



Psychosocial And Academic Outcomes Of Children Raised In Single-Parent Families: A Comparative Study

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Abstract: The increasing prevalence of single-parent families has raised important questions regarding their impact on child development. The present study aimed to compare children from single-parent and two-parent families across six developmental domains: academic performance, emotional well-being, behavioral patterns, social development, economic and time resources, and support systems. A quantitative comparative research design was employed. The sample consisted of 75 parents of school-aged children (26 single-parent and 49 two-parent families), selected using convenience sampling. Data were collected using a structured Likert-scale questionnaire and analyzed using independent samples t-tests.

Results revealed no significant differences in academic performance, emotional well-being, economic and time resources, or support systems. However, significant differences were observed in behavioral patterns, $t(51) = 2.22$, $p = .031$, $d = 0.53$, and social development, $t(53) = 2.07$, $p = .044$, $d = 0.50$. These findings suggest that family structure alone does not determine developmental outcomes and that environmental and relational factors may play a more critical role.

Keywords: single-parent families, child development, academic performance, emotional well-being, social development

Introduction

Family structure plays a significant role in shaping children's psychological, social, and academic development. Traditionally, the two-parent family has been considered the normative and most stable environment for raising children. However, global social changes—including divorce, separation, widowhood, migration, and changing social norms—have contributed to a significant rise in single-parent families. This shift has increased scholarly interest in how family structure influences children's developmental outcomes (Amato, 2005; Lamb, 2012).

Single-parent families are typically defined as households in which a child is raised primarily by one parent due to divorce, separation, death of a partner, or non-marital childbirth. Although these families may face unique social and economic challenges, contemporary research suggests that child development outcomes are influenced not only by family structure but also by parenting quality, emotional support, and social resources. Researchers have increasingly challenged the assumption that children from single-parent families experience uniformly negative outcomes (Amato, 2005; Walsh, 2016).

Several studies have explored the relationship between family structure and children's academic achievement. Earlier research suggested that children raised in two-parent families often demonstrate higher academic performance due to greater economic stability, parental supervision, and access to educational resources. The concept of social capital within families suggests that children benefit from the presence of multiple caregivers who can provide guidance, monitoring, and academic support (Coleman, 1988). However, more recent research indicates that factors such as parental involvement, educational

support, and socioeconomic conditions may play a more important role in determining academic outcomes than family structure alone (Biblarz & Gottainer, 2000).

Emotional well-being is another critical domain influenced by family structure. Children living in single-parent households may encounter emotional challenges related to parental absence, financial stress, or social stigma. However, studies suggest that strong parent–child relationships, consistent caregiving, and effective communication can significantly reduce these risks and promote emotional resilience (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Masten, 2001).

Behavioral development and social competence are also influenced by family environments. Some studies have reported higher levels of behavioral difficulties among children from single-parent families, often associated with increased stress or reduced parental monitoring. At the same time, other research suggests that children raised in single-parent households may develop higher levels of responsibility, independence, and adaptability as they assume additional roles within the family system (Amato, 2010; Walsh, 2016).

In the Indian context, family systems frequently extend beyond the nuclear household to include grandparents, relatives, and community members who contribute to child-rearing. These extended family networks may help mitigate potential disadvantages associated with single-parent households by providing emotional, social, and practical support (Saini & Gill, 2017). Cultural values emphasizing collective responsibility and family cohesion may therefore influence child development outcomes differently compared to Western contexts.

Despite the growing prevalence of single-parent families in India, relatively limited empirical research has systematically compared developmental outcomes between children raised in single-parent and two-parent households across multiple domains. Understanding these differences is important for educators, policymakers, and mental health professionals who aim to develop supportive family and educational interventions.

Therefore, the present study aims to compare children from single-parent and two-parent families across six developmental domains: academic performance, emotional well-being, behavioral patterns, social development, economic and time resources, and support systems. By examining these domains, the study seeks to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how family structure influences child development within the Indian socio-cultural context.

Literature Review

Family structure has long been recognized as an important factor influencing children's psychological, social, and academic development. Over the past several decades, significant demographic and social changes—including rising divorce rates, increased migration, urbanization, and evolving gender roles—have contributed to a diversification of family forms across societies. Among these changes, the growth of single-parent households has attracted considerable scholarly attention. Early research often portrayed single-parent families as disadvantaged environments for children; however, contemporary research increasingly suggests that developmental outcomes are influenced by a complex interaction of parenting practices, socioeconomic conditions, emotional support, and broader social environments.

Family structure refers to the composition of individuals within a household and the relationships among them. Traditionally, the nuclear family consisting of two parents and their children has been considered the normative structure for child-rearing. However, changing social patterns have led to an increase in single-parent families resulting from divorce, separation, widowhood, and non-marital childbirth. Research by Paul R. Amato indicates that children raised in single-parent households may encounter structural challenges such as economic constraints and reduced parental time. Nevertheless, the author emphasizes that family processes—particularly parenting quality and emotional support—are more important determinants of child outcomes than family structure itself.

Academic achievement is one of the most widely studied domains in research comparing children from single-parent and two-parent families. The concept of family social capital proposed by James S. Coleman suggests that children benefit from the presence of multiple caregivers who can provide academic guidance, supervision, and emotional encouragement. According to this perspective, two-parent households may offer greater opportunities for monitoring children's educational progress and facilitating learning opportunities.

However, empirical evidence regarding the relationship between family structure and academic achievement is mixed. Studies conducted by Biblarz and Gottainer (2000) indicate that when socioeconomic status, parental education, and school quality are controlled, differences in academic outcomes between children from single-parent and two-parent families are often reduced. Research also highlights that parental involvement, home learning environments, and teacher support are significant

predictors of academic success regardless of family composition. Studies conducted in India similarly emphasize the importance of parental encouragement and educational support in promoting children's academic achievement.

Emotional well-being is another important dimension of child development that may be influenced by family structure. Children living in single-parent households may experience emotional challenges associated with parental absence, family transitions, or financial stress. However, psychological theories emphasize that the quality of relationships within the family plays a central role in shaping emotional development.

According to attachment theory developed by John Bowlby, secure emotional bonds between children and caregivers provide a foundation for psychological stability and resilience. Research conducted by Hetherington and Kelly (2002) suggests that although children may initially experience emotional distress following parental divorce, many adapt successfully over time when supportive parenting and stable routines are maintained. These findings highlight that emotional outcomes are strongly influenced by parent-child relationships rather than by family structure alone.

Behavioral adjustment among children has also been examined extensively in relation to family environments. Some studies report higher levels of behavioral difficulties among children from single-parent households, often attributed to economic stress or reduced parental supervision. However, resilience research demonstrates that children possess significant adaptive capacities that allow them to cope effectively with challenging life circumstances.

Research conducted by Ann S. Masten emphasizes that resilience is a dynamic developmental process supported by protective factors such as supportive relationships, positive school environments, and community support. In certain cases, children raised in single-parent households may develop greater independence and responsibility as they adapt to family circumstances. These experiences may contribute to the development of self-regulation, problem-solving abilities, and behavioral maturity.

Social development refers to children's ability to form relationships, communicate effectively, and interact successfully with others in their social environment. Family interactions play a crucial role in shaping these skills. According to social learning theory proposed by Albert Bandura, children learn behaviors through observation and interaction with significant individuals in their environment, particularly parents and caregivers.

Research indicates that parenting style, emotional warmth, and family stability are important predictors of children's social competence. Studies by Demo and Acock (1996) suggest that children's social adjustment is influenced more strongly by family processes than by family structure itself. Positive parenting practices and supportive home environments can foster the development of empathy, communication skills, and cooperative behavior.

Economic resources and parental time availability represent additional factors that may influence developmental outcomes in different family structures. Two-parent families often benefit from shared caregiving responsibilities and dual sources of income, which may provide greater access to educational opportunities, extracurricular activities, and healthcare services. In contrast, single parents may experience financial pressures and time constraints while balancing employment and caregiving responsibilities.

Research by McLanahan and Percheski (2008) identifies economic disadvantage as one of the primary mechanisms through which family structure may affect children's developmental outcomes. However, the effects of economic challenges can be mitigated by effective coping strategies, institutional support systems, and strong social networks.

The Indian Socio-Cultural Context

In the Indian context, family systems often extend beyond the nuclear household to include grandparents, relatives, and community members who participate actively in child-rearing. These extended family networks provide emotional, financial, and practical support that can help mitigate potential challenges associated with single-parent households. Studies on Indian family dynamics highlight the importance of collectivist cultural values that emphasize interdependence, family cohesion, and shared responsibility for caregiving.

Research examining single-parent families in India suggests that children raised in such households experience diverse developmental outcomes shaped by cultural and social factors. Some studies report that children in single-parent families may encounter social stigma or financial constraints. However, other research indicates that many children develop resilience, independence, and strong coping skills while adapting to their family environments. Support from extended family members and community networks often plays a critical role in promoting children's emotional and social well-being in the Indian context.

Research Gap

Despite extensive international research on family structure and child development, relatively few empirical studies have examined these relationships comprehensively within the Indian socio-cultural context. Much of the existing literature focuses primarily on Western populations or examines only specific developmental domains such as academic achievement or emotional adjustment. Consequently, there is a need for more comprehensive research that investigates multiple aspects of child development simultaneously within Indian family systems. The present study addresses this gap by comparing children from single-parent and two-parent families across six developmental domains: academic performance, emotional well-being, behavioral patterns, social development, economic and time resources, and support systems.

Method

Research Design

The present study employed a quantitative comparative research design to examine differences in developmental outcomes between children from single-parent families and those from two-parent families. A comparative design was considered appropriate because it allows researchers to analyze variations between groups and determine whether significant differences exist across specific developmental domains. The study focused on six major areas of child development: academic performance, emotional well-being, behavioral patterns, social development, economic and time resources, and support systems. A cross-sectional approach was adopted, in which data were collected at a single point in time from parents of school-aged children.

Participants

The sample consisted of 75 parents of school-aged children. Among them, 26 participants represented single-parent families, while 49 participants represented two-parent families. Participants were selected using a non-probability convenience sampling technique. The inclusion criteria required participants to be parents of school-going children currently residing either in single-parent households (due to divorce, separation, widowhood, or other circumstances) or in two-parent households. The inclusion of both groups enabled a comparative analysis of children's developmental outcomes across different family structures.

Measures

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire developed by the researcher to assess children's development across six domains: academic performance, emotional well-being, behavioral patterns, social development, economic and time resources, and support systems. Each domain consisted of multiple statements designed to capture parents' perceptions of their child's functioning in that specific area.

The questionnaire used a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). Higher scores indicated more positive developmental outcomes in each domain. The questionnaire items were designed based on relevant literature on child development and family structure.

Procedure

Data were collected using an online survey method. A questionnaire was created using Google Forms and distributed through online platforms and social networks. Participants were provided with a brief description of the study along with an informed consent statement before completing the questionnaire.

Respondents voluntarily completed the survey, and only those who provided consent were allowed to proceed with the questionnaire. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and assured that their responses would remain confidential and used only for academic research purposes.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistical methods. Descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, were calculated to summarize the responses for each developmental domain. To examine differences between children from single-parent and two-parent families, an independent samples t-test was conducted. The t-test was used to determine whether the mean scores of the two independent groups differed significantly across the six developmental domains. A statistical significance was evaluated at the $p < .05$ level.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical standards were maintained throughout the research process. Participation in the study was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all respondents prior to data collection. Participants were assured that their responses would remain anonymous and confidential. No identifying personal information was collected, and the data were used solely for academic purposes.

Results

An independent samples t-test was conducted to compare children from single-parent and two-parent families across six developmental domains: academic performance, emotional well-being, behavioral patterns, social development, economic and time resources, and support systems.

There was no significant difference in academic performance between children from single-parent families ($M = 13.42$, $SD = 2.82$) and two-parent families ($M = 14.41$, $SD = 2.37$), $t(44) = -1.52$, $p = .136$, $d = -0.35$. This suggests that family structure did not significantly influence academic outcomes.

No significant difference was found in emotional well-being between children from single-parent families ($M = 13.65$, $SD = 2.02$) and two-parent families ($M = 13.24$, $SD = 2.02$), $t(51) = 0.84$, $p = .407$, $d = 0.20$.

Emotional adjustment was comparable across groups.

A statistically significant difference was observed in behavioral patterns between the two groups. Children from single-parent families ($M = 12.92$, $SD = 1.94$) scored significantly higher than those from two-parent families ($M = 11.88$, $SD = 1.95$), $t(51) = 2.22$, $p = .031$, $d = 0.53$. This suggests that family structure may influence behavioral outcomes.

There was a significant difference in social development between the groups. Children from single-parent families ($M = 15.46$, $SD = 1.94$) demonstrated higher social development scores than those from two-parent families ($M = 14.47$, $SD = 2.04$), $t(53) = 2.07$, $p = .044$, $d = 0.50$. This indicates that children in single-parent families may exhibit stronger social competencies.

No significant difference was found in economic and time resources between children from single-parent families ($M = 13.73$, $SD = 4.94$) and two-parent families ($M = 14.35$, $SD = 1.98$), $t(29) = -0.61$, $p = .546$, $d = -0.17$. This suggests that perceived economic and time-related resources were similar across both family types.

There was no significant difference in perceived support systems between children from single-parent families ($M = 11.42$, $SD = 1.65$) and two-parent families ($M = 11.96$, $SD = 1.66$), $t(51) = -1.34$, $p = .188$, $d = -0.33$. Both groups reported comparable levels of support.

Overall, out of the six developmental domains examined, four variables—academic performance, emotional well-being, economic and time resources, and support systems—showed no statistically significant differences between children from single-parent and two-parent families.

However, two variables—behavioral patterns and social development—showed statistically significant differences, with children from single-parent families scoring higher in both domains.

Effect size analysis using Cohen's d indicated small effects for academic performance, emotional well-being, and support systems, a negligible effect for economic and time resources, and moderate effects for behavioral patterns and social development.

Table 1

Independent Samples t-Test Results Comparing Developmental Outcomes

Variable	Single Parent ($M \pm SD$)	Two Parent ($M \pm SD$)	t(df)	p	Cohen's d
Academic Performance	13.42 ± 2.82	14.41 ± 2.37	-1.52 (44)	.136	-0.35
Emotional Well-being	13.65 ± 2.02	13.24 ± 2.02	0.84 (51)	.407	0.20
Behavioral Pattern	12.92 ± 1.94	11.88 ± 1.95	2.22 (51)	.031*	0.53
Social Development	15.46 ± 1.94	14.47 ± 2.04	2.07 (53)	.044*	0.50
Economic & Time Resources	13.73 ± 4.94	14.35 ± 1.98	-0.61 (29)	.546	-0.17
Support System	11.42 ± 1.65	11.96 ± 1.66	-1.34 (51)	.188	-0.33

Note. * $p < .05$ indicates statistical significance.

Discussion

The present study examined differences in developmental outcomes between children from single-parent and two-parent families across six domains: academic performance, emotional well-being, behavioral patterns, social development, economic and time resources, and perceived support systems. The findings provide important insights into the role of family structure in influencing child development.

The results indicated that no statistically significant difference was observed in academic performance between children from single-parent and two-parent families. This finding indicates that family structure

alone does not determine educational outcomes. Contemporary research increasingly emphasizes that academic achievement is influenced more strongly by parental involvement, educational support, and school engagement than by family composition itself. For example, studies on family involvement demonstrate that parental engagement in children's education significantly contributes to both academic success and socio-emotional development.

Similarly, the findings showed no significant differences in emotional well-being between children from the two family structures. Emotional adjustment in children is influenced by multiple environmental factors, including the quality of parent-child relationships, emotional support, and stability within the home environment. Research on child development indicates that supportive parenting and strong social relationships can buffer potential stressors associated with family transitions. Furthermore, studies highlight that perceived social support and parental psychological well-being play a crucial role in promoting positive adjustment among children in single-parent households.

Interestingly, the present study found significant differences in behavioral patterns, with children from single-parent families reporting slightly higher behavioral scores than those from two-parent families. One explanation is that children in single-parent households may develop greater independence and responsibility due to increased involvement in household roles and decision-making processes. Exposure to such responsibilities may contribute to adaptive coping strategies and behavioral maturity. Recent intervention-based research also suggests that children from single-parent families can develop high levels of psychological resilience, particularly when supported by collaborative family and school environments. Similarly, the results indicated significant differences in social development, with children from single-parent families demonstrating slightly higher social development scores. This may reflect greater reliance on broader social networks and community interactions. Children in single-parent families often rely more heavily on extended family members, peers, and community support systems, which may enhance interpersonal skills and social adaptability. Research suggests that social competence and emotional development are strongly associated with family engagement and supportive learning environments.

In contrast, economic and time resources did not significantly differ between the two family structures in the present study. Although previous literature often suggests that single-parent families may experience financial constraints, such challenges do not necessarily translate directly into poorer developmental outcomes. Socioeconomic support, employment stability, and extended family assistance can mitigate financial stress and provide compensatory resources for children.

Furthermore, perceived support systems were similar for both groups, indicating that children from different family structures may experience comparable levels of emotional and social support. In collectivistic societies, extended family networks often play a significant role in caregiving and emotional support, thereby reducing potential disadvantages associated with single-parent households.

Overall, the findings challenge deficit-oriented perspectives that portray single-parent families as inherently disadvantaged. Instead, the results support a growing body of literature suggesting that parenting quality, social support, and environmental resources are more important determinants of child development than family structure alone. While structural differences may influence family experiences, the presence of supportive relationships and stable caregiving environments appears to be the most critical factor in promoting positive developmental outcomes.

The moderate effect sizes observed in behavioral patterns and social development indicate that these differences are not only statistically significant but also practically meaningful.

Therefore, educators, policymakers, and mental health professionals should adopt a strengths-based perspective when addressing the needs of children from diverse family structures. Interventions aimed at strengthening parenting practices, improving school-family collaboration, and enhancing social support networks may be more effective than focusing solely on family composition.

Implications

The findings of the present study have both theoretical and practical implications. From a theoretical perspective, the results support developmental theories that emphasize the importance of parenting practices and social environments rather than family structure alone. The findings contribute to the growing body of research suggesting that children's developmental outcomes are shaped by complex interactions between family relationships, socioeconomic factors, and broader social contexts.

From a practical perspective, the results highlight the importance of providing support systems for families regardless of their structure. Educational institutions, community organizations, and policymakers can play a significant role in promoting children's well-being by strengthening support networks and providing resources for parents.

Limitations

Despite the valuable insights provided by this study, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study relied on a relatively small sample size, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Second, the use of convenience sampling may introduce sampling bias. Third, the data were collected through self-reported questionnaires completed by parents, which may be influenced by subjective perceptions.

Suggestions for Future Research

Future research could expand upon the present study by including larger and more diverse samples across different regions of India. Longitudinal studies examining children's developmental outcomes over time may provide deeper insights into how family structures influence development across different life stages. Additionally, future studies could incorporate perspectives from children, teachers, and other caregivers to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of developmental outcomes.

Conclusion

The present study aimed to examine the impact of family structure on multiple dimensions of child development by comparing children from single-parent and two-parent families across academic, emotional, behavioral, social, economic, and support-related domains. The findings provide important insights into the role of family structure in shaping developmental outcomes.

Overall, the results indicate that family structure alone does not significantly determine most aspects of child development. No statistically significant differences were found in academic performance, emotional well-being, economic and time resources, or perceived support systems between children from single-parent and two-parent families. These findings suggest that the presence of one versus two parents may not inherently disadvantage children in these domains. Instead, developmental outcomes appear to be influenced more strongly by factors such as the quality of parenting, emotional support, access to resources, and the broader social environment.

At the same time, the study revealed significant differences in behavioral patterns and social development, with children from single-parent families demonstrating higher scores in both areas. These findings challenge traditional deficit-based perspectives that portray single-parent families as inherently less effective environments for child development. Instead, they highlight the possibility that children in single-parent households may develop adaptive strengths, such as increased independence, responsibility, and social competence. These strengths may arise from greater role participation within the family, exposure to diverse social interactions, and the need to adapt to changing family dynamics.

The results can be understood within the framework of resilience theory, which emphasizes that children exposed to moderate life challenges often develop enhanced coping skills and psychological adaptability. Similarly, Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory suggests that child development is influenced by multiple interacting systems, including family, school, and community. In the Indian context, the presence of extended family networks and collectivistic cultural values may act as protective factors, buffering potential challenges associated with single parenting.

An important observation from the study is the variability within the single-parent group, particularly in economic and time resources. This indicates that single-parent families are not a homogeneous category and that children's outcomes may vary depending on individual circumstances, including socio-economic status, parental employment, and availability of support systems. This reinforces the need to move beyond generalized assumptions and adopt a more nuanced understanding of family diversity.

The findings of this study have several important implications. First, they underscore the need to shift from a structural to a process-oriented perspective in understanding child development. Rather than focusing solely on whether a child lives in a single-parent or two-parent household, greater emphasis should be placed on parenting practices, emotional climate, and access to supportive environments. Second, the results highlight the importance of reducing stigma associated with single-parent families, particularly in cultural contexts where traditional family structures are strongly valued. Promoting inclusive attitudes in schools and communities can help support children's social and emotional well-being.

In conclusion, the present study contributes to the growing body of research suggesting that child development is a multidimensional process influenced more by relational, environmental, and socio-cultural factors than by family structure alone. Children from single-parent families are capable of achieving outcomes comparable to, and in some domains even exceeding, those of their peers from two-parent families. These findings support a strengths-based perspective on family diversity. Future research should further examine how contextual and relational factors interact to shape developmental outcomes across diverse family structures.

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