

## THE SINGLE PARENT FAMILY: FROM MARGINALIZATION TO NORMALCY AND ACCEPTANCE

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**Abstract:** *The single-parent family is a major problem of contemporary society. In the last decades the number of single parent families has increased considerably, this is generated by the large number of divorces, the migration of parents, but also death. The emotional development of children who come from single parent families has to suffer, because they fail to learn their behavior patterns, norms and beliefs, which will help them in forming their own personality. The article includes a comprehensive analysis based on extensive qualitative research; the specific techniques were: the documentation, case study, individual counselling, semi-structured interview, applied to 20 monoparental families in Caraș-Severin County, resulting from distinct situations: divorce, death and abroad migration of one of the parents. The results of the research demonstrate the difficulties faced by children from single-parent families and underline their emotional needs. The lack of a parent causes problems of communication of adaptation and of social integration. Children from single parent families should enjoy the same protection and understanding, the same love, even if they do not have both parents.*

**Key words:** *single parent families; emotional development; disorganized family; marginalization.*

### Introduction

Over time, human existence has undergone many changes, and this is evident as change becomes, along the evolution of society over time, a phenomenon socially accepted and recognized. Change is felt in all aspects of human life, and this makes it easy for contemporary humans to adapt to changes that have become ubiquitous in everyday life.

Family is the basic element of any society. The emergence of alternative family models (single mothers, single parent family), causes the idea of traditional family to undergo significant changes both in terms of structure and from the point of view of the role exercised. In recent decades, single parent families have undergone a real social process from blaming and discriminating to normalcy and acceptance.

## 1. Theoretical considerations regarding the single parent family

"Family is a group of people connected by marriage or kinship. It consists of the spouses and their children, the parents of the spouses, as well as other persons with whom they are related." (Filipescu, 1996: 1). Family „constitutes a distinct social reality. Family's specific characteristics come from its numerous functions". (Georgevici, 2014: 3).

From a moral-Christian point of view, family is an institution of divine origin established by creation. It was formed by the conclusion of the marriage; whose main characteristics were unity and indissolubility. Being a God's institution, family has a sacred character, this nature being highlighted by the following characteristics: perfect love, union and equality of its members (Albu., Family Law: 7; Filipescu: 2,4; Stăniloae, 1978: 180). The single parent family is a family in which children are raised and educated by a single parent. Out of the desire to conceive a clearer definition of the single-parent family, the authors Mitrofan and Ciuperca carefully analysed this phenomenon which has become extremely widespread in contemporary society. The two authors made a typology of this type of family starting from the causes that can generate single parenthood: death of the other parent, separation / divorce, abandonment of the family by one of the parents, adoption made by a single person, or "unexpected" birth of a child in a free, consensual relationship outside of marriage, especially when parents are teenagers.

The single-parent family is regarded as a whole which, although "missing an element, does not cease to function as a system, in which the whole is much more than the sum of the parts" (Scutaru, 2006: 19). This new conception comes after transformations and modifications, and thus the family with a single parent has become a normal family, as it becomes a familiar behaviour for the members of the contemporary society and as records an increase in frequency (<https://laws.uaic.ro/>)

## 2. The factors generating the single parent family

**Death.** The death of one parent represents a tragedy for any child, regardless of age. The moment of loss of a loved one is experienced with the same intensity both by children and adults. In the case of the death of a parent, the pain experienced by other family members manifests itself on different levels:

- on the physical level: fatigue, lack of energy, tension in the stomach, muscle weakness, strong predisposition to diseases;

- on the mental level: confusion, reduced ability to concentrate, denial, difficulties in the decision-making process, sensation of the presence of the deceased; emotionally; sadness, despair, longing, anger, guilt;
- on the spiritual level, analysing one's own beliefs and principles about life (Constantin in Mitrofan, 2003: 352)

**Divorce.** Divorce is defined as a legal way to break up a marriage. In Mitrofan and Ciupercă (1998), Parkinson proposes two explanations of the spread of this phenomenon, "the high hopes for marital happiness turn much faster into reproaches and disappointments because reality does not meet expectations". Unemployment, illness or infirmity can also be causes that leading to divorce.

The experience of a divorce is difficult for both parties and can generate feelings of personal failure, hopelessness, insecurity and sadness (especially in the parent who has the custody of the child). Problems related to raising, caring and educating children complicate many divorces, before '89 divorce was considered a shame, a failure especially in the case of couples who had children. Current research has shown that the most beneficial for children is the scenario when the parents get a divorce if they are unhappy, instead of choosing to stay together in an atmosphere of stress, discontent, anger, violence and hatred.

**Divorce effects.** "The effects are generally most obvious in the immediate post-divorce period" (Hetherington, 1989). Usually, the first year after the divorce is marked by a higher level of anxiety, depression, parent-child conflicts. Most of the time both the parent and the child make efforts to adapt to the new situation, and the negative reactions of each can affect the other in a cyclical way, getting more and more numerous. The effects of divorce vary depending on the child's age and gender. Pre-schoolers are more sensitive, more vulnerable, because they lack the cognitive resources needed to understand the reasons for the divorce and may assume that it was also their fault one way or another (Zill, Moirison and Coiro, 1993). Each segment of the development process has its own vulnerabilities and possible negative consequences; adolescence is a very difficult period, because it involves important changes from the physical, mental, emotional point of view, teenagers are prone to depressive episodes, behavioural disorders, anxious states, which is why the manner in which the divorced parent communicates and behaves with their child is paramount.

Usually, boys are more affected by divorce than girls, exhibiting for example rebellious behaviour or defiant attitude. Girls may be more vulnerable to internalising effects, for instance, sadness or self-blame (Stanley-Hagan, 2002). However, the negative consequences of divorce seem more pronounced in boys than in girls (Harwood., Miller, 2010: 762).

**Applied research design.** The qualitative survey was conducted in Reșița Municipality, Caraș-Severin County, between October and December 2018, the methods used were: autobiographical reflection and sociological investigation, the technique being the semi-structured interview, applied to a number of 20 single-

parent families resulted from death, divorce and migration of one of the parents abroad. The investigative tool is the list of questions per se.

**The objectives of the applied research are the following:**

- social perception regarding the increase in the number of single parent families;
- factors generating the spread of the single parent family in the contemporary society;
- observing the disadvantages for the children coming from single parent families.

**3. Case study. Single parent family resulting from the death of one of the parents**

A.P is 18 years old, she is a high school student attending a theoretic high school in the Reșița Municipality, Caraș-Severin County; she comes from a single-parent family, her mother died 11 years ago due to a fatal illness at the age of 32. From then until now the teenager lives with her father in a two-room apartment located in Reșița Municipality. After the mother's death, things changed radically for both A. and her father, as the father had to fulfil also the role of the mother, and A., a 7-year-old, had to get used to the mother's absence and grow up too early. The fulfilment of the maternal role meant a great challenge for Mr. V., father of A., because until the unfortunate event he was not familiar with the household tasks and with the specific needs of a girl preparing for school, doing homework, her hygiene and feeding. The loss of his wife caused Mr V. to see life differently, now he puts more value on health, peace and faith.

From a financial point of view, things have changed considerably, the only income of the family being the father's salary, which does not exceed 2000 RON and the girl's 84 lei allowance. With this money, the father tries to cover all the expenses of the house: the mortgage instalments, the payment of the utilities, the purchase of food and also he takes care of the girl's education, he pays tutoring for her at different subjects, encourages her to participate in different school contests in order to develop her intellectual capacities and also supports the daughter's inclination for volunteering, as well as her involvement in such activities.

From a social point of view, after the loss of his wife, Mr. V. isolated himself from friends and family, because he could not accept the new status of single father. Almost 6 months after the tragic event, both A. and her father went to a psychologist in order to cope with the tragedy that had struck them. Many friendships have deteriorated, due to the father's refusal to communicate and to go out for different activities.

From an emotional point of view, the absence of the mother has left its mark on A.'s personality, as she is a mature person, but introvert, and she is extremely grateful to her father and grandparents who have raised her with lots of love and patience, have always tried to protect her, to be at her side in the most important moments of her life, so that she does not feel the grievance of losing her mother. The relationship between A. and her grandparents is special, and even though the years have passed and A. has become a true young lady, grandparents still treat her like a child and pamper her.

Currently, A. is preparing for the maturity exam and wants very much to become a student of Alexandru Ioan Cuza University in Iași, at the International Relations section, because she is passionate of foreign languages and literature, she wants to go to Iași, because her paternal grandparents live there.

#### **Applied research conclusions:**

Following the interview of the 20 single-parent families, the following conclusions could be drawn: the number of single-parent families is constantly increasing, due to the fact that in the last decades the divorce rate has increased considerably, and more and more parents, who have a poor financial situation, choose to go abroad in search of a better life.

In today's society most families are falling apart, because young people choose to end their marriage much too easily, do not meditate on the consequences, do not think what it means for a child to grow up without one of the parents. The mortality rate among young people has increased a lot, non-curable diseases leaving many orphaned children from very young ages. The disadvantages of children from single-parent families are multiple: they are deprived of the love, attention and protection of both parents, cannot acquire norms, values and principles of life from both parents.

Children who come from single parent families are more sensitive, more introverted, they think they are misunderstood, which is why it is very difficult for them to freely express their feelings and their desires. They tend to get (self) marginalised, feeling different from the other children, who grow up with both parents.

Children in single parent families need a lot of love, attention and understanding from family members, friends and colleagues. The family situation leaves its imprint on the development of the child's personality and later on his or her adult life, because all their existence they live with the fear of not going through a similar situation.

### **In lieu of general conclusions...**

The single parent family is normality in the contemporary society. Most children come from families where the parents chose to move/divorce or go abroad in search of a better life, and this led to a gradual differentiation from the traditional family model in which children were raised and educated by both parents. Even if we live in a democratic society, single-parent families are viewed in a negative light, the education of children who come from single parent families has its deficiencies especially in the case of children who grow up in disorganised families from very early ages, because they cannot acquire their own behavioural patterns, norms and beliefs, which could help them to shape their own personality. The single-parent family faces a number of issues: financial difficulties, social exclusion, marginalisation, and all these aspects contributing to the increasing vulnerability of this social group. Within this type of family there is only one potential income earner, and this contributes to the increase of the degree of dependence on the free and easy help offered by the state through the Social Assistance programs.

The family situation influences the physical, mental and emotional development of children in a decisive way. Most of them become introverted; have a tendency to get (self) marginalised, exhibit adapting difficulties. Children from single parent families need a lot of love, communication, moral support, in order to develop harmoniously. All these emotional aspects can affect children's adult life, because they can look with scepticism at the idea of starting a family, and this can be due to their own family model.

It is essential for parents to understand how important it is to get involved and find the inner resources needed to deal with crisis situations. Children from single parent families should enjoy the same protection and understanding, the same love, even if they do not have both parents. For children it is not easy to accept that they are part of a single parent family and this can become a real issue for parents, who do not know how to manage the relationship with their own child.

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