

Having a single parent doesn't determine your life chances. Data shows poverty is far more important

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Numerous research studies have suggested that children from a single-parent family are worse off than those who have two parents at home.

These findings chime with decades of stigma that have painted coming from a single-parent home as undesirable.

Understandably, [you may find this worrying](#) if you are a [single parent](#)—or if you're thinking of embarking on parenthood alone. But it's worth looking at the detail behind the stats. I reviewed the most up-to-date evidence for my book [Why Single Parents Matter](#), and found that conclusions that suggest significant negative outcomes as a result of coming from a single-parent [family](#) are often not supported by strong data.

For example, a 1991 [meta analysis](#)—a [research paper](#) that reviews the findings of numerous scholarly studies—is [often cited as evidence](#) of a negative impact. However, the study [concludes that](#) the "effects are generally weak, with methodologically sophisticated studies and more recent studies tending to find even smaller differences between groups."

Small differences

Other studies report differences that are unlikely to have any significant real-life impact. For example, [one study concluded](#) that "adolescents' self-esteem in single-parent families was lower than that in the two-parent nuclear families." The average score for children from two-parent families was 39 and for those from one-parent families 37.5—but a score of 25 and above indicated high self-esteem.

Other research has found small differences in rare outcomes such as [school expulsion](#), which do not affect the majority of children regardless of family structure. Further [research](#) finds no differences in children's educational achievement at all.

What's more, when research takes into consideration [important factors](#) such as poverty, the differences often disappear.

For example, the [Millennium Cohort Study](#) looked at differences in the health and well-being of over 13,000 seven-year-olds. It found almost all children were healthy: 0.4% of children living in two-parent households had poor health, compared with 0.9% in single-parent households. Other small differences were found for mental health, obesity and asthma. However, once poverty was taken into consideration, almost all significant differences disappeared.

This is a critical finding because single-parent families are far more likely to be living in poverty than two-parent families (62.7% versus 17.8% in the study). And data from other countries shows us that this issue should be fixable. One global study found small differences in educational outcomes for children from single-parent families. However, these almost all disappeared in countries that had [more supportive social policies](#), such as family and child allowances and parental leave.

Another angle that illustrates how context matters is research focused on [mothers](#) who become single parents by choice through IVF or adoption. These mothers tend to be older, have a higher income and feel ready for parenthood. Reflecting this, one study found [no difference in bonding between mother and baby](#) for single and married women who had IVF treatment.

Furthermore, when the researchers [followed these families up](#) when the children were two years old, the single mothers showed greater joy and lower levels of anger towards their children, and their children had fewer emotional and behavioral problems.

It's also important to note that factors within a two-parent household can affect child outcomes. One study found no differences in the quality of parenting that children from one- or two-parent families experienced—except that when [parent conflict in two-parent homes was high](#), or parents in a two-parent household had "lower levels of love for

each other," children were more likely to have behavioral problems.

Stereotyping and well-being

Differences are sometimes found between single parents and those with a partner when it comes to maternal well-being. Single mothers are [more likely to experience depression](#) compared with mothers with a partner, [exacerbated by financial pressures](#), challenging relationships with ex-partners, and a lack of social support.

While single fathers may [often be praised](#), there are many stigmatizing stereotypes of single mothers. These often perpetuate the image of a younger mother, instead of considering the broad range of [single-parent family set-ups](#) in the UK today.

Historically, in the UK, pregnancy outside marriage was [viewed as shameful](#). Women and girls were thrown out of families, forced into workhouses, or made to give their baby [up for adoption](#). Although [financial support](#) for [single mothers](#) was eventually introduced, governments were anxious that this might [encourage single motherhood](#).

I do not wish to downplay the challenges and difficult emotions that children can experience during or after separation. But this is different to claiming that single parenthood directly harms [children](#) in the long term. Any differences are fixable by ensuring [better support](#) for [single families](#), rather than exacerbating harmful stigma.

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