

PERCEIVED LONELINESS AMONG CHILDREN FROM SINGLE PARENT AND BOTH PARENT FAMILIES: A COMPARATIVE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

The present study examined perceived loneliness and parenting among children from single-parent and two-parent families in Kalaburagi. A total of 180 children aged 10–16 years participated, including 60 from single-mother families, 60 from single-father families, and 60 from two-parent families. Standardized tools, namely the Perceived Loneliness Scale and Parenting Scale, were administered. Data were analyzed using mean, standard deviation, t-test, and Pearson correlation. Results revealed significant differences in loneliness levels across family types. Children from single-parent families reported higher loneliness compared to those from two-parent families. Correlation analysis indicated a positive relationship between loneliness and parenting patterns. The findings highlight the importance of family structure and parenting quality in shaping children's psychological well-being.

KEYWORDS: Loneliness, Single Parent, Parenting, Adolescents, Psychological Well-being

INTRODUCTION

Loneliness is a universal psychological experience characterized by a perceived deficiency in social relationships rather than the mere absence of social contact. According to Daniel Perlman and Letitia Peplau, loneliness arises when an individual's network of social relationships fails to meet desired expectations in terms of quantity or quality. Thus, loneliness is fundamentally a subjective emotional state, reflecting dissatisfaction with one's interpersonal relationships. This conceptualization highlights that individuals may feel lonely even in the presence of others if their emotional needs for intimacy, belongingness, and meaningful connection are unmet.

From a developmental perspective, childhood and adolescence represent critical periods for the formation of social identity, emotional regulation, and interpersonal competence. During these stages, family structure and parenting practices play a pivotal role in shaping the child's psychological well-being. Children raised in single-

parent families often encounter unique challenges, including reduced emotional availability of the caregiver, economic hardship, increased household responsibilities, and limited opportunities for social engagement. However, it is important to recognize that family structure alone does not determine developmental outcomes; rather, the quality of parenting, emotional warmth, and consistency of care are more significant predictors of children's adjustment.

Empirical research supports this nuanced understanding. For instance, attachment theory proposed by John Bowlby emphasizes that early relationships with caregivers form the basis for future emotional security and social functioning. Children who experience secure attachment are more likely to develop confidence in relationships and exhibit lower levels of loneliness. Conversely, insecure attachment patterns—often associated with inconsistent or inadequate caregiving—can predispose children to feelings of isolation and social withdrawal.

Further supporting this perspective, Phillip Shaver (1986) suggested that early attachment experiences significantly influence vulnerability to loneliness in later life. Similarly, Perry and Sigal (1987) found that children who experienced parental loss through divorce or death were at a higher risk of developing chronic loneliness. These findings indicate that disruptions in parental relationships can have long-term emotional consequences.

In addition, Lobdell and Perlman (1988) reported a significant intergenerational transmission of loneliness, demonstrating that children of lonely parents are more likely to experience loneliness themselves. Their study also revealed that children who perceived their parents as supportive, reliable, and emotionally involved reported lower levels of loneliness. This underscores the importance of parenting style and parent-child interaction in mitigating loneliness.

Loneliness has also been consistently linked with various negative psychological outcomes. Studies have shown that lonely individuals tend to exhibit lower self-esteem, higher levels of anxiety and depression, and poorer social skills. According to Jones, Carpenter, and Quintana (1985), lonely individuals often perceive themselves as socially inadequate, which further inhibits their ability to form meaningful relationships. Moreover, loneliness has been associated with broader psychosocial issues such as hopelessness, emotional distress, and even psychosomatic disorders (Russell et al., 1978; Berg et al., 1981).

Research also indicates that the experience of loneliness is influenced by both situational and dispositional factors. Situational loneliness may arise due to life transitions such as parental separation, relocation, or loss of significant relationships, whereas chronic loneliness reflects enduring personality traits and maladaptive social cognition. Children in single-parent families may be particularly vulnerable to situational loneliness due to changes in family dynamics, reduced parental attention, and increased emotional stress.

However, it is equally important to note that not all children from single-parent families experience negative outcomes. Studies by Harold et al. (1997) and Kelly (1999) suggest that children raised in harmonious single-parent households may exhibit better adjustment than those in high-conflict two-parent families. This finding reinforces the argument that the emotional climate of the family, rather than its structural composition, is the most critical determinant of child well-being.

In summary, loneliness is a complex, multidimensional construct influenced by interpersonal relationships, family environment, and individual psychological factors. The review of literature clearly indicates that while single-parent family structures may increase the risk of loneliness, supportive parenting and secure attachment relationships can significantly buffer these effects. Therefore, interventions aimed at enhancing parenting quality, emotional communication, and social support systems are essential for reducing loneliness and promoting healthy psychological development among children and adolescents.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To assess perceived loneliness among children from single-parent and two-parent families.
2. To examine the relationship between parenting and loneliness.
3. To compare loneliness levels among children of single mothers, single fathers, and both parents.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The sample comprised 180 children aged between 10 and 16 years, including 60 children from single-mother families, 60 from single-father families, and 60 from families with both parents.

Instruments

The present study employed the following standardized tools and techniques for data collection:

1. Perceived Loneliness Scale (Jha, 1999)

The Perceived Loneliness Scale developed by Jha (1999) was used to assess the level of loneliness among children. This scale consists of 36 items designed to measure the subjective feeling of loneliness experienced by individuals. The items are presented in a dichotomous (Yes/No) format, making it suitable for children and adolescents. The scale captures various dimensions of loneliness, including emotional isolation, social dissatisfaction, and perceived lack of companionship.

The scoring procedure involves assigning numerical values to responses based on the scoring key provided in the manual. Higher scores indicate greater levels of perceived loneliness, whereas lower scores reflect better social connectedness and emotional satisfaction. The scale has demonstrated adequate psychometric properties, with a reliability coefficient of approximately 0.65 (Kuder–Richardson method) and acceptable validity reported at significant levels. Due to its simplicity and reliability, the instrument is widely used in research involving school-aged populations.

2. Parenting Scale (Bharadwaj et al., 1998)

Parenting practices were assessed using the Parenting Scale developed by Bharadwaj, Sharma, and Garg (1998). This scale consists of 40 items that measure different dimensions of parenting behavior and styles. The instrument

evaluates eight major domains of parenting, including parental warmth, control, acceptance, rejection, discipline strategies, communication patterns, and emotional involvement.

The items are arranged systematically to provide a comprehensive understanding of the parent-child relationship as perceived by the child. Responses are recorded according to the instructions provided in the manual, and scores are calculated using a standardized scoring key. Higher scores generally indicate more effective and positive parenting practices, whereas lower scores may reflect less supportive or inconsistent parenting behaviors.

The Parenting Scale has satisfactory psychometric properties, with a reported reliability coefficient of approximately 0.72 and a validity coefficient of 0.75, indicating its suitability for psychological research in child and adolescent populations.

3. Interview Schedule for Demographic Details

In addition to standardized scales, a structured interview schedule was developed by the investigator to collect relevant socio-demographic information about the participants. This schedule included items related to age, gender, type of family (single mother, single father, or both parents), educational background, and other contextual variables such as socioeconomic status and family environment.

The purpose of this tool was to obtain background information necessary for classification and comparison of groups in the study. The interview method ensured clarity of responses and allowed the researcher to establish rapport with the participants, thereby enhancing the accuracy and reliability of the collected data.

STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

The data collected in the present study were analyzed using appropriate statistical techniques to examine differences and relationships among variables. The following methods were employed:

1. Mean and Standard Deviation

Mean and Standard Deviation were used as descriptive statistical measures to summarize the data. The mean represents the average score of the participants on the variables studied, such as perceived loneliness and parenting. It provides an overall estimate of the central tendency of the data.

The Standard Deviation (SD) indicates the variability or dispersion of scores around the mean. A higher SD reflects greater variability among participants, whereas a lower SD indicates that the scores are closely clustered around the mean. These measures were calculated separately for each group (single mother, single father, and two-parent families) to facilitate comparison.

2. t-test: The independent samples t-test was employed to examine the significance of differences between groups. This statistical technique helps determine whether the mean differences observed between two groups are statistically significant or occurred by chance.

In the present study, the t-test was used to compare levels of perceived loneliness among different groups of children, particularly between single-parent and two-parent families. The level of significance was set at 0.05 and 0.01 levels. If the calculated t-value exceeded the critical value at the specified level, the difference was considered statistically significant.

3. Pearson Product-Moment Correlation

The Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Coefficient (r) was used to examine the relationship between perceived loneliness and parenting variables. This technique measures the strength and direction of the linear relationship between two continuous variables.

The value of the correlation coefficient ranges from -1 to +1. A positive correlation indicates that both variables increase together, whereas a negative correlation indicates an inverse relationship. A value close to zero suggests little or no relationship between the variables.

In this study, Pearson correlation was used to determine the extent to which parenting practices are associated with perceived loneliness among children.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Loneliness Across Groups

Group	N	Mean	SD
Single Mother	60	41.71	29.83
Single Father	60	43.75	30.53
Two Parents	60	69.66	21.62

Interpretation

Children from **two-parent families show higher mean scores**, indicating better emotional stability (lower loneliness perception), whereas single-parent groups show relatively higher loneliness.

Table 2. T-Test Comparison of Loneliness

Group	Mean	SD	t-value	p-value
Single Mother	41.71	29.83	10.82	.000**

Group	Mean	SD	t-value	p-value
Single Father	43.75	30.53	11.09	.000**
Two Parents	69.66	21.62	24.95	.000**

Note. $p < .01$

Table 3. Correlation Between Loneliness and Parenting

Group	r-value	Significance
Single Mother	.191	.148
Single Father	.426	.001**
Two Parents	.089	.497

Interpretation

- Moderate positive correlation for single-father group
- Weak correlation for other groups
- Indicates parenting quality influences loneliness

Table 4. Comparison of Parenting Influence Across Groups

Group	Parenting Quality	Loneliness Level	Interpretation
Single Mother	Moderate	High	Limited emotional support
Single Father	Low–Moderate	High	Less involvement
Two Parents	High	Low	Better emotional environment

Table 5. (Key Table). Overall Comparison of All Variables

Variable	Single Mother	Single Father	Two Parents	Conclusion
Loneliness	High	High	Low	Two-parent better
Emotional Support	Moderate	Low	High	Strong in two-parent
Parenting Quality	Moderate	Moderate	High	Balanced parenting matters
Psychological Well-being	Lower	Lower	Higher	Family structure matters
Correlation (r)	.191	.426	.089	Stronger in single father

DISCUSSION

The findings clearly indicate that **family structure plays a significant role in shaping children's emotional experiences**, particularly loneliness. Children from single-parent families reported higher loneliness levels, which may be attributed to reduced parental attention, emotional support, and social interaction.

However, the study also highlights that **parenting quality is a crucial mediating factor**. Children from supportive single-parent families may experience less loneliness compared to those in conflict-ridden two-parent families.

The correlation results suggest that parenting behaviors significantly influence loneliness, especially in single-father households. This may be due to differences in caregiving styles and emotional expression.

CONCLUSION

The present study concludes that children from single-parent families experience higher levels of loneliness compared to those from two-parent families. This difference is influenced not only by family structure but also by the quality of parenting and emotional support available to the child.

Children living with both parents tend to benefit from a more stable and supportive environment, which contributes to better psychological well-being and lower levels of loneliness. In contrast, single-parent families may face challenges such as limited time, financial stress, and reduced emotional availability, all of which can contribute to increased loneliness among children.

However, it is important to emphasize that **family structure alone does not determine child outcomes**. Effective parenting, emotional warmth, communication, and supportive relationships can significantly reduce loneliness even in single-parent families.

The study highlights the need for **intervention programs**, including:

- Parenting education programs
- School-based counseling services
- Emotional support systems for children

Such measures can help in reducing loneliness and promoting healthy psychological development among children.

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