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## The Academic Performance and Personality Development of Children in Single-Parent Families

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### ABSTRACT

*Children should grow up in a stable family environment where both parents fulfil their tasks as defined by their culture. In the contemporary period, one of the most significant issues a family encounters is family disorganization due to death, divorce, desertion, relocation, and to a lesser extent adaptation. Due to rising family disorganization, single-parent households face challenges as a sole parent may struggle to fulfil both paternal and maternal roles, potentially placing children at risk of inadequate educational support and care. The research investigated the effect of single-parent families on children's learning and development in Sri Lankan society. Hence, this study's objectives attempt to fulfil the requirement of a socio-anthropological approach to study the ability to provide physical care, academic assistance, household management, and meeting the emotional needs of children while balancing the personal lives of single parents. This study is based on twenty single-parent households including ten female-headed families, ten male-headed families and ten teachers who belong to four government schools have been selected from the Ratmalana DS division by purposive sampling method as the sample of the study. Qualitative methods and techniques have been applied to collect data including interviews, case studies, focus group discussions, and observation methods. According to the analysis, fifty per cent of single parents never attend parent-teacher conferences, and thirty per cent rarely do. Discussions with teachers revealed lower academic performances in these children. However, a review of registration documents indicated that children with single fathers as parents were more likely to have regular attendance and receive positive health feedback. Only one single father (5%) reported difficulties in addressing their daughter's emotional needs. The study concludes that academic performance and child development suffer in single-parent families. Policymakers, teacher educators, and curriculum designers should consider these findings to support students in overcoming life obstacles.*

**KEYWORDS:** Academic performance, personality, single-parent households, socialization



## 1. INTRODUCTION

In raising children and facilitating their education, one of the most important responsibilities of parents is to provide their children's educational and development needs, attention, and support. According to Bruce and Meggit (2007), parents are essential to a child's early development, helping prepare them for school, to prepare them for learning and supporting growth and learning. According to Anthony et al. (2005), children learn most effectively when given the proper educational and developmental tools, as well as emotional support. Autumn (2009) supported by Anthony et al. (2005) stated that strong parent-child interactions are beneficial to the children's learning and development. Children's positive school performance and behaviour increase when they are likely to fail and the parent-child relationship is not supportive. According to the indication of Musiiwa and Muzembe (2011), the anthropological theory of Ainsworth supports the argument that children and parents must establish positive bonds to grow up safe and confident. Hence, the above-mentioned research has shown that it is important for parents to participate in family activities related to parenting. Therefore, parents should take care of their children's educational needs. A child's learning and developmental demands are most likely to be difficult for a single parent to care for and support.

As single-parent families have numerically increased rapidly over the years, researchers are investigating the impacts of unstable family structures on child development. The most basic

is to compare two-parent or single-parent families and the extent to which family structure affects child development. Most studies define two-parent families as children living with two parents who are married but have one biological parent due to death, divorce, desertion, migration, or unmarried causing the formation of single-parent families. However, the issue is much more complex, and recent changes in family composition make it increasingly necessary to identify child-parent relationships to understand their impact on child development and well-being. Children's welfare is, therefore, an important part of the social responsibility of the family. Families in Asian societies, especially, Sri Lanka, have a great responsibility to provide for their children, regardless of the type of family unit. However, the culturally shaped traditional role of the family in society has changed significantly in recent years due to many interrelated factors, including social modernization. In this context, a current study was conducted to determine the influence of single-parent families on children's learning and development, focusing on contemporary Sri Lankan society.

### 1.1 Single-parent Households

"Family" is one of the most frequently used terms in anthropological writings and discussions, but its meaning is not always clear, nor is it a matter of consensus. It may refer, for example, to domestic groups or households, to relatives who do not live in the same household, such as parents or adult offspring, or to wider networks of kinship or deeper genealogies (Barnard & Spencer 1996). It is now widely

speculated that modern families are undergoing major structural changes. Societal changes have significantly reduced the proportion of classical 'typical' families, especially 'nuclear families'. It may be determined that childless families, single-parent families, alternative family formations, and quasi-family units are founded on non-marital relationships by shifting these common family structures. The amount of single parents among these family types is rising; the exact percentage is unknown, but experience suggests that this trend is occurring globally (Azuka-Obieke 2016). According to the head of the United Nations Single-parent Foundation, there are currently 320 million single parents worldwide (Wutz 2019). In a study, Jordal et al. (2013) pointed out that single parenthood is a global problem for unmarried women in Sri Lanka. Practical experience and media reports indicate that single-parent households are increasing in Sri Lankan societies, although the exact percentage is unknown.

“Single-parent families” are family structures with children under the age of 18 and headed by a divorced, widowed, unmarried, or never-married parent (Krapp & Wilson 2005). Thus, the term ‘single or lone parent’ has transformed into a commonly recognized term for a specific type of family arrangement in which only one parent exists and is primarily responsible for the householder (Gongla & Thompson 1987). As a result, children's learning and development were severely impaired. Fotoh (2021) determined that children who experience parental divorce, separation, or widows perform poorly in school and have developmental problems. Parental absence is thought to affect a child's social and

cognitive development as each parent has a unique role to play in a child's life.

## **1.2 Factors Influence on Learning and Development of Children**

A “tidal wave of family change” has engulfed today's children (Cherlin 1992). Further, Glick and Norton (1977) point out that one-half of all children born into the society of the 21<sup>st</sup> century will spend a “meaningful portion of their lives” in a single-parent family. Thus, many studies revealed that children from single-parent families have poorer levels of well-being when compared to children from dual families. De Lange et.al (2014) investigated the educational performance of children brought up by a single parent single-parent in twenty-five countries around the world. The article details how, in schools where many children grow up with a single-parent attend, the performance of the children falls further behind that of children who are brought up by both parents. Treanor (2016) encompasses a holistic approach to investigate the children who socialize in a single-parent family. In his research, he demonstrates the relationship between single parenthood, social assets, and remeagre income. Except for repeated separations and partnering, Treanor contends that single parenthood has no negative impact on children's well-being once income is considered. The research mentioned above is based on social learning theory, which offers the main viewpoint on gender development. This theory contends that behaviour is taught by observation, modelling, reinforcement, and punishment, which is in line with mechanical meta-theories (Bandura 1997). Since each

civilization has its own "gender curriculum," which results in distinct expectations and treatment beginning at birth, the researcher's findings demonstrate this. Children who behave following gender roles are praised and reinforced; those who do not are disciplined. According to the social learning theory, children pick up many of their gender roles by watching and imitating their parents and older siblings as they exhibit behaviours that are suitable for each gender. The gender theory suggests that fathers appear to be particularly significant in this process. Therefore, it is crystal clear that disorganized families directly affect on child's learning and development.

### **1.3 Theoretical Framework of Parenting Styles**

The way parents raise their children can also affect how they behave, which can then affect how well they do in school. The Ecological Model of Risk provides a strong framework for comprehending how various variables can affect children's behaviour. The developmental-ecological model's (1979) basic concept is that a person's development is influenced by the ongoing characteristics of the social setting in which they live or engage, as well as the degree and kind of interaction between these environments (Bronfenbrenner 1979). This paradigm aids in explaining why a child's behaviour, in particular, differs depending on the environment. Each of the five intricate environmental "layers" identified by the ecological model has an impact on how a child develops. The microsystem is the layer that is most closely related to the child and contains

components that the child directly interacts with. This comprises the connections and interactions a child has with the people and places in their immediate environment, such as their family, friends, school, neighbourhood, or daycare facilities. Bi-directional impacts are those that occur at this level of the model when connections have an effect both away from and toward the child. As an example, a child's parents may affect his or her beliefs and actions, just as the child may impact the actions and beliefs of his or her parents. The child is most affected by the bidirectional impacts at the microsystem level. The links between a child's teacher and parents, their church and neighbourhood, and other components of their microsystem are provided by the subsequent layer, the mesosystem (Berk 2000). The more extensive social system, with which the youngster is not directly involved, is defined as the exosystem. The structures in this layer influence the child's growth by interacting with a structure in the microsystem. Parents' work schedules are one example, as are the nearby family-friendly resources. At this level, there might not be any direct engagement, but the child will still feel pushed to connect with their system, whether that interaction is positive or negative.

According to research done by Dunifon et.al (2002) and Lansford et.al (2012), family functioning is consistently one of the best indicators of the likelihood that a child would engage in criminal and delinquent behaviour. Parenting techniques, most often discipline and supervision, are the main areas of concentration. In many different communities, child involvement in aggressive and delinquent

behaviour has typically been linked to inadequate parental supervision and disciplining techniques. Independent of their racial or social background, parents must be actively involved with their children, be aware of what they are doing and where they are when they are not around, and punish their children in ways that are both effective and reasonable. By researching the international and domestic literature on single parenting, were able to gain a general understanding of how these studies addressed the societal issues about children. Due to the loss of the cultural role that the mother or father once played alone in the family, households with single parents also experience many cultural issues that have an impact on the children. Therefore, those family difficulties are unavoidable from a socioeconomic and cultural perspective. The dynamics influencing the academic performance and personality development of children in single-parent families within the Colombo District, Sri Lanka, require a nuanced exploration. While studies on similar topics exist, a focused examination of the distinct socio-cultural factors, familial structures, and community support systems in this specific region is yet to be thoroughly investigated, presenting an opportunity to contribute fresh insights to the field

## **2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The descriptive survey research design is best suited for studies of human relationships, such as parenting styles or family problems, as in the present study. The purpose of the research was to examine the effects of single parenting on the growth and development of children. Therefore,

a male or female who had exclusive custody of and was raising one or more children (under the age of 18) by himself or herself at the time of the study was referred to as a "single parent" to achieve the objectives of the research. Twenty Single-parent households including ten female-headed families and ten male-headed families; and ten teachers who belong to four government schools have been selected from the Ratmalana DS division by using a purposive sampling method as the sample of the study. Ratmalana is a suburb in the Colombo District that has a high migrated population density which consists with multi ethno-religious groups. Therefore, the researcher benefited from identifying the big picture of the effect of single-parent families on children's development and learning in Sri Lankan society.

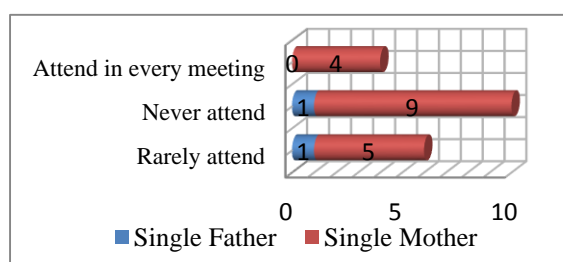
The qualitative methods and techniques have been applied to collect data including interviews, case studies, focus group discussions and observation methods. A semi-structured interview schedule has been used without monetary reward to collect systematic information about the socio-demographic status, and educational, religious and social-psychological resources available in the study area. Additionally, interviews have been conducted for teachers to get the best material possible that is needed to address the research problem. The information obtained from interviews has been verified using observation and document analysis such as the school attendance register, exercise books, school report cards and health records. Since the qualitative technique looks at real data and

emotional responses rather, the research has become more viable. The researcher is free to pursue any response to add depth and complexity to the data being collected because the qualitative approach is flexible. A simple statistical approach was preferred in this anthropological research to approach objective explanations of the underlying cause of patterns and meaningful relationships. Therefore, the data analysis process has been done by using the Microsoft package.

### 3. RESULTS & DISCUSSION

The academic performance and personality development of children in single-parent families are subjects of significant concern and study as mentioned above, particularly in the context of Colombo, Sri Lanka. Understanding the unique challenges faced by these children in the specific socio-cultural and economic landscape of Ratmalana DS Division in Colombo is crucial for developing targeted interventions and support systems.

#### 3.1 Academic Performance



**Figure 01:** Attendance at Parents Meetings in Children's School

The data from the study underscores the adverse impact of single-parent households on the academic performance of children in Colombo. The low attendance of single parents at crucial parent meetings (as shown in Figure

01) points to a lack of parental involvement in the educational journey of their children. A teacher said that "*single-parent fathers never attend the parent's meetings. Usually, they ask a kin to represent them*". Rochlkepartain (2003) has emphasized the opinion that a child's academic achievement is greatly influenced by the family and its structure. This phenomenon is not only reflected in the absenteeism of single-parent fathers but also the delegation of representation to kin. The absence of direct parental engagement in academic matters may contribute to a lack of consistent monitoring of children's progress and limited communication between teachers and single parents.

The teachers' interviews and document analysis further reveal a concerning pattern of poor academic performance among children from single-parent families. Despite a relatively good record of regular attendance, the majority of students exhibit subpar performance in class, indicating a need for targeted academic support. The limited indication of home-based education or homework monitoring aligns with existing literature on the influence of family structure on academic achievement, emphasizing the importance of effective parental involvement in educational activities. In a related way, according to Donkor (2010), parents noticed that their lack of effective homework supervision was a contributing factor to their children's poor academic achievement. As according Case (2009), healthy parent-child relationships benefit children's learning and development. Therefore, Schults (2006) noted that it would be evident that adolescents from unstable homes have greater social, intellectual,

and emotional issues when compared to those from stable homes. According to the results of the study on academic assistance, single parents continuously committed by occupational means there will be not enough time to make that sound relationship with their children.

### **3.2 Personality Development**

Beyond academic concerns, the study also delves into the personality development of children in single-parent families in Colombo. According to the teachers, 100 per cent of positive compliments were identified in children's health, in addition, it was stated that children from single father-headed households have a greater amount of participation in sports at school while the children from single mother-headed households had a poor engagement in extracurricular activities. When asked if they felt capable of caring for their children's emotional needs, only one (5 per cent) of the single father who has a daughter reported difficulties in this area. But, according to the counselling teachers' experience, most of the children who belong to single-parent families spoke with them about their emotional matters.

According to a teacher's statement,

*“Most students do not like others to know that their parents are divorced or separated. It also being reasoned: like not having close friends at school, being unable to get extra help to understand the lessons that they cannot apprehend during school hours, less motivation to engage in academic activities and feeling less fortunate”*

(RT 03, 10.10.2022, 10.30am)

Accordingly, teachers report that these children face challenges in socialization, perceiving themselves as ignored, unwelcome, and uncared for. These feelings can lead to difficulties in forming relationships with peers, parents, and siblings. Such challenges in interpersonal relationships may have lasting impacts on their emotional well-being and overall personality development. Behavioural issues such as stubbornness and short temperaments are noted among children from single-parent families, raising concerns about their ability to navigate healthy relationships. Furthermore, the study reveals gender-specific challenges, with female children becoming victims of unhealthy relationships and male children displaying addictive behaviours related to drugs, social media, and gaming.

In Ratmalana DS Divisions; Colombo, Sri Lanka context, it is imperative to examine the socio-cultural and economic determinants that potentially underlie the identified patterns. Colombo epitomizes a multifaceted and dynamic urban milieu, where economic exigencies, occupational commitments, and societal expectations may compound the difficulties encountered by single-parent households (Smith 2018; Fernando 2020). The teachers' observations regarding the cultural stigma surrounding divorce or separation emphasize its potential impact on students' reticence to disclose their familial circumstances. This cultural backdrop may significantly shape the emotional experiences of children in single-parent families and influence their willingness to seek assistance or support (Gunasekara 2017; De Silva 2019).



Furthermore, the universal emphasis on academic achievement within Sri Lankan society introduces an additional layer of stress for both parents and children (Perera 2016). Single parents, frequently burdened by occupational responsibilities, may confront difficulties in reconciling work commitments with active participation in their children's educational endeavours. The study's findings, revealing a dearth of time for cultivating robust parent-child relationships, underscore the necessity for a nuanced comprehension of the socio-economic milieu in Colombo (Fernando 2020; Silva 2015). This understanding is crucial for developing tailored interventions that consider the specific challenges and demands of the local context.

#### **4. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS**

The research findings presented in this study, coupled with the insights gained from the literature review, offer a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by children in single-parent households within the Ratmalana DS Division in Colombo, Sri Lanka. The multifaceted impact on both academic performance and personality development underscores the urgent need for targeted interventions and support systems. As illuminated by the literature review, the responsibilities of parents, especially in providing educational and developmental needs, attention, and support, are crucial for a child's early development and successful preparation for learning. The research aligns with these notions, revealing that children from

single-parent households experience a range of difficulties, including emotional instability, harmful social disposition, poor moral upbringing, and negligence in parental assistance and guidance in academic activities. Financial distress among single parents further exacerbates the challenges, contributing to a lack of necessary time and attention for their children's academic welfare.

The conclusions drawn from the study emphasize the adverse impact of inadequate parental involvement in academic support, as well as the lack of attention from school administration, instructors, and educational counselors. However, the study also holds a glimmer of hope, suggesting that addressing the root causes of these negative effects, as proposed by Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory, can pave the way for successful navigation of challenges. By enhancing parental involvement, providing targeted academic support, addressing cultural stigma, promoting extracurricular activities, and implementing teacher training, stakeholders can contribute to a more supportive and inclusive educational environment.

In light of these conclusions, policymakers, teacher educators, and curriculum designers are urged to consider the specific needs of single-parent families. The study highlights the importance of developing nuanced interventions that address the socio-cultural and economic determinants in the local context of Colombo, Sri Lanka. By doing so, stakeholders can actively contribute to fostering the academic success and overall well-being of

children in single-parent households, thereby facilitating their growth and development.

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