

## **Single Parenthood, Parental Involvement and Students' Educational Outcomes in Hong Kong**

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### **Key implications**

1. Parents from single-father and single-mother families fare differently in terms of sociodemographic backgrounds and parental involvement.
2. There are negative effects of single-fatherhood but not single-motherhood on children's educational outcomes in Hong Kong.
3. The disadvantages of single-fatherhood are partially explained by the poorer sociodemographic background and lower levels of parental involvement.



### **Background**

Like other East Asian societies such as South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, and the Mainland China, a steady increase in the divorce rate was evident in Hong Kong in the past few decades, particularly after the 1990s. The rise of divorce rate has also increased the number of children living with a single parent. From 2001 to 2011 the annual growth rate of single parents was 2.8% in Hong Kong. The well-being of children growing up in single-parent families in this social context is worthy of further investigation. Although evidence in the Western context consistently shows that children from single-parent families have poorer academic performance than the children from intact families, the negative effects of single parenthood on children's academic performance vary across societal contexts. Some studies found comparatively weak effects of single parenthood on students' reading performance in some Asian societies while an earlier study in Hong Kong could not find any significant effect of single parenthood on students' academic performance in Hong Kong.

Past research has shown that familial economic conditions and parental involvement are important factors associated with differences in students' educational outcomes by family structure. Students with a single parent were more likely to live in poor socioeconomic conditions than students with two parents. Besides, the potential role of gender of a single parent has not been thoroughly examined. Many past studies combined single-father and single-mother families into one category of single-parent families, but relatively little is known about whether the absence of negative effects of single parenthood on students' educational outcomes applies to both single-father and single-mother families in these Asian societies.

In my study, I extend the literature by further separating single-parent families into single-mother and single-father families and examine the educational outcome of their children along with their socioeconomic background and parenting practices.

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## Methods

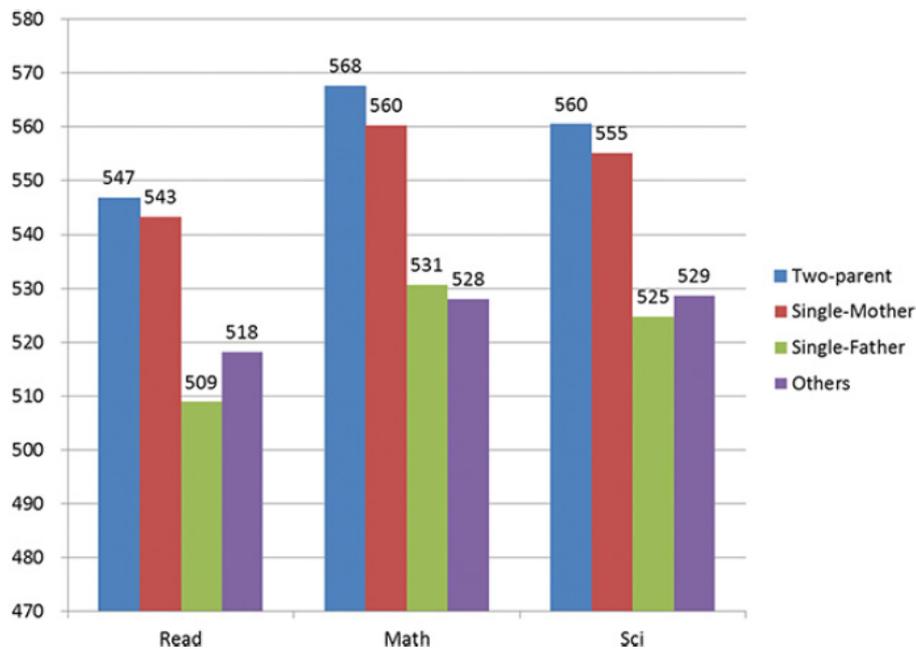
Because single-father families constitute a relatively small group in the population, a large sample size is required for making any statistically meaningful comparison between single-father families and other types of families. To examine the relationships among single parenthood, family's socioeconomic conditions, parental involvement, and academic test scores, we analyzed data from a combined sample of PISA Hong Kong 2009 and 2012. The combined data from both years provide enough cases for children living with a single father as well as a single mother. PISA is a triennial international survey that assessed the skills and knowledge (including reading, mathematics, and science literacy) of 15-year-old students in OECD members and some non-OECD countries and economies.

## Key findings

1. Parents in single-parent families are more disadvantaged in socioeconomic conditions and are less involved in some aspects of parental involvement at home than parents in two-parent families.
2. Single mothers did not show much difference from parents in two-parent families in spending time talking to children while single fathers are less involved in children's education and everyday life.
3. Consistent with previous study in Hong Kong, we did not find a significant negative effect of single motherhood on students' academic performance. However, there is a significant negative effect of single fatherhood on children's academic performance.
4. The negative effects of single-fatherhood on students' academic performance could be partly explained by the poorer socioeconomic background and the lower level of parental involvement

## Significance of the study

Single parenthood still matters in students' educational outcome in Hong Kong, but the gender of the single parents has to be considered. Although single-father families are still a relatively small group among Hong Kong families—38 points less in the test scores— this indicates about 40% of the standard deviation in the international distribution of the test scores and therefore presents a moderate to strong disadvantage that requires attention from policymaking and the scholarly community.



**FIGURE 1** Academic ability scores (readings, mathematics and science) by family structure.

Source: Cheung and Park (2016)

Taking the context into account, it is not very surprising that single fathers are less involved in communicating with their children than single mothers. Traditional gender roles are still expected and performed in Hong Kong. Men's self-evaluation is still largely based on their ability to provide financial support to the home. They may have less time available and are more self-restrained to talk and express affection to their children. On the other hand, single mothers communicate with children as much as parents from two-parent families, possibly because providing emotional care to the children is the expected responsibility of mothers. These differences in parenting behaviors between the types of families have implications on students' educational outcomes.

## RELATED PUBLICATIONS

Cheung, Adam Ka-Lok, and Hyunjoon Park. "Single parenthood, parental involvement and students' educational outcomes in Hong Kong." *Marriage & Family Review* 52.1-2 (2016): 15-40.

## REQUEST FOR MORE DETAILS

Please contact Dr. Adam Cheung at [adamkl@hkbu.edu.hk](mailto:adamkl@hkbu.edu.hk) for more information about the project.

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