
Why Single Parenthood Affects Children

When greater risks are found, we are beginning to develop a better understanding of those factors that differentiate the children in single parent families who develop disturbances from those who do not. Understanding why family instability places some children at greater risk is essential in planning programs and policies to promote healthy children and families. In this section, we briefly summarize five perspectives on the possible pathways through which these effects are transmitted: economic hardship, loss of parental support and supervision, lack of community resources, parental conflict, and life stress and instability.

Economic Hardship

Poverty is the most profound and pervasive factor underlying developmental problems of the young. Roughly, one of two families headed by a single mother is living in poverty compared with one of ten married couples with children (McLanahan & Booth, 1989). Not surprisingly, single parents are twice as likely to report that they worry “all or most of the time” that their total income is not enough to meet family expenses. On average, poor children in mother-headed families are poor for seven years, more than a third of their childhood (Garfinkel & McLanahan, 1986).

The economic differences result, not only from lower income preceding divorce, but also from the decline in income that accompanies divorce (McLanahan & Sandefur, in press); the effect may differ somewhat for families who start out poor or become poor. Nevertheless, the income of single mothers and their children after divorce is only 67 percent of their income before divorce, while the income of divorced men is 90 percent of the pre-divorce income (McLanahan & Booth, 1989).

In one study using four nationally representative data bases, lack of income emerged as the single most important factor in accounting for the differences in children from single parent and intact families; differences in income are estimated to account for over half of the differences in the educational attainment and steady employment of young adults, and just under half of the differences in nonmarital childbearing (McLanahan & Sandefur, in press). Lack of income, however, does not appear to account for the differences in child well-being between intact and stepfamilies (McLanahan & Sandefur, in press) or in intact and divorced families (Amato & Keith, 1991).

Mother-only families are more likely to be poor because of the lower earning capacity of single mothers, the insufficient benefits provided by the state, and the lack of child support provided from the nonresidential father (Garfinkel & McLanahan, 1986). Nationally, only 50 percent of mothers were supposed to receive a child support award in 1989; of these, only half received full payment, and a fourth received no payment at all.

Loss of Parental Support and Supervision

Parents who support and supervise children enhance their well-being (Maccoby & Martin, 1983). In fact, poor parental monitoring has proven one of the most powerful predictors of youth involvement in problem behaviors (Patterson & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1984). Single parents and stepparents monitor their children less closely and know less about where their children are, who they are with, and what they are doing than parents in intact families (Amato & Keith, 1991; Hetherington, 1989; Steinberg, 1986; McLanahan & Booth, 1989; McLanahan & Sandefur, in press).

Single parents are also less involved in their children's school activities and have lower educational goals for their children (Furstenberg & Nord, 1985; McLanahan & Booth, 1989; McLanahan & Sandefur, in press), two factors known to jeopardize academic achievement (Steinberg, Brown, Casmarek, Cider, & Lazarro, 1988). Based on recent evidence, single parents who are more involved in school have children who are less apt to experience problems (Benson & Roehlkepartain, 1993).

These differences in parent support and supervision are estimated to account for 20 to 40 percent of the differences in child well-being between single-parent and two-parent households; stepparents, however, do not make up for a biological parent (McLanahan & Sandefur, in press; Steinberg, 1987).

Lack of Community Resources

Youth who overcome disadvantage are able to rely on a greater number of sources of social support than youth with serious coping problems, including teachers, ministers, older friends, family day-care providers, nursery school teachers, neighbors, or contacts at social agencies (Garmezy, 1983; Werner, 1990; Werner & Smith, 1982). Children from single parent families who do well are more apt to be enrolled in quality schools, extracurricular activities, and church or synagogue programs (Benson & Roehlkepartain, 1993).

Furthermore, the benefits of a supportive community appear to be strongest for children who are the most vulnerable to begin with (Steinberg, 1989). For example, the number of adult male relatives usually grandfathers and uncles who took a child on outings away from home was related to improved report card scores (Riley & Cochran, 1987); the benefits, however, were restricted to the subgroup with the lowest average grades, single parent boys.

Not only does social support benefit youth, it also benefits parents. Social isolation is well-documented as one of the best predictors of poor parenting. Regardless of culture and social class, a mother is warmer and more emotionally stable when there are more adults around to help (Crockenberg, 1981; Crnic, Greenberg, Ragozin, Robinson & Basham, 1983).

Not surprisingly, the children of single parents do better when the mother receives strong support from nearby relatives, friends, or neighbors; members of religious groups; and staff members of family support and child care programs (Bronfenbrenner, 1991).

Two-parent families tend to live in better neighborhoods and their children are more apt to attend better schools and associate with less deviant peers than single parent or remarried families (McLanahan & Sandefur, in press). Single parents are less likely to report that they consider their neighborhoods excellent or good places to raise children than two-parent families (National Commission on Children, 1991). Limited economic resources may force some families to move and live in neighborhoods with poorer schools and fewer community services (McLanahan & Booth, 1989).

A greater number of geographic moves and lower quality schools and peer groups are estimated to account for 20 to 100 percent of the differences in child well-being. These community resources appear particularly important in accounting for the differences between children living with stepparents and biological parents (McLanahan & Sandefur, in press).

Parental Conflict

This explanation is potentially more useful in explaining the differences in child well-being in divorced or remarried families than never married families. Considerable evidence exists that a conflict-ridden marriage jeopardizes the well-being of children (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989). Based on this, ending a conflict-ridden marriage may actually boost rather than undermine children's well-being. Recent evidence suggests that children in divorced single parent families do better than children in high conflict, intact families (Amato, 1993; Amato & Keith, 1991; Peterson, 1986; Peterson & Zill, 1986). In fact, a review of 92 studies documented strong and consistent support for the parental conflict explanation of the differences in child well-being between divorced and nondivorced families (Amato, 1993; Amato & Keith, 1991).

While some families are undoubtedly so conflict-ridden and pathological that they cannot adequately care for children, McLanahan and Sandefur (in press) contend that the proportion of families that fall into this category may be small; with half of all children experiencing family instability, it is hard to believe that half of all parents have such conflictual relationships that they are unable to do a reasonably good job of raising their children. In fact, only 1 of 10 children react to their parent's divorce with feelings of relief (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989).

Obviously, this is a complex issue. Some disagreement in a family may be healthy, and a temporary period of conflict between parents is less detrimental to children than persistent conflict or divorce; yet too much conflict can be quite destructive. Furthermore, divorce does not necessarily stop the conflict and it may generate its own conflict; research suggests post-divorce conflict persists between many parents (Amato & Keith, 1991).

Life Stress and Instability

According to this explanation, one stressful life event is not as detrimental to children's well-being as many (Amato, 1993). Family disruptions often entail a number of changes which, taken together, can be more stressful than any one considered alone (i.e. moving, changing schools, loss of contact with the noncustodial parent, and a decline in one's standard of living).

McLanahan and Sandefur (in press) speculate that instability of resources may be as critical to children's well-being as the level of resources. In particular, they suspect that instability may explain why children in stepfamilies are as disadvantaged as children in single parent families despite their income advantage. Children in stepfamilies are exposed to a series of changes in location, income, and people living in the household (i.e. grandparents, partners, stepparents). The support provided by parents who are adjusting to a new marriage and new stepchildren may also be less consistent.

Conclusion

As the growing body of research evidence indicates, there is no single cause for the declining well-being of children in single parent families, but rather many. No single explanation accounts for the differences, and some scientific support exists for each of the five perspectives: economic hardship, loss of parental support and supervision, lack of community resources, parental conflict, and life stress and instability (Amato, 1993; McLanahan & Sandefur, in press). Thus, programs and policies are most apt to be effective if they are comprehensive and multi-faceted, addressing multiple risk factors.