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## Family Structure Characteristics and Academic Success: Supporting the Work of School Counselors

Gerra Perkins

Kayla Milstead

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## Background

The family is a child's primary context for socialization and greatly affects a child's well-being.

Historical contexts show that families have been evolving for centuries due to social and economic factors, thus resulting in various family structures. A stable, traditional family structure is most conducive to academic success (Tillman, 2007). Much research has found that children raised in a non-traditional home are at a disadvantage (Astone & McLanahan, 1991; Halpern-Meekin & Tach, 2008). The research on the consequences of single-parent families suggests children of single parent families are more likely to be impoverished, to break the law, to abuse drugs, to do poorly in school, to become pregnant before the age of twenty, and to have emotional and behavioral problems. In addition, these negative effects are not short-term, but carry into adulthood and manifest themselves in problems in relationships and occupation. However, single-parent families resulting from widowhood show less harmful effects than divorced or non-union birth households. Although the presence of another adult may bring increased financial and time resources, research indicates children in step-families may be at an even greater disadvantage than children residing in stable single-parent homes. Lastly, cohabitating families often create less defined family roles, lower levels of parental support, supervision, and involvement, and greater family conflict (Tillman, 2007).

Several detrimental characteristics of such family structures may contribute to this outcome. Less income or low income has consistently been shown to result in poor family outcomes, whether the parents are married, divorced, or widowed (Hilton & Desrochers, 2000). With the demands of a household now falling on the shoulders of one parent instead of two, the single-parent family is often subject to higher levels of stress. Stress is correlated with less positive interactions, less nurturing, and poorer communications between parents and children (Weinraub & Wolf, 1983). With the absence of a parent, children of single-parent families often find they receive less parental involvement. Non-biological parents, such as in a cohabitating or blended, may not feel as obligated to care for the child. This may result in less attention paid to the child, less obligation felt toward financial contributions to further education (Aquilino, 2005), or in a rivalry for the attention of the spouse/biological parent (Astone & McLanahan, 1991). Any change in the structure of a family disrupts the child's environment and thus has negative effects. Role theory postulates that unexpected role changes are likely to produce disruptions in a person's life and social structure (George, 1993). The effects of school success have consequences on an individual level, in the school system, and for society as a whole; thus the factors inhibiting school success should be explored in order to develop effective interventions.

## Family Structures

The family greatly affects a child's well-being. Lev Vygotsky emphasized the importance of one's family in cognitive and emotional development. Vygotsky opined that the opportunity for cognitive growth was provided through one's social interactions (Feldman, 2008). Historical contexts show that families have been evolving for centuries due to social and economic factors. The Industrial Revolution pulled men away from the farms into factories, feminization of the workplace introduced the "working

mother”, and today the influx of employment opportunities and strong emphasis on individualism have negated the purpose of the family (Macionis, 1995). Thus, the family continues to evolve to take the form of a variety of structures. For the purpose of this paper four family structures will be examined: traditional, single-parent, blended, and cohabitating, to identify any relationship between characteristics of family structures and school success.

### **Traditional.**

A traditional family structure may be defined as one in which the child resides with both biological mother and father. Not long ago, the ideal family was considered to be a working father, a stay-at-home wife, and their biological children. Today less than one in ten families reflect that ideal (Macionis, 1995). Most children raised in a traditional nuclear family have greater financial resources, increased supervision, and more stability. Unfortunately, “only half the children in the United States spend their entire childhoods living in the same household with both their parents,” (Feldman, 2008, p. 355). Emotional well-being is fostered in traditional two parent families (Sweeney, 2007). Children raised in traditional two parent families report having closer relationships with their parents than children raised in other family structures (Falci, 2006). In addition, a stable traditional family structure is most conducive to academic success. Children residing in traditional families have higher GPAs, fewer incidences of school-related problem behavior, and higher college expectations (Tillman, 2007).

### **Single-parent.**

A single parent home is one in which the child lives with either his or her biological mother or father. A single-parent home may result from a death of one parent, a divorce, or a non-union pregnancy. The U.S. Census Bureau (1995) estimated 11.4 million households were headed by a single parent in 1994. By 2005 the number of single-parent households had risen to 28.3 percent. Single-parent families are more common among certain minority groups. “In 2000, a single parent headed 21% of white families, 35% of Hispanic families, and 55% of African American families” (Feldman, 2008, p. 264). The research on the consequences of single-parent families is numerous, suggesting children of single parent families are more likely to be impoverished, to break the law, to abuse drugs, to do poorly in school, to become pregnant before the age of twenty, and to have emotional and behavioral problems. In addition, these negative effects are not short-term, but carry into adulthood and manifest themselves in problems in relationships and occupation. The effects of disrupted families spill into the larger society as well. Higher rates of poverty, crime, and declining school performance have harrowing consequences for the welfare system, justice and court systems, and school systems (Whitehead, 1997).

Single-parent families resulting from widowhood show less harmful effects than divorced or non-union birth households. Tillman reported children of widowed families experience “less life stress, family conflict, antisocial behavior, anxiety and depression, and more supportive parenting than do children of divorced parents” (2007, p. 389). While children in all other types of family structures have significantly lower GPAs than children living within intact families, GPAs of children in widowed families report no disadvantage. In addition, the school-related problem behaviors that arise in children from non-traditional families are less likely to appear in widowed family children (Tillman, 2007). The death of a parent can permanently bind the surviving family members together and strengthen the bonds of love. In addition, a widowed family often receives greater emotional and financial support from the community. Friends and relatives provide needed emotional and social support, while the government

offers generous welfare benefits from survivors insurance if the family does not already receive benefits from private insurance. This financial assistance allows for greater stability for the family. The family is less likely to face moving due to the need for cheaper housing or for employment. In addition, the authority of the deceased parent is not severed but is often magnified by the death. Lastly, the search for new romantic relationships is less intense for widowers (Whitehead, 1997).

Divorce has negative effects on the adults and children involved. Psychological problems, such as anxiety, depression, sleep disturbances, and phobias may result from the traumatic upheaval in a child's life. In addition, the effects of divorce may linger, as children whose family experienced divorce are more likely to experience a divorce in their own marriage (Feldman, 2008). The dissolution of parental unions also has negative implications for children's academic achievement as their grades decline and the number of courses they fail increase (Frisco, Muller, & Frank, 2007).

The particular reaction may depend on the child's developmental level at the time of the divorce. Very young infants are able to sense the mood and emotional reactions of their caretaker; thus making the role of the parents response to the divorce paramount. Preschool age children do not yet have the cognitive ability to completely understand divorce. They may react with fear, nightmares, and may regress behaviorally. School age children age six to eight are likely to experience a great sense of (unwarranted) guilt, as they perceive the divorce as a reaction to their behavior. Children age nine to twelve often blame one parent or another, develop somatic symptoms in response to the great level of anxiety they feel, exhibit behavior problems and a decline in academic performance. Adolescents may manifest their reactions in sexual behavior and also worry about their future marriages dissolving (as cited in Thompson & Henderson, 2007).

Single-parent families may also result from out-of-wedlock pregnancies. "At least one third of women in the United States now become pregnant as unmarried teenagers" (Macionis, 1995, p. 480). Teenage mothers are less likely to get married and are more likely to care for the child without the father's assistance resulting in subsequent expense for both mother and child including forfeited education, lower-paying jobs, welfare-dependency, poor health, and less support provided to the child (Feldman, 2008). Similar to children who have experienced divorce, children born to single mothers are likely to form single-parent families themselves (Macionis, 1995).

### **Blended.**

A blended family is one in which the child lives with either his or her biological mother or father and that parent's spouse. A blended family may also include the spouse's children or children born to the newly married couple. This family structure is "composed of children and some combination of biological parents and stepparents" (Macionis, 1995, p. 478). Approximately three out of four divorcees remarry within two to five years following the divorce (Feldman, 2008). Although the presence of another adult may bring increased financial and time resources, research indicates children in blended families may be at a greater disadvantage than children residing in stable single-parent homes (Whitehead, 1997). Indeed, children residing in blended families have higher rate of emotional problems, behavioral problems, and a higher combined rate of behavioral and emotional problems than do children in intact or single-parent families (Lee, Burkham, Zimilies, & Ladewski, 1994). The weak sense of attachment is mutual between step-parents and step-children as each reported it was more difficult to love the non-biological member. In the same survey of step-family members, one-third of the children did not

consider their step-parent to be part of their family. In addition, 15% of step-parents did not consider the step-child to be part of the family (Whitehead, 1997). According to the CDC, approximately 23% of remarriages dissolve within the first five years, and the presence of children from a previous relationship greatly increases the likelihood of dissolution (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002).

“Stepfamilies disrupt established loyalties, create new uncertainties, provoke deep anxieties, and sometimes threaten a child’s physical safety as well as emotional security” (Whitehead, 1997).

Children residing in blended families are more likely to have poorer academic outcomes (Tillman, 2007) and are twice as likely to exhibit emotional and behavioral problems (Lee et al., 1994) as those living in traditional families. “Stepfathers are more likely to commit abuse against stepchildren than genetic fathers are against their own offspring” (Feldman, 2008, p. 268). The most extreme threat to a child residing in a blended is sexual abuse, especially to step-daughters. As the step-father has no biological ties to the child, the incest taboo is less reinforced (Whitehead, 1997).

### **Cohabiting.**

In a cohabiting relationship, the child lives with either his or her biological mother or father and that parent’s significant other; however, unlike blended families, the adults are not married. Statistics show that the rate of cohabitation is on the rise. One reason for its increased popularity is that many couples feel it is good practice for marriage. On the contrary, couples who previously cohabitated are more likely to divorce than those who have never lived together (Feldman, 2008). Approximately 49% of cohabiting couples break up in the first five years. The probability of a cohabitation leading to marriage is significantly affected by race, importance of religious beliefs, and income. Caucasian couples are more likely to marry following cohabitation than are Hispanic couples; African American couples are the least likely to marry post-cohabitating. In addition, women who have some religious affiliation are more likely to marry than those without; likewise, of those who hold religious beliefs, the probability of marriage is higher for those whose religious beliefs are considered to be very important to them. Lastly, as household income increases, so does the probability for marriage post-cohabitation. In relation to income, community factors also influence the rate of marriage. As male unemployment rates decline the rates of marriage post-cohabitation increase (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002).

Cohabiting mothers are similar to married mothers in the amount and type of time spent with their children. However, they are less-educated and have lower incomes. “Because education enhances mothers’ awareness of the importance of their investments in childrearing or leads them to prioritize these investments over other uses of time,” education levels may play a vital role in the quality of interactions with children (Kendig & Bianchi, 2008, p. 1239). In addition, low income has consistently been shown to result in poor family outcomes (Hilton & Desrochers, 2000). Cohabiting families often create less defined family roles, lower levels of parental support, supervision, and involvement, and greater family conflict. This combination ultimately leads to negative outcomes for the children involved. Children in cohabiting families fare poorer academically and express lower than average expectations of college attendance. In addition, these children have higher rates of school-related behavior problems than children in traditional two parent families (Tillman, 2007). In fact research has shown that children in cohabiting families suffer the worst academic consequences of all family structures possibly due to the high level of family instability within this structure (Raley, Frisco, & Wildsmith, 2005).

## **Characteristics of Non-Traditional Families**

Children raised in a non-traditional home are at a disadvantage (Astone & McLanahan, 1991; Halpern-Meekin & Tach, 2008; Macionis, 1995; Feldman, 2008; Tillman, 2007). Several detrimental characteristics of such family structures may contribute to this outcome.

### **Stress level.**

“Varying kinds and combinations of family change may produce different levels of stress for parents and children and be associated with different levels of adult-to-child investment” (Tillman, 2007, p. 388). Divorce is a significant stressor and its effects can linger into adulthood (Huurre, Junkkari, & Aro, 2006). With the demands of a household now falling on the shoulders of one parent instead of two, the single-parent family is often subject to higher levels of stress. For blended families, the stress of adjusting to new roles and changes in the “blending” process may lead to higher levels of stress. No matter the particular source, high levels of stress have been shown to negatively affect emotional, social, and financial well-being, in addition to one’s health.

### ***Emotional.***

Stress is a common component of psychosomatic disorders in which physical ailments have no known biological cause, but are rather an “interaction of psychological, emotional, and physical difficulties” (Feldman, 2008, p. 451). Minuchin and his colleagues conducted extensive research on what he termed as psychosomatic families. “Psychosomatic families are those in which children present with symptoms that are more severe than would be expected based on the biological aspects of the disorder” (as cited in Murdock, 2009, p. 426). In these families, the parents channel their stress to the child in one of three patterns (detouring, parent-child coalition, or triangulating) and the child responds by developing symptoms (as cited in Murdock, 2009).

In a study examining the levels of stress between single-mothers and married mothers, unwed mothers scored higher on measures of depression than did their married counterparts and were more vulnerable to caregiver strain, as they must strive to find a balance between family and work responsibilities (Weinraub & Wolf, 1983). The parents’ level of stress can lead to adverse effects on the child’s psychopathology. Children who perceive this maternal stress are more likely to exhibit emotional and behavioral problems (Bakoula et al., 2009). In fact, self-reported levels of emotional distress are higher among children living in all non-traditional families (Falci, 2006).

### ***Social.***

Stress is correlated with less positive interactions, less nurturing and poorer communications, between parents and children (Weinraub & Wolf, 1983). “Stressed parents may respond to family changes with a diminished quality of parenting, supervision, and interaction” (as cited in Tillman, 2007, p. 386). In a study conducted by Broadhead, Chilton, and Crichton (2009), parents’ level of stress was strongly correlated with children’s conduct problems. As interventions were implemented to reduce parents’ levels of stress, the frequency of conduct difficulties among their children also declined. Furthermore, the combination of stress and level of interaction influences disciplinary methods. Ricketts and Anderson (2008) found that parents under high levels of stress engage in less interaction with their children and are more likely to use corporal punishment in disciplining their children.

## ***Financial.***

Avison, Ali, and Walters (2007) found that single mothers are more exposed to stressors for more persistent periods of time than married mothers. Uncontrollable life events and frequent moves, often to less-affluent, more dangerous locations, are more prevalent in non-traditional families, thus compounding stress levels. With a sharp decline in the household income of single-parent families, it is common that new (less expensive) living arrangements must be made. Indeed, this may involve moving to unsafe neighborhoods in which crime and violence rates are high and school systems within the new location are less than adequate (Feldman, 2008).

## ***Health.***

The wear and tear of stress has been shown to produce negative effects to one's health. Examples of stress-related health problems include headaches, backaches, skin rashes, indigestion, chronic fatigue, and the common cold (as cited in Feldman, 2008). In addition, stress deteriorates the immune system, increasing one's chance of becoming sick and making it more difficult to fight off illness. High levels of parental stress decrease the probability of preventative measures being in place to protect children from illness and injury (Alemagno, Niles, Shaffer-King, & Miller, 2008). Furthermore, parental stress can harm children even in the neonatal stages. Research has shown that children born to mothers subjected to severe stressors during pregnancy have a lower than average birth weight (Khashan et al., 2008).

## **Supporting the Work of School Counselors**

Professional school counselors are in a position to impact the lives of children every day. Through an understanding of the unique effects and struggles associated with differing family structures, counselors can better tailor their interventions and hone in on at-risk students. School counselors can utilize The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) National Model for students in guiding their services. This model emphasizes three domains necessary for student achievement: personal/social, academic, and career. The foundation of the personal/social domain is enhancing "personal and social growth as students progress through school and into adulthood" (ASCA, 2004, p. 9). The academic domain guides the implementation of "strategies and activities to support and maximize each student's ability to learn" (ASCA, 2004, p. 5). The final domain, career, relates to "the acquisition of skills, attitudes and knowledge that enable students to make a successful transition from school to the world of work, and from job to job across the life span" (ASCA, 2004, p. 7).

The Personal/Social domain includes multiple competencies applicable to assisting students at-risk due to family disturbances. As children are adjusting to the many changes in their home life they will require assistance to develop coping skills for dealing with problems (PS: B1.4) and managing life events (PS: C1.11), to learn techniques to deal effectively with stress and conflict (PS: C1.10), and to develop an understanding that change can lead to self-growth (PS: A1.4). As stated above, many children are often asked to take on new roles or find themselves in new situations in which the roles are unclear or ambiguous. School counselors can assist students in finding their place in their family and clarifying their roles and responsibilities as a member of the family (PS: A1.12) (ASCA, 2004).

In addition to helping students on an individual level, school counselors are charged with improving the school environment as a whole. Many children may feel embarrassed or alone, that no one else has

experienced what they are going through. By conducting small group counseling sessions, students can connect with their peers who are in similar situations, thereby normalizing their feelings. For the school as a whole, school counselors can improve the climate by providing classroom guidance lessons on respecting the diverse structures of families (PS: A2.5) (ASCA, 2004).

School counselors can also look to the ASCA National Model's Academic domain in guidance of their interventions. As stated in the literature, children in non-traditional homes often suffer emotionally and academically. In order to best serve these students school counselors can provide guidance to emphasize the relationship between classroom performance and success both within school (A: B2.6) and in their future careers (A: C1.6). As many children may receive less attention and involvement from their parents, they will likely need to develop skills to become a self-directed and independent learner (A: B1.7) and display dependability, productivity and initiative (A: A3.4) (ASCA, 2004).

A third domain within ASCA's National Model, Career, is also a key factor in the comprehensive development of students. As the literature suggests, children who perform poorly in school are likely to struggle later in life as well. The consequences of poor grades, not finishing high school, or repeated delinquency are numerous. School counselors can foster children's career potentials by engendering hobbies and vocational interests (C: A1.9), teaching students how to interact and work cooperatively in teams (C: A1.4), and to develop a positive attitude toward work and learning (C: A2.7) (ASCA, 2004). Children can begin to appreciate the relationship school between and their future at a very early age. Alfred Adler suggested children's career interests be fostered and explored at an early age (Murdock, 2009). Classroom guidance lessons and guest speakers tailored to introduce students to the world of work and to dispel stereotypes can have a big impact on students and encourage them to work hard for the future benefits. School counselors can also advocate for students to be placed in special programs to help them progress. For instance, school counselors can inform students of the School-to-Work program and get them placed in the proper track to receive access to such services. School counselors can also be a great source of information for students and parents in reference to disability legislature and protected rights (Brown, 2007).

Lastly, school counselors can help the child by helping the parent. By serving as the liaison between the families and the school/school personnel the school counselor has many opportunities to reach out to the family members. For example, becoming involved in the school's truancy reduction efforts gives the school counselor access to the students who are missing the most school at which point the counselor can contact the family to ascertain the cause of repeated absences. School counselors often assume the role of social services in connecting families with community resources to meet their needs. Individual consultation with parents is a frequent duty of the school counselor, whether it is in regard to the 504 process, behavior referrals, or testing for gifted, the counselor is the first line of defense. The counselor is best suited for this position as he or she is equipped with the skills needed to not only address the needs of students, but to also lend a supportive ear for the parents who have needs and feelings as well. Educating parents through workshops can make the school an inviting environment for the families and can engender a bond between staff and parents. In addition, increasing the parents' awareness of issues at hand can result in greater amounts of protection and nurturance for the children.

## **Summary**



There exists today many different family structures and the current trend indicates that children are likely to experience a non-traditional configuration at least once prior to turning eighteen. Many children will experience multiple changes, thus compounding the effects. Sources of contention inherent in non-traditional families include low household income, higher levels of stress, reduced parental involvement and less social support, and frequent role changes or role ambiguity. As the literature indicates, this can have a variety of negative effects on the development of children that can last well into their adult lives. The impact of such is not simply limited to the individual. The failure of one student has implications for that person, the school, and society as a whole.

While the future is uncertain, one can be sure that this issue is likely to remain at the forefront. Although this review covered four of the prominent family structures in America today, families continue to evolve. The controversy over same-sex marriages and adoption rights remains a topic in current legislature and holds promise for national legalization. In addition, one structure not addressed in this study is that of multigenerational households. As the population of elderly Americans is growing, this type of structure may become more prevalent.

Therefore, it becomes paramount for the school counselors and school leaders to become educated on such changes in order to help students succeed. School counselors have a framework, the ASCA National Model, to provide services for these students. Through individual counseling, group sessions, and large classroom guidance lessons, the counselor can positively impact the individual child's experience and the school environment as well. To do so, the counselor needs to be willing to take on various roles, that of an educator, counselor, advocate, and a locator of community resources, and must have the support of school principals. Together school counselors and principals can tailor a plan to meet the academic, social, and career development needs of these children.

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