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1 Master's Student, Pediatric Health Nursing, College of Nursing, University of Babylon. Professor, Pediatric
2 Health Nursing, College of Nursing, University of Babylon.

Corresponding author email address:
nur453.fatima.ali@student.uobabylon.edu.iq



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Introduction

Family structure began to change around the world. Single-parent families have become a common family structure due to various global events, including death, separation, and divorce. These situations are characterized by a single parent, typically the father or mother, living and raising their children alone. Most single-parent families are headed by women, according

Adolescents' Developmental Challenges in Single-Parent Families

Fatimah Ali. Sahib^{1*}, Nuhad Mohammed. Aldoori²

ABSTRACT

Objective: Single-parent families are considered family structures in which only one parent, who may be the father or mother, is living and raising their children. Many challenges faced by adolescents living in single-parent households in the domains of psychological, behavioral, emotional, economic, and educational may influence their overall well-being, resilience, and academic performance. Aims: to assess developmental challenges faced by adolescent students from single-parent households. To identify the association between adolescent challenges and the sociodemographic characteristics of the participants.

Methods and Materials: A descriptive cross-sectional study design was employed from November 1, 2025, to March 20, 2025. The study was conducted in Babylon Province, Iraq, among 222 secondary school students. Data were gathered through a modified questionnaire and analyzed electronically using SPSS, version 22.

Findings: The study revealed that 62.6% of the sample were between 12 and 15 years old, with 67.6% being male and 27.0% from the second intermediate grade. The overall assessment of challenges was moderate for 58.6% of the sample.

Conclusion: Moderate challenges faced adolescent students from single-parent families, and there is a significant correlation between challenges and class level, family income, mother's education, and gender of the single parent. It is recommended that every school should involve academic and counselling units to address issues of students who come from single-parent families and provide psychological and emotional, financial, and educational support. Counsellors should be adequately prepared to deal with the different difficulties that they may face with students from single-parent families.

Keywords: Challenges, Single-parent family, adolescents.

to single-parent family statistics by sex (Asah, 2021; Chavda & Nisarga, 2023; Perera, 2021). The number of single-parent households has increased in many countries, becoming a globally growing phenomenon. There are approximately 20 million single-parent households in the world, but the actual percentage is still unknown. In the United States, nearly 17.8 million children, or one in four children, are living without a father in their mother's home.

Single nurturing still a global source of anxiety that discards many academically successful broods the opportunity to understand the theoretical differences in themselves and to produce good work for the growth and productivity of the country and students whose experience separation, divorce, and death of a parent do not perform well in school and life and experience many challenges (Arshad et al., 2023).

Students who grow up in single-parent homes are at risk of not reaching their full potential. Such students face many challenges in their home lives, which they may bring to class in the educational system (Rogers, 2020). Pandya (2023) mentioned that students from single parent household experience many difficulties in the areas of economic, psychological and behavioral and social and educational, which may influence their overall well-being, resilience, academic performance (Pandya, 2023). Furthermore, Namwako (2024) documented that poor school performance, rates of school dropout, substance abuse, and criminal activity are high among adolescents' students' who were raised by single parents' (Namwako, 2024).

Another challenge is the low self-esteem of struggling adolescents from single-parent homes. Compared to adolescents raised by a single parent, adolescents living with two parents have better levels of self-esteem. Adolescents with only one parent have a negative self-concept and struggle to get along with both their parents and their peers, and exhibit low self-esteem as a result of the absence of two parents, which fosters children's and adolescents' self-esteem and promotes the development of trust in oneself, others, and the world (Sudarta, 2022).

In addition, the physical health of children was affected as a result of living in single-parent homes. Children from single-parent families exhibit worse health outcomes compared to children living with two parents. The prevalence of chronic conditions such as respiratory illness, asthma, dental problems, dermatitis, and eczema in children living in single-parent homes was higher than in children with two parents (Lut et al., 2021; Nishioka et al., 2021).

Objectives of the study: Identify developmental challenges faced by adolescent students from single-parent households and find out the association between adolescent developmental challenges and sociodemographic characteristics.

Methods and Materials

Study Design and Participants

The study was conducted through a descriptive (cross-sectional) study design to investigate "Adolescent Developmental Challenges in Single Parent Families" in the Babylon Governorate of Iraq through the period (1 November 2025 to 25 March 2025). The sampling technique was used as simple random stratified; the study sample consists of 222 adolescent students from single-parent families, drawn from nine secondary schools selected as the 15% rule (6 schools from the Al Hilha center, one secondary school from Al-Kifil, and two secondary schools from Abu-Ghraq).

Instruments

The data collection process, which spanned from November 13, 2024, to January 1, 2025, utilized the study instrument to gather data through interviews with participants in separate halls. Each participant's interview took approximately 25 to 35 minutes. The questionnaire is designed and modified after extensive review of the relevant literature and articles to data collection process, which consists of two parts: the first part for the demographic characteristics of the adolescent students and their families, and the second part consists of developmental challenges Scale: The scale consists of 20 items to assess difficulties struggle by students living in single-parent families by using a triple-point Likert scale that consists of agree, neutral, and disagree.

Data Analysis

The tabulation of collected data was analyzed using various statistical approaches, including electronic methods with the Statistics Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version. (22) and Microsoft Excel (2010). Objectives were determined through analysis of data by applying statistical approaches: descriptive statistical methods (frequency, percentages, mean, standard deviation) and inferential statistical methods (Kruskal-Wallis, Mann-Whitney U test).

Findings and Results

The study sample consisted of 222 adolescent students from single-parent families, with a mean age of 15.08 years (SD = 1.80); the majority were aged 12–15 (62.6%) and male (67.6%). Most were in second (27%) or first (22.5%) intermediate grades, and a substantial portion (82.4%) came from families earning ≤600,000 Iraqi Dinar/month. Regarding parental education, most mothers had a primary level (41.9%) and were unemployed (86.6%), while fathers were largely unemployed (80.6%) and had secondary education (38.9%). A majority of students had 1–3 siblings (62.6%), lived without extended family (65.7%), lived with their mother (83.8%), and had lost one parent

(66.2%). The overall challenge score was at an intermediate level ($M = 1.82$, $SD = 0.35$), with 58.6% rated in this range. Statistically significant relationships were found between challenges and grade level ($p = .034$), family income ($p = .007$), mother's education ($p = .014$), and living with mother versus father ($p = .049$). No significant correlations were found with age, sex, father's education, parental occupation, number of siblings, presence of relatives, or cause of single parenthood ($p > .05$). These findings suggest that certain socio-demographic variables, particularly economic and educational factors, are associated with the degree of challenges experienced by adolescents in single-parent households (Table 1).

Table 1

Socio-demographic characteristics of the study sample

Items	Categories	Frequency	Percent
Age / Years	12 – 15	139	62.6
	16 – 19	83	37.4
	Mean and Std. Deviation	15.08 ± 1.801	
	Total	222	100
Sex	Male	150	67.6
	Female	72	32.4
	Total	222	100.0
Class	First intermediate grade	50	22.5
	Second intermediate grade	60	27.0
	Third intermediate grade	31	14.0
	Demographic Data	25	11.3
	Fifth grade of middle school	28	12.6
	Sixth grade of middle school	28	12.6
	Total	222	100.0
Family income	≤ 600,000 ID/month	183	82.4
	601,000-900,000ID/month	26	11.7
	901,000-1,200,000 ID/month	9	4.1
	1,201,000-1,500,000 ID/month	1	.5
	≥ 1,501,000 ID/month	3	1.4
	Total	222	100.0
Mother education	Illiterate	33	17.7
	Primary level	78	41.9
	Secondary level	52	28.0
	Diploma and above	23	
Father education	Total	186	100.0
	Illiterate	7	19.4
	Primary level	6	16.7
	Secondary level	14	38.9
	Diploma and above	9	25.0
Mother occupation	Total	36	100.0
	Employed	25	13.4
	Unemployed	161	86.6
Father occupation	Total	186	100.0
	Employed	7	19.4
	Unemployed	29	80.6
Number of Siblings	Total	36	100.0
	Not have	16	7.2
	1 – 3	139	62.6
	4 – 6	56	25.2
	More than 6	11	5

Relatives live at home	Total	222	100.0
	Not found	146	65.7
	1 – 3	53	23.9
	4 – 6	18	8.1
	More than 6	5	2.3
Causes of single parenthood	Total	222	100.0
	Death	147	66.2
	Divorce	44	19.8
	Separation	31	14.0
	Total	222	100.0
living with whom	Mother	186	83.8
	Father	36	16.2
	Total	222	100.0
	Total	222	100.0

Std. Deviation = standard deviation

Table 2

Overall Score Assessment of Challenges Faced by Adolescents from Single-Parent Families.

Main Domain	Rating	F	%	M.S	Std. Deviation	Ass
Challenges levels	High	75	33.8	1.82	0.354	Intermediate
	Intermediate	130	58.6			
	Low	17	7.7			
	Total	222	100.0			

Ass = assessment, F= Frequency, %= percentage, Std. Deviation = (standard deviation), M.S= Mean of scale, cut off point (0.66), (high = 1-1.66), (intermediate= 1.67-2.33), (low = 2.34 – 3)

Table 3

Correlation between challenges and socio-demographic data

Socio-demographic data	Rating and intervals	Mean rank	Test	d.f	P.value	Ass
Age	12 - 15	110.39	1.980	2	0.372	N.S
	16 – 19	113.36				
Sex	Male	107.22	.946**	2	0.623	N.S
	Female	120.41				
Class	First intermediate grade	88.09	10.097*	10	0.034	S
	Second intermediate grade	115.46				
	Third intermediate grade	124.97				
	Fourth grade of middle school	128.62				
	Fifth grade of middle school	118.21				
	Sixth grade of middle school	107.91				
Family income	≤ 600,000 ID/month	106.24	13.375*	8	0.007	H.S
	601,000-900,000ID/month	142.69				
	901,000-1,200,000 ID/month	147.67				
	1,201,000-1,500,000 ID/month	61.00				
	≥ 1,501,000 ID/month	70.50				
Mother education	Illiterate	72.48	3.129*	6	.014	S
	Primary level	93.99				
	Secondary level	101.08				
	Diploma and above	104.87				
Father education	Illiterate	13.50	5.298*	6	.506	N.S
	Primary level	16.75				
	Secondary level	19.18				
	Diploma and above	22.50				
Mother occupation	Employed	107.52	4.74**	2	.192	N.S
	Unemployed	91.32				
Father occupation	Employed	20.50	0.621**	2	.733	N.S
	Unemployed	18.02				
Number of Siblings	Not have	86.33	1.356*	6	.716	N.S
	1 - 3	83.02				
	4 - 6	77.31				
	More than 6	88.79				
Relatives live at home	Not found	30.77	1.170*	6	.760	N.S
	1 - 3	30.06				

	4 - 6	35.43				
	More than 6	25.43				
Causes of single parenthood	Death	114.84	8.124*	4	.087	N.S
	Divorce	105.56				
	Separation	104.08				
living with whom	Mother	108.03	2.595**	2	.049	S
	Father	129.42				

* = Kruskal-Wallis Test, ** = Mann-Whitney Test, d.f= degree of freedom, p. value = probability value, H.S = highly significant, S = significant, N.S = non-significant.

The findings presented in [Table 2](#) reveal that the majority of adolescents from single-parent families experienced challenges at an intermediate level. Specifically, 130 adolescents (58.6%) were categorized in this group, with a mean score (M.S) of 1.82 and a standard deviation of 0.354. Meanwhile, 75 participants (33.8%) reported challenges at a high level, while only 17 respondents (7.7%) fell within the low challenge category. According to the cutoff points (high = 1–1.66; intermediate = 1.67–2.33; low = 2.34–3), the overall assessment indicates that adolescents from single-parent families generally face challenges of intermediate severity. This suggests that while such adolescents do not uniformly experience severe difficulties, they are still at a higher-than-minimal risk, warranting interventions to prevent escalation to higher levels of challenge.

[Table 3](#) presents the relationship between challenges and various socio-demographic variables. The analysis revealed significant correlations for class level, family income, mother's education, and living arrangements. Adolescents in higher grade levels, particularly those in the third and fourth grades of middle school, reported significantly higher mean ranks compared to earlier grades ($p = 0.034$). Family income showed a highly significant relationship ($p = 0.007$), with those from middle-income families (601,000–1,200,000 ID/month) reporting higher challenges. In contrast, both the lowest and highest income groups reported lower mean ranks. Mother's education was also significant ($p = 0.014$), with adolescents of more educated mothers reporting higher challenges. Living arrangements demonstrated significance ($p = 0.049$), where those residing with fathers reported greater difficulties compared to those living with mothers. Conversely, age, sex, father's education, parental occupation, number of siblings, presence of relatives in the household, and cause of single parenthood were not significantly associated with the level of challenges ($p > 0.05$).

Discussion and Conclusion

Following data analysis, the study revealed that fewer than two-thirds of the students were between 12 and 15 years old, male, and in the second intermediate grade. Additionally, less than two-thirds of these students had siblings ranging from 1 to 3, and none had relatives at home.

The majority of students were from low-income families; their parents had low educational levels and were unemployed, and the majority of them were living with their mothers, and the cause of being single-parent households was the death of a parent. These characteristics relate to the fact that most of the students were from martyr families, and traditionally in Iraq, the children stay with their mothers after the loss of their father. The culture of the society from which the sample was collected does not accept the job for the women and does not allow them to complete their educations to care their children, and a low education level may reduce opportunities for careers; in addition, single-parent families lose a second source of income, experience time constraints, which reflect in a low income level.

The study aligns with the findings of the studies conducted by [Chrystal \(2020\)](#), [Mtweve \(2023\)](#), and [Hui \(2016\)](#). These studies revealed that two-thirds of the students were between 12 and 15 years old and male. Additionally, fewer than two-thirds had a sibling count of 1 to 3, and most of their parents had low educational levels, were unemployed, and had a poor income level. Descriptive cross-sectional studies conducted by [Daryanani et al. \(2016\)](#) and [Sackey et al. \(2022\)](#) demonstrated that the majority of students come from single-parent households, and the majority of them live with their mother.

The study shows that more than half of the students from single-parent families experience moderate challenges. This may be due to the culture and customs of Iraqi society, where single-parent families are often

supported emotionally and financially by the extended family, including uncles, aunts, and grandparents, as well as some school administrations and non-governmental organizations. In addition, Islam encourages the care of orphans and broken families, which makes society more willing to help and support single-parent families, which leads to mitigating the challenges experienced by students from such family structures. The study findings are supported by the results of the study established by [Manengelo et al. \(2023\)](#), which aimed to assess challenges faced by students from single-parent families in governmental secondary schools, showing that the challenges faced by students from single-parent families were moderate. At the same time, the results of the current study are inconsistent with the findings of the study conducted by [\(Sto et al., 2024\)](#) about "experiences and difficulties of students in single-parent families" to explore difficulties faced by students living in single-parent households, which exhibited students in such family structures experiencing high levels of challenges in many domains, financially, emotionally, socially, psychologically, and in education.

The findings show that there is a highly significant positive correlation between challenges faced by adolescent students and family income; students from high-income households may be adapted to a certain standard of living and high quality of care, and they may have higher expectations regarding the quality of education and the study environment, in addition to such family structure may set high academic and professional expectations for their children, which puts the student under pressure to achieve success and excellence, and this can lead to struggling more. This finding is inconsistent with the findings of the study conducted by [Rees et al. \(2023\)](#) to find an association between challenges faced by adolescent students and family income, which demonstrated a significant negative relationship between family income and challenges faced by adolescent students. Furthermore, a study conducted by [Yang et al. \(2023\)](#) showed that students from lower family incomes experience many challenges in contrast to the students from high-income households.

The findings exhibited that there is a significant positive correlation between challenges faced by adolescent students and class level. This may be as a result of when students advance in school and become in a high grade level, coursework becomes complex with

students becoming more mature and aware about their academic and situational as single-parent homes, and students when they move to middle school begin readiness for higher education and planning for the future and career, furthermore rational that the positive indicator in behaviors considered a reflection to their emotional deficiencies.

The findings also demonstrated that there is a significant positive relationship between the challenges faced by adolescent students from single-parent families and their mothers' education levels. This may be due to highly educated mothers often having jobs in addition to household responsibilities, which limits the time available to interact with and support their children emotionally and psychologically, as well as follow up on their education. The findings are inconsistent with the findings of the study conducted by [Lange & Dronkers \(2018\)](#) to find an association between mothers' education level and challenges faced by adolescent students at single-parent homes. It was reported that there is a significant negative correlation between challenges faced by students and the educational level of their mothers.

The study also shows that there is a significant positive relationship between living with a father and challenges faced by adolescent students. This may be a result of the fact that in Iraq, customs and traditions often give mothers the responsibility of caring for children. At the same time, the father's role is seen as that of the breadwinner, providing for financial needs and basic family requirements. When the mother is absent, the father may find it difficult to replace her emotional and nurturing role. The findings of the current study align with the study established in Japan by [Nonoyama-Tarumi \(2017\)](#), which demonstrated a significant positive association between single-father households and challenges faced by adolescent students.

Moderate challenges were experienced by adolescent students who came from single-parent households. Family income, class level, mother's education level, and living with father significantly influenced challenges faced by adolescent students from single-parent families.

Based on the conclusions of the study, the study has specific recommendations for the Ministry of Education. The school system should involve academic and counselling units to address issues and obstacles of single-parent students and provide psychological,

emotional, and financial support for students from such a family structure. The Ministry of Education should create workshops to train counselling teachers so that they are adequately prepared to deal with the different difficulties that they may face with students from single-parent families.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants. Ethical considerations in this study were that participation was entirely optional. Ethical approval was obtained from the Babylon Education Directorate, and the school's educational counsellor approved exposing the students to the questions in the questionnaire designated for the study.

Transparency of Data

By the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contribute to this study.

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