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ABSTRACT

Schools are more and more called upon to accomodate students' differences in background and experiences; this picture of diversity includes the growing number of one-parent families. However, educators need to be cautioned against expecting "trouble" from the child from a one-parent family. The diversity among research findings suggests that while, as a group, single-parent children tend to have more behavioral problems in school and are at greater risk in terms of truancy and dropout rate, the likelihood of any particular child having cognitive or behavioral problems depends upon the interaction of many factors. Among those factors are the adequacy of child care arrangements; the number of siblings; the structure of the child's environment in both the home and school; the amount of nurturing the child receives; the age, sex, and race of the child; the socioeconomic level of the family; and the circumstances surrounding the separation of the parents. Therefore, the only accurate answer to the question of whether single-parentness is harmful to a child's academic or behavioral development may well be, "It depends." (RDN)

A CLOSER LOOK AT CHILDREN IN SINGLE-PARENT FAMILIES

by

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A Closer Look at Children in Single-Parent Families

For generations educators have assumed that children living with one parent have more trouble in school than children from two-parent families. As the number of single-parent families has grown, so has concern about the well being of their children. This concern has given rise to new research as well as to reexaminations of work conducted during the 1960s and 1970s. These new studies indicate that the situation is much more complex than originally thought. The experience of living in a single-parent home varies greatly according to a large number of factors. While statistics are helpful as at-risk indicators, day-to-day dealings with students should be guided by strong consideration of the particular circumstances of the individual child.

Profile of Single-Parent Families

Recent census figures and research data indicate the single-parent family is typically headed by a working mother, and in comparison to the two-parent family has fewer financial resources and tends to relocate more often (8, 9, 13).

Figures also show that the number of such families is burgeoning. The ranks of single-parent families swelled to more than 70% in the last decade, from 11% of all families in 1970 to 19% in 1979. Among black families the statistics are even more striking: nearly 45% of families are headed by one parent. Among white families, 14% are single-parent, and among Spanish-speaking families, 27% are single-parent. Overall, one-parent families are more prevalent in American cities than in rural areas: 1982 figures show that 20% of families living in standard metropolitan areas are single-parent, compared with 15% in nonmetropolitan areas (13).

Throughout the country, 12 million children — one out of five — are now living in one-parent families, and a million more are being added to that total each year. Female-headed families, which comprise 9 out of 10 one-parent families, are increasing 10 times as quickly as two-parent families (8). The Bureau of Census estimates that 45% of all children born today in this country will spend at least a year living with one parent (10).

The typical three-person family headed by a single mother operates on an average yearly income of $7,035 — just a little more than a third of the average income ($20,400) of the typical four-person family headed by a father and mother (9). Partly because of reduced income that results from removal of one parent, usually the father, single-parent families tend to relocate more often. A 1980 longitudinal study (8) of 26 schools in 14 states found that one-parent families with elementary school children tend to relocate twice as frequently as two-parent families; at the secondary level the ratio was three to one (8).

In addition to being more mobile, women heading single-parent families are often employed outside the home. Among female-headed families with school-age children, 72% of the women are employed, compared with 59% employment among mothers in two-parent families (4).

Are Single-Parent Children At-Risk in School?

Early research has indicated that children from single-parent families scored significantly lower on achievement tests, had more behavioral problems in school, and received lower teacher-assigned grades than did children in two-parent families (3). However, recent work reexamining earlier research for methodological and statistical adequacy tempers some of these findings and concludes that single-parent children are at less academic risk than previously thought (3, 11, 14).

Hetherington et al. (3) in a review of 58 studies, found the differences between children in one- and two-parent families on tests of intelligence and aptitude are usually small and become less significant when socioeconomic status is considered. They note the difference in IQ between children in single- and two-parent families is smaller than the difference in teacher-assigned grades and postulate that the greater disparity in grades may be due to

- teachers perceiving students who do not conform to school routines and requirements as less competent
- students' functioning in school being affected by home conditions surrounding separation and divorce
- children having less time for homework because of household and child-care tasks

Newer studies do, however, confirm earlier findings regarding the behavior of single-parent children. Researchers generally agree that, in relation to two-parent children, one-parent children

- are absent, truant, and tardy more often
- have less efficient work or study habits
- are more disruptive in the classroom
- at the secondary level, visit in-school health clinics more often
- are more likely to drop out of school (3, 8)

Recent research has also found that parents' divorce tends to have longer lasting and more serious effects on the behavior of boys than on girls. Among both boys and girls, the absence of a father by death is less detrimental than absence due to the voluntary separation of the parents (7). For children of divorce, behavior problems such as disobedience, aggression, and excessive demands for attention are most frequent during the first two years after the divorce and then tend to decrease (3).

Although research indicates that, as a group, single-parent children exhibit more behavioral problems, and that many factors negatively affecting achievement and behavior may be more prevalent in one-parent homes, single-parentness is not necessarily the problem (14). For example, in a NAESP study (8), using subsidized school lunch participation as a proxy for family income, data on 14,493 students in grades 7-12 indicated that family income and the sex of the student had a greater effect on achievement rank than did the absence of a parent (usually the father) in the home.

Several studies have found that single-parent children actually function better than children in conflict-ridden families, and one study found children of divorced parents to be more independent in school and at home (2).

Because working women usually head single-parent families, many have assumed that their children suffer the doubly harmful

effects of loss of one parent and lack of attention from the other. Although there has been little research on the effects of maternal employment on one-parent families, existing studies do not support popular assumptions. The evidence suggests that if adequate provisions are made for child care and maintenance of household routines, maternal employment may have no adverse effects on children (7). One exception to this finding is that if a mother begins to work at the time of divorce or shortly thereafter, the preschool child may tend to exhibit a higher rate of behavioral disorders (7).

The Minority Single-Parent Family

While there has been a great deal of research on the single-parent child, most studies have dealt with the effects of divorce but have neglected large numbers of families in which the mother never married. Furthermore, little work has been done on how the experience of living in a single-parent (usually fatherless) household differs according to such factors as race and urban versus rural habitation. Such factors may be important. As Hetherington et al. (3) note, the presence of extended families and community networks among blacks may make the single-parent experience significantly different for black children.

With regard to achievement, studies of black children, like interracial studies, show small and nonsignificant effects of one-parent rearing (3). There is some evidence, however, that the social and emotional adjustment of urban black children both from single-parent and two-parent families may be hindered by the "latchkey phenomenon," a term used to describe the increasing number of children who, for a certain number of hours each day, are expected to care for themselves without the supervision of an adult. Although this phenomenon occurs in all socioeconomic groups, it may be more prevalant among urban, black elementary school children, where the ratio may be as high as one in three (6).

In their study of latchkey children in grades 1-6 in a black, urban parochial school, Long and Long found that such children often suffer increased fear responses and insecurity, and, because they frequently are not allowed to invite friends to their homes, experience a serious curtailment of socializing play (6).

On the other hand, older studies indicate that the child-rearing practices of working mothers in lower socioeconomic groups and in one-parent (usually female-headed) families may be superior in some ways to the practices of other mothers in enhancing the social and emotional adjustment of their children. Working mothers are more likely to create structured environments for their children and to be more consistent in dealing with them (4). Consistency and structure have been shown to facilitate the adjustment of children who are under stress (3).

In terms of hope and expectations for their children, black single mothers are no different from all other mothers. Black mothers whose marriages have ended or who never married have been found to be no less aspiring for the educational achievement of their children than are mothers in two-parent families (3).

The Single-Parent Family and the School

A recent study of parents and teachers found that teachers had lower expectations of children from single-parent families (5). Likewise, parents perceived that teachers would have lower expectations of such children. The findings suggest that teachers' negative expectations for single-parent children may have an effect on performance, and underscore the need for teachers and administrators to exercise care in dealing with single-parent children and their parents. The literature contains a number of recommendations:

- Teachers and administrators should avoid using pejorative language (e.g., broken families) and expressing prejudicial attitudes toward single-parent families, and should be flexible in scheduling parent-teacher conferences (1, 9).
- Schools should provide curricula that do not perpetuate the "typical family" myth of working father, stay-at-home mother, and two children. (In fact, only 7% of today's American families fit this mold) (9).
- Administrators should keep close records on single-parent children; requests by noncustodial parents for report cards and school records should be granted (1, 8, 9).
- School personnel should recognize the needs of single-parent families by way of special services for teachers, parents, and children. These services may include provision of in-service seminars for educators that can teach them to recognize symptoms of stress in the classroom; discussion groups for children and or their parents, led by school counselors or outside professionals; and informational materials and reading lists for single parents from various organizations (9, 10, 12).

Summary

Today, schools are more and more called upon to accomodate students' differences in background and experiences; this picture of diversity also includes the growing number of one-parent families. However, educators need to be cautioned against expecting "trouble" from the child from a one-parent family. The diversity among research findings suggests that while, as a group, single-parent children tend to have more behavioral problems in school and are at greater risk in terms of truancy and dropout rate, the likelihood of any particular child having cognitive or behavioral problems depends upon the interaction of many factors. Among those factors are the adequacy of child care arrangements; the number of siblings; the structure of the child's environment in both the home and the school; the amount of nurturing the child receives; the age, sex, and race of the child; the socioeconomic level of the family; and the circumstances surrounding the separation of the parents. Therefore, the only accurate answer to the question of whether single-parentness is harmful to a child's academic or behavioral development may well be, "It depends."

—Patricia Palker Roddy

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