

THE CHILDRENS' VIEWPOINT  
OF  
LIVING IN A ONE-PARENT FAMILY

by  
Benjamin Schlesinger, Ph.D.  
Professor  
Faculty of Social Work  
University of Toronto  
1981

Published by:

Research Branch  
Manitoba Department of Education  
221 - 1200 Portage Avenue  
Winnipeg, Manitoba  
R3G 0T5

FOREWORD

The December 1981 issue of Education Manitoba featured an article "Education and Children of One Parent Families". This article highlighted some of the changes which have been taking place in the structure of the family and the resulting implications of these changes for schools. Essentially the article, prepared by the Research Branch as a background paper, was designed for the purpose of providing educators in Manitoba with information on the incidence, effects, counselling techniques and practical considerations associated with children of one-parent families.

Fortunately this article caught the attention of Dr. Benjamin Schlesinger, a researcher at the University of Toronto, who has been actively involved in researching the topic of children of one-parent families. Dr. Schlesinger contacted Education Manitoba to inquire if Education Manitoba would be interested in publishing the findings of a recent research study on this topic conducted under his guidance. As a consequence, Education Manitoba and the Research Branch jointly undertook to make Manitoba educators aware of this recent Canadian study by publishing a summary of the Schlesinger research in the May 1982 issue of Education Manitoba.

Because it was felt that many teachers would want to review the Schlesinger research report in its entirety, arrangements were made with Dr. Schlesinger enabling the Research Branch to publish and disseminate the original report to interested educators.

FOREWORD - by Michael Yakimishyn  
Director of Research  
Manitoba Department of Education

Children's Viewpoints of Living in a One-Parent Family

ABSTRACT

In the literature dealing with one-parent families, we find only a handful of studies in which children living one-parent families were interviewed about their lives in these families.

We completed in 1980 a study of 40 children aged 12-18 years, living in middle class, urban, separated or divorced one-parent families in Metropolitan Toronto, Canada. We present selected findings from our study, highlighting the responses of the children to four open-ended questions related to their feelings about living in one-parent families.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
Foreword . . . . .	i
Abstract . . . . .	ii
Table of Contents . . . . .	iii
List of Tables . . . . .	iv
I. Introduction . . . . .	1
II. Lifestyles of Single Parents . . . . .	1
III. Review of Literature . . . . .	2
IV. Studies of Children in One-Parent Families . . . . .	5
V. A Canadian Study . . . . .	9
VI. Personal Characteristics of the Sample . . . . .	10
VII. Findings: Some Personal Factors . . . . .	10
VIII. Summary of Personal Characteristics . . . . .	12
IX. The Voices of Children . . . . .	12
X. Themes Which Emerge From Open-Ended Questions From Children In One-Parent Families . . . . .	16
XI. Problems Facing One-Parent Families and Their Children . . . . .	17
XII. Positive Aspects of One-Parent Families . . . . .	18
XIII. Some Questions for Research . . . . .	19
XIV. Conclusions . . . . .	20
References . . . . .	21
Reference Notes . . . . .	23

LIST OF TABLES

<u>Table Number</u>		<u>Page</u>
1	Reviews of the Literature - Children in One-Parent Families - United States and Canada - 1968-1979 . . . .	2
2	Studies Related to Children in One-Parent Families - United States and Canada - 1968-1979 . . . . .	5
3	Findings of Wallerstein and Kelly Studies on Children in Divorce - One Year and Five Year Follow-Up - (N = 112) . . . . .	7
4	Advantages and Disadvantages in Being in a One-Parent Family (In Order of Importance) . . . . .	12

## Children's Viewpoints of Living in a One-Parent Family

### I. Introduction

During the past decade we have witnessed a yearly increase in the United States and Canada in the growth of one-parent families.

It is estimated that in 1977, there were 9,212,000 households with children under the age of 18 headed by one-parent only (Single parent, 1979), in the United States. As far as children in America are concerned, 10,419,000 children under the age of 18 years were living in 1977 in fatherless homes and 892,000 in motherless homes. Thus, 18 percent of all American children under the age of 18 years live with one parent only.

Bane (1979), points out that in 1977 there were 1,090,000 divorces in the United States of which sixty-percent involved children. On the average there were 1.3 children per decree. She also states that of children growing up in the 1970's, about 30 percent will experience a parental divorce, another 15-20 percent will spend some time in a one-parent family due to death, separation, or unmarried motherhood. Children are likely to live in a single parent situation for an average of about five years.

One parent families in the United States constitute about 15 percent of all families, of whom 84 percent are fatherless and 16 percent motherless families.

The 1976 Census of Canada (Wargon, 1979), indicated that 9.8 percent of Canada's families were lone-parents; of these, 83 percent were fatherless and 17 percent were motherless families. There were 898,040 children aged 0-24 years living in these families constituting 10.5 percent of all children aged 0-24 years living at home.

### II. Lifestyles of Single Parents

Mendes (1979), has delineated five distinct life styles of single parent families.

Type 1 - The "sole executive" is a unit where the single parent is the only parental figure actively involved in the lives of the children. This often occurs in families where the father has died. Type 2, is the "auxiliary parent" in which the single parent shares one or more parental responsibilities with an auxiliary parent who does not live with the family. This auxiliary parent is usually the father. An example would be a family in which mother has custody and father has visiting rights. Type 3, is the "unrelated substitute." Here, the single parent shares one or more parental functions with a person who is not related to the family. An example is a family who has a live-in housekeeper who is like a mother to the children. Type 4, "the related substitute" is a blood or legal relative who assumes a parental role, although he or she is not the parent of the children. Type 5, the "titular parent," is the single parent who lives with the children but has in effect abdicated the parental role. Examples are parents who are alcoholics, drug addicts or actively psychotic.

It is of interest that existing studies have primarily related to Type 1, and Type 2 lifestyles of single parents. We could not find any studies at this time related to other types of one-parent families.

### III. Review of the Literature

There have been at least twelve reviews of the literature dealing with some aspects of the one-parent families, with special reference to children living in these families. Table I lists these reviews.

TABLE I  
REVIEWS OF THE LITERATURE - CHILDREN IN ONE-PARENT FAMILIES  
UNITED STATES AND CANADA - 1968-1979

Author	Year	Topic
Herzog, Sudia	1968	Fatherless Homes
Bigner	1970	Fathering
Brandwein, Brown, Fox	1974	Divorced Mothers
Ross, Sawhill	1975	Female-Headed Families
Schlesinger	1976	Children of Divorce
Orthner, Brown, Ferguson	1976	Single Parent Fatherhood
Schlesinger	1976	Motherless Families
Schlesinger	1978	One-Parent Families
Luepnitz	1978	Children of Divorce- Psychological Aspects
Lewis	1978	Single Fathers
Orthner, Lewis	1979	Fathers who have custody
Longfellow	1979	Children of Divorce

The earliest review, completed by Herzog and Sudia (1968), examined studies related to fatherless homes.

The authors state that much can be learned by careful analysis of detailed descriptive studies; that useful information does not have to come from neat, precise, experimental testing of discrete, theory-based variables.

The authors come to three conclusions. First, existing data does not permit a decisive answer to questions about the effects of fatherlessness on children, the authors do not expect adequate evidence to indicate dramatic differences stemming from fatherlessness per se. Second, there is a need to look at families in a broader way; that fatherless families deserve study as a family form in

itself rather than as a "broken family." Some of the single mother's economic and social burdens can be eased thus improving the situation both for her and her children. Third, there is a need to shift focus from the assumption that a single variable (for example, how much are children harmed by growing up in a fatherless home?) is the determining factor in the results; we should begin looking at the cluster of interacting factors all of which contribute to the child's adjustment.

Bigner (1970) examined studies of fathering. His major conclusion is that the father's greatest impact on his children occurs primarily in those areas involving psychosexual, personality, social and intellectual development. In an examination of research related to divorced mothers, Brandwein, Brown and Fox (1974) the authors found studies in various disciplines comparing socioeconomic status for married and divorced women, studies of the effects of father absence on children -- particularly boy children, studies of roles with and without sex role stereotyping, and the effects of stress upon families. Yet little attention was paid to the husbandless mother or to the female-headed family as an operating social system following divorce. Little or no attempt was made in the social science literature to integrate these various pieces of knowledge into an understanding of how women cope in the single-parent situation, what effect various constraints have upon them and what variables determine women's abilities to overcome these constraints.

Over and over the literature assumes that the single-parent state is temporary. Although many women, especially those under 30, do remarry, a greater proportion, especially after the age of 30, remain divorced. Divorced men are more likely to remarry than are their ex-wives. Because of the assumption that divorcees will remarry, society does not feel obligated to provide supports for single parents. Because societal supports are largely unavailable, husbandless mothers come to view remarriage as the only viable alternative to a difficult situation. The situation will remain difficult as long as policies are based on these circular assumptions.

In examining female-headed families, Ross and Sawhill (1975) found that over the past decade the number of families headed by a mother increased almost ten times as rapidly as the number of families headed by two-parent families, with the result that the proportion of all families headed by a mother stands at 15 percent, up from 9 percent in 1960. The growth of such families has been substantial among all segments of the population although it has been particularly pronounced among younger women and among those who are black.

One important conclusion which emerged from their analysis was that rising divorce rates are the major cause of the observed increase in female-headed families. Rising illegitimacy rates among teenagers, and a greater tendency for women to establish independent households rather than live with relatives, have also played a role, but it is the increasing number of divorced and separated women with young children which accounts for the greatest share of the growth.

The authors state:

"Our concern with the growth of female-headed families stems from a belief that life is not easy for those who live in such families. We know that many are poor, and that their poverty often necessitates state intervention in the form of income support for the mother and her children. But there remains the question, whether children who live in single-parent homes face problems in addition to the obvious economic ones." (p. 162).

Schlesinger (1976) in a review of children of divorce, found only a handful of studies which used samples in examining divorce and children. The few studies appeared to agree that divorce is a crisis for children.

The topic of motherless families was reviewed by Orthner, Brown, and Ferguson (1976), Schlesinger (1978), Lewis (1978) and Orthner and Lewis (1979). The major issues which emerged from these reviews were:

1. Financial problems. Social class factors play a large part in the lives of the fathers. The middle-class fathers in Canada and America appear to be managing financially. A double standard still exists, fatherless families can obtain government financial assistance while motherless families are not included in official family benefit policies. The underlying assumption is that a man should not stay home but go out to work.
2. Child care. Fathers are finding it difficult to obtain child care help (which includes a wide range of needs -- from day to after-school care and, in the case of middle-class fathers, housekeepers). The cost of such services are, in some cases, prohibitive and the hours in some care-giving centers may not coincide with the fathers' working hours. None of the existing studies have explored the use of the extended family as caregiver.
3. Social Life. Taking on the dual roles of father and housekeeper appears to prevent many fathers from attaining a balanced social life, although middle-class fathers can afford a babysitter for a night out.
4. Parenting-homemaking. Even basic housekeeping duties were a burden and mystery at first, including such simple acts as buying groceries, washing dishes and floors, mending socks, sewing buttons and making beds.
5. Personal problems. Fathers appear to exhibit stress and strain when they become the heads of families in more than the financial sense. Personal problems come to the foreground and require help.
6. Community support. Fathers felt little community support in their effort to raise children on their own.

Lewis (1978) feels that what we need in studying the motherless family is child-centered research. Up to date, only fathers have been interviewed. He feels that single fathers may appear to be "super daddies," but many experience the same difficulties as single mothers, on the other hand, many fathers receive many of the joys of bringing up their children, as well as the joys found by female lone parents.

An up-to-date overview, review and annotated bibliography dealing with North American one-parent families can be found in the book by Schlesinger (1978). The area of children of divorce, with special reference to the psychological literature was completed by Luepnitz (1978).

On the basis of the literature reviewed, she concluded that many children do indeed suffer at the time surrounding parental divorce and that the nature of the distress appears to be age-specific. Data on father absence suggest that the stress on the child of divorce is not primarily in response to the one-parent home, but rather to the turmoil involved in parental conflict. This does not mean that children of divorce do not suffer, or that they should not be considered "a population at risk." On the contrary, divorce is precisely an event which tends

to correlate with that stress-inducing parental discord. Clinicians, social workers, and lawyers can do a service to clients in reminding them that children are very sensitive to parental violence and that continuing the acrimony after divorce, or talking to the children against the other parent, is extremely undesirable. On the other hand, parents can be reassured that the myths about divorce are distorted and that the one-parent home does not "cause" delinquency, homosexuality, neurosis, and school failure. It seems reasonable that the parent who is not overly anxious about the fate of her/his children in a "broken home" will be happier, more relaxed, and a less guilty parent.

Longfellow (1979), also examines the studies related to the effects of divorce of children. She cautions the reader not to accept only clinical studies of divorced children, which seem to find anti-social and aggressive behaviour among divorced children. Her review seems to suggest that it is the type of conflict which parents have during the divorce, which directly affects the adjustment of the child in divorce. Thus unhappy, anxious, fearful, angry, arguing, hostile parents will produce problems in children of divorce. On the other hand, a parent with positive social network supports of family and friends, and a satisfactory relationship to the ex-spouse will enhance the adjustment of a child in the divorce.

#### IV. Studies of Children in One-Parent Families

We were able to find fourteen items related to studies of children in one-parent families during the 1968-1979 period in the United States and Canada. Table 2 lists these studies.

TABLE 2  
STUDIES RELATED TO CHILDREN IN ONE-PARENT FAMILIES  
UNITED STATES AND CANADA - 1968-1979

Author	Year	Sample
McDermott	1968	16 nursery-school children-divorce
Hetherington	1973	72 girls aged 13-17
Wallerstein, Kelly	1974	21 adolescents-divorce
Wallerstein, Kelly	1975	34 pre-school children-divorce
Hetherington, Cox, Cox	1976	48 pre-school children-divorce
Kelly, Wallerstein	1976	26 early-latency children-divorce
Wallerstein, Kelly	1976	31 - 9-10 year olds-divorced
Keshet, Rosenthal	1978a	178 divorced and separated men with children under age 7
Keshet, Rosenthal	1978	49 separated and divorced fathers
Gersick	1979	20 divorced men-have custody
Raschke, Raschke	1979	75 children in one-parent families
Troyer	1979	300 children of divorce
Ercul, Goldenberg, Schlesinger	1979	14 children in one-parent families
Wallerstein, Kelly	1980	101 children- 8-18 years-divorce five year follow-up

A careful examination of this table indicates that there are really only ten separate studies, since Wallerstein and Kelly used sub-samples in their study of children of divorce. It appears that these two authors have pioneered in this area of research and have disseminated their findings in varied sources.

McDermott (1968), examined 16 nursery school children whose parents were being divorced in Michigan. Some of his findings were:

1. For the majority of children of this age divorce has a significant impact and represents a major crisis. There is often an initial period of shock and acute depressive reactions. Clinically observed regressive phenomena were followed by restoration of previous skills and subsequent resolution and mastery both in play and verbally.
2. Sex differences were noted, with boys demonstrating more dramatic changes in behavior, characterized by the abrupt release of aggressive and destructive feelings. Boys seemed more vulnerable to gross disruption of identification already in process than the girls. Some of the children, principally girls, seemed to show a tendency to identify with selected pathological features of the parents of the same sex.

In examining girls without fathers, Hetherington (1973) found that adolescent girls who had grown up without fathers repeatedly displayed inappropriate patterns of behavior in relating to males. Girls whose fathers were absent because of divorce (divorced girls) exhibited tension and inappropriate assertive, seductive or sometimes promiscuous behavior with male peers and adults. Divorced girls reported more conflict with their mothers than other groups; they also felt more insecure and apprehensive around male peers and adults than intact girls. They reported more heterosexual activity than any other group.

In order to summarize the studies completed by Wallerstein and Kelly we have developed Table 3, which contains their major findings related to their sub-samples. They started with 60 families and a cohort of 131 children aged 2-18 years. An examination of their findings indicate that 112 children were used in the one-year follow-up studies, and 101 children in the five year follow-up study.

TABLE 3

FINDINGS OF WALLERSTEIN AND KELLY STUDIES ON CHILDREN IN DIVORCE -  
ONE YEAR AND FIVE YEAR FOLLOW-UP - (N = 112)

1) One Year Follow-Up

<u>Age</u>	<u>Characteristic Reactions to Divorce</u>
Preschool 2 1/2 Years N = 34	Preschool children were frightened, confused and blamed themselves. There was a great need for physical contact with adults. Children expressed fears of being sent away or being replaced. Only 5- and 6-year-olds were able to express feelings and to understand some of the divorce-related changes (Wallerstein and Kelly, 1975).
Early Latency 7-8 Years N = 26	Children expressed feelings of sadness and loss, fear and insecurity. They felt abandoned and rejected, although they did not blame themselves. They had difficulty in expressing their anger toward their fathers. They felt angry at their mothers for sending the fathers away but were afraid of incurring their mothers' wrath. They held an intense desire for the reconciliation of their parents, believing that the family was "necessary for their safety and continued growth" (Kelly and Wallerstein, 1976).
Later Latency 9-10 Years N = 31	Later latency children had a more realistic understanding of divorce and were better able to express their feelings of intense anger. They did not feel responsible for the divorce but were ashamed and morally outraged by their parents' behavior. Their loyalties were divided between the parents and they frequently felt lonely and rejected. They used age-appropriate coping mechanisms including a conscious layering of psychological functioning (Wallerstein and Kelly, 1976).
Adolescence 13-18 Years N = 21	Adolescents were the most openly upset by the divorce. They expressed strong feelings of anger, sadness, shame and embarrassment. Divorce forced the adolescents to see their parents as individuals and to reassess their relationships with each parent. They also re-examined their own values and concepts about what is a good marital relationship. Most were able to disengage themselves from their parents' conflict by a year following the divorce (Wallerstein and Kelly, 1974).

2) Five-Year Follow-Up

101 children - 34 percent of children are happy and thriving, 29 percent are doing reasonably well, and 37 percent are depressed (Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980).

Source: Adopted from an original table in Longfellow (1979, Table 17-3, p. 301).

Hetherington, Cox and Cox (1976) also completed a longitudinal study of the two years following divorce. They investigated 48 divorced parents and their pre-school children and a matched group of 48 intact families. In the families which the authors studied there were none in which at least one family member did not report distress or exhibit disrupted behavior, particularly during the first year following divorce. They did not encounter a "victim less" divorce. Disorganization and disrupted functioning seemed to peak at one year and be re-stabilizing by two years following divorce. Stresses in family functioning following divorce were reflected in fathers not only in alterations in parent-child relations but in changes in life style, emotional distress, and attitudes toward the self. The frenetic activity of the fathers one year after divorce seemed to be a process of exploration and trying out a variety of coping mechanisms. The success of some of these responses is reflected in the increase in happiness, self esteem and feelings of competence in divorced men in the period from one to two years following divorce.

Keshet and Kosenthal (1978) examined a group of 128 separated and divorced men in their role as father during the first two years following the breaking up of their marriage. Their children were 7 years and under.

The authors point out that to maintain the emotional attachment between himself and his children, a father must develop a sensitivity to them. In doing so, he is again faced with their dependency needs, their feelings of powerlessness and impotence, their emotionality, and their irrationality. However, he must face them not only as they are expressed by his children but also as elements that he himself had to suppress during his own childhood as he acquired the veneer of masculinity. By identifying with his children he re-experiences these emotions; by realizing his power as an adult he has an opportunity to resolve them for himself in new and better ways.

Many fathers reported that they became angry when their children cried for no immediately discernible reason. At such times they may be seeing their children as irrational and unmanageable, for the children may be expressing emotions that the fathers never learned to manage or control.

They conclude their study by noting that -

"Thus, men who have separated from or divorced their wives and have taken on some major responsibility for their children's care find that the demands of that responsibility can become an important focus for their own growth." (p. 18).

Further elaboration on this theme is found in another paper by Keshet and Rosenthal (1978a). Gersick (1979) interviewed 20 divorced men who received custody of their children. The author found that they cared deeply about their children, and had to make sacrifices about their careers in order to devote more time to them. Raising their children was important to them, and when the mother visited, the children exhibited problems. The "Kramer versus Kramer" syndrome was evident in this study.

Raschke and Raschke (1979) included 75 children of one-parent families in their study of 289 third, sixth and eighth grade children. The findings lend support to the proposition that children are not adversely affected by living in a single-parent family, but that family conflict and/or parental unhappiness can be detrimental, at least to self-concept, which is also a measure of social and personal adjustment. Further longitudinal research is needed, especially of a

nature that could examine conflicted families who stay together and those who separate, in order to specify what types of family conflicts are detrimental to children and just what those detrimental effects are.

Even though this research has not conclusively answered the questions raised, it does not lend any support to the cliché that "broken homes yield broken young lives." In Canada, Troyer (1979) recorded conversations with 300 children of divorced parents.

Feelings expressed included anger at the leaving parent (usually the father), sadness over the separation and an imminent fear of rejection in later years. Bitterness toward the institution of marriage and the opposite sex was also mentioned. According to the children, it is important that children know why the parents split up. Most children betrayed a hope of reconciliation that the absent parent would come home. A theme mentioned a few times was that when the child grew up, he would go and look for the lost parent. The children disliked being "bought" affection by the separated parent. They also hated being used as "agents" by the separated couple. A few mentioned that they saw alimony being used as a form of revenge on both sides. Two common reactions of the children to marriage were: (1) it is a mortal danger to be avoided at any cost; and (2) wanting to seek an early marriage for security and to show that they do not have the same flaw as their parents. A common myth of divorced parents is that they have not "put any pressure" on their children and have not forced them to grow up before their time. Yet, the author pointed out that "a forced maturity, a self-reliance was clear and ever present at some point and in some form in virtually all the taped conversations."

Ercul, Goldenberg and Schlesinger (1979) interviewed 14 children in one-parent families living in Toronto.

Most of the children with younger siblings felt that it was difficult for the youngsters to understand the situation. Those with older siblings felt that most of them were coping well.

The children cited a number of responsibilities which their missing parent used to have and which their older siblings have assumed. These included giving advice, disciplining, teaching sports, discussing sex, sitting at the head of the table, giving my sister away at her wedding, cooking and cleaning and telling me when to go to bed. Three children said that they resent their older siblings telling them what to do and they do not listen. But five said they turn to their older siblings to discuss family problems.

And the children themselves took on additional responsibilities such as: fixing things around the house, shopping for food, cooking and cleaning, paying for their own clothes, playing a father role, caring for younger siblings, working part time, and listening post for parent. Most of the children felt that they would have fewer responsibilities in a two-parent family.

#### V. A Canadian Study

During March-April 1980, a research seminar at the Faculty of Social Work, consisting of 13 students<sup>1</sup> and the author completed a study of 40 children aged 12-18 years, who were living in one-parent families. After approval of the "Review Committee on the Use of Human Subjects," we approached "Parents Without Partners" and "One-Parent Families Association of Canada;" in order to obtain

volunteers. We visited various of their Chapters in Metropolitan Toronto, and explained the study. The parent living at home, and the child had to sign consent forms.

The questionnaire consisted of 87 structured questions and four open-ended questions. We personally interviewed each child alone, for about one hour. Our group of children could be characterized by being middle class, white, urban living, primarily in fatherless homes for an average of 5 years. Their parents had been either separated or divorced, and the average age of our children was 15 years. Of the 40 children, 23 were girls and 17 were boys. All of their parents at home were working.

#### VI. Personal Characteristics of the Sample

The average age of our total sample of 40 children was 14.87 years. The male children were a little older on the average being 15.05 years, while the average age of the female children was 14.7 years. The age range of the respondents was 12-18 years.

Of the 40 children, 17 were Protestant, 8 were Catholic, 4 were Jewish, and 8 did not give any religious identification.

Of our total sample of 40 children, 14 were the oldest, 17 were the youngest, and 9 were the middle children. It is of interest that all the children had at least one brother or sister.

On the average, our subjects were living for period of 4.7 years in a one-parent family. The range was 1-13 years.

The three most frequent housing situations in which the children found themselves were 1) Rented Housing (37.5 p.c.), 2) Own Home (32.5 p.c.) and 3) Rented Apartment (22.5 p.c.).

The 36 mothers living at home were in 60 percent of the cases working at a clerical/sales position (21). Ten mothers were in professional jobs (nurse, social worker, accountant), and five were working in semi-professional occupations (day care workers, managers, etc.). The four fathers at home all had semi-skilled occupations.

Of the 36 non-custodial fathers, 12 (1/3) were professionals, 12 were in the managerial/executive category (1/3), and twelve were semi-skilled in their work categories.

The four non-custodial mothers, were all in the secretarial field.

#### VII. Findings: Some Personal Factors

The questions which were asked in this section related to some of the personal aspects of life in a one-parent family.

##### Moving

Forty percent of our subjects (18) had moved to a new neighbourhood after the separation. This involved also changes in school and friendships.

### Contact with Relatives

Over 70 percent of the children had contact "less than once a month" with paternal uncles, paternal grandparents, paternal cousins, maternal cousins, and maternal aunts. Maternal grandparents were seen more frequently by about 5.0 percent of our sample.

### Type of Contact with Relatives

Most of the contact with relatives was with in-person visits, followed by telephone calls, and letters. It is of interest that since separation contact with maternal grandparents and maternal cousins has increased, and with paternal aunts and paternal cousins has decreased.

### The Non-Custodial Parent

When we asked about the frequency of seeing the non-custodial parent, only 8 children saw their parent once a week, 9 saw them several times a month, 11 several times a year, 5 once a month, and 7 not at all.

The children spend their time with the non-custodial parent (in order of frequency) going out for a meal, visiting friends and relatives, outdoor activities, watching television, going to the movies, and shopping. Seventy percent of the children (28) stated that they felt that they had enough contact with their custodial father/mother. Thirty percent felt that they did not have enough contact.

The non-custodial parent of our sample lives in the same province of Ontario (18), in the same city of Toronto (17), in another province (4) and another country (1).

### Talking About Separation

We asked who our subjects talked to about the separation. The five most important persons, in order of frequency were mother, friends, sister, brother, and father.

The most helpful of these persons were "mother" and "friends." Of all our children, fifty-five percent (22) stated that their parents had not talked to them about the separation, before it actually occurred.

### Feelings About the Separation

In order of frequency, our subjects felt upset, unhappy, confused, sad, worried, and relieved in at least half of the situations we studied.

Table 4 contains the advantages and disadvantages in living in a one-parent family, as seen by our children.

TABLE 4  
 ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES IN BEING IN A ONE-PARENT FAMILY  
 (IN ORDER OF IMPORTANCE)

Advantages		Disadvantages	
1	closer to mother	not closer to father	1
2	more responsibility	smaller dwelling	2
3	helping in household	helping in household	3
4	get along with siblings	come home to an empty house	4
5	more friends	more responsibility	5
6	trusted more	moving to a new area	6
7	moving to a new area	not get along with siblings	7
8	closer to father	less friends	8

When we asked how they preferred spending their free time, they responded (in order of frequency): 1. with a friend; 2. organized activities; 3. by themselves; 4. at home; 5. with the absent parent.

If they had a problem, our subjects indicated that they talked most frequently with: 1. a friend; 2. mother; 3. other persons; 4. father (only 4).

### III. Summary of Personal Characteristics

Among some of the changes which our children experienced in becoming a one-parent family were moving to a new neighbourhood, a shift in contact with maternal and paternal relatives, and a new experience in their contact with the non-custodial parent.

It is of interest to note that at least half of the children had not had any parental communication about the pending separation. They felt in most cases upset and unhappy about the separation, and found certain advantages and disadvantages in living in a one-parent family.

### IX. The Voices of Children

In our opinion, the most interesting findings resulted from four open-ended questions in our study. Here, the children had an opportunity to voice their opinions.

In response to the question "If you had a friend whose parents were about to separate, what advice would you give him/her?" Some of our children responded:

- Boys: Age 12 - try to see the other parent off and on  
 - don't feel guilty, try to take it calmly
- Age 15 - go on with your life  
 - forget about the separation, there is nothing you can do about it
- Age 16 - helps child grow up more quickly
- Age 17 - every separation is unique  
 - stay out of parents' way and let parents make own decisions
- Age 18 - look for the best side of it that you can  
 - try to understand patiently what your parents are going through
- Girls: Age 12 - get your say in about visiting arrangements with the parent not living at home  
 - the absent parent will always love you  
 - you will worry, but speak to father or mother
- Age 13 - do not get mad at parents cause they need their own freedom  
 - don't pity yourself  
 - keep in touch with the parent you are not living with
- Age 14 - it hurts at first and takes a long time to get over and then it doesn't hurt so badly  
 - you should think of both parents, and the "good times" that you had with the parent who's leaving and not only think of the bad times. This is because your sores have to heal, . . . you have to get over it.  
 - it doesn't mean they don't love you if they separate
- Age 15 - don't feel guilty if your parents separate  
 - try and look at both sides of the situation, mother's and father's  
 - try not to get too bitter about it  
 - tell them you are not the cause of their separation  
 - don't accept any blame  
 - it's O.K. to get upset but it's not the end of the world
- Age 17 - don't take sides  
 - try to be understanding  
 - let parents work out own problems, don't get in the middle  
 - go out if things at home are unpleasant like fighting

We felt that from hearing their comments that they are wise and know what's going on. Some are protective of their parents and realize that the adults have to work things out. They also feel that they are not to blame for the separation of their parents.

The next question we asked was:

"If you were asked to talk to a group of parents who were about to separate, what advice would you give them?"

Boys: Age 12 - keep calm, get the pain over with fast

Age 15 - would go to absent parent and tell them not to be too sweet, don't keep giving money and candy  
- to parent at home, don't lean too heavily on the child

Age 16 - to realize whom they could be hurting if they go through with separation

Age 17 - tell them "whatever they do, to act their age"  
- remember that the kids are going through times which are as "tough" or "tougher"

Age 18 - consider what it will do to your marriage in the future

Girls: Age 12 - to try and work out your problems and to try to agree on things

- ask kids if they have problems  
- you should talk to each other  
- explain to your children exactly what is about to happen, what the custody arrangements are to be

Age 13 - don't ignore kids through this cause they'll feel rejected; they'll think it's their fault

- make sure you are doing the right thing (make sure that you are doing what you think is best)

Age 14 - I'd ask them why they are splitting up. Then I'd tell them to always explain fully to the kids because they are always the last to know and the people who suffer and are hurt the most. Tell the whole and not half-truths.

It is our opinion that kids want to be told the truth about the separation and they do not want to be ignored at the time of family crisis. This is probably the most difficult part for parents, since they themselves may not really know why the separation took place.

The third question we asked was:

"A friend at school asks you to tell him what life in a one-parent family was like, what would you tell him/her?"

Boys: Age 12 - much like any other family, but you are minus a parent

Age 15 - lots of time alone, convenience

Age 16 - more freedom in a one-parent family, less rules and the child "gets away with more" the child becomes more self-sufficient"

Age 17 - it has its ups and downs "one Hell of a lot harder than growing up in a regular family"

- kids have to grow up much more quickly

Age 18 - it's closer, more jobs, more responsibility

Girls: Age 13 - not so bad, I got used to it after a few months, I know my parents better

- more responsibility
- don't see other parent as much
- can't talk to both parents about the same problem at the same time

Age 14 - you miss the quality of the parent who is not living with you

Age 15 - not really different from two-parent family, I still see both of my parents

- a lot more freedom

Age 16 - get lonely at times without the other parent

- I don't want other people to know that I am from a single parent family

Age 18 - at first it's hard to accept that your father or mother is gone, and if you don't go to as many places or do as many things without both parents being there

- still get to see dad and speak to him
- its "different" you have to "adjust to the absence of the non live-in parent, to the busy schedule of the other parent, and the lack of free time that he/she has to spend with the child

The children all feel a missing link, as they moved from a two-parent to a one-parent family. There appears a feeling of having more freedom, and yet more responsibilities, and some even want to hide the fact that they live in a one-parent family. Adjustment to the parent not living at home appears to be a major change for the children.

Our fourth question was:

"Is there anything else you feel you want to add to this interview which might be of help to children in one-parent families?"

Boys: Age 17 - divorce or separation is something that just happens

- kids must understand that separation is not their fault
- kids no longer have to please both parents to avoid parent fighting
- kids should know that things will be hard at first, but kids should remain the same and keep trying
- it will get better even if not until kid moves out and gets into own home and life situation
- it's hard for everyone

- Girls: Age 16 - try behaving yourself, because your parents are going through a lot with this separation
- do not get involved in your parents' conflicts
  - it's good to get involved in a group
  - help each other along
  - then meet other people

Our "experts" are advising other children who may face a separation not to get involved in the conflicts and anxieties of their parents, and that things will improve as time marches on.

X. Themes Which Emerge From Open-Ended Questions From Children In One-Parent Families

The following themes emerged from the open-ended questions:

A. Advice to Other Children in One-Parent Families

- not to feel guilty and take blame for separation, you are not the cause of the separation
- to attempt to grow up and not to get too involved in quarrels of adults
- to understand what parents are going through
- obtain as much information as you can about the reasons for the separation
- do not allow the turmoil of the separation get to you
- both parents will still love you despite the separation
- the separation of the parents will hurt the kids
- do not take sides in the separation struggle
- if you have problems, speak to someone about them

B. Advice to Parents

- not to involve the children in the anxiety, and hostility of a separation
- allow children to decide with whom they want to live
- do not let the children down too hard, tell them what's happening in the separation
- do not force children to take sides
- try to stay together as a couple as long as possible
- see a marriage counselor before splitting up
- see if you can work out your problems before separating
- tell kids you still love them, despite separation
- ask your children what problems they have around the separation
- tell the children it's not their fault that you separate, explain fully the reasons for the separation
- do not put the children in the middle of the adult fights

C. Life in a One-Parent Family

- you are on your own a lot of the time
- you have more freedom and less rules
- you can get away with more
- it has it's ups and downs
- children grow up much more quickly
- children have more responsibility
- miss the absent parent, keep contact with him/her
- get lonely at times for other parent
- children do more housework
- your family can become closer
- children have to adjust to having only one parent at home
- would like someone else to turn to outside of parent at home
- less free time to spend with other children
- you grow up faster in a one-parent family

D. What Might Help Children in One-Parent Families

- it's not the end of the world if you live in a one-parent family
- separation is not the children's fault
- do not let problems overwhelm you
- do not pick sides in the separation
- hope that separated parents may re-unite
- do not mourn too much
- help out more at home
- do not be bitter about separation

XI. Problems Facing One-Parent Families and Their Children

In examining the research studies related to one-parent families I have been able to condense the problems faced by one-parent families as well as the positive aspects of being in a one-parent family.

(a) Concrete and Practical

Finances, housing, legal, employment (part-time work), child-minding facilities, transport, babysitting costs, budgeting, home maintenance.

(b) Personal

Stigma, prejudice, loneliness, limited social and sexual life, emotional problems, physical and mental health affected, decision-making on your own, tiredness if you work, a "threat" to shaky marriages, friends leave you or take sides.

(c) Parent-Child Relations

Child has only one model at home, lack of feminity/masculinity at home, child has only one parent to relate to in discipline, etc., the school does not understand children of one-parent families, treat children as "missing adult" in family, over-protection of children, only source of affection for children.

(d) Psychological Aspects

Feelings of guilt, blame, a low self-image, insecurity, isolation, to overdo parenting and to attempt to be father and mother although you are only one parent, a sense of failure, living with the negative past and not looking ahead.

(e) Communal Aspects

Lack of community supports, suspicion of being a solo-parent. Since you failed in marriage, you are "punished." You are "easy game" if you are a solo-parent female.

(f) Familial Aspects

Lack of extended family support.

XII. Positive Aspects of One-Parent Families(a) Concrete and Practical

Regular financial income, and you decide how to spend it. You can devote your time to child-rearing or decide if possible to work part- or full-time.

(b) Personal

There is peace in the home, coping emotionally, since there is less strain, no harassment from spouse, regain self-confidence, join self-help groups of solo-parents. May find another suitable partner or friend.

(c) Parent-Child Relationships

No contradiction in raising children. Children appear more settled after previous conflicts. Treat children more as companions.

(d) Psychological Aspects

You can raise your own consciousness. Not a shadow of your partner but a unique individual. Find tremendous strengths which were dormant previously. Develop your creativity and capabilities by undertaking new ventures such as educational, vocational, or other practical training.

(e) Communal Aspects

You join self-help groups and feel wanted. You join communal activities as a "person" not as a solo-parent. Social agencies are of help to the one-parent family.

(f) Familial Aspects

You begin to have closer familial ties with the extended family.

III. Some Questions for Research

The following are selected questions for further examination related to research possibilities involving children in one parent families.

Children and Divorce

- 1) The effect of divorce on children at different ages (pre-school to adolescence).
- 2) The relationship to the non-custodial parent and the child.
- 3) The relationship of the extended family and the child in divorce (grandparents, uncles, aunts, etc.).
- 4) The involvement of the children in the divorce process.

Children and Widow/Widowerhood

- 1) We have little information on the process of grief and recovery.
- 2) We have little information about the adjustment process of children where one parent dies.

Children and Separation

- 1) The effect of separation on children at different ages.
- 2) Short-term versus long-term separation and its effect on children.
- 3) Desertion in family life and its effect on children.

Children and Non-Married Mothers

- 1) How do children fare in single-mother homes?
- 2) What are some of the problems and positive aspects over the child's life cycle (pre-school to adolescence) living in a home with a single mother?
- 3) Are there any crucial age periods (18 months to 24 months) in a single-mother-child home?
- 4) What part does the putative father play in child rearing?
- 5) What part does the extended family (grandparents) play in child rearing?

Children of Motherless Families

- 1) What is the adjustment process of children at various age levels in motherless families?
- 2) How do they relate to the mother who is the "non-custodial" week-end parent?

One-Parent Children -- General

- 1) How does the school help the child from a one-parent family?
- 2) Longitudinal study -- what kind of a marriage do children from one-parent families have?
- 3) Are there divorce-prone, separation-prone families (generational patterns)?
- 4) Comparative controlled studies of one-parent and two-parent children in various areas of functioning: school, home, behaviour, etc.?

XIV. Conclusions

It appeared that these children in lone-parent families were quite resilient and showed a lot of strengths. They were saying to parents that they have feelings, that they know what is going on, and that they want to be told about the details of the separation.

It is also apparent that it affects them and that over time the hurt appears to lessen and they seem to live a normal family life with one parent at home. Our study also shows the sensitivity of these children, who have a lot to offer in our examination of one-parent family life. We leave the last word to one of our children: "Separation and Divorce is not the end of the world for kids, they have to keep on going and make the best of it."

References

- Bane, M.J. Marital Disruption and the Lives of Children. In G. Levinger and O.M. Moles (Eds.) Divorce and Separation. New York: Basic Books, 1979.
- Bigner, J.J. Fathering: Research and Practice Implications. The Family Co-ordinator, 1970, 19, 357-362.
- Brandwein, R.A., Brown, C.A., and Fox, E.M. Women and Children Last: The Social Situation of Divorced Mothers and Their Families. Journal of Marriage and the Family, 1974, 35, 498-514.
- Ercul, D., Goldenberg, N. and Schlesinger, B. Children in One-Parent Families: Some Impressions. In B. Schlesinger (Ed.) One in Ten: The Single Parent in Canada. Toronto: University of Toronto, Faculty of Education, Guidance Centre, 1979.
- Gersick, K.E. Fathers By Choice: Divorced Men Who Receive Custody of Their Children. In G. Levinger and O.C. Moles (Ed.) Divorce and Separation. New York: Basic Books, 1979.
- Herzog, E. and Sudia, C. Children in Fatherless Homes. In Bettye M. Caldwell and Henry N. Ricciuti (Eds.) Review of Child Development Research. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973, Volume Three.
- Hetherington, M.E. Girls Without Fathers, Psychology Today, 1973, 6, 47-52.
- Hetherington, M.V., Cox, M. and Cox, R. Divorced Fathers. The Family Co-ordinator, 1976, 25, 417-427.
- Keshet, H.F. and Rosenthal, K.M. Fathering After Marital Separation, Social Work, 1978, 23, 11-18. (a).
- Kelly, J.B., and Wallerstein, J.S. The Effects of Parental Divorce: Experiences of the Child in Early Latency, American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 1976, 46, 20-32.
- Keshet, R.H., F., and Rosenthal, K.M. Single Parent Fathers: A New Study, Children Today, 1978, 7, 13-17.
- Lewis, K. Single Father Families: Who They Are and How They Fare, Child Welfare, 1978, 52, 643-651.
- Longfellow, C. Divorce in Context: Its Impact on Children. In G. Levinger and O.C. Moles (Eds.) Divorce and Separation. New York: Basic Books, 1979.
- Luepnitz, D.A. Children of Divorce: A Review of the Psychological Literature, Law and Human Behavior, 1978, 2, 167-179.
- McDermott, J.F. Parental Divorce in Early Childhood, American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 1968, 124, 1424-1432.
- Mends, H.A. Single Parent Families: A Typology of Life-Styles, Social Work, 1979, 24, 193-200.

- Orthner, D.K. and Lewis, K. Evidence of Single Father Competence in Childrearing, Family Law Quarterly, 1979, 13, 27-47.
- Orthner, D.K., Brown, T., and Ferguson. Single Parent Fatherhood: An Emerging Family Life Style. The Family Co-ordinator, 1976, 25, 429-438.
- Raschke, H.J. and Raschke, V.J. Family Conflict and Children's Self-Concepts: A Comparison of Intact and Single Parent Families, Journal of Marriage and the Family, 1979, 41, 367-373.
- Ross, H.L. and Sawhill, I.V. Time of Transition: The Growth of Families Headed by Women. Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute, 1975.
- Schlesinger, B. Single Parent Fathers: A Research Review, Children Today, 1978, 7, 18-19; 37-39.
- Schlesinger, B. Divorce and Children: A Review of the Literature. In D.M. Steinberg (Ed.) Reports of Family Law, 1976, 24, 203-216.
- Schlesinger, B. The One-Parent Family: Perspectives and Annotated Bibliography. Toronto. University of Toronto Press, 1978. 4th Edition.
- Schorr, A.L. and Moen, P. The Single Parent and Public Policy, Social Policy, 1979, 9, 15-21.
- Single Parent, The, 1979, 22, pp. 31-33.
- Troyer, W. Divorced Kids. Toronto: Clarke, Irwin and Co. Ltd., 1979.
- Wallerstein, J.S. and Kelly, J.B. The Effects of Parental Divorce: The Adolescent Experience. In A. Koupernik (Ed.) The Child in His Family: Children of Psychiatric Risk, New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1974.
- Wallerstein, J.S. and Kelly, J.B. The Effects of Divorce: Experience of the Pre-School Child, Journal of Child Psychiatry, 1975, 14, 600-616.
- Wallerstein, J.S. and Kelly, J.B. The Effects of Divorce: Experience of the Child in Later Latency, American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 1976, 46, 256-269.
- Wallerstein, J.S. and Kelly, J.B. California's Children of Divorce, Psychology Today, 1980, 11, 67-76.
- Wargon, S.T. Children in Canadian Families, Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 1979.

## Reference Notes

The graduate students comprising the research team in this study were:

Gary Brooks	Gia Levin
Glenn Bruder	Mary Anne McEvenue
Cindy Clarke	Janet Miniely
Pat Evans	Sophia Papahariss
David Feder	Sylvia Thibault
Leslie Glennie	Joyce Tremmel
Gail Greenberg	

They received their Master of Social Work degree in June 1980.