

FATHER PARENTING FAMILIES: EMERGING FAMILY PATTERN

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Abstract

Father parenting family is a family (household) whereby the father lives and cares for the upbringing of his children singlehandedly. Father parenting families in the real sense of it was uncommon and rare in, Nigeria as a country but today, the trend is on steady increase. The alarming rate of increase in death rate of spouses, divorce, separation, unfaithfulness, and infidelity is mainly responsible for this family pattern. The Nigerian society in general has not fully accepted the households maintained by father parenting families in particular. The consequences are that such households maintained by father parenting family pattern suffer behavior disorders especially psychosocial problems in addition to financial problems. The children of father parenting families are more hostile, aggressive and distractible relative to those of intact families. However, with improvement in parental adjustment, most of the single parents and their children easily resolve conflicts.

Introduction

Father parenting family is a family pattern (household) whereby the father lives and cares for the upbringing of his children singlehandedly in the absence of the mother of his children or his wife. This could be as a result of death, divorce or separation of any sort. Father parenting families include the divorced or separated, widowers, never married men and single adoptive fathers. In most parts of Nigeria, single parentage is associated with women. If a man lost his wife by death or his wife ran away and left the children behind, the man was expected to send his children to his mother or any of his sisters to raise his children, if he did not intend to marry again. It looked odd to see a single-father family. Nowadays the situation is very different. Single father families are fast-growing family patterns in Nigeria and many parts of the world. It represents a unique and growing share of single parent families or children.

The writer has no available, statistics of single - father parent families in Nigeria but practical experience and newspaper reports show that there is an increase of single – father families in Nigeria and people are fast accepting the trend. In western countries, there has been fast growing increase in the percentage of male adult and children residing in single parent households. In

America, the number of single fathers has increased by 60% in the last ten years and it is one of the fastest growing family situations (Williams 2016). In addition, there is an increasing trend of men having children through surrogate mothers and raising them alone (Williams, 2016).

In a literature review of research on single fathers dating from 1970 through 2015, Coles (2009) concluded that compared to children in single-mothers, the children of single fathers do as well in terms of internalizing behaviours. However, the children of single fathers relatively do better in academic performance, participation in externalizing behavior and substance use. Few studies of young adults do not include significant long-term differences as related to marriage, teenage birth and divorce between those reared in single-father versus single mother homes.

In a more recent study, on sexual behavior among 15 to 19 years olds raised in single parent families, the authors, Waternbeg and Reinhardt, (2011) compared various sexual behaviours (including intercourse, contraceptive use and attitudes towards pregnancy) among boys and girls living with either single mothers or single fathers. Interestingly, the researchers found no significant difference between teenagers living with single fathers and those living with single mothers on these sex-related behaviours.

A study by Chiu (2014) found that single fathers faced a higher rate of premature death, compared to single mothers and others who co-parent. The study, one of the few to focus on the often neglected demographic of single father, surveyed 40,000 parents in Ontario, Canada. The group included 871 single fathers, 4010 single mothers, 16,431 partnered fathers and 18,688 partnered mothers. All of them were aged 15 or older. All had natural or biological children under the age of 25 years.

The study revealed that single fathers tended to earn higher salaries and were less likely to be unemployed. On the other hand, they appeared to be less healthy. Single fathers were more likely to have poor diets and much drinks. They had higher rates of obesity, hypertension, poor respiration condition and cancer.

These findings are consistent with a Swedish study Miller (2004). The Swedish focused exclusively on men, pooling a larger population of over 600,000. The study found in 2004 that single fathers and childless men have higher mortality rate than their peers. The two studies (i.e Canadian and Swedish studies) are alike in that they drew on data from wealthy countries and consequently might not be generalized to other socio - economic environments.

Miller (2004) pointed out one potential factor in single father's life. This is loneliness. In the study, single fathers are significantly less likely to

have relationship and connections within and between social networks. Structure barriers either real or perceived might prevent them from accessing these community services. Loneliness has been associated with poor health and has been found to generate risk of premature death comparable to those of obesity and smoking.

It is not easy to be a male single parent because men are not raised to nurture and be empathic. In fact, the Nigerian cultural society prepares male adolescents inadvertently to be bullies and crass image of masculinity. Hence, Williams (2016, p.18) observes that:

“We don't dote babies around when we were little. We were not the ones hired to baby-sit the twins down the street when we were in our teens. We were instead pushed to physical activities, sports and other activities that emphasize the testosterone factor rather than traditionally feminine aspect of humanity”.

In double family households, fathers are more often than not, the disciplinarian. They actually enforce rule and behavior and impose consequences for violation. The mothers are often the regrant and sympathetic parents. For a single parent - father to change roles or handle the two seemingly opposing roles as a result of the absence of the mother, is not easy, but an uphill task. For a father to step into the new world of single parenting is really hard.

In the past, most of the research studies were on the impact of father absence on the children because most of single parent families were headed by mothers. Nowadays, studies are done on single parent families headed by the fathers and the effect of divorce or separation on the children. According to Nwachukwu, (2008), immediately divorce occurs, the family life is destroyed and everybody in the family including the children redefines relationship. The children experience divorce as a painful destructive factor in their lives. The children feel angry at one or both of the parents over the divorce and are ashamed at the parents' behavior. The future appears uncertain and unpredictable. Indeed, children are affected by divorce in many different ways varying by the circumstances and age of the child. Young children of ages two to six are generally the most fearful of parental separation, and often feel abandoned or confused. Both boys and girls have the same amount of trouble coping but often show this in different ways. Nonetheless, this age group adapts best to their situations as they are often too young to remember their

non-custodial parent vividly. Children ageing seven to twelve are much better at expressing emotions and accepting parentage breakage, but often distrust their parents, rely on outside help and support for encouragement and may manifest social and academic problems. Adolescents cope the worst with divorce: they often struggle most with the change and may even turn away from their family entirely, dealing with their situation on their own. They often have problems expressing feelings similar to younger children and may have adjustment issues with long term relationships due to these feelings. Keeping in touch with both parents and having a healthy relationship with both mother and father appear to have the most effect on a child's behavior which leads to an easier time with coping divorce as well as development through the child's life. Children will do better with their parents' divorce if they have a smooth adjustment period. One way to make this adjustment easier on children is to let them remain in the same neighborhoods and schools, following divorce.

Factors That Helped the Growth of Single Father Pattern

The term single father includes men in a variety of family circumstances. Single fathers include the divorced or separated, widowers, never married males and, single-adoptive fathers who have primary responsibility for the care of their children. Single-father families are of recent phenomenon. In the traditional societies, if they existed at all. They were very few and far between. They were those who sent their wives home after proven adultery. High maternal mortality, also, helped to increase the incidence of single fatherhood (Defrain & Eirick, 2008). Nowadays, single-parent fathers are increasing not only in Nigeria, but all over the world, in spite of worldwide low maternal mortality. In Nigeria, a number of variables are responsible. A great part of the increase is due to large number of divorce and separated men, changes in legal custody arrangements, changes in adoption procedures, civil and inter-village wars. These days, an increasing number of fathers are seeking for and winning custody of the children. Although more widowers than widows remarry after the death of their partners yet there is a growing tendency among widowers to remain single without remarriage.

The growing economic independence of women is a factor that helped the rise of single fatherhood. Women now earn as much as men for doing the same job. Unlike before, women who are unhappy in their marriages leave their husbands and the children behind and live on their own. Finally, a factor in the growth of single fatherhood is a shift in social norms and values during the 1980s. This reduced the stigma associated with separation and divorce. Nowadays, men can divorce or drive away their wives and keep their children without social stigma.

Since the second Vatican Council in 1964, liberal Christian theologians give the laws that guide marriage annulment wide interpretation. The result is that more than ever before, more Christian marriages are annulled. More often than not, the father takes custody of the children.

The Benefits of a Single Parent Fatherhood

It has been observed very often that single parent father tends to use more positive parenting techniques than a married father. Much importantly, a strong bond tends to be formed between parent and child in single parent situations, allowing for an increase in maturity and closeness in the households. Gender roles are also less likely to be shared among all the members of the family without minding the gender of the members.

Many fathers share household management with their children, especially the oldest of the children. Often, the child has a say in the running of the household and assumes more responsibility in taking more care of himself/herself than in two parent families. These responsibilities are seen by Weiss (2009) to promote independence in children.

Problems of Single Father

Single fathers experience difficulties caring for their children and keeping their jobs. Feeding and preparing the children for school and at the same time being on time for their jobs every morning is not easy. The synchronization of work, supervision of children and household management seems to be a major problem to most single fathers (Harmner and Turner, 2005). Home management is perhaps, their greatest headache. Many express difficulty in looking after the family, cooking, washing, arranging the furniture, having to wake up from sleep at night to attend to the children etc. Indeed, very many single fathers indicated, during an informal conversation with them, that the greatest difficulty lies in crossing the male sex roles to which they have been used, into the areas of female sex roles.

Finance is the next difficulty. The entire family has to depend on the earning of the single father for the supplement from the wife is missing. Unlike ex-wives, single fathers generally do not seek for help or child support from their ex-wives.

Defrain and Eirick (2008) observed that single fathers experience difficulty in establishing meaningful social life, and the formation of intimate interpersonal relationships. Many complain of feelings of loneliness, inadequacy and lack of personal and social worth. Some have an overwhelming sense of failure. There may be irritability, restlessness and a tendency to "useless over" – activity (Defrain and Eirick, 2008).

Single fathers experience much adjustment problem in relationship with children regarding child - rearing and child - cares (Schlesinger 2008). The father must recognize his life in such areas as job social life etc, to suit his new roles. He has to make solid arrangement regarding who will take care of his children when he is out for job and he has to make sure that in his absence, the children are properly taken care of.

Most single fathers are ill prepared to handle sibling rivalries, petty quarrels and fights. Providing for emotional development of the children is more tasking to many fathers than home making role. Many find it embarrassing discussing sexual matters or giving instructions on sex to their daughters.

Becoming a single father as a result of the death of one's spouse is emotionally costly and has significant series of challenges that could never be anticipated. Dealing with one's own grief and loss, while helping the children through their own, is not easy and sometimes the impact of it can be debilitating.

Divorced persons have specifically been studied by many social scientists. Smit and Smit (2011) observed that divorced men go through a predictable sequence in adjusting themselves socially. At the onset of divorce, the father would isolate himself from outside interaction and uses lack of time as a pretext. After a year, he starts gradually to readjust and may begin to look for a wife if he opts to remarry.

In a classic study by White and Bloom (2013) on factors that relate to the adjustment of divorced men, the researchers discovered that half of the subjects reported physical and emotional separation stress. After about a year and a half, feelings of loneliness and guilt decreased remarkably. Then an improvement in social life and social integration occurred.

Solutions to Problems of Single Father Parenting through Counseling Intervention

Single fathers need help in coping with their own emotions, in feeling worthy again, in working out acceptable relationship with former spouse and in developing understanding of their children's reactions. When counseling single parents, it is important to pay attention not only to the cognitive contents of the client's communication but also to the affective contents. Similarly, counselors should respond to both cognitive and affective contents of the client's communication. Much information would be lost and an opportunity for effective counseling missed if the counselor fails either to pay attention to the cognitive contents of the client's communication or fails to respond to the affective contents.

A positive identity or enhanced self-concept is a sine-qua-non for the overall adjustment of the single-parents. Counselors should aid them in the three basic dimensions of self-concept, namely: sense of belonging, sense of worth and sense of competence. Exploring feelings of isolation is important for the enhancement of self-concept. Group counseling, family counseling, home visits and supportive associations are potentially helpful intervention strategies.

Orhungur (2008) suggested that the best advice to single parents is not to give up. One's priorities are going to be readjusted, long-term goals may take a little longer to obtain, but one must have a positive attitude.

Group counseling is very effective among single parents for group counseling is germane to our culture, (Nwachukwu, 1994). Group provides excellent condition for learning. Group counseling helps parents find out that they are not alone in their problem and that others have similar problems. Such feelings help individuals to accept their problems and share solution to their problems.

Nwachukwu (1994) insists that group counseling should in general be characterized by five therapeutic factors which include interpersonal interaction, establishing universality, instilling hope, imparting information and developing socialization techniques.

Interpersonal interactions: Here members learn how they are perceived by others and such knowledge increases the awareness of single parents and consequently moves them towards healthier behavior. Interpersonal input is an initial critical step towards interpersonal learning and self understanding. Self knowledge permits single parent client to recognize, integrate and give free expression to previously dissociated parts of themselves. It also encourages a sense of effectiveness and mastery.

Establishing universality: Many single parents particularly the fathers think that they are alone in their problems and that their own situations are different from those of the other people. This type of thinking is often accompanied by feelings of isolation and stress. By instilling a sense of universality, the counseling process can help the parents learn that others share their concerns and problem and they are not alone or very different from others.

Instilling hope: Yalon (2005) suggested that instillation and maintenance of hope are crucial to counseling and that high expectation of hope correlates significantly with positive counseling outcomes. Hope can be instilled in

various ways. One way could be presenting to the single parents a model who is a single parent to talk to them.

Imparting information: Hope cannot be instilled without the imparting of information. Imparting information during group counseling encourages positive relationship among single parents. Some may find it easy to discuss their concerns with fellow members. Yahoom (2005) attributed the search for understanding to the establishment of a sense of control. This sense of control may be particularly helpful to single parents in turning an external to an internal locus of control.

Developing socialization techniques: Social learning, which Yahom (2005) described as the development of basic social skill can be enhanced by teaching the single parents skills necessary for fostering their social relationship, for the debilitating fear of isolation can produce psychological and social problems.

Family counseling: The family is the primary socialization agent and consequently it plays significant roles in the personality development of the family members, hence the need for family counseling. The reciprocal nature of the family goes in a big way to determine how its members cope with problems and social pressures. For a family such as single - parent family which has been fragmented by divorce or separation, it is often possible and important to reassemble it in order to achieve some closure of unresolved problem. The divorced father with custody of his two children may ask for counseling only for himself and the children but it may be necessary to involve his wife if both of them are to cease the unusually covert warfare, which they carry on through their children. Ex-spouses can work productively together during counseling for the benefit of their children, if they understand that it is intended to improve existing relationship and not to re-establish old ties (though some divorced parents are known to live together after therapy). However, in the beginning, the ex-spouses often resist the idea of meeting together but a surprising number agree to work together for the benefits of their children.

The counselor should pay close attention to the family structures and the emotional climate of the home. Major relationship conflicts if any should be resolved. During counseling, both the individuals and the family have roles to play. Some parents may lack the understanding necessary to help the children to address the problems that confront them. In such a situation, the counselor should give the parents the necessary information during individual

counseling. A comprehensive approach to working with parent cannot easily be accomplished unless home visits are incorporated into the programme.

Home visit: Home visit provides a genuine means for linking the school and the homes of the pupils. Hammer and Turner (2005) enumerated various benefits of home visits to the children and single parents. They noted that home visitation provides excellent opportunities to the counselor to gain a greater and deeper understanding of the child, establish rapport with the parent, facilitate communication, encourage parental involvement and enlist parental support, relate a child's progress, discuss any problem the child may be having, provide service to the family and reach those parents who cannot or who are unwilling to visit the school. Home visits help the counselor to understand the influence of the home on the child's behavior and development. The counselor would observe carefully family tension, verbal expression and bodily language as well as interactions of family members. Methods of discipline and child management by the parent should be taken note of.

Social support: Opportunity for satisfying social contacts with friends outside the extended family appear to be important factor in coping with stress, particularly in teenage single parent family as well as in divorced or widowed single-parent families. The lack of friends with whom these parents can share common interest, concerns and problems contribute to feelings of loneliness and isolation. In addition, contact with friends may assist in parents changing inappropriate parent-child relations.

A sense of belonging which is necessary for the easing or even eradication of emotional stress may be satisfied through involvement in various organizations. Such support systems if appropriate are very effective. Counselors should assess these local systems for their appropriateness and usefulness before advising single parents to join them. Such associations as widows and widowers club (for those whose partners are dead), singles club (for the never married) and parents without partners (for the divorced) are non-profit, non-sectarian and educational organizations for the good of the members and their children. They provide psychological and emotional support through the mutual sharing of information and reinforcement of belief and behaviors. Also, they are sources of information about child-development, parent-child relationship and culturally accepted child rearing patterns.

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