

Father Absenteeism and Emotional Regulation among School-Aged Children in Incheon-Songdo, South Korea

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Abstract

The father figure plays an essential role in a child's emotional and psychological development. Fathers are often key providers of emotional security, role modeling, and discipline, contributing to their child's ability to regulate emotions effectively. The general objective of the study was to examine the influence of father absenteeism on emotional regulation of school-aged children in Incheon-Songdo, South Korea. Specifically, the study sought to examine the emotional regulation of school-aged children in Incheon-Songdo, South Korea and to establish the prevalence of father absenteeism among school-aged children in Incheon-Songdo, South Korea. The study was guided by Social Learning Theory, Cognitive-Behavioral Theory and Attachment Theory. This study used a descriptive research design. This study targeted school-aged children aged 13-15. The target population was 56,765 students from 38 schools. The sample size of the study was 379 respondents. In addition, the study also targeted the Mothers and School Counselors. This study used a questionnaire based on the Emotional Regulation Checklist and interview guides to collect data from the students. Data from the Emotional Regulation Checklist was quantitative and was analysed through the use of descriptive statistics. On the other hand, qualitative data were analyzed using NVIVO software. The findings were then presented through thematic summaries and narrative descriptions. The results showed that emotional regulation in school-aged children is at an intermediate level, with strengths in emotional awareness and self-expression and weaknesses in continuous emotional control. The absenteeism of fathers is very high and occurs both physically and emotionally. The father's absenteeism has a considerable impact on emotional control in school-age children by reducing emotional support, guidance, and role modeling. It suggests the reinforcement of school counseling services, inclusion of emotional regulation training in school, increased parental involvement, as well as the encouragement of mentorship and peer support programs.

Keywords: *Father Absenteeism, Emotional Regulation, School-Aged Children, Incheon-Songdo, South Korea*

INTRODUCTION

Father absenteeism, whether physical, emotional, or psychological, has been widely recognised as a significant developmental risk factor affecting children's socio-emotional growth (Cabrera et al., 2020). Physical absenteeism refers to situations where the father is completely absent from the household due to separation, divorce, migration, incarceration, or death. Emotional

absenteeism, on the other hand, occurs when the father is physically present but largely uninvolved, unresponsive, or emotionally unavailable in the child's life (Eisenberg & Spinrad, 2023). Psychological absenteeism involves inconsistent engagement, where the father's presence is unpredictable, limiting the formation of stable emotional bonds with the child (Annor, 2023). Each form of absence disrupts the father-child attachment relationship, which is a critical component of early emotional development.

Emotional regulation can be understood as the capacity of a person to observe, assess, and adjust emotional responses in a manner that is socially appropriate and responsive to situational demands (Gong et al., 2022). The processes involved include emotional awareness, impulse control, stress management, cognitive reappraisal, and behavioural adjustment. During childhood, internal regulation of emotions is not yet fully developed and is therefore highly influenced by external co-regulation provided by caregivers. Fathers in particular play a significant role in shaping emotional behaviours such as anger management, frustration tolerance, problem-solving, and stress resistance (Zhang et al., 2019). Through interaction with their fathers, children learn to name emotions, cope with frustration, and address interpersonal conflict in socially acceptable ways.

Father absenteeism has become a concern in many parts of the world. Research in the United States and the United Kingdom indicates that children who grow up without an actively engaged father figure are at elevated risk of low self-esteem, behavioural problems, and difficulties with emotional regulation (Cabrera et al., 2020; Crosby & Stephens, 2020; Fan et al., 2020). According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2021), approximately 25% of children in the United States live in father-absent households, while the remainder co-reside with their fathers. However, co-residence does not necessarily imply active engagement, as many fathers face competing demands from work and family obligations. In Europe, rates of father presence range from 80% to 90%, though divorce and separation continue to undermine the quality of father-child relationships in many households. Research has consistently established that children whose fathers are disengaged continue to face emotional and behavioural challenges even when the father is nominally present in the home (Crosby & Stephens, 2020; Denham & Burton, 2023; Fan et al., 2023).

In Germany, Schnabel, Asendorpf, and Greenfield (2020) established that approximately 13% of children grow up without meaningful paternal involvement. Despite social policies aimed at addressing father absenteeism, significant challenges persist. Children in such families are more likely to exhibit emotional difficulties, including ineffective coping behaviours and increased incidences of emotional dysregulation. The absence of a father figure may particularly limit positive role modelling for boys in the areas of identity formation and social behaviour (Hofferth & Anderson, 2023).

In Africa, cultural and economic factors play a significant role in shaping father-child engagement. Absenteeism rates range from 20% to 60%, with many fathers working far from home or being absent due to marital conflict. South Africa has one of the highest recorded rates of father absenteeism in the world, with over 60% of children growing up without active paternal involvement (Statistics South Africa, 2021). Historical and structural factors, including labour migration and the legacy of apartheid, have contributed significantly to this pattern. Children in father-absent homes in this context have been reported to struggle with emotional regulation, exhibiting heightened aggression and difficulty forming secure relationships.

In East Asia, accelerated economic growth and shifting cultural expectations have contributed to increased levels of effective father absenteeism (Lavy & Schlosser, 2020). Work-centred cultures

and long working hours in countries such as South Korea, Japan, and China often mean that fathers spend limited time with their families. The phenomenon of so-called ‘weekend fathers,’ who can only visit their children occasionally, is not uncommon. Research indicates that children in such contexts may have difficulty establishing secure attachments and developing effective emotional regulation skills, given the conventional role of fathers as boundary-setters, mentors, and providers of emotional security (Li, 2023).

Incheon, and the Songdo district in particular, is a dynamic economic and commercial hub characterised by rapid urbanisation and intensive work demands. Fathers in this area frequently work in corporations or international business settings, leading to long working hours and extended travel. Historically, South Korean cultural norms positioned the father primarily as the family breadwinner, placing the responsibility for emotional caregiving on mothers. While this is gradually changing as more families embrace shared parenting roles, there remains a scarcity of empirical evidence on how father absenteeism in urban environments, such as Incheon-Songdo affects children’s emotional regulation (Currie & Almond, 2022). This study addresses that gap.

Statement of the Problem

Emotional regulation is a critical developmental skill among school-aged children, as it directly influences academic performance, peer relationships, and psychological well-being (Fan et al., 2020). A growing concern in Incheon-Songdo, South Korea, is that children are increasingly presenting with difficulties in managing their emotions at school. The Incheon Metropolitan Office of Education (2023) estimates that approximately 20% of school-aged children in the area experience challenges in managing emotions such as anger, anxiety, and sadness in classroom settings. Educators report increasing incidences of emotional outbursts, social withdrawal, and stress-related disruptions among students, indicating an ongoing and pressing concern.

Concurrently, father-absent family structures have been on the rise in urban Incheon-Songdo, driven primarily by demanding work schedules, long working hours, business travel, overseas employment, and family separation or divorce. According to Statistics Korea (2023), fathers in metropolitan areas, including Incheon, typically spend limited time with their children on a daily basis due to occupational demands, resulting in diminished paternal involvement in children’s emotional and social development.

A core concern is therefore that many school-going children in Incheon-Songdo are not receiving regular fatherly emotional support, supervision, and guidance. This deficit may undermine the emotional scaffolding available at home, placing children at a disadvantage in handling academic stressors, peer conflict, and everyday challenges. School counsellors and teachers have noted a growing number of children with impulse control difficulties, emotional outbursts, and an inability to meet classroom behavioural expectations, often requiring additional behavioural and psychological support.

Despite the growing visibility of these concerns, there is a lack of context-specific empirical evidence exploring the relationship between father absenteeism and emotional regulation among school-aged children in Incheon-Songdo. Existing school-based mental health programmes tend to address emotional difficulties in general terms, without adequately accounting for family structure variables such as paternal absence. This represents a significant contextual and empirical gap that limits the development of targeted, evidence-based interventions.

The research problem is therefore the growing challenge of emotional dysregulation among school-aged children in Incheon-Songdo, which may be linked to rising rates of father absenteeism (Statistics Korea, 2023; Incheon Metropolitan Office of Education, 2023). Without empirical evidence on this relationship, interventions risk failing to account for the specific

contribution of paternal absence to children's emotional development. This study is thus designed to investigate the association between father absenteeism and emotional regulation among school-aged children in Incheon-Songdo, South Korea.

General Objective of the Study

The general objective of the study was to examine the effect of father absenteeism on emotional regulation of school-aged children in Incheon-Songdo, South Korea.

Specific Objectives of the Study

- i. To examine the emotional regulation of school-aged children in Incheon-Songdo, South Korea.
- ii. To establish the prevalence of father absenteeism among school-aged children in Incheon-Songdo, South Korea.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Social Learning Theory, Cognitive-Behavioural Theory (CBT), and Attachment Theory collectively provide the theoretical foundation for this study, each offering a distinct explanatory lens for understanding the relationship between father absenteeism and emotional regulation among school-aged children. Social Learning Theory, originally formulated by Albert Bandura (1977, 1986), holds that children acquire behaviours and emotional responses through observation, imitation, and reinforcement within the context of significant relationships. Applied to this study, the theory posits that children develop emotional regulation skills by observing how caregivers respond to stress, conflict, and emotionally charged situations. In the context of father absenteeism, the absence of a paternal figure may restrict children's exposure to positive role models for emotional control, including self-regulation, discipline, and constructive problem-solving. As a consequence, children may develop alternative coping strategies modelled on peers, media figures, or other accessible role models, which may not always support healthy emotional regulation (Denham & Burton, 2023; Zeman & Garber, 2020).

Cognitive-Behavioural Theory (CBT), associated with the foundational work of Beck (1979) and Ellis (1962), holds that emotional and behavioural responses are shaped by how individuals interpret and cognitively process their experiences. Children who experience father absenteeism may develop negative cognitive schemas, including beliefs of being rejected, abandoned, or unworthy, which can distort their interpretation of social interactions and stressful situations, leading to difficulties in regulating emotions such as anger, anxiety, or sadness (Kim-Spoon & Holmes, 2021). CBT further posits that these maladaptive patterns can be modified through cognitive restructuring and the development of adaptive coping skills, offering a basis for therapeutic and school-based interventions.

Attachment Theory, developed by John Bowlby (1988) and elaborated by Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, and Wall (1978), provides a foundational explanation for the emotional impact of father absenteeism. The theory holds that the quality of early attachment relationships with primary caregivers forms the basis for a child's emotional security and capacity for self-regulation. Secure attachment is associated with reduced emotional insecurity and greater stability under stress, while insecure or disrupted attachment, such as that which may result from paternal absence, is linked to emotional instability and impaired emotion regulation (Bowlby, 1988). When fathers are absent, the resulting deficit in paternal bonding may heighten children's susceptibility to emotional dysregulation, behavioural difficulties, and problems in forming and sustaining healthy interpersonal relationships.

Taken together, these three theoretical frameworks converge on a shared proposition: that father absenteeism, by removing a significant source of social modelling, cognitive scaffolding, and

secure attachment, may impair the development of effective emotional regulation in school-aged children. This integrated theoretical perspective informs both the conceptual framework and the analytical approach of the study.

EMPIRICAL REVIEW

Emotional regulation is a critical factor in the social competence and school adjustment of school-aged children, significantly influencing academic achievement, peer relations, and behavioural outcomes. Denham and Burton (2023) found that children with stronger emotional regulation skills exhibited more positive peer relationships, fewer behaviour problems, and higher academic achievement. In particular, children who were able to manage emotions such as frustration and sadness were more cooperative, less aggressive, and better adapted to the school environment, underscoring the centrality of emotional regulation in child development. It should be noted, however, that this study was not conducted in South Korea, which limits the direct generalisability of its findings to the Incheon-Songdo context.

Zeman and Garber (2020) demonstrated that children who possessed effective emotional regulation skills, particularly the capacity to manage anger and anxiety, tended to achieve better academic performance and more positive peer interactions. Conversely, children with poor emotional control exhibited externalising behaviours such as aggression, which undermined both their social and academic development. The findings of this study, while instructive, are not specific to school-aged children in South Korea and are therefore considered with appropriate caution in the current context.

Cunningham and Sroufe (2021) highlighted the influence of emotional regulation on peer relations, finding that children able to regulate their emotions formed more positive peer relationships and were more accepted by classmates. Children who struggled with emotional regulation were more likely to experience rejection or bullying, adversely affecting their social adjustment. Whereas this study focused specifically on peer relationship development, the current study examines emotional regulation more broadly, including its family-related antecedents.

In terms of academic performance, Gross and Thompson (2021) found that children who employed adaptive emotion regulation strategies, such as cognitive reappraisal and problem-solving, achieved higher academic outcomes. Those who relied on maladaptive mechanisms such as avoidance or rumination performed less well, particularly in subjects requiring sustained attention. The academic context in South Korea, characterised by high performance expectations and competitive pressures, may amplify these effects, though direct replication in the current setting awaits further research.

Eisenberg and Spinrad (2023) demonstrated that consistent parental emotional support and modelling were associated with better emotional regulation in children, which in turn positively affected their social and academic functioning. Children who received less emotional support from parents experienced greater difficulty in emotional regulation and encountered more challenges in school and social environments. While these findings have broad relevance, the specific contribution of paternal absence to emotional regulation within a South Korean urban context requires dedicated empirical investigation, which the current study undertakes.

Kim-Spoon and Holmes (2021) found that children who were able to balance emotional and cognitive demands, including attention regulation and working memory, demonstrated higher academic achievement and fewer behavioural problems at school. Children with enhanced emotional regulation abilities were better able to manage frustration and impulsive responses, facilitating greater participation in classroom activities. These findings provide useful

comparative context for interpreting the current study's findings, though they were not obtained in a South Korean sample.

Park and Lee (2022) conducted a study on emotional regulation in school-aged children in Seoul and found that those who demonstrated effective regulation strategies achieved better peer attachment, higher self-esteem, and greater academic engagement. The study also identified positive parental involvement as a key factor in helping children manage anger, anxiety, and frustration. This study is the most geographically proximate to the current research; however, it focused on parental support and urban school adjustment in Seoul rather than on the specific impact of father absenteeism in Incheon-Songdo, and thus its findings cannot be directly transferred to the present setting.

Research has identified several factors that influence the degree of paternal involvement. Amato (2020) found that following divorce, fathers were more likely to disengage or reduce involvement, particularly in high-conflict post-divorce situations. Where fathers maintained amicable relationships with former partners, they were more likely to sustain regular contact with their children. These findings highlight the importance of inter-parental relationship quality as a determinant of paternal engagement. However, variation in legal systems, economic conditions, and cultural norms across national contexts limits the transferability of these findings.

Lamb et al. (2023) found that fathers working in high-stress occupations with demanding schedules exhibited lower levels of child involvement due to physical exhaustion and time constraints. Fathers with more flexible working arrangements were more likely to participate actively in their children's lives. The researchers also observed that conflicting work schedules in dual-income households could lead to effective absenteeism even where fathers were willing to be involved. These structural factors are particularly relevant to the Incheon-Songdo context, where intensive corporate work cultures are prevalent.

Jones and Smith (2021) examined how systemic and cultural factors contribute to father absenteeism in minority families, noting that economic disadvantage, systemic inequality, and immigration-related separation were significant contributors. While this study was conducted in a different national and cultural context, the underlying structural dynamics, whereby fathers are constrained by external socioeconomic pressures rather than lack of intent, offer a useful comparative framework for understanding the occupational and cultural determinants of paternal absence in Incheon-Songdo.

Conceptual Framework

A conceptual framework is a structured system of variables that provides a foundation for understanding and exploring a particular research topic or problem. Figure 1 below shows the relationship between the independent variable (father absenteeism) and the dependent variable (emotional regulation of school-aged children).

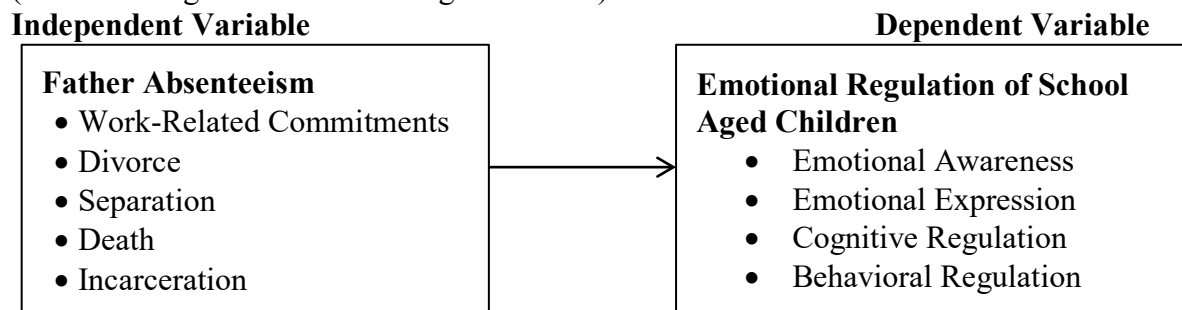


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a descriptive research design, which is appropriate for providing an accurate portrayal of characteristics or phenomena and is compatible with both qualitative and quantitative data (Sekaran & Bougie, 2019). Given that the study utilised a mixed-methods approach integrating questionnaire data and interview data, a descriptive research design was the most appropriate choice.

Study Area

The study was conducted in Yeonsu-gu Songdo, a district within Incheon Metropolitan City, South Korea. Songdo is a rapidly developing urban hub with a diverse population comprising both local residents and expatriates, making it a relevant and rich setting for examining family dynamics in a fast-changing urban environment. The district contains a range of public and private schools, including international schools, providing an appropriate backdrop for studying emotional regulation among school-going children.

Target Population

The target population comprised Grade 9 students (third-year middle school students, their mothers, and school counsellors). Grade 9 students were considered appropriate for this study because they are at a developmental stage at which they can clearly articulate emotional experiences and reflect on family-related influences. Mothers and school counsellors provided complementary perspectives on children's emotional behaviour and coping patterns within home and school environments, respectively. According to the Ministry of Education, South Korea (MOE, 2024), the Songdo region has a total of 38 schools with a total student enrolment of 56,765 students.

Table 1: Target Population

Category	Target Population
Public Schools	42,574
Private Schools	14,191
Total	56,765

Sample Size and Sampling Procedure

A sample size of 398 respondents was determined using Yamane's (1967) formula at a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error, applied to the total student population of 56,765. Of the 398 questionnaires administered, 379 were completed and returned, yielding a response rate of 95.2%. A combination of stratified and purposive sampling techniques was employed. Twelve schools (eight public and four private) were selected from the region. Among the 379 student respondents, those who had experienced father absenteeism due to divorce, separation, death, incarceration, or prolonged work-related absence were purposively identified and their responses analysed in depth. For the qualitative component, 20 mothers and 12 school counsellors were selected based on their direct involvement in the children's care and emotional development, and were interviewed using semi-structured interview guides.

Research Instruments

Quantitative data were collected using the Emotional Regulation Checklist (ERC; Shields & Cicchetti, 1997), comprising 10 items measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). The instrument assessed emotional awareness, emotional control, coping and regulation strategies, and adaptive functioning. Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interview guides administered to mothers and school counsellors.

Reliability and Validity of Instruments

A pilot study involving 10% of the sample was conducted in Bucheon City, Gyeonggi Province. Reliability of the questionnaire was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficient, with a value of 0.70 or above considered acceptable. Content validity was established through expert review; construct validity was examined through factor analysis; and face validity was evaluated by asking respondents and experts to judge whether the instrument appeared to measure what it intended to measure.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS Version 28. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, were used to summarise the findings. Pearson correlation analysis was employed to examine the relationship between father absenteeism and emotional regulation. Qualitative data obtained from semi-structured interviews were analysed thematically using NVivo software, with responses coded and grouped into themes and sub-themes. Findings were presented using tables, thematic narratives, and direct quotations from participants.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval and permission to conduct the study were obtained from relevant authorities, including the Korea Institute of Science and Technology (KIST), ensuring that the study met regulatory quality and ethical standards. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained from all participants, and confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the study.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Instruments Response Rate

The study administered questionnaires to a sample of 398 respondents. Of these, 379 questionnaires were completed and returned, yielding a response rate of 95.2%. This response rate was considered excellent for statistical analysis, exceeding the commonly recommended threshold of 70% for social science research.

Emotional Regulation of School-Aged Children in Incheon-Songdo, South Korea

Respondents were asked to rate their level of agreement with statements relating to emotional regulation on a five-point Likert scale. The results are presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Emotional Regulation of School-Aged Children

Statement	S.D (%)	D (%)	N (%)	A (%)	S.A (%)	Mean	Std. Dev
I am able to calm myself down when I am angry	6	10	14	42	28	3.72	1.02
When I feel sad, I know how to make myself feel better	7	11	16	39	27	3.65	1.10
I can control my negative emotions when with family	9	13	18	36	24	3.48	1.15
I can stay calm when I feel nervous or worried	8	15	20	34	23	3.41	0.98
I can stop myself from yelling when I am angry	10	16	18	32	24	3.36	1.20
I can focus on schoolwork even when emotional	11	17	19	31	22	3.29	1.18
I can talk about my feelings when	7	12	15	38	28	3.52	1.06

upset							
When I am angry, I try to understand why	6	10	16	40	28	3.68	1.01
I take a break when I feel overwhelmed	7	11	17	37	28	3.55	1.09
I can handle disappointment without getting too upset	10	15	20	33	22	3.30	0.92

The results presented in Table 2 indicate the distribution of responses on emotional regulation among school-aged children in Incheon-Songdo, South Korea. A larger proportion of respondents selected Agree (A) and Strongly Agree (SA) for most statements, suggesting that many children possess basic emotional regulation skills. However, the presence of notable percentages in the Neutral (N), Disagree (D), and Strongly Disagree (SD) categories highlights existing gaps in consistent emotional control.

The ability to calm oneself when angry recorded the highest level of agreement, with 70% (42% Agree, 28% Strongly Agree) of respondents affirming this statement, reflected in a mean of 3.72 and standard deviation of 1.02, indicating both strong and relatively consistent emotional control in this area. Similarly, 66% (39% Agree, 27% Strongly Agree) indicated knowing how to make themselves feel better when sad ($M = 3.65$, $SD = 1.10$), and 68% (40% Agree, 28% Strongly Agree) reported trying to understand why they feel angry ($M = 3.68$, $SD = 1.01$), indicating fairly high levels of emotional awareness and self-reflection.

A further 66% (38% Agree, 28% Strongly Agree) reported being able to talk about their feelings when upset ($M = 3.52$, $SD = 1.06$), and 65% (37% Agree, 28% Strongly Agree) reported taking breaks when overwhelmed ($M = 3.55$, $SD = 1.09$), suggesting that most children employ some form of adaptive coping, albeit with moderate variation.

However, several domains showed evidence of less stable emotional control. Sixty percent (36% Agree, 24% Strongly Agree) reported being able to control negative emotions within the family ($M = 3.48$, $SD = 1.15$), and 57% (34% Agree, 23% Strongly Agree) reported staying calm when nervous or worried ($M = 3.41$, $SD = 0.98$). Fifty-six percent (32% Agree, 24% Strongly Agree) reported being able to prevent themselves from yelling when angry ($M = 3.36$, $SD = 1.20$). The higher standard deviations on these items indicate greater variability in emotional and behavioural regulation across the sample.

The weakest domains were the ability to focus on schoolwork when emotional (53% Agree, 31% Agree and Strongly Agree combined; $M = 3.29$, $SD = 1.18$) and the ability to handle disappointment without becoming overly upset (55% combined agreement; $M = 3.30$, $SD = 0.92$). The relatively higher proportions of disagreement on these items suggest that many children encounter particular difficulty managing emotional stress while sustaining attention and meeting social expectations.

Overall, the findings indicate that most children demonstrate awareness of basic emotional states and employ certain coping strategies; however, the consistency with which they regulate emotions varies considerably, as reflected by the moderate mean scores and standard deviations. The notable presence of disagreement on several items further underscores that a meaningful proportion of children experience difficulties with emotional control, particularly in demanding or stressful situations.

Qualitative data from interview guides corroborated these findings. Respondents indicated that the level of emotional regulation among school-going children in Incheon-Songdo is heterogeneous, with some children demonstrating the capacity to regulate emotions such as

anger, sadness, and frustration, while others exhibit impulsive responses, social withdrawal, or aggression. Emotionally regulated children were reported to express emotions appropriately, recover from emotional disruptions more quickly, and maintain positive relationships with peers and teachers, while poorly regulated children were more likely to develop behavioural problems and social conflict.

A mother (P1) observed:

"My child can normally calm down once he has been distressed and can tell you what is worrying him, but other children respond violently or withdraw themselves once they are frustrated."

A school counsellor (SC2) mentioned:

"Some learners can deal with disappointment and conflict positively, while others can barely contain their emotions and tend to react in bursts or retreat into themselves."

These results are consistent with Denham and Burton (2023), who highlighted that children's emotional regulation strategies vary by developmental stage and context. They are further supported by Zeman and Garber (2020), who identified emotional regulation as a key determinant of behavioural adaptation in school settings, and Cunningham and Sroufe (2021), who found that emotionally competent children demonstrated improved social adaptation and fewer behavioural difficulties in the classroom.

Respondents also noted that emotional control has a substantial influence on children's academic performance and social relationships, with children demonstrating higher emotional regulation showing stronger academic engagement and more positive peer interactions. Conversely, children with poor emotional regulation were reported to exhibit reduced concentration, frequent classroom disruptions, and strained relationships with peers and teachers.

A mother (P6) explained:

"When my child is emotionally stable, he can concentrate more in class and manage social situations positively. Emotional difficulties consistently affect children's learning and behaviour."

A school counsellor (SC4) noted:

"Learners unable to manage their emotions are more prone to classroom disruptions, loss of concentration, and peer conflict."

These findings are consistent with Gross and Thompson (2021), who found that academic success and classroom participation are closely linked to self-regulation skills, and with Eisenberg and Spinrad (2023), who emphasised the role of emotional regulation in predicting school readiness and positive peer relationships.

Respondents further identified the family environment, specifically, parental emotional support, communication, and involvement, as significant in shaping children's emotional regulation. Children from supportive family backgrounds were reported to exhibit better emotional control, while those experiencing father absenteeism or limited parental involvement were more vulnerable to emotional instability. The absence of regular emotional support at home was consistently identified as a contributing factor to difficulties in emotional regulation.

One mother (P2) stated:

"Children need the affection of both parents. Some children whose fathers are absent become withdrawn and struggle to control their emotions."

A school counsellor (SC3) commented:

"Inconsistent paternal support is a common characteristic of learners who display anxiety, emotional insecurity, outbursts, and difficulty coping with daily challenges."

These results align with Park and Lee (2022), who found that parenting practices are significant to emotional regulation development, and with Cabrera et al. (2020), who established that active father involvement is associated with better emotional regulation and fewer behavioural problems in children. Kim-Spoon and Holmes (2021) similarly highlighted that secure parent–child relationships foster emotional security and self-regulation.

Prevalence of Father Absenteeism in Incheon-Songdo, South Korea

Respondents were asked to rate their level of agreement with statements concerning the prevalence and nature of father absenteeism. The results are presented in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Prevalence of Father Absenteeism

Statement	S.D (%)	D (%)	N (%)	A (%)	S.A (%)	Mean	Std. Dev
My father is not present in my daily life	7	11	12	42	28	3.80	1.12
I rarely talk to my father	8	12	12	40	28	3.75	1.18
My father is emotionally unavailable even when physically present	9	11	13	39	28	3.69	1.15
I feel the absence of a father figure in my life	6	10	12	44	28	3.88	1.05
My father does not attend important events in my life	8	12	14	38	28	3.70	1.14
My father rarely comforts me	12	16	20	30	22	3.20	1.30

The findings in Table 3 reveal the distribution of responses on the prevalence of father absenteeism among school-aged children in Incheon-Songdo. The general pattern indicates that the majority of respondents selected Agree or Strongly Agree for most statements, suggesting that different forms of father absence are widely experienced in this sample.

The statement ‘I feel the absence of a father figure in my life’ recorded the highest level of agreement, with 72% (44% Agree, 28% Strongly Agree), reflected in the highest mean score of 3.88 and a relatively low standard deviation of 1.05, indicating a strong and consistent perception of father absence among the respondents. Seventy percent (42% Agree, 28% Strongly Agree) stated that their father was not present in their daily life ($M = 3.80$, $SD = 1.12$), and 68% (40% Agree, 28% Strongly Agree) reported that they rarely talk to their father ($M = 3.75$, $SD = 1.18$), identifying lack of physical presence and communication as key dimensions of absenteeism.

Importantly, 67% (39% Agree, 28% Strongly Agree) indicated that their father is emotionally unavailable even when physically present ($M = 3.69$, $SD = 1.15$), confirming that absenteeism in this context is not only physical but also emotional in nature. A further 66% (38% Agree, 28% Strongly Agree) reported that their father does not participate in important events in their life ($M = 3.70$, $SD = 1.14$), reflecting a limited level of paternal engagement in key developmental occasions.

The statement ‘My father rarely comforts me’ recorded a comparatively lower level of agreement, with 52% (30% Agree, 22% Strongly Agree) endorsing the item, while a notable 28% disagreed. This is reflected in a lower mean of 3.20 and a higher standard deviation of 1.30, indicating greater variability in experiences of paternal emotional responsiveness across the sample.

Overall, the high agreement percentages and mean scores, combined with moderate standard deviations, confirm that father absenteeism is a prevalent and multidimensional phenomenon in this study's population. The variation in standard deviations also signals that while absenteeism is widespread, its intensity and form vary across family contexts.

Qualitative findings from interview guides corroborated and enriched the quantitative results. Respondents indicated that father absenteeism among school-going children in Incheon-Songdo is manifested across a range of family structures, where fathers are either physically absent due to separation, divorce, migration, or work commitments, or emotionally unavailable despite being present in the home. It was noted that not all children have regular contact with their fathers, with some having minimal or infrequent contact and others being entirely separated from their fathers over extended periods, affecting family stability and emotional attachment.

A mother (P9) said:

"Some fathers are unable to spend time with their families due to work-related duties, and some are no longer part of the family, so children do not have the opportunity to develop strong relationships with their fathers."

A school counsellor (SC10) noted:

"There are learners whose fathers are totally absent and those whose fathers are physically present but do not interact with them. In both cases, the children tend to face emotional and social difficulties."

These results are consistent with Amato (2020), who found that divorce and separation significantly reduce the frequency and quality of father–child interaction. Lamb, Pleck, and Levine (2023) similarly determined that family instability and single-parent household status are associated with diminished paternal involvement, while Jones and Smith (2021) identified contemporary work demands as a major constraint on fathers' daily presence in their children's lives.

Respondents also noted that father absenteeism is frequently characterised by a lack of emotional engagement, limited communication, and minimal participation in daily child-rearing activities, regardless of whether the father is alive or residing with the family. Children were reported to perceive their fathers primarily as financial providers rather than as sources of emotional guidance and support, a pattern consistent with what Pleck (2020) characterised as psychological absenteeism — whereby fathers are physically present but emotionally detached. These findings are further supported by Cabrera et al. (2020), who established that low emotional involvement reduces the quality of father–child bonding, and by Lamb (2019), who emphasised that emotional absence can be as consequential as physical absence for child development outcomes.

One mother (P11) said:

"Many fathers are work-oriented — they want to provide for their families, but work leaves very little time to bond with their children and offer emotional support."

A school counsellor (SC12) observed:

"Work-related travel, long working hours, and family conflict are some of the most common reasons fathers become less involved in their children's lives."

These findings are consistent with Parke (2021), who found that occupational demands and mobility substantially reduce paternal involvement; with Hofstede (2019), who highlighted that cultural norms in several East Asian societies tend to privilege the provider role over emotional caregiving roles for fathers; and with Amato (2020), who established that labour migration results in prolonged physical separation and weakened father–child relationships.

Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to determine the strength and direction of the association between the independent variable (father absenteeism) and the dependent variable (emotional regulation). The Pearson correlation coefficient ranges from -1 to $+1$, with the magnitude of the coefficient indicating the strength of the relationship and the sign indicating its direction. The study adopted Taylor's (2019) correlation coefficient classification, in which a coefficient of 0.80 – 1.00 indicates a very strong relationship, 0.60 – 0.79 indicates a strong relationship, 0.40 – 0.59 indicates a moderate relationship, and 0.20 – 0.39 indicates a weak relationship.

Table 4: Pearson Correlation Coefficients

		Emotional Regulation	Father Absenteeism
Emotional Regulation	Pearson	1	
	Correlation		
	Sig. (2-tailed)		
	N	342	
Father Absenteeism	Pearson Correlati on	-.682**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	342	342

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The findings in Table 4 reveal a statistically significant negative relationship between father absenteeism and emotional regulation among school-aged children in Incheon-Songdo ($r = -0.682$, $p < 0.001$). The negative coefficient indicates that higher levels of father absenteeism are associated with lower levels of emotional regulation; conversely, children who experienced lower levels of father absenteeism tended to demonstrate stronger emotional regulation abilities.

The strength of this relationship is classified as strong according to Taylor's (2019) guidelines (0.60 – 0.79 range), suggesting that father absenteeism is a substantively important correlate of children's capacity to manage their emotions. The statistically significant p-value ($p < 0.001$) indicates that the observed relationship is unlikely to have occurred by chance. These results suggest that the absence of fathers, whether physical or emotional, may reduce the emotional support, guidance, and modelling that children require for the development of healthy emotional regulation skills, leaving those who experience absenteeism more susceptible to emotional instability, impulsivity, anxiety, and difficulties in stress management. It should be noted, however, that correlation does not establish causation, and the cross-sectional nature of the study design limits causal inference.

These findings are consistent with Cabrera et al. (2020), who established that active father involvement is positively associated with children's emotional competence and self-regulation. Amato (2020) similarly found that low father-child interaction is associated with poorer psychological adjustment and weaker emotional outcomes in children. Kim-Spoon and Holmes (2021) further reported that secure parental relationships play a significant role in fostering emotional security and effective emotion regulation in adolescents.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

The findings of this study support several conclusions aligned with the stated objectives. First, the emotional regulation of school-aged children in Incheon-Songdo is at an intermediate level of

development that is not yet fully stable. While most children demonstrate the capacity to identify and express basic emotions, they exhibit more limited and inconsistent ability to manage intense emotions such as anger, anxiety, and disappointment, particularly in high-demand situations. This suggests that emotional regulation skills among this population remain underdeveloped and would benefit from structured, targeted support mechanisms.

Second, father absenteeism is highly prevalent among school-aged children in the study area, manifesting in both physical and emotional forms. Many fathers are not consistently present in the home, and among those who are, a significant proportion are reported to be emotionally unavailable or disengaged. This pervasive absence diminishes children's opportunities for emotional connection, paternal guidance, and the development of psychological security.

Third, a strong negative correlation ($r = -0.682$, $p < 0.001$) was observed between father absenteeism and emotional regulation, confirming that higher levels of paternal absence are associated with weaker emotional regulation skills. These findings underscore the need for family-centred and school-based interventions that address both the symptoms of emotional dysregulation and its underlying structural causes.

Limitations of the Study

Several limitations should be acknowledged when interpreting these findings. First, the cross-sectional design of the study captures associations at a single point in time and does not permit causal inferences to be drawn. Future longitudinal research would be needed to establish the direction and temporal precedence of the relationship between father absenteeism and emotional regulation. Second, the purposive selection of students who had experienced father absenteeism, while appropriate for the study's aims, means that a comparison group of children from fully engaged two-parent households was not systematically included, limiting the strength of comparative claims. Third, the study relied on self-report measures, which are subject to social desirability bias, particularly among adolescents discussing family relationships. Fourth, the findings are geographically specific to Incheon-Songdo and may not be generalisable to other urban or rural contexts within South Korea or beyond. Fifth, unmeasured confounding variables, including maternal parenting quality, household income, and peer relationships, may have influenced the observed associations.

Recommendations

Based on the study findings, the following recommendations are made. First, schools in Incheon-Songdo should enhance counselling and psychological support services. School counsellors should be adequately trained and resourced to provide regular, structured emotional support sessions, with early identification and intervention mechanisms established for children showing signs of emotional distress.

Second, structured emotional regulation and life skills education should be integrated into the school curriculum. Schools should provide targeted instruction in anger management, stress coping, emotional expression, and resilience, equipping children with practical skills for navigating emotional challenges in both school and home environments.

Third, paternal involvement should be actively encouraged through school-based and community-based initiatives. Fathers should be urged to participate meaningfully in daily parenting roles and to attend key academic and social events. In contexts where physical presence is constrained by occupational demands or separation, regular emotional communication and digital engagement should be promoted as mechanisms for sustaining father-child bonds.

Fourth, mentorship and peer support programmes should be established in schools and communities. Positive male role models, including teachers, coaches, and community leaders, can help fill the emotional guidance gap left by absent fathers. Peer support structures can also provide children with safe spaces for emotional expression and mutual encouragement.

Fifth, family-strengthening and awareness initiatives should be developed to promote the value of active and emotionally engaged fatherhood. Community-based sensitisation programmes can help shift cultural expectations of fathers beyond the provider role, encouraging greater emotional involvement in children's upbringing.

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