

Parental Marital Status and Child Self-Regulation

Elisa Gooding, Megan M. McClelland, Ph.D., Sara Schmitt, M.A.

Abstract

- ❖ Parents play an essential role in their child’s development of the skills needed for self-regulation.
- ❖ The current study examined the relationship between parental marital status and child self-regulation
- ❖ Analyzing a sample of 328 preschool children, results indicate having married parents is related to higher self-regulation in children.
- ❖ These results suggest that living in a single-parent or married parent household may influence child self-regulation in school.

Introduction

- ❖ Preschool is a sensitive time in the development of self-control. It is a time when children learn the skills required to regulate their behavior (McClelland & Cameron, 2012).
- ❖ This development, however, can be greatly affected by negative life events such as divorce (Leon, 2003).
- ❖ Some studies have found evidence of oppositional, aggressive, distractible, and demanding behaviors in children following a divorce (Crossman & Adams, 1980).
- ❖ Other research has found that the majority of children who experience parental divorce do not exhibit significantly more problems in their development (Wood, Repetti & Roesch, 2004).
- ❖ A great deal of research has been conducted on the effect of divorce on a childhood adjustment and development.
- ❖ Indeed, this research is useful to parents, teachers, and child development researchers, but there has not been much research conducted examining the relationship between child self-regulation and living with a single, never married parent.

- ❖ It would be beneficial to determine whether marital status of parents has an effect on child self-regulation.
- ❖ Finding a correlation between these factors could allow early childhood development researchers and educators to design programs for children who may have difficulty managing their behavior.

Study Design/Methods Used

- ❖ My URAP project was part of Dr. McClelland’s *Touch Your Toes! Kindergarten Readiness Study* which is examining the reliability and validity of the Head-Toes-Knees-Shoulders (HTKS) self-regulation task as a school readiness screening tool.
- ❖ The sample consists of 328 preschool children.
- ❖ The data examined were collected in Fall of 2011 (Time 1) and Spring of 2012 (Time 2).
- ❖ Within the sample, 74 children were living with a single, never married parent (22.56%) and 254 children were living with married parents (77.44%).
- ❖ Self-regulation was assessed using the HTKS measure.
- ❖ Correlation and regression analyses were used to analyze the data.

Goals of the Study

- ❖ The present study examined the following research question:
 - ❖ 1. Do children living in single-parent homes have a more difficult time managing their behavior (i.e., lower self-regulation) in school than children living in two-parent homes?

- ❖ Based on previous research, I predicted children living in a single-parent home will have more difficulty regulating their behavior compared to children living with married parents.

Results

- ❖ Results of the correlation analysis indicate having married parents is significantly and positively correlated with HTKS scores at Time 1 ($r = .19^{***}$, $p < .001$) and Time 2 ($r = .26^{***}$, $p < .001$).
- ❖ Results of regressions indicate that, when controlling for child age and parent education, having married parents is significantly and positively related to higher self-regulation on the HTKS at Time 1 and Time 2 (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Regression Analysis
Relations between living in married or single-parent families and child self-regulation

Variables	HTKS Task of Self-Regulation	
	Coefficient at Time 1	Coefficient at Time 2
Parent Education	.38***	.5***
Child Age	.17**	.15**
Living in Married or Single-Parent Families	.12*	.13*

Note. Coefficients are standardized.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$

Summary/Conclusion

- ❖ The results of the analyses support the original hypothesis of child living in single-parent families having lower self-regulation than children living in married parent families.
- ❖ This finding is a good start to future research.
- ❖ It would be very interesting to look further into the factors associated with living in single- and married parent households and how they may affect child self-regulation.
- ❖ Conducting more research to find predictive factors of self-regulation will be beneficial to children, parents, and child educators.

References

1. Eamon, M., & Altshuler, S. (2004). Can we predict disruptive school behavior? *Children and Schools*, 26, 23-37

2. Leon, K. (2003). Risk and protective factors in young children’s adjustment to parental divorce: A review of the research. *Family Relations*, 52, 258-270.

3. McClelland, M.M. & Cameron, C. (2012). Self regulation in early childhood development: Improving conceptual clarity and developing ecologically valid measures. *Child Development Perspectives*, 6(2), 136-142. doi: 10.1111/j. 1750-8606. 2011. 00191.x

4. Wood, J., Repetti, R., & Roesch, S. (2004). Divorce and children’s adjustment problems at home and school: The role of depressive/withdrawn parenting. *Child Psychiatry & Human Development*, 35, 121-142

5. Crossman, S. & Adams, G. (1980). Divorce, single parenting, and child development. *Journal of Psychology*, 106, 205-218

Acknowledgements

- ❖ I would like to thank the College of Public Health & Human Sciences and the Undergraduate Research Award Program for support and funding for this study.
- ❖ I would like to thank Sara Schmitt and Dr. Megan McClelland for their advice, support, and guidance throughout this research experience.
- ❖ I would also like to thank the team of research assistants who have volunteered their time and contributed to the Touch your Toes! Kindergarten Readiness Study.
- ❖ Thank you to the teachers, parents and children who are involved and have been part of the study.

