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Supporting Success for Children from Single-Parent Homes

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Winona State University

Spring 2019

Winona State University
College of Education
Counselor Education Department

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

CAPSTONE PROJECT

Supporting Success for Children From Single-Parent Homes

This is to certify that the Capstone Project of
CASEY SCHEUERELL
has been approved by the faculty advisor and the CE 695 – Capstone Project
Course Instructor in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Master’s of Science Degree in Human Services Professional

Capstone Project Supervisor: 
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Abstract

One out of every three children live in single-parent households either from birth or throughout their childhood. Evidence shows that students from single-parent homes struggle academically, socially, and behavioral due to income difficulties, time parents are spent away from the children, and lack of connection to the schools. While these issues exist, Staying in an unhealthy relationship for the child can actually be worse than terminating the relationship. Though there are difficulties, single parents find financial sustainability when they get child support or when they cohabitate with family, friends, or significant others. Counselors can assist students and families with individual and group counseling, advocating for resources, and working on systemic changes to help attain success on many levels.

Keywords: single-parent households, academics, school counselor, student success

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Supporting Success for Children from Single-Parent Homes

Children in homes that have only one parent have historically had less academic success than their counterparts from dual-parent homes (Pong, Dronkers, & Hampden-Thompson, 2003). More than one third of all children in the United States have a nonresident parent (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006) and research has found that these students have increased chances of dropping out of high school, lower test performance, and an increase in undesired behavior, including teen pregnancy (Ricciuti, 2004). Ricciuti (2004) found that this academic deficit can be attributed to limited economic and social resources that single-parents have compared to a dual-parent family.

When there is only one parent in the home, only one income pays for all the house needs of the family. Parents are forced to work more hours and children are in child care longer than their dual-parent peers (Pong, Dronkers & Hampden-Thompson, 2003). When parents and children have less time together, that attributes to less time a parent can read to them and build vocabulary. A lack of vocabulary due to the parent being away from the home can attribute of an achievement gap (Wasik & Hindeman, 2015). In countries that have generous family policies with long maternity leave and support for single parents, the achievement gap of those in single-family homes and those in dual-family homes was narrower or non-existent than those without strong programs (Pong, Dronkers & Hampden-Thompson, 2003).

Since some parents are at work to provide financial support for their children, parents may be unable to spend as much time with the child. This can have detrimental effects on the future success of a child, especially if this lack of time occurs in the child's first year of life (Pong, Dronkers & Hampden-Thompson, 2003). To survive in America, it may be necessary for parents to return to work within weeks after birth instead of staying home with their child, which

may impede the cognitive development the child would experience if the parent were home. As the child gets older, the lack of quality time with their parent may continue to negatively impact their life. The success of a child is higher when the parent is able to provide high-levels of support, control, and supervision (Stolba & Amato, 1993). When a parent is gone for long hours at work, they are unable to have quality time and ensure the homework is completed and give the child encouragement to be successful in school (Stolba & Amato, 1993). With the lack of time and money with one parent doing the work as opposed to two, it can be difficult for students to be involved in life-learning outside of the traditional classroom in the form of extracurricular activities, community events, and social experiences with peers (de Lange & Dronkers, 2018).

Literature Review

Risk Factors

Students are at risk to have poor school performance due to coming from single-parent homes due to various reasons. Identifying these risks and developing interventions to assist students will promote growth and success for the child.

Financial factors. According to Gibbons (2015), children of two-parent families are at an 8% poverty rate while their peers that are not in two-parent households are at a 40% poverty rate. This directly impacts the living arrangements, resources, and quality of living that a child has. While the needs in their life may be met with one parent, the components of success in school are impacted due to the strain of financials.

Extracurricular activities. One main factor that affects families that have one adult in the home is in relation to income and socioeconomic status. When there is one person paying for bills, there is less money for things that help a child's cognitive development, like extracurricular activities, after-school lessons, and summer camps (de Lange & Dronkers, 2018). Basic needs

are met but those extra opportunities that their wealthier counterparts have access to put the children of single parents at a disadvantage. Forneris, Camiré and Williamson (2015) studied high school students' participation in extracurricular activities and found that students had high school involvement and higher developmental assets like problem-solving skills, collaboration, and communication. This study was expanded upon by Carolan (2018) in which the author found further evidence to substantiate the claim that extracurriculars available to more affluent families had a stronger correlation to student success than those participating in activities that require little to no money. Not only do extracurricular activities have an impact upon student success, but also the quality of the activity and the amount of money necessary to participate in that activity. The lack of finances that hinder families from participating in sports, clubs and musical opportunities has a direct connection the achievement and success a student will have on reading and math comprehension and test scores (Carolan, 2018).

With their access to only one income, single-parent families are often forced into low-income neighborhoods that have schools with limited resources, high numbers of children in poverty, and a lower-quality of teachers (Pong, Dronkers, & Hampden-Thompson, 2003). This results in fewer opportunities for success than students from dual-income families who can afford to live in areas with higher-quality schools. One income does not leave options for expensive rental properties and homes, requiring families to live in areas that are available for lower incomes. Neighborhoods that are made up of lower-income housing create schools that are low income due to taxes that pay for the needs of the schools, resulting in fewer dollars to be spent on supplies for children and opportunities for learning (Pong, Dronkers & Hampden-Thompson, 2003).

Child support. Of the number of children in single-parent homes, only about 43% of those children are mandated by law to receive money in the form of child support (United States Census Bureau, 2018). Of those that receive support, only 60% received the full amount they were mandated to receive, an average of \$5,760 yearly, while the average of money actually paid averaged around \$3,447 in a calendar year for most children. Although any financial assistance is helpful, this money does not make a dent into assisting the bills necessary to provide a safe and healthy upbringing for a child when one person is covering the costs. According to the US Department of Labor (2019), the national median weekly earnings of a single person was less than \$900 (see Table 1) while the cost of living for rent/mortgage, food, utilities, and every day necessities averages to about \$350 per week, not including child care, retirement fund, student loan debt, and savings/incidentals. Single parents struggle to spend time with children because of how much they have to work to pay the bills, and there often is not much money left over after bills are paid for extra opportunities.

Table 1
US Department of Labor (2019) of median personal income

Measure	Some high school	High school graduate	Some college	Associate's degree	Bachelor's degree or higher	Bachelor's degree	Master's degree	Professional degree	Doctorate degree
Persons, age 25+ w/ earnings	\$24,576	\$33,669	\$37,968	\$37,968	\$61,440	\$56,592	\$70,608	\$91,538	\$79,231
Male, age 25+ w/ earnings	\$22,214	\$32,307	\$39,823	\$43,785	\$70,437	\$62,304	\$78,222	\$111,881	\$91,604
Female, age 25+ w/ earnings	\$20,784	\$28,896	\$33,360	\$33,360	\$54,480	\$49,248	\$61,200	\$65,012	\$68,887
Persons, age 25+, employed full-time	\$30,598	\$38,102	\$43,377	\$47,401	\$71,221	\$64,074	\$77,285	\$117,679	\$101,307

Academic factors. With the parent's need to work more to pay for bills on their own, their time with their child is vastly reduced when compared to that of families with two adults in the home (de Lange & Dronkers, 2018). As de Lange and Dronkers (2018) point out, single parents get to spend less time with their child which results in less spoken language and vocabulary in the home, less opportunities to attend school functions, and decreased availability

to check-in on homework and school success. Amato, Patterson and Beattie (2015) define these connections as social capital, or the resources a parent can provide for a child, such as engagement, emotional support, and encouragement. They argue that the lack of social capital a single-parent has compared to a two-parent household can impact the child not only academically but also as they become a member of adult society.

Another obstacle that single-parent families can face is the support system that parents lose when they do not have a connection to the schools. Cataldi and KewalRamni (2009) suggest that students that live with less than two parents in one home perform worse on standardized tests compared to their counterparts from two-parent homes. According to Pong (1998), a student will be more successful when the adult at home can reinforce the school's objectives and curriculum. Pong (1998) goes on to say that when a parent has connections to other parents in the school, the child will in turn be more successful because the parent will understand the child's peers, develop strategies and practices to strengthen their parenting, and establish relationships with other parents to act as surrogate parents when they are not around. Establishing connection between families allows for car-pooling to events, sleepover and places to stay when the parent has schedule conflicts, and a connection and support system in the other parents.

Emotional factors. A lack of time with a parent can have detrimental effects on the future success of a child, especially if this lack of time is done in the child's first year of life (Pong, Dronkers & Hampden-Thompson, 2003). Secure attachment between parent and child is an important component to social, cognitive, and emotional development of infants (Jihyoung & Wickrama, 2014). When parents are able to build connections through proximity and connection, children are unable build the ground level for all future learning to expand upon. Starting with these deficits can further hinder the emotional growth when the foundation is not sturdy.

Effects of divorce. As the child gets older, the lack of quality time with their parent continues to negatively impact their life. In a study by Amato and Anthony (2014), it was found that divorce was associated in the declines of achievement and adjusting to the new life of parents being separated. When a parent is separated from their child due to shared custody, they are less likely to have quality time and ensure the homework is completed and give the child encouragement to be successful in school (Stolba & Amato, 1993). Two homes can also affect school when things get communicated out from schools and only one parent gets the information, which in turn can have adverse effects upon the child with follow-through on items sent home.

Not only are children looking for attention and support from the person they primarily live with, but also from their nonresident parent. Stewart (2010) found that more than one third of children have not seen their nonresident parent in over a year and only one third of children saw their nonresident parent on a weekly basis. Jackson (1999) determined a direct correlation between the success of a child and the co-parenting levels of parent: if a nonresident parent was not around often and/or did not help financially, the primary parent had higher levels of depression which directly affected the child and their emotional health. Having both parents involved in the life of the child and making efforts to co-parent, at least around the child, has shown to have a long-lasting effect upon the well-being of the child.

Protective Factors

While there are many factors that put children of single-parent homes at risk, there are also factors that support the growth of the child and helps to make them independent and resilient. These factors challenge the ideas that children from single homes cannot find success.

Financial factors. The need for financial support as a single parent often means the parent will choose to have the family live with others: with family members like their own parents (grandparents), siblings, aunts, uncles, with friends and other single-parents, and also with significant others both romantically and platonic (Stewart, 2010). Stewart suggests a family can develop from people other than the two biological parents; the newly configured household family can band together to raise and support the child. The non-parents can step in to help with the time and attention the child needs, financial supports, and even be a potential role model for the child and possibly the parent as well. Even if the child and parent do not live with others, having a close-connection to others to help raise the child has shown to have success as well (Stewart, 2010).

Academic factors. While many studies support claims that growing up in a single-parent household has detrimental effects upon a child's academics, one study by Amato, Patterson and Beattie, (2015) delves more into decreased test scores beyond single-parent homes. The study found that there is a correlation with children from single homes having lower test scores, but found other variables such as parent education levels and income affecting outcomes, rather than the sole variable being a product of a single-parent household (Amato, Patterson & Beattie, 2015). Also, it was found that family structure has stronger effects on behavior instead of academic abilities. The effects on behavior can cause students to have decreases in academics not because they have lowered abilities, but because the behaviors hinder quality learning time.

Emotional factors. While there is evidence that having parents who are not together can be a detriment to the welfare of children, there is also evidence to show that staying together in an unhealthy relationship is just as unhealthy for children. According to the results of a study by Amato and Anthony (2014), the children studied had a high number of problems before the

divorce, meaning the marital conflict leading up to the divorce is the source of difficulties for the children. The stress within a home when parents are having difficulties directly impact the emotional turmoil that a child feels being in the home. Staying in a relationship that is not healthy can hurt the child more than getting a divorce and co-parenting (Stroud, Meyers, Wilson & Durbin, 2015). When parents stay together “for the kids”, it can actually hurt them in the long-term when they see modeled an unhealthy relationship, instead of the parents divorcing and having an opportunity to find success in a healthy relationship or live life as a single person.

Role of a School Counselor

Advocacy. According to the American School Counseling Association (2012), one of the roles a school counselor has is to advocate for the needs of their students. One of the needs that has been identified by research is the need to have extracurricular activities available to low-income students at an early age (Carolan, 2018). Carolan (2018) argues that advantaged children will not have difficulty participating in extracurriculars so supports and opportunities should be funded to help children without those opportunities, especially for children in early elementary. Counselors can assist with connecting families with resources and scholarship opportunities to participate in extracurriculars to stimulate growth and success. Assistance from the school, district, state, and federal levels can be advocated for by the counselor through the use of letters, face-to-face meetings, grant applications and media interviews on the needs students have to receive financial support for participating in activities outside the classroom.

Individual and group counseling. Counselors have the ability to work with children through large group, small group, and individual counseling to teach skills. Counselors utilize cognitive behavior therapy (CBT) approach reframe unhealthy cognitive distortions and behaviors (Association for Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies [ABCT], 2018). CBT looks at

how a person perceives a situation and how it makes them feel and is a goal-driven theory and involves counselor-led activities that are meant to help the client learn skills to achieve their goal through positive thoughts and behaviors to combat the negative mindset they currently have (ABCT, 2018). CBT connects how behaviors can be changed by working on thoughts and perceptions of situations and the emotions that go along with those experiences. This theory helps a person take control of the things that happen to them and can be very helpful for those experiencing trauma, people who are unable to see the positive of situations, and many forms of diagnosed mental illnesses like depression and anxiety disorders (Sharf, 2008). Amato, Patterson, and Beattie (2015) argue that a piece that holds students of single-parent households back from academic success is the anxiety they experience due to their home life.

Anxious children have been found to have difficulties in the school setting with academics and social skills that can impede learning and growth (Chiu et al., 2013). Chiu et al. (2013) studied the effects of utilizing CBT on children with anxiety and found that anxiety symptoms decreased and academic performance increased. Using assessments to identify students that are dealing with anxiety and developing interventions to meet the needs of the children will increase levels of student success. The individual sessions to reframe thoughts and address things student can and cannot control allows them to take hold of their own success (Amato, Patterson, & Beattie, 2015). Utilizing group therapy sessions with children from single families that are exhibiting anxious behaviors will not only address the anxiety but will also help to instill connections between peers and build connections between family systems.

Consultation and collaboration. When parents have a connection to the school, children do better academically and socially (Pong, 1993). One way to do this is creating a conference schedule that will allow flexibility for parent needs and schedules. For example, a parent that

works nights will not have an availability to come to conferences at night; counselors can work as an advocate for them to do a conference in the morning when they are done for the day.

Holcomb-McCoy (as cited in Grothaus & Cole, 2010), argues that if financial means are a barrier to get transportation to school, school counselors can advocate for families to be able to utilize the school's funds to pay for transportation so that families can support their child and feel connected to their education. If providing transportation is not feasible, school counselors can help to facilitate video conferences or suggest educators bring the conference to their home. Parents bring knowledge of the child's past experiences and learning styles that benefits teachers to be able to take their teaching expertise and apply it to each child in the way the works best for them (Schmidt, 2003). Building relationships between the school personnel and families through open communication is a key component to ensuring student success.

Another way to build connections between the school and families is by encouraging families to join the school community through things like the school's Parent/Teacher Organization or other parent-school connection opportunities (Grothaus & Cole, 2010). This allows parents to not only have an understanding of their child's academics but also to become leaders in the school to help meet the needs of what their child requires to succeed (Grothaus & Cole, 2010). Families develop a connection that allows them to build relationships with staff, other families, and the classmates their child interacts with every day. This connection becomes a support they can turn to ensure the needs of their child is met physically, academically, and socially.

Psychoeducation. One of the biggest areas that school counselors can help with is the school staff's bias to children of single parents. Grothaus and Cole (2010), argue that bias impacts the expectations of students and the bias may cause the parents to be blamed for the difficulties

children are facing and further alienate them from the school community. According to B.2.d of the ASCA Ethical Standards (2016), counselors are to “provide leadership to provide systemic change to enhance the school”. This means that counselors can utilize psychoeducation to address biases that the staff may have towards children that may intentionally or unintentionally be hindering their success (Grothaus & Cole, 2010). Educating staff on difficulties single-parent families have and why they may not be showing up to conferences, chaperoning field trips, or why they are not helping students with homework at night. This will reduce misconceptions the staff has about families and allows them an opportunity to step up and support their students beyond basic teaching requirements. Creating an atmosphere that is based on support and opportunities for all will develop a place that will bring the children and parents together with staff to help the children grow academically, socially, and emotionally towards success.

Conclusion

Children that come from homes with only one parent under their roof are statistically more likely to struggle in and out of school. Factors outside of their control have the ability to change the outcome of the future even if the parents have the best intentions in raising their children. While there is substantial support on the negative effects children experience from living in single-parent homes, there is also evidence that children thrive from strong co-parenting and resources to create a higher quality of living.

As counselors, the ASCA National Model (2012) recommends counselors engage in roles as leaders, advocates, collaborators, and systemic change agents. Working with the schools, community, and powers-at-be that make decisions, counselors have the capabilities of making life-changing effects upon a large population of children they serve. By advocating for the needs

of the children and families, people can come together to build new policies and supports to assist the children that do not come from two-parent households.

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