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## Advocating for Teens in Single-Parent Households

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**Abstract:** This article examines the issue of young adolescents living in a single-parent household. Challenges include reduced income, limited resources, family stress, and less parental involvement. Academic achievement and social-emotional development may be adversely affected. Teachers can help by becoming advocates for these students.

**Keywords:** single parent household, divorce, social-emotional development

### Introduction

It is no secret that adolescents are faced with many challenges every day. One of these challenges may be living in a single-parent household. Single parent households are families that consist of one parent and one or more children. This family structure can be a result of numerous circumstances such as divorce, a parent's death, or a parent leaving. Advocating for adolescents in single-parent households is important to me because it is more common than people think, I had my own experience living in one, and I faced many challenges in and outside of school because of it.

When many people hear that a child's parents are divorcing, they immediately feel bad and assume the child is heartbroken. For seven-year-old me, this was not the case. Hearing my parents were getting a divorce was the best news in the world to me. I know this is shocking to many people, but I was living in a situation that no child should have to. I remember while my mom and biological dad were having awful fights, having to distract or comfort my little sister. My biological dad was very abusive towards me and would take his anger out on me when my mom was not home. I also remember my mom sending me and my sister to go stay with my aunt for a summer while she was in nursing school, because she did not think my biological dad would take care of us. These were all events that happened before their divorce, so finding out the news gave seven-year-old me hope. During and after the divorce, my biological dad blamed me for it, continued to abuse me, often tried bashing my mom to me, and told me to go to court when I was fourteen and tell them I wanted to live with him. When I was at school, these things constantly played through my mind causing me to zone out a lot in class, turn in work late, and overall have poorer grades. This is just my story, but there are millions of other children across the country who are faced with similar circumstances. Each of their situations are unique and they all have their own story they could tell.

### How Prevalent Is This Issue?

When most people think of a family, they typically envision a mom, dad, and a few children. However, this is not what most families look like in the United States today. According to an article from the Boys and Girls Clubs of Mississippi, "the United States leads the world with nearly 10 million single parent households, and 23% of children under the age of 18 living with a single parent" (Dallas, 2021, n.p.). These statistics prove single parent households are very common in the United States and how many children are living in this demographic. According to the Annie E. Casey Foundation, "In the United States today, nearly 24 million children live in a single-parent family. This total, which has been rising for half a century, covers about one in every three kids across America" (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2022, n.p.). This information proves single parent families are increasing in the United States. Therefore, it is important to explore what challenges these families face and how the children are affected.

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### How Might This Affect Young Adolescents?

Lots of research has been conducted over the years to investigate how adolescents are affected by living in single parent homes. According to the Journal of Indian Association for Child and Adolescent Mental Health, "Children in single-parent families usually don't have the same resources as regular families. Loss of net income, as obtained when married, may lead to increased work time for parent and repeated change in residence" (Chavda & Nisarga, 2023, p.15). Many single parent families must survive on one income from the single parent. It can be expensive to support an adult and one or more children. This results in the parent having to work longer hours or multiple jobs just to survive and provide for their family. Further research states, "Various studies have found reduction in academic performance, motivation, and creativity among those group in single parent households. Children were likelier to dropout, have poorer grades, and get jobs outside of school" (Chavda & Nisarga, 2023, p.15). In many single parent households, the child will get a job or try to provide some type of income to lessen the burden on the parent. Sometimes these children must work long hours or have work schedules that conflict with school. This is likely to result in a child having poor attendance, being tired or falling asleep in class, turning in work late, or seeming distracted in class. It is also likely that these children have low creativity because they do not have the time or money to spend on art supplies, instruments, sports, and other creative outlets.

### What Unique Challenges Do These Young Adolescents Face?

Most single parent families are low-income households because they are only supported by one parent's income. According to social work research, "Compared with two parent households, single mothers with little to no perceived social support from family experienced a 33% increase in the relative risk of a late rent payment" (Martin-West, 2019, p.31).

This study showed that families of single mothers are much likelier to pay their rent late. Whenever rent is paid late, it allows the owner of the property to make a lawsuit against the tenant or file an eviction notice. That means that the mother and their children constantly fear getting kicked out of their homes or brought to court because they are unable to make rent on time. Teachers cannot expect these students to come to school and be the perfect student. These children are constantly worried about keeping their home and it will likely be present in their minds during class. The student may seem distracted or uninterested in the lesson, but it does not make them a bad student; it is the result of them fighting the obstacles of their personal lives.

### **How Might This Affect Their Academic Achievement?**

Single parents' inability to spend a lot of time with their children can cause them to miss developmental milestones. According to the Journal of Indian Association of Child and Adolescent Mental Health, "Children from divorced homes have less language stimulation, are more likely to have lower grades, are made to repeat a year of school, have lower math and science scores, and more likely to be diagnosed with learning disabilities" (Chavda & Nisarga, 2023, p.15). This information shows how a child's development can be negatively affected by living in a single parent household. Adolescents miss out on having a parent around to help them develop and exercise skills such as reading, writing, socializing, critical thinking, problem solving, or handling emotions. These are all skills that are crucial to a child's development and build on top of each other to help a child succeed. It is even more difficult if the child has an undiagnosed/unnoticed learning disability, because the child is unlikely to receive the proper help they need. These children get left behind and miss out on opportunities because they are unable to get the support they need. Teachers should be on the lookout for students like this, so they can make recommendations and get students help.

### **How Might This Affect Their Social-Emotional Development?**

Experts have also studied how an adolescent's mental health can be affected by living in a single parent household. According to the Journal of Education and Learning, "single-parent adolescents become more visible to them, and the coincidence of these stressed with the problems caused by single-parent status led to more behavior problems in single-parent adolescents" (Zoleykha, Mirmahmoud, & Eskander, 2017, p.242). This research shows that children of single parent households are likelier to experience anxiety, depression, and behavior problems. When a parent is constantly working, it decreases the amount of time they can spend with their children. It is easy for a child to become anxious or depressed from not seeing their parent. Anxiety and depression could also be a result of the student not being able to complete or turn in assignment because their parent was not able to be there to provide materials or support. It could also be caused by the stress that comes with having to work to help provide for the family. Behavioral problems are also common

for these adolescents because they often crave attention, are stressed from their circumstances, or lack repercussions for their actions from a parent. Living in a single parent household can put a lot of stress on the child and cause some mental health problems. It is likely that teachers spend more time with students than their parent can. It would greatly benefit the student if the teacher were to communicate with that student and come up with ways for them to cope with their anxiety or depression. Communicating with the student could also decrease the behavioral problems if the student has someone to talk to, work with, and point them in the right direction.

### **How Can Teachers Challenge and Support These Students?**

Living in a single parent household presents many challenges to parents and children it can be difficult to know exactly what is going on in their lives and what battles they are fighting. However, there are some things someone can do as an advocate for these children and as a teacher. One of the most important things for helping people in this situation is communication. There will be many times when a parent is unable to meet with the teacher or the child is struggling with something. It is important to communicate with parents and students to keep them informed, to have an idea of their situation, and to be able to work together and come up with ways to help. Some helpful ways of doing this would be setting up a remind message system, email, or sending out a newsletter that reminds students and parents of assignments, what they are doing in class, or what is coming up. Another way to support these children is by adjusting lesson and assignments. Students with learning disabilities might need a different approach or strategy to be flexible with assignment due dates because of their work schedules or events of their home life. Teachers could also offer extra credit whether it be an assignment or bringing in classroom materials such as tissues or paper. It would also greatly benefit these students to offer tutoring. The teacher could offer tutoring before or after school or recommend someone that could tutor them. Another major way to advocate for these students is to create an environment where they feel welcome and safe to express themselves. A lot of these students are facing major challenges, and they will likely want to talk with a trusted adult about it. Be there for them and listen, be respectful, be slow to judge, offer some advice, maybe recommend resources such as the guidance counselor, and praise them for their strength and courage. These students do not have it easy, but it does not mean that they are not capable of doing great things.

### **Connections to AMLE's This We Believe**

I believe this topic aligns with two of the successful middle school statements from the Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE). First, "the school environment is welcoming, inclusive, and affirming for all" (Bishop & Harrison, 2021, p.9) statement aligns with the topic very well because it demonstrates that all students are welcome despite their family background. It is also inclusive which suggests that no student will be left behind no matter what obstacles

they face in and outside of school. This statement suggests being mindful and respectful of all students and creating an

environment they can feel safe in. The second AMLE statement is, "Every student's academic and personal development is guided by an adult advocate" (Bishop & Harrison, 2021, p.9). I believe this statement demonstrates how teachers do not only value a student's academics, but who they are as a person. It shows that they want to help and guide students through all their obstacles to create the version a student can be.

## Conclusion

Although single parent households are a result of various circumstances, the most common reason is divorce. Like all divorces, there were likely substantial problems that lead to it. Divorces can get nasty as parents argue about who gets what and who gets custody of the child. It is an ugly process that changes the lives of the entire family forever. Eventually, everything is finalized on paper, but everything else is brand new as everyone tries to find a new balance in their daily lives. According to an article from *Family Relations*, "For new single parents, their appears to be an unstructured period that many interviewees identified; we have labeled it the hazy period. Single parents are short on resources, and maintaining daily routines becomes difficult. At this time, people live in a haze, liberated from old routines but also short on money and time and uncertain of how they will survive as single parents" (Van Gasse & Mortelmans, 2020, p.1110). These newly restructured families are trying to find a new normal and trying to heal which a very stressful and emotion process. It takes time, healing, communication, and love to stabilize these families after this process, but the progress is not always linear. It is a unique process for parents and children to navigate. A child going through any stage of the divorce process is going to struggle in some way. In school they are likely to have angry or crying outbursts, zone out, not complete work, or not turn in assignments. On the outside, this may give someone the impression the child is a bad students and does not care about school. However, it requires communicating with the student or their parent to find out the reasoning behind their unusual behavior. Teachers must be patient with these students because they are very vulnerable and trying to find solid ground.

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## About the Author



Bailey Davis is an undergraduate student at the University of South Carolina Aiken and is currently pursuing a degree in Middle Level Education with a concentration in Mathematics.

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