

# Biological Aspects of the Development and Self-Concept in Adolescents Living in Single-Parent Families

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## ABSTRACT

*In this study we investigate whether there are differences between adolescents who grow up in single-parent families and those who grow up in nucleus families. We have decided that there are no differences in the physical development between the adolescents who are growing up in single parent families and those growing up in nucleus families. There is no difference in the self-concept between these two groups, except in the ethical and moral self-image of adolescents living with one parent. Adolescents living in single-parent families have a weaker moral self-image. It can thus be concluded that physical development and positive self-concept (a favorable image of oneself) in adolescents do not depend on whether an adolescent is growing up in a single-parent or a nucleus family, but on the different characteristics of parents and their relationship with children, whether they are married or not. For the children development the best is healthy marriage of their parents.*

**Key words:** evolution of family, single-parent family, adolescent period, growth and development, self concept

## Introduction

Adolescents and their development are becoming a more and more intriguing topic in recent scientific research.

The research issue has been directed at analyzing the period of adolescence from the standpoint of it being a physiological, psychological and social phenomenon, as well as the result of a large number of complex factors. In the 19th century, apart from Roberts and Bodwich<sup>1</sup> who first noticed an increase in the height and an earlier onset of this occurrence in girls, Hall was the first author to observe adolescence from various aspects<sup>2</sup>, although not through all the complexity which makes up the interaction of the close community (the family) and the more distant social community. In fact, one of the factors often neglected goes back to family relationship and the influence it has on adolescents living in single-parent fami-

lies. Within the frame of anthropological research even Margaret Mead<sup>3</sup> through her research emphasized that adolescence need not be a period of stress and unrest, but that it is made such by social and cultural conditions. Regardless of her instructions which suggest a careful approach in viewing the period of adolescence as a universal crisis, the role of family life in this dramatic physiological as well as socio-psychological period remains to this day unclear, especially with regard to the accelerated social and cultural complexity of life in the past decades. In order to encompass all the complexity of growing up in today's globalised world<sup>4</sup> it is necessary to broaden the analysis of adolescence through an interdisciplinary approach, especially through a theoretical frame of the medical and anthropological approach which enables a broader interpretation of the too often neglected issue of

an unsuccessful process of adolescence in single-parent families.

Because of all physiological and socio-cultural characteristics which are implied by adolescence, it is necessary to view it through the entire period which it encircles, and which is not short. Adolescence is the transitional period which begins at 9 years of age, and lasts (to full maturity) until the age of 24. Within this period young people experience deep changes of the entire character, transforming from a child to an adult young person. The physical changes which occur under the influence of hormones are called puberty. Puberty begins with the increase in height and weight. It goes on with the growth of the sexual organs and secondary sexual features such as voice mutation in boys, activation of perspirational glands and the outbreak of acne. Adolescents are considered physically mature when a girl gets her first period (menarha) and the boys the first pollution. On acquiring these features a young person becomes physically able for parenthood, which brings on a number of problematic situations because of the much slower psychological and social development of maturity<sup>5</sup>. A grown up body, a sexual urge, emotions and social requirements which direct their socialization and acceptance of work-related obligations all lead to the formation of the psychological profile of a young person. This field of a complex interactivity of all factors is the field of established neglect in the adaptation of the psychological construction to the physical and social norms. It is therefore essential for the psychological profile to be unquestionable. The psychological profile is measured through self-concept i.e. the picture that a young person has of oneself. Self-concept<sup>6</sup> is a concept which marks the psychological context of growing up that can be defined as the »phenomenological organization« of the experience of the person and the concept of oneself in all aspects of life. Self-concept shows how much a person believes in oneself, and it portrays one's character from adolescence to adulthood.

In 1982, in a further attempt to analyze self-concept, Offer gathered reports from adolescents who dealt with their attitudes and feelings in all important aspects of life<sup>7,8</sup>. Based on the analysis of these reports he divided self-concept into the psychological, social, family, sexual and self-adjusting aspects<sup>9,10</sup>. A number of researches have confirmed that three facets of self-concept show an important aspect of adolescent experience: the family self-concept, the social-self concept and the self-adjustment concept<sup>11,12,13,14</sup>.

Recent research has shown that psychological, social and physical events influence the biological system, sometimes acting synergistically in adolescence. The effect of unfavorable factors can either slow down or even stop growth. After the unfavorable factors have disappeared, growth can be speeded up so as to cache up on the loss<sup>15</sup>. The loss of one parent, whether on account of death, divorce or long term absence could theoretically have an unfavorable influence on the growth and development of an adolescent.

A stable family is usually considered as being favorable for the development of a child. This is a family with two adult biological parents, who respect and love each other, who support each other and have an adequate social and financial stability, both equally participating in the upbringing of the child. The family plays an important part in forming the adolescent<sup>16-20</sup>. The quantity of research in the field of family life data is therefore surprising. These researches show that the adolescents who grow up and mature in two-parent families (nucleus families) are possibly physically more advanced and have a better quality of self-concept than those living in single parent families<sup>21,22</sup>, without taking into consideration all the complexity of the interactions of family and social life in adolescence. If living in a single-parent family the child is exposed to influences from a much wider context of psycho-social situations, and a retrograde analysis of the family situation preceding the loss of the parent is therefore important (e.g. the cause of the loss and the possibility of the remaining parent to balance out the family situation)<sup>33</sup>. From this aspect it is justifiable to wonder whether the process of adolescence differs in single-parent families from the one in a two-parent family. This is an important question with regard to the dynamic changes happening in Croatia, a country undergoing transition, with 190,000 single parents with 90,000 children under the age of 17 in 2004. An additional handicap lies in the fact that 63 000 of these do not receive alimony (only mothers)<sup>24</sup>.

As stress can have an unfavorable effect on the development in childhood and adolescence, every child that undergoes the experience of divorce or death of a parent should be more protected and psychologically strengthened. But at these times it is the parents themselves who are thrown off balance and it is they who also require professional assistance. With regard to statistical indicators which are warning us of an ever increasing number of divorce cases both in Croatia and in the world, this study is attempting to establish whether this trend has a long-term negative influence on the growth, development and psychological stability of adolescents growing up in a single-parent families.

## Participants and Methods

Testing has been performed on a sample of 152 adolescents included by a random selection in three secondary schools in Zagreb. On the basis of demographic data, the participants were divided into 2 groups: the experimental group of participants living with a single parent (N=24), and the second group of participants living with both parents (N=128).

In the assessment of the psycho-physical status of the adolescents and its comparison in single-parent families we have applied two complimentary approaches: measuring the height, weight and body mass index (BMI) as indicators of the physical development and determining the quality of self-concept as indicator of the psychological development. The instruments used were a height

meter and a balance for the physical development and the OSIQ (Offer Self-concept Questionnaire<sup>11,12,13,14</sup>). The scale of the Psychological Self-concept measures the adolescent's wishes, fantasies, feelings, their control of the impulses, and fluctuation of emotions, and satisfaction with the image of their body. The scale Social Relationship describes the adolescent's satisfaction with the company they keeps, their peers and the codex of behavior within this circle. It also describes the moral self-image of the adolescent as well as all his or her educational and professional goals. The Sexuality scale describes the adolescent's attitude to sex and the presence of sex in their life. The scale Family Functioning describes the adolescent's satisfaction with their family life. The last scale describes the adolescent's adaptation to the requirements of life, how successfully they copes with life and the satisfactions or misdirection's when facing the manifold tasks of life. The difference in the scales has been tested by means of the Mann-Whitney U-test.

## Results

The results which show the physical development of adolescents, measured by means of classical anthropological measures, expressed through height, weight and BMI are shown in Table 1. There are no major statistical differences between the two groups in the physical development which was presented by measurements of height, weight and BMI. Both groups were equally well developed in height, weight and BMI.

The results obtained from the psychological development, measured according to the Offer test, expressed through self-concept were shown in Table 2.

The first scale of the Offer test, the scale of the psychological self-concept includes three sub-scales and does not show any substantial differences in the self-concept between adolescents growing up in single-parent families and the ones growing up in nucleus families.

The subscale Impulse Control which shows the ability to control and respond to emotions coming from external sources of frustration does not indicate any difference between the two groups.

The subscale Emotional Tone which shows the balance in the fluctuation of emotions within oneself during

**TABLE 1**  
THE RESULTS OF THE PHYSICAL DEVELOPMENT OF ADOLESCENTS FROM SINGLE-PARENT AND TWO-PARENT FAMILIES, MEASURED BY MEANS OF CLASSICAL ANTHROPOLOGICAL MEASURES, EXPRESSED THROUGH HEIGHT, WEIGHT AND BMI

Measure	Test Statistics Value	p-Value
Height (Male)	U=244	p=0.9442
Height (Female)	U=473	p=0.9740
Mass M	U=173	p=0.2052
Mass F	U=433	p=0.5791
BMI M	U=156	p=0.1168
BMI F	U=472.5	p=0.9688

**TABLE 2**  
RESULTS OF THE STATISTICAL ANALYSIS OF A POPULATION OF ADOLESCENTS OF VARIOUS PSYCHOLOGICAL SCALES AMONG ADOLESCENTS FROM SINGLE-PARENT AND TWO-PARENT FAMILIES

Scale	Test Statistics Value	p-Value
Impulse Control (PS1)	U=1445	p=0.6475
Emotional Tone (PS2)	U=1486	p=0.8005
Body Image (PS3)	U=1301	p=0.2361
Social Functioning (SS1)	U=1248	p=0.1463
Ethical Values (SS2)	U=1120	p=0.03556
Vocational Attitudes (SS3)	U=1531	p=0.9819
Sexuality (SX)	U=1477	p=0.7675
Family Functioning (FS)	U=1328	p=0.2933
Coping with the outside world (CS1)	U=1532	p=0.9859
Psychopathology (CS2)	U=1439	p=0.624
Optimal Adaptation (CS3)	U=1340	p=0.322

a lifetime does not show any differences either. Both groups were equally satisfied with their body, which is presented in the scale Body Image. However, in the scale Ethical Values, measuring the satisfaction of the adolescent with themselves as a person with ethical values, there are significant differences. Adolescents from single-parent families have a weaker image of themselves as moral beings than the adolescents growing up in nucleus families.

The scale of Social Self-concept, the subscale Social Functioning and the subscale Vocational Attitudes do not show major statistical differences. Both groups were equally satisfied with their social contacts and the relationships within their age group and had equally well aimed educational and professional goals. In the scale Sexuality both groups were equally satisfied with the presence of sexuality in their lives, their attitudes to sexuality as well as their relationship with the other sex. Both groups were equally satisfied with family relationships within their family as shown in the scale Family Functioning.

In the scale Coping Self-concept, in all three subscales, adolescents have shown an equally good self image. In the subscale which measures the ability to cope with the external world and conceive oneself as being able to accomplish a certain task when facing a source of frustration while performing it, both groups have shown equal results. Psycho-pathology was equal in both groups. In the subscale Optimal Adaptation which deals with the ability of the ego to adapt to the requirements of the surroundings and remain satisfied in the process, both groups have shown equal satisfaction. The results show that there are statistically no major differences in the psychological or the corporal development between the adolescents from single-parent and those from nucleus families, except in the scale psychological self-concept i.e. in the subscale of ethical values.

## Discussion

A healthy diet, together with healthy habits in life essentially has influence on the height and weight of an adolescent. Although most single-parent families have lower incomes and thus have less means of providing towards a high quality diet, it has been shown that there are no substantial differences between the height and weight of the adolescents from single-parent families and those from nucleus families. Both groups have shown equal rate of physical growth, of development and of the status of BMI.

The aspect of psychological health which was assessed by means of self-concept (i.e. of a self image) in the Offer questionnaire has shown that adolescents from single-parent families have an equally positive image of themselves as those growing up in nucleus families. The only advantage of nucleus family upbringing was in the social scale of Ethical Values. Children from nucleus families have a better image of themselves concerning ethical norms.

According to the Offer questionnaire Ethical Values is the indicator of the development of the super-ego, and that the super-ego is the ideal perception of what they should be like. The two-parent family is considered as being an ideal environment for a child's upbringing and children in their ideal world want a two-parent family. Partly because of the pressure of the stigma that society imposes on them, and partly because of real drawbacks of life in single-parent families, it is the parents who consider themselves as being inferior after undergoing a divorce. This attitude is naturally unconsciously reflected onto their children and those children feel inferior in the moral sense as compared to their peers from a normal environment. In addition to this, a further hindrance is presented in the form of religious attitudes which do not accept divorce and impose a feeling of guilt and shame, questioning the moral values of those divorced.

It is believed that such a negative attitude considerably alters the Ethical values self-image which confused children living with one parent have of themselves.

In former research authors always emphasized that one-parent families run a high risk of dysfunction<sup>25</sup>. However, recent research shows that nucleus families have their specific problems. Research has shown that

adaptation to divorce is a painful experience for the children, but that the children expressed agreement that a divorce was still less painful than living a life where conflict is the everyday means of communication<sup>26</sup>. Sociologists throughout the world are trying to find the reasons for the instability of contemporary marriage. Marriage was in the past maintained through pressure from the outside, whereas today this is done by means of an inside cohesion, on account of numerous changes in social institutions, in the laws regulating the relationship in marriage and divorce, in economical trends, in the status of women and family in society, in the relationship and roles between the sexes and well as other factors. Sociologists also predicted the extinction of marriage, which was proven to be a mistake as the majority of divorcees remarry, thus confirming the future of the institution of marriage to be a serial monogamy<sup>27,28</sup>. The most important thing in case of divorce is for the parent to have a well developed identity which is not tightly linked to the status of »married« or the status of »former marriage partner«<sup>29</sup>. If there were children issuing from the marriage, it is of the utmost importance that the parents overcome emotional problems and form »business« cooperation in a mutual attempt to raise the children. Parental support is a crucial predictor of self esteem in children<sup>30,31,32</sup>. A large number of research points out that strong emotional ties between young people and their families lead to a high level of self-esteem and a positive self-image regardless the structure of the family<sup>33</sup>. Analyses of Jablonska and Lindberg<sup>34</sup> revealed that adolescents in single-father families were at higher risk for use of alcohol, illicit drugs, drunkenness, and aggressive behaviour than in single/mother families. They concluded that children of single parents should not be treated as a homogenous group when planning prevention and intervention programmes. Therefore, in the process of estimating the psycho-physical health in adolescents, less attention is to be paid to structure than it is to the sphere of relationship within the family<sup>35</sup>.

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## **BIOLOŠKI ASPEKTI RAZVOJA I SAMOPOIMANJE ADOLESCENATA U JEDNORODITELJSKIM OBITELJIMA**

### **S A Ž E T A K**

U ovom radu istraživali smo da li postoje razlike između adolescenata koji rastu u jednoroditeljskim obiteljima i onima iz cjelovitih obitelji. Naši rezultati pokazuju da u fizičkom razvoju nema razlike između adolescenata iz cjelovitih i adolescenata iz jednoroditeljskih obitelji. U psihičkom razvoju izraženom kroz samopoimanje nismo našli veće razlike između dvije skupine osim u samopoimanju morala u adolescenata iz jednoroditeljskih obitelji. Adolescenti koji rastu u jednoroditeljskim obiteljima imaju slabiju sliku o sebi u moralnom smislu. Iz toga možemo zaključiti da fizički razvoj i pozitivno samopoimanje (pozitivna slika o sebi) te zdravi psihički razvoj ne zavisi toliko o bračnom statusu roditelja već o nizu kompleksnih osobina roditelja i njihovom odnosu prema djetetu bili oni u braku ili ne. Za dječji razvoj najbolji je zdravi roditeljski brak.