

Kim, Inkyung

Research Report

Transition from a two-parent to a single-parent household and child development

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For Inquiry: KDI Communications Unit

Address: 263, Namsejong-ro, Sejong-si 30149, Korea

Tel: 82-44-550-4030 **Fax:** 82-44-550-0652

Authors | Inkyung Kim, Fellow at KDI (044-550-4173)

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Transition from a Two-Parent to a Single-Parent Household and Child Development

Inkyung Kim, Fellow at KDI (ikkim@kdi.re.kr)



* Summarized and adapted from Kim, Inkyung, *Family Types and Human Capital Formation in Childhood*, Policy Study 2020-03, Korea Development Institute, 2020 (in Korean).

Summary

- As Korea is expected to see an increase in the share of single-parent families, this study analyzes the impact of a family transition from a two-parent to single-parent home on child development.
 - The level of development is measured based on health, self-regulated learning, emotional disorders, self-perception, life satisfaction, peer attachment, school adjustment, sense of community, and multicultural acceptance.
- According to the analysis, children who have experienced a transition have difficulties in academic time management but see improvements in their attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorders. However, the impact on other development criteria cannot be confirmed.
 - The ability to manage academic time dropped 8.5% while the level of attention and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorders improved 14.4%, compared to the averages.
 - These results are possibly due to the fact that the children are able to have a positive relationship with the primary caregiver after the transition as they are no longer caught in the middle of the parental conflict.
- This finding indicates that contrary to the conventional belief, transitions can also positively influence child development, and thus, policy intervention is needed to alleviate the negative effects on learning ability.
- Housework support programs should be expanded to enable single parents to spend sufficient time parenting and, if necessary, receive help in better understanding their parental role. Also, schools should lead efforts to improve nurturing and learning environments by serving as a key link between families and local community.
 - Single parents burdened with household chores cannot invest enough time to establish relationships with their children or gain information about nurturing and education. Programs for such services should stretch to reach single parents struggling with labor, study, disease, and disability.
 - Parent education programs that are specifically customized to fit the needs of single parents should be included in housework support programs if needed to resolve grievances in a timely manner.
 - Teachers should serve as a learning coach and emotional support for the children, and counsellor for the parents while closely monitoring the children's learning stages and family conditions that can affect academic performance.
 - To alleviate the academic difficulties of students, schools should encourage teacher cooperation, promote parent-teacher partnerships, and reinforce parents' capability to provide academic support. They should also take the lead in adopting and driving family support services when a child is in need of help that exceeds the capabilities of the school.

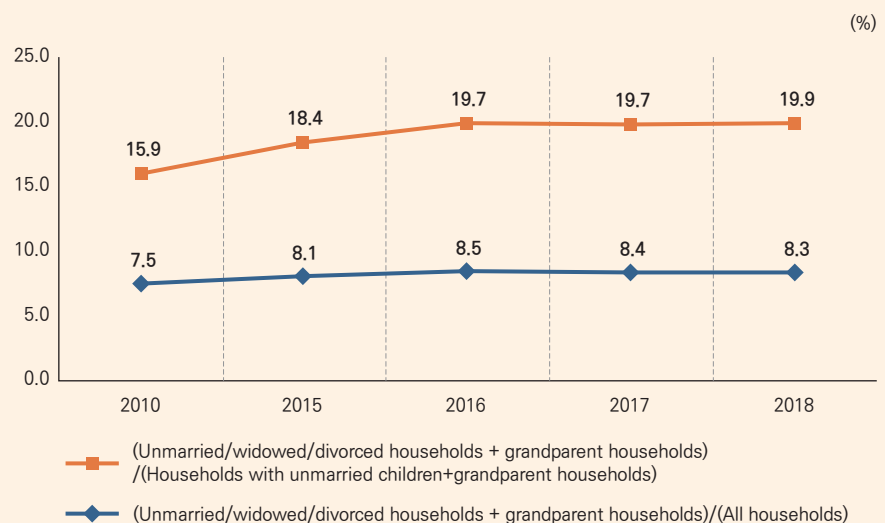
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Issues

- Korea is seeing a steady increase in the share of single-parent families, and the figure is expected to increase as society becomes more accepting.
 - Single-parent families refer to mother-/father-only and grandparent families.
 - A mother-/father-only family is a family that has a child/children and a mother or father who is unmarried or has a spouse who is physically absent due to death, divorce, family discord, military service, prison, abandonment, etc.

- A grandparent family is a family that has a child/children who has/have been left with a grandparent/grandparents, one of whom is over 65 years or unable to work, due to divorce, abandonment, death, etc.
- While the share of single-parent households among all households inched up by less than 1% in 2010-2018, that among unmarried children or grandparent households has gradually increased from 15.9% in 2010 to 19.9% in 2018 (Figure 1).
- According to a 2019 public survey on family diversity, those in their 20s and younger took the highest share in positively responding to the question about accepting a child of a single-parent family as their spouse or the spouse of their children at 85.1%. The percentage gradually decreases as the respondents' age increases, with those in their 60s marking 73.5%.

[Figure 1] Yearly Changes in the Share of Single-parent Households



Note: 1) Data sources denote the number of households, not families. As such, the author calculated the share of single-parent households: 'Household' refers to a living unit comprised of one or more persons who share a dwelling while 'family' refers to people who live together due to family ties, marriage, adoption, etc., and to non-co-residing spouses and unmarried children.
 2) 'All households' refer to the sum of households comprised of family members or of households of five or less.
 3) 'Households with unmarried children' refer to the sum of all types of two-generation households with unmarried children (parents+children, father+children, mother+children, parents+children+other family members). 'Grandparent households' refer to the sum of all types of two-generation households with unmarried grandchildren (grandparents+grandchildren, grandfather+grandchildren, grandmother+grandchildren). 'Unmarried/widowed/divorced households' refer to the sum of father- and mother-only households—extracted from households with unmarried children—who answered that their marital status is unmarried/widowed/divorced.

Source: Author's calculation using Statistics Korea's "Population and Housing Census" (<http://kosis.kr>, last access: Jul. 3, 2020).

- Despite campaigns to end the discriminatory treatment of single-parent families, the overriding perception is that growing up in a two-parent household is more beneficial to the children. The share of people who have experienced unfair judgement/prejudice for being raised by a single parent remains little changed.
- The Ministry of Gender Equality and Family, local governments, and civic groups have organized a variety of events such as competitions, public hearings, artistic performances, and festivals in an effort to ensure that single-parent families are considered to be just one of many family types.
- A survey by Byoun *et al.* (2017) shows that 71.8% believed that children can only grow up well when raised by both parents.
- According to a 2015 survey on single-parent families, 14.4% and 18.0% answered that

their children were unfairly treated or discriminated against in their neighborhood or school/child care facility, respectively. Both figures increased to 17.0% in the 2018 survey.

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Analysis of the Impact of Family Transitions on Child Development

- To reverse the negative perceptions, the impact of family transitions on child development should be empirically analyzed, and policy measures should be formulated to mitigate any side effects of such changes.
 - The findings of overseas studies show that there is no consistent positive or negative correlation between family type and academic achievement.
- This study analyzed the impact of family transitions on child development, using the Korean Children and Youth Panel Survey.
 - The survey targeted fourth graders (elementary school, as of 2010), and a total of seven surveys were conducted until the students' first year of high school (2016).
 - The family type was regarded as a two-parent family if the family had both biological mother and father, and deemed to have transitioned if one or both were absent in the subsequent survey.
 - Specific reasons (unmarried, widowed, divorced, grandparents, etc.) for the transition could not be identified due to data characteristics.
- The degree of child development was measured according to nine separate criteria: health, self-regulated learning, emotional disorders, self-perception, life satisfaction, peer attachment, school adjustment, sense of community, and multicultural acceptance.
 - Refer to <Table 1> for further details.
 - Excluding the BMI, the scores for each variable were calculated from the children's responses on a four point scale.
- The data was analyzed using the fixed-effect difference-in-difference model after applying the propensity matching score.
 - Children from a two-parent family in one survey and a single-parent family in the next were deemed the treatment group, and they were matched with those who showed a similar propensity to transition into single-parent family but had both parents remain throughout the survey period (control group).
 - The explanatory variables used when matching the propensity score include the children's gender, age, number of siblings, mother's age, educational background, working status, and household income.
 - To match the propensity score, the nearest neighbor matching score (within caliper 0.002) was used to pair a maximum of five children from the control and treatment groups with similar propensity scores.
 - The matching method used observable characteristics, and thus, can control the endogeneity arising from certain characteristics.
 - The fixed-effect difference-in-difference model was additionally applied to both groups. Therefore, the endogeneity derived from unobservable, time-invariant characteristics, such as a child's genetic factors and parents' consistent personality differences, were controlled.

■ According to the results, children who experienced a transition had difficulties in academic time management but saw improvements in their attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorders. The impact of the transition on other development criteria were unconfirmed (Table 1).

- After the transition, children's academic time management dropped 0.321 in standard deviation but attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorders improved 0.738, which are equivalent to 8.5% and 14.4%, respectively, in the averages (5% statistical significance).
 - Academic time management: Children were asked whether they set a specific goal for study time before starting, or whether they studied according to a schedule that they planned before the exam.
 - Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorders.: Children were asked whether they make mistakes because of a lack of attention or dislike of attention-demanding tasks.

<Table 1> Effects of Transitions on Child Development

Outcome variable	Health		Self-regulated learning					Emotional disorders					Self-perception
	BMI	Self-rated health	Achievement value	Mastery goal orientation	Action control	Academic time management	Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder	Aggressive behaviors	Somatic symptoms	Social withdrawal	Depression	Self-esteem	
Estimated coefficient (S.D.)	0.057 (0.081)	-0.060 (0.214)	-0.308* (0.173)	-0.120 (0.149)	0.143 (0.148)	-0.321** (0.151)	0.738*** (0.252)	0.287 (0.274)	0.257 (0.242)	0.378* (0.222)	0.024 (0.256)	0.128 (0.185)	
Outcome variable	Life satisfaction	Peer attachment			School adjustment				Attitude towards community		Multicultural acceptance		
		Communication	Trust	Alienation	Learning activities	Following school rules	Peer relationships	Student – teacher relationship	Sense of community				
Estimated coefficient (S.D.)	0.064 (0.139)	0.026 (0.235)	0.212 (0.249)	0.298 (0.238)	-0.232* (0.136)	-0.183 (0.133)	-0.166 (0.142)	-0.188 (0.145)	-0.118 (0.132)	0.251 (0.235)			

Note: 1) For each item, excluding the BMI, a higher score means more positive effects on child development (some scores are reverse-coded where necessary). Scores are standardized by the average and standard deviation; () stands for standard error.

2) *, **, *** mean statistical significance at the 10%, 5%, and 1% levels, respectively.

Source: National Youth Policy Institute, "Korean Children and Youth Panel Survey," 2010-2016.

■ Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorders may have improved after the transition due to the removal of the negative impact from the parents' unhealthy relationship, and being better cared for by the primary caregiver.

- Using the same analysis method, 'children who experienced a transition' were compared to 'those with a similar propensity to transition into single-parent home but had both parents remain.' The results found that guardian abuse among the former decreased 0.347 in standard deviation, which is equal to a 8.8% drop in the average.
- It should be noted that this finding can dispell the myth that maintaining the marriage is good for the children despite marital problems.

■ The fact that no negative impact from the transition was observed in terms of other child development criteria suggests that the primary caregivers' attitudes towards the children may have improved.

- A large number of the participants of the focus group interview on single-parent families spoke of similar experiences to <Table 2>.

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Policy Suggestions

<Table 2> Focus Group Interview on the Changes in Attitude after a Family Transition

"In my case, I had to be the first to change. So, I started to change things that were not good for the children's education. I unsubscribed from cable channels because I did not want to just switch them on and leave my children in front of the TV. Now, we can only watch regular programs and I moved the TV to the small room to restrict TV time. I now pay more attention to making a better environment in our home for study and other activities so that the children can invite their friends over whenever they want. I do not spend much time watching the TV or on internet, either."

Source: Excerpted from the dialogue from the focus group interview in Kim (2020).

- This finding indicates that contrary to the conventional belief, transitions also entail some positive influences on child development, and thus, policy intervention is needed to alleviate the negative effects on learning ability.
- Academic time management can be enhanced when a child's ability to self-control improves. However, this can only be achieved when the need for autonomy, competence, and relationships has been satisfied.
 - The level of academic achievement can be diminished if children from single-parent families cannot manage their study time and are unable to complete their assignments in time as a consequence.
 - Setting study goals and adhering to them can be done through self-control which refers to a child's ability to plan, monitor, control, and change his/her actions to achieve a goal that he/she has set or been given.
 - Self-control can be strengthened when the need for autonomy, competence, and relationships is satisfied. This need encompasses a child's desire to make his/her own decisions, take the lead in activities, do well, and have an emotional bond with others.
 - When such needs are met, children can apply in-depth strategies to learn, and persist and make efforts in regard to a given task (refer to <Table 4-3> in Kim (2020) for satisfying needs).
- To satisfy the above needs, primary caregivers of single-parent families need to commit the time as a parent, and should be given the necessary help to learn about their parental role.
 - According to a 2018 survey on single-parent families, 58.0% and 57.4%% of elementary school and middle-school parents, respectively, answered that they felt challenged due to the lack of information on child rearing and education. This means that parents are in need of support to learn about their roles.
 - Caregivers are those who reside with the children and to whom the children feel attached. It is vital that they acquire good parenting skills as they consistently affect the children's cognitive and socio-emotional development.
- The burden of household chores could occupy the time for parenting and enhancing parental skills. As such, support programs targeting single-parent families should be expanded.
 - The aforementioned 2018 survey found that 73.5% of single parents felt more

burdened by household chores after a transition, indicating that their burden is significantly heavier than that of two-parent families.

- If the single parent is also the sole breadwinner, the children may find it difficult to share their dilemmas and concerns, and may even have to bear some of the burden of housework (Table 3).
- The Seoul Single-parent Family Support Center currently provides housework support programs for single-parent families with parents who work or study, or are facing difficulties due to illness or disability of a family member. These programs should be expanded nationwide.

<Table 3> Focus Group Interview on the Burden of Household Chores in Single-parent Families

“A single mother of three once told me that she had to work two jobs since her children were young which left her exhausted and with little time to manage the home properly. So, her children had to take on the burden, and she found that she was constantly demanding that they “do this” and “do that,” instead of taking care of them. Years later, the mother realized that one of her children, who was over 20 at the time, was not socially adjusted. They sought counselling, and in a drama therapy session, her eldest daughter vented to her, saying, “Mom, why did you make me do all the housework while you were out working? It was unbearable.”

Source: Excerpt from a dialogue from the focus group interview in Kim (2020).

■ Single parents receiving support should be provided with customized parenting education programs, when necessary, to resolve their child-rearing difficulties in a timely manner.

- The Healthy Family Support Center operates parental education programs, and could add customized sessions for single parents receiving support based on the available time and needs.
 - Most parents of single-parent families who are the sole provider find it difficult to afford the extra time to participate in such programs. As such, efficient operation of these programs is key to active attendance.
 - In-person programs for those with common educational interests should be provided in a way that can be of instant and specific help through interaction between the education providers and learners.
- Centers could compile data on the feedback from and needs of single parents and their children in their jurisdiction, and condense the information into a variety of remote learning materials along with alternative solutions. These educational materials can also be sent to interested parties in accordance with their needs.
 - A cautious approach should be considered as some single-parent families feel uncomfortable with the social prejudice towards them and tend to avoid situations in which they have to be open about their family situation.

■ Meanwhile, teachers should serve as a learning coach and emotional support for the children and counsellor for the parents to resolve the academic difficulties of each student.

- Since the Covid-19 pandemic, schools have been quick to switch to remote learning, and the coming years will likely see a continued mix of on- and offline classes.
- Students can acquire basic competencies as per their learning goals and stage by accessing online platforms, while at school, they can engage in interactive learning,

discuss their progress with teachers, and receive counselling on ineffective/damaging study conditions.

- In addition to providing students with technical advice on studying, teachers should be able to identify family situations that can have a negative impact on education. They should also provide emotional support and counselling to alleviate the situation in terms of the children's need for autonomy, competence, and relationships.
 - Children can receive consistent guidance and discipline at both home and school, and support from parents in terms of the school curriculum if parents and teachers can share information about the learning environment, and establish positive relationships.
- To that end, the role of teachers should be further divided into educational content development, project class design, online lectures, and face-to-face classes.

■ **Schools should be able to drive the cooperation between families, schools, and communities by serving as a connecting link, which could help reduce the negative factors in children's learning ability.**

- In Ireland, some teachers serve as a coordinator who is responsible for connecting home, school, and the community, and they actively and frequently meet up with parents to monitor and identify the students' educational environment.
- The coordinator encourages teacher collaboration to ease students' academic difficulties, promotes parent-teacher partnerships, advises parents about programs on parental roles and literacy skills, and facilitates meetings between parents to promote various exchanges to enhance their capabilities across the community.
 - Unlike Ireland, Korea's educational welfare priority projects focus on mentoring and group activity that are centered on the providers.
- When parents and children find themselves in difficult situations in terms of the home environment, income, health, and domestic violence, and require help beyond the scope of school resources, the coordinator can adopt and participate in family support services by collaborating with related organizations in the local community.

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