski, 2020).

Emotion regulation refers to the processes individuals use to influence their emotional experiences (Gross & John, 2003). Gross and John (2003) identified two main strategies: cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression. Cognitive reappraisal involves reinterpreting an emotional stimulus before the emotional response is activated, whereas expressive suppression involves inhibiting emotional expression after activation. Cognitive reappraisal is generally considered more adaptive, as it is associated with better psychological well-being, healthier interpersonal relationships, and more positive adjustment outcomes. In contrast, expressive suppression is associated with poorer mental health and interpersonal difficulties (Gross & John, 2003; Schäfer et al., 2017; Troy et al., 2018).

The ways in which an individual regulates their emotions are primarily shaped by their family environment and parents in particular (Raposo & Francisco, 2022). Research has traditionally emphasized mothers as important sources of co-regulation and emotion modeling (Rolo et al., 2024; Zhu et al., 2025), but increasing attention has been given to fathers. A systematic review found that greater father involvement is associated with better emotional functioning and behavioral regulation in young children (Puglisi et al., 2024). Paternal involvement has also been identified as a mediator between family structure and developmental outcomes (Diniz et al., 2021; Puglisi et al., 2024), while father absence has been associated with psychological and physiological dysfunction extending into adulthood (Choi et al., 2021). Thus, paternal involvement may be relevant to the development of emotion regulation.

According to Lamb et al. (2017), paternal involvement encompasses three primary dimensions: engagement, accessibility, and responsibility. Engagement refers to fathers' direct involvement in shared activities and interactions with their children, accessibility refers to fathers' availability and responsiveness, and responsibility concerns their commitment to children's care and welfare. These dimensions provide relational experiences that may support healthy emotion regulation development (Puglisi et al., 2024). Fathers may also promote self-regulation through challenging interactions, emotional support, and guidance in coping with emotional experiences (Cabrera et al., 2018; Lamb & Lewis, 2010; Robinson et al., 2021).

These processes are consistent with the tripartite model of family influence, which proposes that children develop emotion regulation through parental modeling, supportive responses to emotional expression, and the emotional climate within the family (Morris et al., 2007, 2017). Paternal accessibility may provide opportunities to observe and receive support in managing emotions, engagement may facilitate supportive emotional interactions, and responsibility may contribute to family stability and a positive emotional climate. From a family systems perspective, paternal involvement may also affect children's development through broader family functioning. Structural family theory suggests that fathers can support the family's executive subsystem by sharing parenting and household responsibilities with mothers, potentially reducing maternal strain and protecting children from inappropriate family-role shifts (Minuchin, 2018). Consistent with this perspective, coparent involvement has been associated with lower maternal parenting stress, which may contribute to a more supportive environment for children's socioemotional development (d'Orsi et al., 2023). Thus, paternal involvement may influence emotion regulation through both direct father–child interactions and broader family processes.

The importance of paternal involvement has also received increasing attention in Indonesia (Aritonang et al., 2020; Hendriani et al., 2024; Pratiwi et al., 2026). In 2025, the Kementerian Kependudukan dan Pembangunan Keluarga launched the Gerakan Ayah Teladan Indonesia (GATI), reflecting national efforts to strengthen fathers' involvement in family life (Fauzi & Sihaloho, 2025; Wakadia, 2025). Nevertheless, father absence remains a significant issue. Kompas.id reported that approximately 15.9 million children, or 20.1 percent of those under 18, grow up without a paternal presence (Krisna et al., 2025). Importantly, father absence is not a uniform experience. It may result from parental divorce or separation, paternal death, prolonged

non-involvement, or other circumstances, and these forms of absence may differ in their implications for children.

A critical review noted that father-absence research has often failed to distinguish between absence resulting from death, parental relationship disruption, and other causes, despite their potentially different developmental contexts (East et al., 2006). For example, parental divorce may involve continuing interparental conflict and changes in economic resources, whereas paternal death involves an irreversible loss that may be accompanied by bereavement. Consistent with this distinction, research has found different patterns of child outcomes following parental divorce and parental death (Amato & Anthony, 2014). More broadly, a review of causal evidence suggests that the effects of father absence vary across developmental stages and outcomes, with stronger and more consistent evidence for social-emotional adjustment and later mental health than for some other outcomes (McLanahan et al., 2013).

Furthermore, gender may represent another factor contributing to variability in children's experiences of father absence and its developmental implications. For example, a longitudinal study in the United Kingdom found that although the association between father presence and behavioral problems at age 3 was stronger for boys, there was no overall significant gender difference in the association between father presence and problem behaviors (Flouri et al., 2016). Therefore, contextual factors surrounding father absence may contribute to variations in children's socioemotional development, including emotion regulation.

In such circumstances, substitute father figures, including stepfathers and grandfathers, may provide emotional support, guidance, and caregiving that contribute to children's development. Although research remains limited, existing evidence suggests that these relationships can be beneficial. A meta-analysis found that stronger stepparent–child relationships are associated with more positive psychological, behavioral, social, and academic outcomes among children and adolescents (Jensen, 2022). Similarly, grandparent involvement has been associated with greater resilience among young children, partly through reduced maternal stress (Wu et al., 2025). These findings suggest that developmental benefits associated with paternal involvement may also emerge through the quality and consistency of involvement provided by other paternal figures within the family system (Coall et al., 2016; Jensen, 2022).

Despite growing literature on paternal involvement, empirical research on substitute father figures and emotion regulation remains limited. Most studies have focused on biological fathers rather than nonbiological paternal figures (Banun et al., 2025; Khofifah et al., 2023). Furthermore, little is known about whether substitute father involvement is associated with specific emotion regulation strategies among emerging adults who experienced biological father absence during childhood. This gap is important because emerging adulthood involves developmental demands that require effective emotion regulation while individuals become increasingly autonomous from their parents (Arnett et al., 2014; Brewer et al., 2016).

The developmental significance of paternal experiences may nevertheless extend beyond childhood. Longitudinal evidence indicates that early parent–child attachment is associated with the development of adaptive regulation across childhood and into preadolescence (Boldt et al., 2020). Similarly, a 13-year longitudinal study found that interparental and parent–teen relationships during adolescence were associated with intrapersonal and interpersonal emotion regulation in young adulthood (Wilson et al., 2024). Research among emerging adults has also shown that perceived parental emotion-regulation strategies and the desire to emulate parents are associated with their own emotion dysregulation (Woodward & Viana, 2018). Together, these findings suggest that increasing autonomy in emerging adulthood does not necessarily eliminate the relevance of earlier family experiences. Rather, childhood caregiving experiences may remain associated with later emotional functioning. Accordingly, the present study examines substitute father involvement as a childhood relational experience that may have lasting associations with emotion regulation, rather than as a source of continued parental dependence during emerging adulthood.

The present study addresses this gap by integrating the family systems perspective (Minuchin, 2018) and the tripartite model of family influence (Morris et al., 2017) to examine whether substitute father involvement is associated with emotion regulation among emerging adults who experienced biological father absence during childhood. This approach conceptualizes substitute father involvement as both an alternative source of caregiving and part of broader family and emotion-socialization

processes. Through emotional modeling, supportive responses, and contributions to family stability and emotional climate, substitute father involvement may therefore be associated with more adaptive emotion regulation.

Therefore, this study investigates whether substitute father involvement predicts the use of two emotion regulation strategies, namely cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression, among emerging adults who experienced biological father absence during childhood. It is hypothesized that (H1) greater substitute father involvement will significantly predict higher use of cognitive reappraisal and (H2) greater substitute father involvement will significantly predict lower use of expressive suppression.

METHODS

Research Design, Location, and Time

This study adopted a quantitative approach with a cross-sectional design to investigate the relationship between substitute father involvement and emotion regulation strategies among emerging adults who had experienced biological father absence during childhood. Because all variables were assessed at a single point in time, the design was considered appropriate for examining the predictive association between the study variables without requiring repeated observations. Statistical analyses were performed using a significance threshold of $\alpha = 0.05$.

The research was conducted in Indonesia, and data collection took place throughout September 2025 using an online survey. Participants were recruited from a range of geographical regions to obtain broader representation of father-absent emerging adults. Most respondents resided in major urban areas, including the Greater Jakarta metropolitan area (Jabodetabek), Surabaya, Bandung, Semarang, and Yogyakarta, while additional participants were recruited from Makassar, Palembang, Bali, Pekanbaru, Malang, North Sumatra, and Surakarta (Solo). Administering the questionnaire online enabled individuals from different parts of the country to participate efficiently while ensuring accessibility and standardized data collection procedures.

Sampling Technique and Participants

Participants were selected using purposive sampling because the study focused on individuals with specific childhood experiences relevant to the research objectives. To be eligible, respondents had to be emerging adults aged 18–25 years who had experienced the absence of their biological father before the age of 12 and had received continuous care, guidance, or emotional support from a substitute father figure during childhood. Individuals whose biological father remained actively involved throughout childhood, as well as those who reported no consistent substitute father figure, were excluded from participation.

The cutoff age of 12 years was used to identify father absence occurring during childhood and before or around the transition to early adolescence. This developmental period is marked by continuing changes in emotion regulation, with longitudinal research documenting changes in cognitive emotion regulation across ages 10–12 (Karreman et al., 2025). Thus, the age criterion was selected to capture father absence occurring during childhood, prior to the transition into adolescence, as the developmental context examined in this study. This operational boundary allowed the study to focus on how substitute father involvement following childhood father absence may be associated with emotion regulation outcomes in emerging adulthood, rather than implying that paternal influence diminishes after this age.

Although the study used a cross-sectional design, the assessment of substitute father involvement had a retrospective component because participants were asked to report their experiences with substitute father figures during childhood. This retrospective assessment was necessary because the study examined whether childhood experiences of substitute father involvement were associated with emotion regulation in emerging adulthood.

For the purposes of this study, a substitute father figure was defined as a non-biological adult male who assumed a paternal role following the biological father's absence. This role could be fulfilled by a stepfather, grandfather, uncle, or another adult male caregiver who consistently provided emotional support, guidance, and caregiving responsibilities during childhood (Lamb & Lewis, 2010).

The required sample size was determined using G*Power Version 3.1.9.7. Based on a multiple regression model with three predictors, a medium effect size ($f^2 = 0.15$), and a significance level of $\alpha = 0.05$, the analysis indicated that a minimum of 89 participants was required to achieve adequate statistical power. Initially, 106

individuals completed the online questionnaire. Following the screening process, six responses were excluded because the participants did not satisfy the inclusion criteria, yielding a final sample of 100 participants for the analyses.

Procedures for Data Collection

Data collection was conducted in September 2025 through an online questionnaire created using Google Forms. Before accessing the survey, prospective participants were presented with an information sheet explaining the objectives of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, the confidentiality of the collected data, and their right to discontinue participation at any stage without any adverse consequences.

Only individuals who indicated their agreement by providing electronic informed consent were granted access to the questionnaire. An initial screening section was used to determine eligibility based on the predefined inclusion criteria. Respondents who met all eligibility requirements proceeded to complete the research instruments, whereas those who did not satisfy the criteria were automatically excluded from the study.

To protect participants' privacy, the questionnaire was completed anonymously, and no personally identifiable information was collected at any stage of the research. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Psychology, Universitas Pelita Harapan (Approval No. 01122220064/ETIK/TA/Fpsi-UPH2025) prior to data collection in September 2025.

Measurement and Assessment of Variables

Measurement of Substitute Father Involvement. Substitute father involvement was assessed using a modified version of the Father Involvement Scale (FIS), originally developed by Greene et al. (2001) and subsequently adapted into Indonesian by Sutanto and Suwartono (2021). For the present study, the instrument was modified by replacing references to the biological father with "substitute father figure" while retaining the original conceptual framework, item content, and three dimensions: engagement, accessibility, and responsibility. No new expert judgment or content validity assessment was conducted because the modification did not involve substantive changes to the content or underlying constructs assessed by the items; the modification was limited to changing the referent of the father figure. Prior to the main data collection, the modified instrument was pilot tested to evaluate item performance and its suitability for the target participants. Item analysis was conducted using corrected item-total correlations. Of the initial 37 items, three items were excluded due to insufficient corrected item-total correlations, resulting in a final 34-item scale. The final scale assessed engagement through direct interactions and shared activities, accessibility through the availability of the substitute father figure, and responsibility through caregiving, supervision, guidance, and support for the participant's well-being.

Responses were rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), with higher scores indicating greater perceived involvement of the substitute father figure. The final scale demonstrated good internal consistency in the present sample (Cronbach's α = 0.88), with corrected item-total correlations ranging from 0.12 to 0.52.

Measurement of Emotion Regulation. The Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ) developed by Gross and John (2003) was used to measure emotion regulation strategies. The instrument evaluates a person's tendency to use cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression. The Indonesian version of the ERQ adapted by Radde et al. (2021) was used in the present study. The Indonesian adaptation underwent forward translation, back-translation, and content review by three subject matter experts to ensure semantic equivalence, linguistic clarity, and cultural appropriateness. The construct validity of the Indonesian ERQ was also examined using confirmatory factor analysis by Radde et al. (2021).

The ERQ consists of 10 items distributed across two subscales. Six items assess cognitive reappraisal, which reflects an individual's tendency to reinterpret emotionally significant situations in ways that modify their emotional impact. The remaining four items assess expressive suppression, referring to the tendency to inhibit the outward expression of emotions after they have been experienced.

Participants responded using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Scores for cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression were calculated separately by summing the corresponding items, with higher scores representing greater use of the respective regulation strategy. In the present study, the cognitive reappraisal subscale showed corrected item-total correlations ranging

from 0.37 to 0.49, with a Cronbach's α of 0.73, whereas the expressive suppression subscale showed corrected item-total correlations ranging from 0.48 to 0.61, with a Cronbach's α of 0.74.

Data Analysis

JASP (Version 0.19.3) was used for all statistical analyses. Descriptive statistics were first computed to summarize participants' demographic characteristics and the distribution of the study variables. Means and standard deviations were calculated for substitute father involvement and each emotion regulation strategy. Prior to hypothesis testing, the assumptions required for linear regression were evaluated. These included normality of residuals, linearity, homoscedasticity, and multicollinearity to ensure the appropriateness of the regression models.

To examine the proposed hypotheses, linear regression analyses were performed. The first model evaluated whether substitute father involvement significantly predicted cognitive reappraisal, whereas the second model examined its predictive relationship with expressive suppression. Additional multiple linear regression analyses were subsequently conducted to determine the unique contribution of the three dimensions of substitute father involvement, engagement, accessibility, and responsibility to each emotion regulation strategy. Multicollinearity was assessed using variance inflation factor (VIF), with VIF values below 5 considered acceptable (Jeng, 2023). Statistical significance was established at $p < 0.05$ for all analyses.

RESULTS

Demographic Characteristics of Participants

The study recruited a total of 100 emerging adults aged 18–25 years (M = 22.4, SD = 1.83). The sample consisted of a balanced proportion of males and females, although there were slightly more males (48% female, 52% male). Most participants had completed either senior high school (41%) or a bachelor's degree (39%), indicating a generally moderate level of educational attainment within the sample. In terms of monthly income, most participants reported earning less than Rp5,000,000, with only 10 participants reporting an income above this amount. Regarding family background, the most commonly reported reason for biological father absence was early childhood absence (46%), followed by parental divorce (31%). In terms of substitute father figures, most participants reported involvement from their grandfathers (42%), and most participants reported coresiding with this figure (60%), indicating that the sample largely reflects predominantly kinship-based substitute father–child relationships (see Table 1).

Table 1 Participant demographic characteristics (n = 100)

Demographic Characteristics	n	%
Age		
18	2	2.0
19	1	1.0
20	10	10.0
21	23	23.0
22	20	20.0
23	15	15.0
24	6	6.00
25	23	23.0
Gender		
Female	48	48.0
Male	52	52.0
Educational level		
Senior high school	41	41.0
Diploma (D3/D4)	16	16.0
Bachelor's degree (S1)	39	39.0
Master's degree (S2)	3	3.0
Doctorate degree (S3)	1	1.0
Monthly income		
<Rp1,000,000	14	14.0
Rp1,000,000 – Rp5,000,000	76	76.0
Rp5,000,000 – Rp10,000,000	10	10.0
Reason for father absence		
Divorced from mother	31	31.0
Deceased	23	23.0
Absent since early childhood	46	46.0
Age when father left		
0–1 year	31	31.0
1–6 years	33	33.0
7–12 years	36	36.0
Substitute father figure		
Grandfather	42	42.0
Stepfather	30	30.0
Uncle	27	27.0
Older brother	1	1.0
Substitute father coresidence		
Yes	60	60.0
No	40	40.0

Substitute Father Involvement

Table 2 shows that overall, participants reported a moderate level of substitute father involvement

Table 2 Descriptive statistics of research variables (n = 100)

Variable	Range	Mean	SD
Substitute father involvement	70–158	121.8	16.5
Accessibility	7–20	14.2	2.82
Responsibility	22–52	40.0	6.40
Engagement	40–87	67.6	9.34
Emotion regulation strategies			
Cognitive reappraisal	18–40	30.8	5.24
Expressive suppression	4–28	20.7	5.14

(*M* = 121.8, *SD* = 16.5). This finding demonstrates that among these emerging adults who did not grow up with a biological father, an adult male caregiver was able to be sufficiently involved. In order words, from the perspective of these participants, their substitute father figures were able to provide substantive paternal care for them.

Accessibility. The results show that the mean score for the accessibility dimension of father involvement was 14.2 (*SD* = 2.82). This reflects a moderate to high availability of the substitute father figures, which shows that even though the participants were not their biological children, these male caregivers were able to provide the time and attention needed from a father. As most of the substitute father figures coresided with the participants, perhaps this also promoted the accessibility of these figures for the children.

Responsibility. A moderate level of responsibility was reported for substitute father figure involvement (*M* = 40.0, *SD* = 6.40). This implies that these substitute father figures were able to decently take on the roles of caregiving, providing, and decision-making in the emerging adults' childhood. This suggests that the substitute father figures were able to take on the tasks typical of the executive subsystem in the family, which, due to the biological father's absence, would have otherwise been a burden on the mother.

Engagement. The mean score of the engagement dimension was 67.6 (*SD* = 9.34). This means that there was also a moderate level of substitute father involvement in terms of direct interactions and shared experiences between the substitute father figures and the child. Therefore, the substitute father figures were not only adequately available and able to take on childrearing roles but also provided one-on-one time with the children, which is the primary context in which supportive emotional responses may occur.

Cognitive Reappraisal

A mean score of 30.8 (*SD* = 5.24) was found for cognitive reappraisal, which means that the emerging adults in this study reported moderate to high levels of cognitive reappraisal in their emotion regulation. This implies that the emerging adults often reinterpreted an emotional stimulus to regulate their emotions, which is considered to be more adaptive.

Expressive Suppression

The descriptive statistical analysis also revealed a moderate to high level of expressive suppression use among the emerging adults (*M* = 20.7, *SD* = 5.14). This suggests that the participants in this study also frequently suppressed the expression of their emotions to regulate their feelings, which is considered to be more maladaptive for emerging adults.

Assumption Tests

The data were analyzed to check whether they fulfilled the assumptions required for regression analysis using several classical assumption tests. First, Q–Q plots of the residuals indicated that the residuals were approximately normally distributed, meaning that the assumption of normality was fulfilled. Linearity was then assessed through a visual inspection of scatterplots, which showed a linear relationship between the predictor and outcome variables. Scatterplots of the standardized residuals against predicted values showed that the data did not demonstrate a megaphone or funnel pattern. This means that the assumption of homoscedasticity was met. Lastly, all VIF scores were within the acceptable range (1.60–2.27), indicating that multicollinearity was not an issue with the data. Overall, the results indicate that the data met the necessary assumptions to proceed with hypothesis testing using simple and multiple regression analyses.

Table 3 Regression analysis of substitute father involvement and emotion regulation strategies (n = 100)

Predictor	Cognitive Reappraisal (CR)					Expressive Suppression (ES)				
	B	SE	β	t	*p*	B	SE	β	t	*p*
Substitute father involvement	0.11	0.03	0.34	3.57	<0.001	-0.08	0.03	-0.25	-2.56	0.01
Model statistics										
R^2	0.12					0.06				
F(1,98)	12.7					6.57				
Adjusted R^2	0.11					0.05				
Model *p*	<0.001					0.01				

The Effect of Substitute Father Involvement on Cognitive Reappraisal

First, based on separate simple regression analyses (see Table 3), overall substitute father involvement significantly predicted the use of cognitive reappraisal. Specifically, higher substitute father involvement was significantly associated with greater use of cognitive reappraisal (β = 0.34, $p < 0.001$) and accounted for 12 percent of the variance in cognitive reappraisal scores ($R^2 = 0.12$).

The Effect of Substitute Father Involvement on Expressive Suppression

A simple regression analysis was also conducted to examine the effect of substitute father involvement on expressive suppression levels (see Table 3), and the results show that higher levels of substitute father involvement were significantly associated with lower levels of expressive suppression (β = −0.25, $p = 0.01$, $R^2 = 0.06$). Additionally, the results show that substitute father involvement was able to account for only 6 percent of the variance in expressive suppression scores.

The Effect of Accessibility, Responsibility, and Engagement on Cognitive Reappraisal

A multiple regression analysis was conducted to examine the unique contributions of each dimension of substitute father involvement (see Table 4). The results indicated that only the responsibility dimension significantly predicted cognitive reappraisal (β = 0.30, $p = 0.03$), with the overall model explaining 13 percent of the variance in cognitive reappraisal ($R^2 = 0.13$). This implies that out of the three dimensions, responsibility is better able to explain the variance in the levels of cognitive reappraisal that is associated with substitute father involvement.

The Effect of Accessibility, Responsibility, and Engagement on Expressive Suppression

Based on a multiple regression analysis that examined the contributions of each of the dimensions of substitute father involvement to

Table 4 Multiple regression analysis of substitute father involvement dimensions and emotion regulation strategies (n = 100)

Predictors	Cognitive Reappraisal (CR)					Expressive Suppression (ES)				
	B	SE	β	t	*p*	B	SE	β	t	*p*
Dimensions of substitute father involvement										
Accessibility	0.12	0.22	0.07	0.55	0.58	-0.34	0.23	-0.19	-1.51	0.14
Responsibility	0.25	0.12	0.30	2.15	0.03	-0.15	0.12	-0.19	-1.32	0.19
Engagement	0.01	0.08	0.02	0.17	0.87	0.03	0.08	0.06	0.37	0.71
Model statistics										
R^2	0.13					0.09				
F (3, 96)	4.84					3.04				
Adjusted R^2	0.10					0.06				
p	0.004					0.03				

Table 5 Additional analysis of gender differences in emotion regulation strategies

Emotion Regulation Strategy	Male (n = 52) *M (SD)*	Female (n = 48) *M (SD)*	*t*(98)	*p*
Cognitive reappraisal	29.6 (5.59)	32.1 (4.55)	-2.43	0.02
Expressive suppression	21.2 (5.42)	20.2 (4.83)	0.97	0.33

the use of expressive suppression, none of the individual dimensions significantly predicted expressive suppression, despite the model accounting for 9 percent of the variance (R^2 = 0.09). This suggests that the influence of substitute father involvement on expressive suppression is attributed to the combined contribution of multiple dimensions of involvement rather than to any single dimension acting independently.

Additional Analysis of Gender Differences in Emotion Regulation Strategies

An additional independent-samples *t* test was conducted to examine gender differences in emotion regulation strategies among emerging adults who experienced biological father absence and reported substitute father involvement. Results indicated that females reported significantly higher levels of cognitive reappraisal (M = 32.1, SD = 4.55) compared to males (M = 29.6, SD = 5.59), $t(98) = -2.43$, p = 0.02. However, no significant gender differences were found in expressive suppression, $t(98)$ = 0.97, p = 0.33. These findings suggest that gender may represent an additional factor associated with specific emotion regulation strategies among emerging adults who experienced biological father absence and reported substitute father involvement.

DISCUSSION

The present study examined whether substitute father involvement predicts emotion regulation among emerging adults who experienced biological father absence before the age of 12. Greater substitute father involvement was associated with higher cognitive reappraisal and lower expressive suppression, suggesting that consistent paternal caregiving may be associated with positive socioemotional development even when provided by nonbiological caregivers. These findings support Lamb et al.'s (2017) multidimensional framework, which conceptualizes fatherhood through caregiving functions rather than biological relatedness, indicating that grandfathers, stepfathers, uncles, and other stable male caregivers may contribute positively to a child's emotional development following father absence.

One of the primary findings was that greater substitute father involvement significantly predicted higher cognitive reappraisal. As an antecedent-focused emotion regulation strategy, cognitive reappraisal is associated with better psychological adjustment and interpersonal functioning because it enables individuals to reinterpret stressful situations before emotional responses become fully activated (Gross & John, 2003). According to the tripartite model of family influence on emotion regulation (Morris et al., 2007, 2017), caregivers may foster emotion regulation by modeling adaptive emotional responses, responding supportively to children's emotions, and creating a positive emotional climate. Through repeated interactions, substitute father figures may provide opportunities for children to internalize adaptive emotional coping strategies that are associated with more adaptive emotional functioning into emerging adulthood. These findings are consistent with previous studies demonstrating that greater father involvement supports children's emotion regulation development (Puglisi et al., 2024) and extend this literature by suggesting that involvement from substitute father figures may be associated with similar positive outcomes.

Based on our findings, responsibility was the only dimension of substitute father involvement that resulted in a significant predictive association with cognitive reappraisal. Compared with engagement and accessibility, responsibility reflects a long-term commitment to caregiving, guidance, and decision-making that promotes children's well-being (Lamb et al., 2017). From the perspective of structural family theory (Minuchin, 2018), substitute father figures who consistently share parenting responsibilities may strengthen family stability and emotional security, thereby creating conditions that facilitate adaptive emotion regulation. Previous findings linking greater paternal involvement with lower maternal parenting stress and healthier family functioning (d'Orsi et al., 2023; Wu et al., 2025) provide indirect support for this interpretation, although these mechanisms were not directly examined in the present study.

Greater substitute father involvement also showed a significant predictive association with lower expressive suppression. This suggests

that emotionally supportive substitute father figures may be associated with family environments in which emotional expression is accepted rather than discouraged. Emotion socialization theory proposes that repeated experiences of emotional validation encourage children to regulate emotions more adaptively while reducing reliance on suppression (Morris et al., 2017). Furthermore, none of the individual dimensions independently predicted expressive suppression, indicating that emotional openness may depend on the combined influence of engagement, accessibility, and responsibility rather than any single caregiving behavior. This finding highlights that different aspects of substitute father involvement may contribute to emotion regulation through distinct developmental pathways.

Although substitute father involvement explained only a modest proportion of variance in emotion regulation, this finding is consistent with developmental theory. Emotion regulation develops through the interaction of multiple influences, including attachment security, parenting practices, temperament, peer relationships, and broader sociocultural experiences (Morris et al., 2007; Zitzmann et al., 2024). Therefore, the present findings remain theoretically meaningful because substitute father involvement showed significant associations with both adaptive and maladaptive emotion regulation despite these multiple influences. The persistence of these associations into emerging adulthood further suggests that supportive caregiving experiences established during childhood may continue to play a role in shaping emotional functioning during later developmental transitions (Arnett et al., 2014; Thomas & Zolkoski, 2020).

Gender differences were also observed, with female participants reporting higher levels of cognitive reappraisal compared with male participants. This finding is consistent with previous studies demonstrating that women tend to report greater use of cognitive reappraisal than men (Angelica & Himawan, 2022; Rogier et al., 2019). Rogier et al. (2019) explained these differences through gender socialization theory, suggesting that girls are often socialized to discuss and reinterpret emotional experiences, whereas boys may be encouraged to limit emotional expression, which may influence the development and use of different emotion regulation strategies. Within the context of father absence and substitute father involvement, these findings may also be considered alongside previous research suggesting that associations between father absence and behavioral outcomes may be stronger among boys (Flouri et al., 2016; McLanahan et al., 2013). One possible interpretation is that boys and girls may differ in their developmental responses to father absence, which may contribute to variations in emotion regulation outcomes. However, this interpretation remains tentative, as the present study did not examine whether gender moderated the association between substitute father involvement and emotion regulation, nor did it include a comparison group of individuals with father absence without substitute father involvement.

Nevertheless, the present study broadens existing conceptualizations of father involvement by demonstrating that developmental benefits traditionally attributed to biological fathers may also be provided by substitute father figures. This contribution is particularly relevant in Indonesia, where grandparents, stepfathers, uncles, and other extended family members frequently assume caregiving responsibilities following father absence. Rather than viewing these caregivers merely as replacements, the findings suggest that they may function as meaningful developmental resources that support children's long-term socioemotional adjustment.

Practically, these findings indicate that interventions for father-absent children should not focus exclusively on biological fathers. Mental health professionals, educators, and family practitioners may benefit from recognizing and strengthening relationships with substitute father figures who already provide stable emotional support and caregiving. Such an approach may enhance family-based interventions aimed at promoting children's emotional competence.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the cross-sectional design of this study precludes causal conclusions regarding the association between substitute father involvement and emotion regulation. Second, purposive sampling, the predominance of participants from urban Indonesia, and the use of retrospective self-report measures may limit the generalizability and accuracy of the findings due to potential recall bias and shared method variance. Third, the heterogeneity of biological father absence experiences represents an important contextual consideration, as different circumstances of absence may represent distinct developmental experiences associated with substitute father involvement and emotion regulation. Finally, because the present study only included emerging adults who reported

substitute father involvement following biological father absence, the findings cannot determine the unique contribution of substitute father involvement compared with other protective factors, such as maternal presence or the availability of other sources of support.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

This study aimed to examine the predictive association between substitute father involvement and emotion regulation among emerging adults who grew up without the presence of a biological father. The findings show that greater involvement from a substitute father figure is significantly associated with more adaptive emotion regulation patterns, particularly in terms of higher levels of cognitive reappraisal and less frequent use of expressive suppression. Specifically, with regard to cognitive reappraisal use, a substitute father figure's ability to fulfill the responsibility of a father is shown to be the strongest predictor compared with accessibility and engagement. These results suggest that present, responsible, and engaged nonbiological father involvement may be associated with more adaptive emotion regulation strategies in emerging adulthood. This study contributes to the literature on father involvement in Indonesia by highlighting the potential role of paternal figures in the development of children who experience permanent father absence and underscores the importance of stable, responsive, and responsible caregiving relationships in supporting adaptive emotion regulation across development.

Several directions for future research and practical applications are recommended. As this study employed a relatively modest sample size, future research should consider larger and more diverse samples to improve the generalizability of findings and examine whether contextual factors, such as characteristics of father absence, gender, and birth order, moderate the association between substitute father involvement and emotion regulation. Longitudinal designs may further contribute to understanding the developmental pathways and potential mechanisms underlying this association, including the roles of attachment security, family emotional climate, maternal parenting stress, coparenting quality, and overall family functioning. Research incorporating comparison groups of individuals who experienced biological father absence without substitute father figures would also help clarify the unique contribution of substitute father involvement to emotion regulation outcomes. Furthermore, as substitute father involvement explained only a limited proportion of variance in emotion regulation strategies, future studies should examine other factors that may contribute to emotion regulation development. Beyond quantitative approaches, qualitative research may provide deeper insight into the subjective experiences and meaning-making processes of individuals who grew up without a biological father but with substitute father figures. In terms of practical application, family-based interventions and parenting programs may benefit from recognizing the potential role of substitute figures and educating families about their role in strengthening families affected by father absence. Such efforts may promote healthier emotional development among children without biological father involvement.

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AUTHOR STATEMENTS

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