

## Impact of Changing Family Structures on Children's Lives

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### Introduction

Past and recent research provided evidence that children growing up in 'non-traditional' families (i.e., single-parent, divorce and step-families) are more likely to experience behavioral, social, emotional and academic problems than children growing up in families where the two-biological parents are present (e.g., Acock et al. & Demo, 1994; Bronstein et al., 1993). Earlier findings have also associated living in such non-traditional family arrangements with children's delinquency, alcohol and substance abuse, lower self-esteem, psychiatric problems, and earlier initiation of sexual intercourse (e.g., Allison et al. & Furstenberg, 1989; Brook et al., Whiteman, & Gordon, 1985; Dornbusch et al., 1985; Harper et al. & Ryder, 1986; Newcomer et al. & Udry, 1987). These findings forewarn parents, educators, family practitioners and researchers about the detrimental impact of divorce and remarriage for children's adjustment and well-being. The growing trend toward diversity in family structures in Malaysia led the present study to compare the impact of living in diverse family structures (intact family, step family, divorce and widow) on selected aspects of children's lives (specifically the children's behavioral adjustments which include academic achievement, antisocial behavior and self-concept). The study recognized the importance of the family process variables within all the family types that could affect children's adjustment and well-being, thus the differences in family dynamics (family value, parenting behavior and family competency) among the different family structures and its relationships with children's behavioral adjustment were also examined.

Past findings and three theoretical perspectives influenced the analytical framework for the study. The traditional perspective emphasizes on family composition and posits that the two parental (specifically biological parents) role models are fundamental to normal and optimal development of children. The second perspective is the economic deprivation model, which suggests that because of higher family income children in two-parent households experience higher levels of well-being than children in single-parent or divorce families. The third approach is Bronfenbrenner's "Ecology of Human Development Model", which proposed the importance of looking beyond the "social address" (such as the dynamics of relationships within the family) in order to understand children's well-being (see Acock et al. & Demo, 1994 for further review).

### Materials and Methods

The child behavioral adjustment was measured using three variables: academic achievement, antisocial behavior and self-concept. Academic achievement for the elementary and secondary school children academic performance was measured using their final examination percentage scores. Mothers were asked to rate their elementary school children level of antisocial behavior using a scale that was adapted from Achenbach's et al. (1991) Syndrome and Total Problem Scale. The same 32 items Likert-scale was administered individually by the secondary school children. Cronbach alpha was calculated to be at .87 for the elementary school children, and 0.89 for the secondary school children. The elementary school children self-concept was assessed using 10 items from the "About Me Scale" (Parker et al., 1966). The reliability coefficient for this measure was 0.57. Secondary school

children perception of self was measured using the 10 items Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, which has an alpha coefficient of 0.7.

Three family dynamic variables were measured: family value, parenting behavior and family competency. Family value was assessed using 8 items from the Family Environment Scale (Moos et al., 1974). This measure yields a Cronbach alpha of 0.88. Parenting behavior was assessed using a scale that was developed by the researchers. Secondary school children were also asked to response to the same 31 items scale. The scale had higher Cronbach alpha for the secondary school children (0.9) than for the mothers (0.87). Family competency was measured using 15 items selected from Bloom's et al. (1985) Family Functioning Scale. Reliability coefficient for the scale was 0.84.

### Results and Discussion

The study was conducted in rural and urban areas in four selected states in Peninsular Malaysia (Selangor, Johor, Terengganu and Penang). Sample comprises 860 mother-secondary school child dyad and 519 mother-elementary school child dyad from different family structures (intact family,  $n = 419$ ; step family,  $n = 212$ ; single-parent divorce family,  $n = 358$ ; single-parent widowed family,  $n = 390$ ). The mothers were identified via their children who were schooling either in Standard 3 (9 year-old), Form 2 (14 year-old) or Form 4 (16 year-old) in the selected areas.

Overall the mothers involved are still in their productive years of age ( $x = 41$ ,  $sd = 7.1$ ). However, they achieved only a moderate level of education ( $x = 7.5$ ,  $sd = 3.8$ ), and earned low personal ( $x = RM568.9$ ,  $sd = 552.5$ ) and family monthly income ( $x = RM890.8$ ,

sd = 1287.2). As expected the marital duration of mothers from the intact families ( $x = 18$  years) is higher than other family types (step family,  $x = 7.5$  years; divorced & widowed families marital duration in first marriage,  $x = 6.6$  years). The absence of husbands/fathers in the widowed and divorced families has passed beyond the vulnerable stressful period (Kalter et al., 1990; Ahrons et al., 1987), the mean was 6 and 7 years, respectively. The mean number of children is 4.9 (sd = 2.6) except for the step-families which is much smaller ( $x = 0.8$ , sd = 1.7). Almost half (47.2%) of the selected elementary school children and the secondary school children ( $x = 41.0\%$ ) are males.

Univariate analyses of variance (ANOVA) were conducted to examine differences in the variables of interest for the children across the four family structures. The groups differed on some of the variables included for analyses. Scheffe post hoc tests showed that elementary school children who lived with their biological parents out-performed their counterparts in academics and self-concept. They also showed lower-levels of involvement in antisocial activities. The findings vary however between children from rural and urban areas. Although univariate analyses indicated differences in the academic achievement between the secondary school children from different families, the Scheffe post hoc comparison did not approach significance ( $p \leq .05$ ). However, Scheffe post hoc tests showed that the rural secondary school children from intact family performed better in school than their peers in the non-traditional families.

Out of the three family dynamics variables analyzed, the families only differ in terms of level of competencies. Scheffe post hoc tests however indicate that widowed families level of competencies is highest and significantly different from intact families. This finding may not be surprising given that the mothers in the study have headed their families for more than 5 years and thus, may have developed strategies or defense mechanisms that help them to cope with life stresses. Partial correlation analyses showed that family dynamics are related to both rural and urban elementary and secondary school children behavioral ad-

justments. Both elementary and secondary school children whose parents scored higher on the parenting behavior scale performed better academically and socially than children from other families. Similar findings were found for rural and urban sample. Positive parenting behavior appeared to contribute to higher self-concept for secondary school children from both rural and urban areas. Elementary school children whose families uphold and promote higher values tend to be less involved in antisocial behavior. Secondary school children from similar families also seemed to exhibit better behavioral adjustments. The findings also tend to indicate that secondary school children from competent families perceived themselves positively and have good social behavior.

Consistent with past theory and research, findings from the present study suggest that family structure has impact on children's life. All comparisons between the families on measures of the children's behavioral adjustment yielded significant ANOVA models, although some comparisons did not reached statistical significance after the Scheffe post hoc tests were computed. Nonetheless, the study found no difference in family dynamics between the different family types. Partial correlation analyses showed that family dynamics are related to both rural and urban elementary and secondary school children behavioral adjustments.

### Conclusions

Results from the present study may have significant implications for educators and family practitioners. Related policies and programs must consider the needs of both parents and children in different living arrangements. Parents and children may experience different types and levels of stresses as they adjust to living in new family systems.

### Benefits from the study

Not reported.

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### Project Publications in Refereed Journals

None.

### Project Publications in Conference Proceedings

None.

### Graduate Research

None.