

University of Northern Iowa  
**UNI ScholarWorks**

---

Graduate Research Papers

Student Work

---


2003

## Single custodial fathers : effects on families and implications for school counselors

Nicole M. Gebel  
*University of Northern Iowa*

Copyright ©2003 Nicole M. Gebel

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uni.edu/grp>

 Part of the [Counseling Commons](#), and the [Education Commons](#)

*Let us know how access to this document benefits you*

---

### Recommended Citation

Gebel, Nicole M., "Single custodial fathers : effects on families and implications for school counselors" (2003). *Graduate Research Papers*. 730.  
<https://scholarworks.uni.edu/grp/730>

This Open Access Graduate Research Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Work at UNI ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Research Papers by an authorized administrator of UNI ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@uni.edu](mailto:scholarworks@uni.edu).

---

## Single custodial fathers : effects on families and implications for school counselors

### Abstract

This paper uses current published literature to determine characteristics of single father headed households in comparison to the characteristics of single mother headed households, as well as the effects of being raised by a single custodial father. The general characteristics of single father headed households that are examined include: family resources, role strain, parenting style, and support from others. Behavior, academic performance, and relationships and social development of children of single custodial fathers are briefly examined to explore the effects of being raised by a single custodial father. Implications for school counselors working with single custodial fathers and their children are also included.

Running head: SINGLE CUSTODIAL FATHERS

**Single Custodial Fathers: Effects on Families and  
Implications for School Counselors**

---

**A Research Paper**

**Presented to**

**The Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling,  
and Postsecondary Education  
University of Northern Iowa**

---

**In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts in Education**

---

**by Nicole M. Gebel**

**December 2003**

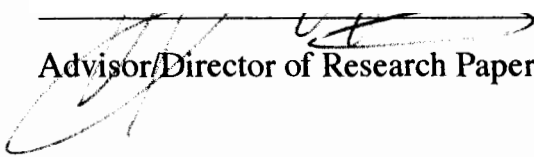
This Research Paper by: Nicole M. Gebel

Entitled: SINGLE CUSTODIAL FATHERS: EFFECTS ON FAMILIES  
AND IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOL COUNSELORS

has been approved as meeting the research paper requirements for the  
Degree of Master of Arts in Education.

10/7/03


Date Approved

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Advisor/Director of Research Paper

10/7/03

Date Approved

Michael D. Waggoner

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Head, Department of Educational Leadership,  
Counseling, and Postsecondary Education

**Abstract**

**This paper uses current published literature to determine characteristics of single father headed households in comparison to the characteristics of single mother headed households, as well as the effects of being raised by a single custodial father. The general characteristics of single father headed households that are examined include: family resources, role strain, parenting style, and support from others. Behavior, academic performance, and relationships and social development of children of single custodial fathers are briefly examined to explore the effects of being raised by a single custodial father. Implications for school counselors working with single custodial fathers and their children are also included.**

## Single Custodial Fathers: Effects on Families and Implications for School Counselors

Anyone who works with children and families, or who pays attention to statistics about children and families, is aware of the fact that there are many households that are headed by a single parent, and many children who live in these households. Exact statistics about the number of households headed by a single parent vary, but it is estimated that single parents are the head of 1 in 5 households (Heath & Orthner, 1999).

Approximately one-half of all children will live with a single parent at some point in their lives; the majority before their sixteenth birthday (Heath & Orthner, 1999; Silverman & Ollendick, 1999; Walsh, 2003). Most of these single-parent households are the result of divorce (Silverman & Ollendick, 1999).

Fathers are granted custody of their children less often than mothers, and the number of households headed by single custodial fathers varies by source. The U.S. Census Bureau information estimated that in 1990, five percent of single parent households were headed by single custodial fathers (Tamis-LeMonda & Cabrera, 2002; McHale & Grolnick, 2002). Parke and Brott (1999), reported that eleven percent of single parent households are headed by men. Maas and Neely (2000), stated that over sixteen percent of single parents are men. Since the 1970s, the number of children in custodial father-headed households has increased three times to a total of 2.8 to 3 million in 1999 (Giannetti & Sagarese, 1999; Kinnear, 1999; Maass & Neely, 2000). In 1997, 61 percent of all single custodial fathers were raising one child and ten percent were raising

three or more (Single and Custodial Fathers Network, 1998). Even though exact numbers vary, it is apparent that the number of children living with their single custodial fathers is increasing.

Even though the number of single custodial fathers continues to rise, the majority of literature and research studies address issues related to single custodial mothers and their children. This is because this group still represents the vast majority of single-parent households (Hilton, Desrochers, & Devall, 2001). The purpose of this paper is to explore characteristics of single-father households, present the conclusions that have been drawn about the effects of being raised by a single custodial father, and the implications for school counselors working with these men and their children. The majority of conclusions are about divorced single parents, unless otherwise noted.

### *Comparing Single-Mother and Single-Father Headed Households*

#### *Family Resources*

Because single parents are most often the primary wage earners in their households, one of the largest stressors for all single parents is related to economic pressure (Heath & Orthner, 1999). With only one income to pay for household and family expenses, both single mothers and fathers may experience greater economic strain than they did prior to the divorce. Financial hardship is a common challenge for all single parents (Walsh, 2003). It should be no surprise, then, that children living in single-parent homes are more likely to live in poverty than children who live in homes with both of their parents (Kinnear, 1999).

Generally speaking, single fathers have more prestigious

occupations and have attained more education than single mothers (Downey, Ainsworth-Darnell & Dufur, 1998). In 1996, 76 percent of children living with their fathers had fathers with high school diplomas and ten percent had fathers with at least a bachelor's degree (Single and Custodial Fathers Network, 1998). Because of their higher levels of education and more prestigious occupations, fathers usually earn more and have more economic resources than single mothers (Hilton, Desrochers, & Devall, 2001; Walsh 2003). Financial factors have a very large impact on children and their well-being (Hernandez & Brandon, 2002).

Single fathers do not experience as large a decrease in household income as women do following a divorce, because of their higher earning status (Hilton & Desrochers, 2000). For example, if one spouse earns \$60,000 a year, and the other \$40,000, the spouse earning the higher salary will experience a 40% decrease in total household income. The spouse earning the lower salary will experience a 60% decrease in total household income. In most families, the spouse contributing the most money to the household income is the male; therefore, men tend to be affected less financially than women following a divorce. This does not mean single fathers do not experience economic hardship; attorney's fees and other expenses related to the divorce have been cited as a common source of stress and may take their toll on any single parent's economic well-being (Frieman, 2002). It is estimated that 22 percent of children living with their fathers are considered "poor" (Single and Custodial Fathers Network, 1998).

Children of single mothers are more economically disadvantaged



compared to children of both married and single-father families (Hilton, Desrochers & Devall, 2001). The income of single-mother families is half the median income of single-father families and approximately one-third of the amount brought home by intact families (Hilton, Desrochers & Devall, 2001). The poverty rate for single-mother families is five times higher than the poverty rate for intact families; the poverty rate for single-father families is twice as high (Hilton, Desrochers & Devall, 2001). Sometimes the loss of a primary earner may have larger effects on a family's well-being than the divorce that caused it (Hilton & Desrochers, 2000).

Because single mothers earn less, they are unable to pay as much for housing, have less access to health insurance for their children and themselves, and are more likely to receive benefits from community services than other parents (Hilton, Desrochers & Devall, 2001). These community services include food stamps, public housing, energy assistance, health insurance assistance, and home visits. In general, single mothers experience economic strain to a greater extent than single fathers, which puts their children at a greater disadvantage than children being raised by their fathers (Heath & Orthner, 1999). For example, high levels of economic strain are related to lower feelings of personal and parental well-being (Heath & Orthner, 1999), which affects parenting skills, resulting in problems in children's functioning (Hilton, Desrochers & Devall, 2001). Children of single custodial fathers have fewer behavior problems than children of single custodial mothers, and this is believed to be associated with the economic advantage that single fathers have over single mothers (Hilton & Desrochers, 2002; McHale & Grolnick, 2002). This has been

supported in other literature, which reported that children who live with their single fathers experience fewer problems because the single father's economic advantage protects them from problems that are associated with economic adversity (Hilton & Desrochers, 2000).

### *Role Strain*

There are many demands on single parents. When an individual becomes a single parent, more responsibilities are placed on that him or her without taking existing responsibilities away (Hilton, Desrochers & Devall, 2001). They must do twice and much with half the resources (Maass & Neely, 2000). Some of the more obvious demands include helping children with schoolwork, visiting schools and teachers, supervising children's activities, spending time with children, and performing housework (Heath & Orthner, 1999; Maass & Neely, 2000). Another demand that single parents must deal with is that of being a good employee. This demand does not originate solely from the employer, but from the need to provide for the family as well. The many roles of single parents, which include head of household, primary care giver, and good employee, can be conflicting and may compete for the time and attention of the single parent. When the parent's ability to adapt to these competing roles is ineffective, there can be adverse consequences at home as well as at the workplace (Heath & Orthner, 1999).

Experiencing economic strain, dealing with work-related issues, and other community problems are the main causes of stress for single parents (Heath & Orthner, 1999). Economic difficulties and little social support can make it difficult for single parents to adapt, which in turn, increases the

amount of stress that the parent and children experience. Single parents and their children must cope with the challenges of becoming more independent, dealing with financial difficulties, and coping with the loss of the other spouse (Walsh, 2003). Both the single parent and their family's ability to adapt to their new family situation and the new roles they must assume coincides with their likeliness to effectively cope with and fulfill the demands placed on the family (Heath & Orthner, 1999). Factors that are related to effective coping skills include having a reliable work environment, enjoying work, having a large support system, and having children with fewer emotional problems and problems at school (Heath & Orthner, 1999).

Conclusions about which gender adapts best to single parenthood are mixed. Single mothers and single fathers have different experiences after becoming a single parent, so their reactions will inevitably be different (Hill & Hilton, 1999). There is limited information available about men's adaptation to becoming a single custodial parent (Maass & Neely, 2000). Heath and Orthner (1999) wrote that single fathers tend to spend more time on work-related tasks, but have also been found to be more flexible in changing their work and family demands in order to adapt to their new role as a single parent. Despite this flexibility, they still tend to have more problems with this adaptation than single mothers.

Other literature (Hilton, Desrochers & Devall, 2001), has stated that there is not a significant gender difference in single parents' adaptation, because men and women are equally unprepared for single parenthood. Therefore, according to this information, there would be no difference

between men and women in their adaptation to single parenting roles. There is evidence, however, that women have more problems adapting to single parenthood than men because they have greater difficulty adapting to the role of primary earner, and they experience a higher level of role strain than single fathers (Hilton, Desrochers & Devall, 2001; Taylor & Wang, 2000). Single mothers are also more likely to become severely depressed as a result of their new roles than single fathers (Hill & Hilton, 1999).

Conflicting conclusions concerning role adaptation among single parents supports the argument that this characteristic, like so many individual characteristics, is unique to each single parent. Some mothers may have an easier time adapting to the role of primary earner, although most struggle with this (Hill & Hilton, 1999). Some fathers, on the other hand, may adapt to the additional role of being primary caretaker and emotional supporter, a role usually reserved for mothers, more easily than other men (Hill & Hilton, 1999).

### *Parenting Style*

Children and adolescents everywhere can describe what kind of a parent their mothers and fathers are. They can also identify which parent they ask for help with their algebra homework and which parent they ask permission to go to a party from. It is not nearly as easy, however, to generalize how all mothers and fathers parent their children.

The component of total parenting behavior that is most negatively affected after divorce is that of parental control, and there is strong evidence that mothers are more affected by this than fathers (Hilton,

Desrochers, & Devall, 2001). Single mothers tend to make fewer demands on their children, are less consistent, and are less likely to effectively discipline their children than parents in intact families (Hilton, Desrochers, & Devall, 2001). Single mothers also tend to use fewer positive parenting practices than married parents and are more critical of their children than married mothers (Hilton & Desrochers, 2000).

Little research has been conducted on the parenting practices of single fathers, but some existing research has asserted that single fathers are more consistent in the discipline practices than single mothers, and their discipline methods tend to be more effective (Downey, Ainsworth-Darnell, & Dufur, 1998; Hilton & Desrochers, 2000). Unlike single mothers, single fathers are less likely to change their disciplinary practices after a divorce, and when a change is made, it typically is a positive one (Hilton & Desrochers, 2000). Despite these characteristics, Downey, Ainsworth-Darnell, and Dufur (1998) stated that single fathers are no more successful than single mothers at controlling their offspring's behavior. More research needs to be conducted on the parenting practices of single fathers in order to make a fair comparison between single parents, however, so this must be taken into consideration when comparing single mothers and single fathers.

Differences in traditional gender roles of parents has also been examined. In general, women tend to take on duties such as dressing, feeding, and taking care of other daily needs of children, while men tend to be the primary breadwinner and are more playful with children (Downey, Ainsworth-Darnell, & Dufur, 1998). It has been concluded that both of

these parenting styles are important for children for different reasons, and that lacking one or the other may be problematic. In single-parent homes, however, both the mothers and fathers have been found to change their parenting style by giving up some of their more traditional behavior (Downey, Ainsworth-Darnell, & Dufur, 1998).

Phares (1999) stated that overall, the most effective parenting style for all parents is an the authoritative parenting style. This involves showing warmth and affection while establishing and encouraging developmentally-appropriate expectations have been explained to the child (Phares, 1999). Because fathers and mothers are both capable of an authoritative parenting style, and because other research has found no difference in the parenting practices of single mothers and single fathers (Hilton & Desrochers, 2000), neither group may be labeled “better” at raising children.

#### *Support From Others*

After a divorce, support systems change as parents’ relationships with friends and family are altered (Hilton, Desrochers, & Devall, 2001). The former spouse is no longer available or as willing to support the ex-spouse, and single mothers and fathers must find other individuals who will take on this role. Single fathers tend to rely on extended family members, professionals, and community resources more than single mothers, and receive less assistance from friends than single mothers (Hilton, Desrochers, & Devall, 2001). When single fathers do receive support from friends, it most frequently comes from single mothers or other single women. Hilton, Desrochers, and Devall (2001) and Walsh (2003), also reported that single

fathers' support systems are not as extensive as those of single mothers. Braver and O'Connell (1998) also stated that support networks for single mothers are more extensive, because women in general, are better at building and maintaining these networks. Emotional and social support for single mothers, however, is lacking as well (Taylor & Wang, 2000).

Results about support systems and their effects on parenting are conflicting. Hilton, Desrochers, and Devall (2001) reported that some researchers determined that lower levels of social support was linked to harsh parenting in single-mother families, but other researchers found no such link. Hilton and Desrochers (2002) found that for all single parents too many demands and too few resources, or too little support, leads to poorer parenting and decreased parental control. No other studies have examined the effects of single custodial fathers' support systems and their influence on their parenting.

#### *Effects of Being Raised by a Single Custodial Father*

There is limited data available about the effects of being raised by a single custodial father. The research that is available presented varied, and sometimes conflicting, arguments about the effects of being raised by a single father versus a single mother. Reliability of studies are also affected because of confounding factors beyond the researcher's control. General results, however, are reported here on the components of children's behavior, academic achievement, and relationships and social development.

*Behavior*

Children who have experienced their parents' divorce may experience a variety of behavior problems. These problems can include internalizing problems, such as withdrawal, anxiety, depression, and inhibition; as well as externalizing problems such as aggression, violence, and other behaviors that indicate a lack of control (Hilton, Desrochers, and Devall, 2001). Hilton, Desrochers, and Devall (2001) stated that studies comparing behavior problems in single-parent homes concluded that children of single custodial fathers have fewer behavior problems than children living with single custodial mothers. However, Downey, Ainsworth-Darnell, and Dufur (1998) found that children of single custodial fathers are not as well-behaved as children of single custodial mothers, and their teachers reported that children of single custodial fathers are not as good at getting along with others as children of single custodial mothers.

*Academic Performance*

Hilton, Desrochers, and Devall, (2001) stated that even though divorce increases the risk of children having poor grades, dropping out of school, and being suspended and/or expelled from school, studies comparing academic differences between children of single-parent and intact families show little difference between the two groups. Downey, Ainsworth-Darnell, and Dufur (1998) also found little difference in quantitative and verbal skills are of children being raised by single mothers and single fathers.

The long-term effects of being raised by a single parent on



educational attainment, however, are different for the two groups of children. According to Downey, Ainsworth-Darnell, and Dufur (1998), individuals raised by single fathers attain one-half year less education than individuals raised by single mothers. They also reported that individuals raised by single fathers earn less money than those raised by single mothers.

#### *Relationships and Social Development*

Downey, Ainsworth-Darnell, and Dufur (1998) wrote that if it is true that mothers develop closer relationships to their children than men, children of single custodial mothers may develop better relationship skills than children of single custodial fathers. They also stated that single custodial fathers and their children tend to be less expressive and communicate less than single custodial mothers and their children, which would negatively affect relationship-building skills in children of single custodial fathers. Another study reported that adolescents living with their single mothers were more adjusted than adolescents living with their single fathers (Parke & Brott, 1999). These conclusions have been drawn from studies with small samples and are not generalizable to the entire population, however, so further research is necessary to make a more accurate statement concerning the effects of single-parent's gender on children's relationships and social development.

#### *Implications for School Counselors*

School counselors will inevitably have opportunities for working with children of single fathers, and may find themselves consulting, referring, and supporting the single custodial fathers of their students.

Support for single custodial fathers is extremely important, but unfortunately, is not ample (Braver & O'Connell, 1998). Fathers experience all of the emotions that anyone else going through a divorce might experience, but often are not treated with the same empathy (Frieman, 2002). Single custodial fathers may be served by school counselors through consultation, referral to outside agencies, support groups, family counseling, parent education programs, and so on. Flexibility in scheduling these meetings is extremely important, as single fathers will need to consider schedules at work and at home. However, educating single parents about child development and relationships is not enough to help them and their children; another adult who is consistently present and accessible to the child and to help the parent is necessary (Hilton & Desrochers, 2002).

Support groups are especially helpful for single custodial fathers for several reasons. For example, fathers often feel isolated in their parenting role, as well as overwhelmed by the responsibility of raising children on their own (Phares, 1999). Single fathers also lack role models to look up to, and support groups provide excellent opportunities for networking with other single custodial fathers (Walsh, 2003). Another important characteristic of support groups is that they help single fathers make a healthy transition from a married parent to a single custodial parent (Frieman, 2002).

Even though most single fathers are like all other parents in that they want what is ultimately best for their children, there are common, unique concerns that most single custodial fathers have. It is important for

school counselors to understand these concerns in order to best serve single custodial fathers and their children. Common concerns of all divorced fathers include: their skills as a parent, meeting the needs of their children, dealing with their children's anger, court processes and expenses, dealing with the child's mother, and starting new relationships (Frieman, 2002; Phares, 1999). Single custodial fathers may also need assistance finding a balance between parenting and their personal lives (Phares, 1999).

As leaders in the school and community, school counselors also play an important role in helping others change their perceptions of single custodial fathers. Because the number of single fathers being granted custody of their children is rising, we will need to change our traditional ways of thinking and behaving (Hawkins & Dollahite, 1997). As long as caring and nurturing are considered "feminine" characteristics, men's traditional masculine socialization will be in conflict with their role as a single father (Dowd, 2000). This traditional, and stereotypical, way of thinking may be harmful to the well-being of single custodial fathers, causing increased role strain. For example, employers are not always supportive of a man's role as a single father, and the possible conflicting roles of being a good employee and being available for his children adds stress to the life of the single father (Hawkins & Dollahite, 1997).

### Conclusions

As previously stated, more valid and generalizable research needs to be conducted in order to make accurate statements about the effects of being raised by a single father. The research that is available, however,

stated that there are few differences between adults raised by single mothers and single fathers, as well as between children who are currently being raised by single mothers and single fathers (Downey, Ainsworth-Darnell, & Dufur, 1998). Neither gender is the “better” parent: fathers and mothers are equally capable of caring for their children of any age, and therefore, custody of children should be based on the needs of the children, not on a parent’s gender (Golombok, 2000, McHale & Grolnick, 2002, Parke & Brott, 1999).

It is important for school counselors to provide support and be able to refer single custodial fathers to appropriate organizations in their area. It is also important to help single custodial fathers find social support (Hawkins & Dollahite, 1997). There is limited support available for single custodial fathers, yet they have many concerns and questions concerning their roles as single fathers (Golombok, 2000). As the number of children living with their fathers continues to rise, the responsibilities of the school counselor and other professionals working with single fathers and their children increase as well.

## References

- Braver, S. L., & O'Connell, D. (1998). *Divorced dads: Shattering the myths*. New York: Penguin Putnam, Incorporated.
- Dowd, N. E. (2000). *Redefining fatherhood*. New York: New York University Press.
- Downey, D. B., Ainsworth-Darnell, J. W., & Dufur, M. J. (1998). Sex of parent and children's well-being in single-parent households. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 60, 878-893.
- Frieman, B. B. (2002). Challenges faced by fathers in a divorce support group. *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage*, 37, 163-173.
- Giannetti, C. G., & Sagarese, M. (1999). *Parenting 911: How to safeguard and rescue your 10 to 15 year-old from substance abuse, depression, sexual encounters, violence, failure in school, danger on the internet, and other risky situations*.
- Golombok, S. (2000). *Parenting: What really counts?* Philadelphia: Routledge.
- Hawkins, A. J., & Dollahite, D. C. (Eds.). (1997). *Generative fathering: Beyond deficit perspectives*. London: Sage Publications.
- Heath, D. T., & Orthner, D. K. (1999). Stress and adaptation among male and female single parents. *Journal of Family Issues*, 20, 557-587.
- Hill, L. C., & Hilton, J. M. (1999). Changes in roles following divorce: Comparison of factors contributing to depression in custodial single mothers and custodial single fathers. *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage*, 31, 91-114.
- Hilton, J. M., & Desrochers, S. (2000). The influence of economic strain,

copied with roles, and parental control on the parenting of custodial single mothers and custodial single fathers. *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage*, 33, 55-76.

Hilton, J. M., & Desrochers, S. (2002). Children's behavior problems in single-parent and married-parent families: Development of a predictive model. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, 37, 13-36.

Hilton, J. M., Desrochers, S., & Devall, E. L. (2000). Comparison of role demands, relationships, and child functioning in single-mother, single-father, and intact families. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, 35, 29-56.

Kinnear, K. L. (1999). *Single Parents: A reference handbook*. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, Incorporated.

Maas, V. S., & Neely, M. A. (2000). *Counseling single parents: A cognitive-behavioral approach*. New York: Springer Publishing Company.

McHale, J. P., & Grolnick, W. S. (Eds.). (2002). *Retrospect and prospect in the psychological study of families*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Parke, R. D., & Brott, A. A. (1999). *Throwaway dads: The myths and barriers that keep men from being the fathers they want to be*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.

Phares, V. (1999). *"Poppa" psychology: The role of fathers in children's mental well-being*. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers.

Silverman, W. K., & Ollendick, T. H. (Eds.). (1999). *Developmental issues in the clinical treatment of children*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Single and Custodial Fathers Network. (June 15, 1998). Single dad facts.

Retrieved September 8, 2003, from

[http://www.scfn.org.single\\_dad\\_facts.htm](http://www.scfn.org.single_dad_facts.htm)

Tamis-LeMonda, C. S., & Cabrera, N. (Eds.). (2002). *Handbook of father involvement: Multidisciplinary perspectives*. Mahwah, NJ:

Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Taylor, R. D., & Wang, M. C. (Eds.). (2000). *Resilience across contexts:*

*Family, work, culture, and community*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence

Erlbaum Associates.

Walsh, F. (Ed.). (2003). *Normal family processes: Growing diversity and complexity* (3rd ed.). New York: The Guilford Press.