

Informational Needs of Single Parents

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Introduction

The significance of research on single-parent families is evidenced by the growing number of these families. In 1982, more than 8 million families in the United States were headed by a single parent (13). Glick (6) has estimated that by 1990 fifty percent of children will reside in a one-parent home for some period of time before they reach the age of 18 years.

The impetus for much of the research on single-parent families has been a theoretical interest in the family's influence on child development. However, research on single-parent families has also had an impact on child custody proceedings (9, 15) on therapy and counseling with single-parent families (2, 7), and on social policy toward single parents (1, 3, 4, 7). Further, such research may help to correct potentially erroneous and harmful assumptions that many hold about the effects of single-parenting (10, 15). It has been argued that these assumptions may be as harmful to single-parent children as any direct effects that parental divorce or deaths may cause (5, 3, 15).

Although interest in single parenting has been increasing steadily, single parents have rarely been consulted concerning their information needs. The relevant literature shows that single-parent fathers want to know how to be a nurturing parent (12) and about what constitutes "normal development" (11). Perhaps this is due to the pressures single fathers feel to be a nurturant parent (14).

Turner and Smith (16) have stressed the single parent's need for education regarding the selection of quality day-care service (16). Finally, Hughes and Durio (8) demonstrated that single parents have different information needs when compared to other types of families.

Few studies have addressed single parents' preferences in regard to the source of information. Hughes and Durio (8) showed that in the absence of an ex-spouse, single parents were more likely to consult no one about their child care concerns. Mendes (11) showed that single fathers found books to be a useless source of information. Orthner, Brown & Ferguson (12) recommended that classes on single parenthood be offered. However, they offer no data regarding single parents willingness to attend such a course.

The present research was designed to investigate the information needs of single parents. The results show what kinds of information single parents need and how they go about getting this information.

Method

Participants were members of Parents Without Partners (PWP) of Central Indiana. Twenty-six members (20 females, 6 males), aged 29-59 years (mean 40 years) participated in the study. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. Participants were asked to complete questionnaires that were distributed through the PWP newsletter and Chapter meetings. Permission to complete the study was granted by the regional president and board of directors of Central Indiana.

The survey questionnaires consisted of a demographic questionnaire and an information needs questionnaire. Demographic information included family type, ethnicity,

occupation, education, salary and support, gender, age, number and age of children and length of time spent as a single parent. Participants were also asked to rate the extent of their interest in obtaining more information in areas such as: Child development, child care, school behavior, the effects of single-parenting on children, the stress of being a single parent, handling family finances, financial planning and including children in discussions of family finances. Participants were then asked to indicate where they obtained information concerning child development, single-parenting and financial matters. Potential sources of information included: parents, ex-spouse, friends, clergy, doctors, teachers, newspapers, magazines, books, professional counselors and PWP meetings.

Results and Discussion

Frequency data for demographic characteristics, informational needs and information sources were tabulated. Participant's educational background ranged from completion of 7th grade through graduate school. Sixty-nine and three-tenths percent had attended college or were college graduates. Ninety-two percent were divorced and length of time as single parent ranged from 1-15 years (mean 5 years, mode 2 years). Ninety-six percent were engaged in paid employment with weekly take home pay ranging from \$50-\$500 (mean \$280.00, mode \$350.00). Fifty-eight percent were receiving child support or alimony.

TABLE 1. *Percentage of Single Parents Interested In Gaining More Information*

	Very Interested	Mildly Interested
<i>Child Development</i>		
Handling Discipline Problems	69%	23%
Involving Children in Family Decisions	62%	31%
Typical Child Development	23%	26%
Characteristics of Quality Day Care	19%	15%
<i>Single-Parenting</i>		
Effects of Remarriage on Children	77%	4%
How to Deal with Task Overload	73%	27%
Children's Interpersonal Relationships	62%	31%
Tell Children About Parent's Sexual & Dating Behavior	58%	27%
How to Deal with Stress	62%	35%
Maintaining Relationships with Former In-Laws	26%	30%
What to Tell About the Absence of a Parent	26%	5%
Effects of Moving on Children	30%	23%
Effects of Changes in Visitation & Custody	31%	39%
<i>Financial</i>		
Get Most from Local Social Services	46%	23%
Information on Financial Planning	46%	35%
Tell Children About Family Finances	31%	46%

Results indicated that single parents were interested in developmental issues concerning the handling of discipline problems, children's behavior at school and involving children in family decisions. Developmental information was acquired from magazines, friends, books, teachers and PWP meetings.

Single parents were extremely interested in information concerning the issues unique to single-parenting. These interests included how single-parenting effects the child's adjustment, sex-role development, and interpersonal relationships; what to tell children about the parent's dating and sexual behavior and the effects of remarriage on children. Single parents were also interested in the effects of their roles on themselves regarding issues of stress and dealing with task overload (too many responsibilities and too little time). Single-parenting information was acquired from friends, magazines, PWP meetings, newspapers and books.

Results show some interest in basic financial planning, the effective use of local social services and what to tell children about family finances. Financial information was acquired from friends, magazines and newspapers.

TABLE 2. *Percentage of Single Parents Who Acquire Information From Various Sources:*

<i>Child Development</i>	<i>Single-Parent</i>
Magazines 73%	Friends 69%
Friends 62%	Magazines 69%
Books 58%	PWP 54%
Teachers 54%	Books 34%
Professional Counselors 23%	Professional Counselor 23%
<i>Financial</i>	
Friends 58%	
Magazines 50%	
Newspapers 42%	
Professional Counselors 19%	

When looking at what single parents are interested in, it might also be useful to discern what information they aren't as interested in receiving and what sources aren't used. Results indicated that single-parents weren't as interested in typical child development, the nutritional needs of children or characteristics of quality day care. This may be true in our sample because most of the participants children were beyond day care ages. The majority of the children were between the ages of 12 and 28 years.

Single parents were also less interested in information concerning what to tell the children about the absence of a parent, the effects of moving on children, the effects of changes in visitation and custody and information on maintaining relationships with former in-laws. This may also be a function of the older ages of the children and the number of years since the divorce. The mean number of years since divorce was 5, because of this the participants had already dealt with these issues. Single parents weren't as likely to seek information from parents, ex-spouse, clergy, and doctors.

Results also indicate that in these three areas, only 19-23% of the participants would seek this information from a professional counselor. However, 73% stated that it was very likely or likely that they would attend a course on single-parenting if one were available. This information is important to professional counselors and educators, who may attempt to provide needed information to single parents.

Conclusion

With the increasing numbers of single parents and children coming from single parent families, it becomes apparent that their unique informational requirements need to be met. It is also apparent that these needs might not be met efficiently by more traditional methods of counseling and education. Efficient and effective dispersal of the information could be achieved in part by:

- 1) Single-parenting classes at local high schools and universities, which also provide on-site child care.
- 2) Professional consultation and outreach programs to reach the single parent rather than requiring them to come in for traditional counseling.
- 3) Increasing the number of high quality articles addressing the needs of single parents, written by professionals but published in popular magazines and written at a level that the layperson can understand.

In summary, the informational needs of single parents and the sources of this information are important when looking at the potential impact this family system has not only on its members, but on the members of society in general. This points to the need for additional research in this area and for innovative methods of disseminating this information to the group who could really benefit from this knowledge: single parents and their families

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