Sole-parent families make up a significant and increasing minority of the various family structures in contemporary Australia. In 2004–06, families headed by a sole parent represented more than one-fifth of families with children under the age of 15 years, an increase from 14% in 1986–88 (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2007a). Numbers of sole-parent households are likely to continue to increase into the future, with a projected growth from 838,000 households in 2001 to almost 1.2 million households in 2026, or a 42% increase (ABS, 2004). Such figures indicate an imperative to ensure that the conditions under which a child or young person is living in a sole-parent household are as conducive to their health and wellbeing as possible. This article explores themes within the literature on sole-parent families and considers the extent to which sole parenting itself, and/or associated factors, impact on outcomes for children. What helps sole-parent families, in terms of a more sophisticated understanding of their needs and methods of support, is also considered.

Types of sole-parent families

There are varying pathways by which sole-parent families are created, including marriage and de facto relationship breakdown, sole-parenting as a lifestyle choice for unpartnered women who wish to have a child through fertility treatments or brief planned or unplanned sexual encounters, or young unmarried mothers who decide to complete an unplanned pregnancy (Stanley, Richardson, & Prior, 2005). Separated parents are also increasingly less likely to repartner, leading to a continuation of a sole-parenting situation, and a small number become sole parents due to the death of their partner (de Vaus, 2004). Two important points can be gleaned from this. Historically, there has been a stigma attached to sole mothering in particular, with single mothers being seen as immoral, to blame for their unmarried state, and less desirable community members (Stanley, Richardson & Prior, 2005). Yet sole parents are clearly a diverse group and can be well-resourced, indicating that a stereotypical view of an unwed, young and welfare-dependent single mother is likely to be non-representative in contemporary Australia. Even if single mothers are young and on welfare, there is some UK evidence to suggest that in the longer term, they are more likely than other sole parents to make successful new families, or establish themselves as working sole parents (Marsh, 2004). Although the level of support and circumstances for young single mothers will vary from country to country, this is a heartening finding.

Secondly, in the case of relationship breakdown, financial, emotional and practical impacts are likely to be present simultaneously with the challenges inherent in raising a child outside of the traditional nuclear family. The enduring and often difficult challenges that co-parenting (or a lack of co-parenting) brings may be an additional strain. As such, the emotional and social challenges of sole parenting can
be many and varied, which inevitably has implications for child wellbeing.

Disadvantages associated with sole parenting

Research indicates that there is little doubt that sole-parent families are at an increased risk of disadvantage in terms of employment, housing, income and social participation (ABS, 2007a). For example, households comprising one parent with dependent children in 2005–06 had a mean income of $446 per week, similar to that of older couples ($458 per week). However, only 13% of sole parents fully owned their home, indicating that a substantially greater proportion of sole parents had to make mortgage or rental payments from their income. The estimated risk of being in housing stress1 is highest for sole parents as compared to singles and to couples with or without children (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2007). In 2003–04, housing tenure security of sole parents was quite different from that of couples—sole parents with children under 15 years were most commonly renting their accommodation (ABS, 2007a). Insecure tenure (i.e., a lack of permanent housing) has potential implications for health and wellbeing (Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, 2006).

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Differing household types are also associated with different levels of financial stress. For example, of the 623,000 adults in sole-parent households with dependent children in 2006, 38% were at risk of not being able to raise $2,000 in an emergency, compared with 11% of the 4,574,000 adults in couple households with dependent children. Forty-eight per cent of adults in sole-parent households had at least one cash flow problem (compared to 19% of adults in couple households with dependent children); and 34% of adults in sole-parent households had at least one instance of spending more than they earned (compared to 23% of those in couple households with dependent children) (ABS, 2007c).

The experience of relationship breakdown, parenting responsibilities and/or financial and other disadvantages may all serve to have a considerable impact on a sole parent’s psychological wellbeing. Loxton, Mooney, and Young (2006), using data from two cohorts of the Australian Longitudinal Study on Women’s Health, found that the psychological health of sole mothers had an increased risk of being poorer than that of other women of their age, particularly for those aged 47–52 years. Sole mothers aged 22–27 years had an increased risk of experiencing both suicidal thoughts and actual self-harm than other women of their age, and both groups had more than twice the risk of experiencing depression. The impact of sole parenting on fathers is also important. One study, using data from the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey, has indicated that single fathers with young children are the loneliest and have the lowest levels of support and friendship of men and women in any household situation (Flood, 2005). Single fathers also generally have worse physical, emotional and mental health than men in other types of households (Flood, 2005).

What helps?

Under such circumstances, it is not surprising to see that children from sole-parent families are at greater risk of adverse outcomes when compared to children from intact families. This relationship, however, is complex, and the size of the differences in relevant research is not large (Pryor & Rodgers, 2001). Poor outcomes are therefore not a foregone conclusion. So what do we know about what makes a resilient and effective sole-parent family?

Several studies have indicated that it is increasingly clear that family processes (e.g., inter-parental relationship, parenting practices), as opposed to structure (e.g., number, gender or sexuality of parents), contribute to determining a child’s current and future wellbeing (Burke, McIntosh, & Gridley, 2007). For example, Amato & Fowler (2002), using a nationally representative data set in the US, examined three parenting practice variables (parental support, monitoring and harsh punishment) and their effects on three child outcomes (adjustment, school grades and behaviour problems). They found that longitudinal associations between parenting practices and children’s outcomes did not depend on parental factors, including family structure, race, education, income or gender. In other words, this study suggests that there may be a core set of parenting practices that influence child outcomes, regardless of family structure.

Data from the Family Strengths Research Project (Silberberg, 2001) suggests that the presence of two particular sets of circumstances were important to the strength of sole-parent families: support from extended family and friends, and a positive co-parenting arrangement. In the case of family breakdown and post-separation parenting, children’s adjustment is protected by factors such as low inter-parental conflict, effective and constructive management of conflict when it does exist, quality of the parent–child relationship, cooperative co-parenting (including good communication), and nurturing, authoritative parenting from at least one
parent (McIntosh, 2003). It makes sense, however, that broadly speaking all of these themes are important to any family.

Combating loneliness associated with sole parenting (Flood, 2005), particularly if associated with unemployment, also appears to be important. The British lone parent cohort study (Marsh, 2004) found that lone parents who suffered the most ill health in the 10-year study period were those who were out of work at the beginning and end of the study, and who remained living alone. This raises the question of the importance of loneliness as a significant variable behind poorer outcomes for sole parents and, by association, their children (Marsh, 2004). Parents who are distracted by the demands of social, emotional and financial disadvantages and the possible elements of a sub-optimal relationship with an ex-partner, are unlikely to be functioning at their full capacity and thus able to consider their children’s needs effectively.

The level of social and economic disadvantage in the family also appears to play a role (Spencer, 2005; Stanley et al., 2005), and issues in families that lead to adverse outcomes for children may have pre-dated sole-parenthood status (Pryor & Rodgers, 2001). The overall message that may be construed from the literature is that sole parenting per se may not lead to adverse outcomes for children. Where child and parent health are good, income is sufficient, there is an extended family and/or social network, the family has secure housing, and access to services is available, there is no increased risk of poor outcomes (Stanley et al., 2005).

Taken together, these studies indicate that factors likely to facilitate a good home environment for growing children are consistent across a range of family structures. The challenge for service providers and policy-makers is to help identify the set of factors that may limit or enhance the ability of sole parents living under a range of circumstances to provide such a home environment, and respond accordingly. Time use studies provide some insight into these challenges, outside of the expected financial and social constraints. Craig (2004), for example, analysing data from the ABS Time Use Survey, found that although sole mothers spend many more hours a day in the company of their child(ren) than partnered mothers—a considerable restraint on their time—their total workload (both paid and unpaid) is no greater or more difficult than partnered mothers. However, because they do spend considerably more time in the company of their child(ren) and with no other adult, the need for child supervision is a real constraint on a sole parent’s ability to conduct activity, including work, outside the home. This may, however, indicate that sole parents are at times a captive audience, and methods of support such as outreach service provision or work from home options are very real ways in which sole parents can be supported to increase the likelihood of a good home environment.

Family stability

One important factor that arose in Pryor and Rodger’s (2001) review of the literature regarding children in changing families is that children who experience multiple family transitions are at a greater risk of adverse outcomes. Hayatbakhsh, Mamun, Najman, O’Callaghan, Bor, and Alati (2008) also found that changes in maternal marital status in the first five years of a child’s life, measured by the mother’s frequency of divorce, separation from partner and changes of partner, was associated with earlier substance use (alcohol, cigarettes, cannabis). In the British lone parent cohort study (Marsh, 2004), children from backgrounds where a single parent had formed a stable couple union fared most favourably, and children whose parent entered a short-term relationship fared least well in the areas of physical wellbeing, social adjustment and education outcomes.

With the likelihood that a significant number of children will spend time in a sole-parent family, Cherlin (2008) called for consideration of the idea that a stable sole-parent family environment may be preferable to an unstable union between a mother and a new partner that has arisen for financial

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functioning well. If, as we know, children fare best under stable circumstances—in any family structure—then we need to work hard to ensure that the same or possibly an even greater level of support, encouragement and acknowledgment is given to sole parents who do choose to repartner.

This includes careful consideration of the messages that we give to children about the types of families in which they are growing up. As Stanley et al. (2005) suggest, damage to children can be caused by comments that are made publicly or privately about “different” families, which can be personally hurtful and undermine a child’s confidence in their family, even if their family is doing comparatively well. However, as stated by Marsh (2004), “normative ties binding relationships—family formation and family income support—are loosening” (p. 12). This may be a positive shift for children in sole-parent families that in itself will have benefits for their wellbeing. As Grayling (2008) states: “there can (also) be and are good and happy families with only one parent in them, and achieving this is the desideratum that society should work towards without preconceptions about traditional models and numbers” (p. 5).

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Service and policy response

Increasing pressures in the current economic climate, such as housing and financial crises, are likely to hit a sole-parent household hard, not only in terms of material, but also psychological stress. It seems timely then to ask how sole parents can be supported to offer the caring and connected relationships that children need amidst these “adult” challenges. If the parent is struggling to provide an environment that fosters caring and connectedness, other adults who are significant in the child’s life may need to be encouraged to take on this role. Maintaining a sense of balance may also help sole parents to cope. For example, exposure to excessive hours of watching television is considered to

reasons, and that family policies should be directed to assisting sole-parent families alongside the support shown for marriage. Cherlin argued that such assistance—including income support that diminishes any financial imperative to repartner—can be provided in a way that increases stability in these families without providing a disincentive to future marriage.

Helping sole parents to establish and maintain a sole-parent family environment that is conducive to their child’s mental health, but also their own, is clearly an imperative. But there are some fundamental assumptions that need to be addressed where questions about the benefits of repartnering exist. A strong, low-conflict union is desirable in any relationship into which a child is born. Targeting sole parents and their unions implies that existing marriages and relationships are automatically preferable, conflict-free, stable environments for children for no other reason than their two-parent structure. We need to consider why sole-parent unions are scrutinised, as opposed to pursuing the need to adopt a blanket approach to supporting stability in relationships regardless of family structure. This includes recognition and acceptance that some two-parent households are potentially more harmful to children than some sole-parent households.

There are also questions around whether the needs of sole parents and their children are fundamentally at odds. If, for example, we know that marriage is a good insulator against loneliness (Franklin & Tranter, 2008) and mental health problems ( Waite & Gallagher, 2000), then the sole parent’s engagement in such a union, if successful, is likely to have positive spin-offs for the child. Yet there is an inherent risk in sole parents pursuing a relationship, in that the child may be exposed to negative outcomes if the union does not work. Whose rights take precedence, and who decides?

In this sense, while consideration of the child’s best interests in separated families is foremost, the health and wellbeing of the sole parent cannot be disregarded. It is also in the child’s best interests to have a parent who is coping and
have a negative impact on children’s wellbeing; however, if it offers the only opportunity for a sole parent to complete important tasks without interruptions, then a balance may need to be struck between activities that potentially impact on child health and dealing with parental stressors that may also impact on child health.

An awareness of the particular and enduring challenges that sole parents face will assist policy-makers and practitioners to address the needs of both sole parents and their children. Inherent in this is the need for professionals to be aware of and step back from their personal position on changing families and approach the subject as dispassionately as possible (Pryor & Rodgers, 2001). As Dr Jan Pryor stated at a New Zealand Families Commission symposium in 2008, there are few scripts in place for how to behave in these changing times for families; as long as children are safe from harm, we should celebrate diversity and support the core functions of a family, no matter the structure. Additionally, we should strive to recognise the various hardships and challenges that sole-parent families have faced over time, and help them to positively express the resilience that they may have shown in the face of adversity.

There is also a need for greater subtlety in the recognition of the particular challenges that sole parents may face in improving the outlook for themselves and their children. These may be physical (for example, the restrictive need to be present even when the child is sleeping) or psychological (for example, not wanting to access help for fear of judgement). Sole parents may find particular benefit in being directed to information on good parenting practices in a range of different and accessible media, particularly the Internet. Telephone parenting help lines are a good example of a service that could meet the needs of sole parents, but wider examination of the use of technology as a means to access an audience who are often limited by their lack of spare time and mobility may be pertinent.

Conclusion

The aim of this article has been to bring together some of the literature related to sole parenting and examine themes and ideas, in order to articulate an approach to responding to the needs of sole parents. While by no means a comprehensive review of the literature, it indicates that there may be little necessity in dealing with sole-parent families in a different way to other family types when examining issues such as parenting practices or relationship stability. Practical and psychological limitations on engaging sole parents in family, relationship and parenting support programs, however, may need further consideration. In all, a more sophisticated and non-judgemental approach to issues faced by sole parents is required.

Endnotes

1 According to Yates and Milligan (2007), housing affordability is compromised when households in the bottom 40% of income distribution spend more than 30% of their household income on housing, adjusted for household size. Those who do not have affordable housing according to this criterion are said to be experiencing ‘housing stress’, which may be measured in terms of people’s subjective experiences of managing housing costs (Yates & Milligan, 2007) and/or material hardship.


References


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