



A Review of Family Structure's Effects on Children's Mental Well Being

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Abstract. Different family atmospheres produce different children, and so do different family structures. The first environment for children to receive education is the family. The influence and infection of the family on children is a kind of silent education. The inner security and sense of home that family gives children are irreplaceable. The change of family structure will first hurt children psychologically, and later it may become worse and worse. Single-parent and two-parent family structures leave various impacts on children, both positive and negative impacts. The present review is an attempt to review studies on the influences that different family structures (mainly single-parent family and two parent-family) bring to their children's mental well being.

Keywords: family structure, child development, mental wellbeing

1 Introduction

Typically, the family has an extraordinary importance in every culture, no matter how the times change, the family is always the basic unit of society. With the freedom and liberation of ideas, family forms became more diverse. There are different ways of defining family structures, the most common one divided the family structures into seven types: 1. Nuclear families, the traditional family that have two parents and children, 2. Single parent families, there is only one parent taking care of children, 3. extended families, having more adults who are related by blood living together with their children, 4. Childrenless families, only parents in the family, 5. Step families, two people from previous families join to make one, 6. Grandparent families, grandparents take care of the children, 7. Unconventional families, like polygamous families [1]. The single-parent family in this review included single mother or father, blended step, or divorced parents, etc; there's only one blood parent in the family raising the children. Mental health includes emotional, psychological, and social well-being, and it reflects how people think, feel, and act. According to National Institute of Mental Health there are a number of prevalent mental illnesses, including autism, eating disorders, bipolar disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and anxiety disorders. Children

between the ages of 3 and 17 are most frequently diagnosed with depression, ADHD, anxiety issues, and behavior issues.

The percentage of nuclear families decreased 15% (from 40% to 25%) from 1970 to 2000 in the United States, and the rest 75% of the families are not traditional family structures. The rate of single parent families is also increasing gradually. People often have prejudice against the children of single-parent families and think that they are different from the children of traditional families, for example, they are psychologically or mentally abnormal. But children are also victims of single-parent families and should not be treated differently. Children's minds are not fully developed, and if they are negatively affected by changes in their family structures while growing up, this may continue into adulthood or even their entire lives. The change of the family can give the children with great trauma, that the children will easily distort the psychological or eccentric character, and also easy to commit a crime. The differences in family structure reflect the culture of family concept. The impact of different family structures on children is long-term and deep, and can play an important role in children's future growth. Therefore, it is important to study the psychological impact of family structure on children, and can provide them with appropriate support according to different influences, allowing more children to have a healthy and happy growth environment. Family-structure's impact and effective intervention and suggestion is a current gap that not many people study for, and this is also a blind spot for some people. To fill in the current gap on our knowledge of family structure's impact on children's mental wellbeing, and to know more specifically, this research is needed. Families can bring both positive and negative effects on children's personality, behavior, academic performance, and mental health. And this review paper aims at investigating family structure's impact on children's mental health.

2 Theoretical Background

2.1 Family system theory

Different theories exist in the literature regarding the family structure and parent-child relationship. The family unit is viewed by family systems theory [2], a theory of human behavior, as a complex social system whose members interact to affect one another's behavior. Each person is impacted by the interactions of subsystems between parents, between parents and children, and between children, which has an impact on the group as a whole. Because the family's equilibrium is frequently shaken at these periods, relationships in families alter most profoundly when specific family members or the family's circumstances are changing (leaving or joining). While a regressive period will witness surges in the divorce rate, a progressive phase is when things are improving.

2.2 Attachment theory

It distinguishes between a "confident" style and two or three different conceptualization "insecure" styles, with the three primary ones being avoidant, ambivalent, and concerned or anxious. In 1990, Main and Solomon proposed a disjointed style. Each

attachment style, according to the theory, involves deeply ingrained ideas of the self and others, issues with affect, and actions that are reflective of these underlying attitudes). After their family structure changes, the children will feel insecure or self-abased, and have less reliable attachment styles than the others who have not had those kinds of experiences.

2.3 The Influences that Single Family Brings to Children

A significant increase in negative internalizing or externalizing behaviors was observed in children and adolescents who did not grow up in nuclear households, as well as worse life satisfaction and mental well-being. This review mainly focuses on four perspectives: negative emotions, self-values, risk and illegal behavior, and mental disorders that the family will influence.

2.4 Negative Emotions

Negative emotions are unpleasant emotions which are evoked in individuals to express a negative effect. The children from single parent families tend to have more negative emotions than the children who grew up with two parents. Some of the bad emotions last for a short period of time, and some last until adulthood, even their whole life. Children of divorce may seem unhappy, angry, protective, or completely hide their emotions. They frequently alternate between the two parents' replies or even change from one parent to the other minute by minute [3]. According to researchers Kelly and Emery, divorce will bring longing sadness, worry, and regret to the children, and they will have more emotional problems; while for the children who lose a parent, they may feel the lack of parental companionship, but usually do not have serious psychological difficulties. Due to a lack of family affective disorder, children will lack interpersonal communication with their parents. It is also simple to introduce this mood to children; children live in fear and desire to spend a lot of time coping with dysfunctional families. And the interpersonal relationship will allow them to feel apprehensive, lacking a sense of security. Additionally, research has shown that children with divorced parents experienced continual high levels of rage and that unhappy youngsters in split families felt depressed [4].

2.5 Self-values

Values are the principles that affect the individual's thinking and behaviour [4]. The self-values of children from different family structures will be diverse. Some researchers have found a lower self-esteem, a poorer self-concept; they also tend to have more negative self-concepts. When children see the happy families of their peers and think of their own broken homes, the sadness and loss in their hearts make them feel inferior. Due to their low evaluation of themselves, they attribute their failure in study or life to their inability, resulting in negative emotional experiences such as anxiety, guilt and disappointment, which leads to their entire psychological imbalance and a strong sense of inferiority. The Mann-Whitney U test revealed that the average respect value score

for children in non-divorced families was 4.7, while the average respect value score for children in divorced families was 4.15. Not only the respect value, the mean responsibility value, cooperation value, the honest value, and the sharing value for divorced children were all lower than intact families' children [4]. In accordance with Freud, Avdoan finds that a person's personality develops throughout the first years of life. Early childhood experiences have long-lasting consequences on a person. Thus, the building of self-value is important.

2.6 Risk and Illegal Behaviors

Children from single parent families are more likely to be neglected by their parents, and they will feel insecure, stressed, and frustrated by the difference between their circumstance and their friends. Because of the repression being too long, once the burst of energy is greater, it is easy to produce extreme behavior and choose radical ways to solve problems. This tendency manifests itself in crying or running away from home in girls and in aggressive behavior in some boys. "Similar to Dunifon and Kowaleski-Jones (2002), we found that adolescents from single-parent families exhibit more anti-social behavior than adolescents from two-parent families" [5]. Children from divorced families manifest delinquent behaviors, such as petty stealing, lying, and manipulation [3]. A research found that "adolescents in non-intact families were at higher risk for use of alcohol, illicit drugs, drunkenness and smoking than their counterparts in intact families. In addition, adolescents in shared physical custody were at higher risk of drunkenness than youths in two parent families"; moreover, the children from single parent families are at higher risk of being victims of physical violence or bullying and aggressive behavior [6].

2.7 Mental Disorders

According to WHO, a clinically significant impairment in a person's cognition, emotional control, or conduct is what defines a mental disorder. Children from single parent families have higher probability to get mental disorders, including depression, anxiety disorders, schizophrenia, and addictive behaviors than others. The National Survey of Children's Health in 2003 shows the percentage about mental health of children from various family structures. Only 5.7% of the children (age 3-17) from two-parent families have moderate/severe difficulty with emotions/concentration/behavior, but the rate from single parent families varied from 7.8% to 14.4% [7]. According to a recent study, parental divorce is linked to an increased incidence of mental disorders, whereas parental death is not, even after accounting for family history of mental diseases. Furthermore, While, many studies looked at the relationship between either parental divorce or parental death and 1 particular mental disorder, the NESARC provides an extensive assessment of a wide range of psychiatric disorders, including mood and anxiety disorders, substance use disorders, and personality disorders within 2 timeframes (mental disorders occurring after the age of 17 years a primarily depression) [8].

3 Method

In the following, each of the steps to gather the research base for this review would be described. In the beginning, the main articles to be reviewed were searched in Google Scholar by identifying the keywords in the title and abstract. Specifically, the keywords were entered in the form of (“different family structures” or “single and two parent family” or “household formation”) and “mental health”. The search yielded an initial proof of 36 candidate articles. To limit the scope of the review and to make the target more concise and specific, the second selection was based on a set of research criteria, including: 1. the articles were written in English; 2. the articles were written after 2000; 3. the participants were higher education level learners (e.g., college, university); 4. the study investigated and examined the impact on students; 5. For empirical articles, the purpose or problem of the study and the methods of analysis were clearly stated. Following the screening, 21 articles were excluded because their scope, quality, or focus did not match this literature review paper. After the screening process, full-text of the articles were read and vetted to ensure that they are suitable for further review. This screening then narrowed the pool of studies down to 15 articles. In the searching process, the impact that families bring to children's mental health was considered the most noticeable when reading every source, and always keep the question that this review paper wants to discuss in mind. The review question is “What role does family structure play in children's mental wellbeing?”

4 Results

Various studies consistently show that children from single-parent families are more likely to develop a variety of behavioural problems than children from two-parent families. The following pooled ORs (95% CIs) showed a strong correlation between parental divorce and every element of mental health: Alcohol 1.43 (1.34-1.53), smoking 1.64 (1.57-1.72), drug use 1.45 (1.44-1.46), suicidal ideation 1.48 (1.43-1.54), suicidal attempt 1.35 (1.26-1.44), distress 1.48 (1.37-1.6), depression 1.29 (1.23-1.35), anxiety 1.12 (1.04-1.12), suicidal attempt 1.35 (1.26-1.44), suicidal ideation 1.48 [9]. Children who have experienced the loss of a parent during their childhood or adolescence are more likely to experience psychiatric disorders, such as those related to alcohol and other drugs, mood or anxiety disorders, and psychosis, and to commit suicide [10]. An incomplete family will bring emotional negativity to the child, which will affect his behavior and psychology. Overwhelmed, anxious, or emotionally distraught parents who are divorcing or separated may express their feelings through critical, forceful speech with their children, which may heighten their externalizing tendencies [11]. Even worse, sometimes, the maltreatment by parents will co-occur with the separation or divorce, which will affect children's externalizing behavior. A child's psychology and behavior are closely linked, and one will impact the other. For example, a child from an incomplete family may feel depressed, and the persistent negative emotions may lead to mental disorders (depression or other illness); also, it may distort his or her self-values; furthermore, he or she may take things to extremes and may break the law.

5 Conclusion

More diverse family structures are an increasing phenomenon in modern society. Children are immature individuals who will be influenced by the change in family structure, and they are vulnerable to it, even a little thing can break down their psychological defences. Although divorce or separation is a “parental thing”, It has proven an unreliable indicator of emotional inclination, misbehavior, achievement, and mental disease. Entürk asserts that a child who is forced to leave their parents because of a divorce feels vulnerable, alone, and unprotected. Although researchers claim that the two years following divorce are the most difficult for adolescents to adjust to, there are long-term impacts, such as sleeper effects. More essential than the number of parents in the home is the quality of the relationships that the adolescent has with significant adults. Receiving support from all sides will make the breakdown of the family less impactful for the children.

Compared to the past centuries, the percentage of single-parent families has increased a lot, and it is children who suffer most from the disintegration of the family. Thus, the way they interact with their children, the way of communication is important. Family members' mutual respect, caring, and support for one another helps young people overcome the influence of negative emotions and maintain a pleasant, upbeat, and positive attitude. Instead of acting rashly, parents should handle their children with patience. Educational style is very important, not just focus on academic performance, mental health is also important. Parents of incomplete families should pay more attention to their children's psychological problems and need to timely guide their children when they have negative emotions. Feeling sufficient love and care from parents will let children be confident and positive. Children of incomplete families can turn to people or institutions for help or social support when necessary. They need to be strong that no one can hurt them easily by their special family structures. The society should be more tolerant and understanding to the children of non-traditional family structure, and should not treat them with prejudice.

The researchers in the future can study more about why children have those negative behaviors, and how people can minimize harm to help them. Programs to study the different impact on boys and girls are necessary, since gender difference makes boys and girls think differently; moreover, the studies about the long-term impact of the disintegration of family brings to their children is less. Future studies should concentrate on creating initiatives that support the resilience of kids from broken families.

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