

Nixon E., Greene S., & Hogan D. M. (2012). Negotiating relationships in single-mother households: Perspectives of children and mothers. *Family Relations*, 61(1), 142–156. doi:10.1111/j.1741-3729.2011.00678.x

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Summary

Literature Review: This article focuses on the relationship between children and their single-mothers. Furthermore, researchers explore how children and single-mothers work to negotiate and establish shared meaning within a stable single parent household. The type of relationship mentioned in this article revolves mainly around relationships between children and their single-mother after a divorce where the mother proceeds to parent alone early on in the child's life. This type of child-parent relationship within the family category is extremely important to investigate because there are a total of 15.31 million children living with a single-mother as found in a 2020 statistics, which means that approximately 5% of children in America live in single-mother households. Evidently, it is crucial to conduct research regarding single-mother households in order to gain a better understanding of the relationship dynamics within these single parent households. For this study, researchers utilized the bilateral model of parent-child relations as the main framework. The bilateral model of parent-child relations states that child-parent relationships are interdependent and bidirectional as relationships develop through interactions and negotiations between both the parent and child. In other words, researchers looked at the specific communication processes, in particular, negotiation to understand how children and parents constructed shared meaning that has allowed them to understand their unique relationship. Shared meaning can be created when people within a relationship, in this case single-mother and children, have reached the same understanding through a strategic process that includes negotiation (Nixon et al., 2012).

The overall purpose of this qualitative study was to discover what the relationship between single-mothers and their children is as well as how active negotiation plays a role in interpersonal communication to achieve shared meaning within a single-mother household. Researchers felt compelled to address these questions because past research has overwhelmingly highlighted the perceived disadvantages of growing up in single parent households while providing limited insight into the communication processes such as negotiation that take place between single parents and their children. With this in mind, researchers justified posing these research questions, as they believe that it is important to shed light on the relational dynamic and process of negotiation to create shared meaning in single-mother households, which many researchers have failed to explore in an in-depth manner (Nixon et al., 2012).

Methods: In this study, researchers utilize a qualitative methodology to collect data. Evidently, this study provides a focused, intentional sample of single-mothers who have been parenting alone for a significant period along with their children or adolescents, ages eight to seventeen. This study only included single-mothers who had not transitioned from divorce or re-partnered. Furthermore, the father had to be out of the household and child's life by the time he/she reached two-and-a-half years old. The participants in this study included a total of 35 families that comprised 35 single mothers in addition to 38 children and adolescents. From these families, 19 families included a single mother and only child while the remaining 16 families each incorporated a single-mother, child, and siblings. From the aforementioned sample,

researchers conducted individual, semi-structured interviews with each mother, child, and adolescent in the study. Interviews with children and adolescents took place at their homes and lasted roughly 45-90 minutes. Most interviews with single-mothers lasted 60-120 minutes and took place at home, besides a few who agreed-upon locations outside the home. Throughout the interviews, researchers focused on communication topics, interactive events, conflicts, and conflict resolution to guide discussion. That being said, researchers still provided single-mothers, children, and adolescents adequate time to share their own experiences and perceptions of what it is like to be a part of a single parent household. Following data collection, researchers worked to compile all the transcripts and translate them. Additionally, researchers engaged in an open coding process to create a careful thematic analysis of the data. Multiple researchers, including those separate from the study, assisted with analysis to further refine and delineate themes. This process led researchers to identify three emerging themes from participants' words and ideas to draw on the important findings (Nixon et al., 2012).

Discussion: The findings of this study reveal that relationships between single-mothers and children include negotiations and accommodations within three main themes: interdependence, responsibility over care, and establishment of roles/boundaries. Researchers have found interdependence to be a defining characteristic in single-mother households as children and single-mothers often become extremely close to each other by doing a lot of activities together in the absence of another parental figure. This has been perceived as both positive and negative, which children and adolescents, in particular, had disclosed in their interviews. A positive effect that has been revealed mainly among children includes a greater sense of closeness to their single-mother while many adolescents have perceived this relationship as too draining and intense because of the overexposure to one parent within the relationship. Furthermore, the single-mother and child relationship has highlighted a newfound sense of responsibility over care for each other. Children and adolescents often explain how they feel obligated to lower the demands they place on their mothers due to the fact that she is parenting alone. Oftentimes, children and adolescents have sought out help outside the house for issues or problems that they have in order to lower the demands placed on their mother. By lowering these demands, children and adolescents have been shown to take a sense of ownership and responsibility over their mothers' emotional needs through this heightened awareness. In some cases, particularly those of adolescents, both children and adolescents have appeared to take on more of an adult role within the relationship and acted as an adult when conversing with their single-mother. On the other hand, single-mothers have also shown an extra sense of responsibility over care for their children knowing that they are the only parent. Additionally, single mothers have demonstrated a sense of responsibility to protect their children from not having to grow up too fast because they live in a single parent household (Nixon et al., 2012).

Lastly, single mothers and children have been found to establish their own understanding of roles/boundaries within their relationship. Single-mothers have asserted their authority roles within the household, as they are the sole parent responsible for disciplining their children. However, single-mothers have also recognized the need for leniency when it comes to discipline given the more unique circumstances of the relationship; therefore, they have proved to be willing to negotiate and accommodate children's needs as well. In response, children and adolescents have acknowledged their mothers' authority and established a sense of dependency on her. That being said, this highlights a clear horizontal/vertical continuum in which mothers and children interact with each other (Nixon et al., 2012).

Researchers have stressed the importance of utilizing the aforementioned implications found within the study to recognize the presence of negative signs and work to maintain a balanced, healthy relationship between single-mothers and their children. With these results, practitioners and therapists can also work to help prevent the perceived negative effects, such as adultification, that sometimes occur within single parent households. Overall, researchers hope to bring attention to and find ways to support single-mothers in their parenting roles (Nixon et al., 2012).

Evaluation

We chose this article because we found the study really interesting due to its uniqueness. There are not many articles that discuss single parent relationships; most of the time they discuss divorce and how it affects the child, but usually they do not have a heavy focus on how parenting plays out in a relationship between a single-mother and child. We also discovered some compelling findings on negotiation dynamics between the single-mother and child, and how many of the participants stated that this dynamic applied to them (Nixon et al., 2012).

The researchers of this study clearly articulated their ideas and thoroughly explained every step of the research process. In fact, the method section of this study provided a well laid out process by breaking down each step and elaborating on the interview parameters for the research. Furthermore, we could fully understand the discussion section of this study, as the researchers broke down the results and shared the three main themes: interdependence, responsibility over care, and establishment of roles/boundaries. Because researchers articulated the results using a thematic approach, we feel that these results can be easily applied to relationships and communication within other single-mother households outside the study. This study investigating the relationship between single-mothers and their children has prompted us to consider whether the results would be similar in a single-father household. Although this study solely focuses on single-mother households, it does, in fact, draw important conclusions about the relational dynamic between single-mothers and their children (Nixon et al., 2012).