

Influence of Family Structure on Children's Well-being – Challenges and Pathways to Promote Positive Development

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Abstract. Children's well-being is a complex and multidimensional concept that encompasses physical, emotional, social, and mental dimensions. Previous research has explored how the family may influence children. However, papers with depths and complexities about the different family structures' effects on children's well-being are lacking. This review aims to fill the gap by discussing the intricate relationships between family structures and children's well-being, with a specific focus on single-parent families and stepfamilies resulting from remarriages. The review reveals that children in single-parent families face unique challenges due to the absence of dual parental support, affecting their academic achievements, interpersonal relationships, and overall life satisfaction. Stepfamilies, characterized by complex dynamics, present additional complexities that influence children's well-being. Mental well-being emerges as a central dimension, shaping a child's ability to navigate challenges and thrive. The findings of the review contribute to a deeper understanding of how family structures interact with children's well-being. Future studies can further explore the impact of specific interventions on diverse family structures and children's well-being. By highlighting challenges and opportunities within different family compositions, the review informs evidence-based policies and interventions aimed at empowering families, educators, and policymakers to create environments that nurture children's overall development, irrespective of their family structure.

1 Introduction

The concept of children's well-being is multi-faceted, encompassing their physical, emotional, social, and mental dimensions. Researchers have explored different facets of well-being, such as hedonic and eudemonic approaches [1], to capture the diverse aspects that contribute to a child's growth and flourishing. Global recognition of the significance of well-being has led to its inclusion as a Sustainable Development Goal [2], underscoring its role in shaping not only individual lives but also the broader societal fabric. Central to children's well-being are the family structures with which they grow and develop. However, as family structures evolve, from single-parent families to stepfamilies, the implications for children's well-being are multifaceted and complex.

The relationship between family structures and children's well-being has garnered significant attention from researchers and policymakers. Numerous studies have explored how different family compositions impact various dimensions of well-being, shedding light on the challenges and opportunities presented by single-parent families and stepfamilies (e.g., [3-5]). However, despite these efforts, there exists a critical research gap that calls for deeper investigation into the dynamic interactions between family structures and children's well-being across developmental stages. Bridging this research gap

is not only crucial for advancing the theoretical understanding of family structures and children's well-being but also for informing evidence-based policies and interventions. Thus, researchers can provide insights that empower families, educators, and policymakers to foster environments that nurture children's overall development.

The present article aims to delve into the intricate relationships between family structure and children's well-being, highlighting its significance as a foundation for academic achievements, interpersonal relationships, and life satisfaction. The article examines well-being's dimensions through the lens of mental health, which shapes a child's ability to navigate challenges and thrive. The article also emphasizes the influence of family structures on well-being. Single-parent families reveal unique challenges due to the absence of dual parental support. Stepfamilies resulting from remarriages uncover complexities in navigating new relationships and dynamics. Recognizing the importance of promoting well-being in diverse family contexts, the article explores pathways for intervention. It stresses parental support, healthy relationships, and policies fostering nurturing environments. Educational institutions' role is highlighted, emphasizing the need for mental health education and inclusive environments.

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2 Children's well-being

2.1. Defining well-being

Well-being is a broad term that always includes multiple aspects of a person's life. Researchers use different terms and synonyms to define well-being, for example, flourishing [6]. However, there is no agreed definition of well-being. Definitions vary widely: On the one hand, well-being is defined by pleasant feelings like happiness and pain avoidance while evaluating life satisfaction. This is referred to as hedonic well-being (HWB) [1]. On the other hand, some people underestimate the significance of joyful feelings, emphasizing self-realization and positive functioning, such as the ability to volunteer to help others and contribute to a community. This is referred to as eudaimonic well-being (EWB) [1], which focuses on individuals' functional abilities. These two approaches provide people with different focuses on studies and a school of knowledge that can be divergent and complementary in various areas [1]. There are also researchers, including Huppert and So [6], defining well-being as the union of good feelings and great functioning, more than the absence of disorder and negative feelings, including both hedonic and eudemonic approaches to defining well-being. Although there is no current agreement on which definition should be used in empirical studies and policy-making processes, it will take years to achieve an agreement and take a step to go forward. The present review defines well-being as both pleasant feelings and good functioning for well-being.

2.1.1 Significance

Well-being holds immense significance in both individual and societal development as it encompasses people's emotional states, overall functioning, and ultimately influences the prosperity of society. Research shows that it is beneficial for both individuals and society to have high levels of well-being [6]. People who experience high levels of well-being perform in academics effectively, are more innovative and productive, have more significant relationships, and endure life [7]. As a result, well-being has obtained attention on a worldwide scale. It has been designated as Sustainable Development Goal 3 (SDG3), which guarantees healthy lives and enhances well-being at all ages [2]. For children, well-being incorporates their mental, emotional, and physical health [8]. It serves as the foundation during childhood for developing healthy thoughts, behaviors, and relationships. A child's level of well-being significantly influences their educational performance, employment competence, and interpersonal communication skills in the future. When children experience positive well-being during their formative years, it sets them on a trajectory towards a fulfilling and successful life.

2.1.2 Measurements

The measures of well-being are multi-dimensional. Well-being can be evaluated from each component of health: physical, emotional, social, and mental, which add up to conclusions of health-related quality of life [9]. From the eudaimonic approach, researchers tend to focus on individuals' functional limitations because it comes from the perspective of pathology [6]. Therefore, they investigate less positive functioning abilities. At well-being's core, the measurements of it should be subjective, reporting one's thoughts and feelings. Although some critics question the validity of measuring subjective experience [7], evidence shows that many instruments that measure subjective well-being have high reliability and validity [9]. For example, the General Well-Being Index (GWB) assesses people's internal states, including questions about positive and negative feelings. The six characteristics evaluated – choosing themes from the eudemonic perspective – are positive well-being, self-control, anxiety, depression, vitality, and general health [9].

2.2 Mental well-being

Mental well-being is defined in several ways but with a relatively strong focus. According to Huppert and So, ten characteristics – competence, engagement, meaning, emotional stability, optimism, positive relationship, positive emotion, resilience, vitality, and self-esteem – are identified as positive components of mental functioning [6]. Similarly, mental well-being aims to promote emotional and social stability in order to lower the risk of psychological breakdowns [2]. Mental health is easy to be ignored and underestimated by people and society. According to the World Health Organization, mental health enables a person to recognize his or her abilities, deal with stresses in life, work efficiently, and make efforts for the community [10]. Therefore, mental health is crucial for children's development and connections to the external world. However, there are detrimental factors that affect children's mental health. Children's well-being is undermined by harsh parenting styles and physical punishment [10].

In mental well-being, depression is a common and severe mental health disorder that leads to problems in personal and societal life. Globally, approximately 3.8% of the population suffers from depression, including an estimated 5% of adults, which causes more than 700,000 people to die because of suicide annually [11]. Unfortunately, although the interventions for depression have developed for years, there were 86.3% of individuals receiving no treatment for depression in low-middle-income countries, and only 22.0% and 36.8% of patients received treatments in upper-middle-income and high-income countries [12]. Therefore, identifying possible factors contributing to depression is crucial for early intervention and the financial burden on treatments.

3 Family structure

3.1. Single-parent family

A single-parent family is defined as a family where a child or children under the age of 18 reside with one parent alone [13]. Single-parent family is a common phenomenon worldwide. In the United States of America, single motherhood has become so prevalent that it now leads to 80 percent of single-parent households [14]. The percentage of kids living with a single parent has been increasing for decades, along with a fall in marriage rates and an increase in unmarried births, and more than three times as many children worldwide (7%) as children in the United States (almost 24%) live with just one parent and no other adults [15]. Because of the loss of one of the main family members' concerns, children from single-parent families cannot get enough psychological support from their families. With drastic changes in physical and mental aspects, their well-being faces an enormous challenge.

3.2. Stepfamily

With the increased number of single-parent families, many divorced remarry, and the majority of them bring their children from the previous union with them [16]. This gives rise to a new type of family structure known as stepfamilies. However, it is important to note that children in serial marriage families, characterized by a pattern of remarriage where individuals have been married at least three times, are likely to experience a prolonged history of family instability that begins in early childhood and persists into adolescence [3]. Remarried relationships tend to be less stable compared to initial marriages. This instability can be attributed to the challenges that family members face as they reorganize and modify their relationships to adapt to the new family structure [3]. These adjustments can be complex and require significant effort from both parents and children, often leading to various problems that form a vicious circle within the family dynamic.

4 Family structure on children's well-being

4.1. Single-parent family versus double-parent family

By the 1990s and early 2000s, in the United States of America, it became less typical to live into adulthood with only one spouse or partner as cohabitation tended to be the norm for people who are starting their first relationships. This shift in societal norms is influenced by various factors, including changing attitudes towards marriage and the increasing acceptance of alternative relationship structures [4]. During this period, rates of separation and divorce remained high [4], contributing to the prevalence of single-parent families. Mounting evidence shows that living in single-parent families significantly influences children's multiple aspects of life. Numerous studies have highlighted the negative impact of divorce on children's well-being and development. For example, a review shows that children

in divorced families are at an increased risk of having more depressive symptoms and have higher tendencies to smoke, drink, and drug use during adolescence and adulthood compared to children in intact families [8]. Similarly, much research shows that children with divorced parents score lower on multiple outcomes on average, including emotional, behavioral, social, health, and academic, than children with married parents (e.g., [5]). For example, according to Wang et al., the prevalence of allergic tendencies, physical symptoms, phobic tendencies, and anxiety in single-parent families is higher than that in double-parent families [5]. Therefore, the well-being of children in single-parent is disadvantaged compared to children in double-parent families, further affecting their development.

4.2. Stepfamily

Children living in stepfamilies are more likely to produce negative outcomes than children in nuclear families. Brody et al. identify several possible effects of repeated exposure to a number of divorced-related events on children, including decreased parental stability, conflicts between parents, and attachment interruption [3]. Cherlin also suggests that children's well-being appears to be, on average, lower the more family living configurations they experience [4]. This means that the more changes they go through, such as when their parents remarry and form a stepfamily, the lower their average level of well-being becomes. Comparing the quality of parent-child interactions in nuclear and stepfamilies, researchers find that stepfamilies have worse ties: parents, both husbands, and wives, in first-marriage families report more favorable parent-child connections than do stepparents [17], resulting in subsequent families and children's problems. At the same time, children's relationships with peers, especially their tendency towards aggressions, are associated with parental conflicts emerging from the stepfamilies. Each failed marriage and remarriage of parents increases the possibility of children's exposure to interparental conflict, which, in turn, has a cumulative effect, escalating levels of anxiety and despair, lowering levels of self-esteem, and provoking aggression toward peers [3]. Other cumulative effects may occur when multiple breakdowns of relationships happen, which severely undermine children's behavioral and emotional functioning [3]. The possible reasons for negative outcomes of children, such as behavioral problems and teenage childbearing, are readjusting a new family system from a stable and well-functioning one or new partners do not pay much attention and effort to investing in the stepchildren's well-being [4]. Meanwhile, evidence shows that children in stepfamilies are related to a greater risk of problems with emotional, physical, and social health and well-being (e.g., [4]). In a word, remarriage creates a negative environment to rear children, and serial marriages result in cumulative exposures for children to have negative outcomes.

5 Promotion and prevention

Promoting children's well-being is a priority and can be achieved through appropriate policies. These policies should encompass several key aspects to ensure a nurturing environment for children in disadvantaged family structures, ultimately preventing potential tragedies. A crucial factor in children's well-being is the support provided by parents or caregivers. Policies can be set to encourage parents to offer warm and attentive care. Moreover, facilitating the development of healthy relationships with families is essential. By implementing programs that address emotional, behavioral, and social challenges, society can significantly contribute to enhancing children's well-being. One aspect that deserves emphasis is the need for stable care arrangements for children, irrespective of the family structure, because a stable and well-functioning family is likely to offer the best environment for children [4]. It is also important to recognize that contemporary society includes diverse family compositions. As a result, policies should also extend support to single-parent families by enabling them to remain stable, especially among low-income single-parent families, such as financial difficulties should be addressed [4]. For divorced parents, both parents should take the responsibility to care and mutually support for their children. Nurturing parent-child affection and providing a warm, stable family environment is vital. Schools should play an integral role in promoting mental health education: offering classes, lectures, and a supportive atmosphere can facilitate children's self-regulation and emotional well-being; creating an inclusive and positive environment can eliminate discrimination against students from divorced families; monitoring behavioral and emotional changes [1]. The government should establish a comprehensive support system. A responsible and caring societal environment should be presented to all students, especially those from diverse family structures.

6 Conclusion

This review unravels the intricate relationship between family structures and children's well-being and reveals significant insights that underscore the importance of holistic development. The review discusses the impact of single-parent families and stepfamilies on children's well-being, highlighting the challenges faced by these diverse family structures. Single-parent families and stepfamilies lead to children's negative outcomes, including emotional problems such as depression, anxiety, and behavioral problems such as antisocial behaviors. This review also underscores parental support, healthy relationships, and policies for nurturing children's development. The roles of educational institutions in promoting well-being and inclusivity and creating a compassionate and supportive society are emphasized.

This review uncovers how family structures affect children's well-being, highlighting challenges and potentials in single-parent families and stepfamilies. By informing policies, this paper bridges a critical gap,

promoting holistic child development. The impact extends to education, parental support, and social awareness, fostering empathy and positive changes across generations. This paper empowers stakeholders to create nurturing environments for diverse family contexts, ensuring children's well-being.

Prior research has left a gap in comprehensively investigating the complicated interactions that unfold between family structures and children's well-being. While existing studies have shed light on the impact of various family compositions on different dimensions of well-being, they have not fully delved into the dynamic interplays. This gap underscores the need for a deeper exploration that encompasses the evolving nature of family structures and their effects on children's well-being. By addressing the gap, researchers can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how different family structures influence children's growth, development, and well-being. Future studies can further explore the impact of specific interventions on diverse family structures and children's well-being. Investigating the effectiveness of support systems and policies in addressing challenges within single-parent families and stepfamilies, as well as studying the interplay between mental well-being, family dynamics, and cultural contexts, could deepen the insights. Longitudinal research tracking children's development over time, considering resilience and growth, offers potential. By integrating diverse approaches and robust methodologies, future studies can continue shaping strategies that empower children to thrive amidst evolving family structures.

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