

Single Parents

Services for single parents constitute a category of child and family services. These services are carried out by public and non-governmental bodies for people who are single parents by unfortunate events or by their own choice. Individuals come to single parenthood mainly through divorce, separation, birth outside of marriage, child abuse or neglect, death of a partner or widowhood, and adoption. At the end of the 20th century in developed countries, the single-parent family continued to emerge. According to the 2013 World Family Map report, the highest levels of single parenthood are noticed in countries of South America and sub-Saharan Africa (from 16 percent in Bolivia to 43 percent in South Africa). North America, Oceania, and Europe average about one-fifth of children living in single-parent households. The highest levels were noticed in the United States (27 percent), the United Kingdom (24 percent), and New Zealand (24 percent). Lower rates were in Europe (average 15 percent), Asia (9.8 percent), and the Middle East (8.5 percent). Most of the single parents are women. Adults in the Americas, Europe, and Oceania lean more toward acceptance of voluntary single motherhood than in other regions. Therefore, these services are often limited as services to pregnant single women who decide to carry the baby to full term and then keep the child.

Reasons for Distinguishing Services for Single Parents

Single parents with children need additional social, professional, educational, and legal support. The single parent is usually also the primary caregiver and breadwinner, meaning the parent with whom the children have residency the majority of the time and parent on whose income the household budget is based. The single parent must play both mother and father roles—not only providing love and nurturance but also interpreting society for the children and being a figure of authority and discipline. This situation creates considerable stress, responsibility, tasks, and emotional overload. Single-parent, mostly mother-only, families have a greater likelihood of children living in poverty. Usually, post-divorce or separation, a mother's earnings are significantly lower than that of a divorced man. Single parents are likely to have problems associated with combining work with child-rearing. Their job mobility, earning power, freedom to work late, and job performance are negatively affected.

Children in a single-parent family might come from abusive or neglectful homes or live in very poor and dangerous communities. Such children also have above-average levels of youth suicide, mental illness, violence, drug abuse, poor school performance, lower levels of education, and higher dropout rates. They are also more likely to have health-related problems as a result of the decline in their living standards, including the lack of health insurance. As

children from single-parent families become adults, they are more likely to marry early, have children early, and divorce. Girls from single-parent families are at greater risk of becoming single mothers as a result of nonmarital childbearing or divorce.

General interventions of social policy programs may include child allowances, an education benefit, national health services, access to public housing, promoting family benefits, child care provision, preventing teen pregnancy, increasing access to education, supporting entry into the labor market for low-income women, and identifying mothers early on in the process of marital disruption.

Types of Services for Single Parents

Single-parent families rely on support from immediate family members, which is the most important resiliency factor in helping them to face life challenges. Sometimes, support comes from friends, a style of positively approaching problems, and religious or spiritual support.

Social services of public agencies and nongovernmental organizations depending on the purpose of assistance may be directed to pregnant single women, those who already are single parents, and children from single-parent families.

Services aimed at pregnant single women include the following:

- Alternatives counseling for pregnant single women that aims to help in making decisions about carrying the baby to full term, having an abortion, keeping the child, terminating parental rights, deciding on a foster placement, and undergoing adoption counseling.
- Physical and mental childbirth preparation, including information about the effects of drug and alcohol abuse on the embryo, information on the effects of venereal diseases, and pre- and postnatal counseling.
- Legal counseling, including procedures for termination of parental rights, legitimation and adoption procedures, rights to attend school, and procedures of receiving public assistance.
- Interpersonal relationships counseling focused on the pregnant single women and relationships with the alleged father, parents, and other relatives.
- Information and management of alternative living arrangements like a maternity home, home of parents or other relatives, and foster homes.

Services to those who are already single parents include the following:

- Programs for teenage mothers involving them to continue education (e.g., through home study programs) and to instruct them about parenting, sexuality, social services for which they

may be eligible, financial and money management, as well as employment opportunities.

- Family planning counseling, including information on birth control and referral to a family planning clinic.
- Alleged-father counseling, including informing him about his rights and responsibilities, providing birth control counseling, and premarital counseling.
- Foster care and adoption—children can live in homes with families other than their birth parents until they are returned to birth parents or adopted. Foster parents should be trained and related to children and their birth parents. Foster care is sometimes used when a single parent relinquishes his or her parental rights or is unsure about whether to give up parental rights. The goal is to protect the children, rehabilitate parents, and return children to their genetic parents as soon as it is feasible.
- Psychotherapeutic interventions including help by community agencies, like guidance centers, including individual or family therapy with a social worker, psychologist, or psychiatrist. Such entities sometimes maintain reference libraries of books and movies on death and divorce for clients.
- Parent-assistance programs aimed at help for the experienced or overburdened parent with dealing with some practical problems of child and home care.
- Family crisis intervention, including services aimed at assisting during intense domestic disputes that require police intervention.
- Support groups and self-help groups like Parents Without Partners, which help individuals realize that they are not the only ones coping with a given problem. They assist members in developing new ways to cope as they learn from each other.
- Child-care programs targeted at working and nonworking parents, families with children who have severe developmental disabilities in which adults care for children during evenings or weekends so parents can have time to themselves. This includes crisis nurseries or shelters, where parents under severe stress or in a serious emergency can leave their children for a limited time.
- Homemaker services to families that are at risk or have neglected or abused their children. Homemakers offer practical suggestions and education about housekeeping, child care, nutrition and cooking, health and safety, shopping, budgeting, and access to community resources. Sometimes, they serve as surrogate parents, developing positive, trusting relationships with family members who have been isolated.
- Volunteer and outreach programs who spend time with families, prevent family disruption, assist in problem-solving and gaining access to community resources, or serve as a surrogate

parent or friend to parents and family members.

- Child protective services; for example, ensuring that children can be safe in their own homes; arranging for community resources; parent education and support; helping with involvement in a parent support group; and developing a contract with a parent on goals the family must accomplish to be removed from a child's protective services caseload.
- Family preservation services with an emphasis on keeping together families that would have been separated in the past. Services include maintaining and strengthening family bonds, stabilizing a crisis situation that precipitated any need for outside placement, and increasing family's coping skills, competencies, and use of appropriate and informal helping resources.

Among the services-oriented on children in single-parent families are the following;

- School-established support groups for students coping with family problems such as divorce or abuse.
- Peer counseling in the form of rap groups in schools. Groups sponsored by the school or a local counseling agency help children to express feelings about home life and reduce the sense of isolation. Children in the group realize that others have similar feelings in similar situations.
- Daytime care programs for young children. The aim is to foster optimal intellectual development and to help overcome some of the emotional effects of early deprivation.
- Big Brothers and Big Sisters programs aiming to fill the gap in a child's life who was left by a departed parent.
- Social and recreational programs for children at different ages offered by community centers.
- Respite care for adolescents who need time away from their parents. Emergency shelter facilities for teens that provide crisis and family counseling to help stabilize the situation so teens can return home.

Services for single parents may be coordinated through resource centers where families can receive thorough assessments, so they can be referred to appropriate agencies and databases that contain information about the services available to single parents run by social groups and networks. Services should be adapted to the cultural diversity of the single-parent family.

Andrzej Klimczuk

Warsaw School of Economics

A. Klimczuk, *Single Parents*, [in:] L.H. Cousins (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Human Services and Diversity*, SAGE Publications, Los Angeles 2014, pp. 1191–1194. <http://doi.org/10.4135/9781483346663.n509>

See Also: Adoption Agencies and Services; Divorce; Family Services; Family Structure, Diversity of; Parenting Skills Training; Parenting Styles, Cultural Differences in; Poverty; Pregnancy and Parenting Services; Profile of Parenting Study.

Further Readings

Ambrosino, Rosalie, Robert Ambrosino, Joseph Heffernan, and Guy Shuttlesworth. *Social Work and Social Welfare: An Introduction*. Belmont, CA: Thomson Brooks/Cole, 2008.

Burger, William R. *Human Services in Contemporary America*. Belmont, CA: Brooks/Cole Cengage Learning, 2013.

Goldstein, Sam, Jack A. Naglieri, eds. *Encyclopedia of Child Behavior and Development*. New York: Springer, 2011.

Lippman, Laura H., W. Bradford Wilcox, and Renee Ryberg. *2013 World Family Map: Mapping Family Change and Child Well-Being Outcomes*. Washington, DC: Child Trends, 2013.

Ponzetti, James J. *International Encyclopedia of Marriage and Family*. New York: Macmillan Reference USA, 2003.

Zastrow, Charles. *Introduction to Social Work and Social Welfare: Empowering People*. Belmont, CA: Brooks/Cole, 2010.