

[Review of GROWING UP WITH A SINGLE PARENT: WHAT HURTS, WHAT HELPS, by Sara McLanahan and Gary Sandefur](#)

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Review:

McLanahan, Sara, and Sandefur, Gary. (1994). *Growing Up With a Single Parent: What Hurts, What Helps*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 196 pp. Hardcover ISBN 0-674-36407-4, price \$19.95.

Integrating their insights from more than a decade of research on single-parent families, McLanahan and Sandefur rekindle the debate concerning the consequences for children growing up in households where only one biological parent is present. Their news is not good. Based on extensive analyses of four national data sets, the authors conclude that the disadvantages for children living with single parents are substantial, they occur across several important life domains, and they persist long into adulthood. The authors find that regardless of parents' race or educational background, children spending some part of their childhood in a single-parent household earn lower grades in school and are less likely to graduate from high school, less likely to attend or graduate from college, and more likely to be unemployed during late adolescence and early adulthood. Young women from single-parent households are more likely to bear children outside of marriage.

This research is made more significant by the fact that most studies have examined children's short-term adjustment to divorce and other single-parent arrangements, and very few have examined long-term effects. Attempting to establish linkages between childhood family structure and later success, the authors systematically explore the potential mediating influence of parenting practices, socioeconomic differences, and community involvement across family types. They document that, according to high school sophomores, divorced parents provide less supervision and less help with homework than married parents and that children from single-parent households are more likely than other children to be poor, to live in poor neighborhoods, to attend poorly funded schools with high dropout rates, and to have peers who do not value education. Importantly, when predivorce and post-divorce income are controlled in analyses of high school dropout risk and other outcomes, the differences between adolescents who experience parental divorce and those who do not diminish to 3 to 4 percentage points.

Readers should be aware that the authors value the "standard package" the heterosexual, conjugal, nuclear, domestic unit headed by a male breadwinner and female caretaker. Most of these families are assumed to be happy and functional and when adverse circumstances arise, they should stay together because "the child would probably be better off" (p. 31). The authors argue that in single-mother families, "parental affection and warmth is . . . likely to be below average, since the mother must fill two roles instead of one and is likely to be under considerable stress" (p. 28). The title of chapter 2, "How father absence lowers children's well-being," seems to beg the question. Is it really father absence? Isn't the problem that more children need two parents (regardless of the parents' gender or sexual orientation), that more children need two involved and supportive parents

(regardless of whether two or more of the parents reside with the child), and that more children need economic security (regardless of whether that income derives from one, two, or more parents' salaries)?

The authors' ideology and deficit-comparison approach are evident in key data analysis decisions and interpretations. For example, in many analyses comparing "disrupted" families with "intact" families, McLanahan and Sandefur group together in the same classification children whose parents never married, those who experienced the death of a parent, those whose parents separated or divorced, and those who live in step families. In interpreting their findings, it is also critical to understand that the comparisons involve children who at age 16 lived with one of their biological parents (even if they lived with both biological parents for as many as 15 years) and children who lived continuously with their two biological parents. Although the authors conclude that growing up with only one parent damages children's changes in high school and beyond, many- and probably most-of these children grew up with two parents for long periods of time, some for most of their childhood. Thus, we do not know how disadvantaged these children were by family dynamics such as marital conflict, parent-child conflict, wife abuse, child abuse, and alcoholism prior to parental death, separation, or divorce.

Organizationally, the book is an exemplar of clear presentation of sophisticated analyses, simplifying statistics with easy-to-read figures and tables, and ample technical information and elaboration in appendixes. The concluding chapter discusses well thought out and sorely needed policy recommendations. Regardless of one's views on the many issues it addresses, *Growing Up With a Single Parent* is essential reading for scholars, practitioners, and students interested in divorce, single-parent families, the antecedents of early adult adjustment problems, and family policy.

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