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Perspective

Single Parenting: Impact on Child's Development

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Abstract

Age-old societal beliefs are being challenged and constantly changing with urbanization, industrialization, and modernization, which have blurred the typical family gender roles and structure. The studies conducted 2 to 3 decades back showed that family instability can negatively affect children's development. The absence or loss of one parent and conflicts between separated and divorced parents affect not only the child's mental health but also the child's physical health, overall growth, and future relationships. Single parents are often overburdened with the responsibilities of 2 parents, face social stigma, and lack social support, as a result they have difficulty spending time with their children. Hence children of single parents have poor academic performance, decreased social interactions, emotional and behavioral problems. Newer research has focused on the positive outcomes and protective factors that can steer the child towards better outcome. We need to focus on such protective and resilience-building factors to help the child adjust in the short and long run.

Keywords

Single parent family, single parent, child development, impact, resilience, divorce

Introduction

Parenting is a process and a state of being a parent. It includes nourishing, protecting, and guiding a child through development.[1] Traditionally, parenting included dichotomous gender-linked roles, with the mother being involved in nurturing and providing emotional support to the child, whereas the father was involved in providing protection and disciplining the child.[2] With the attaining of better education, dual-earning parents, higher income, and gender equality, there has been a shift in the paradigm of the family and the advent of gender-neutral roles in parenting. [3] This, along with industrialization and globalization, has seen a rise in single-parent families.

A single parent can be a single mother or a single father, a solo parent, where the individual is a divorcee or a widow or widower, separated from their partner and unplanned pregnancy, or could be a single parent by choice, where a man or woman chooses to become a single parent through donor insemination or adoption living with one or more dependent children without the presence and support of an adult partner sharing the responsibility of parenting.[4–8]

Globally, the United States (23%) and the United Kingdom(21%) have the highest number of children living in single parent households. On average, around 6.8% of children live in single-parent households worldwide. India was noted to have 5% of single-parent households.[9] Single parent statistics by gender shows that there are more women than men who are single parents.[10] Among the single parents in the world, single mothers comprise the overwhelming majority of 84.3% and lone-father households comprise 15.7%, indicating that women bear primary responsibility for child-rearing and the family's economic survival. The prevalence of single fathers is low, as men are more likely to re-marry and leave their offspring in the care of their mothers or other female relatives. Multiple reasons have been listed for lone mothers to establish their own homes, such as divorce, separation from spouse, widowed, male migration, intimate partner violence, abandonment, a quest for independence, and or social norms or laws that make it difficult for women to

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re-marry or enter a new union. In India, the number of "lone mothers" is rising, with 4.5% (approx. 13 million) of all Indian households run by single mothers.[11]

A few decades ago, death of the spouse used to be the most common cause of the rise in single-parent households, whereas now we see a rise in other reasons for single parenthood such as parental divorce, parental separation, unplanned pregnancy, and choice to be a single parent by adoption or donor insemination.[12,13,14] Studies have suggested that the loss of a parent by separation or death is associated with psychiatric disorders, especially depression.[15,16,17] These studies also indicate that the loss of a mother more than a father accounted for the increased rate of depression. This has been already noted by the work of Bowlby (1969, 1973) and Rutter and Madge (1976), who suggested that the disruption of parental bonds in childhood is likely to lead to psychopathology in adulthood, and they emphasized the role of quality of replacement care or substituted care as crucial pathogenic factor.[18,19,20]

The separation or divorce of parents is not just a single event, it is a process and the adjustment of the child to the new norm occurs in stages. The onset of mental health concerns in children with single parents occurs long before the actual event of the separation due to the conflicts between their parents. They experience painful emotions initially, that include sadness, confusion, fear of abandonment, anger, guilt, grief and conflicts related to loyalty, concerns about what will happen to them, and misconceptions. Most children experience feelings of loss when one parent leaves the family, but some feel a sense of relief in families where domestic violence or abuse is involved.[21-26] Research has suggested an ongoing gap between children of divorced parents and continuously married parents in various aspects.[27] Most research have shown that single-parenting households have a negative impact on children as compared to positive impact. We have enumerated the effects and impacts on children brought up by single parents.

Impact Based on Various Age Groups of Children

Studies have shown mixed findings on how single-parenting impacts children's physical health and development; some studies showed that these were due to the co-varying differences in socioeconomic status, and others reported a negative impact of single parenting on factors such as child mortality, homicide, and childhood stunting.[28] Infants and children younger than 3 years of age may reflect a caregiver's distress and grief, manifested as irritability, poor sleep-wake rhythms, separation anxiety, feeding disturbances, or even developmental regression.[27]

Adverse neonatal outcomes, such as low birth weight, preterm birth, small for gestational age, and admission to the neonatal intensive care unit, are more likely to occur in children born to single mothers. These single mothers were more likely to be unmarried, less likely to engage in prenatal care, more likely to be primiparous, use alcohol, smoke, and have pregnancy-related diabetes.[29]

Young children between the ages of 2 and 6 years feel fearful, confused, and abandoned during parental separation. Children in this age group adapt quickly as they are often too young to remember their noncustodial parent vividly.[30] The age group of 7 to 12 years can express emotions, accept parental separation much better. They distrust their parents, seek and rely on outside support, and may manifest social and emotional problems.[31] Adolescents are the worst affected by their parents' divorce, as they find it difficult to accept the change. They may even abandon their home and have challenges in expressing their emotions.[22,30]

Impact on Cognitive Development and Academic Performance

Various studies have found reduction in academic performance, motivation, and creativity among those growing up in single-parent households. Children were likelier to drop out, have poorer grades, and get jobs outside of school. The socioeconomic status of single-parent families and the parent's lack of participation in school activities might be the reason for reduced academic performance. Compared to the children whose fathers were less involved, higher paternal involvement in school was associated with better academic function and behavior, including higher scores, fewer absences, and a positive attitude towards school.[28,32] Children from divorced homes have less language stimulation, are more likely to have lower grades, are made to repeat a year of school, have lower math and science scores, and more likely to be diagnosed with learning disabilities.[33]

Impact on Economic Resources and Social Support System

Children in single-parent families usually don't have the same resources as regular families.[32] Loss of net income, as obtained when married, may lead to increased work time for parents and repeated change in residence. It has been noted that children living with single mothers are much more likely to live in poverty than children living with both married parents. Although most custodial mothers have child support agreements, custodial fathers rarely receive child support. Custodial fathers also experience financial loss, but they tend to recover more quickly financially.[33] The child may lose social support systems such as grandparents, friends, school teachers, neighbors, and others due to a change in residence or a weakened relationship with grandparents or relatives of the noncustodial parent. The child may also lose family traditions, may face disruption of celebrations, daily routines, and become less religious.[33,34]

Impact on Emotional and Behavioural Well Being

With the intensification of the conflict between the parents, the emotional and behavioral problems among children intensifies whether the parents are married or divorced. The risk of negative impact depended on whether the conflict's nature and character were more focused on the child and the frequency and degree of violence involved in parental conflicts. Children faced less level of stress and anxiety if parents demonstrated an excellent capacity to solve conflicts during the process of separation.[32]

Immediately after parental divorce, separation, or remarriage, when children cope with the new situation and confusion, they experience emotional distress, anxiety, depression, and behavior problems such as anger, resentment, and noncompliance. These responses diminish as time passes in most children, but a few experience delayed effects; they appear to adjust well in the early stages but have difficulties later.[34] Children of single parents develop negative feelings about themselves, feel unwanted, have reduced self-esteem, and constantly compare themselves with children living with both parents due to the absence of another parent. This may lead to repressed anger and resentment towards their missing parent and may also show sadness and loneliness.[35,36]

Studies in African countries showed that children of single-parent families scored lower on assessments of psychological well-being than children from dual-parent households and faced depression, suicide, and substance abuse at higher rates. Indian studies showed that children from single-parent households, especially single father headed, had a higher rate of externalizing and internalizing problem behaviors. Girls had the most significant behavioral problems, followed by boys from single-father households. In contrast, girls were well-behaved in single-mother households. These children tended to hide more from their parents, had higher rates of dropping out of high school, and had higher rates of alcohol and substance abuse.[28] Boys from single mother headed families showed impaired masculine development, sort to criminal behavior, and had difficulty controlling impulses due to lacking of a male figure. It has been reported that the experience of the divorce process is the one that affects juvenile delinquency. Teenagers of divorced parents, compared to teens of nondivorced parents, have a higher risk of developing mental disorders, risk of substance addiction, alcoholism, or getting pregnant.[32] Such problems arise due to a lack of economic resources in mother-headed households and limited parenting resources in father-headed households. Higher rates of delinquency among children from single-parent households are due to attention-seeking and yearning for affection.[28] Parental divorce is one of the parental factors related to the increased risk of suicide among young people. Studies have found higher rate of depression, suicidal attempts, and higher risk of suicide among girls, compared to boys of divorced parents, whereas suicidal ideation among boys of divorced parents was common.[32] Children also exhibit inattention problems, hyperactivity, and somatic symptoms such as headache.[32,33]

Young adults of divorced parents report more overall chronic stress (social isolation, chronic worrying, and work discontent), loneliness, attachment anxiety, avoidance, and personality disorders than young adults whose parents still lived together.[37]

Impact on Parenting and Parent-Child Relationship

With the adjustment to new role as a divorced custodial parent, they tend to invest less time in parenting as they need to work long hours to support the family and play the role of dual parent. As the noncustodial parent visits occasionally, the bonding and contact between the child and the parent lead to a loss of knowledge, skills, and resources from that parent.[32,33] Parenting during the early period following a divorce is often characterized by increased irritability, coercion, diminished communication, affection, consistency, control, and supervision, which improves after the first year of divorce.[34]

Baer (1999) reported that adolescents in single-parent families have more conflict with their parents, less positive communication, and low levels of family cohesion than their counterparts living in nuclear families.[38] Children living with one biological parent experienced 3 to 8 times more severe neighborhood violence, caregiver violence, or caregiver incarceration or have lived with a caregiver with mental illness or an alcohol or drug problem than the children living with 2 biological parents.[33] Dr Richard Gardner introduced the term "parental alienation syndrome," a phenomenon that arises primarily in the context of custody battles, with the manifestation of a child's campaign of denigration or defamation against either of his parents, where the content has no foundation, in reality, acting in accord to another parent's manipulation. There can also be false allegations of sexual abuse and physical abuse made.[32]

As the single-parents move in and out of intimate relationships, children are exposed to the changes and stresses associated with multiple family transitions. Remarriage of the custodial or noncustodial parent has positive and negative impacts on the child. The child faces the stress of adjusting to the new step-parent, stepsiblings, extended families, and traditions. The presence of caring step-parent offers possible emotional, practical, and social support for both the biological parent and the child. If the single parent is distressed and unable to handle their responsibilities, instrumental and emotional parentification of the child occurs who assume more adult-like roles, including performing household tasks, taking care of siblings, and serving as emotional support, advisor, or confidant to distressed parents.[34]

Impact on Social Development and Social Communication

Parents provide an initial opportunity for children to develop relationships, communicate, and interact.[39] Parents are role model for their children to develop healthy relationships and help them relate positively with people around them.[40] Parental divorce can cause impaired development of social skills difficulty in social adjustment, insecure attachment, difficulty in starting a new friendship, poor communication skills, and difficulty in engaging in satisfactory intimate relationships. Their future relationships are affected due to the lack of a healthy model of long-term relationships with the situations.[30,41] Single parents are often overprotective of their children, which can affect the child's social skills development.[41] Children of single parents often miss the other parent's role who is not involved in their life, especially if the parent is of the same sex, as there is no role model. Hence these children may seek support from outside, including unapproved sources by the parent, such as social media and peers.[42,43,44] Lack of parenting and supervision by the single parent can lead to wrong choice of friends, cyberbullying, being aggressive, over-involvement in social media, being influenced inappropriately by social media and various internet sites, and having less physical interaction. Lack of social skills, in turn, can lead to low self-esteem.[41,45,46]

Children of single parents may have a different outlook on sexual behavior and adult intimate relationships, such as increased approval of premarital sex, cohabitation, earlier age of initiation of sexual activities, teenage pregnancies, and divorce when compared to their counterparts with nondivorced or dual parent cohabited children. They are less likely to view marriage as permanent and a lifelong commitment. In adulthood, they experience less trust and satisfaction in romantic relationships.[33] These children are stigmatized and disrespected for not having a family and are constantly reminded of the missing parent.[28,47] The stigma, lack of social support, lack of social acceptance faced by single-parent children and constant negative judgments by extended relatives may lead to a socially challenging experience, reducing their motivation to seek social support, lower participation in social and recreational activities, experiencing sadness, vulnerability, and lowered sense of belongingness.[48]

Positive Impacts of Single Parenting on Children

Studies have indicated that children and parents' bonding increases in a single-parenting family compared to the children and parents in nuclear families. Children raised by single parents develop a strong sense of community as they and their single parents are more involved in community activities. They appreciate the value of parenthood and try to be successful parents in the future to their children. Most of the children are taught by their single parents to balance their needs and the needs of others, as well as work hard towards their goals. They become successful in their career as they become resilient at a very young age.[48,49] As these children spend more time in household chores and duties helping their single parent, they are more responsible and mature than their counterparts.[48,50] These children understand the struggle of their parents, assume parental responsibilities, become mature early, are more self-resilient, are involved in family decision-making, and develop elevated emotional regulation and problem-solving abilities.[48] Few studies have suggested that adolescents from single-parent households develop confidence and high self-esteem as they are not subjected to parental conflicts and domestic violence.[49,51]

Interventions and Recommendations

Single-parent families have become a way of life in the west and are increasing in India. Children of single-parent families are at risk for diverse short and long-term negative outcomes. Longitudinal studies have indicated that most youngsters from single parent families develop normally and only some of them have problems before separation and some develop problems after seperation.[52] There is a need for more holistic approach of interventions that can tackle the wide-ranging problems that single parents and their children face.

Effective Parenting, Parental Responsibilities, and Parent Child Relationship

Parenting and parent-child relationships with warmth, nurturance, supportiveness, effective discipline, limit-setting, developmentally appropriate expectations, problem-solving skills, positive communication, and low levels of conflict and negativity are protective and resilience-promoting factors for children experiencing parental separation or divorce. Developing a strong parent-child relationship depends on frequently communicating, effectively, and openly expressing their love with children. It is difficult to know what the children are thinking and going through, as most of the children do not communicate about the divorce with their parents. Parents need to listen without judgment, reflect understanding, allow silence, respond with empathy, establish family routines, share activities, and increase one-on-one time with each child. Parents need to control their conflicts, develop a respectful, business-like relationship with each other, with clear boundaries and ground rules for interacting and working together towards the children's best interests and well-being. Both parents need to be involved in school meetings, school visits and after-school activities of the child. Support groups and group

therapy for children can help them reduce sense of isolation, clarifies their misconceptions, and helps them learn problem-solving techniques, and communicate more effectively with parents. Parents need to look after their own health, seek mental health professional help for their emotional turmoil, compartmentalize time for different activities, and set aside time for themselves.[27,34]

When single parents enter into a new relationship too quickly, it can increase a child's sense of loss and the fear of being "replaced" as a parent shifts the focus to a new partner. Introduction to new relationships needs to be done slowly and handled with care.[27,34] The stepparents need to build a warm and involved relationship with the child, support the biological parents' discipline. Extended families, such as grandparents living together with single parent needs to be supportive of the parent's decisions, show limited control, reduce unwanted advice and criticism.[34]

Promotion of Social Development

Single parents need to be educated to develop social relationships through healthy conversations with their children and friends, such as communicating politely, with respect, with honesty, giving each other space and by, managing their anger, and positively resolving their conflicts. They need to provide an opportunity to their children to discuss social conflicts in a nonjudgmental way and let them solve their problems independently. They have to discuss about bullying and harassment, both in person and on the internet. Single parents have to be available and approachable. The single parent needs to work towards understanding their child's interests and hobbies and help them make friends by getting them involved in activities that match their interests and have more meaningful interactions. They are required to make them understand which risks will enable them to test their skills and which risks may have harmful consequences even though those behaviors are encouraged by peers.[34,41]

Learning institutions can promote social development by developing debate and public speaking programs. This, in turn, can cultivate self-confidence and self-esteem among children. Guidance and Counseling teams of schools must serve in identifying children with poor social skills and help them. Also, they can make provisions for life-skills training programs in terms of an empowerment program for decision-making, conflict resolution, and anger managemnt.[41]

Legal and Therapeutic Interventions

Most of the past guidelines regarding visitation and custody of the child in divorced parents were designed uniformly as suitable for everyone, in which the children live half the time with the custodial parent, and several individual days are served for the non-custodial parent, who is usually the father. In individual custody one parent makes all the decisions and doesn't consult or notify the other parent. The introduction of the joint legal custody enables both parents to participate in important decisions concerning their children (eg, health, education, daycare, etc). Adolescents want their living arrangements to let them see their noncustodial parent whenever desired. Children adapt better to a joint custody arrangement rather than with a single custody parent.[32,34] Studies have suggested that a good relationship between the child with the custodial parent predicts fewer behavioural problems, better communication skills, better grades, and higher ratings of adjustment.[27] Emotional and behavior problems can be treated by mental health professionals through medications as well as therapy. School-based programs and child-focused interventions appear to be more helpful in reducing their distress. Programs focused on parents and parenting interventions have been used in parental adjustment and parenting practices.[34]

Building Resilience

Although studies have highlighted the negative outcomes of children living in single-parent families, most children grow up normally and have positive outcomes. Children's resilience can be developed by reducing risk factors and cultivating protective factors. Factors that can reduce the risk of negative outcomes and promote positive outcomes include warm and competent parents, lack of depression and other psychological disorders among parents, low conflicts among parents, living arrangements after separation satisfactory for the child, joint custody of the child, improved communication and healthy relationship between parent and child, authoritative parenting, financial and household stability and supportive extended family, sibling relationship, and extra-familial social relationship.[27,32,34,53] The risk of negative outcomes for these children increased with either or both custodial and noncustodial parents having a mental illness, substance use disorder, poor parenting habits, multiple family transitions, unstable household, poverty, bad parent-child relationship, and no social support.[27,32,34]

Children's temperament is another critical factor that determines maladjustment or resilience. Externalizing problems stem from a lack of persistence or intentional self-regulation, and withdrawal and shyness are more related to internalizing problems. Children with an easy temperament, physical attractiveness, average or above-average intelligence, high self-esteem, a sense of humor, persistent temperamental trait, having a social responsibility are free from the influence of others, have active coping styles, are more resilient, more likely to evoke positive responses and support from others, are better at adapting to the stresses and challenges of single-parent family. On the other hand, children with difficult temperaments, less attractive individual characteristics, low self-efficacy, an external locus of control, who

blame themselves for the divorce, who rely on distraction or avoidance rather than active coping skills are more likely to exhibit behavioral problems and have difficulty in coping and adjusting with marital transitions, separation, and challenges of single parent family.[34,53]

Conclusion

For various reasons, single parenting is on the rise in India, especially with the blurring of the lines of gender roles, gender equality, acceptance of various gender and their preferences, and also due to the loss of a parent in the COVID-19 pandemic. With such a shift in family dynamics, we all have to be prepared to face the impacts of single parenting on children and parents. It is widely known through various studies that single parenting, especially in the background of parental divorce, separation, parental abandonment, and abuse, negatively impacts their children. Children of single parents are emotionally disturbed, have behavioural problems, have difficulty socializing, have impairment in physical, social and cognitive development, low educational achievement, and low self-esteem. Very few studies have highlighted the positive outcomes of single-parenting households that include higher resilience, greater sense of responsibility, better emotional regulation, better problem-solving skills, and are involved in decision-making of the family. It has also been noted that only a few of them in a single parenting household have negative impacts, and we need to work to prevent these negative impacts by identifying the risk factors and promoting resilience-building, protective factors. As mental health professionals, we need to reach out to these families to ensure their mental and emotional well-being and help them develop effective parenting techniques.

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