

**Single mum or single dad? The effects of parent
residency arrangements on the development of
primary school-aged children.**

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ABSTRACT

Research describing the effects of parental separation or divorce on children has tended to examine the effects of custody (residency) arrangements on children without differentiating between the gender of the parent and the gender of the child. Typically, studies have examined child outcomes where the residential parent is the mother. Very few studies have examined child outcomes where the father is the residential parent, or compared child outcomes for children of both genders resident with either their mothers or fathers. The prevailing wisdom has been that boys will be disadvantaged and girls advantaged when the custodial parent is the mother and the reverse when the custodial parent is the father. This concept has been described in the literature as the *same sex tradition*.

This paper presents the findings of a study which examined the effects of different parent residency arrangements on the growth of competence and self-esteem in primary school-aged children of both genders resident with parents of both genders. These single parent children were also matched and compared with children from two parent families. In all there were 272 participants in the study, 136 single parent children (72 girls and 64 boys) and 136 two parent children. Child outcomes assessed were academic competence (Wide Range Achievement Test (Revised), Jastak, 1984), self-esteem, (Self-Perception Profile for Children, Harter, 1985) social support (Social Support Scale for Children Harter, 1985) and everyday skills (Everyday Household Responsibilities Life Skills Inventory, Amato, 1986).

Results showed that overall the single parent children's scores on the dependent measures were average or above and there were very few statistically significant differences between single parent and two parent children on these measures. Results also suggest that it is not necessarily advantageous for single parent children to be raised by a parent of the same gender. Implications from the study will be discussed.

Background

Permanent parental separation and divorce is increasingly a part of the fabric of contemporary Australian life. Over the past thirty years statistics have revealed that there has been a steady increase in divorce rates, with current figures indicating that two in every five marriages will end in divorce (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 1994). Funder, Harrison and Weston (Funder, Harrison, & Weston, 1993) indicate that data gathered by the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS), suggested that 40% of marriages are likely to end in divorce. The 1996 ABS Divorces and Marriages Report (ABS, 1996), shows a slight increase on this figure, where nearly 50% of marriages have ended in divorce. It should be noted that whilst these statistics only deal with official divorce figures, there is a large but unknown number of permanent separations which occur without going through the legal process of divorce. In short, the statistics are likely to be conservative in their estimation of the incidence of relationship breakdown (legal or de-facto).

As the incidence of parental relationship breakdown has increased, so has the number of children who are inevitably involved in family restructuring increased. Again, data published by the ABS reveals that in 1982, 10.7% of all types of families were single parent families. By 1992, this had risen to nearly 13%, representing an increase of 21.5% in a decade (ABS, 1994). The latest figures available indicate that 14.7% of all Australian families are single parent families, the vast majority of which, some 87%, being headed by women (ABS, Focus on Families Demographics and Family Formation cited in Funder (Funder, 1996)). In 1995, some 49, 666 children experienced their parent's divorce. By comparing this number to previous years, it was estimated that the pool of children with divorced parents is increasing by forty to fifty thousand children each year (de Vaus & Wollcott, 1997).

While the effects of parental separation or divorce on children and adolescents have been widely reported in the literature emanating from the United States of America (USA), inspection of relevant Australian data bases reveals considerably smaller numbers of published research studies reporting the effects of parental separation and divorce overall and an even smaller subset of studies focussing on Australian primary school-aged children (Pike, 1999; Rodgers, 1996). Examination of the Australian research literature reveals that there is the same level of claim and counterclaim concerning child outcomes as a consequence of parental separation and divorce. Some authors promote the idea that maladjustment, particularly in later life is virtually inevitable (Rodgers, 1996; Rodgers, 1997) while others argue the contrary (Dunlop, 1993; Dunlop & Burns, 1995; Pike, 1990; Smiley, Chamberlain, & Daghli, 1987). The evidence is at best mixed and often compromised by methodological shortcomings (Pike, 1999).

Further, common to both USA and Australian published research findings, the majority of research studies rely on child adjustment data that is drawn largely from samples of children (girls and boys) primarily resident with their mothers. Only occasionally does the research report findings based on data from single parent families where children of both genders are resident with their fathers. One obvious explanation

for this is related to the fact that in most western cultures, there has been a long legal tradition of custody or residency decisions being made in favour of mothers. The rationale behind this has been driven by the application of the “tender years doctrine”; that it is in the best interest of (young) children to be raised by their mothers. One consequence of this practice has been that samples of children, particularly girls, being raised solely by their fathers are very difficult to locate and usually provide only small sample sizes.

Notwithstanding the above, there has been a long held belief generated from the American separation, divorce and child outcomes literature, that children are most advantaged by being raised by a parent of the same gender. The origins of this belief trace back to the Texas Custody Research Project which was conducted in the USA in the late seventies and early eighties (Santrock & Warshak, 1979; Warshak, 1986; Warshak & Santrock, 1983b).

Initial findings of the Texas Custody Research Project were reported in 1979 and suggested that children living with a parent of the opposite gender are less well adjusted than children living with a parent of the same gender. More detailed analyses of the data in 1983 and 1986 reinforced these initial findings. Further analyses demonstrated that children living with a parent of the same gender uniformly showed more competent social development than children living with a parent of the opposite gender. They also indicated that “the impact of custody disposition is mediated by a host of factors that include the sex of the child, aspects of the custodial child relationship and the availability of and reliance on extra-familial support systems” (Warshak & Santrock, 1983b, p. 260).

The Texas Custody Research Project was one of the first to look at custody outcomes by sex of parent and is identified as the beginning of what has sometimes been called **the same sex tradition** or **the same gender hypothesis**, that is, that boys are advantaged when growing up with their fathers and girls are advantaged when growing up with their mothers. This was described as a “major and robust finding” from the study and “substantiated by the results of (six relatively independent) data sources” (Warshak, 1986, p. 195). Further, Warshak claimed substantiation of this pattern from two other sources; one source being some independently conducted studies, (Camara, 1982; Gregory, 1965; Rholes, Clarke, & Morgan, 1982) and the other source arising from mother custody research which had consistently demonstrated that female children in a variety of age groups in mother custody arrangements made better adjustments than their male counterparts in mother custody arrangements (Guidubaldi & Perry, 1985; Hess & Camara, 1979; Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1982; Kurdek & Berg, 1983; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980; Zill, 1984).

American research examining the claims of the same sex tradition has continued into the 1990s with the most recent works producing contradictory findings to most of the earlier studies (Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1992; Clarke-Stewart & Hayward, 1996; Downey & Powell, 1993; Guttman & Lazar, 1998). Commenting on the earlier same sex tradition or same gender hypothesis research studies, contemporary researchers are critical of the previous research, noting that while there is some slim evidence for the

same sex advantage for adolescent children, there is much less support for this advantage operating with younger children (Clarke-Stewart & Hayward, 1996).

In reviewing the contemporary research in this area, Clarke-Stewart and Hayward (1996) noted that for younger children, there are only three studies that support the same gender hypothesis. In one study, girls resident with mothers did better than girls resident with fathers, but no difference was observed for boys in similar residency arrangements (Maccoby, 1991). In a second study, boys with fathers and girls with mothers had fewer behaviour problems, were less aggressive, had higher self-esteem and were accepted more by same gender playmates. However these findings may be questionable in that the sample in this study included only 10 children in father custody (Camara & Resnick, 1988). Clarke-Stewart and Hayward note that the third study which has been most frequently used to support the same gender hypothesis is the Texas Custody Research Project, (Santrock, Warshak, & Elliot, 1982; Santrock & Warshak, 1979; Warshak, 1992; Warshak & Santrock, 1983a). “It is this study from which the implication has been drawn most strongly that there is an advantage of having a custodial parent of the same gender” (Clarke-Stewart & Hayward, 1996, p. 243). Yet, as Clarke–Stewart and Hayward note, the Texas Custody Research Project “did not report differences between boys in father custody and boys in mother custody or between girls in father custody and girls in mother custody”, which they describe as “**the real test of the same gender hypothesis**” (Clarke-Stewart & Hayward, 1996, p. 244).

Possibly the best contemporary review of the effects of different parent residency (custody) arrangements on children’s development and adjustment is provided by Lamb, Sternberg and Thompson (Lamb, Sternberg, & Thompson, 1997). The authors conclude that some of the most prominent lacunae requiring further research include custodial fathers. They contend that because most children are placed primarily in the physical custody of their mothers, most of the extant research has focussed on children living with custodial mothers. “The lack of information about custodial fathers...significantly delimits the conclusions that can be offered about them” (Lamb et al., 1997, p. 403). These researchers agree that greater information is needed about the factors predicting successful and unsuccessful post-divorce adjustment and, list custodial or residency arrangements as amongst the most important of these factors.

In summary, there is a dearth of data on the effects of parental separation and divorce on primary school-aged children in contemporary Australian families, and a need for a greater understanding of the effects of the range of post-separation or divorce family forms on children’s development. The necessity to re-examine this area is made all the more urgent not only by the recent commentaries made on the methodological shortcomings evident in previous empirical research but also by the increased incidence of fathers seeking residency of their children in Australia. There is an urgent and compelling need to generate data from post-separation and divorce residential arrangements that include father headed households as well as mother headed households, where parents of both genders are raising children of both genders.

The study described in this paper was an attempt to address this need and presents data collected on children in the late 1990s from post-separation and divorce single parent families in Western Australia. The children were all attending primary schools and were living with single parents who had been separated or divorced for a minimum of twelve months. These single parents had sole residency with their children.

Description of the study

There were a total of 272 participants in the study comprised of 136 single parent children (72 girls and 64 boys) and 136 two parent children matched for age, gender, school year and educational cohort. Participants were drawn from a total of 45 schools, 35 state and 10 private schools.

The study employed a matched sample or correlated groups design wherein a sample of non-clinical, single parent children of both genders resident with parents (for a minimum of one years) of both genders, were matched and compared with children from two parent families. The children were individually matched on criteria believed to be crucial for any meaningful comparison of the children’s performance-age, gender, school year and school cohort

Table 1.

Distribution of single parent child participants showing gender, average age of children and numbers in each type of residential parent household

	Girls	Boys	Total Households
Mother-headed Households	42 (9 yrs 11 mths)	34 (9 yrs 10 mths)	76 children in mother headed households
Father-headed Households	30 (9 yrs 11 mths)	30 (10 yrs 5 mths)	60 children in father headed households

The study generated data about the children’s competence and self-esteem from the children themselves. Data measuring the children’s competence and self-esteem were gathered on a range of dependent measures including the Self-Perception Profile for Children (SPPC) (Harter, 1985a), the Social Support Scale for Children (Harter, 1985b), the Wide Range Achievement Test (Revised) (Jastak & Wilkinson, 1984) and the Everyday Household Responsibilities Life Skills Inventory (EHRLSI) (Amato, 1986). These instruments are described briefly below.

1. The Self-Perception Profile for Children (SPPC), Harter (1985).

The Self-Perception Profile for Children was selected to provide a multi-dimensional measure of children's perceived competencies and self-esteem. Harter's scale was developed to measure perceived competence in cognitive, social, athletic, physical and behavioural domains as well as general self-worth among middle primary school-aged children. The scale is designed for administration to children from 8 years to 12 years of age. The reading ability of the child is the key determinant as to the suitability of the scale. Each of the six domains or sub-scales has six items constituting a total of 36 items. The instrument is set out in a structured alternative format, (see Figure 1 below) and can be completed by children in groups or individually. The scale takes a child approximately 20-25 minutes to complete, depending on their reading skill. A maximum score of four can be obtained on each item giving a possible maximum raw score of 24 for each domain. Mean scores for each domain are calculated by dividing the raw score by six. The actual questionnaire that is filled out by the child is entitled *What I am Like*.

Really True for me	Sort of true for me				Really True for me	Sort of true for me
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Some kids find it hard to make friends	BUT	other kids find it pretty easy to make friends	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Figure 1.

Sample question from the SPPC showing the structured alternative format

2. Social Support Scale for Children (SSSC), (Harter, 1985)

This instrument was selected to assess children's perceived level of support from significant others, another major source of influence impacting on how children feel about themselves. The SSSC is based on the premise that the origins of the individual's sense of self lies in their perception of what significant others think about them. Therefore, the instrument is not directly measuring competence per se, but explores the child's perceived social support, a factor identified as a key variable influencing perceived competence.

Harter's scale aims to assess social support in the form of perceived positive regard felt by the individual from others. In designing the instrument, Harter felt that by identifying several sources of potential support or regard it would be possible to determine significant others who had more of an impact on the self than others. Four possible sources of social support are identified: parents, teachers, classmates and close

friends. Each source of support is defined as a separate sub-scale that allows for an examination of the individual's profile of support across these four sources.

As with the SPPC, the scale is designed for administration to children from 8 years to 12 years of age. Each of the four sub-scales contains six items, making a total of 24 items on the instrument. The SSSC also uses the same structured alternative format employed by the SPPC. The instrument is completed by the child individually or in groups and it takes the child approximately 15-20 minutes to complete. A maximum score of four can be obtained on each item giving a possible maximum raw score of 24 for each sub-scale. Mean scores for each sub-scale are calculated by dividing the raw score by six.

3. The Wide Range Achievement Test-Revised (WRAT-R), (Jastak, 1984).

This instrument was selected to provide a quick measure of the academic achievement of the children in the three basic academic skills areas of reading, mathematics and spelling. The WRAT-R was first standardised in 1936 in the USA as a convenient tool for the study of the basic codes of reading (word reading and pronunciation of words out of context), written spelling (writing single words to dictation) and arithmetic computation (solving oral problems and performing written computations). It was originally designed as an adjunct to tests of intelligence and behaviour adjustment. The 1984 version represents the fifth revision of the instrument. The WRAT-R₁ (the Level 1 version of the WRAT-R designed for use with younger children between the age of 5 years 0 months and 11 years 11 months) provides a quick and ready measure of the codes which are needed to learn the basic skills of reading, spelling and arithmetic.

4. Everyday Household Responsibilities and Life Skills Inventory (EHRLSI) (Amato & Ochiltree, 1986).

The Amato and Ochiltree inventory is designed to examine the range of everyday household responsibilities and life skills performed by Australian children. This instrument is one of the few available that can provide some insights into non-academic forms of children's achievement or competencies. Life skills have been identified as critical to the child's overall development of competent self and were described by Amato as:

...the practical abilities that are necessary to meet day-to-day needs. These abilities are different from academic skills that are learned and applied in school settings. In contrast, practical life skills are rarely taught in our education system and are mainly learned and exhibited, at least initially in the home (Amato, 1987, p.87).

The inventory is a 20 item Likert type scale developed by Amato and Ochiltree (1986) based on the work of Zill and Peterson (1982). Zill and Peterson had originally designed a 14 item list of practical skills which was read to parents in order for them to indicate whether their child had ever performed the activity “without help”. Starting with some 40 everyday life skills, Amato and Ochiltree pre-tested their scale to identify items judged to be most relevant and contemporary to Australian primary and secondary school children. The EHRLSI is designed to be answered by parents and children. The instrument was used originally as part of the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) *Children in Families Study* conducted in 1982-83.

In the present study, comparisons were made between the performance of the single and two parent children and the performance of the children in the different single parent residential groups on these four measures using a series of t tests and ANOVAS.

Findings

The performance of the single parent children was evaluated in two ways. The research design allowed comparison of the differences between the children in single parent residency groups **relative** to each of their two parent matched groups. That is, it incorporated the use of the two parent group as a “benchmark” for comparative purposes. So firstly, the single parent children were compared to their two parent matched peers in terms of their performance on the dependent measures. This provided a comparison of how they were going against the “benchmark” or “norm” of children growing up with the perceived benefits of two parents. Secondly, single parent children in the four parent residency groups were compared with one another in terms of their performance across the dependent measures thus allowing a more detailed examination of each of the residential groups. In combination these two types of comparison provided important data contributing to the ‘real test of the same sex hypothesis’.

1. Comparison with two parent peers

This comparison is represented Table 2 which summarises significant differences in mean scores between all single parent and two parent groups across the three standardised dependent measures.

Table 2

Summary of significant differences in mean scores between all single parent and two parent groups

	Girls with mothers and two parent matches	Boys with mothers and two parent matches	Girls with fathers and two parent matches	Boys with fathers and two parent matches
SPPC				
Scholastic				* (p = < .015)
Social				* (p = < .034)
Athletic				
Physical	* (p = < .032)			
Behavioural	* (p = < .027)			* (p = < .026)
Global				
Discrepancy				
SSSC				
Parent	* (p = < .014)			
Teacher	* (p = < .028)			
Classmate				
Close friend				
WRAT-R				
Reading	! (p = < .037)			* (p = < .023)
Spelling			* (p = < .000)	* (p = < .004)
Mathematics			* (p = < .010)	

* = significant at <.05 level. (significant difference between single parent and two parent groups where the single parent groups' scores are **lower** than the two parent groups' scores).

! = significant at <.05 level. (significant difference between single parent and two parent groups where the single parent groups' scores are **higher** than the two parent groups' scores).

As can be seen from Table 2, the comparison between single parent children and their matched two parent peers revealed very few statistically significant differences between the single and two parent children across the range of dependent measures. However, at the same time the research design did allow for some subtle but important differences in patterns of performance to emerge.

These data revealed that girls in the mother residency group show significant differences in their performance when compared with their matches in two specific domains (physical, behavioural) of the SPPC, two sub-scales (parent, teacher) of the SSSC, and one sub-scale (reading) of the WRAT-R₁. With the exception of the reading score, all other differences indicate significantly lower mean scores for the single parent girls than their two parent matches.

Girls in the father residency group show no significant differences in their performance with their matches in either the SPPC or the SSSC. Their spelling and mathematics scores on the WRAT-R₁ indicate a significantly lower level of performance than that of their matches.

Boys in the mother residency group show no significant differences from their two parent matches on any of the measures. On the other-hand, boys in the father residency group show significant differences in three specific domains (scholastic, social, behavioural) on the SPPC and, reading and spelling on the WRAT-R₁ in comparison to their two parent matches.

There were no significant differences identified between single and two parent children on the EHRLSI in either the number or frequency of skills performed as measured by the instrument and reported by the children.

It is worth noting that even where there were statistically significantly different results between the single and two parent children indicating that the single parent children were not performing as well as their two parent peers, examination of mean scores revealed that overall, the single parent children's scores on the dependent measures were still in the average to above average range. In one instance, the significant differences between the single and two parent children occurred where the single parent children were **outperforming** their two parent matches. For example, mother resident girls (with a mean score of 107.69) outperformed their matches (with a mean score of 102.05) on the reading sub-scale of the WRAT-R. Overall, these results suggest that these single parent children are **not** at risk in terms of their development of competence or their self-esteem as measured by these instruments.

2. Comparison of the four residential groups to one another

The children in the four single parent residential groups were compared with one another on their performance on the three standardised instruments (SPPC, SSSC, WRAT-R) and the EHRLSI using one way ANOVA and conducting post hoc comparisons using Tukey HSD. These analyses showed that on the SPPC there were significant differences between the groups in the scholastic domain ($F(3,132) = 2.91, p < .037$), the athletic domain ($F(3,132) = 2.85, p < .040$) and the physical domain ($F(3,132) = 3.36, p < .021$). The post hoc comparisons revealed that boys in the mother residency group scored significantly higher on these three specific domains. Boys in the mother residency group scored higher than boys in the father residency group on the scholastic domain and higher than girls in the mother residency group in the athletic and physical

domains. There were no significant differences in performance between the four residential groups on the social and behavioural domains, in global self-esteem and the discrepancy scores.

On the WRAT-R₁, there were significant differences between the groups in reading ($F(3,132) = 4.40, p < .005$) and spelling ($F(3,132) 17.87, p = < .000$). Post hoc comparisons indicated girls in the mother residency group were outperforming both girls and boys in the father residency groups in reading and spelling. Boys in the mother residency group were also outperforming both girls and boys in the father residency groups on the spelling sub-scale. There were no significant differences between the groups on the SSSC or the EHRLSI.

These findings confirmed the contention that when considering competence and self-esteem, single parent children **cannot** be treated as an homogeneous group. The findings have identified subtle but important differences between the patterns of performance between the four single parent residency groups. The findings also suggest that it is **not necessarily** advantageous for single parent children to be raised by a parent of the same gender.

Implications

There appears to be two major sets of implications flowing from this research: one primarily for researchers and the other primarily for professionals who work with single parent families such as teachers, psychologists and other mental health workers. There are also some implications pertinent to both researchers and professionals. For example, for both researchers and professionals, the study highlights the need to develop a more sophisticated way of identifying and talking about single parent children, as single parent children cannot be treated as a homogeneous group.

Of particular importance for researchers are the methodological implications. Whereas recent methodological advances in researching this field have seen the distinction being made between a child who is experiencing single parenthood as a result of parental death and one experiencing single parenthood as a result of the ending of a marital relationship, the same level of distinction must be exercised when considering parent residency arrangements and their potential impact on the child's development. To date, the research methodology has generally not taken residency arrangements into account. Asking the broad question "*are there differences in performance between single and two parent children?*" is too simplistic. Rather, this study suggests it is important to specify **which** category or group of single parent children one is referring to and, further, that a more accurate answer is likely to be provided when variables such as family type, child gender and parent residency are accommodated in the research design.

Findings from this study suggest that on the whole, most children will make satisfactory adjustments and cope adequately with these changes to family structure and family process resources. Therefore, it would behove professionals working with

children whose parents had separated or divorced to be aware of the more positive rather than negative prognosis for these children which this study and some other Australian studies have identified.

From the multidimensional measure of self-esteem, the study has identified that there are difference profiles of competence for each residential group. This would suggest that professionals working with single parent families must consider the different profiles generated by both children and parents and tailor any necessary involvement to accommodate these profiles.

There are also some implications pertinent to professionals working in the education system. There is a case for teachers to specifically monitor children from father residential arrangements in terms of their individual academic achievement as findings from this study indicate that, both boys and girls resident with their fathers are not performing as well as their matches from two parent families or single parent children resident with their mothers. If children resident with their fathers continue to lag behind their peers in the basic academic areas throughout primary school, then this could jeopardise their academic performance when they reach secondary school and may explain some of the poorer academic outcomes that have been reported overseas for single parent children in the adolescent age group.

There are also some implications for public policy and legal decision making. The findings suggest that fathers, as parents with sole residency responsibilities, are just as able as mothers in raising their children to be competent and have a healthy self-esteem. The study has not identified any particular support for the “tender years doctrine” which in the past has favoured the mother as the residential parent and minimised the father’s opportunities for gaining residency of his children.

Residential fathers appear to be capable of providing a supportive and nurturing home environment comparable to that provided by residential mothers. This residential father family home encourages the development of a range of competencies in the children that are age appropriate and developmentally normal. It would appear that the guiding judicial principle of “in the best interests of the child” must also accommodate fathers who wish to undertake the responsibility of caring for and raising their children as sole residential parents.

Finally, the predominantly positive single parent child outcomes identified in the study are consistent with and, substantiate previous Australian research findings in this area (Bennington, 1983; Pike, 1990; Smiley et al., 1987). This adds weight to the claim that single parent children growing up in Australia do have a different experience of single parenthood in comparison to children in other countries, particularly the USA. Additionally, the study underscores the importance to both researchers and professionals of collecting contextual and contemporary data about Australian single parent families and not being solely reliant on outcomes generated from studies overseas.

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