

Single Parents Describe Parenting Needs

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**Presentation to European Region of International Council on Social
Welfare Conference, June, 2007. Vilnius, Lithuania**

Overview of Presentation

- General observations regarding single parent families
- Canadian single families
- Voices of single parents
- Family policy/practice implications

General Observations

- Social attitudes
- Prevalence
- Gender
- Poverty
- Family policies

Social Attitudes

- Stigmatization and marginalization
- Decreased opportunity for social participation
- Children expected to develop social deviance and/or psychopathology
- Single parents strengths increasingly recognized

Prevalence

- High rates: USA=27%, UK=25%
- Increasing prevalence: In USA, tripling of rate between 1970 and 1990; In Australia, an annual increase of up to 2% expected.
- Impact on children: In USA, 50% of children can expect to experience single parenthood

Gender

- In USA and Canada, 90% of single families are female headed.
- Unmarried mothers are a growing number, presently constituting 37% of births in USA.
- Multiple disadvantages of gender, marital status, education & economics ensue.

Poverty

- Single parents, particularly mothers, are economically disadvantaged;
- In USA and Canada, family outcomes include poorer health and higher stress for all members, poorer educational attainment for children, and higher likelihood of child protection involvement;
- Negative outcomes show greater association with poverty than family structure.

Family Policies

- Family policies have been shown to influence family stressors;
- Range from limited (e.g. USA) to comprehensive (e.g. Sweden);
- Universal policies regarded as desirable while need for targeted policies recognized.

Single Parents in Canada

- 52% of single mothers with children financially dependent on IA live in poverty;
- Income assistance covers only 57% of basic costs;
- Housing costs consume disproportionate amount of income;
- The child poverty rate in BC is 24%.

Need for Parent Voices

- Parent voices largely ignored;
- Need for parents to be “creative, reflexive, agents” in creating their social conditions;
- Amplification of parent voices required;
- “Moral failure” of inattention.

Purpose of Study

- To explore perceptions of high risk parents to determine what helped or hindered their capacity to parent

Design of Study

- Parents recruited considered to be at high risk for abuse or neglect and referred to parenting program by child welfare authorities.
- Four focus groups with parents completing parenting program.
- 115 interviews with individual parents at 3 month intervals (max. 6 interviews).
- Transcripts analyzed using Atlas.TI

Participants

- 29 parents (out of total of 35)
- Average age=34
- 27 mothers, 2 fathers
- Education=high school or less (N=24)
- Income Assistance for 25 families
- Subsidized/shared housing for 15 families
- Substance abuse, domestic violence reported by 19 parents

Results

- *Material Deprivation*
- *Overwhelming Parenting Responsibility*

Material Deprivation

On the Margins of Defeat

No Income, Bad Parent

On the Margins of Defeat

- “It is a struggle....” “a fight”....”a challenge”
- “There are days that I go without so my daughter can have...”
- “It is impossible with a 3-year old son to ensure that he has proper fruits and vegetables...”

No Income, Bad Parent

- “I got caught up in thinking that if I can’t bring the income in, then I am not really a good parent”
- “I am no good with my finances...I buy [what I need] until there is no more money”
- “Children borrow money to buy lunch in school, and then I have to pay, pay, pay [even though money is lacking] just be easy”.

Mitigating Factors

- Subsidized/shared housing
- Family assistance

Overwhelming Parenting Responsibility

- *Need Parenting Help*
- *No Time for Self*
- *Motivation for Growth*

Overwhelming Parenting Responsibility

- “Overwhelming”, “stressful”, “wearing”
- “Results in physical and mental exhaustion”
- “Brings down morale”

Need for Parenting Help

- “There is just me and my son. When some situations come up, I have nowhere to turn”
- “I am terrified, but I have to do it because there is no one else.. and that scares me.
- “I am learning that you cannot do it all by yourself. The key is to trust the right people. Like the saying goes, ‘It takes a village to raise a child’”.

No Time for Self

- “When you have conflict with your child..it stays inside you..but having a break is like a breath of fresh air--a new outlook”
- “By putting all my efforts into my child..I won’t be helping him in the long run because I’ll be breaking myself down”
- Unable to pursue self-improvement

Motivation for Growth

- “If it was just me, I wouldn’t care. But because of my kids, I want to be a good role model”.
- “I’m really determined to show my children that there is a better life that you can make for yourself”.
- “I want to give [my son] every opportunity that I can”.

Summary of Findings

- Single parent families frequently obliged to make “stone soup”--i.e. something from nothing.
- Subsidized housing and family support help
- Many families live on the edge, and some families collapse, accepting self-blame.
- Parenting responsibility is overwhelming, help is needed, sometimes growth ensues.

Implications for Family Policies

- Comprehensive, integrated policies
- Integration of work & care in policies
- Material aid
- Child care
- Targeted services

Comprehensive & Integrated Policies

- Need to link labour market, housing, child care, income maintenance and education/training policies in a coherent manner to promote family stability.

Integration of Work & Care

- Single parenthood as a transitional state
- Equal valuing of care-giving and employment outside the home
- Goal of easing transitions from care work to outside employment

Material Aid

- Parent/child allowances
- Guaranteed/advanced maintenance
- Housing subsidies
- Leaves (parental, sick leaves)
- Educational benefits

Child Care

- Subsidized child care
- In-home relief

Targeted Services

- Respite care
- Residential substance abuse treatment including child-care
- Child welfare NOT child protection

Conclusions

- Importance of listening to parents
- Universal benefits for single parent families
- Targeted and/or means-tested supplementary services still required

Parent Final Words

- “I want a better life for my children..... but I know that I can’t do it by myself”.