

Single-Parent Families and Adolescent Well-being

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AUTHOR BIO

Yayue Deng, a girl who grew up in a single-parent family, is a high school student in South China who will graduate from high school in 2024 and go abroad as an undergraduate. She has various interests in her daily life, such as dancing, playing the piano, chess, badminton, and sketching. In academic learning, she loves psychology in general. Specifically, social psychology and development psychology. The reason for writing this paper is that since she has grown up in a single-parent family, she has faced lots of surprise from others about how mentally and physically healthy she is when they learn that she is from a single-parent family. She argues that family structure is not an obstacle in adolescent growth, and that the things that determine adolescent well being are enough love, support, and attention from parents.

ABSTRACT

With the current high divorce rate in lots of countries, including China and the United States, the number of single-parent families is rapidly increasing, so single-parent families are no longer uncommon. However, most people still perceive that the single-parent family structure is harmful to children's development and adolescent well-being as all socioeconomic support and family responsibilities are shouldered by one parent. Nevertheless, this paper explains that children who grow up in single-parent families can receive and achieve nourishment and well-being equivalent to children in two-parent families by pointing to two factors to alleviate this common concern, one related to the distribution of the divorce rate and household income, and the other related to community support. Also, this paper illustrates the points that truly matter to adolescent wellbeing, including contact, comfort and emotional attachment, attachment behaviors and bonds, and parenting style and scaffolding behaviors, which can be achieved regardless of the family structure and that are more about love, support, attention, and strong attachment bonds.

Keywords: *Single-parent families, socioeconomic support, emotional support, contact comfort, community support, parental income, adolescent well-being, parenting style, attachment theory, attachment bond.*

INTRODUCTION

From 1900 to 2018, the divorce rate increased from 4.1% to 15.7% in the United States (Schweizer 2020), and 0.018 % to 0.336% from 1978 to 2019 in China (CEIC, 202). Under the sky-high divorce rate, the number of single-parent families has had an upward trend. In the United States, nearly 24 million children live in single-parent families (Casey, 2022), which triggers discussions centered on the impact of single-parent structure on adolescent wellbeing, a secure state in which teenagers are healthy both physically and mentally and can achieve their potential future growth (Ross et al., 2020). People commonly assume that with a lack of one side of the parental unit, children, especially in adolescence, will more likely live in poverty compared to those from married-parent families. As a result, children's physical and mental wellbeing would be negatively influenced due to limited financial and socioeconomic support (Casey, 2022). In reality, children who grow up in single-parent families receive as much nourishment as children in two-parent families. This paper gives two solutions to this common concern and reiterates the elements, including love, support, and strong attachment, that matter in the development of children.

LIMITATIONS

This paper does not distinguish between single-mother families and single-father families, and it does not discuss cultural differences between families..

Common Concerns Regarding Single-Parent Households

The main concern about single-parent families is that there is only one source of income, which may limit the developing person's access to basic needs and their opportunities for extracurricular enrichment. Furthermore, single-mother families are the

main victims of low socioeconomic support, due to the gender stereotypes in employment and education. This criticism leads to the conclusion that single-parent families are detrimental to children's development because they are devoid of food, health care, shelter, utilities, and transportation (Casey, 2022). However, the impact of relatively lower income in single-parent families than married-parent families can be eased by a difference of distribution in marital dissolution and support of community.

Parental Income

In understanding the distribution of divorce and parental income, low socioeconomic support can be alleviated. Urbanites have a higher marital dissolution rate than those in rural areas, due to variations in social controls and interactions (Shelton, 2016). At the same time, urban cities' household income is higher than rural areas, which means single-parent families in urban areas may still have enough financial power to raise their children comfortably. Similarly, in China, the educational gradient of divorce remains positive; the number of children who can be educated still rises, even though the divorce rate has increased. Research shows that the household income of single-parent versus two-parent families is not different (see Fig. 1). Thus, divorced parents, particularly single mothers, are not necessarily more disadvantaged than married parents in urban areas (Zhang, 2019).

Demographic and Social Characteristics of Children Under Age 18 in Each Type of Family, a Pooled CFPS Sample

	Urban (%)	Parental education percentile score	Household income per capita (10,000 Yuan)	Value of household assets (10,000 Yuan)	Coresidence of grandparent(s) (%)
Intact two-parent families	42.7	42.5	1.2	42.8	36.9
Divorced single-mother families	77.4**	61.7**	1.7	41.0	45.3
Divorced single-father families	47.2	44.2	1.3	41.2	71.0**
Stepparent families	47.3	44.1	1.1	41.9	39.0

Fig. 1. Data distribution in different family structures (Zhang, 2019).

Community Support

Extended families, including grandparents and other relatives, and the other parent who left the family (provided they are still present) can play an important role in compensating the financial loss to which many single-parents are subject. China's mainland shares this phenomenon with other Asian societies, such as Japan, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, in which a strong family bond provides kinship (Zhang, 2019). It is common for three generations to live together in Asian families, and grandparents or relatives would help their sons and daughters to take care of their children when they go out to work. Furthermore, some parents who are too busy to take care of themselves even send their children to live with their grandparents, so some of the daily expenditure for raising children will be paid by extended family members, which reduces the financial burden of the single-parent. Also, when two people divorce, the person who doesn't get the guardianship of children will be required to make financial contributions to the primary parent and children, which also helps single-parent families to recover their financial losses. In this way, when parents divorce, an extended kinship network can distribute the responsibility of raising children, and the monthly income from the other parent can greatly offset the negative financial effects brought about by the separation of two parents.

Family Structure and Adolescent Wellbeing

The well-being of children is not all based on the financial resources; love and affection matter, too. Children who grow up in a rich family that meets all their material desires will still be negatively impacted without the establishment of attachment bonds, cognitive formation, social interaction, and academic learning, which is likely if their parents are too busy producing income to emotionally attend to their children (Hetherington, 2022).

Contact Comfort & Emotional Attachment

In the 1950s, behavioral psychologist Harry Harlow conducted research to prove that maternal contact, or *contact comfort*, is much more important than the provision of basic needs. He replaced the real mother of an infant monkey with two fake "mothers": one, a feeding robot made of wire, the other one, a robot wrapped in soft cloth. He analyzed the infant monkey's distress responses by making a threatening machine to frighten the monkey. Although the infant's food and biological needs were provided by the wire mother, the monkey stayed with the surrogate mother, a robot wrapped in soft cloth, to get comfort. This study emphasizes the importance of accompaniment and comfort when raising children because, at the time of the study, much of the public believed that the provision of food, clothes, and shelter were the key elements for the growth of children (Cherry, 2018). When subjected to contact comfort, a child's initial love response is built up, so little animals and children can feel the affection from their parents, step-by step, which forms a strong emotional attachment. As shown in Fig. 2, during physical contact, the sensorimotor reflexes are triggered, which calm children and boost a sense of safety (Yoshida & Funato, 2021).

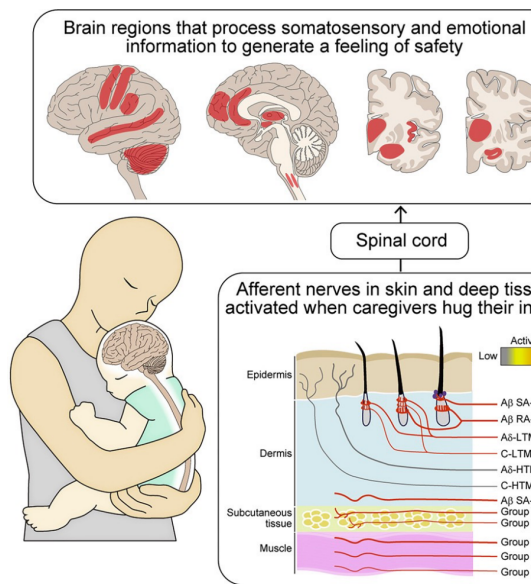


Fig. 2. The impact of physical contact on children (Yoshida & Funato 2021).

Therefore, even in a single-parent family, each parent may still be able to give enough love and attention to their children, and love and attention have no relationship with wealth disparity.

Attachment Behaviors and Bonds

The formation of attachment bonds during a child's growth plays a significant role in any family. *Attachment behaviors*, coined by John Bowlby, help children build up survival skills by interacting with their parents in a secure environment, including crying, smiling, crawling, and reaching. During this process, children's "internal working models" are developed, which become more sophisticated as their cognition matures; they form the ability to memorize, focus, and speak. If caregivers can give a child enough love and attention to help them grow up, their cognitive ability and attachment bond will get stronger to pave the way for future development. According to Vygotsky's theory, interactions with adults, especially parents, are the foundation for children to develop higher psychological functions. In addition, the attachment quality influences the formation of self-esteem (Cassidy,

1990). Children who grow up in an insecure environment are more likely to have low self-esteem, which will be vulnerable to test anxiety, so, in turn, would negatively impact future achievement (Ruiter & Ijzendoorn, 1993). As a result, the attachment establishment is so important that it is directly related to children's psychological functions and future achievement, which does not consider the family structure, but only parents' love and responsibility.

Parenting Style and Scaffolding Behaviors.

Parenting style affects children's later academic performance, such as problem-solving, responsibility, and thinking patterns. By giving small cues while assisting and accompanying children to practice a new skill, parents help children form the concepts of cooperation and competence (Ruiter & Ijzendoorn, 1993). In this way, parents' *scaffolding behaviors*, assisting behaviors that help children attain what they can't manage alone, vary between parenting styles. There are four types of parenting styles: authoritarian, authoritative, permissive, and neglectful. The most effective style is authoritative because children with an authoritative parent cannot only realize their errors, but also learn solutions for similar situations. Infants who grow up in a secure environment with effective scaffolding behavior directing are more likely to get higher scores on future tests (Ruiter & Ijzendoorn, 1993). Parenting style depends solely on the individual parent, rather than the type of family structure. Furthermore, the single-family structure takes advantage of parenting-teaching style selection because it doesn't require mediation between opposing parenting styles.

Conclusion

This paper explains how the single-parent family structure can be as effective in raising children as a two-parent family structure, by showing two efficient solutions for

a common concern regarding single-parent families. This paper addresses the elements that truly matter in adolescent well-being: contact comfort and emotional attachment, attachment behaviors and bonds, and parenting style and scaffolding behaviors.

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