

# The Social, Emotional, and Educational Impact of Family Disruption on Adolescents and Young Adults: A Systematic Review

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## Abstract

Family stability is widely considered the cornerstone of emotional development and social stability, especially during the early years of adolescence and early adulthood (Buka et al., 2020). However, in recent decades, the growing prevalence of family disruption has raised significant concerns about their long-term effects on young people. This review aims to identify social, emotional, and educational impact of family disruption on adolescents and young adults. Following PRISMA guidelines (Moher et al., 2009), the search strategy was designed to ensure comprehensive coverage of the relevant literature across multiple disciplines, including psychology, sociology, education, and public health.

Searches were conducted across several academic databases including Google Scholar, PubMed, PsycINFO, and ResearchGate. Additionally, institutional repositories, grey literature archives, and government or think-tank reports such as those from the Centre for Social Justice were also explored. 148 articles were extracted when search strategy was implemented. When all criteria were satisfied, 11 articles emerged and were included for the final review. Results showed that family disruption negatively affects (1) educational outcomes, (2) emotional vulnerability of adolescents, and (3) social and behavioural outcomes, (4) while parenting styles mediated the effects of family breakdown. Recommendations were made in the view of practical implication in education, mental health, social services, policymaking.

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**Keywords:** Family disruption; Broken homes; Impacts of family disruption; Impact of broken homes; Adolescent mental health.

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## 1: Introduction

Family stability is widely considered the cornerstone of emotional development and social stability, especially during the early years of adolescence and early adulthood (Buka et al., 2020). However, in recent decades, the growing prevalence of family disruption has raised significant concerns about their long-term effects on young people. Family disruption, defined as non-intact families due to separation, divorce, bereavement, prolonged parental illness, incarceration, or care placement (Prevoe & Ter Weel, 2015; Stanick, Crosby, McDonald, 2017), has become a growing concern in both Western and non-Western societies (Furstenberg, 2019).

Experiencing family disruption can have profound effects on the emotional development and social security of early adulthood and the early years of adolescent (NSPCC Learning, 2011). In many countries, including the UK, USA, and China, the rates of family instability have increased dramatically over the past few decades (Fan et al., 2022). Homes, regardless of stability, play a significant role in the growth and development of adolescent and young people (Childs et al., 2022). The prevalence of children growing up outside of stable, two-parent biological households has shifted from a marginal occurrence to a common reality for a substantial proportion of the population. These structural changes in family systems have generated widespread interest from researchers, educators, clinicians, and policymakers due to their far-reaching implications. Adolescents and young adults are particularly vulnerable to the effects of family disruption because these developmental periods involve critical transitions in psychological, cognitive, social, and academic domains (Wood et al., 2017; Harold & Sellers, 2018). During adolescence, individuals establish identity, develop independence, form peer and romantic relationships, and pursue educational and vocational goals (Bonnie, et al., 2019). The family serves as a foundational system that either supports or undermines these processes (Saroca & Sargent, 2022; Breiner et al., 2016). Disruptions within this system may result in stress, reduced parental monitoring, emotional insecurity, economic strain, and changes in living arrangements or school stability. These changes have the potential to influence a range of outcomes, including mental health, social functioning, and academic performance. Despite growing recognition of these risks, research findings in this field remain fragmented. Cultural, socioeconomic, and policy variations mean that the consequences of family disruption are not uniform, and mediating or moderating factors such as ethnicity, peer quality, and parenting styles can significantly alter outcomes. This systematic review was undertaken to consolidate and critically examine the existing literature on this topic, offering a comprehensive synthesis of the emotional, social, and educational effects of family disruption on adolescents and young adults worldwide.

### **1:1 Aim and Objective**

The objective of this systematic review is to explore and synthesize the existing body of empirical evidence regarding the impact of family disruption on adolescents and young adults, with a specific focus on emotional wellbeing, social development, and educational attainment. This review aims to identify social, emotional, and educational impact of family disruption on adolescents and young adults. In doing so, it considers a range of cultural, socioeconomic, and structural variables that may shape these outcomes. The review also seeks to identify protective factors and mechanisms that can buffer the negative consequences of family disruption, with the goal of informing policy and practice. By examining how elements such as parenting style, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, peer interactions, and educational expectations interact with experiences of family disruption, this review aims to provide a multidimensional understanding that supports intervention development and preventative frameworks. Ultimately, the review serves to bridge the gap between disparate strands of research and generate recommendations for supporting adolescents and young adults navigating the challenges of disrupted family environments.

### **2: Method**

The systematic review followed a staged methodology, aligning with principles of transparency, replicability, and academic rigour. First, all titles and abstracts identified through database searches were screened for relevance.

Studies that appeared to meet the inclusion criteria were retrieved in full for detailed review. Full-text screening was undertaken independently by the lead reviewer and confirmed through a secondary review process. Studies that failed to meet inclusion criteria or displayed insufficient methodological transparency were excluded. The next stage involved data extraction using a standardised template. Key details extracted included author(s), year of publication, country of study, research design, participant characteristics, type of family disruption studied, main outcomes, findings, and quality assessment rating. Each study was then assessed using a critical appraisal checklist that considered factors such as clarity of research aim, appropriateness of study design, sampling robustness, analytic rigour, and reliability of reported findings. Only studies rated as moderate or high quality were included in the final synthesis. Once included studies were selected and appraised, a narrative synthesis approach was employed. Given the diversity in methodological approaches, outcome measures, and contextual variables, a meta-analytic synthesis was not appropriate. Instead, studies were thematically grouped based on the type of impact assessed—emotional, social, or educational. Within each thematic grouping, patterns and differences were analysed with attention to mediators and moderators, such as ethnicity, gender, peer quality, and parenting style. Cross-study comparisons allowed for the identification of consistent trends and anomalies, enabling a more nuanced understanding of the mechanisms by which family disruption affects young people. The results of this synthesis were structured to highlight major impacts, contextual factors, and protective mechanisms, as detailed in the results section of this report.

## **2:1 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria**

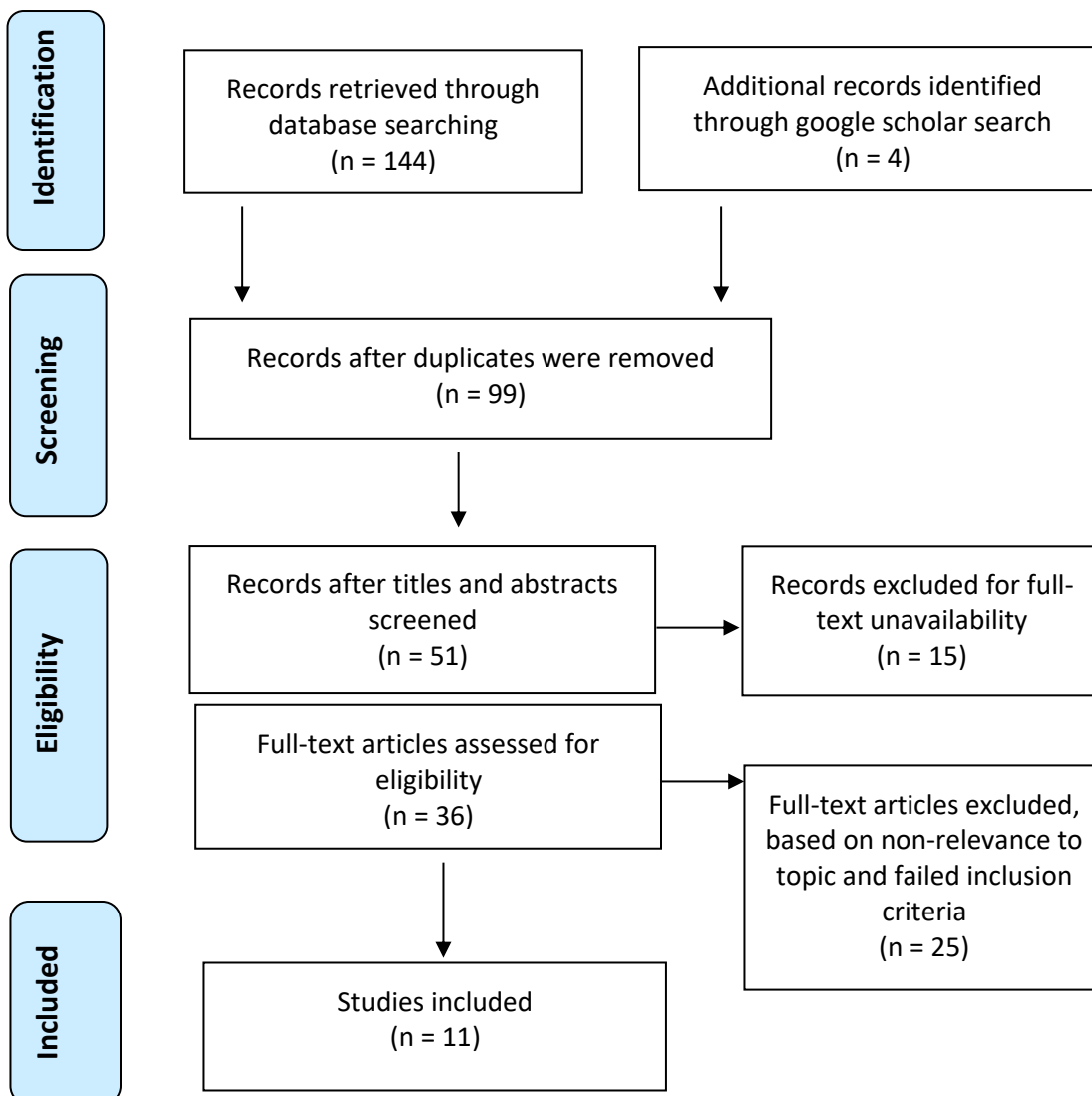
To ensure that the review remains focused and comprehensive, specific inclusion and exclusion criteria were established:

- a. Eligible studies were those that explicitly investigated the effects of family disruption—defined as non-intact family structures due to separation, divorce, bereavement, prolonged parental illness, incarceration, or care placement—on adolescents and young adults, typically aged between 10 and 25 years.
- b. Studies were required to assess outcomes related to emotional wellbeing (such as anxiety, depression, self-esteem), social development (including peer relationships, behavioural adjustment, social competence), or educational performance (grades, attainment, engagement, or motivation).
- c. Both primary research (quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods) and high-quality secondary analyses (systematic reviews, meta-analyses) were included.
- d. Studies published between the year 2000 and 2025 were eligible, provided they were written in English.
- e. A global perspective was adopted, and studies from any country were considered, provided they met quality standards.
- f. Excluded were theoretical papers, editorials, or opinion pieces that did not contain primary or secondary data.
- g. Studies that did not clearly differentiate family disruption as the primary exposure variable or failed to report on adolescent/young adult outcomes were also excluded.
- h. Articles that did not meet basic methodological transparency or were assessed as being of poor quality based on sampling, data analysis, or reporting, were omitted from the final synthesis.

## 2:2 Search Strategy

Following PRISMA guidelines (Moher et al., 2009), the search strategy was designed to ensure comprehensive coverage of the relevant literature across multiple disciplines, including psychology, sociology, education, and public health. Searches were conducted across several academic databases including Google Scholar, PubMed, PsycINFO, and ResearchGate. Additionally, institutional repositories, grey literature archives, and government or think-tank reports such as those from the Centre for Social Justice were also explored. Keywords and search phrases included combinations and variations of the following terms: 'family disruption,' 'family breakdown,' 'parental separation,' 'divorce,' 'bereavement,' 'parental illness,' 'incarceration,' 'foster care,' 'adolescents,' 'young adults,' 'mental health,' 'educational outcomes,' 'academic performance,' and 'social development.' Boolean operators and truncation were used to refine results, and search filters were applied to restrict publication dates to between 2000 and 2025. Reference lists of eligible studies were reviewed manually to identify any additional sources not captured through database searches. This multi-pronged approach ensured that peer-reviewed journal articles, high-quality grey literature, and relevant longitudinal or cross-national studies were all included in the evidence base.

### PRISMA flow diagram for searches and results (Moher et al., 2009).



148 articles were extracted when search strategy was implemented. The tool, Mendeley, a reference management program was used to manage every process involved in the selection and the management of the inclusion and exclusion criteria. When all criteria were satisfied, 11 articles emerged and were included for the final review. See *PRISMA flow diagram for searches and results*.

### **3: Results**

#### **3:1 Study Selection and Characteristics of Included Studies**

A total of 11 studies met the inclusion criteria for this systematic review, spanning diverse geographical and socio-cultural contexts including the UK, USA, China, Pakistan, Nigeria, and Indonesia. These studies used a mix of methodologies: 9 were quantitative (cross-sectional, longitudinal, or regression-based studies), 2 were mixed-methods reviews, and 2 were meta-analyses. Sample sizes varied widely, ranging from 120 participants in a school-based survey to over 430,000 in a national administrative dataset. Studies covered themes of academic performance, mental health, ethnic disparities, parenting style, and broader social adjustment in the context of family breakdown. Quality appraisal revealed that 9 studies were of high methodological quality, 3 were rated moderate, and 1 was assessed as low quality. Common limitations in moderate and low-rated studies included a lack of longitudinal data, unreported effect sizes, or limited detail on sampling and analytic strategies.

#### **3:2 Key Findings**

##### **3:2:1 Educational Impact**

Multiple studies provided robust evidence that family disruption negatively affects educational outcomes. Ereke et al. (2015) found that students from broken homes had poorer performance in English, with girls disproportionately affected. Firdausi et al. (2021) observed increased absenteeism and poor engagement in Indonesian students from disrupted families. In China, Zhao and Zhao (2022) demonstrated through a longitudinal panel analysis that family environment significantly predicted academic success, with peer interaction quality acting as a key mediator and accounting for 27.5% of the variance in academic achievement (Zao and Zao). Moreover, the Centre for Social Justice (2020) reported that children from fragmented families were more likely to underperform academically and become NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training), linking poor educational outcomes to long-term social exclusion.

##### **3:2:2 Emotional and Mental Health Outcomes**

A consistent theme across studies was the heightened emotional vulnerability of adolescents from disrupted homes. Jonsson et al. (2018) found that White British youths living in deprived neighbourhoods had significantly poorer mental health than their minority peers, even after adjusting for parental behaviour and socioeconomic factors (Warner et al 2025). Warner et al. (2025) extended these findings in a Welsh context, showing that ethnic minority children had a higher likelihood of entering care when exposed to parental risk factors such as anxiety or alcohol misuse (Warner et al 2025). Widard and Hardy (2021) further confirmed that children exposed to family instability had higher emotional and behavioural difficulties, and this risk was compounded by lower socioeconomic status (Widard and Hardy (2021)). St'astná et al. (2024) used sequence analysis to show that trajectories involving repeated

separation or step-parenting were more strongly associated with poor mental health outcomes in children than stable, two-parent biological households Starstina et al (2024).

### **3:2:3 Social and Behavioural Outcomes**

Gul and Nadeemullah (2022) reported from Pakistan that children from broken homes exhibited higher levels of aggression, anxiety, and withdrawal, indicating poor social integration. The Centre for Social Justice (2020) similarly highlighted how disrupted family environments contributed to higher risks of youth offending, substance abuse, and antisocial behaviour. Turner and Kopiec (2006) provided longitudinal evidence that exposure to interparental conflict and corporal punishment in adolescence led to maladaptive romantic and peer relationships in adulthood. The quality of early family interactions was shown to shape long-term relational stability and emotional regulation.

### **3:2:4 Parenting Styles and Moderators**

Parenting practices were found to mediate the effects of family breakdown. Maynard and Harding (2010) showed that warm, supportive parenting predicted better emotional and behavioural outcomes, even in non-traditional family settings. In contrast, authoritarian or disengaged parenting styles amplified negative outcomes across ethnicities. Zhao and Zhao (2022) also confirmed that family rules and emotional expression significantly contributed to a stable developmental trajectory when aligned with children's educational expectations (Zao and Zao).

### **3:2:5 Synthesis of Results**

The overall findings affirm that family disruption is a multidimensional risk factor affecting adolescents' emotional health, academic success, and social functioning. Importantly, not all disruptions have uniform outcomes. Factors such as ethnic background, parental mental health, socioeconomic status, and the quality of parenting mediate the impact. The evidence suggests a need for context-sensitive interventions that address not only the structure of the family but also the processes within it—especially parental behaviour, support systems, and peer environments.

Emerging themes across studies point to:

- The protective role of warm parenting, regardless of family structure.
- Peer dynamics as both a risk and buffer mechanism.
- Ethnic and cultural contexts influencing outcomes significantly.
- Intergenerational cycles of disadvantage when family disruption is combined with poverty or poor mental health.

These findings call for a comprehensive approach to adolescent care that integrates educational support, family counselling, mental health resources, and targeted social policies to break the chain of disadvantage.

**Table 1: Systematic Review Summary Table**

Study No.	Study	Country	Study Design	Key Findings	Participants	Quality Assessment
1	Gul, A. & Nadeemullah, M. (2022)	Pakistan	Quantitative Survey	Children from broken families showed significant emotional and behavioral issues, including depression, anxiety, and social withdrawal.	120 children	Moderate
2	Makarova, E. et al. (2023)	Multiple (Western)	Mixed Methods (Systematic Review + Meta-Analysis)	Parental practices and acculturation influence school adjustment in ethnic minorities. Family-related risk factors include low involvement, language barriers, and instability.	105 studies	High
3	Turner, R. J. & Kopiec, K. (2006)	USA	Quantitative	Exposure to interparental conflict and corporal punishment during adolescence was associated with adult depression, low support, and poor romantic relationships.	1,000+ (Add Health)	High
4	Ereke, J. S. et al. (2015)	Nigeria	Quantitative	Broken homes negatively impact academic performance in English. Girls were more affected than boys.	300 students	Moderate
5	Firdausi, N. I. A. et al. (2021)	Indonesia	Quantitative Survey	Students from broken homes showed increased delinquency, emotional distress, and lowered academic performance.	150 adolescents	Moderate
6	St'astrná, M. et al. (2024)	UK	Quantitative (Longitudinal)	Children in separation or step-parent trajectories had lower mental health; stable biological-parent trajectories showed no significant harm.	7,298 children	High

7	Jonsson, K. R. et al. (2018)	UK	Quantitative (UKHLS)	Mental health poorer for White British youths than ethnic minorities; parenting and neighbourhood deprivation had differing impacts.	5,513 youths	High
8	Maynard, M. & Harding, S. (2010)	UK	Quantitative	Warm, supportive parenting predicted better mental health across all ethnicities. Authoritarian parenting correlated with higher difficulties.	4,349 pupils	High
9	Zhao, L. & Zhao, W. (2022)	China	Quantitative (Longitudinal Panel)	Family environment and peer interaction quality both influenced academic achievement. Peer quality mediated 27.5% of family effect.	9,449 adolescents	High
10	Warner, N. et al. (2025)	UK (Wales)	Quantitative (Population-Level Observational Study)	Using linked administrative data of over 430,000 children, the study found that when parental risk factors were controlled for, ethnic minority children were more likely to enter care than White children. Strongest predictors included parental alcohol misuse and anxiety in Asian families.	431,584 children	High
11	Centre for Social Justice (2020)	UK	Mixed Methods (Review and National Statistics)	Identified family breakdown as a key driver of youth offending, educational failure, and poor mental health. Emphasised the generational cycle of disadvantage and the policy neglect of family structure.	National data; secondary review	Moderate

#### 4: Discussion

The findings of this systematic review corroborate and extend existing research into the multidimensional impact of family disruption on adolescents and young adults. Consistent with attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969), the reviewed studies demonstrate that disruptions in caregiving arrangements, particularly in the early years, compromise the formation of secure attachments. This often manifests in emotional instability, difficulty trusting others, and impaired relational development in adolescence and adulthood. For example, Turner and Kopiec (2006) found that exposure to interparental conflict during adolescence predicted maladaptive romantic attachments later in life. Similarly, St'astná et al. (2024) and Widard and Hardy (2021) observed that repeated family disruptions result in compromised emotional regulation and lower mental health outcomes, supporting the theory that stable, predictable caregiving environments are essential for healthy psychosocial development.

These findings also align with ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), which emphasises that adolescent outcomes are shaped not only by family structures but by the broader context—peers, schools, neighbourhoods, and policy environments. Zhao and Zhao (2022) illustrated how peer interaction quality mediated the impact of family disruption on academic achievement, underscoring the role of the microsystem beyond the family unit. Makarova et al. (2023) echoed this in showing how school adjustment for ethnic minority youth is contingent upon both familial and institutional support structures.

However, this review also reveals some notable contradictions and surprising patterns in the literature. A particularly intriguing finding is the apparent resilience observed among certain ethnic minority groups in the UK and internationally, despite exposure to higher levels of risk. Jonsson et al. (2018) and Warner et al. (2025) report that, controlling for deprivation and parental risk behaviours, White British youth often experience poorer mental health outcomes than their ethnic minority peers. This contradicts a common assumption that ethnic minority adolescents, often exposed to structural inequalities, discrimination, and economic disadvantage, would show uniformly worse outcomes following family disruption.

This paradox may be explained by cultural resilience factors not typically accounted for in quantitative research. Ethnic minority communities may have stronger extended family systems, community cohesion, and spiritual or cultural frameworks that buffer against the worst effects of family disruption. These findings resonate with resilience theory, particularly Ungar's (2011) ecological model of resilience, which posits that resilience is not simply an internal trait but a product of access to meaningful relationships, cultural belonging, and supportive environments. In this light, ethnic minority adolescents may be drawing on informal support networks—grandparents, religious communities, or neighbourhood mentors—that mitigate the psychological damage caused by family instability.

Another unexpected finding is the disproportionate academic impact of family disruption on girls in some contexts. Ereke et al. (2015) found that in Nigeria, girls from disrupted homes performed

significantly worse in English than boys. This gendered dimension suggests that cultural expectations, caregiving burdens, or differing emotional coping strategies may make girls more vulnerable to academic fallout in certain cultural settings. Yet, this pattern was not universally observed, highlighting the need for more gender-sensitive and culturally nuanced analyses.

Further, while most studies confirm the negative effects of family disruption, there are exceptions where disruption led to improvement, especially when the original family context was characterised by violence, neglect, or chronic instability. For example, some children fared better psychologically after leaving abusive or high-conflict homes, suggesting that not all forms of “intact” families provide healthy developmental environments. This challenges the oversimplified dichotomy between “broken” and “intact” homes and supports the argument that family quality matters more than family form, a finding echoed in work by Maynard and Harding (2010), who highlighted how warm, supportive parenting led to better outcomes regardless of family structure.

Finally, this review adds weight to literature on intergenerational disadvantage. The Centre for Social Justice (2020) and Warner et al. (2025) describe how unresolved trauma, poverty, and low parental mental health compound over time, reinforcing cycles of social exclusion. These findings support cumulative risk models, which suggest that adverse outcomes are not the result of a single disruption but of layered and interacting stressors over time.

In sum, this review affirms and extends theoretical frameworks in developmental psychology and sociology while also surfacing contradictions that demand more complex, intersectional, and culturally sensitive interpretations. The evidence suggests that while family disruption is a critical risk factor, it is not a deterministic one. Its impacts are moderated by parenting style, community support, gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic conditions, and cultural meaning systems, all of which must be considered in both research and intervention design.

## **5: Limitations**

While the review offers valuable global insights, several limitations warrant caution. First, despite the inclusion of studies from various countries, the review remains uneven in geographical representation. Western contexts (particularly the UK and US) dominate the data, limiting generalisability to regions with differing familial norms, social policies, or kinship systems. Secondly, publication and language bias may have excluded valuable non-English or grey literature sources. Research conducted in non-Western settings or underreported populations, such as refugees or Indigenous communities, may thus be underrepresented. Methodologically, the included studies are heterogeneous in design, with a predominance of cross-sectional surveys and observational studies. While these provide important snapshots, they limit causal inferences. Only a handful of studies used longitudinal designs capable of tracking developmental trajectories (e.g., Zhao & Zhao, 2022; Turner & Kopiec, 2006). Few studies integrated qualitative data, which constrains our understanding of how adolescents interpret and navigate family disruption. Finally, the broad operational definition of “family disruption”, including divorce, bereavement, incarceration, and illness, while inclusive, may conflate distinct experiences with different psychological implications. Future studies should disaggregate these categories to sharpen

intervention strategies.

## 6: Future Research

To advance the field, future research must prioritise longitudinal, intersectional, and culturally embedded approaches. Specifically: (a) Longitudinal studies should track how early family disruption shapes mental health, relationship quality, and educational/employment outcomes into adulthood and parenthood. (b) Intersectionality must be integrated, considering how race, class, gender, disability, and immigration status intersect with family disruption. (c) Global South perspectives are urgently needed to understand how community structures, extended families, and alternative caregiving models influence outcomes in non-Western contexts. (d) Qualitative studies should explore adolescents' own voices—their meanings, coping mechanisms, and stories of resilience or despair. (e) Evaluative research on intervention effectiveness—such as school-based counselling, parenting programs, and restorative justice models—is also critical for scaling up best practices. Finally, future work should explore digital and peer-support innovations as accessible tools for adolescents navigating family change.

## 7: Practical Implications

The evidence has profound implications for educators, mental health professionals, social workers, and policymakers. Given the widespread prevalence of family disruption and its developmental consequences, systemic responses must go beyond individual counselling and crisis management.

***In education:*** Schools are critical frontline spaces for identifying and supporting affected adolescents. Interventions such as mentorship programs, school counsellors trained in trauma-informed care, and policies promoting educational stability post-family change are essential.

***In mental health:*** Community-based services must be made accessible and culturally competent. Adolescents from disrupted families need targeted support in emotional regulation, attachment repair, and future planning. Integrated care pathways, linking social, educational, and psychological services, should be prioritised, particularly in deprived or ethnically diverse communities.

***For social services:*** The findings call for a paradigm shift: from assessing risk purely by family structure to evaluating relational quality and support networks. Evidence-based parenting programs should be offered across all family forms, especially during transitions like divorce, incarceration, or bereavement.

***Policymakers:*** Policymakers should recognise family disruption as a public health issue with long-term economic and social costs. Investments in early childhood support, parenting education, and neighbourhood resilience can mitigate risks and promote healing. Culturally sensitive, trauma-informed frameworks must be embedded into child protection, education, and youth services globally.

## 8: Conclusion

This review provides compelling global evidence that family disruption, whether through divorce, separation, bereavement, incarceration, or other causes, significantly shapes the emotional, social,

and educational wellbeing of adolescents and young adults. It confirms that while the risks are real and far-reaching, they are not irreversible. The most significant protective factors are not necessarily structural, but relational: warm parenting, stable peer connections, culturally attuned support, and community involvement. These factors can interrupt cycles of trauma and transform vulnerability into resilience. To support youth from disrupted families, responses must be multifaceted rooted in both compassion and evidence. From school policies to national family strategies, from social work assessments to mental health practice, the systems that surround young people must learn not only to identify brokenness but also to cultivate healing. Family disruption should not be a life sentence. With the right support, adolescents from any background can not only survive, but thrive.

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### Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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