

The Impact of Single-parent Families on Children's Externalizing Behaviour

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Abstract. The article discusses the impact of the increasing divorce rate in China on the prevalence of single-parent families and its influence on the development of children. Children from single-parent families often face challenges due to the incomplete family structure, leading to external behavior problems during adolescence. The article aims to provide a comprehensive review of previous research and examine the implications of single-parent families on adolescent external behavior. It explores the reasons behind behavior problems in these children, including family dynamics, economic circumstances, and societal influences. These factors include the absence of companionship and conflicts between parents at the family level, prejudice against single-parent families and negative social norms at the societal level, and economic constraints leading to materialistic desires. To address these issues and their underlying causes, the article suggests several solutions. For example, social institutions should enhance their supervision of minors, combat prejudice against children from single-parent families, and provide financial support to alleviate economic challenges. Efforts should also be made to improve educational resources. In conclusion, the article aims to enhance the external behavior and overall development of adolescents from single-parent families. By addressing the root causes of behavior problems and implementing practical solutions, it is expected that the well-being and positive outcomes of children from single-parent households can be significantly improved. Future research requires a comprehensive exploration of this topic.

1. Introduction

Single-parent families have been a hot topic in recent years and have garnered widespread attention. In China, children from single-parent families often face many negative stereotypes, such as being considered eccentric or manipulative, and there are even claims of higher crime rates. However, the reality shows that due to the incomplete family structure, children from single-parent families do indeed have a higher crime rate. During an interview conducted at a prison in Ningxia, it was discovered that underage offenders from single-parent families accounted for 30% of the total number of inmates [1]. Crime is a form of externalized behavior issue, and other externalized behavior problems include violence and conflicts. Certainly, in the realm of child development, the family unit serves as the foundational cornerstone. Family education, undeniably, assumes a pivotal role in facilitating the robust and wholesome growth of children. It is imperative to acknowledge that any alterations within the family dynamic possess the potential to impart adverse consequences upon a child's developmental trajectory, further complicating the issue of externalized behavioral patterns. This article will analyze the reasons behind adolescent externalized behavior issues in single-parent families, as well as potential solutions.

2. Child externalizing behavior issues

2.1 Concept

In academia, there is no unified definition for externalizing behavior. In 1966, Achenbach conducted research on externalizing behavior and classified children and adolescents' issues into internalizing problems and externalizing behavior problems [2]. Unlike internalizing issues such as sadness, satisfaction, and happiness, externalizing behavior problems refer to external antisocial behaviors, usually directed towards others. Externalizing problems encompass conflicts with others, including defiance, aggression, rule-breaking, temper tantrums, and excessive activity, indicating social maladjustment characteristics [3].

2.2 Classification of problem behavior

Achenbach initially categorized problem behavior into externalizing problem behavior and internalizing problem behavior in 1966 [2]. Externalizing problem behavior includes physical aggression, provocation, and property destruction, while internalizing problem behavior encompasses withdrawal, anxiety, overexcitement, and depression, all of which significantly impact adolescents and those interacting with them [4]. Among these, externalizing problem behavior is generally considered as behavior that violates social norms and infringes upon others' personal and property rights [5]. Furthermore, scholars subdivided sub-types of externalizing problem behavior, including overt aggression, covert aggression (rule-breaking and delinquent behavior), defiance, attention problems, and emotional disorders [6].

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3. Definitions

3.1 Current status and definition

A single-parent family refers to a family consisting of only one parent (father or mother) living with unmarried dependent children (aged under 18 or, although aged 18 or older, still receiving full-time education) [7]. The term "single-parent family" was first introduced by Western countries, while in China's "Dictionary of Marriage," a single-parent family is defined as a family composed of one parent and unmarried children, formed due to the death of the father or divorce of the parents [8].

3.2 Different types of single-parent families:

In the paper, the researchers make a distinction between types, single-parent families are mainly divided into several types: divorce-based, widow-based, unmarried-based, separated-based, and single-based. Divorce-based single-parent families refer to families where legal procedures dissolve the marriage contract, and underage children live with one parent [9]. Widow-based families involve one parent's death, and the other parent lives with underage children [9]. Unmarried-based families are formed by unmarried men and women raising children together in one household [9]. Separated-based families retain marital status but do not live together. Single-based families involve women freezing eggs and men donating sperm, independently giving birth using medical technology [9].

3.3 International Comparison:

According to the 2016 report by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the proportion of single-parent families among all family types ranges from 3% to 11%, with an average of 7.5%, varying across different countries and regions [10]. Countries with higher proportions include New Zealand, Latvia, and Costa Rica, at around 11%; Australia, Canada, Mexico, Lithuania, and the United States are about 10%; while countries with lower proportions include Bolivia, Bulgaria, Germany, Italy, Greece, Switzerland, and Japan [11].

4. Reasons

4.1 Family perspective

The lack of companionship has a significant impact on children's externalizing behavioral issues. This situation is very common in single-parent households where there's only one parent who has to work to support the family financially and handle household chores, leaving little time to spend with the child. Some families even neglect their children entirely, for instance, when parents divorce and both remarry, forming new families and disregarding the previous children. When the judicial authorities deal with juvenile criminal cases, many divorced single parents,

upon receiving notices from the authorities, directly express that they have divorced from the other party and don't want to be responsible for the child anymore. Many single parents in authority who haven't maintained contact with their children after their release contribute to the child experiencing multiple instances of abandonment. American criminologists have already found through research that many lifelong and persistent criminals turned to a life of crime due to their guardians losing faith and giving up on them [12].

For single-parent families resulting from divorce, parental conflicts are nearly inevitable. There is often a period of arguments before a complete separation, varying in duration. During this time, parental conflicts can have negative effects on adolescent externalizing behavioral issues. Criminologist David Farrington points out that families producing delinquent youths generally have a tense family atmosphere [13].

Adolescents mainly develop their independent living skills through parental guidance. Parental conflicts can go beyond verbal arguments and escalate into physical fights, leading children to develop erroneous concepts in such an environment, considering violence as a means of problem-solving. In severe cases, children might become tools for venting frustrations, and problems might be resolved using harsh and simplistic methods. As a result, externalizing issues can worsen. Relevant experiments also confirm that minors who witness intense disputes among adults are more prone to violent behaviors towards their peers. This is because open conflicts provide minors with more opportunities for learning [14].

4.3 Social perspective

In contemporary society, certain individuals continue to hold the belief that single-parent families are inherently unsuccessful and unhealthy. Divorce is often associated with parental issues, and children within single-parent households are occasionally stigmatized with negative labels, casting them as difficult to interact with and prone to problematic behavior. These perceptions can have a detrimental impact on the self-image of single-parent families, as noted in Zhu Ling's research on the social development of family children [15].

Due to these prejudices and stereotypes, individuals may inadvertently develop biases against children raised in single-parent families during their everyday interactions. Such distinctions, although seemingly minor and unintentional, can be particularly distressing for children within these family structures. Owing to various family-related factors, children from single-parent households often exhibit heightened sensitivity. Irrespective of others' intentions, differential treatment can evoke negative emotions and foster a sense of dependency. These emotional responses, in turn, can readily manifest as externalized behavioral problems in children.

Furthermore, the broader societal context can significantly influence externalized behavior problems in children from single-parent families. Such children often find themselves introduced to society at an early age, exposing them to various negative influences during

adolescence. Many single parents, owing to the demands of childcare, may struggle to provide adequate attention to their children's moral and ethical development. Consequently, they might fail to offer timely guidance when confronted with adverse societal phenomena, potentially resulting in a distortion of their children's values.

As a result, these adolescents may struggle to discern right from wrong, tending towards self-centeredness and materialistic pursuits. In some cases, early societal integration may lead to a skewed understanding of the value of life, potentially resulting in self-harming behaviors or even suicidal tendencies. Furthermore, indifference towards the well-being of others may lead to illegal actions that harm others or endanger their lives, as discussed in Qi Guofeng's research on the ideological and moral education of minor children within single-parent families [16].

Additionally, social scientists, particularly political scientists and sociologists, have cited relative deprivation, especially temporal relative deprivation, as a potential cause of social movements and deviance, leading in extreme situations to political violence such as rioting, terrorism, civil wars and other instances of social deviance such as crime [17].

4.2 Economic perspective:

Economics play an indispensable role in human life, supporting their livelihoods. Family economic status significantly affects children's externalizing behavior. Li pointed out that lower living standards in single-parent families might lead to criminal behavior due to the emergence of a disparity mentality [12]. Sociologist Festinger proposed the "social comparison" theory in 1954, suggesting that individuals in groups tend to compare themselves with others to determine their self-worth [18]. Individuals often compare themselves with those better off to derive a sense of achievement. Single-parent families have lower living standards compared to two-parent families, with only one side providing income. As mothers typically assume household roles in single-parent families, and women have relatively lower status in the workplace, the economic situation in single-parent families might be less favorable. While government subsidies are available for single-parent families, these subsidies are limited, resulting in an overall lower income level.

Quality education in China is often associated with high costs, making it challenging for families with limited financial resources to afford steep tuition fees. Consequently, children from single-parent households tend to face greater difficulty in accessing quality education. This circumstance can significantly influence the development of externalization problems among these children. In today's society, materialism is widely promoted. Children with better economic conditions often have higher social status, with their luxurious traits and superior family conditions making them favored by classmates and teachers. Adolescents tend to compare and display themselves, and for children from economically disadvantaged single-parent families, there may be few

peers to satisfy their vanity. However, compared to peers with better economic conditions, they might feel inferior and envious, particularly evident when a significant wealth gap exists. Single-parent families might have a more repressive family atmosphere, and due to the absence of both parents, children's personalities and psychological development might be relatively distorted. If they can't cope with this gap properly, they might develop extreme thoughts of making others experience their miserable life, which could lead to criminal behavior (an externalizing behavior).

5. Solutions

5.1 Societal Perspective:

Firstly, society should strengthen supervision over minors, as children from single-parent families often have less structured upbringing and higher truancy rates. They might frequent entertainment venues like internet cafes and bars to seek solace. However, these places have complex social environments, and minors can be easily influenced by negative trends. Over time, their attitudes and beliefs might even become distorted. This could contribute to the emergence of externalizing issues, such as theft and fighting. Therefore, society can enhance the management of these entertainment venues, prohibiting minors from entering. Additionally, reducing the spread of biased information about children from single-parent families can purify the social environment, maintain social stability, and provide a harmonious and healthy growth environment for minors. The government can increase subsidies for single-parent families to help children overcome the lack of access to educational resources due to economic reasons. While these subsidies are limited, they can generally improve the family's economic situation and consequently influence children's behavior.

5.2 Family educational perspective:

At home, parents should act as role models. American criminologist Sutherland proposed that criminal behavior is learned through interactions with others [19]. Parents are the people children interact with the most, especially during crucial periods of their character and personality development. Therefore, parents in single-parent families, in the absence of one parent, should try to fulfill the missing role as much as possible. For instance, in a single-mother household, a gentle mother might need to provide strict discipline when necessary, taking on the role of a strict father. Parents can take various measures to mitigate the negative impact of the family structure's absence on their children. Furthermore, parents should engage in frequent communication with their children to enhance their sense of security. Children in single-parent families might feel insecure due to the absence of both parents' companionship, so parents should actively communicate with them, help build their confidence, and intervene promptly before they display externalizing behavior issues. At the same time, parents should avoid

conflicts in front of their children to prevent teenagers from forming wrong ideas.

5.3 School perspective

Schools serve as the primary environment for adolescents, shaping their values and fostering character development. In the context of a school's communal setting, the teaching methods employed by educators are crucial in preventing externalizing behavioral issues among students. Research indicates that children from single-parent households have significantly lower levels of adaptation compared to those from intact families [20]. Prolonged exposure to the pessimistic and negative emotions prevalent in single-parent households can lead to psychological maladjustment, characterized by traits such as self-isolation, indifference, and reluctance to engage in conversations. They might be afraid of making friends, fearing others might judge their family situation. Within the school setting, teachers can provide single-parent children with additional encouragement, aiding their integration into groups, thereby cultivating social skills and a friendly personality. This approach can prevent these children from attributing their lack of belongingness to their single-parent background. Additionally, moderate criticism plays an important role, aiding children in better identifying with and obeying the guidance of teachers and parents, serving as a means of regulating and correcting problematic behaviors [21].

Children from single-parent households are often sensitive, and excessive criticism can trigger rebellious thoughts, exacerbating externalizing behavioral problems and yielding counterproductive results. However, ignoring their mistakes can lead to a sense of entitlement, where they believe they can do whatever they want without facing consequences, possibly even remaining oblivious to their wrongdoings. Moreover, peers might perceive preferential treatment toward single-parent children as unfair, which can unintentionally be conveyed through their interactions and subtly detected by perceptive single-parent children. This intensifies suppressed emotions in these children, potentially resulting in externalizing behavioral issues as they attempt to release and manage their frustrations. For example, throwing things or using foul language. Therefore, it's crucial to be attentive when employing disciplinary approaches with such adolescents.

6. Conclusion

This article draws upon a wide range of sources, including international literature and specialized books, to comprehensively analyze the underlying causes of externalizing behavioral issues among adolescents in single-parent households in China. It also presents viable solutions to address these challenges. The following conclusions can be drawn:

Causes of externalizing behavioral problems in Chinese adolescents from single-parent households encompass firstly, insufficient parental companionship and caregiving. Secondly, prevalent societal biases and

negative perceptions. Thirdly, economic hardships resulting in diminished living standards.

The proposed solutions include, firstly, enhancing the oversight of minors by relevant government agencies to mitigate negative public opinions and increasing economic subsidies. Secondly, encouraging family members to allocate more time to their children, offering them support and serving as positive role models. It is essential to minimize conflicts in their presence, thus fostering a constructive environment for children to emulate. Thirdly, prioritizing the mental well-being of students within the school system. Teachers should engage in more frequent communication with single-parent students, offering encouragement to boost their self-confidence.

The dynamics within single-parent families exhibit ongoing evolution, accompanied by significant variations from one family to another. Simultaneously, numerous influential factors and potential solutions exist. This article primarily outlines a selection of typical scenarios within the context of Chinese teenagers. It is important to acknowledge that a comprehensive and intricate understanding of this subject necessitates continual research, supplementation, and refinement in the future.

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