



## **Father Absence in Long-Distance Marriage and Early Childhood Self-Confidence in Indonesia: A Qualitative Phenomenological Study Integrating Attachment and Ecological Systems Theory**

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### **Abstract**

**Purpose** – This study examines how father absence within long-distance marriage (LDM) arrangements influences the development of children’s self-confidence, with particular attention to gender-specific vulnerabilities. The analysis is framed through an integrated perspective combining attachment theory and ecological systems theory to explain how relational and contextual factors shape children’s socio-emotional outcomes.

**Design/methods/approach** – Employing a qualitative phenomenological design, this study involved eight participants (five mothers and three early childhood teachers) from Pekanbaru City, Riau Province, Indonesia. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed by applying bracketing, extracting meaning units, clustering meanings, and synthesizing the essence of participants’ lived experiences through iterative verification against the transcripts.

**Findings** – Three principal findings emerged. First, fathers in LDM arrangements were described as having lower parenting self-efficacy and often delegated daily caregiving to mothers. Second, children in LDM families were reported to show lower self-confidence, expressed through clinginess, fearfulness, and heightened anxiety consistent with disrupted attachment-related security. Third, participants’ accounts suggested gendered patterns: girls were more often described as insecure and sometimes compensatorily self-reliant, whereas boys were more often described as showing reduced confidence alongside externalizing behaviors such as aggression.

**Research implications/limitations** – The findings extend Western father-absence literature by validating these theories within the Indonesian context, demonstrating that virtual presence (video calls, periodic visits) maintains emotional connection but cannot fully support the consistent responsiveness required for secure attachment development.

**Practical implications** – Policy and intervention programs should focus on strengthening paternal self-efficacy and increasing the quality and frequency of father–child interactions despite geographical separation. Family education initiatives, school-based guidance services, and accessible mental health support should address qualitative relational dimensions that promote attachment security and children’s self-confidence.

**Originality/value** – This study uniquely examines LDM-induced father absence in Indonesia, distinguishing structural absence from relational abandonment, and demonstrating that extended family support, though culturally significant, provides only partial compensation for paternal absence in early childhood development.

**Keywords:** Father absence, Long-distance marriage, Father involvement, Early childhood, Self-confidence

**Paper type:** Research paper

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## 1. Introduction

The psychological development of children who grow up without a father figure in the family has been brought to the forefront of attention by many social scientists and psychologists (self-confidence in particular). Self-confidence is an important psychological phenomenon that empowers individuals to believe they can accomplish (or succeed in) a task (or many tasks). Such psychological self-confidence is a foundation of an overall healthy psychological self (Mil & Natasha, 2025; Valle et al., 2021). Self-confident children communicate positively (strong communication skills), actively participate in class (engagement), and can handle difficulties (resilience) throughout the challenges of everyday tasks (Giraldez-Hayes & Burke, 2022). A fatherless family structure, however, may negatively influence the child to have and develop these particular positive attributes and may eventually create such dysfunctional family structures that may initiate the development of such attributes deficiently throughout the child's lifetime and create (functional) psychological problems throughout adulthood (Reuven-Krispin et al., 2021). The literature on child development has extensively examined the role of fathers in families. Both attachment and ecological systems theories outline the father's role in a family with children as an important figure who significantly and positively influences the children's many educational achievements and their social and psychological health (Rothenberg et al., 2020). Although the mother is the primary caregiver and has the most parenting responsibilities to children, the father's involvement in parenting is equally important. Their parenting role contributes to the overall development of the child, including their social life, emotional health, academic achievement, and learned motivation (Bosqui et al., 2024; Dwi Aprilia et al., 2025; Shorey et al., 2021; Ünlü-Çetin & Olgan, 2021).

This study employs both attachment theory and ecological systems theory to examine how father absence affects children's self-assurance. Disruptions to the father-son bond lead to father absence and insecure attachment relationships (Deneault et al., 2021; Sticca et al., 2020). This theory is illustrated by the absence of one parent and the role of the other, as this neglect is accompanied by psychological and holistic development in children (Utari et al., 2023; Yuliana & Karim, 2024). In examining the positive aspects of father and mother parenting, a substantial impact on children's development is noted, with benefits related to children's academic success, social-emotional health, and motivation to learn (Shorey et al., 2021). It is noted that the absence of both parents provides little to no cognitive-behavioural structure, social support, and external support that a child needs to develop. Children's external structure derives from their mothers; fathers also play a role, although this role is often neglected.

Fathers play a crucial role in positively influencing children's development and fostering a supportive and healthy family environment (Ejuu, 2016; Ünlü-Çetin & Olgan, 2021). However, Yoshida highlights the absence of a systematic framework that clearly explains the pathways of father involvement and its impact on child development, particularly in relation to the integration of social, cultural, and ecological factors that shape such involvement (Churchill & Craig, 2022). In response to ongoing socio-economic transformations, including the increasing participation of women in the workforce and the diversification of family structures, scholarly attention to fathers' roles within the home and their parenting responsibilities has grown significantly (Eerola, 2014).

The absence of father figures, culturally and socially ingrained in society's fabric, demands that vulnerable children make certain adaptations in the emotional and psychological spheres (Ünlü-Çetin & Olgan, 2021). As Lestari (2023) and Pratiwi et al. (2024) describe, Indonesia's case of fatherlessness is a paradoxical and socially problematic situation that both aligns with and counters prevailing social and cultural norms concerning parental involvement. It has been widely accepted and internalised across cultures that the traditional family system, with both parents actively present, plays a key role in a child's complete development (Kumpfer et al., 2016). The absence of a father figure in family structures is a worldwide paradox. It undermines the classical explanation concerning the family framework, adversely affecting the child in a multitude of emotional and negative health issues. This is further compounded by the causes of father absence being divorce, death, migration, or other social and economic factors (Jörger et al., 2025). This

phenomenon is amplified when society stigmatizes the absence of a father figure. This explains the emotional and psychological adjustments demanded from the affected children.

Numerous studies have investigated the consequences of fathers' absence in families, and the results have consistently been negative across various developmental domains. Among the negative consequences of father absence are increased psychological stress, poor socio-emotional development, difficulties in emotion regulation, poor social functioning, and insecurities in attachment (Papadopoulos, 2020; Speyer et al., 2022). These weaknesses and deficiencies can increase the risks of multiple poor mental health outcomes and contribute to poor mental functioning that has consequences in many other areas, such as educational attainment and economic opportunities (Goa et al., 2021). In addition, other adverse outcomes on mental health can be structural and intergenerational.

Self-confidence, defined as the belief in one's ability to succeed in a particular job or situation, is among the psychological factors that enable children to grow and thrive (Giraldez-Hayes & Burke, 2022). It is the child's self-referential mental model that enables transcendence of developmental challenges both within and beyond childhood (Sticca et al., 2020). Children with higher self-confidence are more verbally expressive, participate more, and are better able to overcome challenges necessary for their development (Mil & Natasha, 2025). Self-confidence is crucial in the early years of a child's life, as it is a prerequisite for developing a personality that is more willing to take risks and socially and emotionally competent (Deneault et al., 2021). Self-confidence enables children to communicate their thoughts more effectively, overcome learning challenges, and consistently achieve, thereby transforming their personalities into more resilient ones (Valle et al., 2021). Children aged 5-6 years can manage their emotions, make and identify problems, solve problems, and show self- and social respect in ways that enable self-regulation and adaptable self-respect, and harmonious social relations through mindful parenting (Putri & Muthmainah, 2024).

Next, there has been scant exploration of the depth of the gendered and paternal-absence effects on self-confidence as it diminishes, even in the theoretical literature, raising the possibility that boys' and girls' self-confidence and absence effects may diverge. Furthermore, there has been scant attention to the Indonesian context of this study, despite the increasing prevalence of father-absent families and the particular socio-cultural significance of fathering in Indonesia. Absences of fathering are associated with socio-emotional deficits, such as difficulty in self-regulation, problems with social integration, and the formation of primary attachment bonds, which limit access to a range of socially adaptive mental health responses. Understanding socio-emotional deficits in the absence of fathering is critical for providing socially and emotionally adaptive interventions for father-absent children (Reuven-Krispin et al., 2021). In a broader social context, the absence of fathering has intergenerational effects and is associated with lower educational attainment, poorer mental health, and diminished career aspirations (Goa et al., 2021).

This phenomenological study examines how father absence shapes children's self-confidence through a relatively underused lens by comparing boys' and girls' lived experiences. It asks how father absence is experienced and interpreted in children's self-appraisal, interpersonal relationships, and school participation, and whether these pathways diverge by gender and in what ways. Accordingly, gender is treated as a substantive analytic category in interpreting participants' accounts rather than as a background demographic descriptor. Attachment theory and ecological systems theory are used as an integrated explanatory framework to interpret how relational and contextual conditions generate gendered patterns of vulnerability and coping. By centering an Indonesian case within a rapidly changing socioeconomic setting shaped by enduring family norms, the study also addresses the Western tilt of existing scholarship. It further considers the implications for gender-sensitive supports for children in contexts of limited paternal involvement.

## 2. Methods

This study used a data collection guide. The following outlines the research design, participants, data collection, data analysis, ethnic considerations, and the researcher's position.

### 2.1. Research Design and Approach

Researchers examined the experiences and views of mothers and early childhood educators regarding fathers' roles in child-rearing and their impact on children's self-confidence, using a qualitative phenomenological approach. Creswell explains that phenomenology focuses on the interpretation of individual experiences and the meaning given to specific events (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Therefore, this approach is most appropriate for examining how participants feel and interpret the absence of fathers in child rearing and the presence of insecure behavior in children.

This research was conducted at the Laboratory Kindergarten of the Faculty of Teacher Education and Training, University of Riau (FKIP UNRI) and Cendana Rumbai Kindergarten in Pekanbaru City, Riau Province, Indonesia. These institutions were selected based on the researcher's initial observation that these schools had high enrollment rates among children from families, especially fathers, who were often absent for extended periods due to work on plantations, in the oil industry, and in interregional trade. The objectives of this study were also fulfilled through a phenomenological design that detailed (a) mothers' experiences of raising children alone and the daily absence of fathers from home, (b) descriptions of children's behavior indicating that they felt insecure, and (c) the absence of fathers and the presence of self-confidence in children.

### 2.2. Participants

This study employed purposive sampling as the primary strategy because it relies on the researcher's knowledge and judgment to select members of a specific population who are considered most relevant or representative of the research objectives, within certain limitations (e.g., small sample sizes or specific criteria). The sample criteria for mothers were those who were currently in a long-distance marriage (spouses working in different cities/regions for  $\geq 6$  months), had at least one child aged 4-6 years enrolled in kindergarten, acted as the primary caregiver when the father was absent, and were willing to participate and share their experiences. Then, for teachers, they were currently teaching in kindergarten in Pekanbaru City, had a minimum of five years of teaching experience in the field of early childhood education, had experience teaching students from families with minimal father involvement, and were able to articulate observations regarding children's behavior and self-confidence levels.

The sample size of eight participants (five mothers and three teachers) was determined based on data saturation. Data collection continued until no new themes or insights emerged from subsequent interviews (Guest et al., 2006). Mother participants were eligible if they were in a long-distance marriage with a partner working in another city or region for at least six months, had at least one child aged 4-6 enrolled in FKIP UNRI Laboratory Kindergarten or Cendana Kindergarten, served as the primary caregiver during the father's absence, and consented to share their experiences. Teacher participants were eligible if they taught at either kindergarten, had at least five years of early childhood teaching experience, had worked with children from families with minimal father involvement, and could describe children's behavior and self-confidence based on classroom observation. Sampling prioritized participants who directly experienced the phenomenon and could provide rich, experience-based accounts. The study used a small sample to support intensive engagement with each participant's narrative and cross-case comparison. This approach aligns with phenomenological research conventions that emphasize depth over breadth (Smith et al., 2022).

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Code	Role	Age	Education	Experience	Children	LDM Duration
RI1	Mother	32	Senior High School	-	2	3 years
RI2	Mother	28	Bachelor's Degree	-	1	2 years
RI3	Mother	35	Senior High School	-	3	4 years
RI4	Mother	30	Bachelor's Degree	-	2	2.5 years
RI5	Mother	34	Bachelor's Degree	-	2	5 years
RG1	Teacher	45	Bachelor's Degree	12 years	-	-

Code	Role	Age	Education	Experience	Children	LDM Duration
RG2	Teacher	38	Bachelor's Degree	8 years	-	-
RG3	Teacher	42	Master's Degree	15 years	-	-

*\*Note: Experience refers to teaching experience for teachers. LDM = Long-Distance Marriage.*

### 2.3. Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted in Indonesian, audio-recorded with informed consent, and transcribed verbatim. Audio files were translated into English for reporting, while the Indonesian transcripts were retained as the primary analytic corpus. A standardized interview guide was applied across participants to maintain alignment with the research questions, and targeted probes were used to clarify meanings and follow emerging issues. The protocol was reviewed by two experts in early childhood education to strengthen clarity and content adequacy prior to fieldwork. Mothers were interviewed for 45–60 minutes and teachers for approximately 50 minutes, and field notes were produced during and immediately after each session to capture nonverbal cues, emotional tone, and contextual conditions.

Due to ethical constraints in research involving minors, children were not interviewed directly; instead, mothers and teachers provided routine-based observations from home and classroom settings. Children's self-confidence was operationalized through concrete behavioral indicators, including willingness to participate, task initiative, expression of opinions, persistence when facing difficulties, and peer social engagement. Teachers were asked to report specific classroom episodes illustrating each indicator and to contrast them with signs of insecurity such as withdrawal, hesitation, avoidance, and excessive dependence on adults. Mothers provided parallel examples from home and neighborhood interactions, including behavior with siblings, extended family members, and peers. Accounts were compared across sources to identify convergence and divergence, and any inconsistencies were addressed through follow-up probes and checked against field notes to refine interpretation.

### 2.4. Data Analysis

Data analysis integrated an iterative workflow for organizing qualitative materials with phenomenological interpretation oriented toward experiential essence. An interactive analytic cycle was used to manage the process through repeated rounds of condensing data, displaying data, and drawing and verifying conclusions (Miles et al., 2020). In practice, the researcher selected relevant transcripts and field-note segments, reduced redundancy while preserving contextual cues, and documented decisions to maintain an explicit audit trail. Condensed material was organized in working matrices to compare patterns across participants and across respondent groups (mothers versus teachers). The analytic cycle continued until interpretations were stable and consistently supported by direct excerpts.

Throughout the analysis, bracketing was implemented through reflexive memos to identify and hold in check assumptions about father involvement and children's self-confidence. Each transcript was read repeatedly for immersion prior to extracting significant statements related to the phenomenon. Significant statements were treated initially as equally meaningful (horizontalization) and then segmented into meaning units that captured discrete experiential claims. Meaning units were coded using labels that remained close to participants' language and then clustered into coherent units of meaning shared across cases. Triangulation was conducted by examining whether clusters were corroborated, qualified, or challenged by accounts from both mothers and teachers.

Next, clustered meanings were synthesized into phenomenological descriptions that articulated what was experienced and how it was experienced within family and school contexts. Provisional essence statements were drafted and repeatedly checked against raw transcripts and field notes to prevent drift into generic thematic description. Verification was strengthened by tracing each essence statement back to its supporting meaning units and original excerpts, preserving transparency from raw data to interpretation. Disconfirming or marginal cases were retained and used to refine the boundaries and conditions of the essence. For confidentiality and

analytic clarity, each respondent was assigned a role-based code (e.g., mother/teacher), and the coding scheme is summarized in [Table 2](#).

Table 2. Participant Codes

No	Code Responders	Description
1	RI1-RI5	Mother Responders
2	RG1-RG3	Teacher Responders

### 2.5. Ethical Considerations

This research adheres to the ethical principles governing research involving human subjects. Before data collection, all participants were provided with detailed information about the research objectives, procedures, and their rights as research participants. Written consent was obtained from each participant to ensure they understood that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time without consequences. To protect participant confidentiality, all identifying information is removed from the transcripts, and codes are used throughout the analysis and reporting. Audio recordings and transcripts are securely stored on password-protected devices and are only accessible to researchers.

### 2.6. Researcher's Position

In qualitative research, the researcher serves as the primary instrument for data collection and analysis, making reflective awareness crucial for ensuring transparency and analytical credibility ([Creswell & Creswell, 2018](#)). The principal researcher in this study is a lecturer in early childhood education at the University of Riau, with expertise in parenting, and has published several articles and books on the topic. The researchers had no prior personal or professional relationship with the participants or schools before the study began. However, the researchers acknowledged an initial assumption, based on professional experience, that father involvement plays a significant role in children's social-emotional development.

## 3. Result

This study employed a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of mothers (n=5) and teachers (n=3) regarding father involvement in early childhood parenting within long-distance marriage contexts. Through in-depth interviews and phenomenological analysis, the findings show how participants make meaning of father absence in relation to children's self-confidence. The results are organized into clusters of meaning that were iteratively refined and synthesized into an overarching description of the essence of the experience. Individual informants are coded as RI1–RI5 (mothers) and RG1–RG3 (teachers) to represent variation across participants.

To provide a clearer picture of the respondents' characteristics in this study, the researchers first presented demographic data. This presentation of demographic data aims to strengthen understanding of the context of the respondents' experiences and provide a more comprehensive basis for interpreting the research findings.

Table 3. Demographic Percent of Mothers

Demographic	n	%
Role		
Mother	5	100%
Age		
25-30	2	40%
31-35	3	60%
Level of Education		
Senior High School	2	40%
Bachelor's Degree	3	60%
Job		
Civil Servant	1	20%

Demographic	n	%
Job		
Housewife	3	60%
Entrepreneur	1	20%
Other		
Number of children aged 0-8 years old		
1	2	40%
2	2	40%
3 or more	1	20%

Table 4. Demographic Percent of Teachers

Demographic	n	%
Role		
Teacher	3	100%
Age		
36-40	1	33,3%
41-45	2	66,6%
Level of Education		
Bachelor's Degree	2	66,6%
Graduate Degree or above	1	33,3%
Job		
Teacher	3	100%

### 3.1. Mother's Perspective on the Causes of Father's Lack of Parenting Involvement

Several mothers identified traditional gender role beliefs as a significant barrier to father involvement. Three out of five mothers explicitly mentioned that their husbands viewed childcare as primarily the mother's domain.

"Because fathers feel that the task of raising children is entirely the mother's responsibility." (RI1, mother)

"My husband always says that he is the breadwinner and I am the caregiver. Even when he is at home, he expects me to handle everything related to the children." (RI2, mother)

From a phenomenological perspective, these narratives reveal how cultural scripts about fatherhood are internalized and reproduced within families, creating structural barriers that operate at the level of beliefs and expectations rather than merely practical constraints.

### 3.2. Fathers' challenges in parenting

Remote work arrangements create practical barriers that exacerbate psychological barriers. Mothers described fathers struggling to maintain meaningful engagement in parenting within a limited time.

"I think the challenge for fathers is time management and approach. So far, they have overcome this by spending as much time as possible with their children on the weekends. Weekends are family time." (RI3, mother)

"The challenge fathers face in parenting is that their communication style with their children is inconsistent with their children's personalities. Fathers often speak in a high-pitched voice, and here I am, a mother, trying to maintain a consistent tone of voice with my father." (RI4, mother)

These findings highlight how physical distance exacerbates communication challenges within the family microsystem. The mismatch between fathers' communication styles and their children's needs reflects a cumulative discontinuity in attachment-related interactions.

### *3.3. The impact of fathers being actively involved in parenting*

When fathers are actively involved, mothers consistently observe positive developmental outcomes in their children, particularly in terms of emotional openness and self-confidence.

"Children become more confident, willing to share any difficulties, whether at school, in friendships, or even in trivial matters, with their parents. Children become more affectionate and easier to educate." (RI1, mother)

"Children are more receptive to advice, more receptive to explanations, and more emotionally attached to their parents." (RI2, mother)

"When children receive support, they feel proud and more confident. Conversely, when they do not receive support, they tend to lose confidence." (RI3, mother)

Across these accounts, paternal involvement appears to matter less as physical presence and more as repeated experiences of being noticed, listened to, and affirmed. What seems to strengthen children's confidence is the emotional message carried by support, namely that they are valued and can rely on a stable response. When this support is consistent, children are described as more willing to try, speak up, and persist when facing difficulties. When it is inconsistent, the accounts suggest children may read the absence as reduced emotional availability and respond by clinging, withdrawing, or overcompensating. This interpretation keeps the focus on participants' meaning-making while preserving the causal logic implied in the subtheme.

### *3.4. The condition of children when fathers are less involved in parenting*

Several mothers described their children experiencing increased anxiety and emotional vulnerability when fathers were minimally involved. This pattern was consistently observed in four out of five mothers, suggesting that father absence creates a persistent emotional gap that children interpret as a loss of protection.

"Children often appear less confident, more fearful, and sometimes seek substitute figures outside the home. Some children also become more dependent on their mothers because they feel like they are the only one they can rely on." (RI1, mother)

"My child often asks, 'Where is Daddy?' and when I tell him he is away at work, he becomes quiet and sad. I can see he is trying to understand but feels something is missing." (RI3, mother)

"They often feel anxious or easily frightened because they feel there is no one to protect them, and they also feel less confident because there is no one to support them mentally, no role models or heroes." (RI5, mother)

The phenomenological meaning embedded in these narratives reveals that children interpret their father's absence not only as a physical distance, but as an emotional emptiness—a sense of loss of protection and esteem. From an attachment theory perspective, these responses reflect an insecure attachment pattern in which children develop anxiety about the availability of their primary caregiver.

### *3.5. The role of a father can strengthen a child's sense of security and self-confidence*

Beyond cultural expectations, mothers also reported that fathers demonstrated low self-efficacy in parenting tasks. This finding suggests that lack of involvement may be partly rooted in fathers' perceived incompetence rather than unwillingness.

"I feel like I do not have the skills and abilities to raise my child, and I am afraid of making mistakes." (RI1, mother)

"When my husband tries to help, he often seems hesitant about what to do. He constantly asks me—should I do this? Is this right? It is as if he does not trust his own judgment regarding our child." (RI5, mother)

The phenomenological significance of this description lies in the emotional dimension of parenting confidence. Fathers' fear of "making mistakes" reflects not only a lack of skills but also a more profound anxiety about their role competence—a finding that has implications for intervention design.

### *3.6. The role of fathers in parenting*

Both mothers and teachers consistently described children's perceptions of fathers as protectors and sources of security. This archetypal understanding of the father's role emerged across various informant groups, revealing a shared cultural interpretation.

"I think a father's constant presence and support make a child feel sufficiently loved. If this is fulfilled, the child will become more confident, feel more secure, and be more expressive and cheerful." (RI2, mother)

"Fathers can act as both protectors and motivators. By paying attention, listening to their stories, and accompanying them in their daily activities, children feel loved and secure. From there, their self-confidence grows." (RI4, mother)

"In Islamic concepts, if a mother is a madrasah for her child, then a father is a principal for his child. Like a principal, a father's role is to provide guidance, outlines, boundaries, direction, finances, and even facilities and infrastructure." (RG1, teacher, 10 years of teaching experience)

These narratives reveal that informants construct the father's role through the lens of providing security, both physical and emotional. The metaphor of the father as 'principal' used by RG1 illustrates how the teacher conceptualizes the father's role as providing structure and direction within the Bronfenbrenner (1994) family microsystem.

### *3.7. The relationship between the level of father involvement and children's self-confidence*

The teacher's perspective incorporates mothers' experiences and offers observations from the educational microsystem. All three teacher informants observed a relationship between father involvement and children's self-confidence.

"An active, consistent, and affectionate father can raise children who are bold in making decisions and who have fewer insecurities." (RG1, teacher, 10 years of teaching experience)

"When children are valued and cared for, they become more confident. I can see it in how they participate in class—children whose fathers attend school events are usually more active." (RG2, teacher, 7 years of teaching experience)

"Fathers should play a role in parenting by constantly collaborating with mothers, meaning both work together to care for their children. When this happens, children will be more balanced." (RG3, teacher, 5 years of teaching experience)

The teachers' observations from the school microsystem confirmed the patterns reported by mothers from the home microsystem, providing ecological validity through triangulation across contexts.

### *3.8. Differences in self-confidence between girls and boys who do not get their father's attention*

Teachers reported observing different patterns of response to father absence between boys and girls. However, these observations are indicative rather than conclusive, as they arose from qualitative reflections rather than systematic measurements.

"I think it is different, because boys and girls have their own perspectives on the role of fathers. Girls tend to be less confident than boys." (RG1, teacher, 10 years of teaching experience)

"In my observation, girls tend to become more withdrawn when their fathers are absent. They appear to require greater protection. Boys sometimes become more aggressive, as if they are trying to prove something." (RG2, teacher, 7 years of teaching experience)

"Yes, there will be a difference in the impact on self-confidence between girls and boys who do not receive attention from their fathers. Boys often view their fathers as playmates, motivators, protectors, supporters, and role models. This makes them vulnerable to low self-confidence and aggressive behavior. Meanwhile, girls view their fathers as good listeners, sources of reassurance, protectors, and problem-solvers. As a result, girls are more likely to experience insecurity." (RG3, teacher, 5 years of teaching experience)

This teacher's observations suggest that children may construct different meanings about the father's role based on gender, leading to different manifestations of father absence. Although teachers consistently observed that girls appeared more affected in terms of self-confidence, boys exhibited distinct behavioral patterns, including aggression. This qualitative observation requires further investigation through systematic cross-case analysis.

Findings indicate that children experience father absence in the context of long-distance marriages as an emotional void that impacts their sense of security and self-confidence. Mothers interpret this through changes in their children's behavior, increased anxiety, dependency, and emotional withdrawal. Teachers corroborate these observations from the school context, noting differences in participation and self-confidence between children with involved and absent fathers.

Barriers to father involvement appear to be multifaceted, including cultural expectations regarding gender roles, fathers' low confidence in their parenting, and practical challenges related to time and communication in long-distance relationships. These barriers operate at multiple levels of Bronfenbrenner's (1994) ecological model—from individual beliefs to cultural norms. Mothers and teachers consistently described the relationship between father involvement and self-confidence as a pattern of meaningful relationships—children who feel valued and supported by their fathers develop more secure internal working models that manifest as confidence and openness. Although teachers observed gender patterns, these findings are indicative and warrant further systematic investigation.

## **4. Discussion**

This study drew three main conclusions regarding fathers' roles in long-distance marriage (LDM), with a focus on the implications for children's self-confidence. First, fathers in LDM situations often lack confidence in their parenting, which leads them to question their own role and ask mothers to care for the children. Second, children in LDM situations tend to lack confidence as a result of dysfunctional attachment processes coupled with a lack of emotional support from their fathers. Third, the impact of this situation differs by gender among these children. Girls tend to show more insecurity, while boys show higher levels of dysfunctional aggression, as well as greater resistance to completing tasks that are considered to undermine their masculinity. This effect illustrates the situation and is among the few that explain how father distance affects the mental well-being of LDM children in Indonesia.

In LDM families, fathers' assumptions that child-rearing is "the mother's job" often coexist with an erosion of parenting self-efficacy that distance quietly amplifies. Self-efficacy is not sustained by intention alone; it is built through repeated mastery experiences, observational learning, and credible encouragement (Bandura, 1977). When fathers lack everyday opportunities to practice parenting, a self-reinforcing loop can emerge in which reduced involvement weakens confidence, and weaker confidence further reduces involvement. In that sense, paternal self-efficacy functions less like a by-product and more like a threshold condition for sustained engagement. Occasional video calls and intermittent visits may preserve a sense of connection, yet they rarely provide the sustained, hands-on routines that rebuild competence and restore confidence. The link between paternal absence and lower child confidence is more plausibly read as an attachment disruption: limited availability constrains the father's role as a secure base from which the child can explore and develop confidence (Bowlby, 1979).

Accounts from mothers and teachers were consistent with anxious, attachment-related insecurity in children, reflected in descriptions of heightened fearfulness, worry, and dependence (Ainsworth, 2015). Rather than indicating a clinical attachment "style," these narratives suggest a relational process in which limited paternal availability reduces the child's sense of a reliable, secure base, increasing vigilance and constraining exploratory play and initiative that typically support early self-confidence. In this reading, the pathway is not simply the father's physical absence, but the disruption of predictable, responsive interaction through which children learn that support will be available when needed. Periodic visits and video calls may sustain connection, yet they may not provide the continuity of responsiveness required for stable security in daily routines. Accordingly, improving children's self-confidence is less about the sheer amount of time and more about the consistency and sensitivity of caregiving across interactions, including fathers' and mothers' responses (Bendel-Stenzel et al., 2024; Jaramillo et al., 2025; Qin et al., 2025; Wells et al., 2021).

Fathers should be involved in parenting because they have a significant impact on this aspect and play an important role. Information obtained from interviews indicates that fathers' roles are those of leaders who provide supervision, management, and support. However, collaboration should not be one-sided. Fathers and mothers need to collaborate, share tasks, authority, and responsibilities in parenting. The presence of fathers is a significant factor in assessing children's well-being. To improve the quality of support, more attention should be given to family education, family guidance, mental health support, and time spent with children to acknowledge their differences (Mancinelli & Filippi, 2025).

Children's well-being is closely tied to the felt availability of caregivers and the quality of everyday interaction, not merely co-residence. When parental presence is limited or inconsistent, children may rely more heavily on the remaining caregiver, and some may respond by internalizing family strain, interpreting relational distance as personal rejection or responsibility. Such internalization can heighten anxiety and reduce exploratory behavior, which is a key behavioral pathway through which self-confidence is expressed in early childhood. In extended-family settings, additional caregivers may buffer daily stress, yet this support does not necessarily replicate the child's sense of security derived from a consistently responsive parent. Consistent with prior work, father involvement and the broader parent-child relationship are associated with children's socio-emotional adjustment, although the direction and magnitude of effects depend on interaction quality, stability, and contextual stressors (Simonardóttir & Arnalds, 2024; Garcia et al., 2022).

Bronfenbrenner's (1994) ecological systems theory provides a framework for understanding the impact of father absence across multiple levels of development. Within the microsystem, father absence disrupts the family structure, shifting the relational focus to the mother-child bond. Mothers become dual employees, which can increase stress and reduce their ability to care for their children. In the mesosystem, teachers note how LDM students "have difficulty reconciling various expectations, especially when it comes to male authority figures." This response suggests that the absence of fathers results in relational deficits that hinder children's ability to interact with male figures outside the home. The theoretical gap captured here

is profound; the absence of a father figure not only severs a unique relationship, but also limits the child's relational capacity with same-sex peers. There are significant moderating factors in the Indonesian sociocultural context that distinguish this study's results from those in Western literature on father absence.

In Indonesia's extended-family context, older relatives often step into secondary caregiving roles, offering children an additional attachment figure and a partial buffer at the microsystem level (Kumpfer et al., 2016). However, our data suggest that this compensation has limits: extended kin may soften disruptions, but they do not reproduce the relational specificity associated with fathers. Three constraints recur in participants' accounts and in the literature: the father's role is not interchangeable with grandparents' roles, father-child interactions often provide distinct opportunities for confidence-building and identity work, and children's meanings attached to "father" can remain tacit, leaving an unresolved conceptual gap. Read through Bronfenbrenner, this points to a macrosystem practice that moderates but does not neutralize microsystem consequences, implying that "support" and "substitution" should not be conflated. The downstream effects appear especially visible in gendered developmental pathways, where father absence is discussed not only as a loss of presence but as a disruption in identification and internalization processes. Consistent with this view, father-daughter dynamics are linked to insecurity or hyper-independence. At the same time, for boys, the lack of a salient male role model may leave masculine identity less articulated and self-regulation more fragile, with potential implications for later dysregulation (Chavda & Nisarga, 2023).

This study advances the existing literature in three ways. On the one hand, it expands the implications of attachment theory and ecological systems by arguing that virtual emotional presence (through video calls and occasional face-to-face visits) is a form of paternal involvement that maintains emotional presence but cannot provide the emotional availability and continuous responsiveness necessary for secure attachment formation. This contradicts the prevailing understanding in the literature that online presence is a sufficient substitute for physical presence in early childhood. On the other hand, this study is the first in Indonesia to test the theory of paternal absence, which is well documented in the context of Western nuclear families. It demonstrates that the theory remains valid even in a culture heavily dependent on extended-family support. These findings suggest that interventions should aim to increase the quantity of contact and fathers' parenting self-efficacy, and to provide opportunities for responsive, sustained interactions that will routineize the formation of secure attachments under conditions of physical separation.

The existing literature on father involvement will also benefit from this study through contextual validation and theoretical advancement. Our findings align with the existing literature (Cabrera, 2020; Wells et al., 2021) and indicate that father-child relationships predict children's emotional well-being and self-confidence. This study, however, goes beyond this literature by clarifying the mechanisms through which paternal absence operates, particularly in the context of LDM. Unlike other studies that focus on divorce and rejection, LDM demonstrates a complex structural absence due to the persistent relational complexity of fathers who remain relationally disconnected but still maintain a desire to be involved. This distinction has theoretical significance, as it seeks to differentiate the impact of physical presence, or its absence, on the situation: even though fathers may be motivated and strive to be involved, it is not possible to do so in a meaningful way during the early years if they are physically absent.

#### *4.1. Research Contribution*

This study contributes to the existing literature in several ways. It extends attachment theory and ecological systems theory by demonstrating that virtual presence through video calls cannot substitute the emotional availability necessary for secure attachment formation. This study also fills a gap by examining paternal absence within the Indonesian context, revealing that extended family support only partially mitigates the consequences of father absence. Furthermore, this research highlights a distinct form of structural absence where fathers remain motivated but unable to engage meaningfully due to physical separation. The findings suggest that interventions

should focus on enhancing paternal self-efficacy and creating opportunities for sustained father-child interactions.

#### **4.2. Limitations**

Some limitations should be acknowledged when interpreting these findings. The focus on long-distance marriage families in Indonesia may limit the generalizability of findings to other cultural contexts. The reliance on qualitative methods and self-reported data limits the ability to establish causal relationships and may introduce bias. This study also did not control for confounding variables such as socioeconomic status and mother-child relationship quality. Additionally, the cross-sectional design prevents examination of how paternal absence effects evolve across different developmental stages.

#### **4.3. Suggestions**

Several directions for future research are recommended. Future studies should employ longitudinal designs to examine how the effects of paternal absence change over time. Mixed-methods approaches could be used in future studies to establish stronger causal links. Determining the broader applicability of these findings would require examining this phenomenon across many cultural contexts. Future research should also examine moderating factors such as communication quality and length of separation, as well as the efficacy of therapies intended to enhance paternal self-confidence. Finally, gender-specific intervention strategies warrant further investigation given the differential impacts on boys and girls.

## **5. Conclusion**

This phenomenological study examined father absence in long-distance marriage contexts in Pekanbaru, Indonesia, through an integrated attachment and ecological systems lens, focusing on children's self-confidence and gendered vulnerabilities. The findings indicate that fathers' reduced parenting self-efficacy in LDM arrangements often leads to the delegation of daily caregiving to mothers. At the same time, children show diminished self-confidence manifested in anxiety, clinginess, fearfulness, and withdrawal across home and school settings. Gender-differentiated patterns were also evident, with girls tending toward heightened insecurity and at times compensatory hyper-independence. In contrast, boys more often exhibited low self-confidence accompanied by aggressive behaviors linked to impaired masculine identification.

These results substantially answer the study's aims by clarifying how limited paternal involvement relates to children's self-appraisal and classroom participation, and by demonstrating that the consequences are not uniform across genders. Virtual contact can help sustain emotional connection, yet it does not consistently provide the continuous responsiveness needed for secure attachment in early childhood, and extended-family support appears only partially compensatory. Practically, interventions should prioritize strengthening paternal parenting self-efficacy and increasing the frequency and quality of father-child interaction, alongside coordinated family education, guidance services, and school-based support that is sensitive to gendered expressions of insecurity.

Interpretation should consider limitations, including the small, context-specific qualitative sample, reliance on adult reports, and the cross-sectional design. Future studies should employ longitudinal and mixed-methods approaches, incorporate fathers' perspectives and developmentally appropriate child measures, and test gender-responsive intervention strategies under varying LDM conditions.

## **Declarations**

### **Author contribution statement**

Ria Novianti: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Writing - Original Draft, Project administration.

Ainama Nafisa Putri: Conceptualization, Writing - Original Draft, Writing - Review & Editing.

Ilga Maria: Validation, Supervision, Writing - Review & Editing.  
Daniel Mpolomoka: Investigation, Data curation, Writing - Review & Editing.

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### Data availability statement

The data supporting the findings of this study, including interview transcripts, observation notes, and documentation, are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. Due to ethical considerations and the involvement of children and community members, raw data is not publicly archived.

### Declaration of interests statement

All authors declare that they have no financial or personal interests that could influence the work presented in this manuscript.

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