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The Role of Family Members in Preventing Empty Nest Syndrome Among the Elderly in Karang Anyer Village, East Kisaran

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Abstract. This study aims to identify the experiences and variations in Empty Nest Syndrome levels among eight informants, four older adults and four family members, and to examine the role of families in preventing the syndrome in Karang Anyer Subdistrict, East Kisaran District. This descriptive qualitative study does not aim to calculate the prevalence of Empty Nest Syndrome within a population. The researchers selected informants using purposive sampling. Data were collected through observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation, then analyzed through data reduction, presentation, and conclusion drawing. The four older adults showed varying emotional responses, including loss, sadness, and emptiness. Stronger responses were observed among older adults who lived alone and had lost their spouses. In contrast, those who continued to live with their spouses, children, or grandchildren showed milder responses. Families played an important role through emotional support and positive communication, togetherness and social support, and encouragement and the development of a sense of meaning in life. These roles were perceived as supporting older adults' psychosocial adaptation. Therefore, the family can be understood as an informal educational environment. This study's limitations include its small sample size and its single-site design.

Keywords: Empty Nest Syndrome; Community Education; The Role of the Family; Older Adults; Social Support.

1. Introduction

The growing number of older adults is a demographic phenomenon in many countries, including Indonesia. Rising life expectancy and improvements in healthcare quality have increased the proportion of older adults over the years. Globally, the proportion of older adults continues to increase (WHO, 2021). In Indonesia, the older population reached approximately 25.9 million people, or 9.7% of the total population, in 2019 and was projected to increase to approximately 48.2 million people, or 15.77%, by 2035 (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2019). This situation indicates that Indonesia is entering an aging population era. Consequently, the challenges older adults face require greater attention, not only in health but also in psychological, social, and community education.

Older adults are individuals aged 60 years and above who experience various changes as part of the aging process (Pratama & Aprilia, 2023). This process is characterized by declines in physical, psychological, and social functioning that may interfere with daily activities. Aging can impair organ function, increase susceptibility to degenerative diseases, and cause psychological changes that affect older adults' quality of life (Yusmaida & Zulkarnaini, 2024). In addition to biological changes, older adults also experience changes in their family roles, particularly when their children reach adulthood and leave home for employment, marriage, or further education.

Empty Nest Syndrome is a psychological phenomenon characterized by feelings of emptiness, isolation, and a diminished sense of meaning in life after children leave their parental home. It refers

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to an emotional response resulting from reduced interaction between parents and their children (Mahendra et al., 2023). If not properly addressed, this condition may lead to stress, anxiety, depression, and a decline in the quality of life of older adults (Sulha et al., 2024). Therefore, preventive efforts are essential to help older adults adapt to changes during this stage of life.

Previous studies have examined Empty Nest Syndrome from various perspectives. Religiosity is negatively associated with symptoms of Empty Nest Syndrome among older adults (Puspitasari & Maryanti, 2021). Experiences of empty nest and loneliness among mothers living alone have also been explored (Mulyani & Kristinawati, 2021). Meanwhile, cultural contexts have been found to shape loneliness and parental well-being during the empty nest period (Hartanto et al., 2024).

Previous studies reveal several limitations. A quantitative approach was employed to examine the relationship between religiosity and symptoms of Empty Nest Syndrome among older adults, focusing on individual factors without directly examining the role of family members (Puspitasari & Maryanti, 2021)A qualitative approach involving mothers aged 40–60 years who lived alone focused on maternal experiences and did not adequately represent older adults aged 60 years and above (Mulyani & Kristinawati, 2021). The influence of cultural contexts was examined from a cross-cultural perspective, leaving specific practices of family support within particular local communities insufficiently explored (Hartanto et al., 2024). Furthermore, these three studies did not examine the role of families from a Community Education perspective.

Within the context of community education, the family serves as the first educational environment, providing continuous learning throughout life. Family education is an ongoing learning process through which family members develop knowledge, attitudes, and skills that serve as the foundation for their lives (Yunus & Wedi, 2018). Families perform affective, socialization, and healthcare functions for their members (Friedman et al., 2018). From this perspective, families can contribute in three ways: (1) serving as an informal learning environment in which older adults and family members learn to understand changing roles and psychosocial needs; (2) helping older adults develop adaptive skills to cope with life changes; and (3) encouraging older adults to participate in community activities. Thus, families function not only as caregivers but also as sources of emotional, social, and educational support for older adults.

This study's novelty lies in examining the role of families from a Community Education perspective, an aspect that remains relatively underexplored in previous research. Family relationship patterns and social environments may vary across regions and influence how older adults adapt to life changes. Therefore, a study conducted in Karang Anyer Subdistrict, East Kisaran District, provides a contextual understanding of this issue that remains limited in the existing literature.

Based on these research gaps, this study aims to identify the experiences and variations in the levels of Empty Nest Syndrome among older adults and to describe the role of family members in preventing the syndrome, which is conceptualized in this study as family efforts to facilitate the adaptation of older adults. This study does not aim to calculate the prevalence of Empty Nest Syndrome. These objectives are addressed through two research questions: (1) What are the levels of Empty Nest Syndrome experienced by older adults? Moreover, (2) What role do families play in preventing the occurrence of Empty Nest Syndrome? Both questions are addressed through a qualitative study involving older adults and their family members in Karang Anyer Subdistrict, East Kisaran District.

2. Method

This study used a descriptive qualitative approach to identify informants' experiences and variations in their responses. The research was conducted from April to June 2026 in Karang Anyer Subdistrict, East Kisaran District, Asahan Regency, North Sumatra, Indonesia.

Informants were selected using purposive sampling based on a preliminary survey indicating that many older adults in the subdistrict lived alone or with only one other person because their children no longer lived with them. The informants consisted of four older adults and four family members. The inclusion criteria for older adults were: (a) being 60 years of age or older; (b) residing

in Karang Anyer Subdistrict; (c) having children, some or all of whom lived separately, either within the same neighborhood or outside the area; and (d) exhibiting signs consistent with empty nest experiences, such as loneliness, feelings of emptiness, feeling neglected, or reduced interaction. This study aimed to identify personal experiences rather than establish clinical diagnoses. The relevance of the informants was determined through the preliminary survey and the application of these criteria.

Family members were selected based on their direct involvement in providing care for the older adults. All four family members were the biological children of the respective older adult informants. All informants agreed to participate in the study. To maintain confidentiality, their identities were anonymized using the codes L1–L4 for older adults and K1–K4 for family members. We used these codes consistently throughout the manuscript. The informants' profiles are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Research Informants' Profiles

Code	Age (Years)	Gender	Marital Status	Living Arrangements	Relationship with Older Adult
L1	72	Female	Widowed	Living Alone	Older adult (primary informant)
L2	66	Female	Widowed	Living with grandchild	Older adult (primary informant)
L3	74	Female	Widowed	Living Alone	Older adult (primary informant)
L4	70	Female	Married	Living with husband and one child	Older adult (primary informant)
K1	40	Female	Married	Living separately from L1	Biological child of L1
K2	39	Female	Married	Living separately from L2	Biological child of L2
K3	33	Male	Married	Living separately from L3	Biological child of L3
K4	37	Female	Married	Living with L4	Biological child of L4

Source: Research data, 2026

Data were collected through observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. Individual interviews lasted about 20 minutes, were audio-recorded on a mobile phone, documented in written notes, and later transcribed. The interview guidelines were developed based on three indicators of Empty Nest Syndrome (feelings of loss, feelings of sadness, and a sense of emptiness in life) and three forms of family involvement (emotional support and positive communication, togetherness and social support, and encouragement and the development of a sense of meaning in life). Each interview guideline consisted of 15 questions for older adults and 15 questions for family members.

Data were analyzed using a model comprising data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing (Miles et. al., 2014). During data reduction, the data were coded according to six indicators in the research framework: three Empty Nest Syndrome indicators and three forms of family involvement. These indicators served as the analytical themes, while irrelevant data were excluded. The data were presented narratively and compared across informants. Interview findings were compared with observations and documentation, while conclusions were continuously verified throughout the analytical process.

Data trustworthiness was assessed using four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Sugiyono, 2023). Credibility was established through methodological triangulation (observation, interviews, and documentation), source triangulation (comparing information from older adults and family members), reference materials (audio recordings and photographs), and informal checks of the researcher's understanding during interviews (member checking). We supported transferability by providing detailed descriptions of the research context and informant profiles in Table 1. We supported dependability by maintaining interview guidelines, audio recordings, field notes, and interview transcripts. We ensured confirmability by preserving research data and including direct quotations from informants.

3. Result

The research findings are presented according to the two research questions. Findings related to the three indicators of Empty Nest Syndrome and the three forms of family involvement are summarised in Table 2. In contrast, the relationships among these indicators are illustrated in Figure 1.

Levels of Empty Nest Syndrome among Older Adults

The categorization of levels was based on comparisons among informants in three aspects: marital status, living arrangements, and the intensity of reported emotional responses. Stronger emotional responses were observed among L1 and L3; responses were still evident among L2, while milder responses were observed among L4. The term "levels" refers to relative comparisons among informants rather than scores obtained from a standardized instrument and is not intended to represent a clinical diagnosis.

Feelings of Loss. Feelings of loss were most prominent among L1 and L3, who lived alone, had lost their husbands, and whose children had established their own families and moved out. L2 continued to experience feelings of loss despite living with a grandchild, whereas L4 demonstrated milder responses because she continued to live with her husband and one child. L3 stated: "The changes are very noticeable. This house used to be full of people, but now it feels much quieter, and I often feel that I have lost someone to talk to and share stories with."

Feelings of Sadness. Sadness occurred at particular times, such as at night, when informants were alone, when their children had not visited for a long time, or when not all family members attended family gatherings. Sadness occurred more frequently among older adults living alone, whereas it appeared less intense among those who continued to receive companionship from their grandchildren or spouses. L1 explained: "Usually, it happens when my children have not come home for a long time. At night, I usually call them to ease my longing for them."

A Sense of Emptiness in Life. A sense of emptiness was evident among older adults who felt that their roles had diminished after their children became independent, particularly L3, who lived alone. In contrast, L4 stated: "I feel that my role has changed, not disappeared." Some older adults coped with feelings of emptiness by joining religious study groups, gardening, and interacting with neighbors.

The Role of Family Members in Preventing Empty Nest Syndrome

The role of families was reflected in three complementary forms of support. Emotional Support and Positive Communication. Families maintained emotional connections through regular telephone calls, checking on older adults' well-being, listening to their concerns, and making visits. Families also involved older adults in decision-making processes. K1 stated: "We always ask our mother for her opinion when making decisions and involve her in family activities. We believe that this helps her feel that she still has an important role as a parent."

Togetherness and Social Support. Togetherness was demonstrated through regular visits, shared meals, and involving older adults in family gatherings. These practices varied across families. They included daily interactions with a grandchild living in the same household (L2), visits every one to two weeks (L3), and everyday companionship with a husband and one child (L4). The quality of togetherness appeared to depend not only on residential proximity but also on how consistently families maintained their relationships.

Encouragement and the Development of a Sense of Meaning in Life. Families encouraged older adults to keep engaging in activities they enjoyed and found meaningful, such as attending religious study groups, gardening, and socializing with neighbors. Older adults who were involved in family activities and treated with respect were perceived to maintain a sense of usefulness and purpose. Older adults who received all three forms of support simultaneously appeared to demonstrate better adaptation than those who received only some forms of support.

Table 2. Themes, Empirical Evidence, and Preliminary Interpretations

Theme	Subtheme	Empirical Evidence	Preliminary Interpretation
Feelings of loss	Loss of the lively atmosphere at home	L3: "The changes are very noticeable. This house used to be full of people, but now it feels much quieter, and I often feel that I have lost someone to talk to and share stories with."	Feelings of loss appear stronger among older adults who live alone and have lost their spouses (L1, L3).
Feelings of sadness	Sadness arising in specific situations	L1: "Usually, it happens when my children have not come home for a long time. At night, I usually call them to ease my longing for them."	Sadness is situational and tends to subside through communication with children.
A sense of emptiness in life	Changes or reductions in parental roles	L4: "I feel that my role has changed, not disappeared." L3: "I feel that my role has diminished considerably compared to what it used to be."	Parental roles appear to be maintained when children continue to involve older adults in family activities.
Emotional support and positive communication	Regular communication and attentive listening	K1: "We always try to call her regularly, even if only to ask how she is doing, listen to her stories, or hear about her concerns."	Communication is seen as a way to make older adults feel cared for and valued.
Togetherness and social support	Regular visits and family togetherness	L3: "Although my children cannot always come, they still make time to visit me every one or two weeks. If they cannot come, they still call me."	Maintaining family relationships consistently seems more important than residential distance.
Encouragement and the development of a sense of meaning in life	Supporting activities enjoyed by older adults	K1: "We always support our mother in continuing the activities she enjoys, such as attending religious study groups, gardening, or gathering with neighbors."	Older adults are perceived to maintain a sense of usefulness and purpose in life.

Source: Research data, 2026

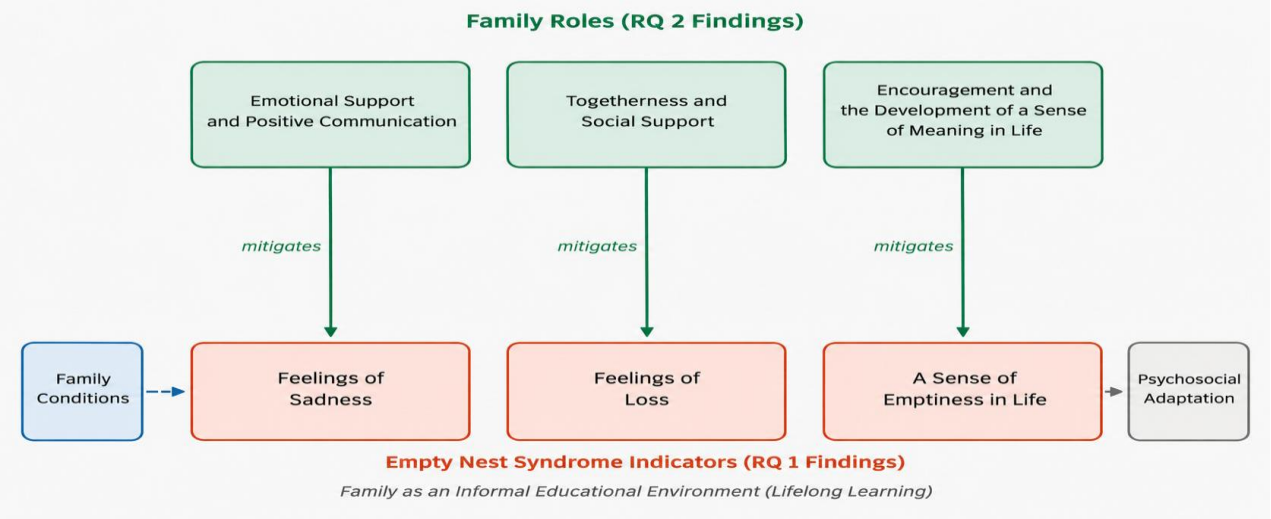


Figure 1. Relationship between Family Roles and Empty Nest Syndrome Indicators

4. Discussion

Empty Nest Experiences as an Adaptation Process

The findings indicate that empty nest experiences among older adults represent a process of psychosocial adaptation rather than merely a consequence of children leaving home. This finding is consistent with the view that Empty Nest Syndrome constitutes an emotional response to reduced interaction between parents and children, while extending this understanding to older adults, as the previous study focused on middle-aged adults (Mahendra et al., 2023). This phenomenon has also been described as a developing process that progresses from initial reactions of loss and sadness towards adaptation (Ahmadi Khatir et al., 2024). Variations in experiences among older adults are also consistent with the finding that the psychological well-being of older adults experiencing an empty nest is influenced by living arrangements, social support, coping abilities, and the quality of family relationships (Park & Mendoza, 2022). The experience of double loss among L1 and L3, involving both the loss of a spouse and the departure of their children, is consistent with the description of loneliness resulting from separation from emotionally close individuals. However, since the previous study examined middle-aged mothers, this similarity should be interpreted as an indication rather than a direct comparison (Akmalah, 2014).

Emotional Connectedness and Family Support

Bowen's Family Systems Theory provides a useful framework for understanding these findings. Families are viewed as interconnected emotional systems in which changes affecting one member influence other members. Therefore, children's departure can be understood as requiring mutual adjustment rather than adaptation solely on the part of older adults (Mahmudah et al., 2024; Sugitanata, 2024). This is reflected in L3's statement that her children still make time to visit and call her, even when they cannot always come in person. The finding that consistency in maintaining family relationships appears more important than residential distance further supports this perspective.

The three forms of family involvement identified in this study support the view that families fulfill the emotional and social needs of their members throughout the life cycle (Friedman et al., 2018). Warm relationships, open communication, and family attention are also associated with reduced psychological distress and loneliness among older adults (Santrock, 2018). Furthermore, the presence of children, frequency of communication, and emotional support have been reported to influence older adults' perceptions of social support (Tajvar et al., 2023).

Meaning in Life and the Roles of Older Adults

Regarding the indicator of a sense of emptiness in life, L4 stated that her role had "changed, not disappeared", whereas L3 felt that her role had diminished considerably. This difference appears to be related to the extent to which children continue to involve older adults in family decisions and activities. This finding is consistent with the view that having a sense of purpose in life is an important factor in the psychological well-being of older adults (Asharani et al., 2022). The involvement of older adults in religious study groups and gardening activities is also consistent with findings highlighting the role of religiosity in relation to Empty Nest Syndrome symptoms (Puspitasari & Maryanti, 2021), as well as research describing loneliness among mothers living alone, which resembles the experiences of L1 and L3 (Mulyani & Kristinawati, 2021).

Contributions from a Community Education Perspective

From a Community Education perspective, older adults are viewed as active individuals who continue to learn rather than merely as recipients of assistance. Communication, family visits, and the involvement of older adults in family life can be understood as forms of informal lifelong learning (Yunus & Wedi, 2018). Through these interactions, older adults learn to accept changes in their roles and establish new routines, while family members learn to understand older adults' psychosocial needs. This perspective can also be extended to non-formal education through initiatives such as educational programs and learning groups for families and older adults.

Variations in Experiences and Inadequate Support

Family support does not necessarily eliminate feelings of loneliness. L3 continued to experience loneliness at night despite receiving regular visits from her children. L1 explained that her children's attention was helpful not only when they asked about her well-being but also when

they sought her opinions. This study did not examine situations in which family support was absent or failed to meet older adults' needs.

Practical Implications

For families, the findings highlight the importance of consistent communication, regular visits, and involving older adults in family decisions and activities. For community health volunteers (*posyandu cadres*), the findings emphasize the need to monitor the psychosocial well-being of older adults, particularly those who live alone and have lost their spouses. For local government authorities, these findings may provide a basis for developing educational programs, learning groups, and social and religious activities that actively involve older adults.

Challenges

The challenges identified include geographical distance, children's work and family commitments, and potentially limited community support. K1 explained that visits could only happen on holidays because family members had busy schedules.

Limitations of the Study

This study was limited to four older adults and four family members from a single subdistrict; therefore, its findings cannot be generalized to a wider population. All older adult informants were women, and all family informants were biological children. Consequently, the experiences of older men and the roles of other family members were not represented. Data verification with informants was conducted informally.

5. Conclusion

Experiences of Empty Nest Syndrome among older adults in Karang Anyer Subdistrict varied across three indicators: feelings of loss, feelings of sadness, and a sense of emptiness in life. Stronger responses were observed among older adults who lived alone and had lost their spouses. In contrast, milder responses were found among those who continued to live with their spouses, children, or grandchildren.

Families played a role in facilitating older adults' adaptation through emotional support and positive communication, togetherness and social support, and encouragement and the development of a sense of meaning in life. These roles were perceived to support older adults' psychosocial well-being. The findings are descriptive and are not intended to establish causal relationships. This study also contributes to the literature on family roles in elderly care through a Community Education perspective.

This study was limited by its small number of informants, relatively homogeneous informant characteristics, and focus on a single local community. Therefore, the findings are not intended to be generalized to a wider population. Families are encouraged to maintain consistent communication and actively involve older adults in family life. Community Education programs may also develop educational initiatives and learning groups for families and older adults. Future research should use larger samples, compare locations, and use a mixed-methods design.

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