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**Single-mothers-by-choice: parent-child relationships, social support networks and the well-being of their children**

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**Study question:**

Are there differences between single-mother-by-choice (SMC) and heterosexual two parent families, looking at parent-child relationship, social support of the parent and well-being of their children.

**Summary answer:**

No differences were found between family types looking at parent-child relationships and child development. SMC had a larger social support network.

**What is known already:**

Children growing up without a father in a single mother family have more developmental problems. This is mostly measured after an emotional trauma (like divorce or death). It is likely that secure attachment and parent-child relationships are negatively influenced by this trauma and not by the absence of a father. SMC knowingly choose to raise their child alone. This means that their children do not suffer from this kind of trauma. Little research on the subject has been done but it shows that children of SMC do not have any more developmental problems than children from two parent families.

**Study design, size, duration:**

This cross sectional study, consists of 69 single-mothers-by-choice and 59 mothers from heterosexual two-parent families with a child between the ages of 1.5 and 6 ( $M_{age}=3.12$ ,  $SD_{age}=1.50$ ). Participants filled out a questionnaire consisting of standardized instruments. Parent-child relationships, social support network and children's well-being were compared between family types (single-mothers-by-choice versus heterosexual two-parent households). Then the relationship between parent-child relationship and social support, and children's well-being were analyzed within the SMC group.

**Participants/materials, setting, methods:**

SMC were recruited through a fertility center in the Netherlands. Mothers from the comparison group were recruited through day care centers. Inclusion criteria were that the relationship

status did not change since the child was born, and additionally for the single mothers, that they had knowingly chosen to raise their child alone. The mothers completed the Parenting and Child Rearing Support Questionnaire (PCRSQ), the Child-Rearing Practices Report (CRPR) and the Child Behavior Checklist 1<sup>1/2</sup>-6 (CBCL).

### **Main results and the role of chance:**

1. There were no significant differences in emotional involvement ( $p=.936$ ) or parental stress ( $p=.474$ ) between family types.
2. SMC showed significant higher scores on received social support ( $p=.012$ ), and interestingly also on wanting more social support ( $p=.030$ ); there was no significant difference between the mothers in both family types on their satisfaction of support ( $p=.112$ ).
3. There were no significant differences on the offspring's internal ( $p=.769$ ) and external ( $p=.985$ ) problem behavior (well-being) between both family types.
4. When looking at the offspring's problem behavior in the SMC families, a significant negative correlation between satisfaction with social support and internalizing problem behavior was found ( $r= -.386$ ,  $p=.007$ ). Likewise, a significant negative correlation between satisfaction with social support and externalizing problem behavior ( $R= -.319$ ,  $p=.027$ ) was found in the SMC families.

### **Limitations, reasons for caution:**

Because the study has a cross-sectional design nothing can be said about the cause and effect of the findings. Additionally, social support questionnaires about child rearing are originally made for couples. This means we had slightly alter one of the questionnaires. This did not influence the reliability of the instrument.

### **Wider implications of the findings:**

Children in both family types are doing well in terms of their well-being. SMC and their children benefit from a good social-support network. In the counseling of women who want to have and raise a child without a partner, one should emphasize the importance of having a good supportive network.

### **Trial registration number:**

not applicable.

Funding by University(ies)  
University of Amsterdam