
Sa Puder ng Padre de Pamilya: Exploring the Dynamics of Firstborn Adolescents Raised by Single Custodial Father

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ABSTRACT

In the Philippines, male solo parents constitute a minority, with 38 registered in Cebu's 2nd Congressional District (DSWD Region VII, 2024)—a marginalized, understudied population. While existing literature addresses single-parent households, limited research explores firstborn adolescents in single-father families, whose roles are shaped by Adler's Birth Order Theory and Erikson's psychosocial development frameworks. This study examined their challenges, coping mechanisms, and actionable proposals. Using a qualitative multiple case study design, eight 15–19-year-old firstborn adolescents from the district were selected via purposive sampling until data saturation. Semi-structured interviews (validated and translated into Cebuano) and thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) were employed, with ethical safeguards including informed consent and post-interview emotional support. Results identified three key challenges: emotional deprivation from maternal absence and paternal emotional distance, parentification and heavy familial obligation, and financial struggles limiting basic and educational needs—aligned with Bowen's Family Systems Theory. Coping mechanisms included growth-oriented coping, social coping, recreational/emotion-focused coping and cognitive and meaning making coping, integrating cultural values like pagmamalasakit (care) and faith. Conclusions highlight that firstborn adolescents in single-father households carry heavy responsibilities early, face emotional and financial challenges, yet show strong resilience underscoring the need for recognition of their adaptability rather than viewing their experience as deficit.

Keywords: single father, firstborn adolescent, challenges, coping mechanism

INTRODUCTION

“It takes a village to raise a child and the child who is not embraced by the village will burn it down to feel its warmth” - African Proverb

For generations, the traditional Filipino family has been framed around the dual-parent structure: the father as haligi ng tahanan, symbolizing authority and provision, and the mother as ilaw ng tahanan, representing nurturance and emotional scaffolding. This idealized family dyad has been culturally regarded as the gold standard for child development (Elsayed, 2024; Gutierrez, 2024). However, in recent decades, this model has shifted dramatically due to changing societal realities—labor migration, marital dissolution, annulment, and maternal mortality have increased the visibility of non-traditional family structures, including single-parent households (Harkens, 2022).

Recent national data reveal that these changes are not isolated. The 2021 Young Adult Fertility and Sexuality Study (YAFS5, 2022) reported that only 67% of Filipino youth were raised by both biological parents. An estimated 18% grew up with single mothers, while 4%—approximately 750,000 young people—were raised solely by their fathers (Garcia, 2021). Regionally, in Central Visayas, 3,188 out of the 23,672 documented solo parents were male (Philippine News Agency, 2024), emphasizing that the presence of single fathers is neither insignificant nor rare. Despite this reality, there remains limited empirical inquiry into the psychological and developmental experiences of children growing up in these family structures.

Academic and policy-oriented research has increasingly acknowledged the struggles of single mothers; a significant population gap remains in understanding the experiences of children raised by single custodial

fathers, especially those who are firstborn and in adolescence. Existing literature predominantly views fathers through the lens of economic provision, often overlooking their emotional capacities and parenting complexities (Coles, 2021). As a result, the psychosocial consequences of growing up in a solo father household particularly for firstborn adolescents navigating identity, emotional regulation, and increased family responsibilities are rarely represented in mainstream studies because of a highly over generalization of experiences (Škvařil & Presslerová, 2024).

This oversight is critical. Adolescence is a pivotal stage marked by identity formation, social belonging, and emotional development (Masten, 2021; Wong & Lee, 2023). Firstborns, in particular, often serve as mediators of household stability and emotional anchors in times of transition. According to Adler's Birth Order Theory (1928), birth order significantly shapes personality traits and familial roles. Firstborn children are typically assigned greater responsibilities and higher expectations, especially in non-traditional settings like father-only households (Sumicad et al., 2023). These demands combined with the absence of maternal care may lead to premature maturity, internalized stress, and the development of coping mechanisms that profoundly influence future well-being.

Coping mechanisms adopted by adolescents are essential to understanding how they manage dual challenges. Clark (2020) distinguishes between problem-focused coping (e.g., task orientation, responsibility) and emotion-focused coping (e.g., seeking support or emotional regulation), both of which rely heavily on the emotional atmosphere within the home. However, in father-led households, emotional availability may be compromised due to paternal role strain, limited support networks, and the pressure of balancing work with caregiving (Green et al., 2021; Manalo, 2024). This unique combination of structural and emotional limitations calls for targeted inquiry, especially as most studies continue to assume maternal presence as the foundation of emotional development.

The persistence of this population gap raises urgent questions about the inclusivity and efficacy of current family-centered interventions and policies. Without empirical insight into the realities of children raised by single custodial fathers, especially firstborns, frameworks intended to enhance youth resilience may be incomplete, exclusionary, or misaligned with lived experiences. A more balanced and culturally situated research approach is therefore needed to understand the evolving landscape of Filipino family life and the children shaped within it.

In light of this critical population gap in literature, this qualitative multiple case study seeks to explore the lived experiences, challenges, and coping strategies of firstborn adolescents raised solely by their biological fathers. Specifically, it aims to (1) Identify the unique challenges encountered by these adolescents; (2) Examine the coping mechanisms they employ; and (3) Contribute to a culturally grounded understanding of family dynamics in Filipino single-father households.

By centering the voices of an underserved population, this study aspires to inform educators, mental health professionals, and policymakers in designing inclusive, contextually sensitive interventions that reflect the complex realities of Filipino youth growing up in non-traditional family arrangements.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative multiple case study design to explore the lived experiences of firstborn adolescents raised solely by their biological fathers. The case study approach was deemed appropriate for examining real-life phenomena within their natural context, providing rich and detailed insights into individual experiences.

A multiple case study design was specifically utilized since the research focused on eight (8) cases. Examining multiple cases enhanced the credibility and validity of the findings by providing a broader perspective on the phenomenon and improving the transferability of results to similar populations.

Research Setting

The research was conducted in selected localities within the 2nd Congressional District of Cebu Province, specifically in Southern Cebu, to provide a contextually grounded understanding of family dynamics among single-father households. As a foundational reference, data from Central Visayas indicate that 3,188 of the 23,672 documented solo parents were male (Philippine News Agency, 2024). However, the researchers deliberately focused on Cebu Province, particularly the 2nd Congressional District, given its distinct socio-cultural context and the methodological feasibility of community engagement compared with other provinces in the region. According to the data from the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) Region VII, as of 2024 there were 38 registered male solo parents in the 2nd District and 63 in the 7th District. While the latter presented a larger number, the 2nd District was intentionally chosen because it represents a more marginalized and understudied population, allowing for a richer, more focused qualitative exploration of the lived realities of this minority group. From a scholarly standpoint, studying minority or smaller populations yields deep insights into social experiences that are often obscured in mainstream or larger-sample studies (Kegler et al., 2018).

Research Sampling

In this study, the researchers employ purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling technique that follows a set of criteria for selecting participants who meet specific, pre-established inclusion requirements central to the research objective. Data collection continued until data saturation was reached when no new or meaningful themes emerged thereby supporting the rigor and trustworthiness of the findings.

Participants

During the data gathering phase, a total of nine (9) individuals initially qualified and met the established inclusion criteria. However, only eight (8) participants were ultimately included in the final analysis due to the attainment of data saturation, a methodological point at which no new or significant themes emerged from the data. These eight participants fully satisfied the parameters set forth to ensure that their lived experiences authentically represented the phenomenon under study namely, the psychosocial development and coping mechanisms of firstborn adolescents raised solely by their biological fathers.

Participants were adolescents aged 15 - 19, consistent with UN and POPCOM classifications. This age range captures a critical developmental stage marked by identity formation, emotional regulation, and growing autonomy (Erikson, 1963), allowing participants to reflect meaningfully on their upbringing while paternal influence remains salient. Only firstborn children were included, grounded in Adler's Birth Order Theory, which highlights the heightened responsibilities and parental expectations associated with eldest children. Participants must have been primarily raised by their biological single fathers throughout their formative years (ages 0–18), ensuring psychosocial development shaped predominantly by paternal caregiving without maternal or co-parenting influence. Lastly, participants were required to reside within the 2nd Congressional District of Southern Cebu to ensure contextual and socio-cultural consistency.

Research Instrument

This study employed multiple qualitative instruments to capture the depth and complexity of lived experiences among firstborn adolescents raised solely by their biological fathers. Rooted in a case study approach, tools were selected and refined to align with the study's cultural context, ethical considerations, and commitment to credibility.

Semi Structured Interview Guide

The primary data collection tool was a semi-structured interview guide with close- and open-ended questions, enabling in-depth yet systematic exploration of participants' lived experiences. The initial 24-item guide was subjected to expert validation to ensure content validity, ethical sensitivity, and developmental appropriateness by three subject matter experts. Based on their feedback and panel recommendations, the guide was refined to

13 core questions to improve clarity and emotional sensitivity. The revised guide underwent a second validation by another three subject matter experts using a four-point Likert scale to assess relevance and clarity, the validators rated most items as highly relevant and very clear, leading to minor revisions. The final interview guide was deemed developmentally appropriate, conceptually sound, and responsive to the psychosocial context of the target population.

Translating the Final Interview Guide into Cebuano Dialect

To ensure cultural and linguistic appropriateness, the final 13-item interview guide was translated into Bisaya (Cebuano) for participants in Cebu South. The translation was conducted and validated by a native Bisaya speaker with over seven years of experience teaching AB English majors. Following Sousa and Rojjanasrirat's (2010) cross-cultural adaptation guidelines, the translation preserved semantic accuracy, cultural sensitivity, and the emotional tone of the instrument.

Post-Interview Self-Assessment Checklist

The Post-Interview Self-Assessment Checklist was designed to ensure the emotional well-being of participants immediately after the data-gathering process. This short instrument aims to gauge the participants' emotional state following their sharing of personal and potentially sensitive experiences during the in-depth interview. It allows the researcher to identify any signs of distress, discomfort, or emotional fatigue that may have emerged, as well as to determine whether post-interview support or debriefing is necessary. The inclusion of this checklist reflects adherence to ethical principles of beneficence and non-maleficence, ensuring that participants are protected from psychological harm and are provided with appropriate care when needed. The structure of the tool and the idea of post-interview emotional monitoring were adapted from qualitative research ethical guidelines emphasizing participant welfare during sensitive inquiries.

Procedure

This study followed a systematic and ethical process to collect and analyze data, ensuring the participants' rights and confidentiality are upheld throughout. The following describes the steps of data collection and analysis.

Data Collection

Data collection employed a multi-layered, participant-centered approach designed to generate rich, accurate, and trustworthy insights while safeguarding the comfort, well-being, and autonomy of each participant.

Before the Interview:

Prior to data collection, participants were fully informed about the nature, purpose, and scope of the study. Written informed consent was obtained in accordance with established ethical standards, ensuring voluntary participation and the right to withdraw at any time without consequence. In preparation for ethically sound engagement, all researchers involved in the study underwent a mental health and ethics training to enhance their capacity for trauma-informed, sensitive, and respectful interaction with participants especially when discussing potentially distressing topics.

During the Interview (Actual Data Collection):

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in private, participant-selected settings, either face-to-face or online, to promote comfort, safety, and autonomy. Rapport-building activities preceded the interviews to foster trust and encourage open sharing of lived experiences. With informed consent, interviews were audio-recorded for accurate transcription and analysis. The process remained flexible and adaptive to emerging themes, participant feedback, and ethical considerations, with close attention to participants' emotional well-being. The researcher monitored emotional responses and arranged debriefing with a mental health professional when necessary.

After the Interview:

After each interview, participants underwent a structured debriefing session **if necessary**, to help them process their experiences and regain emotional balance. Before proceeding with the debriefing, participants were asked a brief follow-up questions checklist, designed to assess their emotional state and determine whether professional support was needed. If signs of emotional strain or distress were identified, recovery protocols were promptly implemented under the guidance or supervision of a registered psychologist.

For participants who did not exhibit signs of distress or did not require immediate debriefing, the researcher maintained post-interview communication to ensure their continued well-being. Follow-up messages or calls were made to check on their emotional state and provide reassurance that support remained available should they later feel the need. A licensed psychologist had been prearranged and remained on standby for debriefing sessions when necessary, demonstrating the researcher's proactive commitment to ethical care, sensitivity, and participant safety.

Data Analysis

The data collected from the semi-structured interviews was analyzed following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis framework, which offers a rigorous yet flexible approach to identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within qualitative data. The researchers personally conduct the analysis to ensure a deep and consistent engagement with the data. The steps are as follows:

Familiarization with the data: The researcher began by repeatedly reading the interview transcripts and listening to the audio recordings to gain an in-depth understanding of the participants' narratives (Braun & Clarke, 2006)

Generating initial codes: Systematic coding of relevant data features was conducted manually, supported by qualitative analysis software to maintain consistency and reduce bias (Nowell et al., 2017).

Searching for themes: Codes were examined and grouped into potential themes, reflecting significant patterns across the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Reviewing themes: Themes were reviewed and refined through an iterative process to ensure they accurately represent the data and have clear boundaries (Nowell et al., 2017).

Defining and naming themes: The researchers clearly define each theme, selecting representative quotes to illustrate them effectively (Braun & Clarke, 2020).

Producing the report: The final phase involves constructing a coherent narrative that links the themes to the research questions and theoretical framework, ensuring the findings are well-grounded and meaningful (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Throughout the analysis, reflexivity was acknowledged by the researcher's, thus enhancing the trustworthiness and depth of the findings.

Data Management

Data management, defined as the systematic organization, protection, and preservation of research data to ensure its accuracy, security, and accessibility throughout the study, was strictly implemented in this research. The researcher adopted a series of practical and ethical strategies to maintain data integrity from collection to final reporting.

All interview recordings were stored in encrypted, password-protected Google Drive files accessible only to the researcher. Transcripts used participant codes (P1–P8) to ensure anonymity, while the code–identity master list was stored offline on a secured USB and destroyed after the study's completion.

All transcriptions were personally completed by the researcher to minimize third-party exposure to sensitive content. Each transcript was backed up in a secondary storage location, such as a password-protected external

hard drive. Regular data backups were conducted weekly during the active data collection and analysis period to prevent accidental data loss.

Systematic coding incorporated interview metadata (dates, participant codes, locations, and researcher notes) recorded in a centralized tracking log. Thematic revisions and analytical decisions were documented in research memos, ensuring transparency and a clear audit trail throughout the analysis.

Anonymized excerpts were used in reports only with participant consent, and any data sharing beyond the study was conducted solely in anonymized form for academic purposes. These measures ensured strict confidentiality, ethical responsibility, and scientific rigor throughout the research process.

Reflexivity

The researchers acknowledge the potential influence of personal experiences, assumptions, and emotional responses on the study. Given the sensitive nature of exploring the lived experiences of firstborn adolescents raised by single fathers, continuous self-reflection and awareness of positionality were maintained throughout the research process. To minimize bias and uphold research integrity, bracketing, ongoing peer consultation, and member-checking were employed to ensure that participants' voices remained central. By balancing empathy with professional objectivity, the researchers aimed to produce findings that are credible, ethical, and reflective of the participants' authentic experiences.

RESULTS

This chapter presents the findings of the qualitative exploration on firstborn adolescents raised solely by their biological fathers. It begins with the participants' demographic and contextual profiles, followed by the emergent themes and subthemes from the thematic analysis.

Table 1 Demographic Profiling of Participants

Participants	Age	Sex	Municipality	Cause of Maternal Absence	Primary Caregiver
Participant 1	19	Male	Dalaguete	Financial Conflict	Father
Participant 2	17	Female	Alcoy	Death	Father
Participant 3	18	Female	Argao	Death	Father
Participant 4	15	Male	Argao	Parental Separation	Father
Participant 5	17	Female	Oslob	Parental Separation	Father
Participant 6	18	Female	Santander	Death	Father
Participant 7	15	Female	Boljoon	Parental Separation	Father
Participant 8	17	Male	Argao	Parental Separation	Father

This study involved eight (8) firstborn adolescents from various municipalities in Southern Cebu, arranged geographically from north to south: Argao (Barangays Bulasa, Langtad and Taloot), Dalaguete (Barangays La Paz, Poblacion), Alcoy (Barangay Pugalo), Boljoon (Barangay El Pardo), Oslob (Barangay Hagdan), and Santander (Barangay Pasil). All participants were raised solely by their biological fathers and spent their formative years under paternal care following the financial conflict, death or separation of their mothers. Participants ranged in age from fifteen (15) to nineteen (19) years, aligning with the adolescent developmental classification established by the United Nations (UN) and the Commission on Population and Development (POPCOM). The sample encompassed both male and female firstborn adolescents, with a predominance of females (n = 5) over males (n = 3).

In developmental and family psychology, challenges are conceptualized as multidimensional stressors that arise when individuals must negotiate the demands of their environment alongside personal capacities and role-based expectations (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Accordingly, any activity, responsibility, or demand that exceeds an individual's developmental readiness may be considered a significant challenge. Analysis of the narratives from eight (8) participants revealed that their lived experiences are characterized by a continuous negotiation of life challenges. Table 2 presents the emergent themes that addressed SOP 1, which sought to explore the challenges experienced by firstborn adolescents under the custody of a single father.

Table 2. Challenges Met by Firstborn Adolescents Raised by Single Fathers

Themes	Subthemes
Emotional Deprivation	Longing for Maternal Affection Emotional Gap from Father
Heavy Familial Obligation and Parentification	Instrumental Parentification Forced Maturity Self Sacrifice and Prioritization of Family needs
Financial Struggles	Limited Access to Basic Needs Limited access to Educational Needs

The first theme, Emotional Deprivation, reflects the profound emotional and psychological gaps experienced by firstborn adolescents raised solely by their fathers. Emotional deprivation refers to the lack of adequate emotional support, warmth, and responsiveness. These needs are crucial for healthy adolescent development. This theme is further divided into two subthemes: Longing for Maternal Affection and Emotional Gap from Father, both of which reveal how the absence of emotional nurturing affects the participants' well-being.

The subtheme Longing for Maternal Affection captures the participants' yearning for care, comfort, and emotional attunement that only a mother can traditionally provide. Participants shared experiences such as,

[..] "Ma-miss gyud nako si Mama, labi na kung maglain akong gibati" (I really miss my mom, especially when I'm not feeling well) - (P3)

[..] "Bisan gahatag si papa, lahi gyud ang pag-atiman sa mama" (Even if Papa provides everything, her care and warmth just feel different.) - (P4)

It emphasizes that material provision alone cannot substitute for maternal warmth. Developmental and anthropological studies support these reflections, noting that mothers are generally associated with emotional nurturance, daily caregiving, and a unique responsiveness that fosters emotional security. The absence of maternal care thus created an emotional void in these adolescents' lives, shaping their sense of safety, attachment, and psychological resilience (Richard, 2025).

Meanwhile, the subtheme Emotional Gap from Father reflects the adolescents' experiences of emotional distance and limited responsiveness from their fathers. Many participants reported difficulty expressing emotions or seeking comfort, as their fathers were often perceived as unavailable or unresponsive.

As participants revealed, [...]“Lisod usahay mag-open up kay murag dili siya kasabot.” (It’s hard sometimes to open up because it feels like he doesn’t understand.) - (P2)

[...] “Usahay maglisod ko makig-open kay murag di siya interesado kung emosyon ang topic. It feels like we’re close only because of duty, not connection.” (Sometimes it’s hard to open up because he doesn’t seem interested when it’s about emotions. It feels like we’re close only because of duty, not connection. -) - (P7)

These experiences can be understood in the context of traditional Filipino masculinity and the cultural concept of the Padre de Pamilya, where fathers are expected to prioritize provision and authority over emotional expression (Gutierrez, 2024). Such cultural expectations may contribute to fathers’ perceived lack of emotional intelligence, inadvertently limiting emotional support for their children.

The combination of maternal absence and paternal emotional distance creates a double-layered emotional deprivation, which has significant implications for adolescent development. Adolescents in this context may struggle with emotional expression, attachment, and mental health, as they grow increasingly in need of guidance and emotional support (Tan et al., 2023). These findings just show how the unique qualities of maternal and paternal care, together with cultural norms, shape the emotional experiences and psychological well-being of firstborn adolescents raised by single fathers.

The second major theme, Heavy Familial Obligation and Parentification, captures how firstborn adolescents raised by single fathers take on responsibilities far beyond their developmental stage. In these households, the father's dual burden of being both sole provider and primary caregiver often leaves a caregiving gap that the eldest child is compelled to fill. This reflects what scholars identify as instrumental parentification, wherein children assume practical, household, and caregiving tasks typically carried out by adults (Dariotis et al., 2023). The participants' narratives illustrate this clearly. One firstborn shared,

[...] “Kuan atiman sa akong mga manghud, og akong mga buluhaton sa balay kay syempre ako ang kinamagulangan, trabaho akong amahan.” (I just take care of my younger siblings and do my chores at home because I’m the eldest and my father is working.) - (P1)

This is a statement that mirrors the literature noting that parentified children frequently perform domestic labor and childcare to compensate for parental absence (Cho et al., 2024). Another participant described becoming both a mother and father figure to younger siblings, said, [...]“Ako jud ang nag-take ug responsibilities sa akong mama... ako ang nagpaka-mama ug nagpaka-papa sa akong mga igsoon.” (took on the responsibilities of my mother; I became both a mother and a father to my siblings.) - (P6)

These accounts align with research indicating that parentification contributes to role confusion, chronic stress, and premature loss of typical adolescent experiences (Van Loon et al., 2015). Long-term consequences may include difficulty setting boundaries, emotional over-responsibility, and a tendency toward hyper-independence in adulthood.

Linked to parentification is the subtheme of forced maturity, also referred to as premature adulthood or accelerated maturity. Literature emphasizes that when adolescents are placed in roles demanding emotional and social competence beyond their age, they develop what appears to be maturity but is actually shaped by necessity rather than readiness (Purna et al., 2024). Participants repeatedly expressed the pressure to appear strong despite internal struggles. One said, [...]“Bisan kapoy na, magpaka-lig-on gihapon ko kay di ko gusto nga makakita akong manghud nga di ko okay. Need nimo magmature para sa imong manghud.” (Even when I’m tired, I try to stay strong because I don’t want my younger sibling to see me break down. You need to be mature for your siblings.) - (P1)

Another explained, [...]“As raised by a single father, the hardest part is carrying responsibilities too early—being expected to be mature while still young.” (P2)

These utterances reflect the dual nature of forced maturity described in the literature: it fosters resilience and competence while simultaneously producing emotional strain, exhaustion, and difficulty expressing

vulnerability (Luthar and Zigler 1991). For firstborn adolescents in single-father households, this emotional burden is amplified by the absence of maternal emotional labor, positioning them as the household's stabilizing force even when they are not emotionally equipped for such a role.

The final subtheme, Self-Sacrifice and Prioritization of Family Needs, underscores how firstborns place their family's welfare above their own desires, a pattern deeply rooted in Filipino cultural values such as pakikisama, malasakit, utang na loob, and strong family cohesion. Participants expressed a consistent tendency to give way for their siblings, with one saying, [...] "Dapat gyud unahon ang mga igsoon, magparaya nalang ka." (You have to prioritize your siblings and give way for them.) - (P6)

Another added, [...] "Dili ko makabuot sa akong gusto kay pirmi una ang needs sa pamilya." (I can't do what I want because the family's needs come first.) - (P7)

These statements mirror Alampay 2024 research showing that Filipino adolescents often feel morally obligated to prioritize family needs, even at the expense of personal growth or autonomy. Psychologically, such self-sacrificing behavior can lead to suppressed individuality, guilt when prioritizing oneself, and long-term patterns of self-neglect. For firstborns raised by single fathers, this dynamic becomes more intense because they perceive themselves as essential to the family's emotional and practical survival, further intertwining their sense of identity with responsibility rather than self-development.

Collectively, this theme reveals that firstborn adolescents in single-father households navigate complex emotional and familial demands that significantly shape their development. While these experiences cultivate resilience, adaptability, and a strong sense of duty, they also come with substantial costs, particularly the loss of a typical adolescence, emotional strain, and identity formation centered on obligation. These findings resonate with global literature on parentification but also highlight the unique cultural and familial expectations that shape the lives of Filipino firstborns in single-father families.

The third theme, Financial Struggles, illustrates the stark economic precarity that shapes the daily lives of firstborn adolescents raised solely by their fathers. In the Philippine context, single-father households remain a particularly vulnerable but understudied family structure, often navigating poverty without the social safety nets more frequently extended to solo mothers (Cruz et al., 2024). Although national data indicate that poverty incidence has declined in recent years, millions of Filipino families continue to experience insufficient income for basic needs, with food insecurity and rising living costs disproportionately affecting low-income households (Ubal, 2023). These macro-level realities were echoed powerfully in the adolescents' narratives. Participants shared,

[...] "Financially sad, usahay way bugas ana hahaha..." (Financially, sometimes we didn't even have rice, haha.) - Participant 1.

[...] "Naay mga panahon nga dili mi makabayad dayon sa kuryente o tubig, kay prioridad gyud ni Papa ang pagkaon ug bayad sa utang." (There are times when we can't pay for electricity or water right away because my father prioritizes food and debt payments.) - Participant 7

These accounts demonstrate how chronic scarcity dictates household decision-making and restricts adolescents' access to essential resources, aligning with evidence that economic stress undermines children's physical, emotional, and academic stability (Neppl et al., 2015).

Financial constraints also extended to schooling, forming the subtheme Limited Access to Educational Needs, where adolescents described how insufficient funds forced them to compromise educational aspirations. Participants recounted,

[...] "Wa pud ko kahuman og eskwela kay giuna nako ang manghud... tungod sa budget kulang." (I wasn't able to finish my studies because I prioritized my younger sibling; our budget wasn't enough.) - (P1).

[..] “Maglisod mi usahay sa bayad sa project o school fees kay usara ra man si Papa mo-provide. Mao nga usahay late ko maka-submit.” (We sometimes struggle to pay for school projects or fees because Papa is the only provider. That's why I'm sometimes late in submitting requirements.) - (P7).

These narratives align with research showing that economic hardship is one of the strongest predictors of disrupted schooling and reduced long-term mobility in low-income Filipino families (Munoz-Carrasco, 2024). For firstborn adolescents, these educational sacrifices often become intergenerational in nature, as they relinquish academic opportunities to support younger siblings thereby perpetuating cycles of economic vulnerability.

The pattern emerging from these experiences illustrate that the challenges faced by firstborn adolescents raised by single fathers are not isolated but interconnected, emotional deprivation leads to role overextension, and financial scarcity reinforces the cycle of self-sacrifice and early maturity.

The second exploration of this study was the coping mechanism. Coping mechanism is a conscious or unconscious thought or behavior a person uses to manage stressful situations and difficult emotions (Miller & Hedges 2023). Therefore, understanding these coping mechanisms is essential in gaining insight into how individuals adapt to emotional challenges and maintain psychological well-being amid adverse challenges.

Table 3. Coping mechanisms adopted by first born adolescents raised by their Single Father

Themes	Subthemes
Growth- Oriented Coping	Purposeful Endurance and Life Appreciation Strength Through Adversity
Social Coping	Peer and Family Support Seeking Social Connection for Emotional Venting
Emotion Focused and Recreational Coping	Self- Care and Time Management Escape and Distraction Spiritual or Faith Based Coping
Cognitive and Meaning-Making Coping	Positive Outlook Learning from Adversity

Table 3 presents the emergent themes that addressed SOP 2, which sought to explore the coping mechanisms adopted by firstborn adolescents under sa Puder ng Padre de Pamilya. The findings revealed four themes- Growth-Oriented Coping, Social Coping, Emotion- Focused and Recreational Coping, and Cognitive and Meaning-Making Coping. Collectively, these themes highlight the multifaceted strategies these adolescents utilize to navigate life's challenges.

The first theme, Growth-Oriented Coping, illustrates the adolescents' proactive efforts to cultivate resilience and personal strength amid adversity. This theme emerged as participants consistently reported transforming difficult experiences into sources of motivation and life appreciation. The subtheme Purposeful Endurance and Life Appreciation reflects participants' conscious recognition of daily struggles and sacrifices while maintaining a positive attitude toward life and family.

As stated, [...] “Laban lang.. Lisod pero di ta palabig ka stress.” (Just keep fighting, it can be done. It's hard, but don't let stress get to you too much.) - (P1)

Similarly, Participant 2 emphasized: [...] “Learn to appreciate small sacrifices; what matters most is the love that binds the family.”

Their narratives reveal firstborn adolescents are strongly shaped by Filipino cultural values. In the Philippine context, the father is often viewed as the pillar of the household, expected to fulfill the role of the economic provider rather than that of an emotional nurturer (Gutierrez 2024). Despite this limited emotional expressiveness, adolescents develop adaptive coping patterns by observing their fathers' quiet perseverance, sense of responsibility, and unwavering commitment to the family. This aligns with Seligman and Tayyab (2018) positive psychology framework, which emphasizes that individuals can cultivate strengths such as resilience through daily experiences of overcoming adversity.

Participants' narratives further reflect the Filipino “laban” attitude, a culturally embedded form of perseverance and grit that encourages individuals to keep fighting despite difficulties (Pe-Pua, & PMarcelino 2000). Participant assertion, “Laban lang..” illustrates a culturally shaped form of learned optimism—a positive psychology construct describing how individuals frame challenges in ways that maintain agency and hope (Abramson & Seligman, 1978).

Moreover, their narratives also highlight the Filipino values of pagpapahalaga (appreciation) and pagkakaisa (family unity), both of which contribute to a meaning-making orientation that supports well-being. In line with the Sikolohiyang Pilipino, their narratives emphasize gratitude, which in the Filipino context is often expressed as utang na loob—a deep sense of relational obligation and acknowledgement (Rungduin et. al 2015). This demonstrates how Filipino cultural values converge to reinforce purposeful endurance under the puder nang padre de pamilya.

Associated with this is the subtheme; Strength Through Adversity, where participants described how personal challenges, including maternal loss, became motivation for growth. This is attested by Participant 3: [...] “motivation to fight.....” - (P3) , furthermore another participant reflected [...] “became stronger” — (P1)

The subtheme aligns with Resilience Theory by Garmezy (1991), which posits that individuals can develop adaptive strengths in response to exposure to significant stressors.

Looking at the second major challenge, Heavy Familial Obligation and Parentification was most strongly addressed through Growth-Oriented Coping. Forced maturity, instrumental parentification, and self-sacrifice prompted adolescents to adopt coping strategies grounded in resilience-building, strength cultivation, and purposeful endurance. Growth-Oriented Coping among adolescents under parentification reflects the transformation of burdensome responsibilities into motivation for personal growth and resilience.

The second theme, Social Coping, emphasizes reliance on interpersonal relationships as a buffer against emotional stress. As highlighted in developmental research, social support during adolescence serves both protective and restorative functions (Furman & Buhrmester, 2009). Peer and Family Support Seeking involved turning to trusted individuals for guidance and reassurance.

As stated by Participant 6: [...] “daghan kong friends ug cousins pwede gyud nako sila maduolan incase naay mga problema sa kinabuhi.” (I have many friends and cousins to rely on whenever I have problems in life).

Similarly, Participant 5 noted: [...] “If naa koy mga kalisdanan... dool sa mga tawo nga dool sa imong dughan, like friends, akong mga ig-agaw.” (When I face difficulties, I approach people close to my heart, like friends and cousins.)

Developmental research shows that adolescents increasingly turn to peers for emotional support over time; parental support, though still important, tends to weaken in mid- to late adolescence (Szwedo et. al, 2017). This shift underscores the protective function of social support in adolescence (Spitz et. al, 2020).

Research by Alampay & Jocson (2011), on Filipino parenting indicates that fathers often adopt more authoritarian attitudes and may be less emotionally expressive. Due to this emotional distance, sometimes

described in cultural analyses as aligned with the “poder del padre de familia” model adolescents may experience an emotional gap in their relationship with their father. To fill that gap, adolescents lean on peers and extended family members, such as cousins. These interpersonal relationships provide emotional stability, guidance, validation, and a safe space for disclosure.

Furthermore participants also relied on Social Connection for Emotional Venting ,where it captures the relief obtained from sharing feelings with others. A popular emotional venting belief claims that doing so dissolves the emotional impact (Nils & Rimé 2012).

As attested: [...] “...bug-at man gud kung walay kaestorya sa imong mga problema.” (.. it feels heavy when you have no one to talk to about your problems.) - (P3)

Similarly, [...] “...Makig-istorya pud ko sa akong amiga kung naa koy problema kay makagaan man gamay basta makashare ka.”(I also talk to my friend whenever I have problems, because it relieves me a little when I can share)- (P7)

From a therapeutic perspective, sharing emotions can promote greater insight into oneself, strengthen coping abilities, and enhance closeness with others, however, it also carries potential downsides, including the possibility of feeling embarrassed, being misunderstood, or facing rejection (Kennedy & Watson 1999).

Integrating this with emotional regulation theory, according to Gross’ (1998) process model of emotion regulation, strategies such as cognitive reappraisal and social sharing modulate both the intensity and trajectory of emotional experience. Social venting facilitates co-regulation, wherein peers and extended family members actively assist in stabilizing emotional arousal, offering perspective, and enhancing adaptive appraisal of stressors.

Another major challenge of the participants is the Emotional deprivation—characterized by longing for maternal affection and limited paternal emotional availability—prompted adolescents to depend heavily on **Social Coping**, a mechanism that substitutes for the emotional support unavailable at home.

Given their fathers’ perceived emotional distance, adolescents' reliance on peers and extended family functions as a protective factor, offering psychological safety and emotional reciprocity absent in the household.

The third theme, Emotion Focused and Recreational Coping, describes categories/sub themes involving self-care, time management, and engagement in enjoyable activities. Emotional regulation (ER) is a central developmental task during adolescence, a period marked by rapid emotional, cognitive, and social changes (Yilmazer 2024).

The subtheme Self-Care and Time Management reflects conscious efforts to balance personal needs and familial responsibilities. Through reflective awareness of their own needs and limitations, adolescents deliberately schedule periods for rest, relaxation, and personal reflection as a strategy to manage stress and prevent negative thinking. As stated, [...] “Tagaan nakog time akong kaugalingon para di kaayo ma-stress kay basin makahunahuna tag daotan.”(I give time to myself so I won’t be too stressed because I might start thinking negatively) — (P1)

Similarly, Participant 8 emphasized: [...] “Ginabalanse nako ang akong kaugalingong panginahanglan ug ang responsibilidad sa pamilya.”(I balance my own needs and family responsibilities).

These narratives reflect intentional time management, boundary setting, and self-monitoring, which are crucial for reducing stress and maintaining psychological equilibrium.

The subtheme Escape and Distraction highlights engagement in recreational or relaxing activities as temporary stress relief. Statements by Participant 4 and Participant 7 such as, [...] playing video games”, [...]...muadto ra ko sa daplin sa dagat magtan-aw lang sa balod ug mamati og tingog sa hangin.”(I go by the sea just watching the waves and listening to the sound of the wind).

These behaviors illustrate emotion-focused coping, in which individuals regulate their emotional state rather than directly confronting stressors (Baker, & Berenbaum 2006). Such distraction provides temporary relief, allowing adolescents to detach momentarily from overwhelming demand. Adolescents' strategic use of escape and distraction also demonstrates a healthy coping mechanism, enabling them to recharge, maintain resilience, and return to challenges with renewed perspective while excessive reliance on avoidance may be maladaptive, increasing emotional difficulties (Yilmazer 2024).

Finally, Spiritual or Faith-Based Coping emerged as a significant resource, with participants relying on prayer, religious activities, and faith in God to manage emotional strain. As stated,

[..] “Apil-apil ko og activities sa simbahan... naa man gud mo tabang ang Ginoo. Makagaan pud siya sa akong pamati/ hunahuna.” (I join church activities because that way I feel that my situation is still okay since God helps me. It also lightens my mind). — Participant 7

This reflects positive religious coping, where individuals seek spiritual support and meaning through their faith. Research shows that positive religious coping—such as participating in religious activities or trusting in God—enhances emotional well-being by offering comfort, purpose, and a sense of control during stressful experiences (Ano & Vasconcelles, 2005).

Similarly attested,: [..] “Always ra gyd magpadayon, apilan ug prayer kay lisod man gyud ang kinabuhi... mag pray ra gyd kay mao nay makatabang sa atoa pod.” (Just always keep going, include prayer because life is really hard... prayer helps us).— Participant 3

Similarly, Participant 3 emphasizes that continuous prayer helps them endure life's hardships, demonstrating how prayer functions as a stabilizing coping tool. Pargament's theory of religious coping further explains that people turn to prayer, faith, and divine connection to find meaning, maintain hope, and feel supported (Xu 2015), which aligns with the participants' experiences of emotional relief and the belief that prayer truly “helps” them manage life's difficulties.

In addition to seeking social support, adolescents used **Emotion-Focused and Recreational Coping** to self-regulate the psychological strain produced by Emotional Deprivation. This became the anchor of the emotional weight because adolescents lacked a safe emotional environment at home where their feelings could be validated or expressed freely.

In essence, Emotion-Focused and Recreational Coping enables adolescents to regulate distress, achieve emotional equilibrium, and momentarily detach from the psychological weight of emotional deprivation, particularly when external sources of emotional support are limited

The fourth theme, Cognitive and Meaning-Making Coping, emerged from participants' use of cognitive strategies, including maintaining a positive outlook and reframing challenges as learning opportunities.

As stated, [..] “Mao ra to, dapat gyud sige kang positive to become a better person.” (Just be positive in order to become a better person). (P5)

Similarly, Participant 6 highlighted: [..] “See life as positive...”

This subtheme reflects participants' use of cognitive restructuring—the process of intentionally reframing adverse situations to reduce distress and foster adaptive thinking. Also their narratives exemplify the principles of Dispositional Optimism Theory, which posits that individuals with generalized positive expectations about the future are more likely to use adaptive coping strategies such as positive reinterpretation and meaning-making (Carver & Scheier, 2014). From this perspective, the participants' tendency to frame difficulties as learning opportunities reflects not only emotional resilience but also the cognitive processes that characterize optimistic individuals.

The subtheme Learning from Adversity also highlights participants' use of reflective coping, wherein they actively examine past challenges and reinterpret them as sources of personal strength. As attested, [..] “Use

mistakes as a lesson kay mao rana ang way ug gi unsa nako pag stay strong.” (I use mistakes as a lesson because that’s how I stay strong) — (P4)

Similarly, [...] “Naka-ag i kog daghang challenges nga ako ray nakabalo, pero nahimo gihapon nakong motivation nga molaban every day.” (I’ve gone through many challenges that only I knew about, but they became my motivation to keep fighting every day). — (P3)

Based on their narratives, such reflective coping indicates emerging metacognitive awareness, the ability to monitor, evaluate, and regulate one’s own thinking and coping strategies (Kentridge & Heywood 2000).). This cognitive process aligns with Resilience theory, which emphasizes how individuals adapt positively by reframing hardships into opportunities for learning and growth (Garmezy, 1991). By converting adversity insight, participants illustrate key mechanisms of resilience, including meaning-making, emotional regulation, and belief in one’s capacity to overcome challenges. Thus, their narratives show not only survival of difficulty but the reflective transformation of those experiences into psychological strength.

Adolescents coped with Financial Struggles by using **Cognitive and Meaning-Making Coping**, allowing them to reinterpret challenges as opportunities for growth. Through cognitive reframing, they transformed experiences into sources of motivation, perseverance, and personal strength.

DISCUSSIONS

A family is often conceptualized as a cohesive system, a complex network of relationships in which each member’s roles, actions, and emotional contributions sustain the overall functioning and equilibrium of the household (Bowen, 1978). The absence of one parental figure does not merely remove a component from this system; it fundamentally alters its structure and dynamics. For a firstborn adolescent raised in a single-father household, this transformation is especially palpable. According to Sison et al. (2024) and Sumicad et al. (2023), these adolescents inhabit a space that is simultaneously familiar and foreign, where the boundaries between childhood and adulthood blur, and the weight of familial responsibility often surpasses the lightness typically associated with youth.

The present study reveals the realities of these adolescents, whose formative years are not defined by freedom or leisure, but by a persistent negotiation of duties, emotional gaps, and unmet needs. Three overarching challenges emerged from their narratives: Emotional Struggles, Heavy Familial Obligation and Parentification, and Financial Struggles (refer to Table 2). These themes collectively answer the statement of the problem where firstborn adolescents in single-father households confront multidimensional challenges that intricately shape their developmental trajectories.

The first theme, Emotional Deprivation, indicates that the firstborn adolescents raised by single fathers revealed persistent emotional struggles stemming from the absence of maternal affection and difficulty establishing emotional intimacy with their fathers. The longing for maternal warmth, comfort, and understanding underscores a deep emotional void that contributes to feelings of loneliness and emotional detachment. This aligns with Mahmood et al. (2023) and Digon (2023), who reported that adolescents in single-parent families often experience identity confusion and emotional deprivation due to the absence of one parent. The participants’ reflections further echo Zhang (2024), who emphasized that adolescence is a critical period for social and emotional development, and disruptions in parental availability can hinder emotional regulation and self-concept formation. These findings also correspond with Adler’s Birth Order Theory, which suggests that firstborns are prone to heightened emotional sensitivity and neuroticism due to the burden of responsibility and elevated expectations within the family hierarchy. The participants’ emotional struggles manifested in the need to appear strong despite inner vulnerability mirror Adler’s view that firstborns often internalize anxiety when attempting to meet parental and familial expectations. Similarly, Biruny et al. (2024) observed that firstborn individuals frequently assume emotional leadership within the household, constructing their identity around dependability and maturity. This emotional role, while adaptive, also exposes them to stress and emotional exhaustion. Moreover, Yakov et al. (2024) highlighted that maternal emotional availability strengthens empathy and sibling bonds, suggesting that the absence of a mother figure may disrupt emotional communication within the

household. The participants' accounts confirm this, as many struggled to confide in their fathers due to perceived emotional distance. This finding reinforces the notion that emotional regulation and empathy are not only personality traits but are also shaped by early family dynamics and attachment experiences.

Another salient theme that emerged from the participants' narratives was the experience of heavy familial obligation and parentification, wherein firstborn adolescents assumed parental roles within the household. This theme resonates strongly with Adler's Birth Order Theory, which identifies firstborns as "substitute parents" who embody responsibility, protectiveness, and leadership (Cole, 2021). Biruny et al. (2021) similarly found that firstborns internalize early social expectations, leading to an inflated sense of duty and accountability. The findings also align with Easey (2023), who noted that firstborn adolescents burdened with excessive family roles are more likely to experience stress, anxiety, and reduced psychological well-being. This echoes the present study's participants, who often felt pressured to mature early and suppress their emotions to maintain family stability. Furthermore, Sia and Aneesh (2024) linked emotional suppression and over-responsibility to decreased emotional regulation and increased mental health risks, underscoring the psychological cost of being the "pillar" in single-parent households. From the perspective of the role of firstborns in family structure, Yakov et al. (2024) emphasized that firstborn empathy and responsibility are magnified by parental expectations and family needs. In this study, the absence of maternal guidance and the father's preoccupation with economic survival intensified the firstborn's parental substitution role. Thus, the adolescents' sense of duty extended beyond ordinary sibling care—it evolved into an emotional and moral responsibility to preserve family order.

The third major theme identified concerns the financial struggles that pervade the lives of firstborn adolescents raised by single fathers, primarily reflected through their limited access to basic needs and educational resources (see Table 2). Participants described times of food scarcity, unpaid bills, and prioritization of family needs over personal desires, which mirrors the findings of Shitindi and Lubawa (2022) and Mahmood et al. (2023), who emphasized that single-parent families often face economic deprivation that affects adolescents' emotional well-being. These adolescents internalize their fathers' financial strain, leading to heightened anxiety and guilt when basic necessities cannot be met. Similarly, Easey (2023) noted that adolescents in financially strained households often experience emotional fatigue and self-blame as they assume moral responsibility for family stability. The issue of limited access to educational needs further intensified their struggles. Some participants reported delaying or discontinuing schooling due to lack of funds, aligning with Aloro (2024) who found that adolescents in single-parent families frequently experience academic interruptions and low motivation due to limited resources. For firstborns, education becomes both a personal aspiration and a family duty, creating internal conflict as they balance studying with supporting their households. As Easey (2023) explained, such conflict often leads to reduced self-esteem and hindered academic success, not from incapacity but from economic constraint and emotional burden.

Participants shared experiences of economic scarcity, like limited access to basic needs and educational needs. These findings are consistent with Bronte-Tinkew et al. (2019), who noted that children in low-income single-father households often experience financial insecurity that influences both educational attainment and psychological well-being. Similarly, Sison et al. (2024) found that single fathers face compounded economic pressures due to their dual role as breadwinner and caregiver, leading to heightened stress that trickles down to their children.

Synthesizing all three themes, emotional deprivation, heavy familial obligation and parentification, and financial struggles, the findings collectively support Bowen's Family Systems Theory (1978). According to Bowen, the family operates as an emotional unit, where changes in one member affect the entire system. The study revealed that in single-father households, the absence of a maternal figure disrupted systemic balance, compelling firstborn adolescents to assume compensatory roles to preserve family stability. Their emotional struggles reflect emotional cutoff, suppressing vulnerability to maintain harmony. Their caregiving and financial sacrifices demonstrate role shifting and triangulation, where the firstborn mediates emotional and practical responsibilities within the family system.

These results align with Bauza et al. (2015) and Sumicad et al. (2023), who found that single-parent households often rely on firstborns to fulfill emotional and functional gaps, resulting in blurred generational boundaries. Likewise, Lampis et al. (2018) noted that the process of differentiation of self, balancing individuality with emotional connection is more challenging in high-stress or interdependent families, as seen among the participants who struggled to express emotions freely while remaining devoted to family duties.

However, while Bowen's framework provides a structural explanation for these dynamics, a cultural counterargument emerges in the Filipino context. Bowen's theory assumes that overfunctioning behaviors (e.g., parentification) indicate dysfunction, yet in Filipino culture, such behaviors are often seen as acts of pagmamalasakit (deep care) and utang na loob (gratitude). Rather than pathology, these responses signify cultural resilience and moral obligation, demonstrating how collectivist values reinterpret systemic stress as a source of familial strength. Therefore, while the findings align with Bowen's assertion that emotional and role adjustments maintain family equilibrium, they also challenge the theory's universality by showing that balance in collectivist cultures can coexist with emotional sacrifice.

The findings affirm that firstborn adolescents in single-father households act as systemic stabilizers, absorbing emotional, financial, and caregiving pressures to maintain family functioning. This adaptation validates Bowen's view of interdependence within family systems, yet it also reveals that equilibrium is sustained not through emotional detachment but through resilient, culturally grounded compassion. The study thus extends Bowen's theory by illustrating that in Filipino families, harmony is maintained not by avoiding emotional involvement but by embracing it even when it comes at the cost of the self.

The in-depth exploration on the coping mechanisms of first-born adolescents raised solely by their single fathers, reveals four primary themes: Growth-Oriented Coping, Social Coping, Behavioral and Recreational Coping, and Cognitive and Meaning-Making Coping. Collectively, these findings illuminate how adolescents navigate the psychosocial challenges of maternal absence and paternal-led households. Anchored in Bowen's (1978) Family Systems Theory and Garmezy's (1991) Resilience Theory, the findings underscore how individual adaptation and family dynamics interact to shape adolescents' psychological functioning and emotional resilience.

The first theme, Growth-Oriented Coping, reflects the adolescents' proactive attempts to cultivate resilience and emotional maturity despite their familial loss (refer to Table 3, Growth-Oriented Coping). Participants emphasized perseverance, gratitude, and deriving meaning from hardship, traits consistent with purposeful endurance and life appreciation. Such adaptive attitudes parallel the findings of Capacio et al. (2024), who observed that firstborn adolescents of single fathers often internalize the dual pressures of caregiving and emotional regulation, thereby maturing faster than their peers. The subtheme Strength Through Adversity highlights adolescents' capacity to reinterpret maternal loss and familial hardship as motivational forces for self-improvement. This echoes the work of Biruny et al. (2021), who asserted that firstborns develop strong self-regulatory and problem-focused orientations due to their early exposure to family demands. Consistent with Adler's Birth Order Theory (Cole, 2021), the firstborn's heightened sense of duty and perfectionism appears to transform emotional strain into structured coping and self-discipline. Thus, the participants' narratives underscore a process of meaning reconstruction—transforming grief into personal growth and endurance.

The theme Social Coping encapsulates how adolescents seek emotional stability through relationships with peers, cousins, and extended kin (refer to Table 3, Social Coping). Their reliance on peer and family support and emotional venting reveals the centrality of social connectedness in mitigating loneliness and stress. These findings correspond with Furman 2009, developmental model of social support, which identifies peer affiliation as a key buffer against psychological distress during adolescence. Aloro (2024) emphasized that adolescents from single-parent households often face social stigma and isolation; however, the present findings suggest that these adolescents counteract such risks by cultivating supportive peer ties. Moreover, these interactions serve both cathartic and regulatory functions, allowing emotional expression and collective problem-solving forms of coping also identified by Ali (2024) and Pany et al. (2022) among youth in single-parent families. Thus, social coping emerges as a relational resilience strategy, reflecting the adolescents' ability to substitute structural family loss with social belonging and shared empathy.

Emotion Focused and Recreational Coping underscores adolescents' conscious regulation of stress through self-care, time management, recreational distraction and spiritual or faith based coping (refer to Table 2, Emotion Focused and Recreational Coping). The participants' emphasis on balance allocating time for personal restoration while fulfilling family roles reflects mature executive functioning and self-awareness. These findings resonate with Liga et al. (2020), who noted that adolescents' coping styles are often modeled after parental behavior.

Recreational outlets such as video gaming, social media engagement, or contemplative solitude by the sea represent temporary escape mechanisms forms of emotion-focused coping that provide psychological relief without avoidance (Sipovskaya, 2022). This aligns with Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) model of emotion regulation, suggesting that adaptive distraction facilitates emotional processing.

Importantly, Spiritual or Faith-Based Coping emerged as a salient subtheme, reflecting the adolescents' reliance on prayer and church involvement as emotional anchors. This spiritual dimension aligns with Philippine cultural norms that equate religiosity with moral resilience and emotional strength (Evangelista et al., 2022). The adolescents' belief in divine assistance reflects what Pany et al. (2022) describe as "existential coping" a strategy that fosters psychological continuity amid loss. These findings further affirm that faith serves as both a moral compass and a psychological sanctuary, enabling adolescents to sustain hope and internal stability.

The final theme, Cognitive and Meaning-Making Coping, captures the adolescents' efforts to reframe adversity through positive thinking, reflection, and spirituality (refer to Table 3, Cognitive and Meaning-Making Coping). The subtheme Positive Outlook reveals a deliberate cognitive reframing process, consistent with Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) theory of positive reappraisal. Participants' focus on optimism and future orientation parallels findings by Pirkina (2022), who noted that adolescents who employ cognitive restructuring demonstrate greater resilience and emotional adjustment. Similarly, Learning from Adversity emphasizes reflective meaning-making, where hardships are integrated into personal narratives of growth—a process supported by Sia and Aneesh (2024), who linked reflective coping to improved emotion regulation among firstborns.

The findings align with Garmezy's (1991) Resilience Theory, which views resilience as a dynamic interplay between internal strengths and external supports that enable adaptation amid adversity. Overall, the findings affirm resilience as an adaptive process and extend Garmezy's theory by introducing a cultural-existential dimension, where faith, gratitude, and purpose serve as moral anchors—illustrating that Filipino adolescents' resilience transcends mere survival to become a transformative act of meaning-making and endurance.

IMPLICATIONS

Despite the various coping mechanisms employed, the absence of maternal care often leads to a loss of adolescence among firstborns, as they assume heavy responsibilities beyond their age. Financial struggles further compel them to seek work to sustain personal and family needs reflecting both resilience and burden. It emphasizes the need for inclusive, family-centered mental health and social support programs for single-father households. Agencies such as DSWD, MSWDO, and DepEd should implement counseling, peer-support, and guidance programs that address emotional strain, promote father-child bonding, and recognize diverse family structures. At the policy level, integrating a Paternal Support Framework into existing welfare programs like 4Ps would ensure psychosocial and financial aid reaches father-led families. Ultimately, the results call for empathy-driven, culturally sensitive interventions that validate single-father families as equally deserving of recognition, protection, and support.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals the unique realities of firstborn adolescents raised solely by their fathers. In these father-led households, responsibilities, expectations, and emotional labor often fall heavily on both the parent and the eldest child. These adolescents face challenges such as emotional deprivation, parentification, and financial strain, requiring early maturity and adaptive role-shifting.

Despite hardships, they show resilience through emotion-focused, growth oriented coping, social, cognitive, and sometimes avoidant coping strategies, though this resilience comes at the cost of emotional suppression and fatigue. Their experiences highlight the need for context-sensitive support from counselors, social workers, community programs, and policies that recognize and strengthen single-father families.

Growing up under paternal custody is neither a deficit nor a romanticized struggle; it reflects human adaptability and underscores the importance of recognizing and supporting these often-overlooked adolescents.

INTERVENTION PLAN

Project Summary

Title: Project Silong A Holistic Intervention Plan for Firstborn Adolescents in Single-Father Households

Project Location: Taloot, Argao, Cebu

Total Project Cost: ₱105,500.00

Rationale

Firstborn adolescents raised solely by their fathers often experience emotional deprivation, early parentification, and weakened support systems despite showing resilience. These unmet emotional and relational needs highlight the necessity for Project Silong, a culturally grounded psychosocial intervention that provides emotional shelter, strengthens father-child relationships, and fosters adaptive coping and resilience within the family system.

Objective

The intervention aims to improve adolescents' emotional awareness, resilience, and healthy role boundaries, while building basic financial skills and engaging community and government support to ensure sustained, collaborative care.

PROJECT SILONG INTERVENTION PLAN MATRIX

Key Result Area	Objective	Strategies	Time and Duration	Person In Charge	Budget Allocation (₱)	Expected Outcome	Remarks
Emotional Deprivation	To promote emotional expression, awareness, and healing	Strategy 1 Silong sa Kasing Kasing (Emotional Resilience Workshop)	1 day (8:00am-4:00pm)	Guidance Counselor, LGU Youth Officer, Psychologist	₱40,500.00	Participants express emotions more openly, develop self-awareness, and show improved emotional connection with their fathers.	Follow-up check-in via peer support group recommended two weeks after the workshop to reinforce skills.

Heavy Familial Obligation & Financial struggle	To empower adolescents through role balance and resilience building	Strategy 2: Lihok og Lamdag – Two-Day Empowerment & Role Balance Seminar	2 days (8:00am - 5:00pm)	DSWD Representative, Barangay Council for the Protection of Children (BCPC), Guidance Counselor, Financial Literacy Enthusiast Officer)	₱65,000.00	Participants demonstrate improved sense of identity, establish healthy boundaries, develop coping strategies for familial and financial pressures, and gain basic financial management skills.	A one-month follow-up session for reflection and peer support is recommended to monitor practical application of learned strategies.
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