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Single Parenting: Fewer Negative Effects on Children's Behaviors than Claimed

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Abstract

In this literature review, research on single parenting is examined. Current research heavily correlates single parenting with internalized and externalized behavioral problems in children. After broader investigation it appears traumatizing events (e.g. divorce, separation) display a confounding variable which is not given adequate significance in research on single parenting. Reviewed research in which early childhood differences in children raised by dual-, or single parents were controlled for has not found behavioral differences between these two groups. In this article, research on adopted children has also been examined. Adopted children taken care of by single-, or dual parents do not show behavioral differences between each other. This suggests single parenting in itself does not have as many negative behavioral effects on children as currently claimed by researchers in western society. Researchers who find positive correlations between single parenting and negative behaviors in children do not control for events like divorce or separation, which often occur early during the childhood of single parented-, but not of dual parented children. Reviewed research on this topic strongly suggests that single parents do not need to be overly concerned about the negative effects their single parent status could have on children.

Keywords: Single parenting, Adoption, Divorce, Traumatizing events

Introduction

According to the 2009 census of the United States, there are about 13.7 million single parents who have custody of 21.8 million children (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009). From 1970 to 2010 the number of single parents in the United States has more than doubled, going from 12% to 27% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). This increasing number of single parent homes raises questions about the effects single parenting has on children. Research studies show a steady trend of children expressing significantly more negative behaviors when raised by a single parent than when raised in a dual-parent home (Blackwell, 2009; Hilton, Desrochers, & Devall, 2001; Hilton & Devall, 1998; Jackson, Preston, & Franke, 2010). It is important to keep in mind that an essential third variable (traumatizing events, e.g. divorce) is not accounted for by these studies showing negative effects of single parenting on children.

External Behavioral Effects of Single Parenting on Children

Single parents consistently report more externalized behavioral problems of their

children than dual-parents do. External behavioral problems are behaviors associated with an absence of emotional control. Such behaviors can be, but are not limited to, destroying property, being aggressive, and acting out (Holden, 1997). This could be the result of single parents having higher stress levels than dual-parents do, and resultantly exhibit harsher disciplining methods when interacting with the child (Jackson et al., 2010). Hilton and Devall (1998) conducted a survey with 30 single mothers, 30 single fathers, and 30 dual-parent families. Single parents reported more cheating, lying, bragging, and property destruction problems with their children than married parents did about their children. Compared to single parenting, no negative effects of dual parenting have been reported.

Children raised in single parent homes who have influence from both parents show fewer behavioral problems than children raised in single parent homes with no influence from the non-custodial parent (Jackson et al., 2010). Having paternal and maternal influence is assumed to reduce negative behaviors in children (Blackwell, 2009; Jackson et al., 2010). In a two-year

longitudinal study by Jackson et al. (2010), teachers of single parented children reported significantly fewer negative externalized behaviors within children who have contact with both parents than within children who do not have contact with both parents.

Internal Behavioral Effects of Single Parenting on Children

Negative externalized behaviors of single parented children can often be observed, but internalized differences of single parented children and dual parented children are also significant. This could be the result of harsh disciplining by single parents (McLoyd, 1990). Internal behavioral problems are associated with excessive emotional control. Such behaviors can be, but are not limited to, depression, withdrawal, and anxiety (Holden, 1997). Hilton et al. (2001) found children of single parent homes show more internalized behavioral problems (e.g. anxiety, depression, inhibition and withdrawal) than children raised in functioning dual-parent homes. On the other hand, they also found children of single parents and dual-parents do not score differently on self-esteem, social relationship competency, extracurricular activity, school performance, or health scales. Another difference of single parented children is that they often have more friends and rely more upon their friend's advice than dual parented children do (Hilton et al. 2001). This demonstrates that children from single parent homes show more external and internal behavioral problems, than children of functional dual parent homes. But this research does not demonstrate the reason for those negative effects is single parenting. As mentioned, traumatizing events early in a child's life have not been accounted for by the explained research.

The Case of Adoption

Adoption is the legal act of obtaining custody for a child whose biological parents are passing on the right of custody. Sometimes the child is handed to the "new" caretaker directly by the biological parents, on occasion even right after birth. Other times children are institutionalized until "new parents" decide to adopt them. Children can even be adopted from other countries.

The Negative Effects of Adoption on Child Behavior

Similarly to single parented children, adopted children tend to show negative behavioral patterns (Barcons-Castel, Fornieles-Deu, & Costas-Morgas, 2011; Hoksbergen, Rijk, Van Dijkum, & Laak, 2004; Tan, 2004). The reason could be that adopted children might not perceive the love from parents the same way non-adopted children do. The reason could also be adopted children often have traumatic experiences early in their lives. Tan (2004) collected data from over 500 families about adopted children and compared the obtained data to the U.S. norm. This data was collected through surveys sent to the participating families. Tan (2004) found adopted children show generally more negative externalized and internalized behaviors than non-adopted children do. Similar findings were also reported by other studies about the effects of an adoption on children (Barcons-Castel, Fornieles-Deu, & Costas-Morgas, 2011; Hoksbergen, Rijk, Van Dijkum, & Laak, 2004). As explained, children raised by single parents also show externalized and internalized behavioral problems (Bayer et al., 2012; Hilton & Devall, 1998; Hilton, et al., 2001). Interestingly enough, some studies have found that negative behavioral effects of

adopted children disappear when controlling for institutionalization (Barcons-Castel et al., 2011), or removing outliers from the analysis (Brand & Brinch, 1999; Hoksbergen et al., 2004).

No Negative Effects of Adoption on Child Behavior

Some researchers have not found any behavioral differences between adopted and non-adopted children (Brand & Brinch, 1999; Tan, 2004). The negative effects on children do not occur because of adoption, but because of negative experiences. Brand and Brinch (1999) interviewed non institutionalized adopted children, foster children, and children living with their biological parents (control group) from the District of Columbia and all 50 states of the United States. The sample consisted of 47,485 households. The researchers reported that when removing some outliers from the adopted children group, there were no behavioral differences between the adopted children and the children raised by their biological parents. On the other hand, foster care children who have been institutionalized show significantly more externalized and internalized behavioral differences compared to both the control and adoption group. The previously mentioned studies (Barcons-Castel et al., 2011; Hoksbergen et al., 2004) in which the researchers claim adopted children show more negative behaviors than children raised by their biological parents have obtained participants with the help of adoption institutions. The researchers who have not found negative behaviors in adopted children have mostly had non-institutionalized participants. Thus, institutionalization appears to be the main cause for negative effects in adopted children.

How the Case of Adoption Relates to Single Parenting

The negative effects on children that researchers studying single parenting and adoption have found are very similar. This suggests there might be more behind the negative effects of single parenting than just the type of parenting. As has been explained, the negative effects of adopting children are diminished when controlling for institutionalization. To broaden this factor, it appears that traumatic events early in a child's life have negative effects on the behavior of children. This is also so in the case of single parenting.

When using a sample of children with similar early childhood experiences, the supposedly negative effects of single parenting compared to functional dual parenting disappear. Tan (2004) in his research study about adopted children, which has been explained previously, included two age groups: Preschool children and school aged children. He found that adopted children of single parents (father or mother) and adopted children of dual parents do not show any behavioral difference at any age. Because the adopted children sample consists of children who have been institutionalized, the adopted group as a whole exhibit significantly more negative behaviors than non-adopted children. It can be concluded that single parenting does not affect a child as much as expected, but traumatic events do.

Effects of Divorce on Children

Divorce is a major traumatic event in a child's life and is, when combined with separation of non-married parents, the main cause for parents raising their children alone in the U.S. (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009; U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Negative behavioral

effects of a divorce can be observed in children who are raised singularly (only one of the divorced parents takes care of the child), parallel (divorced parents do not talk to each other about the child; the child is traded off between parents), and cooperatively (divorced parents correspond to each other about the child and how to raise it). The closer the divorced parents are to each other after the divorce, the fewer negative behaviors are observed in their children (Amato, Kane, & James, 2011). Amato et al. (2011) reported in their study that children who have experienced a parental divorce display more negative behaviors than the normal population does. The more involved and cooperative both parents are after the divorce, the fewer negative effects are displayed in children because children of divorced cooperative parents do not blame oneself as being the reason for the divorce.

Even a quick remarriage of divorced parents does not diminish the negative effects of a divorce. The negative effects of traumatic experiences on children, like a parental divorce, cannot be fully overcome by the type of parenting (e.g. dual parenting) children receive. In a five-year longitudinal study Pagani, Boulerice, Tremblay, and Vitaro (1997) investigated the effects of divorce and remarriage on children. The first survey was handed to 6,397 children from functional dual parent homes in 1986. Parents were questioned annually about their marriage status and their child's behaviors until 1992. Pagani et al. (1997) found that a divorce has significant negative effects on a child's internalizing and externalizing behaviors. Early remarriage has a positive effect on behavior, but even children of remarried couples show significantly more negative behavior than children who have never experienced a divorce of their parents.

Single Parenting Studies in the Light of Traumatizing Events

Researchers investigating single parenting report very similar results to researchers investigating the effects of divorce or the effects of adoption. It appears that traumatizing events early in a child's life are the main reason for these negative behavioral effects on children. The problem with most studies about single parenting have mostly been examined as a whole and researchers have not ruled out factors that do not occur in functioning dual parent homes such as divorce, separation, or other traumatizing events. Instead, most researchers investigate and account for factors like ethnicity, social status, income, or education of parents (Blackwell, 2009; Hilton et al., 1998; Jackson et al., 2010).

In the few studies in which children without early traumatic experiences were participants, researcher found no significant differences in negative behaviors of children raised by dual-parents or by single parents. This strengthens the assumption that negative effects of traumatizing events on children far outweigh possible negative effects of single parenting. Golombok, Tasker, and Murray (1997) used a sample of single mothers ($n=42$), lesbian-dual-mothers ($n=30$), and dual parents ($n=41$) to compare the effects of paternal influence. Only children who had been raised in these types of a situation from infancy were used in the sample. The only difference found between the children in those three groups, is that children of single mothers, and children raised by lesbian-dual-mothers, had more separation anxiety than children raised in dual-parent homes. Golombok et al. (1997) reasoned that this is the result of single and lesbian-mothers scoring higher on the "mother's warmth to child" scale than mother of dual parenting homes. This could

cause children to be more anxious when being separated from their parent. On the behavioral and emotional problem scale the three groups showed no significant differences. These results in respect to other research done on single parenting point to the conclusion that traumatizing events early in a child's life have more negative effects on children than single parenting itself does.

Alternative Perspectives

Even though empirical and theoretical evidence suggesting that single parenting is not the main reason for negative behaviors in children of single parent homes, many researchers argue that it is. It is argued, single parenting cannot provide the "important" paternal and maternal influence (Blackwell, 2009; Hilton et al., 2001). Other researchers focus on single parents experiencing more stress than dual parents because single parents have to take upon themselves work, nurturing and maybe even educational responsibilities (Jackson et al., 2010; Taylor, Larsen-Rife, Conger, Widaman, & Cutrona, 2010). These researchers suggest that the elevated stress in single parents leads to negative child rearing methods.

Paternal and Maternal Influence

One problem with single parenting is children are missing either a father or mother figure. This could be a problem when children grow older and bodily changes occur. Adolescents prefer to talk about such matters with members of their own gender. The child might then seek help from sources the parent does not approve of (e.g. internet or peers). Researchers have found children from single-parent-homes depend more upon friends and friend's opinions than children growing up in dual-parent-homes (Hilton et al. 2001). Children

in single-parent-homes who have influence from both parents display fewer negative behaviors, even when accounting for socioeconomic factors (Blackwell, 2009; Jackson et al., 2010). This suggests having both parents in the home has the least negative effects on children.

The only problem with this viewpoint is that it does not account for traumatic events occurring early in a child's life in single parent homes. Firstly, Pagani et al. (1997) found that even a quick remarriage does not diminish the negative effects of a divorce on a child's behavior. Secondly, Amato et al. (2011) suggested having continual influence from both parents after the divorce hinders a child from thinking that the parent's divorce was the child's own fault. For this reason children who have more influence from both parents show fewer negative behaviors because often children (especially young children) blame themselves for their parent's divorce. Lastly, as explained Golombok et al. (1997) used a sample of children who did not experience a separation or divorce in their past and found no significant behavioral difference between single-parented-children and dual-parented-children. This concludes the supposed need for a father figure and a mother figure in a child's life is not as important as it has been suggested in the past. It is more important that children do not experience traumatizing events.

Single Parents: Stress Theory

Single parents have many responsibilities to deal with alone. These can be work, nurturing, or educational responsibilities to name a few. For this reason, single parents experience a high rate of stressors. This, according to research, decreases parental warmth, involvement in a child's life, and support (Jackson et al.,

2010; Taylor, Larsen-Rife, Conger, Widaman, & Cutrona, 2010). In return, externalized and internalized negative behaviors in children increase (Taylor, Larsen-Rife, Conger, Widaman, & Cutrona, 2010). Parental stress is generally associated with negative behaviors of children (Jackson et al., 2010). This theory of single parents experiencing more stress, which affects their children negatively, appears very plausible.

But this theory contains a few flaws. Firstly, researchers consistently find single mothers express more warmth to their children than dual-parents do (Golombok et al., 1997; Bodovski & Youn, 2010). In some studies it has even been reported that parental warmth significantly decreases the effects of poverty, physical discipline and parental depression (Pittman & Chase-Lansdale, 2001). Parental warmth has also been shown to increase self-esteem, coping abilities, and decrease anxiety among older children (Hipwell et al., 2008). Secondly, findings of studies with single parents of children who have not experienced traumatizing events, show that these children have no externalized or internalized behavioral differences to their dual-parented peers (Golombok et al., 1997). Finally, the literature about stress being experienced more by single parents than by dual parents is split. On one hand, Hilton et al. (2001) found single mothers experience more stress than dual parents do; On the other hand, Golombok et al. (1997) found single mothers do not report experiencing more stress than dual parents do. This concludes the assumption of single parents experience more stress than dual parents might be true. But negative effects resulting from this has not been shown in research. Research points to the conclusion that traumatizing events are the superior factors lead children to exhibiting negative behaviors.

Discussion

The number of single parents in the U.S. has more than doubled in the last 40 years (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). In current society the belief that single parenting has negative effects on children is dominant over the belief that single parenting has no negative effects on children. Even though many researchers who have compared the effects of single parenting and dual parenting on children consistently found correlations between single parenting and negative child behaviors, these studies do not account for a very important third variable; namely traumatizing events (e.g. divorce, separation early in a child's life). As shown by cases of adoption, adopted children of dual, and single parent homes do not show behavioral differences. In the case of adoption, children experienced the same traumatizing events before having consistent single, or dual parents. It appears that traumatizing events are the main reason for negative behavioral effect on children, not the type of parenting. This conclusion is strengthened by research done with single and dual parented children who have not experienced a separation or divorce of their parents. These children also do not show any behavioral differences between each other.

Strengths and Limitations

The studies looked at for this literature review have high external validity, because the data have been collected outside a laboratory. Further, the findings have been replicated very often. In most of the examined studies, outside factors like socioeconomic status have been controlled for and multiple regression designs have been used. This increases internal validity. This also reduces the chances of third variables skewing the results of a study. Another strength of the cited studies is that

many of them followed a longitudinal design in order to examine long-term effects.

Another limitation of this literature review is the impossibility to conclude causation from the examined correlational designs. But the combination of the examined longitudinal and multiple regression designs allows to get as close as ethically possible to a causal conclusion. Another limitation is the topics of parenting and traumatizing events allow for many third variables that can skew the data. It is very unlikely one design can control for all possible variables that could affect negative behaviors in children, many of which could be still unknown.

Implications

I am not suggesting that single parenting is as good for a child as functional dual parenting is. Though, I am suggesting the majority of negative effects on children, which have been correlated to single parenting, are really the effects of traumatizing events occurring early in a child's life (e.g. divorce, separation). The effects of single parenting need to be evaluated more in the future with experimental designs accounting for traumatizing experiences. An analysis of the current research suggests that parents should protect their children from experiencing traumatizing events in order to prevail negative effects on children's behaviors. Adults who are lonely and desire to help a child without a home should do so without being concerned about the negative effects single parenting might have. Especially because research suggests foster children experience the most negative effects. Society should not look down upon single parents, but encourage and support them in their path of life.

Future research on single parenting should focus on using a sample of single parented children who have not experienced traumatizing events during their life. This will help in analyzing more truthfully the effects of single parenting in comparison to dual parenting. More studies with adopted children of similar backgrounds (length of, or if institutionalized) in single parent or dual parent situations could also help in solving this puzzle of the assumed negative effects of single parenting.

Conclusion

With further research in this area, parents will be able to make better informed judgments about their parenting choices. Single parents can be more confident about the consequences of raising children. Dual parents who are considering a divorce or separation, can understand better what effects this might have on their children. Then, parents can no longer blame the negative behaviors in a child on the parenting techniques of the custodial parent. At the current stage of research it is clear though that single parents do not have to be overly concerned about the negative effects single-parenting has on children, but society in general needs to be aware of the negative effects traumatizing events have on children.

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