

Trailing the Class

Sole Parent Families and Educational Disadvantage

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The association between family structure and educational performance has been the focus of much research in recent years. It seems that a child's education is often one of the casualties of family instability arising from divorce, separation and sole parenthood. The growing number of sole parent families, and an increasing body of evidence indicating educational disadvantage in these families, highlights the importance and urgency of this issue.

Parental variables relevant to the assessment of sole parent families and educational disadvantage include:

- Education levels: generally sole parents have a lower education level than couple parents
- Economic status: sole parent families earn less than couple parent families
- Parental involvement in schools: schools with higher proportions of sole parent families often suffer from decreased parental involvement
- Parental employment and welfare dependency: sole parents are less likely to be employed and are more likely to rely on welfare as their main source of income

These factors all play a significant role in the effect of sole parenthood on educational outcomes. But they do not tell the entire story. There are a number of family structure variables specific to sole parent families that independently contribute to the poor educational performance of children from these families. These include:

1. Decreased involvement and support from the non-custodial parent in terms of school activities and academic achievement
2. Lack of supervision and discipline resulting from reduced parental time and energy
3. The absence of a gender role model (usually male)
4. Increased responsibility of children for domestic chores, sibling care and paid work, interfering with study and schooling
5. Poor relationships between the parent and child, leading to lower levels of parental support and increased socialisation and emotional problems for the child

In addition to understanding all the potential causal factors involved, it is also necessary to be aware of variables that influence the extent of this disadvantage for sole parent families. These include characteristics of the child, such as age and gender, the type of broken family (i.e. divorced or never married), how long the child has lived in a sole parent family, whether or not the sole parent is male or female, and whether or not there is a strong relationship with the absent parent and an extended family network.

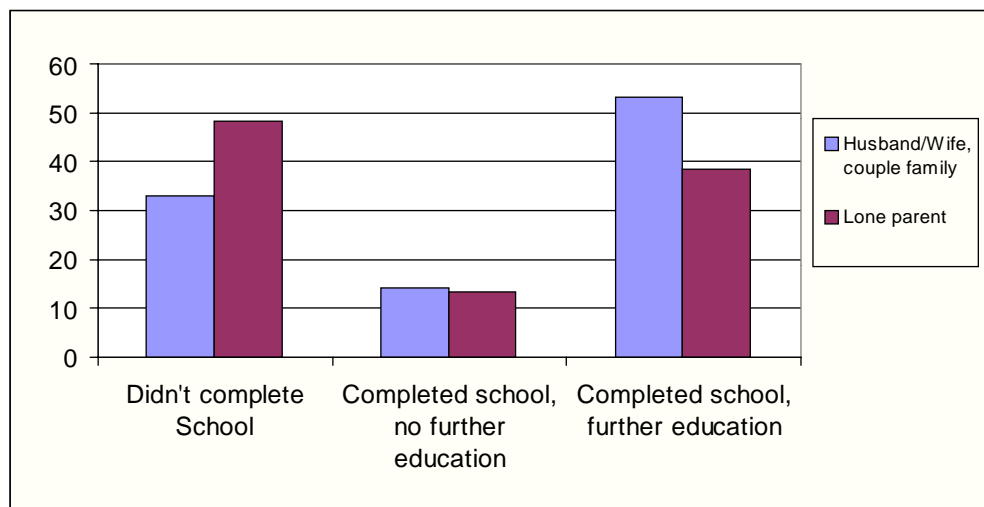
FACTORS RELEVANT TO EDUCATIONAL DISADVANTAGE IN SOLE PARENT FAMILIES

The research literature has identified a number of parental variables relevant to educational attainment and achievement. How these variables specifically relate to the effect of sole parenthood on educational outcomes is discussed below.

Parental education

Sole parents have, on average, a relatively low level of education. As Figure 1 demonstrates, more lone parents failed to complete school to the highest level, compared to married parents. Moreover, a higher percentage of couple parents attained some kind of higher education degree, compared to sole parents.

Figure 1. Parental educational attainment



Source: *Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1999a.*

Parents' levels of education and intelligence influence their ability to assist their child with school matters such as homework, orienting their child towards academic activities, developing effective study skills and basically managing their school careers.

Educated parents are more likely to provide a home that is conducive to learning. Studies have shown that the home environment of a sole parent family is often not as cognitively stimulating or supportive as that of couple families (Edgar & Headlam 1992). The educational attainment of a child is also related to the ability of the parent(s) to provide the necessary motivation and skills for success. Evidence suggests that children in sole parent homes are less motivated to do well at school, in part because their parents have lower expectations of success. According to research by Astone and McLanahan (1991), sole parents provide less supervision of home activities, such as homework, and give less encouragement in educational activities.

Parental economic status

Sole parent families rely on a weekly income that is approximately half that of couple families. Some 54% of sole parent families earn less than \$400 per week, whereas 55% of intact couple families earn more than \$800 per week (ABS 1997). There are also higher levels of poverty in sole parent families than in couple families, especially for never married single parents (see Table 1 below).

Table 1. Percentage of families with children in poverty by family structure, 1995-1996

Family Type	% in poverty
Married / de facto parents	9%
Divorced / separated sole parent	23%
Never married single parent	27%

Source: *Harding and Szukalska, 1999.*

The home environment of a sole parent family is often not as cognitively stimulating or supportive as that of couple families.

The low income levels and poverty in sole parent families have a distinct influence on educational outcomes, leading to increased health problems as well as an inability to provide educational materials or resources for their children. These families also tend to live in poorly maintained houses and units, and in more dangerous areas with poorer schools. In addition, poverty can result in parental preoccupation with financial matters, which may interfere with their ability to support and encourage their children's school activities.

Some researchers contend that the educational disadvantage faced by children in sole parent families is not a family effect but simply an economic effect (e.g. McLanahan & Sandefur 1994). However, many studies have found that even after controlling for income, the educational outcomes of children from sole parent families are still lower than those of children in intact families (Pong 1998; Zill 1996). Research findings have also shown that children in stepfamilies perform below those in intact families, even though an additional parent usually means an increase in family income (Amato & Keith 1991).

It cannot be denied that family breakdown often results in lower financial resources for families. But this is not the only disadvantage faced by children in sole parent families. There is far more to the issue than this.

School performance and parental involvement

Research has shown that schools with a high concentration of students from sole parent families do not perform as well as other schools (Pong 1998). Pong partly attributed the poor performance of schools that had a high proportion of sole parents to the lack of parental involvement in these schools. Sole parents tend to become cut off from the school community as a result of time constraints or a feeling of detachment from the school social circle (Lee 1993).

The difficulties faced by sole parents when it comes to getting involved in school activities may be the result of a reduced knowledge base and resource pool. If sole parents are working, they are limited in the time they have for such activities. If they are not working, then the lack of material resources and knowledge is more likely to be an obstacle. Whatever the reasons, children attending schools with low levels of parental involvement and fewer financial resources suffer the consequences by way of poor achievement (Pong 1998).

Parental employment and welfare dependency

Sole parents are less likely to be in the labour force and are more likely to be unemployed compared to couple parents. Some 44.3% of lone mothers are not in the labour force, compared to 37% of married mothers. At the same time, 27.6% of lone fathers are not in the labour force, compared to 7.2% of married fathers (see Table 2 below). Of those lone mothers who are in the labour force, 15.7% are unemployed (looking for work)—the highest unemployment rate of all parents. Unemployment is also high for lone fathers (12.6%).

Table 2. Labour force participation of different types of parents with dependent children

	In the labour force			Not in the labour force *
	Employed		Unemployed (%)	
	Full time (%)	Part time (%)		
Father-married	95.0	5.0	4.5	7.2
Mother-married	42.7	57.3	4.8	37.0
Lone father	83.5	16.5	12.6	27.6
Lone mother	47.6	52.4	15.7	44.3

* As a percentage of each group's civilian population aged over 15.

Source: *Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1999b*.

These figures indicate that the majority of children living in sole parent homes (where 91% of sole parents are female) do not have a working parent as a role model. In couple families, 60% of mothers are employed and 90% of fathers are employed. Hence, children in couple families are far more likely to be exposed to a parent who is

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working and therefore acting as a good role model for achievement. Children tend to perform better academically if their parent(s) are employed (Zubrick et al. 1997).

The substantial levels of unemployment and absence from the labour force imply that a large number of sole parents are living off welfare. In fact, for the year 1996-7, 42.3% of sole parents relied on government benefits for 90% or more of their income, compared to 8.2% of couple families. Welfare dependency is yet another contributing factor to poor educational performance (Haveman et al. 1991).

THE INDEPENDENT CONTRIBUTION OF FAMILY STRUCTURE

Having discussed the impact of parental characteristics on children's education, we now focus on the structural variables that are specific to disordered families and how they independently add to the explanation of why children from sole parent families have lower educational outcomes. As Zill (1996: 155) puts it, '... there are significant associations between family structure and school outcomes that remain after related background factors are controlled.'

Explaining educational disadvantage in terms of family structure variables

The largest and most obvious problem for sole parent families is the absence of a second parent for the children and a partner for the parent. The difficulties caused by an absent parent in terms of educating children are described below.

Decreased involvement of the non-custodial parent

It is conceivable that the scholastic achievement of a child in a sole parent family will be enhanced if the non-custodial parent continues to provide support and continues to monitor the child's progress. Unfortunately, it is often the case that contact with the non-custodial parent diminishes rapidly following divorce or separation (Seltzer 1991). Even when the non-custodial parent does maintain contact, what they add to the academic achievement of their child is minimal compared to that of a non-divorced parent. Divorced fathers are less likely than non-divorced fathers to control, discipline, criticise, and monitor behaviour, or help with their children's homework (Bray & Berger 1993).

Time / Supervision / Discipline

Because their parents tend to have less time and energy, children in sole parent families suffer maternal or paternal deprivation. Muller and Kerbow (1993) found that children living in sole parent families scored lower grades than those in two parent families and related this to their other finding that these children were less likely to be supervised after school.

Divorced mothers, for instance, are less efficient in enforcing rules compared to married mothers with a similar socioeconomic status (Hetherington et al. 1982). Hetherington (1991) reported that after a divorce, a mother's parenting ability is severely depleted. Her parenting improves in the following years, but remains less authoritative than that of married mothers. If sole mothers are less effective in enforcing rules and controlling their children's behaviour it is conceivable that their children will be less well behaved, which can lead to poorer performance at school (Mulkey et al. 1992).

Children living in homes without a father often exhibit various behavioural problems such as delinquency and crime (Weatherburn & Lind 1997) and increased susceptibility to peer pressure (Steinberg 1987). A lack of discipline and supervision in sole parent families is sure to affect the educational achievement of their children.

Lack of male / female role model

Parents act as role models for their children, modelling thoughts and behaviour. However, research concerning the distinctive role modelling of mothers versus fathers is limited. This makes it difficult to draw conclusions about whether or not children's education is affected by the lack of a particular sex role model (usually male). According to Lynn (1974), the father acts as a role model by providing motivation for achievement. Thus a father's absence could arguably influence a child's level of motivation to achieve at

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school. The lack of supporting research, however, means that only weak conclusions can be made, if any at all.

Increased child responsibility

In a sole parent family, the older children often take on childcare roles and assist with domestic responsibilities. An Australian study by Vaus and Millward (1998) found that self and sibling care was more prevalent among children from sole parent families than children in couple families. In some cases, it is also necessary for a child to work part-time to assist the family financially. These extra responsibilities can have an adverse effect on the school achievement of these children, as the time and energy which they should spend on schoolwork is spent elsewhere. Hetherington et al. (1983) claim that when children in sole parent families are faced with burdens such as these it leads to increased truancy, absenteeism and lateness.

Parent-child relationship

Sole parents tend to have poorer relationships with their children compared to married couples (Amato & Keith 1991). It is likely that this impoverished parent-child relationship in a sole parent family will cause a string of emotional and behavioural problems for the child that can contribute to problems at school and poor study patterns. Kinard and Reinherz (1984) found that children in disrupted families are prone to emotional and behavioural problems such as aggression, distractibility, dependency, anxiety and depression.

Divorced mothers communicate less with their children and are less affectionate towards them compared to married mothers, especially when they are just recently divorced (Hetherington et al. 1982). This lack of social capital in the family can provoke socialisation and communication difficulties for the children which carry over to school (Entwisle & Alexander 1996). Moreover, if the relationship between parent and child is poor, then the parent may be less likely to motivate and support a child's school activities and achievements.

Understanding the extent of disadvantage in sole parent families

Not all sole parent families are the same. The differing circumstances within such families influence the magnitude of disadvantage faced by the children in the family.

Age of child

Although living in a broken family at any age can be detrimental to a child's well being, it may be that at certain ages children are more vulnerable to the negative effects of having a sole parent. Krein and Beller (1988) argue that it is in the years prior to school that parental inputs into the educational development of a child are most crucial. Their research has shown that it is during these years that living in a sole parent home has the largest negative effect on subsequent academic achievement—although it is not unreasonable to argue that living in a sole parent family at any age is not optimal for academic success.

Duration of time spent living in a sole parent family

The educational outcomes of children may be affected by how long they live in a broken home. Some claim that the longer a child is exposed to the conditions of a sole parent household, the greater the negative effect on educational outcomes (Krein & Beller 1988). Others argue that if a family breaks down when a child is young, then the negative consequences may dissipate over time and may not seriously affect its senior years of education (Garasky 1995).

Type of broken family

There may be differences in effect depending on whether or not the broken family was the result of divorce or separation, or whether it was a sole parent family initially. Zill and Rodgers (1988) found that never-married mothers tended to spend more time at home than divorced mothers, and that spending more time at home might be beneficial to the children. On the other hand, divorced mothers were more likely to include their children in family activities, thus building a stronger sense of family security and belonging. Although not as good as intact families, divorced mothers were better at providing an intellectually stimulating home than never-married sole mothers, probably because they had a better education on average.

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Living in a sole parent family has a stronger negative effect on boys' educational attainment than girls'.

Gender of child

The impact of family disruption is often cited as being more severe for boys than for girls (Guidubaldi & Perry 1985; Wallerstein 1984). Krein and Beller (1988) found that living in a sole parent family has a stronger negative effect on boys' educational attainment than girls'. The most common explanation for this is that sole parent families are generally headed by a female, so girls retain the same sex role model when the family breaks down but boys do not. However, this argument has been contested because of a lack of research comparing the performance of boys and girls in both mother and father sole parent families (Downey & Powell 1993). Thus, although the claim that boys are worse off in a sole parent family may be well supported, the 'same sex' parent explanation is contentious.

Sole mother vs. sole father

The majority of research on sole parent families does not make an explicit distinction between lone fathers and lone mothers. On the whole it is not necessary to make this distinction, since 91% of sole parents are mothers. But there is some research suggesting that the home life of children living with a lone mother is different to those living with a lone father. Generally, children in sole parent families perform at levels below children from an intact family, regardless of whether the lone parent is male or female. However, the contributing factors to this poor performance differ for lone mothers and lone fathers (Downey 1994). By and large, lone fathers tend to earn higher incomes than lone mothers. On the other hand, lone mothers are more likely to be involved in school activities and are also more likely to know other parents, compared to lone fathers.

Extended family

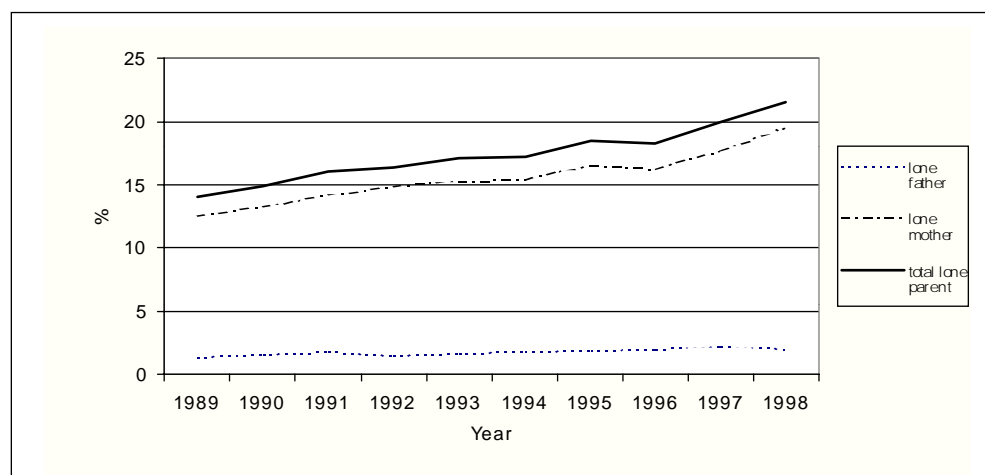
Extended family members such as grandparents can assist with childcare, allowing the sole parent flexibility for work and other commitments. They can also provide advice and support on parenting matters, help to relieve financial hardship and act as additional role models to the children. In terms of educational attainment and performance, sole parents who live with an extended family have different and greater resources to draw upon when preparing their children for school (McLanahan 1985). The presence of other 'parents' is likely to benefit a child's development and academic achievement.

How important is the issue of sole parenthood and educational disadvantage?

In 1997, only 72% of families were intact 'original' families. Almost 21% of families were sole parent families and about 8% were step/blended families. The increase in the rates of divorce, separation and births outside a couple family mean that more and more children are being raised by sole parents.

Figure 2 illustrates the steady increase in families headed by a sole parent over the past ten years. In 1989, sole parent families constituted 14% of all families. By 1998, this figure had risen to 21.5%.

Figure 2. Sole parent families with dependent children



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1999c.

There is a growing body of evidence indicating that children in sole parent families are performing poorly at school. The detrimental effects of growing up in a sole parent family, such as failing at school or dropping out, have been found even when controlling for socioeconomic status, parental education and other background factors (Entwisle & Alexander 1995; McLanahan & Sandefur 1994; Zill 1996). The unique effect of family structure on educational performance demonstrates the importance of this issue, especially in light of the growing number of non-traditional families.

Conclusion

If Australia is to provide a quality education for all students and achieve excellence in education, then all potential causes of educational disadvantage need to be identified and dealt with appropriately.

Children from sole parent families fall into this category of disadvantage, although the assessment of their disadvantage requires an acknowledgement and understanding of all the factors involved, not to mention the variables that affect the extent of this disadvantage. It is not the case that all sole parents are incapable of providing their children with a decent education, but rather that children from sole parent families are more likely to encounter difficulties that children in married couple families do not.

In light of the preceding discussion it is important to note that simply adding a parent/partner to the equation will not necessarily solve the problems associated with sole parenthood. The problem is that the original family has been disrupted or never existed in the first place. The optimal family situation for a child, and the one that will be strongest in enhancing its education is a stable intact family.

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The detrimental effects of growing up in a sole parent family, such as failing or dropping out, have been found even when controlling for socioeconomic status.

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