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The Effects of Parental Involvement on Student Achievement: Implications for Students with

Absent Parents

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Spring 2019

Winona State University

College of Education

Counselor Education Department

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

CAPSTONE PROJECT

The Effects of Parental Involvement on Student Achievement: Implications for Students with
Absent Parents

This is to certify that the Capstone Project of

Molly Serum

Has been approved by the faculty advisor and the CE 695 – Capstone Project

Course Instructor in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Master of Science Degree in

Counselor Education



Capstone Project Supervisor: _____

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Approval Date: May 10, 2019

Abstract

Over the past few decades, the typical family structure has changed greatly. Now more than ever, we have seen an increase in single parents, absent parents, blended families, and custodial grandparents (Parenting in America, 2015). One might wonder how these changes impact the success and development of a child, for better or for worse. This paper is a consolidation of the literature that has investigated parental involvement and student success. Further, the implications for students who experience parental absence on their academic, social-emotional, and overall well-being is also discussed.

Keywords: absent parent, custodial grandparent, student achievement, divorce, parental incarceration

Table of Contents

Introduction.....5

Review of Literature.....6

 Reasons for Parental Absence and the Effects.....6

 Divorce.....6

 Incarceration.....9

 Addiction and Mental Health Disorders.....10

 Chronically Ill or Deceased.....11

 Working and Deployed.....12

Benefits of Parental Involvement on Student Achievement.....15

Discussion and Conclusion.....16

Authors Note.....20

References.....21

The Effects of Parental Involvement on Student Achievement: Implications for Students with Absent Parents

Although it is difficult to know exactly how many children are growing up with absent parents, Grall (2016), United States Census Bureau, reported that one fourth of all children living in families, or 22.1 million children, were living with only one parent as of 2014. Of the 22.1 million, approximately 13.4 million children were living with custodial mothers, with fathers being absent (Grall). This is a drastic shift from the 1960's, when 73% of all U.S. children under 18 years old were being raised in a "traditional" family, consisting of two married, heterosexual parents in their first marriage (Livingston, 2014). Today, this number has dropped to 46%.

In many cases, children are living with grandparents as primary care givers instead of a biological parent. As of 2013, 2.2% of children in the United States were living in a home consisting of one grandparent but no parent (Pilkas & Dunifon, 2016). A 2013 Pew Research Survey estimated that this would equate to approximately 3 million children being cared for primarily by a grandparent (At Grandmother's House We Stay, 2013). If no parent, grandparent, or other legal guardian is available to take a child, they may be placed in foster care to live in foster families. As of 2016, over 435,000 children were living in foster care, an increase from roughly 397,000 children in 2012 (The AFCARS Report, 2017).

Through this review of the literature, this author aims to explore the various reasons that children are growing up in non-traditional homes with absent parents and reveal the potential related effects on student well-being and achievement. Potential benefits of parental involvement in a child's life and education will also be discussed. By understanding this dynamic, we may be able to find and fill possible gaps in opportunities between children raised in traditionally structured families and those who are not.

Review of the Literature

As we know, the traditional family structure has been changing over the past few decades. Today, we have more single parents, absent parents, blended families, and custodial grandparents than ever before (Parenting in America, 2015). According to the legal definition, an absent parent is “a non-custodial parent who may be obligated to pay partial child support and who is physically absent from the child's home. The term also refers to a parent who has abandoned his or her child, and failed to maintain contact with the child (US Legal, 2019).” A “custodial parent” refers to the parent who has physical custody of their child most of the time (Wolf, 2019). In many recent cases, a phenomenon is occurring where children are beginning to live with custodial grandparents. In these cases, the child is under a grandparent’s legal guardianship with no biological or adopted parents living in the household.

Reasons for Parental Absence and the Effects

Divorce. Divorce has become a common occurrence for many families over the past few decades and is a common reason why a parent may become absent from their child’s life. Statistics show that over one million U.S. children are affected by divorce each year (Pedro-Carroll, 2005). Divorce is defined by the Meriam-Webster Learner’s Dictionary (2017) as the ending of a marriage by legal process. Although this is a short phrase, it holds great weight by containing two key words that demonstrate how complicated divorce can be, especially for children. These words are “ending” and “process,” which prove that divorce is not simple and even though a marriage has now ended, it is not over in an instant.

Effects in School. After a divorce has finalized, children can experience adjustment periods as a direct cause of the divorce. Adjustments might include moving to a new home or seeing a parent date and remarry another partner. Many children handle divorce well, but for

some children, the process of divorce promotes big changes in their lives which can result in painful losses (Somody & Hobbs, 2006) and daily struggles. The rise in divorcing couples has resulted in an increase of families with children experiencing divorce in the school setting (Lamben, King & Goldman, 2002). School counselors must be aware of the potentially negative effects that divorce has been known to bring into a child's life. Such effects include increased risk for behavioral, social, physiological, and academic problems (Connolly & Green, 2009), which children can display in a number of ways.

Academic. Divorce can affect many areas of a child's life, including their academic success (Amato, Anthony & DiPerna, 2014). According to research conducted by Kaye (1989), children of divorce score significantly lower on achievement tests in the first one to two years following a divorce. This is important to consider when forming support groups for students experiencing divorce, recognizing that the initial stages of divorce often have the most detrimental effects on academic achievement. Studies have been conducted to aid in the understanding of why divorce affects children negatively along with how children of divorce can be supported to have academic success (Anderson, 2014, Kaye, 1989). Divorce may interfere with the academic success of children for many reasons, such as reduced income, less time spent with the child, parental distress or depression, and the lack of a father figure in the home.

In their 2014 study, Amato, Anthony and DiPerna discovered that children of divorce, on average, scored lower on standardized math tests. Their study contributed the findings to decreased motivation, not lack of ability. This might lead one to believe that emotional stressors caused by divorce are negatively impacting the student's academic achievement. Likewise, Sun and Li (2009) discuss studies that show children of divorce as being more likely to score lower on standardized testing and fail to graduate from high school as compared to children whose

parents were not divorced. Wood, Repetti and Roesch (2004) sought to explore how children adjust to divorce at home and in school in their research study. The research concluded that preadolescence could be a vital time to implement divorce intervention programs in an effort to reduce divorce related adjustment problems in later years.

Some researchers are working to determine what helps students of divorce. One qualitative study, conducted by Colpin, Vandemeulebroecke and Ghesquiere (2004), investigated how parental and school involvement can play a part in academic success among children of divorce. The study posed questions regarding how well parents believed they support their children academically, and how well the school supported their child academically. Results showed lack of parental involvement based on financial restraints due to divorce, as well as fear of judgment from other parents (p.280) as a key factor in parental involvement.

Social-Emotional. Similarly, students from divorced homes exhibit social-emotional effects at school. Kalter and Schreier (1993) identify that children bring divorce related problems into the school setting each day. Some problems include difficulty concentrating and completing assignments, managing anger toward peers and school authorities, disruptive behavior in the classroom, regressing, and sadness. Research shows that divorce strongly contributes to negative short-term effects on a child's academic performance, social judgement and emotional well-being (Kalter & Schreier, 1993).

Supporting evidence of financial difficulties for divorced families can be found in research conducted by Kaye (1989), which showed 42% of children of divorce were enrolled in free and reduced lunch versus 24% of their non-parental-divorce peers. The research is significant because it proves underlying issues exist within families that could potentially hinder

the academic success of the children within that family. It also shows a possible need for free in-school counseling opportunities.

Incarceration. Incarceration can influence students' academic and social-emotional development. Issues discussed below include lowered academic expectations of adults, time adults can spend in single parent homes, and the stigma connected to families who have been incarcerated.

Academic. Due to incarceration, children with absent parents have apparent implications for academic achievement. Research has shown that connections can be made between children with incarcerated parents (CIP) and school drop-out, truancy, and lower overall school engagement (Brown & Barrio Minton, 2018). Additionally, teachers may hold lower expectations of CIP, also known as the Halo Effect (Thorndike, 1920), and assume them to be less academically, socially, and behaviorally competent than their peers (Dallaire, Ciccone & Wilson, 2010). In the school environment, students may feel fearful or ashamed to share that a parent is incarcerated, making it more difficult to help the child and find appropriate interventions for them (Brown, 2018).

Social-Emotional. One unique factor surrounding children with incarcerated parents (CIP) is the involvement of negative stigma and shame surrounding the parents arrest and crimes committed. Due to this shame and associative guilt, some children may begin to withdraw from others during a time when they need help and support the most (Adalist-Estrin, 2006). This withdrawal might include shying away from friends, teachers, or extra-curricular activities. Withdrawing from extra-curricular activities can be especially harmful for a child long-term. Many researchers have found that participation in an extra-curricular activity provides many positive opportunities such as a regular schedule, emphasis on skill development, meaningful

participation, belonging and identity formation, and links to a supportive adult outside of the home or classroom (Fredricks & Eccles, 2005). The benefits of these activities can be helpful to all children, including those who have absent parents. Withdrawing from them may only put the student at more risk to engage in problematic behavior that could lead to poor outcomes.

Adalist-Estrin (2006) names many other predictable effects of parental incarceration that a student may experience. Some of these include prior separations from the parents, poor living conditions, multiple changes of residences or schools, poverty, and assuming adult caregiver roles to siblings. When a child must take on the responsibility of caring for siblings or unstable adults, they may be referred to as “young carers.” (Charles, 2011, p. 27). Although positive growth such as maturity, independence and responsibility are possible for children in this position, it can also lead to negative implications. Young carers may experience more missed school days, stress and feelings of non-belonging as compared to their peer counterparts who are not young carers. All of the ramifications of being a young carer can lead to poor academic performance, isolation and depression (Charles, 2011).

Addiction and Mental Health Disorders. According to a report compiled by Lipari and Van Horn (2017), 1 in 8 children, or 8.7 million, ages 17 and younger lived with at least one parent who had a substance use disorder between the years of 2009 to 2014. The report continued saying that children with addicted parents are more likely to be of low socioeconomic status and show more signs of difficulties academically, socially, and behaviorally. In addition to this finding, research has shown that children with addicted or mentally ill parents are more likely to exhibit school failure, followed by poor functioning in work and intimate relationships later in life (van Santvoort, Hosman, van Doesum & Janssens, 2014). Furthermore, these

children are 2 to 13 times more likely to develop their own mental health disorders later in life than those with mentally healthy and non-addicted parents (Lipari & Van Horn, 2017).

Parental absence may occur with mentally ill or addicted parents during drug or alcohol usage, or a psychotic episode. During these times, children are often left to support themselves or serve as a young carer for siblings and possibly the absent parent. As seen previously in the literature, this pressure to support one's family and self at a young age can cause increased school absence, stress and lack of belonging in the school setting (Charles, 2011). These experiences take away opportunities for academic, social, and emotional well-being from the child.

Research conducted by Throndsen (2012) sought to discover the challenges in everyday life that children with mentally ill or addicted parents faced. This research focused on 5 subtopics, being (a) lack of information and openness, (b) unpredictability and instability, (c) fear, (d) loneliness, and (e) loss and sorrow. It is important to recognize these emerging themes when working with students in schools, understanding the dynamic that they are living in compared to peers who are not submerged in this environment.

Chronically Ill or Deceased. According to Sieh, Visser-Meily, and Meijer (2012), approximately 10% of children grow up with a parent who has been diagnosed with a chronic medical condition and are at risk for adjustment difficulties. Children with chronically ill parents have been found to have more internalizing behaviors than their healthy parent peers (Sieh, Visser-Meily & Meijer, 2012). These internalizing behaviors can include anxiety, depression, and withdrawn behavior. Additionally, students in this circumstance commonly have more household chores, caregiving responsibilities, activity restrictions, and stress. Because of these

internalizing behaviors, it is not uncommon to see students with chronically ill parents holding a lower grade point average in school than their peers. (Sieh, Visser-Meily & Meijer).

An event that many children with chronically ill parents will unfortunately have to endure is the loss of their parent. A 2008 article revealed that 1 in 20 children will experience the death of at least one parent before age 15, and 1.5 million children are living in a single-parent household because of the death of one parent (Owens, 2008). After the death occurs, a child will experience grief and can undergo this process in a variety of ways, being dictated by how the child understands death and how other family members are coping with the loss. Many emotions may take hold of the child, including shock, guilt, and anger to name a few. These emotions can be demonstrated at home, school, and with peers, as grief is not isolated but instead transcends across every environment the child is engaged in (Eppler, 2008). Apart from the emotional stress that a child will experience, there is also the potential for financial stress due to loss of income or medical bills.

Although the loss of a parent is often a tragic and traumatizing event, themes of resiliency emerge. Interviews with children who have lost a parent, conducted by Eppler (2008), revealed that they want to be viewed as normal to their peers and teachers. The children interviewed would like others to understand that they remember happy times both before and after the loss of their parent. Considering this information when working with students, it is important to acknowledge the range of emotions that the child may be feeling, but also to treat them “normally” and not only express sadness for their loss, but also positive memories of their parent.

Working and Deployed. According to Van Velsor and Orozco (2007), work is often a reason that prevents parents, especially low-income parents, from participating in their child’s

schooling or daily lives. Some parents may have inflexible work schedules, work more than one job, work odd hours that do not align with their student's schedule, or are simply tired from working at the end of the day (Van Velsor & Orozco). Ultimately, working parents may be considered absent due to the lack of engagement in their child's life even if they are still living in the same household. This can occur despite the many associated benefits of parental involvement in the child's school environment. Research has found these benefits to include increased academic performance, attitudes and behaviors, school engagement, and graduation rates (Barnard, 2004).

Implications of single parent responsibilities are important to consider. If a parent is committed to a strict work schedule, they may not be able to control their ability to become more involved. Another possible implication of one or more working parent is the lack of opportunity for the child to engage in extra-curricular activities due to parents not having time to transport them to meetings or practices. As mentioned previously, extra-curricular involvement is important to a child's development. If a child is still able to participate in such activities but a parent fails to attend events or concerts, they may be at risk for lower self-esteem or bad feelings toward themselves or the absent parent. More research is needed to discover if this is indeed a consequence of absent parents and extra-curricular events.

Military Deployment. Military deployment is an example of a work obligation that would keep a parent from engaging in their child's education and would classify them as absent. As of 2011, the United States military consisted of approximately 2.2 million services members, with nearly 40% of whom having children (U.S. Military Demographics, 2011). This number equates to over 800,000 children under the age of 18 with parents in the service. When these children

have a parent who is called to be deployed, they will either transition into a single parent home or will live with another designated guardian.

This transition alone can cause stress on the child which can hold negative impacts on their social and emotional well-being, as well as their academics (Chandra et al., 2010). One behavioral change that is commonly noticed in children with deployed parents is acting out in the classroom setting and misbehaving more in general. These behaviors can be tied to anger and aggression regarding the absent parent, with stress, fear, and anxiety being other possible explanatory factors (Cole, 2016). When a parent arrives home from deployment, they may have new mental health issues that were not present before the mission, which has unfortunately been shown to negatively impact their children. According to Dansby and Marinelli (1999), students with veteran parents have been known to have lower grades, more absences, lower teacher observation ratings, and lower standardized test scores.

Immigrant and Deported Parents. According to the most recent estimates available, approximately 4.1 million U.S. citizen children under the age of 18 live with at least one undocumented parent (U.S. Citizen Children Impacted by Immigration Enforcement, 2018). Deportations have greatly increased in the US in the past three decades, with over 340,000 people being deported from the country in 2017 (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2017). The American Immigration Council (2018) reports that living with an undocumented parent adds significant threats to the child's physical, emotional, developmental, and economical well-being. They also report that children in this situation are commonly living with toxic stress from constant fear that the parent will be deported.

Children who are left behind after a parent is deported will often find themselves in unstable housing situations, economic hardships, and food insecurity (Statement on the Effects of

Deportation and Forced Separation on Immigrants, their Families, and Communities, 2018).

Additionally, these children may be expected to take on a role of young carer, assisting more with household chores and watching after siblings or other family members. The remaining parent may have to begin working more hours, causing them to also become absent in their child's life (Dreby, 2012). According to Dreby (2012), all of the aforementioned details cause potential challenges for children, including poor school performance, eating and sleeping changes, sadness, anxiety, anger, and withdrawal.

Even in cases when a parent is not deported, it can still prove difficult for an immigrant family to feel welcome to be involved in a child's academics or school environment. In some instances, parents will not become involved for cultural reasons, which is something that must be taken into consideration by school counselors (Gonzalez, Borders, Hines, Villalba & Henderson, 2013). In other cases, a language or communication barrier may be holding parents back from being actively involved in school events.

Benefits of Parental Involvement on Student Achievement

A wealth of research has been conducted on the effects of parental involvement on student's social, emotional, and academic well-being. Two main types of involvement include school-based involvement and home-based involvement. According to Wang and Sheikh-Khalil (2014), home-based involvement can include structured homework and leisure time, as well as monitoring the child's schoolwork progress. School-based involvement includes parent-teacher communication, attending school events, and volunteering for school activities. Both types of involvement can lead to positive outcomes for children, such as better student grades, more participation in advanced coursework, lower dropout rates, more motivation to complete school work, and the overall valuing education (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005).

Parental involvement has been shown to produce positive results for students when applied in specific aspects of a child's life. For example, Epstein and Van Hoorhis (2010) discuss the outcome when parents remain in good communication with the school and upcoming events, enforce positive behaviors at home, and work on reading, math and science with children at home. Students will show better school attendance, reduced disruptive behavior and higher achievement in the aforementioned subjects (Epstein & Van Hoorhis, p. 3-4). Perhaps most impressive, however, is research conducted by Gonzalez-DeHass, Willems and Holbein (2005), stating that parental involvement can be linked to increased intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in students. When a parent is involved with school matters in the home setting, such as homework help, a student will feel more motivated to make academic effort, may feel increased competence and incorporate education into their personal value system (Gonzalez-DeHass, Willems & Holbein).

In addition to parental involvement improving upon the academic side of child's life, benefits can also be detected in their personal life and cognitive development. Children with high parental involvement show raised self-esteem, more self-discipline and have higher aspirations for themselves (Olsen & Fuller, 2017). Olsen and Fuller point out that parental involvement also benefits the parents themselves, as well as teachers and schools as a whole (2017). Parents gain a better understanding of teacher jobs and school curriculum, teachers experience higher workplace moral, and schools increase in community support are just a few of the positive repercussions of parental involvement (Olsen & Fuller, p.1-2).

Discussion and Conclusion

As the literature has shown, children with absent parents are at risk for multiple social, emotional, and academic difficulties. Many themes have emerged from the literature as

implications for these children across types of parental absence, including, but not limited to: (a) lower standardized test scores, (b) higher high school dropout rates, (c) increased anger, sadness, and heightened stress and anxiety, (d) increased classroom misbehavior, (e) reduced extra-curricular activity participation, (f) increased young carer responsibilities, (g) increase in withdrawal or isolation, truancy, and (i) risk of financial strain due to lower household income. It is important for school counselors to be aware of the added challenges these children are facing every day and to consider how they can mitigate these issues when working in small groups, classroom lessons, and individual counseling sessions.

Communication. Likewise, it is necessary for school counselors to understand the benefits of parental involvement in a child's life and academic success. With this understanding, counselors should work to include parents, single parents, foster parents, custodial grandparents and other legal guardians in the conversation regarding a child's school experience. Communication is key in providing opportunities for legal guardians to become more involved in the school setting, thus giving children more opportunities to be successful. Huss, Bryant and Mulet (2008) discuss how "information highways" can be used to reach parents and legal guardians, including school counselor websites, e-mail correspondence, newsletters, handbooks and flyers (p. 365-366).

Newsletters may be a great resource being that they can be shared via printed mail, printed issues and e-mail which provides more opportunities for parents to receive the publication. Walker, Shenke, and Hoover-Dempsey (2010) also offer ideas to include families or legal guardians in the school environment, including inviting parents into the school setting, welcoming parents to serve as educators, organizing student-family activities, sharing resources

with parents to increase their parenting skills, and addressing barriers to parent involvement (p. 34-35).

Supports. School counselors can serve students with absent parents by holding small group and individual counseling sessions (ASCA, 2012). Group counseling sessions can create peer support that is structured to address many of the potential negative outcomes of parental absence, including anger management, self-doubt, stress, shame, and anxiety to name a few. In a study conducted by Rose and Steen (2014), group counseling in a middle school proved to foster more resilience among group members and increase group grade point average by 16% on average. In another study, small group counseling was shown to take one group of at-risk 9th graders and significantly increase the study skills, aiding them in improving their academic standings (Kayler & Sherman, 2009).

Although these studies were not specifically designed for students with absent parents, arguments can be made that they reflect the possible effectiveness of group intervention with this population. While groups are one positive example of peer supports, school counselors can also encourage students to join extracurricular activities, clubs, after school programs, mentor programs such as Big Brothers Big Sisters, or to engage in positive friendship circles or peer support programs (ASCA, 2015). As noted in the literature, positive peer supports and belonging can make a great difference in the lives of all students, not only those with absent parents.

Resources. Outside referrals may be as made as appropriate to assist students when mental health issues arise that are beyond the school counselor's scope of practice or time-limited schedule. School counselors should be equipped with knowledge regarding community resources, such as housing and food shelf information, to assist students as needs arise. In

addition, cultivating a positive and welcoming school climate should also be considered an essential role of the school counselor.

Finally, the ASCA National Model (American School Counseling Association, 2012) advocates working with students from a strength-based approach. With this in mind, it is important for school counselors to not merely focus on the potential negative aspects of a child's life who may be experiencing an absent parent. Instead, draw on the student's strengths, courage, and positive behaviors to help the student recognize their potential. By pulling on the positives, we can offer supports that will hopefully assist children through their high school careers, giving them a chance to rise above their circumstances and be successful; a right that all children should have. As school counselors, it is our responsibility to give each student every opportunity to experience this success, regardless of family structure or parental involvement.

Authors Note

Throughout the course of this semester, I have been honored to work with a variety of students experiencing absent parents for many of the reasons described in this capstone. As a school counselor, I saw first hand the common themes that tied these children together and put time and effort into researching how to better equip myself in working with this demographic, now and in the future. While working with children who are living these stories, I was blown away and truly inspired by their strength and resilience. Although this paper touches on much of the negative aspects that come from having an absent parent, it should not go unnoticed that there are positive points as well. I myself was a child with an absent parent, therefore I know firsthand the struggles but also the triumphs one can experience.

My students showed up to school when the night before was hard, got siblings ready for school when no parent came to help in the morning, and managed to study for tests when parents were fighting over weekends just down the hall, among so many other things. It is my hope that school counselors, teachers and mentors will recognize how strong and brave these children are, always working to help them realize their full potential. I have been amazed and inspired by the grit of so many of these students and hope that my research was able to do them justice.

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