



Single-parent households

By Dr. Douglas Berger, M.D., Ph D. | **ASK THE EXPERT**



Q: What are the possible consequences to children being raised by a single-parent than those from two-parent households?

A: This is a complex question, the answer largely depending on what age the child was when the family became single-parent, the circumstances around becoming a single-parent, the personality of the single-parent, and the environment the child is raised in. For this discussion we can only assume the single parent is kind, rational, and emotionally stable, and the child is in a good community and school system, otherwise it would be too difficult to provide a commentary without having all the details.

Infants only a few months old are generally more connected to their mother than their father because of the physical proximity for nursing, bathing, soothing, and putting to sleep, but some fathers who fulfill these roles all the time can also be very close to their infants. Infants, however, do not yet have a good concept of WHO this person exactly is and will not be too disturbed if this person changes, as long as their needs are met well.

Infants whose parents are or become single-parents will not feel a sense of loss or have a

catastrophic reaction (a terrible and inconsolable reaction) because they have not yet attached to a specific individual and they can not understand relationships and loss yet.

These children may or may not long for another parent later in life depending on the relationship with the single-parent, and while they may miss some education or experience of having a parent of the other sex, they may still do very well emotionally in life.

Children around 3 years old then develop something called “object constancy”, which means they become able to realize the person is still there when they are not and who this person is (Peekaboo is a game that helps develop this skill). Children who are over 3 and up to puberty may have a catastrophic reaction to the loss of a parent. Children closer to puberty being more independent may have less of a reaction than younger children. Some children who experience these losses may become quite fearful of loss of relationships in the future, some may show some pattern of intimacy avoidance or over-neediness or other issues. Many however, may still do well emotionally depending on their genetic makeup, their ability to cope and deal with adversity, their relationship with the single parent, extended family, and teachers and friends as they grow up.

Teenagers are more independent from their parents but also exaggerate their ability to be independent from their parents and use psychological denial about the deep attachment they still have with their parents. They are less likely to have a catastrophic reaction, but may still react with withdrawal, depression, or acting-out or “bad” behavior that can affect their study or social functioning.

Most people are resilient and will live a normal life, if there is an obvious problem then a mental health professional should be consulted.

Dr. Berger and his staff at the Meguro Counseling Center in the Shibuya-Ebisu area provide mental health care for individuals, couples, and families, in both English and Japanese.
www.megurocounseling.com

The discussions herein are meant as general information and advice only. Each person needs to make their own personal life decisions and to contact a mental health professional for consultation if deemed appropriate.

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