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# Single-Parent Families with Adolescents: Parents' Perspectives of Their Personal and Parenting Experiences

by

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DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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We accept this dissertation as conforming to the required standard

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ABSTRACT

A descriptive research methodology based on the principles of symbolic interactionism was employed to explore and explicate the meaning of experience of single-parenting with adolescents. Prior research has indicated that single-mothers experience more psychological and emotional problems than two-parent mothers, and that adolescents from single-parent families have more behavioural, emotional, and academic problems than adolescents from two-parent families. However, recent studies have reported that family processes, such as parent-adolescent relationships and parenting styles, rather than the family form itself are more strongly related to how adolescents adapt in single-parent families. As well, the meaning of the economic, social, and family challenges faced by single-parents affects their psychological wellbeing and their parenting abilities.

Single-parents (n=16) were interviewed twice using an interview guide which comprised the basic conceptual domains of the study. These domains were challenges to single-parents and their families, supports needed, family structures and processes, parenting issues, parents' perceptions of their adolescents' adjustment, and the single-parent "self". Other data sources were utilized to triangulate the data to add depth and credibility. Means of triangulation included a focus group (n=10), interviews with adolescents (n=6), and interviews with key informants (n=5) who encounter a broad range of single-parent families through their professional affiliations.

Theoretical and developmental perspectives drawn upon to inform and organize the data were Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological model, Kegan's constructive-developmental theory, and Baumrind's typology of parenting styles. The common challenges experienced by the participants identified by a

thematic analysis of the data were increased responsibilities, means of coping with increased demands, the other parent, social isolation, negative social expectations, financial constraints, and extenuating circumstances related to adolescents' learning, behavioural, or health problems. The challenges that single-parents face and their resources available to buffer the effects of these challenges can be conceptualized using Bronfenbrenner's social-ecological model. This transactional model enables the assessment of families in relation to challenges and supports from both proximal and distal environments which may affect the families' strengths, vulnerabilities, and development.

The participants described a process of development through which they redefined their roles and relationships, reorganized their families' internal and external supports, and re-established a social role. Resolution of these processes led to a transformation of their identities and a more differentiated way of constructing meaning of their situation as single-parents. This transformation affected the parents' capability to mediate their families' functioning and to meet the culture's demands of parents (Kegan, 1994), for example to manage family boundaries, set limits, and facilitate development.

The results have implications for how we understand single-parent families. The more positive portrait of single-parenting painted by these participants illustrated that despite challenges and risks, single-parent families are a viable family form capable of raising adolescents effectively. Prevention of such problems as adolescent alienation and risk lie in strengthening supportive family relationships and community networks to counterbalance the impact of ongoing challenges. Clinical approaches should assist single-parents to realign family roles and structures, to integrate their internal and external resources, and to develop a positive single-parent identity. Affirmation of the single-parent

family as a legitimate and viable family form enables single-parents to challenge negative stereotypes that can minimize their ability to function effectively. Recommendations for further research include exploration of the adolescents' perspectives of growing up in a single-parent family, and also exploration of single-fathers' perspectives.

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Single-parent families have become a prevalent and enduring form of family life in our society. An increasing number of single-parent families in Canada, United States, and Britain is largely due to an increased divorce rate and an increase in never-married mothers (Dornbusch & Gray, 1988; Munroe Blum, Boyle, & Offord, 1988). In British Columbia, as in the rest of North America, approximately 25 percent of children live in single-parent families (Tonkin, Cox, & Milner, 1993). It is estimated that about one-half of children born now will live in single-parent families before they turn 18 years of age (Norton & Glick, 1986). Although most divorced people remarry, their children spend an average of five years in that social environment (Dornbusch, 1989).

Following marital separation, a family experiences changes in family roles, relationships and household structure (Ahrons, 1994). Children in single-parent families may experience parental conflict over visitation or financial arrangements, absence or reduced involvement of the noncustodial parent, and changes in the custodial parent's availability or overall parenting style (Dornbusch & Gray, 1988; Furstenberg & Cherlin, 1991; Hetherington, Stanley-Hagen, & Anderson, 1989b). Single-mothers are reported to experience a greater number of ongoing social, family, and economic stresses (Compas & Williams, 1990), and more symptoms of psychological distress, such as depression and anxiety, than two-parent mothers (Hetherington, 1989a). Single-fathers

are reported to experience similar family and social challenges as single-mothers (Fassinger, 1989), but do not appear to experience as many economic stresses or symptoms of psychological distress (Risman & Schwartz, 1989). A cumulation of family changes and ongoing stresses, in conjunction with decreased availability of support and economic resources, can significantly challenge the well-being of the single-parent family (Hetherington, 1989a; Rutter, 1987).

Marital separation is an unfolding process that often begins before and continues long after the physical separation (Furstenberg & Cherlin, 1991). There is general agreement that marital separation has short-term adverse consequences for parents and children (Camara & Resnick, 1988; Hetherington, 1989a), especially for boys (Hetherington et al., 1989b). However, a great deal of variation in both the short-term and the long-term reactions of children, including children in the same family, have been recorded (Hetherington, 1989a). Most children return to a normal developmental course within one or two years following the separation (Furstenberg & Cherlin, 1991). Some children exhibit remarkable and sustained resilience. Some suffer developmental delays or disruption, while others show delayed effects that emerge at a later time (Furstenberg & Cherlin, 1991; Hetherington et al., 1989b; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989).

Three longitudinal studies of families' adjustment

following divorce indicated that in approximately one-half of single-parent families, family members had adjusted well and did not experience psychological problems, while in the other one-half, family members experienced varying degrees of psychological difficulties (Ahrons, 1994; Hetherington et al, 1989b; Wallerstein, Corbin, & Lewis, 1989). Much of the variation among children and adolescents remains unexplained, although differences in age, gender, and temperament, the availability of emotional support, and a relatively predictable family structure appear to influence children's resiliency (Hetherington, 1989a). Furstenberg and Cherlin (1991) conclude that, "there is no ineluctable path down which the children of divorce progress. What becomes important then is to identify the circumstances under which children seem to do well" (p. 70).

The majority of studies of single-parent families to date have focused on problems and outcomes of family members immediately following marital disruption (Compas & Williams, 1990). The enduring effects of living in a single-parent family are, at least in part, due to ongoing challenges and experiences associated with this family configuration, and the ways that family members cope with these situations (Ahrons, 1994; Compas & Williams, 1990; Neighbors, Forehand, & McVicar, 1993). Adolescents may be particularly vulnerable to the renegotiation and realignment of the family's roles, structures, and responsibilities that occur in single-parent

families (Compas & Williams, 1990).

Adolescence is a phase of life characterized by many concurrent changes, including the emergence of more sophisticated thinking abilities, the transition into new and different social roles with peers, parents, and other adults, as well as psychosocial development in areas such as autonomy, sexuality, intimacy, and identity (Simmons, Burgeson, Carleton-Ford, & Blyth, 1987). The nature and structure of contexts in which adolescents develop profoundly influence the process of their psychosocial development (Feldman & Elliot, 1990). To weather the challenges and many changes of this developmental period, adolescents need a secure family environment (Csikszentmihalyi & Larsen, 1984), and to maintain attachment to a significant adult while gaining autonomy (Baumrind, 1987; Armsden & Greenberg, 1987). Single-parents simultaneously experience ongoing, interactive processes of adjustment and development as they redefine their roles, relationships, and their identity following their marital separation (Korritko, 1991). The stresses and demands associated with this process may affect the parent's coping resources to meet the family's needs. Consequently, adolescent development may have different personal meanings for both the adolescent and the parent in a single-parent family than in two-parent families (Hetherington, 1989a; Sessa & Steinberg, 1991; Weiss, 1979).

The quality and intensity of stress experienced by a

person in a situation may depend upon whether the person cognitively appraises the situation as favourable or unfavourable, and whether it is perceived to be within or beyond the person's coping resources (Lazarus, 1986). Lazarus emphasized that the appraisal and interpretation of stress is influenced by the meaning of the situation for the person in terms of it's immediate or long-range significance for her or his wellbeing. Levitt, Selman, & Richmond (1991) define personal meaning as the "primary filter through which new skills, experience, and information passes" (p. 360). Personal meaning incorporates values, attitudes, and beliefs which are central to an individual's sense of self and their ongoing significant relationships (Baumrind, 1987; Levitt et al., 1991). According to Kegan (1982, 1994), people actively organize their experience in order to make meaning or to make sense of it. Like Levitt et al., Kegan describes meaning-making as a primary mental organizational process comprised of cognition, emotion, social relating, and relating to the self. Moreover, people order their experience and construct their reality through their narratives which express the meaning of and connectedness to events that they have experienced (Mishler, 1986; Parry & Doan, 1994).

The purpose of this study is to explore and explicate the meaning of experience in single-parent families with adolescents. Single-parents' narratives were selected as the mode to understand the meaning of challenges and stressors

associated coping mechanisms related to this family configuration. These narratives also provide a window through which to view single-parents' subjective, interpretive experience in relation to the dynamics and interactional processes of the family system, and to the multiple social and economic contexts that influence his or her family's well-being (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Dornbusch, 1989). A deeper understanding of the concerns and questions particular to this family form in our culture may identify potential points of clinical and community intervention and prevention, as well as avenues for further research.

# Chapter Two

## Review of the Literature

### The Social Context of Single-Parent Families

Evidence supports single-parent families as a viable family system that can raise children as successfully as other families (Hetherington et al., 1989b; Neighbors et al., 1993), but perhaps in a different manner with respect to realignment of roles, structural changes, and utilization of support systems (Ahrons, 1994; Kissman, 1992; Korittko, 1992). However, according to Dornbusch and Gray (1988), much of the past research on single-parent families adds to the single-parents' burden. They state that,

> While a single-parent is told that her child is more at-risk for delinquency, for poor grades in school, or for emotional upset, there is usually no set of behaviours that a single-parent is encouraged to utilize to overcome these disadvantages" (p. 284).

There seem to be two prevalent societal views of single-parent families (Ahrons, 1994; Benson & Roehlkepartain, 1993). One is a sympathetic view in which single-parent families are an acceptable alternative to an unhappy or conflicted two-parent family that deserves social acceptance as a legitimate family form. The second view characterizes single-parent families as a deficient family structure that is potentially harmful to children. Many single-parents occupy a marginal position in this society, both economically and socially (Hardy & Crow, 1991). The majority of single-parents have to manage their lives on lower incomes than before they became

single-parents (Ahrons, 1994; Furstenberg & Cherlin, 1991). They are often excluded from full participation in mainstream activities by both their lack of income, and the "couple-centred family ideology which permeates the social structure" (Hardy & Crow, 1991, p. 1). They tend to be distinctively poor in an affluent society, and alone in a generally couple-centred society (Polakow, 1993). A fundamental challenge for single-parents is to develop coping strategies as a means of dealing with these social and economic constraints (Hardy & Crow, 1991; Shaw, 1991).

Negative stereotypes and social expectations can minimize the ability of single-parent families to function effectively. The external label of single-parent may engender internal feelings, shaped by society's reaction to the connotation of that label (Ahrons, 1994). Some single-parents internalize a view of their family as "incomplete", and begin to view themselves as less competent parents and their children as problematic (Kissman, 1992; Korittko, 1991). Ahrons's (1994) six-year study of 98 divorced parents informed her point of view that "to recognize families of divorce as legitimate, we first have to shatter a deeply ingrained myth - the myth that only in a nuclear family can we raise children" (p. 4).

In recent years, researchers have begun to move away from the view that single-parent families are atypical or "broken-homes", and are refocusing on the diversity of children's responses and on the factors that facilitate or disrupt

development and adjustment in single-parent families (Hetherington et al., 1989b).

Single-Parents - Person and Parent

Single-parents are a diverse group of individuals. For example, they differ in the number and ages of their children, whether or not they are employed, and the existence and quality of their support systems. As well, there are several routes to single-parenting. The most common route is the end of a marriage, although the reasons for the end of a marriage are diverse, for example, incompatibility, abuse, adultery (Hardy & Crow, 1991), or change in one partner's sexual preference (French, 1991). However, regardless of these differences, most single-parents experience many similar uncertainties and ambiguities as they face often contradictory social, economic, and personal pressures (Shaw, 1991). The stress of losing the roles, rules, and rituals of their marriage; the ambiguity associated with the lack of positive role models; the physical and financial stresses; and the search for external resources, such as community supports and positive social sanctions, increase the difficulties in adjusting to life in a single-parent family (Ahrons, 1994; Alexander, 1994). Even when single-parents receive financial and/or practical support from their ex-partners, they may experience social isolation after being separated from a couple-centred social life (Alexander, 1994; French, 1991).

Single-mothers are reported by several researchers to experience more economic and household problems and stresses, as well as higher rates of psychological distress, health risk behaviours and concerns about their physical well-being than mothers of two-parent families (Compas & Williams, 1990; Dornbusch & Gray, 1989; Hetherington, 1989a). Shaw (1991) found that the most negative aspects of parenting alone reported by 25 single-parent mothers on income support were loneliness, and the worry, isolation, and insecurity associated with their financial situation. Loneliness referred to a lack of adult companionship, as well as feeling "partnerless in a society which finds it easier to deal with couples" (Shaw, 1991, p. 145). Yet, despite these challenges, the majority of women in this study were not negative about themselves or their futures. Other researchers have reported also that despite a lengthy period of adjustment during which challenges can seem overwhelming, many single-parents report positive aspects of parenting alone, such as control over the household's resources and a greater sense of confidence and autonomy (Ahrons, 1994; Alexander, 1994; Hardy & Crow, 1991; Shaw, 1991). Compas and Williams (1990) found that the coping efforts of single-mothers differed from those of married mothers. Reflecting the realities of single-parenting, single-mothers reported using more coping strategies related to accepting responsibility for family problems and positive

reappraisal of stressful situations than their married counterparts.

Phases of Development.

Being a single-parent is not a static state, but an ongoing interactive process. French (1991), Ahrons (1994), and Korittko (1991) described similar phases of adjustment and development with specific challenges that single-parents need to address at each stage. These phases include dealing with the aftermath of marital transition; realignment of family roles, rules, responsibilities and reorganization of external and internal family supports; and, re-establishment of a social life while maintaining a sense of security within the family. The initial phase of loss and confusion generally takes several months to several years to resolve, depending in part on the degree of choice in becoming a single-parent, the amount of conflict or cooperation with the ex-spouse, and the accessibility of support networks. Development through these phases depends also on the meanings that the single-parent constructs of the events and challenges at each phase, which in turn influences the parent's coping ability and strategies employed (French, 1991; Shaw, 1991). In addition, Ahrons (1994) suggests that how single-mothers redefine and transform their roles as "wife", "mother", and "woman" influence and are influenced by how they construct meaning and make sense of their experiences. The roles of wife and mother traditionally

provide a central core of identity for women, and often these two roles become enmeshed (Ahrons, 1994). To change roles and to develop a current concept of the self requires that the single-parent disentangle these past identities (Ahrons, 1994; Fassinger, 1989). Developing a single-parent identity is not a single event, but a gradual process through which the single-parent's identity emerges in relation to their new roles, their changing self definition, and also in relation to society's definition of single-parents (Ahrons, 1994; French, 1991).

Economic Viability

Furstenberg and Cherlin (1991) stated in their literature review of the effects of divorce,

> Academics and clinicians debate how much divorce affects the personality, values, and behaviour of children. But the economic effects are hardly ever disputed. Divorce often results in a sharp drop in the standard of living of children and their custodial parents. It carries many families into poverty, and locks others into economic disadvantage for lengthy spells (p. 45).

Poverty constitutes a major factor leading to many of single-parent families' problems, despite the fact that labour force participation by single mothers is higher than for mothers in general (Dornbusch & Gray, 1988). The increase in the number of single-mothers who live in poverty has contributed to an increase in the "feminization of poverty" (Dornbusch & Gray, 1988). Reduced economic resources are often accompanied by poorer quality of housing, neighbourhoods, schools, and child

care, and sometimes dependence on welfare (Dornbusch, 1989; Hetherington, 1989a). Women who remain unmarried are especially likely to increase their working hours, often taking on additional jobs to increase their income (Furstenberg & Cherlin, 1991). Single-fathers do not experience the same degree of economic hardship as single-mothers as they are more likely to be employed and at higher paying jobs than single-mothers (Furstenberg & Cherlin, 1991). An increasing proportion of separating couples must sell the family home which is one of the most disruptive consequences of the pattern of economic decline in single-parent families (Furstenberg & Cherlin, 1991). Moving away from a familiar environment often sparks other social transitions, resulting in family insecurity and psychological distress. Economic stresses can impact children both directly (e.g., resources for needs and wishes), and indirectly through the behaviour and experiences of other family members (e.g., mother's accessibility at important times due to her work schedule) (Hetherington et al., 1989b).

Evidence suggests that while some of the differences in daily stresses between one- and two-parent families are accounted for by family income, other differences are independent of income (Compas & Williams, 1990; Dornbusch & Gray, 1988). Pervasive financial stress and insecurity at home, in addition to other stresses associated with marital disruption and living in a single-parent family, can lead to

emotional and psychological problems for both parents and adolescents (Hetherington, 1989a).

When the social context supports single-parents, they can engage in the world of work more freely (Hardy & Crow, 1991). However, finding the right combination of opportunities and supports to make it possible to work without sacrificing their children's care is arduous for single-parents. And when single-parents are not employed, they often must endure poverty, and live on the social and economic margins in relation to expectations of the dominant social context (Polokow, 1993). Polakow found underlying themes of "otherness" or interpersonal distance and alienation of self from others in her recent ethnographic study of the existential experience of single-parents in poverty.

## Adolescents in Single-Parent Families

### Adjustment and Development.

The research programs of Hetherington (1989a), Dornbusch and Gray (1988), Ahrons (1994), and Wallerstein and Blakeslee (1989) represent a compilation of both cross-sectional and longitudinal studies of the effects of divorce and remarriage on children and adolescents' adjustment. The results indicated that after a period of disequilibrium of one to two years most children adjust to these marital changes, although ongoing adjustment depended on individual characteristics (temperament, gender, intelligence), family stress and

adjustment, and support systems. However, even when potentially confounding sociodemographic variables were controlled, compared to children from two-parent families, children from single-parent families were reported to more frequently exhibit acting-out behaviour, problems in academic achievement, emotional maladjustment and disruption in peer and heterosexual relationships, (Hetherington, 1989a, 1989b) and to participate in risk behaviours, such as smoking and drug use (Benson & Roehlkepartain, 1993). Adolescent boys in single-parent families were found repeatedly to show more behavioural and emotional problems than did girls in single-parent families or children in two-parent families. There is also some evidence of depression or social withdrawal, particularly among adolescent females in single-parent families (Hetherington et al., 1989b; Wallerstein et al., 1988). Wallerstein and Blakeslee (1989) reported long-lasting problems, such as difficulties in forming intimate relationships, which were submerged in adolescence and reappeared in adulthood. However, this evidence of long-lasting or re-emergent difficulties remains controversial. Ahrons (1994) and Furstenberg and Cherlin (1991) commented that as these results were based on a small sample that contained a high proportion of individuals with clinical problems, they were not representative of the typical divorced population. Moreover, they emphasized that the media and general public have popularized these negative findings which

have led to an overgeneralization of the long-term negative effects of divorce.

Some studies have not found differences between young adolescents in single- and two- parent families on self-reports of stressful events, coping, or self-reports and mother-reports of emotional or behavioural problems even when socioeconomic status was controlled (Compas & Williams, 1990; Kurdeck & Sinclair, 1988). As well, researchers consistently have found that children adapt better in a well-functioning single-parent family than in a conflict-ridden two-parent family (Dornbusch, 1989; Hetherington, 1989a; Neighbors et al., 1993).

Adolescents' functioning is also enacted and evaluated in the school environment. Based on a national sample of 1200 American youth, Dornbusch and his colleagues found that adolescents from single-parent families were more likely to be rated lower by their teachers on intellectual ability and academic performance than students from two-parent families, even though they did not do worse on intelligence or achievement tests (Dornbusch, 1989). In addition, teachers held lower academic expectations of youth from one-parent homes than from two-parent homes. Further analysis revealed that teachers' lower ratings and expectations were more frequently associated with the adolescents' higher levels of deviance than with their actual academic performance.

Review of this evidence suggests the questions, "Why do

some adolescents from some single-parent families have more emotional and behavioural problems", and "What is it about some single-parent families that increases the risk of negative outcomes for some young people?"

Risk or Resilience: What Makes the Difference?

While evidence seems to support the statement that many children from single-parent families have more problems than other children, making generalizations based on "social address labels" such as family structure or social class, may be misleading. These categorizations do not reveal the enormous variability of individual or family processes that are more central to competence and development than membership in a particular social group (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). The mechanisms by which adolescents in single-parent families develop or maintain resilience, or become at greater risk for behaviour, health, and developmental problems remain unclear (Hetherington, 1989a; Weiss, 1979). The term resilience refers to successful adaptation or sustained competence despite challenges or stressful circumstances (Garmezy, Masten, & Tellegen, 1984; Werner & Smith, 1992). Moreover, evidence suggests that the family's dynamics before the marital separation should be taken into account when assessing the functioning and adjustment of individuals in single-parent families (Furstenberg & Cherlin, 1992). Furstenberg & Cherlin cite Walker's 1988 longitudinal study of over 17,000 British

families which indicated that many of the emotional and behavioural difficulties evident in youth after divorce were associated with pre-divorce conflict, although these behaviours were often attributed to the single-parent family status. In a ten year longitudinal study of a non-clinical sample, Block, Block, and Gjerde (1988) found that as early as a decade before divorce, parents of boys reported conflict with their sons. The parents also described their families' child-rearing orientation during this pre-divorce period as characterized by fathers' disengagement and mothers' resentment.

In addition, while more youth in single-parent families than youth in two-parent families appear to be at higher risk and have more problems, there is a significant proportion of youth in single-parent families that do well (Ahrons, 1994; Benson & Roehlkepartain, 1993; Furstenberg & Cherlin, 1991; Hetherington, 1989a). Several critical factors affect both the short-term and long-term adjustment of youth in single-parent families: how effectively the custodial parent, who is usually the mother, functions as a parent and copes with the challenges of single-parenting (Furstenberg & Cherlin, 1991); a low level of interparental conflict (Amato & Keith, 1991; Brody & Forehand, 1993; Furstenberg & Cherlin, 1991); and, a good parent-adolescent relationship (Brody & Forehand, 1993). A national study in the United States of 47,000 sixth to twelfth grade students, of whom 8,266 lived in single-parent

families, found that many of the differences between adolescents in single-parent families who thrive and those who do not indicated the importance of support systems both within and around the families (Benson & Roehlkepartain, 1993). Those who thrive are almost twice as likely to report feeling support from their family, turning to a parent for social support when necessary, having a parent involved in schooling, having explicit parental standards, and being involved in community activities.

Another potential factor in children's successful adjustment is the maintenance of a continuing relationship with the noncustodial parent, who is usually the father. Although research findings are inconsistent regarding this factor, several researchers remain convinced that a father who maintains a supportive relationship with his child has a positive impact on the child's ongoing adjustment (Furstenberg & Cherlin, 1991; Hetherington, 1989a). However, fathers' continuing involvement on a regular basis beyond three and one-half years occurs in a minority of families, although three-quarters of fathers visited their children occasionally (Furstenberg & Cherlin, 1991; Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992). The decline in father involvement is more evident where the father cannot or does not pay child support or where there is a high level of parental conflict. When relationships between ex-partners are conflicted, children are more likely to be caught in the middle, particularly in adolescence (Buchanan, Maccoby,

& Dornbusch, 1991). Approximately one-quarter of ex-partners are still highly conflicted three to four years following their marital separation (Ahrons, 1994; Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992). Co-parenting, or collaborative efforts of parents who live apart occurs in a minority of cases. Parallel parenting is a more common pattern among families in which fathers continue to see their children, but the parents maintain separate and segregated relations with their children. Low conflict and minimum consultation characterizes this pattern of ex-spouse involvement.

Single-Parent: Mediator of Family Stress and Change

As single-mothers are reported to experience more daily hassles and psychological stress than two-parent mothers, one wonders whether these hassles and psychological distress are transmitted to their adolescents. D'Ercole (1988) found that adolescents' self-esteem was positively correlated with the single-mother's psychological well-being during the stress of economic hardship. On the other hand, Compas & Williams (1990) found that single-mothers' hassles and psychological symptoms do not appear to serve as a source of stress for their adolescents. No differences were found between young adolescents in single- and two-parent families on self-reports of stressful events, coping or emotional/behavioural problems. Moreover, Amato (1987) found in a large, representative sample that mother-support of adolescents was similar in both one-

parent and two-parent families. The main differences between these groups were less father-support and greater autonomy in adolescents from single-parent families.

The impact of parental stress and family structure on adolescents' social and cognitive competence and psychological well-being has been found to be mediated through the adolescents' perceptions of having a good parent-adolescent relationship (Amato, 1987; Brody & Forehand, 1993; Hetherington et al., 1989b; Wierson & Forehand, 1992). Maintenance of a parent-adolescent relationship characterized by open communication, support, and appropriate boundaries appears to be a critical factor in determining how well children and adolescents adjust in single-parent families (Ahrons, 1994; Alexander, 1994). These findings add strength to the case that family processes rather than family form are associated with both adjustment and problem behaviour in adolescence, and also emphasize the important role of the single-parent as the potential mediator of stress and change in the family.

A brief review of literature on the possible mechanisms through which single-parents influence the context of development and adjustment of adolescents in single-parent families follows. The most prevalent issues in the literature are parenting style, family relationships and environment, and adolescent psychosocial development (e.g., autonomy, attachment) in relation to family processes.

## Single-Parent and Adolescent: Family Dynamics

### Parenting Style.

Parenting style is a global concept, including communication patterns, family decision-making, and limit setting (Baumrind, 1987). Baumrind's typology includes four main parenting styles: authoritative, authoritarian, neglectful, and permissive. A number of large-scale studies have found repeatedly that authoritative parenting is associated with higher social competence, social development, and lower rates of behaviour problems among adolescents than other parenting styles (Baumrind, 1987; Dornbusch, 1989; Steinberg, Lamborn, Darling, Mounts, & Dornbusch, 1994). The warm, firm approach with consistent demands and responsive control associated with authoritative parenting appears to play a protective role against the challenges of growing up in any family structure. Authoritarian, permissive, and neglectful parenting styles were negatively associated with academic and social competence, and were positively associated with behaviour problems in adolescence.

Researchers have found a general tendency for single-parents across all class levels, compared to two- parents, to be more permissive in parenting (Dornbusch & Gray, 1988; Hetherington et al., 1989b). The permissive parents granted early autonomy (responsibility, independence, and power in decision-making) which was strongly related to adolescent deviance (Steinberg et al., 1994). Boys seemed to gain

earlier autonomy than girls in single-parent families and as previously mentioned, to be more involved in problem behaviours.

How does permissive parenting contribute to earlier autonomy and deviance among adolescents? Even though the authoritative parenting style has been associated with positive outcomes in a variety of ecological niches, Steinberg et al. (1994) hypothesized that rather than the parenting style itself, it may be the meaning of the parenting style in the context of the family system that largely influences the child's interpretation of parental behaviour and attitude. For example, what may be experienced as permissive and indifferent in one family context may be experienced as parental trust and respect in another. The impact of any parenting behaviour and style on adolescent adjustment may be understood best if it is viewed in relation to the adolescent's perceptions of the parent's behaviour in relation to the parent-adolescent relationship (Wierson & Forehand, 1992), and the sense of security in the home environment (Csikszentmihalyi & Larsen, 1984). The findings of Weiss's (1979) interview research with single-parents and adolescents reinforced Steinberg's hypothesis. These findings indicated that the dynamics of single-parent families were different from two-parent families, not simply because the adolescents had more autonomy, but because they were expected also to become more self-reliant, to take more responsibility, and to

share in family decision-making.

Essentially, single-parent families have a different echelon structure that permits children to begin sharing both greater responsibility and companionship with the custodial parent than they would in a two-parent family. In a two-parent family, the parents can support each other in their authority, and most decisions are made by them even when the child participates in the process (Elkind, 1987). Adolescents in single-parent families often take on the role of the junior partner in the family firm, become more accountable for the family's functioning, and assume their responsibilities in that fashion (Weiss, 1979). In the words of single-parents, "these children grow up faster" (Weiss, 1979). Consequently, the meaning of responsibility to adolescents in single-parent families is different than it is to adolescents in two-parent families. Weiss suggests that parental lenience or permissiveness is thus consistent with the maintenance of a more egalitarian family structure.

Family Relationships and Family Environment.

The greater responsibility and independence experienced by these adolescents often results in an equal, mutually supportive relationship with their single-parent (Hetherington, 1989a; Weiss, 1979). This relationship can be viewed as one of the strengths of single-parent families (Ahrons, 1994; Amato, 1987). Meeting challenges and taking

responsibility, if not overwhelming, can cultivate resilience, a prime index of mental and emotional health (Garmezy et al., 1984; Rutter, 1987). Weiss (1979) reported that many adolescents from single-parent families tend to be more mature, independent, self-sufficient, disciplined, and unusually self-assured. In other instances, "particularly when the emotional demands or responsibilities required by the mother were inappropriate, were beyond the child's capacities, or interfered with the child's normal activities, resentment, rebellion, or behaviour problems often followed" (Hetherington, 1989a, p. 5). Resilience research has found consistently that a parent-adolescent relationship that provides affectional ties and emotional support in times of stress is one of the essential factors that differentiates resilient and non-resilient children (Rutter, 1987; Werner & Smith, 1992). This relationship provides a protective effect against stress, such as that which accompanies inter-parental conflict and family reorganization (Neighbors et al., 1993). As well, Baumrind (1987) found that adolescents experimentation with risk behaviours, such as truancy, delinquent acts, and alcohol and drug use, is attenuated by parent-adolescent relationships.

The mother-adolescent relationship appears to be the nidus of potentially troublesome as well as potentially protective dynamics in single-parent families. Hetherington (1989a) found that mother-son relationships in single-parent

families were particularly problematic as single mothers had difficulty in setting and reinforcing effective limits with their sons. The close, dependent mother-daughter relationship that often develops in single-parent families may create conflict for adolescent girls in their development of autonomy (Hetherington, 1989a; Sessa & Steinberg, 1991). Some adolescents reported a sense of insecurity as they shared their mothers' financial worries (Weiss, 1979). Contradictions between the single-parent families' egalitarian family relationships and the family styles of their peers can lead to confusion for the adolescent, and to confrontations within the family (Alexander, 1994). Single-parents may become overprotective or overindulgent as they attempt to compensate for their single-parent status through indulgence of their adolescent's demands, creating further difficulties in setting appropriate family boundaries and limits (Ahrons, 1994).

The adolescent's relationship with the non-custodial parent, who is the father in approximately ninety percent of single-parent families, tends to become primarily social and to decline in both quality and quantity (support, availability, involvement) over time (Amato, 1987; Hetherington, 1989a; Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992). When inter-parental conflict remains unresolved, and is openly expressed in front of the children, the children are negatively affected (David, Steele, Forehand, & Armistead, 1996; Furstenberg &

Cherlin, 1992). They may struggle to reconcile the polarity between their parents, for unless they can claim the other parent as a part of themselves, they may feel psychologically fragmented (Ahrons, 1994; Alexander, 1994).

Weiss (1979) reported that siblings often serve as a source of support for children when parents separate, while other evidence indicates that these family relationships become less cohesive and warm following separation (Amato, 1987; Wallerstein et al., 1988). Other supports external to the family may alleviate stress for some of the family members. For example, authoritative teachers who have a warm, structured, predictable approach can provide stability that mediates the effects of cumulative stress on adolescents (Hetherington et al., 1989b; Rutter, 1987). Dornbusch & Gray (1988) reported that an additional adult in the single-parent household, provided the adult was not the step-parent, reduced adolescent deviance indirectly through its effect on the adolescent's participation in the family's decision-making process.

Adolescent Psychosocial Development.

The renegotiation and realignment of family structures and interpersonal relationships, as is common in single-parent families, is particularly relevant to adolescent development because realignment of family relationships is a hallmark of the development of autonomy (Steinberg, 1990; Sessa &

Steinberg, 1991). Autonomy is a multidimensional construct that is manifested in affective, cognitive, and behavioural domains (Sessa & Steinberg, 1991). Affectively, the development of autonomy refers to the development of a sense of individuation and emotional differentiation which may involve the process of parental deidealization. Behaviourally, autonomy refers to active independent functioning, including decision-making and regulation of one's own behaviour. In the cognitive domain, autonomy is characterized by a sense of self-reliance and a belief that one has control over her or his life. Sessa & Steinberg (1991) proposed that the development of autonomy is different for adolescents in single-parent families as the mother-child and father-child relationships are qualitatively different relationships than in a two-parent family. For example, with an absent partner, the mother may seek emotional support from and place greater demands on the maturing adolescent. Early parental demands for development of behavioural autonomy may prevent a child from completing the tasks of the latency period such as, in Eriksonian terms, developing a sense of competence, leaving the adolescent unprepared for later developmental tasks (Hetherington, 1989a). Weiss (1979) also found that when children or adolescents assumed too many adult responsibilities, their subsequent expressions of need often took on a disguise: some children acted-out, while others denied their needs to become the parent's confidante.

Without effective coping strategies and a support system, some adolescents in single-parent families, particularly boys, attempt to cope with family tensions and disequilibrium through detachment from the family (Compas & Williams, 1990; Hetherington et al., 1989b; Rutter, 1987). Girls may be less inclined to disengage from their families as they are more likely than boys to be concerned with and define themselves within the context of relationships with others (Brown & Gilligan, 1992). Emotional detachment has been shown to be related to feelings of insecurity with parents and a reported lack of parental acceptance (Ryan & Lynch, 1989). Conversely, self-reported attachment has been positively related to self-esteem, life-satisfaction, and negatively related to depressive affect (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987) and depressive modes of adaptation (Armsden, McAuley, Greenberg, Burke, & Mitchell, 1990). Bowlby's theoretical work on attachment in 1980 suggested that organized patterns of behaviour maintain early affectional bonds that persist throughout life contributing to a sense of security (cited in Armsden & Greenberg, 1987). In adolescence, the sense of security becomes less due to the actual presence of parents and more due to adolescents' perceptions of their parents as competent allies (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987; Weiss, 1979).

The establishment of developmental autonomy in adolescence appears to be critically influenced by the core elements of attachment; trust, mutual respect, and a good

relationship with a caring adult (Armsden et al., 1989). In a series of eight studies of over 1000 adolescents, Youniss and Smollar (1985) found that adolescents continue significant relationships with parents at the same time that relationships with friends become more complex and influential. Moreover, they found that adolescents' self-understanding and sense of self increases as they seek independence from their parents, but simultaneously try to maintain connections to their parents. The transition to healthy attachment to the peer group is facilitated by autonomy from parents in the behavioural sense, but not in the emotional sense (Sessa & Steinberg, 1991; Youniss & Smollar, 1985). Adolescents in single-parent families who become detached from their parents during transformations of the family's structures, roles, and relations may have difficulty around issues of trust, empathy, and dependence/autonomy with peers and teachers, as well as with parents (Armsden & Greenberg, 1990). However, if these adolescents develop constructive, nurturant relationships outside the family, this transfer of attachment out of the family can be an adaptive coping mechanism. If the adolescent's detachment from the family is associated with involvement in antisocial groups and activities with little adult monitoring, the outcomes may be negative (Hetherington, 1989a).

In summary, a review of the literature on adjustment of single-parents and adolescents in single-parent families

reveals that the effects of divorce on adolescents and single-parents are diverse. Several researchers have begun to address how family processes in single-parent families influence adolescents' and single-parents' behavioural and emotional outcomes (Dornbusch & Gray, 1988; Neighbors et al., 1993). However, according to Sessa and Steinberg (1991), the majority of previous studies of single-parent families have been insensitive to the context of adolescents' developmental transformations in relation to family processes and structures. Moreover, there is little systemmatic description of single-parents' development in relation to the fluctuating demands of a growing, changing family (Kissman, 1991, 1992). It is also important to broaden the scope of inquiry of single-parent families to include the family members' meaning and inner experience of their transactions with all levels of their ecological systems, including extrafamilial transactions (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Jessor, 1993). Research is needed to increase our understanding of the meanings of how various challenges, supports, and dynamics within the family, as well as those of the larger social contexts influence the resilience, risk, and development of individuals in single-parent families.

# Chapter Three

## Methodology

This study was an interpretive inquiry into the meaning(s) of experiences in single-parent families with adolescents. The primary form of data collection was narrative interviews with single-parents (n=16). These interviews were a means to explore the subjective inner experience of single-parents with adolescents, and to learn about their family's structures, relationships, and dynamics in relation to the social-ecological contexts in which the family members live and develop. Other perspectives on the research topics were collected through interviews with adolescents of parents interviewed (n=6), a focus group of single-parents who had not been interviewed (n=10), and interviews with key informants (n=5) who encounter a broad range of individuals from single-parent families through their professional affiliations.

The research approach was based on theoretical assumptions of symbolic interactionism which has evolved from the work of John Dewey, Charles Horton Cooley, and George Herbert Mead. The primary assumption of symbolic interactionism is that human experience is mediated by interpretation (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). Individuals are actively involved in interpreting and defining their experiences (Denzen, 1989). The interpretive process occurs through individuals' interactions with others which are symbolic in nature as they involve the "manipulation of

symbols, words, meanings, and language" (Denzen, 1989, p. 5). Thus, individuals interpret their experiences and construct meaning through symbolic interactions. Moreover, this interpretive and meaning-making process shapes and guides individuals' behaviours and their constructions of "self" (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Denzen, 1989). Consequently, factors such as socioeconomic status, personality traits, and physical environment are relevant to "understand behaviour only to the degree that they enter in and affect the defining process" (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992, p. 36).

With the goal of accessing and understanding the subjective aspects of single-parenting with adolescents, methods were developed to enter into the interpretive world of the participants. Guided by Denzen's (1989) methodological principles derived from symbolic interaction theory, an interview method was developed to provide the following opportunities. The interviews enabled the investigation of how the participants' symbols and interactions came together, for example, how beliefs and attitudes were influenced through contact with others. Because symbols, meanings, and definitions are forged into self-definitions, the interviews attempted to capture the reflective nature of the "self", including the gendered conception of "self". As well, the researcher linked the participants' personal and social perspectives, for example, how their beliefs about a social situation represented a combined view of both their own

attitudes and those of relevant social groups. The situational context and dynamics of experience, including the participants' interpretations and meaning of the norms, expectations, and rules of social conduct were recorded. Moreover, the methods enabled the reflection of behavioural processes and change, as well as static behaviour. Utilization of in-depth interviews and other previously mentioned means of data collection provided opportunities to fulfil these principles (Denzen, 1989; Jorgenson, 1991).

Instruments

Two interviewer's guides were developed; one for single-parent interviews and the other for interviews with the adolescents of the single-parents interviewed. The interview guides comprised a set of research topics which constituted the "substantive frame" or the key conceptual domains of the study (Weiss, 1994, p. 15). The guides were designed to enable each interview to proceed as a "conversation with a purpose" (Jorgenson, 1991, p. 213). The wording and sequencing of questions were flexible to follow relevant topics that emerged in the interviews, and to word the questions within the context of the interview process. The research topics for the single-parent's interview were selected from research and conceptual literature on single-parent families (Ahrons, 1994; Korritko, 1991; Weiss, 1979). The topics are listed in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

In addition to the topics listed in Table 1, biographic questions regarding age, family size, length of marital separation, and occupation were asked to attain a description of the different background and situational contexts of the participants' accounts.

There have been few descriptive studies reported of adolescents' perspectives on growing up in single-parent families (Amato, 1987; Weiss, 1979). As such, the topics of the adolescent interviews were general to encourage the adolescents to search their own experience to identify issues relevant to their situation. Five interview topics were presented: the adolescents' perspectives of the most important issues related to growing up in a single-parent family: how they deal with perceived challenges; who or what helps them deal with particular challenges; their role and relationships in the family; and, how they view their situation as compared to other adolescents they know who live in single-parent families. In addition, the adolescents were asked their age, grade in school, about participation in activities, and a general question about their school progress.

Table 1

Interview Topics for Single-Parent Interviews

| Topic | Description |
|---|---|
| Challenges to single-parents and their families | Social, economic, psychological |
| Supports | Internal and external support systems to the family |
| Family structures and processes | Roles, responsibilities, decision-making, communication, involvement of noncustodial parent |
| Parenting issues | Parent-adolescent relationship, limit-setting |
| Parent's perception of adolescent | Overall well-being and adjustment in terms of autonomy, attachment, self-perceptions |
| The single-parent "Self" | Related to heading the family, re-establishing social and occupational roles |

Both parents and adolescents were also asked to describe their future visions of themselves (one year, five years, and ten years) with respect to activities, friends, intimate relationships, and sense of well-being. Future expectations and visions provide a context of meaning and evaluation for an individual's current behaviour, and serve as incentives for action (Marcus & Nurius, 1986). The interview guides are contained in Appendix A.

Sampling

Single-parents in this study were defined as any parent, currently living without a partner, who was the custodial parent at least 50% of the time of one or more adolescents (ages 10-18 years). The aim of sampling was to locate single-parents who represented a range of ages, socioeconomic, cultural, and occupational backgrounds (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Weiss, 1994). As poverty is a core issue in many single-parent families, I attempted to find both employed parents from a variety of occupational groups, as well as unemployed parents. I wished to conduct this inquiry into the ongoing experience of life in a single-parent family, and therefore included parents who had parented alone for more than one year. The first year after marital separation is typically overwrought with issues related to the separation itself (Compas & Williams, 1990; Hetherington, 1989).

Two methods of purposeful sampling were utilized to

locate volunteer participants for the interviews. First, with the assistance of the Executive Director of the Single Parent Resource Centre (SPRC), I advertised for participants through flyers posted at the SPRC. I also introduced the study to two groups attending a "Parents with Teens" session at the SPRC and requested their participation. After one month with only one reply, I added to the posted flyer that I offered an honorarium of $20.00 for their participation. In the two weeks that followed, four more participants volunteered.

Snowball sampling or sampling through a series of referrals (Weiss, 1994) located the remaining eleven participants. A University of Victoria graduate student and an individual with whom I am acquainted each referred me to a potential participant. The referral sources telephoned the potential participants to briefly introduce the study and my need for participants, and to request their approval to pass on their name and telephone number to me. I then contacted the person directly to explain the study's purpose, my role in the study, the type of information I was interested in, and to request their participation after ensuring that they met the sampling requirements. Upon completion of their interview, most participants referred me to another potential participant, and the process was repeated until I had finished data collection. Only one referred parent declined to participate in the study due to a recent crisis in her family.

## Data Collection

The data collection procedures for the in-depth interviews with the parents, adolescents, and key informants, and the procedures for the focus group are described in this section following a description of methodological issues that were addressed in the study.

### Methodological Issues

The single-parent interviews were developed according to methods and factors presented by Lincoln & Guba (1985) to provide for requirements of rigor in naturalistic inquiry: credibility, transferability, confirmability, and dependability. Credibility or theoretical validity (Maxwell, 1992), or trustworthiness of explanations (Mishler, 1990) was provided for by employing three research techniques: pursuing data collection to the point of data saturation; checking the data with participants; and triangulation of data collection. Data saturation refers to the point of diminishing returns when additional information obtained from interviews is redundant (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). Triangulation or multiple means of data collection was also employed as a means to increase credibility in the study by capturing as many relevant features of the research topic as possible (Denzen, 1989; Patton, 1990; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Weiss, 1994). The adolescent and key informant interviews and the focus group were the means selected to triangulate the data collection

(described in greater detail later in this chapter). Credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) also depends on whether there is a consensus within the community concerned with the research about the terms used to characterize and describe the research topics. As such, two attempts were made to check the data and analyses with participants; a second interview conducted by telephone and a third contact upon completion of the preliminary analysis of all participants' data.

Confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) or interpretive validity (Maxwell, 1992) refers to efforts to collect and analyze the meaning of experience from the participants' perspectives rather than the researcher's perspectives. However, information is context-dependent and is shaped at least in part by the interview situation (Denzen, 1989). Concrete descriptions of experience in the participants' language and voice, rather than generalizations or opinions, given to a partner in whom one trusts are less likely to be modified by the interview context (Weiss, 1994).

The transferability of the study's findings is limited to the specified contexts of the participants' accounts, and is also limited by the characteristics of the participants in the study (Weiss, 1994). A summary of the characteristics of the sample and a brief description of each participant is included at the end of this chapter.

To increase dependability of the study, the researcher should leave a clear audit or record of the specific aspects

of the data collection process (for example, participants chosen, the research setting, the research partnership, and the specific steps in the method) such that they can be understood by another researcher (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). However, as mentioned previously, interviews are a form of discourse between speakers, and the meanings of questions and responses, and therefore data, are contextually grounded and jointly constructed by both interviewer and participant (Denzen, 1989; Mishler, 1986; 1990; Weiss, 1994). Moreover, how participants make sense of and respond to the researcher's questions depends on how they interpret the interviewer and her or his study's objectives to themselves (Jorgenson, 1991). Consequently, visible attributes of the researcher, such as gender, race, and age, in addition to the interviewer's form of involvement in the interview process strongly influences how the participants "fashion an identity" for the interviewer and engage in the interview. As such, the researcher must attempt to understand and record the interview context and his or her presence and involvement in the interview to enable others' understandings of the research process and findings (Brown, Tappan, Gilligan, Miller, & Argyris, 1989). In addition, the researcher should explicate their attitudes and presuppositions about the topic, and clarify how these were dealt with in the social construction of the interview data.

Researcher's Presuppositions About Single-Parent Families with Adolescents.

My assumptions about single-parent families with adolescents were informed by my personal experiences as a single-parent, as well as from a review of the literature. My frame of reference includes the view that although a single-parent family faces many challenges, it is a viable family form capable of raising children effectively, even through adolescence which is a time of rapid change and potential challenge for the family. I clarified with all participants that, although I had had personal involvement with the phenomenon, I wanted to hear their experiences and to learn from them.

Ethical Issues.

The interviewer maintained the responsibility to do no harm, to remain non-judgemental, and to refrain from making connections or suggest motivations for participants that they would not have considered themselves. All participants successfully managed the interviews with no apparent loss or harm, and in fact, many reported that they gained from the experience. Several participants described their involvement in the study as "affirming", "validating", "a good experience to talk to someone about these issues". I was prepared to provide a referral to an appropriate follow-up service if a participant's reflections on his or her life experiences

created discomfort or appeared to instigate a different course of action.

I ensured that each participant read, understood, and signed an informed consent form which made explicit issues regarding voluntary participation and withdrawal, anonymity, confidentiality, the purpose of the study, third party liability, and how the results would be used. All audiotapes and field notes were kept in a locked file and will be destroyed upon completion of the research report. The participants' anonymity is protected in the report as no names or descriptions are used that allow determination of the participants' identities. Parents were requested to sign a parental consent form for the participation of their adolescent, and the adolescents were asked to sign a consent form as well.

Focus group members were also assured of confidentiality and anonymity in the researcher's management and reporting of the data. However, these measures could not be maintained to the same degree among group members as for interview participants. Group members were requested to sign an informed consent form indicating their understanding of the form's contents, and their willingness to maintain confidentiality of other members' personal information. The consent forms are located in Appendix B.

Procedures for Single-Parent Interviews

The length of the interviews ranged from one and one-quarter to three and one-quarter hours. Each interviews continued until the data were saturated and all research topics had been explored, or the participant appeared to have exhausted his or her account. Data saturation also applies to whether or not the data obtained from all interviews together are sufficient to richly describe the research topics. Repetitive patterns of issues and themes began to appear in the data after approximately 12 interviews, and although unique information was gained about how these patterns were manifest in different contexts of participants' lives, the main issues remained the same. However, I had interviewed fewer parents of boys than girls. As I wished to explore single-parenting with both boys and girls, I asked previous participants for referrals to four additional single-parents of boys. The emergence of reoccuring patterns of interview data and their similarity to the issues identified from the key informant interviews and focus group supported that I had reached a point of diminishing returns or data saturation after 16 interviews. As well, I frequently assessed the patterns of data against existing theoretical frameworks (Denzen, 1989) derived from conceptual and empirical literature (Ahrons, 1994; Alexander, 1994; Benson & Roehlkepartain, 1993; Korritko, 1991; Shaw, 1991; Weiss, 1979). This literature review and comparison process

sensitized my approach to interviewing and analysis and enabled me to discover how the participants' description of their unique interactions with their environments "fit" with existing descriptions (Denzen, 1989).

A second interview, in which a summary of the first interview was read to each participant, was conducted by telephone within two to four weeks after the first interview. The summary was structured according to the research topics as outlined in the interview guide. I had explained at the end of the first interview that the purpose of the second contact was to clarify the accuracy of my understanding of their narrative, and to ensure that my words did not take their meanings out of context. Participants were invited to make modifications or further additions to the summary. These interviews ranged from 20 to 50 minutes.

The second interviews were conducted by telephone rather than in-person because of the time pressures that most single-parents face and the scheduling difficulties that had been encountered in arranging the first interviews. Weiss (1994) has found in his extensive interviewing career that telephone interviewing is acceptable, particularly if preceded by a face-to-face interview and the establishment of a trusting research relationship. These conditions appear to have been met in this study. During the telephone interview, the participants' responses to the summaries of their interviews were candid and forthcoming. Many added new examples to

illustrate further their experience and perspectives. I recorded this data during the telephone contact by writing it down primarily in a summary form, adding direct quotes to punctuate the record with the participants' language.

Approximately three to five months following the initial interview, I sent each participant a summary report of the preliminary analysis of the main issues and themes from all participants' data (see Appendix C). This summary report was, in part, to acknowledge their participation in the study, and also to request their feedback on how these issues and meanings resonated with their experience. I invited them to respond in one of the following ways: a group discussion (n=4), a short face-to-face interview (n=3), or a telephone interview (n=9). Nine participants stated that they were interested in attending the group discussion, but could not attend because of family, educational, or travel commitments. The participants emphasized which issues and themes resonated with their experience and also identified which aspects of the summary were not pertinent to their experience. Both the telephone interview after one month and this final contact after three to five months added a temporal dimension to the data and revealed a more dynamic view of these single-parent families as participants updated or added to their accounts according to recent evolutions in their lives. I did not make the third contact with one person who had moved to another city to work, as I was unable to find a forwarding address.

I audiotaped and transcribed all interviews and the focus group discussion (described below). I interviewed participants from November, 1995 to March, 1996. I conducted the focus group on April, 1996, and the discussion group and final contact with participants in May, 1996. I interviewed key informants in January and February, 1996. Prior to data collection, I conducted pilot interviews with two single-parents and one adolescent in October, 1995. This process confirmed the usefulness and boundaries of the interview guides in obtaining information to meet the study's purpose. I made not changes to the interview guide as a result of the pilot interviews.

Several people stated that their participation in the study was a positive experience. Some stated that telling their story, hearing it in summary, and then reading their experiences juxtaposed to the experiences of other single-parents in the final summary was beneficial and affirming.

Triangulation of Data Collection.

Triangulation is a means to check data through various sources in order to enhance credibility. It is not meant to search for objective truth but is meant to add depth and breadth to the analysis of the research topic (Denzen, 1989; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Triangulation of data collection in this study also enabled descriptions of the emergent issues and themes in relation to other social contexts. The

following were means to triangulate the single-parent interview data: interviews with adolescents, key informant interviews, and a focus group.

Interviews with Adolescent Females.

It was very difficult to gain access to the adolescents of the parents interviewed, and as a result only six females from five families were interviewed. Two sisters were interviewed together at their request. The reasons given by some single-parents why their adolescents could not or would not be interviewed were that the adolescents didn't have time or felt they didn't have anything to say about growing up in a single-parent family other than "it's OK" or "I don't think about it." A small number of parents seemed leery about the potential effect on their adolescent of participating in an interview in view of the rapid changes that accompany adolescence, in addition to the stress associated with their marital changes. However, as most parents appeared to be in favour of the interviews, it seemed that my limited success in gaining access to adolescents was more due to the adolescents' reservations than the parents' concerns. Perhaps some adolescents felt somewhat exposed since their parent had already given an account of the family's issues. I did not contact adolescents directly unless both the parent and adolescent had given their permission.

These interviews were conducted in a similar fashion to

that of the parent interviews. However, I did not request their interpretations of their experiences in relation to their sense of self or their family relationships as I was concerned about provoking insights that the adolescent had not already experienced. The interviews lasted approximately one hour. The adolescents' participation was acknowledged with gift certificates from a local music store or fifteen dollars if the adolescent was on social assistance. This acknowledgement was not mentioned prior to the interviews. Perhaps it would have served as an incentive to other adolescents who did not participate in the study. Approximately two to three weeks following the interviews, I called the adolescent on the telephone to ask for their responses to and clarifications of the interview summary I read to them.

Key Informant Interviews.

Upon completion of 12 of the parent interviews, I interviewed five key informants (Weiss, 1994) who were asked to describe their perspectives of the main issues for single-parent families related to challenges and barriers to family members' well-being, supports required, and supports available. The key informants were professionals who plan, administer, or deliver programs or services for single-parents or adolescents from single-parent families. Their perspectives were grounded in their diverse experiences with

several years. The following individuals were interviewed: the Executive Director of the Single-Parent Resource Centre; a senior policy analyst for the British Columbia Ministry of Social Services who works in the area of income policy which affects single-parent families on social assistance; a group leader who has facilitated educational and support groups for single-parents with adolescents for nine years; a group leader who has facilitated groups for single-parents and also groups for youth regarding adjustment in post-divorce families; the Director of Programs for the Boys and Girls Club of Victoria. Another purpose of the latter two interviews was to gain additional insights into adolescents' perspectives to compensate for finding fewer adolescents to interview than I had planned.

Focus Group of Single-Mothers

To locate participants for the group, a flyer was posted at the SPRC requesting participation in an informal group to discuss single-parenting with adolescents. Interested participants signed their name and telephone number on the flyer. I called each person who had signed (n=12) to describe the purpose of the group and my study, to answer their questions, and to request approval for tape-recording the group. The participants (n=10) represented a diverse sample of employed (n=7) and unemployed mothers (n=3) who were parenting adolescents (7 males and 9 females) whose ages

parenting adolescents (7 males and 9 females) whose ages ranged from 11 to 18 years. The participants had single-parented from three to seventeen years. While the SPRC provides programs for both single-mothers and single-fathers, a small percentage (approximately 5%) of their clients are single-fathers. No single-fathers volunteered for the group.

The focus group was co-moderated by the researcher and the group facilitator of the "Parents with Teens" group at the SPRC. Our roles were those of non-directive moderators who facilitated the group process but allowed the participants' own interests to be expressed (Morgan, 1988). Initially the group was welcomed, the consent forms were distributed, explained, and signed, and questions were answered. A short ice-breaker game, which involved talking in dyads and then introducing one-another to the group, was played to increase participants' comfort and ease of communication. The purpose of the group was described again: to share their perspectives and experiences of single-parenting with adolescents, including what helps and what hinders their ability to deal with challenges.

The group discussed a range of topics similar to those discussed by interview participants. However, the two-hour time period did not allow for participants to exhaust their experiences or perspectives. A summary of the main issues discussed in the group was sent to each participant (see Appendix D). They were invited to give their feedback about

the summary or the group by telephoning me or sending their comments to me in the stamped-self-addressed envelope included. Three people out of ten responded to this invitation. There were no disagreements with the summary.

Analysis of Data

The transcribed audiotaped interviews were analyzed inductively to discover recurring patterns, issues, and essential themes which characterized the participants' perspectives and experiences (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). I recorded field notes within one day following each interview. These field notes included background information regarding the interviews and interviewing process, observer's (researcher's) comments about the research methods, theoretical notes and developing hunches, and interviewer's reflections (See Appendix E for a sample of field notes). Within two to four days after each interview, I listened to the audiotapes to attend to how the narrator connected several parts to provide a coherent and continuous account; textually, ideationally, and interpersonally (Denzen, 1989; Mishler, 1986). I completed the transcriptions within two to three weeks of the interviews.

I read the transcribed texts twice to capture and code the data according to the research topics in the interview guide (e.g., challenges, supports, parenting), and then each transcript was divided into main issues related to each topic

(Weiss, 1994). For example, some of the main issues under the topic, "challenges" included financial constraints, social isolation, and the other parent. I created computer subfiles for each main issue, and text from all participants that had been coded for those issues was transferred to those subfiles of "excerpt files" (Weiss, 1994). I then began to read and code these excerpt files which contained text from many interviews dealing with the same issue. Descriptions of these issues or categories were "developed and defined through interaction with the data" (Weiss, 1994, p. 156). Further coding and interpretation took place within each issue subfile to identify emergent themes (see Appendix F for a sample of coding). Themes are concepts that represent units of meaning of participants' interpretations of their experience (Denzen, 1989; Weiss, 1994). Examples of themes describing meanings of the issue, "the other parent" were; supporting the adolescent's relationship with the other parent, supporting their emotional reactions to the other parent, and accepting the adolescent's new step-family members.

Descriptions of all themes related to each issue were integrated and summarized to bring coherence and meaning to the data according to what the majority of participants said. Then the descriptions were modified according to variant cases. I organized and integrated the material within each excerpt file to achieve "local integration" towards the development of a minitheory (Weiss, 1994) or set of

theoretical propositions (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Denzen, 1989) that made sense of thematic material within each issue. I then organized the minitheories from all interviews into a framework to find some general descriptive and theoretical conclusions about the meaning of experience in single-parent families with adolescents. Three key dimensions of this topic emerged as organizers to add coherence to the findings. These dimensions were; the development of the single-parent "self", parenting adolescents in a single-parent family, and the balance of challenges and supports experienced by the family. These dimensions and their interconnections are discussed in Chapter Five in relationship to relevant theoretical and empirical literature. I analyzed the data from the focus group and adolescent interviews in a similar fashion as the parent interviews, to describe their personal-meaning of their experience. However, I analyzed the key informants' data to distinguish what they perceived and thought were were the main issues and themes experienced by single-parents with adolescents.

## Interview Participants - Single-Parents

### Summary of Characteristics.

The single-parents interviewed stood at a similar life cycle stage; all were in their late 30's or early 40's; all had single-parented for at least three years; and all were parenting adolescents. The age range of the 12 female and 10

male adolescents represented was 10.5 years to 19 years. Fifteen out of the sixteen participants had been married or had been in a common-law relationship for a minimum of three years prior to their separation. One participant had chosen to have her child independently without cohabiting with the father. The parents (14 women and 2 men) represented a range of socio-economic backgrounds. Nine people were employed, six were on social assistance, and one person was in university supported by a student loan. Occupations in the sample included a teacher, senior civil servant, health programs consultant, volunteer co-coordinator, employment counsellor, medical assistant, counsellor, administrative assistant, and a secretary. Most participants were Caucasian, and two women were part First Nations. The participants also represented a range of family sizes: seven participants were the custodial parent of one child, eight participants of two children, and one participant was parenting four children.

Brief Biographies of Single-Parents.

Linda

Linda is a 43 year old woman who separated from her husband seven years ago. After the separation, Linda and her two children moved from Toronto to Victoria and bought a home in a middle-class neighbourhood. She acquired a job as a volunteer management co-ordinator which she has had since then. One year ago, Linda returned to university, although

she has maintained her job on a part-time basis.

Her daughter (14 years old) and her son (12 years old) have attended the same school and lived in the same neighbourhood since they moved to Victoria. They visit their father and step-mother in Toronto during the Christmas holidays and for two months in the summer, and have telephone contact with him on a regular basis throughout the year. Both children have friends and activities they enjoy, and are doing well at school. The relationship between the parents is cooperative but cool, especially since the father's remarriage.

Cathy

Cathy, is a part First Nations woman in her late thirties who has single-parented her 16 year old daughter since her daughter was one year old. The father has remarried, but he has maintained an ongoing, long-distance relationship with his daughter with telephone calls, letters, and her visits to the Okanagan once or twice a year.

Until approximately 4 years ago, when Cathy developed health and emotional difficulties, she worked as a cook. Since then she has been on social assistance while she prepares to re-enter the workforce. She has attended a variety of programs through social institutions to accomplish this plan, including a nine month employment preparation program for women who have survived abuse.

Her daughter is managing, with some difficulty, to pass her grade eleven subjects. She has friends, a part-time job, and is involved in a school theatre company. Cathy's daughter was interviewed for the study.

Cindy

Cindy is a 39 year old English woman who moved to Canada with her husband 20 years ago. She has two daughters, who are almost 12 and almost 15, that she has single-parented for four years. The marital separation was based on marital conflict and the husband's infidelity. Since the separation there have been brief attempts at reconciliation and recurrent conflict. At first, the girls saw their father every Saturday at his home on one of the Gulf Islands, but now the visits are more sporadic.

Cindy has attended high school upgrading for the past three years to enable her to enter the nursing program at Camosun College in the fall of 1996. She also volunteers at a birth control clinic and at the Single Parent Resource Centre. The family lives in a small one-bedroom apartment. Cindy shares the bedroom with her younger daughter and the living room has been partitioned off with a curtain to create a small sleeping space for the older daughter. They are on the waiting list for subsidized housing.

The youngest daughter has adjusted fairly well in school. However, the oldest daughter has been experimenting with

smoking, drinking alcohol, and skipping school. About midway through the four years of the separation, the oldest daughter went to live with her father for several months, but returned to live with her mother after getting into some trouble with not attending school and possibly experimenting with drugs. Cindy feels there has been some improvement in her daughter's behaviour and mood over the past year. Cindy's two daughters were interviewed for the study.

Diane

Diane is in her late 30's. She has a 14 year old son and an 11 year old daughter whom she has parented alone for six years. She and her ex-spouse separated when he left the marriage to live with another woman. The children stay with their father and step-mother every Wednesday night and every second week-end. The son stays an extra night at the father's home during the week.

Diane remained in the family home and her children have continued to go to the same school since the separation. The relationship between Diane and her husband is cooperative. Diane had not worked for ten years at the time of the separation, so returned to university with the help of a student loan to take refresher courses. She is now a grade seven school teacher, three days per week. Both of Diane's parents who supported her a great deal following the separation and with whom she was very close, died during the

past two years. This has been a great loss for both Diane and her children. The children are progressing very well in school, have many friends, and are involved in several activities in the community.

Paul

Paul is a single-father in his early forties who single-parents his two sons who just turned 18 and 19 years of age. Paul's ex-wife had custody of these two boys and their older sister for five years following the marital separation. However, five years ago, she asked Paul to assume custody of the children as she felt she couldn't deal effectively with the sons' problem behaviours. At this time, Paul had just resigned from his clerical position with the provincial government which he had had for 13 years to attend the environmental technology certificate program at a local college.

His daughter stayed with him for only a brief period, and since her departure, she has had two daughters. Two years ago, she asked Paul to assume custody of her children (ages four months and eighteen months) as she couldn't care for them and would have to put them up for adoption if he did not. Since then Paul has legally adopted these children. Having this extra responsibility slowed his pace through his coursework, and when he could not obtain any further student loans, he requested social assistance. He is currently

looking for employment.

The older boys have had several difficulties academically and behaviourally. Last year, the 18 year old was convicted of delinquent acts and is now on probation. According to Paul, this young man is still in transition and is not yet committed to work or school. The 19 year old boy is working part-time and trying to finish high school at night.

Jen

Jen is a woman in her early forties who has been the sole parent of her 12 year old son for 10 years. Her son has an attention deficit with hyperactivity for which he has been taking medication since he was approximately ten years old. He has also had emotional and behavioural problems which Jen attributes to his low self-esteem related to his learning disability, and to the father's irregular, and sometimes disruptive involvement with his son. The father currently lives in Ontario.

Jen quit her job during her son's pre-school years because he was a difficult child, and she felt he needed her support and nurturing on a full-time basis. At that time, Jen was diagnosed with Myasthenia Gravis, a chronic condition of the muscles that causes periodic weakness and fatigue. She supported her family on social assistance until her son turned ten years of age, and then she decided to prepare to return to

the workforce. Jen had an honours degree in English Literature, but felt she needed more specific training in order to get a job. Hence, one year ago Jen moved to Victoria from Ontario to complete a professional degree at the University of Victoria.

Due to the multiple changes associated with their geographical relocation and her return to university, both Jen and her son have had a very stressful year which has exacerbated her son's attention deficit and behaviour problems. She has reluctantly and regretfully approached Social Services to access respite care for her son for four nights per month. Recently her son has had to make a court appearance for charges of delinquent acts, and he now has regular appointments with a probation officer and a court-imposed curfew. Jen plans to move back to Ontario upon completion of her degree to be in closer proximity to her brother who is a good role model and mentor for her son.

Robin

Robin is in her late 30's and has one twelve year old daughter whom she has single-parented for three years. Shortly after the marital separation, Robin's five-year old son who had severe cerebral palsy died. At first Robin had to rely upon social assistance to support her family. However, for the past year, Robin has worked as a single-parent educator at the Single Parent Resource Centre. Due to

recent funding difficulties, she has been laid off from her job, except for one day per week. The reduction in income has forced Robin to reapply for social assistance. Robin's ex-husband has become disengaged from the family and does not provide financial support.

Robin's daughter has an attention deficit with hyperactivity for which she takes medication. Her daughter receives extra support at school and at home, and is progressing very well both academically and socially. I met Robin coincidentally several months after the interviews and she related that she recently gained employment as a probation officer in another city in British Columbia. Robin's daughter was interviewed for the study.

Amy

Amy has been a single-parent of two children for 12 years. Her son is now almost 15 years old and her daughter is almost 13 years old. She has a university degree as a nutritionist, but has worked for the past seven years as an administrative assistant in a medical office. Her employer is currently providing opportunities and support for her to become a certified medical assistant.

Her son visits his father, who lives in Texas, during the summers, and the father usually visits his children in Victoria once a year. Amy does not allow her daughter to go to Texas during the summer because of her daughter's diabetes.

She is concerned that her ex-husband might not be able to ensure that her daughter had the right combination of proper diet, medication, and sleep, and that in the case of a medical emergency, he wouldn't know what to do.

The daughter is an excellent student, has good friends, and is involved in many activities. The son has had more difficulties in school, but is otherwise, an active, involved teenager. Both children attend a private Catholic school. The family has a small house in a middle-class neighbourhood that was bequeathed to Amy when her father died several years ago.

Kim

Kim is a 43 year old woman who has never-married and has single-parented her 16 year old daughter since she was born. The father does not have a relationship or regular involvement with his daughter, but he visits her twice a year to deliver birthday and Christmas presents.

Kim has worked at the same job at a large educational institution since before her daughter was born and is currently an administrative assistant. She recently bought a small house in a middle-class neighbourhood. Kim's parents and siblings provide a supportive network for both Kim and her daughter. Her daughter is a peer counsellor, enjoys several extra-curricular activities, and does moderately well in school. Kim's daughter was interviewed for the study.

Leanne

For seven years Leanne and her ex-husband have maintained a joint custody partnership to parent their daughter who is almost 11 years old. Leanne's daughter lives with each parent fifty percent of each week. The parents have a cooperative relationship and still share special family occasions together.

Leanne works as an employment counsellor and educator. Her daughter goes to a private girls' school, and according to feedback from the school, she is a happy, competent student. Leanne reports that both parents and the daughter are very satisfied with the living and custody arrangements. Leanne lives in an apartment geographically close to her ex-husband's apartment.

Luce

Luce has been a single-parent to her two boys (ages 9 and 11 years) for seven years. She has worked as a part-time secretary since the marital separation, but is currently exploring new career opportunities. Her sons have regular contact with their father every Saturday afternoon. The parents' relationship is cool but cooperative.

Luce and her boys stayed in the family home after the marital separation and the children have always gone to the same school. They are involved in activities in the community and are doing well in school. The younger one has some

problems with aggressive behaviour, but Luce feels that this is within normal limits. Luce's father, who was very involved with and supportive of both Luce and her sons, died about one year ago.

Kate

Kate is in her early forties and has two boys (ages 7 and 11 years). She became a single-parent three years ago when her husband left the marriage to cohabitate with another woman. Kate has faced numerous struggles in adjusting to single-parenting, in part, due to the abruptness of the marital separation. Her sons have experienced very strong emotional reactions to the transition, although their father has maintained regular involvement with them. One year ago, Kate moved with her boys to Victoria from Montreal to live closer to her parents and brothers. The father maintains contact with his sons through daily telephone calls and visits approximately six times per year.

Kate has started her own business as a health and lifestyle consultant. The family lives in a house in a middle-class neighbourhood. The relationship between Kate and her ex-husband is tense, although they attempt to cooperate for the well-being of their sons. Kate feels that her sons' adjustment strains are settling down and that they are becoming more confident in their new environments.

Doreen

Doreen is a part native woman who has been a single-parent to her fifteen year old daughter since her daughter was three years of age. The ex-husband has not maintained involvement with the daughter. Doreen worked as a secretary but lost her job about a year ago and has not been able to find another job. To maintain her work skills, she has volunteered with the Big Brothers and Big Sisters organization and the Single Parent Resource Centre, and is currently doing secretarial work with a volunteer bureau.

When her daughter was in her early teens, Doreen had some psychological problems for which she needed residential treatment. At that time, her daughter lived in a social service group home for six months. Since then Doreen and her daughter have been working to maintain a healthy emotional and psychological balance. They have moved frequently over the past five years, but currently live in a small apartment where they would like to remain. Doreen's daughter has new friends in their community and is planning to finish high school in French Immersion. Doreen's daughter was interviewed for the study.

Phil

Phil is a single-father in his early forties. He has an 18 year old daughter from his first marriage who lives with him, and a four year old son from his second marriage, who

lives with the mother. He has maintained regular involvement with his son since the marital separation four years ago.

Phil is receiving social assistance while he negotiates an injury claim with the Worker's Compensation Board. He hopes to be retrained for another type of work when the negotiations are settled.

Phil's daughter is finishing high school, has a part-time job, and busks playing her guitar for extra money. Phil describes her as competent, mature, and wise.

Jane

Jane has single-parented two daughters (ages 13 and 15 years) for five years. The girls' father lives in close proximity to their home and is very involved in their lives on a regular basis. As Jane stayed in the family home following the separation, the girls have always gone to the same school. Jane recently completed a master's degree from the University of Victoria and has begun to build a small private business.

Jane and her ex-husband have had a cooperative relationship regarding the daughter's upbringing. Both girls are very involved in community and school activities, and are coping very well with growing up in a single-parent family.

Donna

Donna has been a single-parent for eight years to two of her three adolescent sons (ages 14, 17, and 20). The two

younger boys live with her and the older one returned to live with the father after Donna moved the family to Victoria from Alberta several years ago. Donna retrospectively describes her son's move to live with his father as the best thing for him, but that it was very difficult at the time. Donna has worked as a senior level civil servant in the Provincial Government for eight years. Her sons are doing very well.

# Chapter Four

## Results

The study results are organized into four sections. The first two sections reflect the findings of the single-parent interviews. In section one, the structure and function of the single-parent families are addressed, including perceived challenges and supports, and the single-parent as "self". Parenting adolescents in single-parent families and the adolescent-parent relationship are the topics of section two. The issues common to the majority of participants are presented first, followed by themes that represent differences across families in the intensity and meaning of each issue. The third section addresses the adolescents' perspectives of growing up in a single-parent family, and also some aspects of the dynamic nature of relationships and processes in single parent families. Section four presents issues identified by key informant interviews and the focus group.

### Structure of the Families

The single-parents interviewed differed in the length of time that they had single-parented, the number and age of their children, the degree of cooperation and conflict in single-parent's relationship with the other parent, and the degree of involvement of the non-custodial parent in child rearing (see Table 2).

Insert Table 2 about here

The adolescents from ten of the 16 parents interviewed saw their other parent regularly. For example, Luce's sons saw their father every Saturday afternoon, and Diane's adolescents went to stay at their father and step-mother's home every other week-end and one evening during the week. Several ex-spouses (n=5) lived in another city, but maintained regular contact with their children through visits during Christmas holidays or summer vacation, and through telephone calls and letters in between. Other adolescents saw their other parent on an irregular basis (n=4) and two never or rarely saw or heard from their other parent.

This structure had changed in six families when their children became adolescents or other family changes had occurred, such as a change in the parent's support system. For example, since Luce's father, who had provided a great deal of support with her two boys, died last year, she has begun to ask her ex-husband for greater involvement with his sons. Two boys have increased the frequency and duration of their visits with their fathers, one boy went to live with his father permanently, and one girl went to live with her father for several months. One single-father became the custodial parent five years ago when his sons (ages 13 and 14 years) came to live with him after the mother reported that they were

Table 2

Characteristics of Single-Parent Families Interviewed

| Group | Name | Number of Children | | | Years Parenting Alone |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | ≥ 11 | 11-14 | 15-18 | |
| Mothers | | | | | |
| | Kim* | | | 1F | 16 |
| | Luce | 1M | 1M | | 7 |
| | Robin* | | 1F | | 3 |
| | Cathy* | | | 1F | 15 |
| | Linda | | 1M,1F | | 7 |
| | Amy* | | 1M,1F | | 12 |
| | Leanne | | 1F | | 6 |
| | Diane | | 1M,1F | | 6 |
| | Jane | | 1F | 1F | 5 |
| | Cindy | | 2F | | 4 |
| | Kate | 1M | 1M | | 3 |
| | Doreen | | | 1F | 12 |
| | Donna | | | 2M | 8 |
| | Jen* | | 1M | | 10 |
| Fathers | | | | | |
| | Paul* | 2F | | 2M | 5 |
| | Phil | | | 1F | 3 |

Note. F=female; M=male

Star (*) indicates rare, irregular and infrequent involvement of the other parent with the children (less than once per month)

getting into too much trouble in the community and were non-compliant with limits at home.

Two parents, Jane and Leanne, described their relationship with their ex-spouses as a co-parenting or equal parenting arrangement. These participants stated that they had shared philosophies in child-rearing, shared financial responsibilities, clear agreements, and ongoing communication. Both live geographically close to their ex-spouses which logistically enables close involvement of both parents in the children's lives. Leanne and Jane said that although they live as single-parent families, they and their ex-spouses sometimes function as a two-parent family for the sake of the children. For example, both parentsthey attend concerts or athletic events in which the children are involved, collaborate when establishing limits, privileges, and decisions regarding emergent situations.

## Challenges of Single-Parenting

Seven main issues related to challenges of single-parenting discussed by the participants were; the other parent, added responsibilities, coping with the demands of single-parenting, financial challenges, social isolation, negative social expectations, and extenuating circumstances.

## The Other Parent

### Supporting the Adolescent's Relationship.

Whether the other parent was present in the family's schedule regularly, irregularly, or not at all, he or she was present in the children. Participants talked a great deal about the ongoing issues associated with this reality. Whether the ex-partners' relationship was characterized by cooperation (n=7), tension or conflict (n=5), or little or no relationship at all (n=4), the single-parents made efforts to support their adolescents' involvement with their other parent as a means of protecting their adolescents' self-esteem. Jane, who has a cooperative, co-parenting relationship with her ex-spouse, Kate and Cindy who have a good deal of conflict with their ex-spouses, and Jen who has little contact with her son's father illustrate the meaning of this challenge:

Jane:

> It remains a huge part of your life evermore and it affects every aspect of your life. And this is not a man I would want to see if it were not for my daughters....But we have worked really, really, really hard to learn to co-parent together.

Kate:

> You are never done with them. Any child you have ties you to that person forever whether you want that tie or not. It would be better and easier if he had died. He's remarried and has a new child. How can they get on with their life if he is calling everyday and saying, "I miss you". So I am involved in his messages on the answering machine, calling the kids to the phone, listening to them, negotiating who will talk first and for how long, and more often now, hearing them try to get out of talking to him. Every day I hear that man. I can't believe he's still doing this after three years....
>
> I try to be direct and not bad-mouth him, and

> to his credit, he doesn't bad-mouth me. If the kids complain, I tell them they have to take it up with him directly because I can't mediate.

Cindy:

> I don't go on about him. I just listen to them when they talk about him or complain about him because he is part of them and part of their self-esteem.

Jen:

> When P (her son) was between 8 and 11, his dad would drop in and out; would be gone for months....This is one of the heart-wrenching things about being a single-parent. One of the times his dad just basically abandoned him for several months, P. said, 'my dad's dead.' I said, 'No, honey, he's not dead'. P said, 'yes, he is because I haven't heard from him.' And working through that and having to say, 'Your dad loves you.'

Accepting the Adolescent's New Family.

For some parents (n=4), supporting their adolescents' relationships with their other parents meant accepting and dealing with the presence of a step-parent in their adolescents' lives. Linda and her ex-husband have had cooler relations and more arguments since he remarried two years ago. She reported that her children "love their father but they have trouble with the step-mother thing.... There's a lot of insecurities that happen in divorce, so the kids have real split loyalties and it is hard for them when they are there." They complain that they are expected to disconnect from their mother and their past family life when they visit their step-mother and father. The children are seeing a counsellor with their father and step-mother to deal with these issues. Linda stated that she feels less "legitimate" as a mother when they

are visiting their father, and that she resents the stress it imposes on her children and on her indirectly. However, because this relationship is important to her children's wellbeing, she listens to their concerns and tries to be supportive. Diane's quotation describes her experience as a mother with a daughter who has a step-mother:

Diane:

> I think I'm fortunate; (step-mother) really loves them. I mean we're pretty lucky. There's some things about her I don't love, but she cares about them and is sensitive to the fact that they are my kids and that she's the step-mother. But, my kids think it's great.
>
> At Christmas, I hate it because I don't get them for Christmas dinner, because I see them in the morning, and they say to me, 'tough, we get two Christmases, we're lucky' (laughing). I think that they really believe they are fortunate, that they have two families and that they are lucky....So who am I to put that down....
>
> (But) I know (my daughter) feels torn sometimes between (step-mother) and me. It's pretty normal that she would because she really likes her step-mother....Fortunately she is very communicative and very clear so that helps and we talk about it a lot.

Supporting Adolescents' Emotional Reactions.

Several parents described experiencing and dealing with their adolescents' expressions of sadness, regret, or anger about their arrangements with the other parent. This was more evident when the other parent lived in another city, or when the adolescent rarely saw the other parent. As illustrated by Kate below, the children's reactions tended to become less intense over time, and as they got older. Kate's sons, ages

seven and twelve years, visit their father in another city six times a year.

Kate:

> They have pined for him in the past but less often now. After each visit, there was night crying, rebellion, and trouble at school with the older one. They are now generally happy here and are doing well... (but) the little one can't deal with it, so he avoids talking to or about his dad.

Kim never married the father of her daughter, A. The extent of A's contact with her father has consisted of short visits during which her father drops off presents at her home on her birthday and at Christmas. Recently, A. (age 16) asked her mother why she never married her father and expressed her regret, "that it would have been nice to have a dad." A. also questioned her mother's apparent double moral standard to have done something that she warns her daughter against. Kim assured A. that she was an independent, 26 year old woman who had a career, and was happy with her choice to have had a child without having been married. Kim stated that, "A. reacts more strongly to the stigma about me not having been married, not even married and then divorced, than to the stigma associated with her favourite uncle being gay and her favourite aunt being a lesbian."

## Added Responsibilities

### More Tasks Plus Emotional Demands.

When the participants became single-parents, they had to assume tasks for which at first they were not prepared, such

as household repair and financial management, in addition to balancing all parenting functions. Most parents emphasized that the cumulation of additional physical tasks, having to learn new household management skills, and the emotional demands of "being the only parent in the house to respond to everyone's needs and wants" became an enormous challenge. Making decisions about family matters alone with no support was also very trying, particularly in crisis or highly charged emotional situations when a decision had to be made immediately, or when they were unsure of what to do to solve the problem. Robin described how these demands affected her:

> There are just so many things that are interconnected, but mainly it's just me - just one person. It's just my income, just what I can handle and cope with, what my strengths and my vulnerabilities are. It's just me. Every family has this balance. I would like some down-time, rest, and to do my own personal growth...like anybody else, but I just feel all the responsibility. I don't have someone to balance work and responsibility with. I have to do it all at once or give something up. It goes in circles.

For Kate and Linda, a difficult aspect of managing all of the responsibilities alone was that they have no-one else who really knows and cares for their adolescents as much as they do to talk to about parenting issues. Kate expressed that, "Not being able to share the responsibility, even verbally, makes it seem bigger and also makes me feel more lonely." However, Kate makes sure that other people, who are involved in her family's life, understand that she is a single-parent with two children, and at times may have to deal with her

responsibilities differently.

Kate:

> That is, if you have to post-date a cheque or can't be somewhere on time because you are the only one to drop the other child off somewhere ... so I feel an explanation is necessary about where we're coming from as far as organization, time, and money. It puts it into perspective for them.

Double Duty.

Most participants said they tried to do the work of both parents by doing "double duty" to demonstrate to others and themselves that they were single, but responsible parents. For example, Kim took extra responsibilities as class representative and band chaperon at her daughter's school so that her child would be represented and that people, "especially teachers would see me as a responsible person and parent." Kim and Linda describe their perspectives on taking responsibility as a single-parent below:

Kim:

> Part of being a class representative included phoning other parents to ask them to help with various school outings. When the dad would answer the telephone, he would always say 'oh, I'll get my wife'. This irritated me because I was the breadwinner, like the dads, but was involved with the school too. They got to split up that responsibility but I did it all. I do double time; try to do it all just in case others might be critical of what single parents are or are not doing, including my family. And partly this is to convince myself. A single-parent is hard on themselves for their kid's sake. So they cover all the bases.

Linda:

> As a single-parent you feel you have to do it all for some reason. That is hard; feeling that trapped feeling you get sometime. If you get sick; what do you do when you get sick?...

> Another hard thing for a single-parent with two kids is how do I go to two soccer games that are on at the same time? How do I even drive? I found that really hard. I was always feeling pressured that I wasn't doing my part because I'd have to ask someone to drive one of the kids. Now I am used to it...But I always had to do more to prove that I was doing OK (as a single-parent).

Two participants did not experience the challenge of added responsibility alone; Leanne, who has a 50% co-parenting situation with her one young adolescent daughter, and Phil, a single-father with an independent, older adolescent daughter.

## Coping with the Demands of Single-Parenting

### Exhausted and Sometimes Overwhelmed.

With the multiple demands and responsibilities of work/school, family, and household work, combined with little time to themselves, the parents often became exhausted, and at times overwhelmed. And when they became overwhelmed, their children often became involved in this dynamic. Jane, Amy, and Kate illustrate this balancing act:

Jane:

> You do get overwhelmed. The 'mood swing thing' is what my kids label it; where sometimes I just can't handle them and go (noise and hand movements replicate a rocket). And we talked about that and about the other moms who are like that. They are all single moms (emphasis). (Quoting her words to her children): you guys, sometimes it just gets so much and there's not another person to step in.... It's just coming at it from a different angle and it's just a shift in the energy. But, there's not that.

Amy:

> With all the demands on my time, the difficulty for me is that I feel worn-out a lot of the time. It's

not that my children are really difficult; it's that I'm tired a lot. My children are actually fine. I think the most difficult thing is my own limitations. (For example) my daughter hugged me in the kitchen one day while I was making dinner, and she asked me why I was so mad at her. I was not angry at her, I was just really busy, and was exhausted.

Kate:

I hold back all the frustrations, challenges, and other emotions in order to keep functioning and then, after awhile one (of the children) will ask for something I don't have the energy to do and then the wall breaks down and I get either really mad or I cry. I cry and cry and they get upset and then I dry my tears, pull up my socks, and take on the next week....I try to explain to them what's going on - not going into the financial figures. I have said to them that it's really difficult being the only parent...I say, 'You are not upsetting me; it's the situation. It's the fact there's only one of me and I can't do it all.' They have become a bit more sensitive and responsible. They have the ability to sit and hear things out, especially the older one. The younger one acts things out.

Overcompensate, Overindulge, Overprotect.

Several parents stated that they had tried to make up in some way for their children's loss associated with the other parent not being there, or for the fact that they weren't a "traditional two-parent family." Jen and Linda recount below their experience with this issue:

Jen:

I think I compensated for the fact that his dad wasn't around. I had other people around me who were the little nuclear families....Ya, I think I really bent over backwards just to compensate. I had this feeling that I had to do just as well as they did.

Linda:

I think we tend to overindulge our kids a lot. I feel guilty that he doesn't have a dad in the same city. Yet it was circumstances, it's not anyone's

> fault....So, I feel that there's a loss for them. And so I will always drive everyone everywhere and I tend not to say 'no' about stuff because they've only got me.

Cathy and Doreen stated that because they were parenting alone, they felt they needed to overprotect their children to ensure their safety and wellbeing. However, Luce, Leanne, Diane, and Jane, whose ex-spouses were more involved with their children, and Paul whose sons were older adolescents, did not feel they needed to compensate for their adolescents' loss.

Adjusting Priorities.

Most participants had reached a point where they realized that they had to adjust their personal and family priorities to balance their demands and personal resources in a way that would allow them to care for their own needs as well as their children's. Luce demonstrates below that adjusting priorities requires a letting go of some responsibilities, and Amy illustrates that self-confidence is required to enable the parent to shift priorities to meet their own needs. Kate describes how requests from others to assume additional family tasks may mean reevaluating personal decisions and priorities for the whole family when there is only one parent.

Luce:

> I found myself doing more because I was the only parent doing what two parents do.... I am getting better at not doing everything for two parents. I used to stay up till midnight. You have to learn to let go of some things.

Amy:

> I get overwhelmed and had to change my thinking about what I could do. I stopped making incredible lists and now do what I can and do some things for me. There are demands of time and responsibility on every level. Gaining greater confidence in myself helped me to make better choices and to priorize; not just do lists of tasks all the time.

Kate:

> My son's baseball coach suggested that someone play catch with him every day to work on his arm.... It meant to me there was another thing I should be doing. As a single-parent you're supposed to do it all. There just isn't enough time in the day to do it all and still be there for your other child and for yourself. Something has to give and so you have to decide in your own head what you're going to priorize or sacrifice or work with to the best of your ability. And so, it's a very sensitive issue when someone inadvertently challenges your decisions or your priorities. You feel you have to make long, lengthy explanations about it.... I'm doing my darndest to see that he gets to three practices a week and the game; rearranging my schedule and my other child's schedule to slot that one in. And even that's not enough...
>
> When other people say things, it goes deeper when you're single. You take things more to heart because you're the parent and there's no dad to take on some of the responsibility. I have started to set limits on what I can do.

## Financial Challenges

### Insecurity.

Despite more limited financial resources, most participants stated that in comparison to when they were married, they enjoyed the autonomy and choice of how their money was spent. However, when there were constant financial worries about support payments from their ex-husbands, as for Amy and Kate, an ongoing sense of insecurity prevailed. Kate stated, "We still live with the prospect of having the money

yanked at any time. He is going to court to prove he can't afford it. There is always the unknown financially." Amy described the meaning of her financial situation which is complicated by irregular support payments and regular financial demands and mortgage payments.

Amy:

> It creates such an insecurity for me. I don't think that people realize the pressure you're under financially...The insecurity you feel and how it affects your personality. I have orthodontics to face for my son and daughter - more financial demand. I sort of feel like collapsing inside sometimes....Sometimes I feel like I've been pushed to the outer edges of who I am...it's given me an understanding of how a woman could become oppressed in these circumstances and get into a bad lifestyle.

Several months later in the discussion group, Amy reported that she had sold her house to "make a big financial correction" and that her sense of confidence had been restored as she had become less reliant on the regularity of the support payments from her ex-husband.

Five participants receive regular support payments from their ex-spouse, and Leanne and her ex-husband share the financial responsibility for their daughter's needs, based on each parent's ability to pay. However, as Linda explains below, the taxes she has to pay on her support payments from her ex-husband add a degree of financial insecurity to her life as well. She explains below:

> So, of what he gives me, one-third goes to taxes, no almost one-half. It sucks. I get the money and then I have to pay it back. I've written letters to David Anderson but....I owe $9000 on last year's taxes....And what I've done in the past years is to

> remortgage my house to pay these taxes, because I'm taxed at 41%. I'll have to sell my house before I wanted to at this rate.

Single-Parenting on Social Assistance.

Several participants (n=6) were on social assistance, and another participant's source of income was a student loan, but she had been on social assistance before returning to university. All of these participants were involved in school, college, retraining or volunteer programs to learn or maintain employment skills.

Single-parents on social assistance confronted other challenges besides the financial ones. To some, it meant that they were not measuring up to society's standards or their own standards of what they would like to provide for their children, for example, music lessons and other educational opportunities. However, Robin and Cathy point out in their quotations below that although having more money would help them to be more self-sufficient, it would not erase some of the emotional and personal issues about becoming a single-parent:

Robin:

> It would increase my autonomy and personal control and allow me to be more self-determined....(but) it wouldn't answer all the problems. The emotional wounds of separation still must be worked through and dealt with. Any big traumatic change in our lives like that make us question who we are and what we should be doing.

Cathy:

> Some say that they are broke and have no food in the cupboard and don't know how they are going to pay the rent. But I can say I'm broke when I have

> three hundred dollars in the bank. It's a different kind of broke. Broke is when you have no will left....It's (money is) not going to make everybody happy. It depends on how it's used - but it can't fix sad.

Cindy has been completing her high school requirements over the past two years, and she has worked hard to attain adequate marks to be accepted into the nursing program at Camosun College. Recent changes in social policy may mean that even though she has been accepted into the program, she will not receive enough financial support to attend the college and also support her two teen-age daughters.

For some participants, part of the financial challenge included finding affordable, safe housing with adequate space. For example, Cindy lives in a small one-bedroom apartment with her two girls, ages 12 and 14 years. The daughters are very unhappy about and often fight with each other over their lack of space and privacy.

Cindy:

> I just try to acknowledge it...and say to them, it is horrible you don't have a bedroom and none of us have a bedroom but we have a home and we have heat and we have food...I'm on the CRD housing list so I'm trying to do that. But it takes time. And there's nothing else I can do to get any better. It works OK. Bless us all really because none of us has our space. I share the bedroom with (the younger daughter)

These parents also reported difficulties in providing the material goods and means of the adolescent culture that their teens are exposed to everyday at schools. For example, they may not have a tapedeck or compact disc player on which to

play music, or extra money for movies, videos, for recreational admission or programs.

## Social Isolation

### Changing Social Relationships.

With little extra time and many responsibilities and demands, social relationships changed for most participants when they became single-parents. Many talked about feeling socially isolated at times and wondering, "Am I the only one doing this or feeling this?" This sense of isolation was felt more intensely when the parents were new to single-parenting and had not yet located or mobilized support systems. It was also augmented by some parent's beliefs about their parenting responsibility, and by difficulties in arranging adequate supervision for young adolescents as illustrated by Amy and Robin:

Amy:

> A parent for me is someone who is devoted to their family, who comes home every night and who is there for them.... I just feel my place is at home just as if I was married. It's like this conflict, you want to have a life to make up for what you've lost, but you've got responsibilities.

Robin:

> It's harder overall on the week-end. It's just us. (My daughter) or I may have an invitation but if the times don't coincide, we can't always take advantage of the offers. The time and freedom are issues: we need freedom from one another too. These are similar issues with two-parent families but they can spell each other off. We sometimes need a break from one another. It could be another third party, it doesn't have to be a husband. We also need to relate to other people besides each other.

Feeling Left Out Socially.

Another reason given emphatically by most participants for their social isolation was that they felt that they were "left out" socially by others. Most found that they became distanced from old friends who seemed to prefer to socialize "in couples." Some participants had begun to socialize with other single-parents, while others were having difficulty knowing how or finding time to become reconnected socially. The following quotations exemplify the associated meanings for the participants about "not fitting in."

Linda:

> My friends initially were single-moms too. We had the same issues and invited each other for dinner. When you are a single-parent you don't get invited to 'couples' things. There's a stigma surrounding being a single mom (very definite statement)....The women will say when my husband is out of town let's go do something. They never think of saying we're having people in, come over. So, you know, it drives me crazy. You are a different person because you are not a couple. Our life-style is different than their life-style.

Robin:

> We don't have the same connections with the community as two-parent families. I don't feel we fit in at their functions - like a third wheel. It's not necessarily a prejudice, it's just an odd number....I have one single-parent chum with a daughter (who is) my daughter's age, and that works out well but these are hard matches to find...I'm not in the same social circles as the two-parent families. (My daughter)'s friends' parents don't invite me over or include me, and there isn't a sense of comfort in talking with them to develop a friendship.

Kate:

> I don't fit with the traditional families, but I don't necessarily fit with other single-parent families as they are a very diverse group of families. I feel very alone, in no-man's land.

There were two people who stated they did not experience social isolation to the same extent as the other participants. Diane has maintained all of her friends from when she was married. Kim mentioned that, even though she doesn't feel that she fits in with two-parent families, she does not experience this as isolation. Both of these people have had strong support from and ongoing involvement with their extended families, in addition to other communities of connection, such as workplace connections. Choosing to be a single-mother from the beginning, Kim established a support network early. For example, through the workplace daycare where her daughter was cared for while she worked, she met other single-parents: one of these single-mothers has been her friend for 14 years.

## Negative Social Expectations

### Other's Assumptions about Single-Parents.

As mentioned by Linda above, the majority of other participants also experienced a lack of sensitivity to or understanding of single-parents at best, and negative social expectations or negative stereotype at worst. Most often, the remarks or actions of other people did not directly involve the participants, although the impact was experienced as direct and personal for some parents. For example, Cindy was recently at a meeting of women who were being oriented to be volunteers at a birth control clinic. At the coffee break,

Cindy listened to several women talk about how angry they were at "all the breaks that single-parents on welfare get and how easy they have it." Cindy said that it made her angry, but also stated, "I try to rise above it and not go down to their level. It is shocking to hear what they say when they don't know you're a single-parent." Luce also has strong feelings about other peoples' assumptions about single-parents:

Luce:

> One thing is I'm really surprised that there still seems to be a lack of understanding and a social stigma of sorts associated with it (single-parenting). So many of my kids' friends are single-parents, and it is so common now that some of the remarks you hear are really surprising. The whole stigma thing is really surprising since on the surface, it seems we have come a long way....you hear a lot of people say about delinquents as coming from a single-parent family as sort of an explanation for it. I mean I know that's not true. I've had people say that they love it when their husband goes out of town because they don't have to cook. But he comes back. It's different altogether. He doesn't go and take his income with him.... Things like that are not as damaging as saying your kids are going to become delinquents, but it makes you realize that people have no idea. I wonder why there is that label in the first place. You are a parent. Like 'she's a single-parent', that's who you are. We should just get rid of the label for starters. I mean you're a mom or you're not a mom.

In anticipation of the stereotype and to avoid negative expectations of others, Jen and Luce tried to conceal that they were single-parents at times. After experiencing the exclusion of herself and her sons from social circles associated with her sons' private Catholic school, Donna also began to conceal her status as a single-parent. The experiences of negative social expectations at times provoked

anger for some people and a sense of isolation and marginalization in others. However, most participants had learned over time to distance themselves from these social attitudes. They agreed that these notions and negative expectations do exist in the minds of some people in society, but they felt that they had reached a level of personal confidence and legitimacy where these societal valuations did not bother them as much as they had earlier. For example, Jane stated that, "the fact that I don't respond to or consider societal expectations is part of who I am. I don't feel shamed for being a single-parent."

Cindy:

> I don't burden myself with that. It makes me try harder to do the best I can. I had no preconceived notion of single-parenting. I just never thought I'd be one. But I do find that the outside world has a preconceived notion, especially if you are on welfare.

However, several participants made reflective comments about whether their personal expectations and internalized feelings and thoughts about single-parenting had colored or intensified their sense of these external social judgements. The following quotations are examples of these reflections:

Amy:

> I don't know if it's a combination of what they think or what you think - but you feel a bit like a loser. You feel, financially, like you're not up to par. And you sometimes feel uncomfortable that you don't have a man.

Luce:

> In my family, it (being a single-parent) was a very negative thing. As it was, I thought that only poor, uneducated people became single-parents and

> all their kids have problems. And I never thought I'd be one. I felt ashamed.

Robin:

> I feel like I'm not measuring up. I see it in what I've been able to accomplish. I have to be aware of it and I have to deal with my own feelings about that. Some of me knows that....But (also) there's an impression out there that I'm just not measuring up. There's always something I can't do because of time, resources...

Kim and Donna were particularly aware of negative expectations of single parents in the workplace where they felt that some co-workers and employers held expectations that "they wouldn't be there." As such, they always tried to be punctual, reliable employees, and if they had to miss work, they worried a great deal. Leanne related detailed evidence that she had been discriminated against for a job for which she had applied because she was a single-parent. She explains below that her current approach to applying for jobs and being a single-parent in the workplace involves refraining from labelling herself a single-parent:

Leanne:

> Because I am an employment counsellor, I would never label myself as a single mother in an employment interview unless I was being interviewed by the Single Parent Resource Center and that might be the determining factor in whether they want me for the job or not.... I know that I was discriminated against once anyway for a job because I was a single parent. I definitely think that some people think we are grossly dysfunctional, not managing very well, and that we're raising a bunch of hysterical kids who are out on the streets at all hours.

Single-Fathers' Views of Social Expectations.

Both single-fathers interviewed thought that they faced the same issues as single-mothers in parenting adolescents. The single-fathers views were, however, somewhat different regarding social expectations. Although Paul is aware of negative social expectations, he has not experienced any personally. He also wondered if perhaps single-fathers are viewed more sympathetically in society than single-mothers. For example, he thinks that in comparison to the single-mothers he knows, his request for subsidized housing was dealt with more expeditiously. Phil, on the other hand, feels that he is sometimes viewed suspiciously by others because he is "trying to do a mother's job."

Social Expectations of Adolescents from Single-Parent Families.

About one-half of the participants felt that there can be negative expectations of adolescents from single-parent families, and that although they had experienced negative expectations of their adolescents in the past, they had not experienced any recently. They attributed this change to the fact that their children have been in stable school and community environments for several years and are now known and trusted. Kim and Leanne also experienced negative expectations from their families. For example, Kim stated, "Kids are watched in school, and even in my family. My family always expects there'll be trouble and if there was, it would

be explained as a single-parent thing rather than a rotten parent thing." The other half of the participants expressed that most people do not have negative expectations of adolescents in single-parent families because this family form has become so common in society that the adolescents are not considered or identified as different.

Diane offered an "insider" perspective as she is both a school teacher and a single-parent. She related several experiences where negative expectations about single-parents and their children had been voiced in the school where she teaches. She then described how she locates herself and her family outside of these negative expectations, as "not a typical single-parent family." At the end of her quotation, she speaks of her own expectations and assumptions of other single-parent families.

Diane:

> Teachers make negative comments about kids from single parent families - call them broken homes.... If the child is having problems, it's because it's a single parent family - no rationale. They are not looking at the parent as a person - a person who is an alcoholic or a person who is this or that. No, they jump from the problem to the single parent cause. I probably don't hear it all, because they are aware that I'm a single parent.
>
> I mean so often kids from a single-parent family are (emphasis) messed up but I don't think it's necessarily because they are from single-parent families. Other circumstances like abuse or financial difficulties or lack of parenting skills is a big thing....I mean a lot of those parents don't go into the school to see what's going on.
>
> I think because our home is pretty stable, I don't think people think of me as a single-parent, or the typical single-parent. Most of my kids friends are from two-parent families.... Because I do so much with the kids...I think other parents

> have this vision that it's a wholesome, together family...
>
> I have to admit, I was just talking to somebody who is from a very solid two-parent family. Their comment was, 'My husband and I were just talking about this and wondering what the chances were that our kids would marry someone from a two-parent family. The whole implication on my part as well is that we prefer a two-parent family. This is somewhat hypocritical of me. So even I have some of that. I'm glad that my kids' friends have two-parents....
>
> I suppose that we think that they (two-parent families) are more successful people; that it's a healthier environment. And yet, I don't believe that. I believe that I'm a healthier, stronger person having divorced, and I think my kids are in a better environment than they were previously.... I feel I'm a lot stronger person and better role model for my kids. So I don't know what's there.

## Families with Extenuating Circumstances

### Additional Challenges and Increased Intensity.

Four participants dealt with extenuating circumstances on the basis of their adolescents' health (Amy), learning (Jen, Robin), and/or behavioural problems (Paul, Jen). For these families many of the challenges of single-parenting increased in intensity and frequency, and the need for external family supports also increased. For example, Jen's 12 year-old son has a learning disability with hyperactivity and behaviour problems as well. As a result, Jen struggles to help her son deal with these problems and also to maintain her psychological well-being. Jen moved to Victoria one year ago to complete a professional degree at the university. Because she has no family or established friendships here, Jen has had difficulty in finding support for both herself and her son.

She has recently requested respite care from Social Services to give both her and her son a break from one another every other week-end.

Jen:

> P. (her son) is so demanding all of the time that I have totally retreated....I worry about the teenage years because you know if I don't work really hard at getting my mental space together, this will probably be detrimental for me.
>
> The morning times and the evening times when he is not on Ritalin are particularly hell around here and our relationship in the last year or so has gotten pretty toxic because of all the changes I've implemented.
>
> I wouldn't seek out respite care...It's tied to into this whole thing, I can do it all. I should be able to control this. I'm in (professional training), I've got lots of skills, why can't this sort of little situation work out in our home....
>
> Single-mothers who don't have those supports are clearly more disadvantaged and feel more isolated, and become even more isolated....This is particularly true with a difficult child which furthers the isolation.... Single-mothers need respite and it should be built right into the system so the parent can get a break and then reparent their child and themselves....
>
> When my resources are there, I'm a good parent. But so often it is the cumulative effect of stress and exhaustion...My priority now is to keep it together to keep P. with me. I am afraid to ask for too much help or say how things really are with P. to Social Services (regarding respite care) or with his probation officer, as P. might be taken away from me.

Amy's daughter has diabetes, and both her son and daughter have moderately severe asthma. Robin's daughter has an attention deficit disorder for which she takes medication. Adolescents with these types of problems require a more consistent lifestyle and a great deal of support both at home and at school. Amy, Robin, and Jen pointed out that they have

to be more available to be their children's advocate in their dealings with the school, health care, and social systems. Paul's 18 year old son and Jen's 12 year old son have each become involved in delinquency with a group of peers. The parents and their sons have had to negotiate with the police, the courts, probation officers, and the school system regarding the offences and their consequences.

## Supports and Resources

All parents agreed that finding a support system external to their immediate family was essential to help them deal with multiple demands and responsibilities of single-parenting. The support required included supervision of adolescents while parents are at work or school, household repair and maintenance, and emotional and psychological support for themselves and their adolescents. Parents relied upon a variety of sources of support depending on their situation and needs, including informal supports, such as the ex-spouse, extended family, and friends, as well as formal supports.

### External Family Supports and Resources

#### Formal Supports and Resources.

Several participants sought supports for themselves and their adolescents from various agencies and organizations, such as the Single Parent Resource Centre (SPRC), the Boys' and Girls' Club, and Divorce Lifeline. These formal supports

were reported to be extremely beneficial for parents who received little informal support from their ex-spouse, family or friends. In particular, the SPRC provided multiple opportunities and supports for five participants on social assistance, for example, low-cost educational and support groups, free counselling, opportunities to volunteer and learn job-related skills, and a supportive community atmosphere to network with other single-parents.

Informal Supports and Resources.

Luce, Amy, Kate, and Linda didn't feel that what they needed was available through existing formal programs. Their perceptions were that existing programs were for very young single-parents who needed basic parenting skills or for parents on social assistance. Most parents said they needed and preferred an informal support network, "to find out you're not alone and to find out from others how do you manage to get out, and how do you manage to get your house fixed." (Luce) Linda's quote also illustrates that single-parents, regardless of the source or amount of their financial support, need social networks:

Linda:

> I've often thought that there's a lot of things for people who are financially needy but there's very little for someone in my position. I'm doing OK; I'm getting by but there's not support for me. Like I'm supposed to be doing OK because I'm not on social services....
>
> Having a support group with everyone pooling their skills. I think there are a lot of women like me who are kind of isolated at home. And

> maybe they are getting child support and so aren't on social services. But they are having the same anger and grief and hard times.

A minority of parents grew closer to and gained support from their own parents or other relatives. Luce's father and Diane's mother and father, who had been their primary sources of support, died during the past two years. This was a profound loss for both Diane and Luce and their children. Kim's parents are an additional source of support for her daughter, which indirectly provides emotional support for her. As well, her father helps her with household maintenance which reduces some of the physical demands of being a single-parent and a homeowner. Kim also emphasized that while parental support is important, "the emotional demands of single-parenting were more difficult because there are no role models, not even in books. With no role models, you're always hoping you're doing it right."

Asking for Help.

A common barrier to receiving adequate supports was the reservations some people had in asking for help. These reservations were related to different issues for different parents. Some participants had no previous frame of reference for becoming a single-parent and being someone who needed assistance. They had long ago accepted their family or cultural standard of being self-sufficient. Asking for help was more difficult when the parent lacked confidence and a

sense of legitimacy as a single-parent. This was most often in the early stages of single-parenting, when there were multiple changes and stresses, or when there were extenuating circumstances as described earlier. Paradoxically, it seems that the experience of having support helps build enough confidence to be able to ask for support. Robin, Amy, and Luce describe their experiences of asking for support below:

Robin:

> There are always personal issues on how to ask for help...You need personal strength and need to know you deserve help but that comes from confidence and confidence comes from informal supports.

Amy:

> You're developing as a parent alone, as an individual, you're getting over trauma of separation, and that all requires an awful lot of supports. It's hard to come by all those supports. Over the years, I've gone to the doctor, 'my back hurts' and what I mean is 'I hurt'. You don't, very rarely, express the help you need or get the help you need.

Luce:

> I didn't grow up with any knowledge of single-parenting. To be a single-parent in my family was real negative. I never thought I'd be one. My whole family were social workers or ministers and they helped other people but they didn't ask for help. They gave help....
>
> If I had to do it all over again, I would first go out of my way to find other single-parents. I didn't. That's part of my upbringing; that you go it alone. Like my dad was great at helping other people but when it came to having problems; he didn't ask for help. I probably took on more than I should have. If I were to do it again, I would have found other single-parents on my own. You have to get over that - not asking for help.

Supports for Single-Parents

Supporting and Nurturing Oneself.

All participants emphasized that taking care of themselves and meeting their own needs were essential to being able to parent alone effectively. The majority of participants stated that they had developed or maintained some interest or activity that they referred to as "lifelines" to gain personal space and "time-outs" from the intensity of single-parenting. Examples of these activities included creative expression such as writing, sewing, painting, gardening, and reading; contact with trusted friends; or physical activities, such as walking, jogging, and yoga.

Most parents also spoke about the importance of providing primary support for their adolescents' development to avoid problems later. This commitment meant that the parents sometimes elected to delay fulfilment of some of their own needs, which caused resentment at times. Jane's, Kate's and Diane's statements that follow illustrate this commitment:

Jane:

> I know how important stability and doing this work with them now is because I don't want to have to pay a huge price and I don't want them to have to pay a huge price down the road. So it's a very stable environment and it doesn't allow me a lot of time or space for my own emotional life.

Diane:

> It's really important for kids during tough times to have one person who accepts them unconditionally and is there for them. But if that person is depressed, it doesn't help and also doesn't help if the parent becomes involved in a new relationship in the early years.

Kate:

> I feel I owe them all my time. There's a resentment in that and I feel that's something I need to work on. I wrote an article on it, 'Self-nurturing for single-parents'. Nurture yourself first because the message you send your kids is that you count just as much as they do. It's easy to get caught in that trap of always putting your kids first....Sometimes their needs come first and sometimes yours come first. And then you argue with yourself about whether that's selfish. In a single-parent family, the tendency is to put the kids first.

Work as a Source of Support.

Those participants who were employed (n=9) emphasized how important it was to them as single-parents to have a job for financial stability, personal fulfilment, and social connections. However, finding the right combination of circumstances to make it possible to meet the demands of the traditional rhythms of the workplace, eight-hour days for five days a week, is sometimes difficult for single-parents. Supportive relatives, ex-spouses, and employers who allowed some flexibility in work schedules were essential to enable the parents to both work and meet emergent needs at home. Linda's quotation is an example,

> I feel that because of the kids it was a really good choice (of job) because it is so flexible. When you work for a non-profit...they are understanding of your family needs. For example, when my kids got sick or if I had to leave early to go to the doctor's, they allow that....It's been good for me and I think that is one of the reasons that I stayed here initially for so long (seven years). The people I work with have been there for several years. We're friends.

The other participants, who did not have a job at this

time, looked forward to finding employment for financial security as well as social and psychological reasons. Four parents were involved with high school upgrading, community college, or university on a full-time basis, and three participants had volunteer commitments or were attending retraining sessions to become better prepared to find employment in the marketplace.

## Single Parent as "Self"

### Redefinition of "Self" and "Family".

A common theme that was central to all participants' experience was the fact that becoming a single-parent involved a redefinition of who they were as individuals in the world. Associated with this redefinition was an increase in their sense of self-awareness, independence, and confidence. For example, Luce and Jane described how their sense of independence and self-confidence grew as they coped with the many responsibilities of single-parenting and learned new skills. Luce stated, "You take on and manage many big responsibilities and changes. Maybe it (confidence) builds in small steps, for example, in fixing something you didn't think you could."

How single-parents interpret, and define themselves as single-parents is, in part, influenced by how they see themselves in relation to their own expectations, those of their community, and the cultural values of the society at

large as illustrated by Linda and Jen below:

Linda:

> For the first few years I used to think that I was the only one by themselves - especially the neighbourhood I moved into (which) was a very middle class with two-parent family homes.
>
> I used to walk into a grocery store and see a mom and dad and baby and I'd burst into tears. Because that's what I wanted. I always wanted a family. A family meant everything to me. And so when I divorced that's what I lost - family....I've learned to redefine what family really is.

Jane:

> To break the isolation that many single-parents feel, especially at first, requires an internal redefinition - an acceptance. This is difficult if the parent allows themselves to be influenced by the strong cultural values that support the two-parent family as the best way to bring up children.
>
> Family form doesn't matter. It's how you define it (single-parenting). How you define it and live it affects how your kids see it. It can be OK however it's defined.

Part of the redefinition of family involved reinventing family rituals. For example, it was important to Linda to maintain Sundays as family days, but with different activities than was her custom before her marital separation.

Growing into the Single-Parent "Self".

Most participants did not begin to parent alone with a sense of confidence and legitimacy. As the participants mentioned above, this sense of confidence grew over time. Some people began their journey of parenting alone with a negative vision of single-parents as being "poor, distraught, and having children who were out of control." Luce, Jen, Kate, and Amy said that they felt as if they were "failures"

or "losers" because they were on their own raising children and didn't have a partner. Luce, Donna, and Jen were so sensitive to this negative vision of single-parenting that they concealed their feelings and needs, as well as their status as single-parents. This contributed to their sense of isolation and loneliness. Several people described going through a period of severe sadness or depression following their separation. For some, this psychological struggle continued periodically for three or more years (Amy, Cathy, Doreen, Luce, and Kate).

Most participants described turning points where they experienced a "shift in their personal vision" of their families and their futures. They consequently gained a stronger sense that they could be independent and could effectively manage their families. Their plans and actions became more purposeful in support of their new vision and confidence. For some people, turning points occurred when certain beliefs and expectations about families, marriage, and single-parenting were challenged. Luce reported that reading about women's growth, identity, and creativity, and discussing these issues with her sister who is also a single-parent was a turning point for her in becoming more confident as a single woman. Kate's and Cindy's quotations illustrate other types of turning points:

Kate:

> Letting go of feeling like a victim; the illegitimate parent, the anger, the frustration. The turning point for me was letting go of

> that....then I got a new vision of how I wanted our family to live in the future. Then my actions became more purposeful....To move through the phases you have to identify 'yourself' first.

Cindy:

> The ending of the marriage sparked it, but it had been building up before. That's been one of my big things since I separated - realizing that I had choices...that was a big, big eye opener for me. Cause I never knew I had choices; I never knew. Like I was always helpless - in my head.

Differences among the participants were related to the timing of the turning points in relation to the degree of choice they had had in becoming a single-parent. For those who left their marital relationship of their own choice or were involved in a mutual choice to end their relationship, the turning point occurred either before the actual physical separation or shortly after. For those who were left by their spouses, and did not exercise choice in the separation, the turning point occurred some time after the physical separation. This was particularly the case for those parents who also began their journey as single-parents with a negative internalized vision of single-parent families.

Jane, as a "leaver", stated that she left her marriage with sadness but with confidence that she could and would be a good parent for her children. Many of the separation issues, such as rules, boundaries, and the relationship between the children and their father had been negotiated prior to the separation. She said, "I never thought for a minute that I couldn't create for them a good environment by being on my own. It never entered into my mind. Of course I

could. Of course I would."

All participants who became single-parents against their wishes (n=10) found that the first part of the single-parenting process involved dealing with the "anger and devastation of being left." Moving on from this point required reaching a point where "you want within yourself to move ahead" (Cindy). Participants clarified that their growth of confidence was not only related to their increased capabilities to manage their responsibilities, it was also an internal shift of the "self" as Cindy describes below:

> Since I have become a single-parent, I am more aware of where my strengths and weaknesses are. I was totally dependent for so long. The hardest thing has been that I didn't know what I wanted. It's bizarre to know that you can be so blocked; that you don't know what you need and what you want...The big change came when I realized that if I change me then...

Moving toward the future involved seeking counselling for more than one-half of the participants and various other forms of support to deal with psychological and emotional issues regarding the separation and to parenting alone. Several people explained that "old pains from childhood fears, anger, and insecurities add to the pain of separation and loneliness that you feel" at this vulnerable time. Others, like Diane, Luce, and Amy, who felt they had fairly secure and happy childhoods were shocked by their feelings and fears after their marital separation.

Kim, a never-married parent, did not experience a turning point. She described herself as an independent person who had

no regrets about her choice to have her daughter without a husband.

## Parenting Adolescents in Single-Parent Families

### Doubts and Attributions

Single-parents have many of the same issues in raising adolescents as two-parent families. However, most participants sometimes wondered if their adolescent's moods, personality style, or behaviours were caused or aggravated by the fact that they were from single-parent families. Linda wondered if her son's behaviour would be different, "if their dad were here."

Jen:

> Intellectually you know you're not the cause of it but emotionally you feel that if you had a partner it would have been better (soft voice). So there's always that niggling little thought.

Kim:

> A. is shy, perhaps lonely. She's fine with adults but wishes that her peers would call and include her more often. This concerns me and I wonder at times if this is because we are a single-parent family. A. is very intense, serious, and interested in and talks about social issues. She doesn't really connect with peers.

Luce:

> I don't dwell on it. I don't wish I were back in my marriage. My kids are better off just with me than if I'd stayed in a family. I don't dwell on that, but I just wonder sometimes if I'm doing the right thing.

Luce regularly checked her perceptions out with her sons' teachers or with other parents to see if her boys' behaviours were attributable to being in a single-parent family or to

other possible factors, such as age or temperament.

Despite these concerns, most parents emphasized their belief that it is the quality of parenting, and not the family form that makes the important difference to adolescents' adjustment and development. Most participants described the parenting style that they tried to attain and maintain was one which encouraged open communication, placed expectations for mature behaviour, recognized the rights of both parent and adolescent, provided flexibility and clear standards with reasonable consequences for "errors". However, this authoritative parenting style (Baumrind, 1987) was complicated in these single-parent families due to the intensity of parent-adolescent interactions and other characteristics of relationships and functions in single-parent families which will be discussed in the next section.

Intensity of Interactions in Single-Parent Families

A common theme among all participants was the intensity of the interactions in their families. There were no other adult in the household to diffuse the intensity of interactions with their teens, nor to advise them as to whether their limits were too strict or too lenient. Nor was there alternative support for the parents or the adolescents. One participant said, "I am free of conflict with another parent, but the conflict takes place within me."

Due to this intensity, about half of the participants

said that they experienced considerable self-doubt in parenting their adolescents. This was particularly evident in determining and maintaining limits when the parent felt vulnerable or was not yet experienced in parenting alone. Paul and Cindy describe their perspectives on becoming a single-parent with an adolescent below:

Cindy:

> Becoming a single-parent with adolescents, you have to be strong because limits get tested at a time you are falling down; when you come out of your marriage. They are constantly pushing limits, how far, how much. It's like a please and thank-you thing. You just have to keep going over it and over it and over it....
>
> They want to not have you in their lives, but you have to be in some ways anyways. I had to learn to discipline because I always played the passive one... my husband was so controlling.

Paul:

> They don't visit their mother much and all the responsibility on me and it's a lot. It's been much better since I took counselling courses at SJ Willis where I learned a lot about kids taking responsibility for their actions. My earlier vision of what a good dad does was, 'be there, tell them right from wrong', but I was getting angry. I had to learn to not let it get to me - that was the hardest thing. Single parents put more on themselves than they need to. I really did. I tried to take all the responsibility to fix everything. It was hard to let go of that and when they did unacceptable things, I took that personally....
>
> That's the hard part. You don't have anyone to say you're right...by yourself you can come up with some completely wrong ideas. That's difficult. You can miss that other point of view in problem solving. You feel alone.... Parenting adolescents doesn't come automatically. You need feedback and ideas.

Like Paul, learning about parenting adolescents through courses helped other participants (Doreen, Cathy, Phil, and

Cindy) to develop their parenting skills and esteem as parents. Luce, Jen, Kate, and Amy, who all have young adolescents, expressed the need to learn more about adolescent development and parenting adolescents. Paul, however, expressed caution that parents should find out what kind of learning situation would be best for them, as some counselling groups were not helpful for his particular learning style or needs. He preferred a learning situation with clear information, references, and examples to try at home rather than a discussion group where members share stories and make suggestions to one-another. Cathy's and Cindy's notes of caution about parenting courses were that to be able to use the skills that you learn in parenting courses, "you have to be ready and have an awareness of self."

As mentioned earlier, ten participants received counselling or attended support groups to assist them in adjusting to parenting alone, or to address personal issues related to their family of origin to enable them to parent alone more effectively.

Enough Male Contact for Adolescents?

The issue of "having enough male contact" was of concern for several single-mothers, particularly for those with sons whose fathers were not present on a regular basis or lived in another city. Amy reported that, "The boy is more unhappy as he misses his dad.... He mentions his dad a lot but the girl

never does." From Linda's perspective, the social stigma is more apparent for single-mothers with male children. She has felt this way "even with friends until they really know you - because there's no dad." She described her son's long-distance arrangements and relationship with his father, and her own coming to terms with being able to parent her son effectively. In the following example, her son's "going back" refers to a time that he decided to stay and live with his father instead of coming home after the Christmas holidays. Linda agreed with the request, however, B. (her son) returned home the next day.

> I don't do sports. I don't do guy stuff. I think that's why I let him go back that time. I felt I wasn't what he needed. He needed his dad too. But, lately he seems fine... He loves his bass teacher, this young guy...Although I have to say that earlier I wasn't what B. needed and that I wasn't doing as good a job as with (her daughter). I have to admit that B. and I have gotten closer...He's got a dad all summer, talks on the phone twice a week or whenever he wants, knows his dad loves him and is there for him. He said to me, 'I probably talk to my dad more than kids who live with their dad.' And when he's with his dad, he's got his dad's attention...
>
> He's very sensitive and cries when he's sad...that's OK. His dad has come a long way in teaching him (it's Ok to cry).

Kate finds that others' comments about her son's need for male influence perplexing and sometimes hurtful. Her son's music teacher recently suggested that if her son is going to take more music lessons, he should have a teacher who provides a strong male influence. Kate described her son as sensitive, intelligent, and inquisitive. He becomes impatient at times

if he does not understand something quickly. Kate thinks that perhaps his impatience may have interfered with his piano lessons, and may explain why the teacher suggested "a strong male influence" for the next teacher. However, the meaning of this encounter to Kate was deeper and more critical than this explanation.

> When she said, he needs a strong male influence right now, I internalized it and just (thought) I'm not doing it right. It was really hurtful. There isn't a male influence. His dad is in Toronto and he sees him about six time a year. He is in baseball which is all guys, and he sees my brothers a lot. It's not as though he's not around men. I don't know what people mean when they say that. I take that to mean, 'You're too soft with him or he's not macho or strong enough.' And yet, he's very strong....A piece is missing because I'm his mother. I'd fix it if I saw it or knew what it was that was missing. What is a male influence going to do or add to his life? I find that really hurtful.

Luce and Diane didn't think that "enough male contact" was a very important issue for their sons because they had regularly scheduled visits with their fathers, and had meaningful contact with other male role models. Luce stated:

> Raising sons on my own isn't a real issue because they see their father once a week, participate in church and Y(M-WCA) activities where they really like the male leaders.... are good role models for them. So I think if that continues... I'll probably look for male teachers as well.... I'm pretty open with them and we talk a lot.

However, Jen described her difficulty in finding appropriate role models for her son who rarely sees his father. Her son has a learning disability as well as other behaviour problems, and has begun to associate with a negative

peer group with whom he has gotten into trouble with the law.

> When they're under 11 (years), it's better. But, for example, Big Brothers cuts off adding new people to their list at 11 because there is a one and one-half year waiting list. P. needs someone to hang out with, to have fun with, gain some positive regard.

Doreen expressed a concern that because her daughter does not see her father at all, she also needed a male role model. (This point was also raised by several parents in the focus group.) When her daughter was younger, Doreen requested a Big Sister for her daughter, but stipulated that she wanted a Big Sister who would also bring her husband to their visits. Doreen stated in strong language:

> I really believe my daughter needs both a male and a female (role model) no matter what; but emotionally healthy ones....My daughter has issues when she has male teachers and I think it's good for her to work those out with the teachers. She needs to find her place with males in the world.

## Parent-Adolescent Relationships

### Close Relationships.

Most participants had very close relationships with their adolescents. They said that this companionship, which was undiluted by the presence of another adult in the household, seemed to be one of the benefits of single-parenting from the parents' perspective. The high priority of this relationship was common to all participants interviewed even though there was more conflict in some families than others. For example, Robin described the importance of her relationship with her 13 year old daughter:

> I work hard on developing a level of respect to go both ways. Not just to say it but to go beyond words into actions. I see a lot of value in developing a relationship with her. That's all there is and that's why she'll do chores. It's not just for money; she sees I'm tired and wants to support me. Support in our relationship is not just based on rules and regulations. I acknowledge her feelings so she feels heard. I try to stop and really listen to her. It's not just being a provider...So the relationship is a priority and I've devoted time to 'walk the walk' and not just talk about it.

This close relationship fluctuated over time as the adolescent vacillated between independence from and dependence upon the parent-adolescent relationship. These vacillations were felt acutely by the single-parents because of the closeness of the relationship. As the adolescents pulled away from the parent to establish their autonomy, a new type of relationship gradually developed with the parent. Some participants recount their experience with this process:

Linda:

> E. (her daughter) started to spend more time in her room with the door closed and to keep more personal information to herself. I was really hurt and I told her so, and she says, 'Mom, I'm just a teenager.' I guess when kids reach adolescence you can see the end of the road and you do feel the division. E. is becoming more independent since she hit high school. She is her own person more and I do have to respect that and I do have to realize that I'm not the most important person in her life anymore. But I was for a long time and I have to realize that. And that is hard for me; where friends are far more important than parents at that stage. That's a tough one.

Jane:

> As they hit adolescence they began to create their own life and friends became much more important to them in their world. So they became less dependent on my world...there's a greater separation in our lives. Although there's an ability to talk and

> meet in another kind of way that's almost closer than it used to be. It seems that there's much more independence now and everyone's responsible for their own little piece of what they do...I think I've become more of an individual person to them than I was before.

Kim:

> Now, my daughter (A.) prefers to spend time with her peers and not to include me as usual. One night, A. said that friends were coming over for the evening, and I said, 'Oh good, we can play cards.' A. explained that she just wanted to spend time with her friends alone. I was kind of hurt, even though I realize she's growing up and that this is normal for an adolescent.

Participants with young adolescents expressed that even though their teens sought greater independence, they still needed parental involvement, but perhaps in a different way than when they were children. Cindy described her view of her young adolescents' needs for parental involvement:

> They really still need parenting. They are like little jewels. You've got to hold them and love them even more. They are a little bit like two-year olds....(You hear) a lot of horror stories about teenagers but in my experience, I'm actually - it's OK. It's tough, even horrible at times but it is not more difficult than when they were younger. It's just on a different level; more head stuff and more verbal.

The adolescent's process of gaining independence is complicated when there are extenuating circumstances, such as health or behaviour problems. Amy describes an experience with her 14 year old daughter who is diabetic:

Amy:

> Today the little girl wanted to go to the mall with her girlfriend - to go alone. She's asked to do this a couple of times before, and usually I try to poopoo the whole idea....She's diabetic; she'd die if she didn't have the right care.
>
> Today I said to myself, 'I'm going to accept

> her belief in herself that she can go out and have fun and try not to confuse it all with a lot of worry'....It demands a little willingness to listen to what they're telling you. At first you don't want to let go of control I guess. But then you recognize you have to respect their belief in themselves that they can do it.

The process of letting go begins to occur in slightly different contexts in single-parent families when (if) the children leave one parent's household on a regular basis to live in the other parent's household as Diane described, or when parents pursue their personal growth or career as Robin described:

Diane:

> I would rather that they were with me all the time. I have to let go. And I do; I work at that....With our situation the letting go has occurred more and more and so maybe it isn't quite as much of shock in adolescence. Cause I've had to let go; I've had to.

Robin:

> It's scary stuff, letting go of her and also finding a self for me.... I was at a workshop on Saturday which was good for my professional and personal development; but she had no-one to check in with. This all poses more stress to the growth process - fears regarding the teens separation. Their approach/avoidance causes all parents to rethink and reframe but single-parents can't hand a piece of that off, even once in awhile .

Egalitarian Nature of Relationships.

Instead of an automatic hierarchy of two adults defining the power structure, participants of this study described a more egalitarian relationship in their families. The adolescents were more like joint partners in the family firm than junior partners, particularly when they were only

children or were the eldest siblings. Leanne's quotation describes the egalitarian relationship clearly:

Leanne:

> When you have a single child and a single parent, you have much more of an egalitarian relationship just by definition. There's no one else's needs to consider except the two of yours. And although I don't believe in any kind of role reversal, the child is the partner in the sense that they are the other person you check stuff out with. I think if there was another person around and someone else's needs to consider, by definition (my daughter) would have to be the third, not the last, but another priority.

Other dimensions of the egalitarian relationship include reciprocity and directness. In most families, the adolescent and parent encouraged, protected, and supported each other. For example, Jane stated, "I go to my daughters for the kind of support and help that I would have in the past gone to my husband for."

Cindy:

> (The oldest daughter) had to do something at school...write something about her mom. What she wrote was how proud she was of me (soft voice)...I don't think they were proud of me during the marriage. They always looked at me as down-trodden and said, 'I hate the way dad treats you'.... (Now) they get to see a different side of me that they didn't know was there.

Leanne:

> She really cheers me on too. She knew how much I wanted this job at...and when I got it, she was bouncing up and down for joy. She's very supportive of the things that I want to do as well as me being supportive (of her).

In this type of egalitarian relationship, rules were negotiated. As such, the adolescents tended to be direct and

open about how the negotiated expectations are working. For example, Kim's daughter tells her mother about all of her activities, including when she tried smoking. However, because this type of family relationship stands out in contrast to her friends' families, Kim's daughter recently asked her mother "why she is so slack" about rules, and suggested that perhaps "she should set more rules like her friends' parents." She also reported that "all the others lie to their parents" but she doesn't. Jane also talked about a recent discussion she had had with her 16 year old daughter and her daughter's friends who are also from single-parent families about why they do not lie to their single-parent mothers.

> They are able to be more honest. It ties back to the family structure being less hierarchical where things are less negotiable; more right or wrong. It becomes more all about process, not whether it's right or wrong or breaking rules. It becomes a process which is talked about in terms of how it fits with the 'self' of all parties. This leads to greater emotional honesty...

The closeness of the parent-adolescent relationship varied with the temperament of the adolescent. However, the egalitarian structure existed for most adolescents represented in this study, regardless of age, sex, or temperament of the adolescent.

Conflict.

While confrontations during adolescence occur in most families, the intensity may be greater in single-parent

families where there is no other adult to diffuse or interrupt the directness and intensity of interactions. Even during conflict, the nature of the interactions seemed to be egalitarian with both the parent and the adolescent expressing their views and feelings and later negotiating an outcome. The parent-adolescent conflict increased where the adolescents were experimenting with new behaviours or their own autonomy (Doreen, Cindy, Linda, Amy), or were exhibiting problem behaviour (Paul, Jen). Cindy describes below the conflict in her family as an ongoing challenge:

Cindy:

> And because they project this ...that they know everything, and their verbal skills become competent and they throw all this stuff at you.... So it's harder to know where to draw the line and when to stand back and ... (it's) an ongoing challenge every day. Some days are better than others. I try not to get into a power struggle with (her oldest daughter).

Three parents believed that the intensity of the conflict can be even greater when there is a single-mother and a single child. As explained by Jen below, the mother's evaluation of herself as a parent relies upon this one relationship:

Jen:

> Whatever emotions there are, they are more intense. If I could just spread it out. Whatever happens, you wear it. If they are bad or difficult, you internalize it and personalize it, and think you are a bad mother. With two kids, there's another whole possibility to resurrect a sense of being Ok at parenting.

Adolescent Responsibility.

The majority of adolescents in these single-parent

families took and were expected to take a high degree of responsibility for themselves. They also had greater involvement in decision-making in family and household issues. Most parents described their adolescents as mature and self-sufficient. The following quotations illustrate this point:

Jane:

> I think they see me as alone and they do what they can when they become conscious about that... I think they tend to ask for a little less than they would if I were with their dad. So they take more responsibility for getting rides back and forth to places rather than continually asking me because they know there isn't two of us in the house; there's just one. And if she's going to be late she'll sort of arrange a ride home for herself. So she takes that kind of responsibility for herself - rather than just assuming I'll do it.

Robin:

> She's concerned about our house; that it looks presentable so her friends can come over... Now her decision is to have the dishes done and the house sorted. She realizes that it's not so easy when you're tired, and still have other things to do....I'm aware of not giving her too much responsibility because she's a kid but also (she) needs more responsibility in adolescence because we are a single-parent family.

The issue of adolescent responsibility extended to the family's finances. Several participants felt that their adolescents began to understand the limitations on financial resources better than they did when they were children. For example, when Doreen lost her job, she discussed their economic situation with her daughter who agreed to relinquish her allowance without argument. On the other hand, Jane and Cindy felt that as their daughters became more aware of the world around them, they sometimes became frustrated or angry

when they compared themselves to more affluent peers. Kate's older child (age 12) is expected to give up some of his play time to babysit his younger brother when his mother is working.

Kate:

> I worry a lot that the older one will resent the younger one, and so I began to pay him a bit. And it works. It's made a complete difference in his attitude because we're more like partners in the family business and everybody has to pull their weight and take responsibility. Otherwise, if they don't it's the adult who loses out and the kids lose out in the end cause you just can't do it all(emphasis).

However, Jen talked about the circumstances related to her son not taking responsibility in the family or for his actions. This inability to take responsibility is, in part, related to his learning disability. He has many problems in school with delaying gratification, immature behaviour, and poor impulse control. Jen added that her son's difficulty in taking responsibility for his behaviour is also related to his relationship with his father and her parenting style when he was younger.

> But he is also acting-out what went on before; his sense of rejection from his father. And he hangs out with a negative group of kids who are also having trouble in school....
>
> I've made a very unpleasant child at times because I indulged him and spoiled him to compensate for all the reasons that I have...You always have in the back of your mind (that) you're a mother, you're a good mother, and you'll look after your kids and do the best you can for them. But hey there's a me in all of this too.

Many participants talked about being cautious that the closeness and implied equality doesn't prompt their teenager

to grow up too soon by taking on too much adult responsibility. Linda stated, "sometimes I feel badly that they feel bad for me and it's partly my fault. Sometimes I do feel sorry for myself and I do talk to them more as adults than I normally would because there's no-one else there." This concern is also illustrated by Diane's quotation that follows:

> I'm aware that I don't want them to be the substitute adult and I talk to my friends about that. But I think, if there was another adult in the house they probably wouldn't have the opportunity to be as involved as they are. And perhaps given the age they are, maybe that's a benefit they have...But I'm also aware that I don't want them to take on too much that they shouldn't, like financial worries.

Role Reversal.

Role reversal had occurred in the past in two families interviewed. Cathy and Doreen talked about how their daughters had assumed the parenting role and cared for them at times when they were vulnerable and had other emotional problems. However, as Cathy and Doreen began to resolve their own psychological and emotional issues, they worked to rebalance the family roles, and establish a clearer separation of their emotional issues from their daughters' lives. Both parents communicated openly with their daughters about this process.

For Doreen, existing psychological problems became compounded by a combination of responsibilities of single-parenting and few trusted supports. This led to a situation where she felt very isolated and depressed. While Doreen

received treatment in a residential treatment setting, her young adolescent daughter lived in a Social Services group home for several months. Doreen emphasized that understanding this history and context is essential to understanding her struggle to accept her daughter's growing autonomy. Cathy described how the reversal of roles in her family was strongly connected to her personal history. She talked about how her childhood issues of abuse became part of her reality with her child as she mirrored what she had experienced growing up, and then her child mirrored that behaviour. Now, her daughter's behaviour reflects Cathy's personal growth. She explained:

> Like when she was younger it wasn't always that I wasn't well, it was more that I was really sad, but I couldn't tell her. She would take care of me, bring me tea, and bring me a blanket to keep me warm.... Now I can tell her that I am sad and there is a lot of things I need to work out. I tell her it's a way of letting it go. And she says 'OK' and goes off to do her homework. She takes care of herself instead of caretaking me.
>
> She's been a reflection of me; because at each stage of her life, I look at my own stages...and see the mirroring of me....Because I've been doing a lot of work on myself over the past years - there's always spill-over - like my daughter is a peer counsellor at school now.
>
> And before, because of the spill-over we had some problems and we both went to a counsellor a couple of years ago separately - because of history repeating itself. When you've been abused, it spills over to your child if you don't know how to look after it. So, through the counsellor we worked on it.

Past Influences and Future Visions.

The participants talked about their sense of "self" and their parenting in relation to temporal influences from both past memories and patterns and future visions. Several

participants recounted that negative experiences from their own adolescence influenced their parenting more strongly as single-parents because there was no other adult's point of view to counterbalance their views and personal history (Cathy, Doreen, Cindy, Leanne, and Jen).

As they watched their adolescents become more independent, the parents began to recognize the time limits to the duration of parenting. They also began to have more time and both physical and mental energy to meet their own needs. All parents interviewed had begun or were planning personal or career developments. However, the anticipation of a future without children as the central organizer in their lives caused mixed feelings, as it does for many parents. The quotations that follow illustrate both the anticipation of greater personal freedom and the regret that their children were growing up. Kim stated that she is aware that she has to let A. go, but "it hurts and it is hard to make that shift when it has been good the way it was." However, she is also looking forward to travelling and perhaps changing jobs as she has stayed in the same job for fifteen years to provide personal and family stability. Jane and Linda describe their experiences with this process below:

Jane:

> You know that this relationship is limited by time and changes with time, (as) you see it continually evolving. And there's an end in sight to this incredible dependency....I feel ready; I feel the right to have a life. I feel I've done a lot of work for what we have. And now I need to expand that a bit and 'you guys have to see me as a person

with needs too.'

It's a huge process being a parent. I've been as conscious as I can throughout to keep the things important to me, like I run and so on. So I've always tried to keep those things pretty constant. There's a sadness that they're not little kids anymore because they were so cute and they were funny and all that stuff. But I'm glad that they're not young any more too; I can talk to them and they are people - becoming lovely young women. So there's both of those things.

Linda:

They need me less than they used to. I see me looking for direction now. I feel I'm on a path now. I don't know where it will end but I've made a few steps and that has made all the difference. And this particular journey is not going to end up with kids; it's my journey.

Despite the challenges of single-parenting, the majority of participants stated that they anticipated a positive future. They felt that both they and their children were doing very well, or were at least moving in a positive direction. Most were satisfied with their personal gains in self-esteem and sense of personal power. As explained by Cindy, "It's a struggle both in the marriage and now, but at least on your own it's a different kind of struggle; a more positive struggle because you are making your own decisions."

However, Kate and Robin are somewhat fearful of the future because of their economic situation, and Jen because of her son's attention deficit and behaviour problems. These parents have young adolescents who still need a great deal of support and parenting. Jen stated: "My whole life revolves around my child because he has problems and I'm not getting a break to grow on my own." Robin had just lost her job and had

re-applied for social assistance. She stated:

> The economics of the situation terrifies me of how to move ahead. Up until a week ago I felt locked in a grid lock; having to work many hours for small pay, leaving no time to upgrade to move up because of time and responsibilities with a child with attention deficit.

## Family Dynamics and Transactions

In this part of the results section, the emphasis is on the dynamic nature of interactions and relationships in the families, including the impact of sibling relationships, and the influence of the other parents' relationships on the families' dynamics. As well, the adolescent's perspectives about issues they perceive to be important about growing up in a single-parent family are compared to the parent's views of what they think the adolescent's perspectives would be, if asked.

### Sibling Dynamics

The majority of parents reported that their children had close relationships. Often, the older child helped and guided the younger one which was a great support for the parent (Paul, Linda, Luce). In Amy's and Diane's families, the children usually "avoid or snipe at one another" but when there are hard times in the family, they pulled together. With close family relationships, the whole family dynamic shifted as the eldest sibling became more autonomous in adolescence. For example, Linda described how her son began

to spend more time with her when she was hurt that her daughter was going through a phase of "pushing her away" and becoming moody with her. Alternately, as the daughter became more independent, she sometimes interceded with her younger brother on behalf of her mother. For example, when Linda and her son had had an argument over a large assignment that he had delayed until the night before its due-date, the daughter reassured her mother that she would rise earlier the following morning to help her brother with the assignment so that it could be handed in on time.

However, sibling conflict in Cindy's family became another stressor and challenge for the parent.

Cindy:

> They try to involve me and to cause a crisis but I have shifted the responsibility to them....I've been sticking it out but it upsets me so much. I mean it ruins my whole day. It drags me down...I feel so black. I'd rather not even go to that place...I never had brothers or sisters so I can't understand it and I think that's why it upsets me so much, because I don't know how to deal with it.

The Past Marital Relationship Lives On

Sometimes the dynamics from the past marital relationship affected the dynamics in the single-parent family. This transfer occurred through experiences that the children had witnessed in the home during the marriage and throughout the separation process. For example, Cindy interpreted some of her daughters' behaviours in relation to characteristics of the marital relationship. She explained, "I know where a lot of this stuff is coming from. It's what they've seen.

They've seen it with me and (my ex-husband) They've seen it a lot...fighting, swearing, and drinking and him verbally abusing me."

The ex-spouse's characteristics and behaviours can be brought into the single-parent family home through the child's coping behaviour. For example, Linda's son learned with his father's help that it's permissible for him to cry when he is sad. Cindy related that her eldest daughter mimics aspects of the father's lifestyle that she herself criticizes; "for example, she would have dropped out of school if I hadn't stepped in. She was smoking pot and not taking any responsibility."

Single-Parent's New Adult Relationship

A shift occurred in the family dynamic when parents began to develop new intimate relationships. While about one-third of parents had dated after their marital separations, these relationships were short-lived. These participants mentioned that the priority, closeness, and egalitarian nature of their relationships with their children became a difficult issue to deal with in their dating relationships. As well, their children tried often to interfere with their parents' relationships by not allowing their parent to have private time, or by acting-out when the dating partner were present in their homes.

The small number of participants who were currently in a

new intimate relationship (Phil, Jane, Jen) talked about the challenge of rebalancing roles and relationships among all family members at this time, including the ex-spouse. Jen spoke about her 12 year old son becoming confused about his male role in the family now that she is involved in an intimate relationship. Jane reported that her ex-spouse's intense response to her new relationship created perturbations in his relationship with his daughters:

Jane:

> My ex's reaction was almost as if we were still a family unit....taking it out on his daughters. The older daughter is very insightful and strong and has become angry and upset; telling him in person and in a letter that he needs to acknowledge his feelings and deal with it and not take it out on them....The younger daughter has coped with it differently, pulling in, and feeling as though it is somehow her fault.

As referred to by Jane, children's coping responses may vary by age. Kate also mentioned that when she was in conflicted or tense situations with her ex-husband, the youngest child withdrew while the eldest acted-out his feelings.

Parents' Perspectives on Adolescents' Perspectives

Most parents described their adolescents as mature, responsible, and self-sufficient for their age. As well, the majority considered their adolescents to be well-adjusted and fairly happy. They thought that if their adolescents were asked, they would say that overall, living in a single-parent family was fine. The parents based their opinions on the fact

that their adolescents did not express concerns about their family status, and that there is a relatively high proportion of adolescents living in similar families in their communities. However, Linda, Kate, and Amy stated that their sons probably would say that they missed their dads, but not as much as they had at first. The majority of single-mothers described their daughters as perceptive, intuitive, and empathetic. Cindy thought that her daughters would relate being in a single-parent family with being poor, and living in a small apartment with not enough personal space or privacy. Three parents (Paul, Jen, and Cindy) stated that although their adolescents had had some behavioural or emotional problems, these difficulties were not primarily related to the family status.

Adolescents' Perspectives

Six female adolescents from five of the families represented in the study were interviewed; the daughters of Robin, Cindy, Amy, Cathy, and Doreen. Three girls were young adolescents (ages 11-14 years) and three were middle adolescents (ages 15-18 years). The main issues and themes identified by these adolescents about life in a single-parent family were similar to those identified by their mothers. However, the adolescents did not seem to experience the same extent or intensity of challenges as their parents. They referred to the parent-adolescent relationship in terms of the

intensity, equality, reciprocity and frequent conflict. They also spoke about their fathers, their sense of responsibility, social reactions to their family status, and feelings of being more mature than many of their peers. Gaining autonomy and social pressures were also talked about by the adolescents as important personal issues. Growing up in a single-parent family does not seem to be a topic of conversation for these adolescents with their peers. Although they all said they knew other adolescents from single-parent families, they did not talk about issues related to living in a single-parent families with these other adolescents.

Relationships with Fathers.

Three of these girls had ongoing relationships with their fathers, while the other three did not. The girls who had relationships with their fathers, even if their visits were infrequent, valued these relationships. Cathy's daughter stated that the main challenge of growing up in a single-parent family for her was that, "you don't see the other parent as much as you'd like....Kids in single-parent families who don't see their dad miss their dad. I see my dad." Cindy's two daughters also have a relationship with their father, whom they see on an irregular basis. The parents' relationship is tense and involves frequent conflict. The eldest daughter said about growing up in a single-parent family:

> It's not that bad. I prefer living with one or the other as long as it's not both of them. With one you can compromise, but with two there was always conflict about how you should be raised.

The daughters of Doreen and Robin, who have grown up without any involvement with their father, stated that to them, "it's just a way of life." They said that they had gotten used to it, and because they have grown up without a father, it doesn't bother them. Kim's daughter sees her father briefly about twice a year when he delivers presents for her birthday and for Christmas. She explained that one of the main issues for her about living in a single-parent family is,

> the role of the father figure, but it doesn't bother me....I never really had a dad. Although he brings me presents, I don't really consider him my dad. Sometimes, I guess I feel kind of angry because my dad has two sons that are older than me and like he can be a dad for them, but he can't for me.

Relationships with Mothers.

The four girls who lived alone with their mother said they would like more people in their homes to have other people to relate to. They all mentioned that there are more arguments in their family because, "there is only one person to negotiate with" and "we don't have anyone else to talk things out with; it's just us." The arguing that occurs in Cindy's family is more triangulated with both sibling arguments and parent-adolescent arguments. Despite the conflict, the adolescents described fairly close relationships

with their mothers. Cathy's 16 year old daughter describes below how the nature of their relationship has changed and has become more egalitarian as she has matured:

> We are (farther) apart in activities but closer in communication now. We used to be more like friends, but now she has more of a life and I have more of a life. I think we've gotten closer though than we were before....It's more like two adults. Before it was more like 'you're the child, you have to listen to me.' Now I think we're on an equal level.

These adolescents said that they talk to their mothers when they have large problems or when they need support, but otherwise, they prefer to talk with peers. This was particularly the case for the middle adolescents. The younger adolescents communicate with their mother more frequently and enjoy their time with her. They all related that they sometimes needed to push their mothers away to create more personal space. Yet they also indicated an awareness of their mothers' feelings and their mother's emotional responses to their growth and change. Kim's daughter stated,

> I get a lot of love from my mom, but I need more time out now. But, I know that frustrates and hurts her. It's hard to let go, I guess. I tell her that I'm just a teenager and I need time. I think she understands; it's just hard to let go, I guess.

However, Cindy's daughters were more often engaged in sibling rivalry, trying to lure their mother to their side of the arguments, and so were less sensitive to their mother's emotional life. Doreen's daughter described her relationship with her mother as good now, in comparison to a few years ago

when their roles were reversed. Both Doreen and her daughter stated that they were currently trying to rebalance the roles in their relationship. Her daughter describes her perspectives on the role reversal process below:

> I think we've both been through a lot. Like she went to emotional therapy... and we had to go through a lot of stuff because of it....For awhile I felt more like I didn't have my mother because she had to fix herself....I felt more like my mother's caretaker. (But) I learned to vent out my feelings through my mom's therapy basically. We both learned that at the same time.

Responsibility and Maturity.

The egalitarian sharing of household responsibility expressed by these adolescents is described by Cathy's daughter, "I've never had any chores....We share responsibility - more like two adults. We're on an equal level." The younger girls expressed some chagrin at having to take more responsibility, and said that it was sometimes hard to have both family and school responsibilities.

These adolescents generally felt more mature than many of their peers. They claimed a strong sense of what they believed in, and stated that they made decisions for themselves. However, like other adolescents, these girls experienced a challenging course throughout their adolescence as they tried to cope with academic, social, personal, and family stresses. The girls all felt that they had a support system that they could draw upon in times of stress. Parents,

relatives, extended family, and peers were the primary sources of support mentioned.

Social Contexts.

These adolescents described their experiences of other peoples' responses to their family status. Doreen's and Robin's daughters reported that occasionally when new friends or their friends' parents heard that they were from a single-parent family, they would "pity us sometimes" or would wonder about their well-being. Until they heard these types of comments from others, they had not felt that their family was different from others' families. However, these adolescents stated that such comments were infrequent and did not bother them.

Four of the six adolescents interviewed were on social assistance. Doreen's and Cathy's daughters did not mention this as a difficult issue for them. However, for Cindy's two daughters, being in a single-parent family meant being poor, being on social assistance, and living in a very small apartment. Cindy's eldest daughter explained in a grim, emphatic statement, "Mainly it's the space and being in each other's faces...we can't get away from each other." This family lives in a small one-bedroom apartment where the mother and the younger daughter share the bedroom. A corner of the living room has been partitioned off by blankets suspended from the ceiling to create a private sleeping space for the

older daughter. The younger daughter reported that she is sometimes teased and called names about being on welfare at school. The older daughter had recently read an article which asserted that violence comes from poverty. She related her response to this article:

> They are completely stereotyping people... (It) makes me mad. When you're with a single-parent, people think you are poor, white trash and you're not worth anything. It's really important to me to earn respect from people....I think when you're like this (in a single-parent family), you have to earn people's respect more.

All adolescent participants stated that they experienced more pressures from school work and their social networks than from being in a single-parent family. They were all aware of risk behaviours and peer pressure to smoke cigarettes or drink alcohol. Four of these teens stated that they had resisted such risks. However, Cathy's and Doreen's daughters had been influenced by peer pressure when they were young adolescents, and participated in risk behaviours in order to be accepted by their peers. They both felt that as they got older and developed "more self-assurance and respect" resisting peer pressure became easier for them.

Five out of the six teenagers envisioned themselves fairly positively in the future. They talked about their future plans to become a computer graphic artist, an actress, psychologist, counsellor or lawyer. However, Cindy's oldest daughter was much less positive about her future and only

hoped that she would be "very far away from here" (referring to their small apartment).

## Focus Group and Key Informant Results

### Focus Group Summary

The experiences and perspectives of single-parenting with adolescents addressed in the focus group shared common ground with the issues identified from the parent interviews. Challenges of single-parenting that were emphasized in the group included the constant demands and responsibilities with few breaks, making decisions alone with no support, and financial challenges. As well, very spirited dialogue ensued about the intensity of dealing with adolescents' changes, their feelings of not fitting into society, and the impact of negative social expectations of single-parent families. They also talked about what facilitated their coping as single-parents, for example, establishing new priorities for their time and energy, finding a support network, and overcoming personal difficulties in asking for help, especially when feeling socially isolated.

The group members shared specific coping methods of dealing with tense, volatile situations with their adolescents, for example, taking time-out or a "reality check" telephone conversation with a trusted friend or relative. They also shared information about helpful community programs and resources for their teenagers, for example, the Boys and

Girls Clubs, sports sponsorships, Scouts, and the Big Brother's and Big Sister's organizations.

This data increased the depth of understanding of the research topic. As well, the interactions among group members provided insights into the intensity of the parent's challenges and how the issues and themes applied to other contexts. This was particularly noticeable as those who were single-parents to older adolescents, and who had parented alone throughout the teenage years, offered support and suggestions to single-parents of young teens. They emphasized the importance of learning about parenting adolescents, dealing with and becoming accountable for their own emotional and psychological issues, and taking time to nurture their own development. Another commonality with the interview data was that the parents described positive aspects of being a single-parent, particularly their growth of confidence and self-sufficiency as they met the challenges of parenting alone.

Key Informant Interviews

There was overall agreement on the issues identified from the interviews, the focus group, and the key informant interviews. The key informants also added perspectives on the potential risks embedded in the challenges of single-parenting adolescents, and they suggested possibilities for prevention of such risks. The challenges and potential risks described were role reversal, problematic coping mechanisms

employed by single-parents, social isolation, and lack of social networks.

Role reversal is a "real risk for single-parents", particularly during transitional phases when the parent feels vulnerable and is having difficulty coping effectively. With the intention of "protecting their mom" or "trying to control the family that appears to them to be out of control", the adolescent may assume a "forced maturity". As adolescents attempt to parent their own parent, their sense of security may be jeopardized. Some adolescents may try to disconnect from their feelings and disengage from the family or may act-out their sense of confusion.

Overindulgence, overprotection, over-control or under-control are some of the manifestations of coping mechanisms employed by single-parents to compensate for being a single-parent. These mechanisms often become problematic with adolescents who want to experiment and experience new dimensions of themselves and the world independently.

Social isolation and marginalization are potential risks for the single-parent. Isolation is increased by a lack of resources and opportunities to join in with local communities, and from perceived negative social expectations of single-parent families. If negative social expectations become internalized, parents may project their sense of loss and failure onto their children, and begin to perceive their normal adolescent behaviours as problematic.

An implication of these challenges and risks described above is to acknowledge that supportive contexts are necessary to enhance the single-parent's development towards self-sufficiency and efficacy as a parent, and to help to normalize and legitimize the structure and function of their single-parent family. Of paramount importance is to sustain the parents' coping abilities so that they can maintain a healthy parent-adolescent relationship and a stable home environment. Environmental factors and stress on single-parent families have created the need for community programs to provide support and a sense of belonging for members of single-parent families.

# Chapter Five

## Summary and Implications

The participants in this study represented a diverse group of single-parents with adolescents. They differed in the length of time that they had single-parented, the number and ages of their children now and at the time they became single-parents, and the degree of cooperation and conflict with their ex-spouses. As well, they had different individual characteristics, such as temperament, psychological makeup, and personal history, and were also from different educational, occupational, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Similarly, the adolescents in these single-parent families represented a range of ages, individual characteristics, degrees of involvement with the non-custodial parent, and personal histories.

The diversity of single-parent households is a primary characteristic of this family form. Therefore, to make generalizations about other single-parent families based on this small sample, which was purposefully rather than randomly selected, requires caution. The aim of this study was not generalizability, but to gain understanding of single-parenting of adolescents from the parents' perspectives. However, it still may be possible to make some cautious generalizations based on the continuity of responses, particularly where there is empirical support from other sources (Weiss, 1994). Despite the differences in the

language used and of the particularities of their experiences and contexts, all parents interviewed held responsibility for bringing up their adolescents without the presence of a partner in the household, and as a result, they experienced similar dynamics and constraints which influenced the structure and functioning of their families. The results of this study can be generalized to other single-parent families with adolescents in so far as the dynamics and constraints described by these participants apply. Because no participants in this study had become single-parents as teenagers, or due to the death of a spouse, or were currently experiencing severe emotional or psychological problems, it may not be appropriate to apply these findings to those populations. Moreover, findings based on snowball sampling, which was used in this study, generally underestimate the extent of social isolation (Weiss, 1994).

Most single-parents experience many doubts and conflicts which reflect the competing and often contradictory pressures and challenges they face in their lives. However, the overall picture that emerged from interviews with this particular sample is that of resilience and resourcefulness in the face of increased responsibilities, and varying degrees of economic and social marginality. The study results add support to previous research that has demonstrated that the effects of marital separation for adolescents are related more to ongoing processes in single-parent families than to the single event

of parental separation (Compas & Williams, 1990; Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1991). Important processes reported in this study include the parent's psychological wellbeing and ability to mediate the family's processes of change and growth, the resources and support systems available to the parent and adolescent, the parent-adolescent relationship, and the balance of inter-parental conflict and cooperation.

Most of the adolescents from the single-parent families in this study seemed to have adapted reasonably well both socially and academically. Those who had pre-existing learning or behaviour problems, or encountered new personal or family stressors had greater difficulty in adapting. The single-parents were of paramount importance as mediators of the social, family, and economic changes and stresses on their families' initial reorganization and ongoing adjustment. Many of these life changes had a direct impact on the adolescent, but also had an indirect impact mediated through the behaviour and attitudes of their parents. For example, reduced income had a direct effect on adolescents through the available funds for material goods, but it also affected them indirectly through their parents' interpretation and meaning of the family's financial situation (for example, sense of insecurity or lack of control), and the parent's subsequent attitudes and actions.

Summary of Challenges and Supports

Seven interconnecting challenges of single-parenting with adolescents that emerged from a thematic analysis of the interview data were increased responsibilities, coping with increased demands, the other parent, financial constraints, social isolation, negative social expectations, and extenuating circumstances. Fulfilling all of the families' functions and responsibilities independently was challenging for the participants. Most had to learn new parenting and household management skills and to balance shifting family roles, needs, and priorities. But the greatest challenge was the emotional demand of being the only parent in the household to respond to and make decisions about family needs and issues with no support or feedback from an adult partner.

Assuming these responsibilities entailed creating a new parenting role. The parent's marital history, which may differ according to each spouse's level of participation in such structural elements of the family as decision-making and division of labour, plays a prominent role in reactions to single-parenting (Fassinger, 1989). The degree of stress experienced by the participants as they assumed a new parenting role was influenced by the degree of the role change required. For example, assuming the role of the head of the household was difficult at first for the single-mothers who reported dependency on their husbands in their marriages. Many mothers felt intimidated about dealing with the more

technical demands of household management which, in many households, had been the husbands' role. Conversely, a single-father, whose role had been primarily economic and social, reported that he struggled to develop a parenting role which incorporated both nurturing and control. As well, the ways in which people are socialized as men and women can influence the degree of challenge as they step into the unfamiliar roles of single-parenting (Risman & Schwartz, 1987). However, most single-parents in this study had gradually assumed roles that were determined primarily by the social context and situational demands in which they lived, despite previous sex-role training. For example, mothers typically continued their role as primary caretaker, but also assumed some or all of the father's responsibilities for economic support, even though the fathers usually continued to have greater earning power. The two single-fathers in this study described that their new role included "mothering" functions, such as caretaking and nurturing.

Single-parents remain connected to their ex-partner through their children, whether or not that parent is physically present. The participants all had to make choices about how to communicate with their children about the non-custodial parents and sometimes their step-parents, and how to support their children's emotional reactions and healing. The participants whose ex-spouses maintained involvement with their children had to make choices about how to deal with

their ex-spouse, and how to minimize conflict by negotiating rules of conduct. All of these decisions and subsequent actions required a personal resolution of inner conflict regarding the marital separation and being a single-parent. How these resolutions and decisions are made impacts the level of ongoing challenges and stressors in the family (Ahrons, 1994; Hetherington, 1989a). Participants who had been able to arbitrate reasonable boundaries and lines of communication with their ex-spouses to allow an ongoing arrangement of shared or even parallel parenting found that some of the intensity, responsibility, and emotional demands of parenting alone were reduced. Moreover, the adolescents interviewed valued their involvement with their fathers, even if the visits were sporadic, as long as they perceived that there was an established relationship. The regular involvement of the other parent provided support for the custodial parent by enabling more "time-out". This "time-out" or personal time was essential to permit the parent to gain a fresh perspective on both parenting and personal issues which enhanced their coping capacity.

If the other parent lived in another city or was not regularly accessible, the custodial parent sometimes experienced the child's sadness or anger in dealing with the loss of the absent parent, absolute or relative in terms of what might have been. Some participants had to deal with the presence of step-parents in their children's lives and in a

few cases to support their adolescents' feelings of having "split loyalties" between two homes. Potential stresses for the adolescents in these situations included frequent transitions as they moved from one parent's home to the other parent's home; from one set of values and rhythms and ambience to another, often contrasting set. The meaning of this challenge for the parents was that they had to "let go" of their adolescents, sometimes for extended periods of time, sooner than they would have if they were not single-parents. The parent's communication with and support of the adolescent's needs and feelings about their other parent was essential. In some families, the adolescents' changing needs were accommodated by changing the frequency or duration of their visitation arrangements.

The family's financial situation was a significant challenge for most single-mothers. Although, the impact of limited finances depended to a large extent upon the meaning of the financial situation to the parent and to the adolescent. Several participants stated that despite their more limited economic resources, compared to when they were married, they enjoyed the autonomy and choice of how their money was spent. However, single-parents whose financial arrangements with their ex-spouses were inconsistent, under negotiation or threatened to be renegotiated, experienced a sense of insecurity which affected every aspect of their personal and family lives. Some participants on social

assistance felt that they were not measuring up to society's standards by being unemployed, and not being able to provide more educational and recreational opportunities for their teenager. However, all participants, whether or not they were on social assistance, said that having greater financial resources may increase their sense of self-sufficiency, but it could not prevent the emotional and personal challenges of parenting alone, for example, their sense of loss, fears about parenting alone, and the social isolation.

Single-parents in this study experienced several dimensions of social isolation: a sense of being alone with all of the family responsibility and decision-making; feeling socially isolated and excluded from couple society; and feeling lonely. Social isolation has been reported as a significant, ongoing challenge among single-parents in other interview studies of single-parenting (Alexander, 1994; Polakow, 1993; Shaw, 1991). Due to time, energy, and financial constraints, and with their lives centering around their children, social relationships changed for most participants. Many became distanced from or felt excluded from social circles comprised of couples. Moreover, the diversity of single-parents as a group influenced their sense of isolation in society and created a "social situation full of ambiguity" (Hardy & Crow, 1991, p.1). Many parents didn't feel that they fit in with two-parent families, nor did they necessarily feel that they fit in with single-parent families

because of this diversity.

All participants had experienced or witnessed negative social expectations or stereotypes about single-parent families. One participant, who is a middle-school teacher, reported several experiences where school staff had associated this family form with negative behaviour and poor academic outcomes among adolescents without considering intermediate factors in the causal chain. Several other researchers (Ahrons, 1994; Dornbusch & Gray, 1988; Hardy & Crowe, 1991; Shaw, 1991) and family therapists (Kissman, 1992; Korritko, 1991) have reported that social stigma may marginalize and challenge single-parents' personal coping and their parenting abilities. Single-parents who internalize these negative social expectations begin to doubt their abilities to parent alone effectively and to view their adolescents as potentially problematic (Korritko, 1991).

Most participants indicated that networking with other single-parents is or would be beneficial for the following reasons: to find role models and social connections to validate and normalize their experience of single-parenting; to gain a sense of belonging in a social group with common experiences; and, to resist the sense of isolation and marginalization as a single-parent in society. Several women had become members of other interpersonal communities and had developed strong friendships with other women that they had not done before. Moreover, as their children became more

independent in adolescence, the parents had more time and energy resources to pursue social connections. Participants who had adolescents with additional problems, had younger children as well as adolescents, or who had experienced recent geographic or career changes continued to have difficulties becoming socially connected. The participants related that the intensity of interactions in their families increased and their parenting and coping effectiveness decreased when they did not have the opportunity to step back from their families to gain a clearer perspective on the family's dynamics. Thus, when the parents could not get time-out from their family responsibilities, their family tensions and sense of social isolation tended to increase.

Bronfenbrenner (1986) found that social support is most potent under conditions of stress such as low socioeconomic status, low belief in one's control in influencing one's own life, and co-occurrence of misfortune in the lives of significant others. These conditions are apparent in varying degrees in many single-parent families, particularly during the first few years following the marital separation. Locating and utilizing a variety of support systems and networks was essential for practical assistance and emotional and spiritual support for the participants and their adolescents. When the other parent was not involved regularly with his or her children, this need and practice was even more evident. The decrease in contact with the non-custodial

parent in about one-half of the families was not only a loss of an important potential resource for adolescents, it also further entrenched the single-mothers' roles as mediators of the families' wellbeing. The mothers' emotional well-being and ability to effectively cope with the role as family mediator has been found to be an important determinant of how both adolescents and mothers weather the rapid changes associated with adolescence in both single-parent families (Furstenberg & Cherlin, 1991) and two-parent families (Larson & Richards, 1994). The well-being of mothers in two-parent homes is strongly connected to the buoyancy which they gain through contacts with friends and a social network (Larson & Richards, 1994). Larson and Richards also found that employment and extrafamilial friendships promoted mothers' resilience to family stress, which in turn increased their involvement in positive family relationships. These conditions and processes of social connection also seem to apply to the well-being of single-parent mothers.

Participants who did not have access to informal supports such as ex-spouses, family, and friends, sought supports from various social and community agencies and organizations. While informal supports were preferred by participants, formal supports were very advantageous for parents who were new single-parents without a career or means of financial support, and for parents whose adolescents required interventions for health, learning, developmental, or adjustment problems.

One of the major barriers to receiving adequate support was the difficulty many single-parents had in asking for support. Many participants had no existing frame of reference for being a person who needed help as their identity and self-esteem rested on being self-sufficient. They felt that they might be viewed as inadequate parents or not measuring up to their family or the cultural standard of being autonomous if they could not manage their families' responsibilities independently. As well, locating and requesting appropriate support and resources requires self-confidence and esteem as a single-parent. Paradoxically, receiving social support bolstered the single-parents' confidence and esteem sufficiently to enable them to ask for support from others; especially if negotiation with formal institutions was required to access appropriate support. This finding suggests that the single-parents who are multiply stressed and most vulnerable may not request help when they are in the greatest need of assistance.

Despite being confronted by many changes, responsibilities and emotional demands, most participants expressed that their adolescents were well-adjusted, and were not overly stressed by growing up in a single-parent family. The adolescents interviewed stated that they were more concerned with school and social demands than with living in single-parent families. Similarly, Compas and Williams (1990) found no differences between adolescents in single-parent and

two-parent families on self-reported emotional problems or stressful events. Perhaps both adolescents' and parents' adjustment in single-parent families can be explained, at least in part, with reference to three interconnected dimensions of this study's findings that follow.

Dimensions of Adjustment In Single-Parent Families

First, the concurrent challenges that single-parent families face and the resources available to buffer the effects of these challenges can be conceptualized by taking a social-ecological view to assess the family in relation to the multiple contexts in which they live. The challenges and supports from both proximal and distal environments can be viewed as having a potential influence on the strengths and vulnerabilities of the family members. Secondly, the single-parents in this study developed through several phases which led to a transformation of their identities and development of new ways of making meaning of their situations. This process of growth and redefinition affected the parents' abilities to mediate stress and change in their families, and to draw appropriate boundaries and limits within the close, egalitarian parent-adolescent relationships which are common in single-parent families. Thirdly, the more positive portrait of single-parenting with adolescents painted by these parents' narratives, illustrates that despite challenges and risks, single-parent families are a viable family form capable

of effectively raising adolescents. Further discussion of each of these issues is provided in the following sections.

Single-Parent Families in Context

Bronfenbrenner's (1977, 1986) social-ecological model illustrates the connections and reciprocal transactions among individuals and their external environments as a series of nested structures. These nested structures, each contained within the next, represent four levels of environments, ranging from proximal settings in which the individual is embedded and affects the individual directly, to the more distal and macro contexts that have an indirect effect on the individual's adjustment and development. The microsystem is the setting in which the individual lives, and the mesosystem involves relationships between microsystems. The exosystem refers to social settings that affect but do not contain the individual, and the macrosystem refers to the overarching ideology of the culture (Bronfenbrenner,1986). If we view this model from the vantage point of an adolescent's lifeworld or microsystem, we can see that all of the social, economic, and personal challenges and supports experienced by the single-parent are contained in the adolescent's exosystem and may influence her or him indirectly.

Interactions within and among these environments are transactional. For example, parents' attitudes about the legitimacy of single-parent families to raise children

effectively colors their adolescents' attitudes about their families. Reciprocally, adolescents' attitudes and behaviours affect their parents' sense of efficacy as single-parents. Moreover, although the exosystem is not intimately connected to the individual, the individual may be strongly influenced by it. For example, health or social programs available for single-parents, and television portrayals or news media accounts of single-parent families, which are all contained in the exosystem, may contribute to either their sense of resentment, shame, and exclusion, or to their sense of validation, legitimacy, and inclusion. Cultural values of the macrosystem regarding the traditional family and social expectations of single-parent families can impact on the single-parent family either positively or negatively. Again, these positive or negative influences constitute supports or stresses for the parent which can affect the adolescent indirectly.

The following example illustrates how the parent's world of work impacts on the family through exosystem forces. The opportunity to work was deemed by both employed and unemployed participants to be an important source of financial support and of social and personal fulfilment. Supportive employers who allowed flexible work hours enabled parents to both work and to meet the emergent needs of their families. Parents' employment had a profound impact on family members both directly and indirectly through multiple factors related to

the family's standard of living (for example, housing, educational and recreational opportunities).

The cumulative balance or ratio of supports and challenges from all levels of the single-parent's and adolescent's environments influence their strengths and vulnerabilities. For example, most children and adolescents can contend with low levels of risk, such as unemployment or parental illness, but it is the cumulation of risks, particularly with no compensatory forces that jeopardize adjustment and development (Garbarino, Dubrow, Kostelny, & Pardo, 1992; Rutter, 1987; Werner & Smith, 1992). Multiple challenges faced by many youth in single-parent families can "become gateways to risky choices" (Benson & Roehlkepartain, 1993, p. 7), for example, drug and alcohol use or antisocial behaviour.

The possibilities for prevention are to counterbalance these challenges with supports and positive assets both within the family and in the community. Support offered by friends and family can increase parents' positive attitudes of themselves and their families, and can facilitate their parenting roles (Hetherington, 1989a). As well, during times when single-parents are vulnerable and overwhelmed, authoritative teachers and schools (Rutter, 1987), community mentoring and surrogate grandparent programs, can provide support for children undergoing stressful experiences (Werner & Smith, 1992). Moreover, children of poor single-parent

families are often identified as at-risk for maladjustment and school problems (Polakow, 1993). Polakow suggests that the dangers of focusing on primarily on risk include the possibility of shifting attention away from the social conditions and larger exosystem and macrosystem contexts that contribute to risk, and to locate the risk within the child.

The chronosystem is a more recent dimension of Bronfenbrenner's model (1986) which represents the cumulative effects of a sequence of developmental transitions over time. While proper application of the chronosystem requires a longitudinal study, the participants described retrospectively how interactive dynamics of both individual and environmental challenges and supportive resources affected their continuing development as single-parents at several transitional points. As well, both parents and adolescents in the families interviewed were often simultaneously dealing with similar developmental issues, such as identity, intimacy, autonomy, and social roles, creating a complex, transactional system of development over time.

## The Single-Parent as "Self"

How the single-parent parents and copes with and mediates the ongoing family changes and stresses is also influenced by the single-parent "self" and the subjective experience of these constraints and supports. The participants' narratives illustrated that growing into the role of a single-parent was

a process which involved several phases, and resolution of issues and challenges at each phase led to a stronger, subjective sense of wellbeing as a single-parent and as a person. Similar phases and processes have also been identified in the research literature (Ahrons, 1994; French, 1991; Shaw, 1991) and in the family therapy literature (Kissman, 1992; Korritko, 1991). These phases, which lead to some form of adjustment in the identity of the single-parent are; dealing with the aftermath of marital transition, realignment of family roles and external and internal family structures, and reestablishment of a social life while maintaining stability in the family.

The earlier stages of coming to terms with single-parenting usually represented a lengthy period of adjustment, during which the hardships sometimes seemed overwhelming. The immediate stress of marital separation and loss and the concomitant economic, physical, and emotional demands of single-parenting had placed many participants at-risk for psychological and emotional problems. The participants experienced varying degrees of emotional distress, such as depressed mood, anxiety, or helplessness which lasted anywhere from several months to several years, depending on their available supports and resources. Increased parental risk for psychological and emotional problems has been found also in other research (Compas & Williams, 1990; Forehand, Fauben, Long, Brody, & Slotkin, 1987).

Superimposed on their family demands were the demands that the parents imposed on themselves to meet their preconceived beliefs of what it means to be a good parent. Some single-parents felt guilt or helplessness that they had become single-parents or that there was no father in the household for their children. Many reported that they tried harder, assumed extra family, school, or community tasks and responsibilities to appear to their children and to others that they were responsible, competent parents, even though they were single-parents. Some parents reported that they sometimes overprotected, overindulged, or overcontrolled their children as a means of coping with and protecting their children from experiencing a sense of "loss of the traditional family", or a sense of fragmentation of their family. When parents are vulnerable and at-risk for developing, or are already experiencing psychological distress, their adolescents encounter "altered" parents who are less able to mediate the stress associated with family disorganization (Larson & Richards, 1994), and to establish consistent family rules and roles (Hetherington, 1989a). However, most participants gradually learned new coping strategies that enabled them to address both their families' needs and their own needs. They began to encourage their children to share some of the families' responsibilities. They also provided a sense of family security by assuring their children that the families' stresses and changes were manageable, and were attributable to

the situation rather than to particular family members. Most parents in this study sought family, community, or therapeutic support during these vulnerable times to enable them to develop or maintain their role as family mediator and a sense of security in their families.

While the challenges and constraints of parenting alone sometimes dominated their experience, the majority of participants also rendered positive aspects from single-parenting. Over time, they developed a sense of confidence through experiences of coping alone successfully and managing to deal with their multiple demands and responsibilities. Positive attitudes about single-parenting and experiences of personal growth have been reported in other studies as well (Ahrons, 1994; Alexander, 1994; Hardy & Crowe, 1991; Shaw, 1991). Maccoby and Mnookin (1992) suggest that this recent picture of single-parents contrasts "the dark scenario that has been portrayed by other studies of divorce" (P. 293). An example of such positive attitudes was evident in the participants' attitudes to remarriage. About two-thirds of the group felt that they would like to have an intimate adult relationship in the future, but that despite social pressures to recouple, their current priorities were to support their adolescents' development and their own development. Sustaining their development of "self" was viewed as a means of preventing the repetition of their previous marital relationship patterns and outcomes.

However, if the parents did not have adequate supports to counterbalance ongoing stressors, it was more difficult for them to grow beyond the first phase of single-parenting, particularly for those dealing with extenuating circumstances or unresolved divorce or personal issues. When extenuating circumstances related to an adolescent's health, learning, or behavioural problems were present, the parent experienced greater intensity and frequency of many of the challenges of single-parenting, and also required more external supports. As one parent of a learning disabled boy stated, "I am a good parent when resources are there, but the cumulative effects of stress and exhaustion make it difficult."

Erik Erikson (1980) explained that with too many changes, sudden or gradual, in too many dimensions of life, the individual may suffer a loss of identity. Their "sense of sameness and of continuity and the belief in one's social role are gone" (p. 42). Following the extensive personal and social transitions associated with becoming a single-parent, most participants experienced a disruption of their previous identity. The challenge to attain a satisfactory personal and social identity was magnified for participants as there were no social traditions, cultural definitions, and few role models to help them integrate their new and sometimes conflicting roles. Development of a single-parent identity was thus a gradual, transformative process as the parents assumed new roles, responsibilities, and self-definitions.

How single-parents interpret and define themselves as single-parents is influenced by how they see themselves in relation to their own expectations and values and those of the community and the culture. To enable an acceptance of oneself as a single-parent, the parent needs to rework his or her personal meaning of "family" and to call into question the belief in the cultural normality of the two-parent family to reduce unfavourable comparisons (Ahrons, 1994; Hardy & Crow, 1991). The dominant narratives in our culture have influenced the social construction of negative social expectations of single-parent families, and these expectations can "control, contain, and construct our understandings" (Gergen & Gergen, 1991, p. 89) of our own personal history and experience, and that of others. On the basis of these socially constructed negative expectations, many participants developed comparable visions of single-parents who are fraught with difficulties and losses. A number of people were so sensitive to internalized negative stereotypes about single-parents at first that they submerged and silenced their feelings and needs as well as their status as single-parents. A redefinition and acceptance of the single-parent family as a viable and legitimate family form was essential to the development of a positive single-parent identity. Social isolation and perceived negative social expectations of single-parents complicated this redefinition process.

Most parents described specific turning points where they

gained a greater sense of acceptance, confidence and legitimacy as a person who is parenting alone. Turning points represent a shift in vision of single-parenting which is accompanied by a realization of the possibility of choice, and mobilization of more instrumental plans and actions. Several people experienced turning points when their beliefs and expectations about families and single-parenting were challenged and reframed in counselling or support groups. Examples of these beliefs were, "single-parent homes are broken homes" and "single-parents are usually poor, distraught and uneducated." Following these turning points, these participants began to resist defining themselves as "victims" or their homes as "broken homes" by employing coping strategies, such as positive reframing, to neutralize the impact of both negative social stereotypes and their own negative assumptions about single-parents. The timing of the turning points seemed to be influenced by the degree of choice the single-parents exercised in their marital separations, and on their psychological preparedness to head their family.

The process of growth through periods of rapid change and/or crisis evident in the participants' narratives has been described by Kegan (1982, 1994) and Erikson (1980). Kegan's constructive-developmental theory (1982, 1994) suggests that in times of crisis we rework our systems of meaning by raising the possibility of making relative what has been taken as definitive, and thereby gain a new perspective on ourselves

and our experiences. We can then construct new meaning for our experience, and a new definition of ourselves, and ourselves in relation to others (Kegan, 1982; 1994). A transformed sense of identity is experienced as "a sense of psychosocial well-being...and knowing where one is going" (Erikson, 1980, p. 127). Turning points represented the juncture at which the single-parents began to integrate resources of growth and recovery to attain a degree of psychological differentiation from the disruption in their lives and the social expectations of single-parents.

Parenting Adolescents in a Single-Parent Family

Most women have been socialized to experience mothering as central to their identity. As such, it is more likely for women's self-esteem to revolve around their children than it is for mens' (Ahrons, 1994; Ehrensaft, 1987; Larson & Richards, 1994). When parenting without a partner, even a larger part of a woman's identity may be related to parenting. The single-mothers interviewed described that they were more committed to their children after their marital separation, and that their lives became more centred on their children. When the parent had difficulties with their adolescent as in the families with extenuating circumstances, the parents remarked how deeply and personally these problems impacted on their identity.

Some mothers worried about whether their adolescents had

enough contact with male role models. While this was especially evident for mothers of sons when the father was not present on a regular basis, it was also an expressed concern of some mothers of daughters. Some mothers felt there was more stigma associated with mothers parenting sons alone, and as this situation cannot be readily changed, these mothers at times experienced a sense of inadequacy that they were not able to provide what their sons needed. Silverstein and Rashbaum (1994) reported that many single-mothers devalue their ability to effectively parent their sons, even though they may provide their sons with love and acceptance, and also provide other competent adults in their sons' lives. However, despite a few periodic doubts, finding male role models through community activities, friends, and relatives helped to alleviate much of this concern for most mothers of both sons and daughters in this study. The two single-fathers in this study did not express that finding female role models for their daughters or sons was an issue of concern for them. However, single-fathers in other studies have reported that this was a concern for them (Risman & Schwartz, 1988).

Parent-Adolescent Relationship.

The parents placed a high priority on their relationships with their adolescents and maintained involvement with them even though their adolescents had begun to become more autonomous and spent more time with their peers. The close,

egalitarian relationship between parents and adolescents in single-parent families, reported by Weiss in 1979, was also found in this study. The closeness of these relationships was undiluted by the presence of another adult or partner. Without a second parent in the household, the echelon structure of the two-parent family dissolved and made possible the development of a new mutual relationship in which the children had responsibilities and rights not very different from the parents'. In response to high maturity demands from the parents, the adolescents had become independent, responsible for themselves and for some aspects of the household, and contributive in decision making, as has been found in several other studies (Dornbusch and Gray, 1988; Hetherington, 1989a; Weiss, 1979). Most parents felt that the close parent-adolescent relationship was one of the benefits of single-parenting, and that this egalitarian family structure was functional and necessary to maintain the operation of the household.

The closeness of the relationship vacillated over time as the adolescent's striving for independence fluctuated. Some parents experienced sadness when their adolescents distanced themselves from the family. In the families where the adolescents had regular visits to their other parents' home, the custodial parents had to begin to "let go" of their children earlier than they would if they were not single-parents. However, these adolescent developments of greater

autonomy and separation from the family both prompted and allowed the parent's pursuit of her or his own personal development and future, following a similar and parallel path with the adolescent.

The high levels of adolescent autonomy in single-parent families could be interpreted as an index of a lack of supervision and control, which is characteristic of a permissive parenting style (Dornbusch & Gray, 1988; Hetherington, 1989a). On the other hand, as Weiss (1979) suggested, it may reflect the fact that because these adolescents tend to be relatively mature, strict controls were less necessary. The parents in this study described the parenting style that they tried to attain and maintain as authoritative in nature. According to Baumrind (1987), authoritative parents in comparison to permissive parents are more demanding, and in comparison to authoritarian parents are more responsive. Authoritative parents are demanding in that they guide their children's activities firmly and consistently, and require them to contribute to family functioning by helping with household tasks. During adolescence, increased symmetry of power typically characterizes these family structures where privileges and responsibilities are shared among family members. Authoritative parents are responsive affectively in the sense of being loving, supportive, and committed. The parent-adolescent relationships and family organization described by

the participants seemed to match Baumrind's description of authoritative parents. Perhaps a strength of many single-parent families is that out of necessity, their adolescents are expected to become involved in the family's functioning and are relied upon and trusted to contribute to the family. These adolescents may be willing to respond positively to their tacit, egalitarian family contract because it appeals to the conception of justice and fair contract that develops during adolescence (Baumrind, 1987). As well, through the close parent-adolescent relationship, an adolescent in a single-parent family learns how to perceive, respond, and relate to the needs and feelings of the other person, which is an important aspect of the development of the adolescent "self", and the "self" in relation to others (Youniss & Smollar, 1985). Moreover, challenges and "required helpfulness" which are offset or buffered by protective factors, such as a close relationship with an adult, can promote the development of competence under stress or resilience (Rutter, 1987; Werner & Smith, 1992).

A cautionary note regarding close, egalitarian parent-adolescent relationships may be that in some single-parent families, this sharing of responsibility may occur before puberty or before the adolescent is ready to assume such responsibilities. As well, adolescents' responsibilities, commitments, tacit contracts, and financial limitations that they experience in their families may separate them from

joining the adolescent culture. They may not have the time, money, equipment, or transportation to join with their peer groups' activities to the extent that enables them to feel a sense of belonging. Weiss (1979) found that these conditions can create a sense of alienation or loneliness (Weiss, 1979). A sense of alienation that is not balanced with a sense of constructive commitment is central to understanding adolescent risk-taking behaviour (Baumrind, 1987).

Several participants expressed their awareness and concern that due to the intensity and closeness of their relationships, their adolescents witnessed their emotional reactions to stress. They were also cognizant of the need for adequate family boundaries to separate their emotional and psychological issues and such adult responsibilities as finances, from their adolescents. Ahrons (1994) emphasized that single-parents need to establish boundaries and limitations even though the dynamic of the parent-adolescent relationship implies equality. Erikson (1980) described this balance of parent-adolescent collaboration within appropriate boundaries as equality in worth but not kind or function.

Without adequate family boundaries there are several possible risks that may emerge from the parent-adolescent relationship (Ahrons, 1994). Parents and adolescents may become enmeshed; they may reverse their roles; or the adolescent may disengage from the family due to confusion of family roles and rules. In enmeshment, the parent loses

herself or himself and begins to live through his or her child. While this is not limited to single-parent families, the single-parent family tie is more direct and there is no other adult to diffuse the intensity of the parent's involvement with the adolescent (Hetherington, 1989a).

Adolescents in single-parent families may come to define themselves as partners of the parent, but the danger is that the parents may go beyond simply being open and companionate with their children, especially during the early troubled phase of single-parenting. The roles may reverse and the parent may begin to rely on her or his children for comfort and the sort of nurturing that may be considered parental. To set limits in any context can signal separation between the parent and adolescent, and the closer the relationship, the harder it tends to be to define separation (Ahrons, 1994). Development and reinforcement of the participants' family boundaries were enabled when both the parents and the adolescents maintained relationships and involvements outside their relationship, and when the parents had developed a positive identity as a single-parent.

The participants interviewed represent a fairly resilient group of single-parents. However, two families had experienced role reversal when the parents were psychologically vulnerable, but had been able to realign the family's roles through therapy. Two families who had described their past parenting style as permissive,

consequently had difficulties enforcing limits with their adolescents, who later became involved in problem behaviour.

The Demands of Parenting Adolescents.

Learning about adolescent development and parenting adolescents through books, courses, or counselling helped many parents build their parenting skills and esteem as parents. Participants whose parenting models from their own families were perceived to be negative found this essential. Although, some participants cautioned that parenting courses that primarily emphasize parenting skills or open-ended sharing of their experiences may not be helpful in meeting the demands of parenting.

According to Kegan (1994), the key features of parenting demanded by the "hidden curriculum" in our culture include setting limits, creating roles, managing boundaries, regulating relationships, and facilitating development. Parents are expected to manage boundaries in the family, and to include children in a secure and durable family unit and at the same time to exclude their children from the burdens of adult participation. They also need to take appropriate adult authority and responsibility and not share so much responsibility with their adolescents that they become "peerlike confidentes" (Kegan, 1994, p. 80). Kegan stated that these parenting demands require a level of mental organization, a fourth order of consciousness, that exceeds

the mental organization of many parents in our culture, particularly in situations of family disorganization or reorganization. Mental organization defines the way in which an individual constructs her or his meaning, and way of knowing the world. Knowing or mean-making is the organizing principle of an individual's thinking, feeling, and relating to others and to the self. It is both an ontological and epistemological activity, and it directs her or his "selective, interpretive, executive, and construing capacities" (Kegan, 1994, p. 29). The root structure of mental organization is the subject-object relationship: subject refers to the elements of knowing that the individual is identified with or embedded in, and object refers to the elements of knowing that he or she is differentiated from and can reflect and operate upon.

In traditional or homogeneous communities, "the community's collective consciousness" (p. 104) provides a vision, role models, and supports for parents. In our pluralistic, heterogeneous, contemporary culture, the complex demands of parenting must be met primarily by the parents. According to Kegan, a mismatch between external epistemological demands and internal epistemological capacities is characteristic of everyones' lives at various times in their development. The mismatch is not negative provided the individual also experiences support; both external support and internal support for the individual to

become more autonomous or self-authoring. The emphasis is not on support in terms of the quantity, consistency, or proximity of support, but rather in terms of the "borrowability" of support as a way of ordering reality or knowing. This type of support for single-parents would address such issues as viability of raising adolescents effectively, differentiation from negative social expectations, reduction of social isolation, and normalization of the single-parenting process.

Kegan (1994) emphasized that his constructivist theory is applicable to both males' and females' development, and that it is not at odds with theories of women's psychology, ways of knowing, and development, such as voice or relational theory (Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Taylor, Gilligan, & Sullivan, 1995) which also are based on constructivist principles. He suggested that these theories are compatible but make two different kinds of distinctions; stylistic and structural distinctions. In our culture, stylistic distinctions have been associated with gender as females tend to maintain their connections with others as they develop, while males tend to become more autonomous as they develop. However, Kegan's theory is based on James' 1890 conception of the duality of human experience in which all humans yearn to be both connected to or in communion with others and to be distinct or autonomous. Autonomy, in subject-object theory, does not refer to autonomy from others, but rather refers to an increase in differentiation from that which one is identified

with and embedded in. It refers to an increase in self-authoring and self-regulation. Kegan cites the 1986 research of Belenky and her colleagues and 1985 research of Surrey to illustrate how these two different types of distinctions and theories can be brought together profitably. These researchers attend to stylistic dimensions of self in the context of relationships, with structural changes of development occuring with increasing differentiation of self in relationships, and increasing differentiation and internalization of authority in ways of knowing and meaning-making. An individual, male or female, can be autonomous or self-authoring (structure) in a relational way (style).

To fulfil these demands of parenting, single-parents have to create distinctions between "being" and "having" a single-parent family. In "being" a single-parent family (third order consciousness), the parent's difficulty in preserving family boundaries is due to the lack of or disruption of an overarching vision of how the family should run which enables the parent to subtend individual roles and relationships to this larger vision. In "having a single-parent family" (fourth order consciousness), the parent has a more separate and differentiated relationship to the single-parent role and family in society. As a single-parent begins to create their role as a single-parent based on their own positive internal assumptions and differentiate themselves from society's expectations and definitions of single-parents, they are

moving from third to fourth order mental organization. The parent can then fulfil such parenting functions as assuming an executive function, limit setting, and maintaining psychological and social boundaries as important concepts in maintaining the complex vision of the family system, including all roles and relationships in the family. As such, parenting skills taught without addressing the way the parents construct their reality and the meaning of their current family role will be ineffective in providing the supports they need to meet the complex demands of parenting. As mentioned, a small number of participants expressed that until they could render parenting information meaningful and relevant to their experience, it was not useful or helpful to their parenting.

The single-parents' growth in terms of redefining their identity and reworking their construction of meaning as single-parent families, likely involves similar changes in mental organization as described above. As the individual develops a more differentiated relationship to that which they were identified with or embedded in, there is a transformation of knowing and meaning (Kegan, 1982; 1994).

With the multiple demands of parenting in our society in addition to the multiple challenges of single-parenting, one wonders how single-parents meet these demands. Baumrind (1987) has also remarked that even the nuclear family with both parents working has difficulty sustaining strong kinship bonds and adequate supervision of adolescents. She questioned

how single-parents legitimate their authority with their adolescents and maintain the commitment and supervision necessary. Many of the parents interviewed attempted to decrease the possibility that one parent undermines the authority of the other parent, and also to increase the amount of adolescent involvement in the negotiation of decisions and demands. They also demonstrated a willingness to allow conflictual interchange to develop and to be resolved, while sustaining an attachment with their adolescent, and an affective climate of support, mutual co-construction and respect. Baumrind (1987) and Youniss and Smollar (1985) have suggested that these conditions increase the possibility that adolescents will accept the parents' requests as legitimate, and will also facilitate the adolescents' development.

## Implications and Recommendations

The results of this study have implications for individual counselling and family therapy, and also for social policy that directs community programs and services that support single-parent families. As the participants interviewed were relatively resilient, perhaps other single-parents and people who know single-parents can learn from these experiences about positive, growth-supporting processes in single-parent families. And, perhaps their experiences will contribute to a greater understanding of and sensitivity to single-parent families.

It is important to view individuals from single-parent families in relation to the social and economic contexts of their immediate family, as well as in relation to the larger, more distal contexts that also influence the families through social attitudes, economic opportunities, and available resources for the family. Opportunities for promotion of the wellbeing of all family members and prevention of such problems as adolescent alienation and risk lie in providing and strengthening supportive family and community networks to counterbalance the impact of ongoing challenges in single-parent families. As well, a significant aspect of reducing negative social expectations of single-parent families may be to develop means to sensitize professionals who work with members of single-parent families to both their challenges, and their potential and promise.

To empower single-parents, clinical and educational approaches should assist single-parents to realign roles and responsibilities in their families, draw together their internal and external resources, and to gain a more differentiated perspective on the meaning of the roles and relationships in the family. Gaining affirmation of the single-parent family as a legitimate and viable family form enables single-parents to challenge negative stereotypes that can minimize their ability to function effectively, and to normalize their experiences of single-parenting. Increasing awareness of the potential risks associated with the dynamics

and interactions both within single-parent families and in relation to the other parent are an essential component of prevention and intervention. Assisting the families to make appropriate internal structural realignments, including boundary definition, division of labour, family communication patterns, limit-setting, and building and maintaining relationships are also significant. It is recommended that future research focus on the factors and processes that facilitate or disrupt development and adjustment in single-parent families from the family's perspectives. The processes that seemed to have the most influential impact on the families in this study were the custodial parent as mediator of family processes, the parent-adolescent relationship, and external and internal support systems. As becoming a single-parent is not a single-event but a dynamic process of family break-up and reorganization, a longitudinal research approach would capture critical events as they occur at sequential points of development.

Further exploration of adolescents' perspectives of growing up in a single-parent family is indicated. For example, we need to know what it means to adolescents to sustain relationships with two parents who live apart and who do not speak with one voice about family standards. One of the limitations of this study is that only six female adolescents and no male adolescents were interviewed. Male adolescents' perspectives of growing up in single-parent

families and mother-son relationships are important topics for exploration. Past research has found that single-mothers have difficulty in setting limits on their sons' behaviours and that the consequences of marital separation are worse for boys than for girls (Furstenberg & Cherlin, 1991; Hetherington, 1989a). How are parent-adolescent processes and family dynamics different for boys and girls in stressful single-parent family situations. Moreover, how do adolescents experience growing up when their parent is dealing with similar developmental processes? Does this influence the parent-adolescent relationship in terms of competition, detachment, or closeness, and does this depend upon the gender or temperament match of the parent and adolescent?

As there were only two single-fathers interviewed in this study, little light has been shone on how single-fathers experience developing their identity and roles as single-parents. The fathers seemed to experience the same challenges and parenting issues as single-mothers. The main difference seemed to be in the perceptions and experiences of single-fathers in relation to social expectations. This is an important topic of future research as the number of single-fathers is increasing.

The use of a focus group conducted after the completion of the majority of interviews was helpful in adding credibility to the emergent issues and themes, and in adding depth by exploring the varying contexts in which these themes

occur. Utilizing two focus groups; one prior to the interviews and one following the interviews is recommended for future research. The early group would assist in identifying key issues which would form the substantive frame of the interview guides, and the latter group would triangulate and add credibility to emergent data and preliminary analysis.

This study was a broad descriptive study of the perspectives of single-parents with adolescents. Future studies that focus on particular aspects of this phenomenon with a different sample, including perhaps single-parents of troubled youth or members of other ethnic groups may reveal a deeper understanding of single-parent families with adolescents.

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# Appendix A

## Interview Guides for Single-Parent and Adolescent Interviews

### Single-Parent's Interview Guide

Introduction
Study purpose
Consent form

Perceived challenges/stresses and means of coping
What are the challenges and stresses of being a single-parent? For each challenge, probe meaning of experience to the self (affectively, cognitively, and behaviourally) and the meaning to the family.

Supports
What helps and what hinders your ability to cope with each situation? Ask about both internal and external family structures?

Family structures and processs
Family roles, responsibilities, decision-making, involvement of and relations with the noncustodial parent

Parent-adolescent relationship
How would you describe your relationship with your son or daughter? Address shared activities, trust, warmth, support, empathy, conflict and resolution, control/freedom, involvement (e.g., school, homework). How do you think your adolescent views you as a single-parent?

Parent's perceptions of adolescent adjustment
What do you think the challenges are for him or her in being in a single-mother-headed household? How do you think your adolescent son or daughter is managing life in a single-parent family? How is he or she handling issues related to being a teenager - peers and peer pressure, autonomy and attachment, identity, sense of self, responsibility? How are these issues manifest and addressed/negotiated in the family?

Self-perceptions and social life
What are your perceptions of yourself as a single-parent? What do you think the perceptions of others are? What is your personal life like now - social relationships, sense of well-being?

Future self

Could you describe yourself in the future (1 year, 5 years, 10 years) - general mood, activities, friends, work?

Comparisons with other single-parents

Do you know other single-parents? How do you think your experiences are similar? different from yours? What do you think society expects of single-parent and their adolescents? How do you experience that?

Demographic data

Address
Telephone number
Number of years of parenting alone
Number and ages of children
Employment, schooling, volunteer work,

Other emergent areas relevant to study

Interview Guide for Adolescents

Introduction
same as for parents

Challenges and means of coping
What are the challenges and stresses of being a teenager in a single-parent family, if any?

Supports
What helps and what hinders your ability to cope with each situation? Address internal and external supports.

Family roles and structures
What are the rules and limits regarding your freedoms, choices and responsibility in your family? How were these decided and how are they monitored? How would you describe your role in the family?

Mother-adolescent relationship:
How would you describe your relationship with the parent that you live with? What are your perceptions of how your parent is managing as a single-parent? How is she or he handling issues related your being a teenager - peers and peer pressure, autonomy and attachment, responsibility? What do you think your parent's perceptions of how you are coping and adjusting?

Future visions
Could you describe yourself in the future (1 year, 5 years, 10 years) - general mood, activities, friends, work?

Comparisons with other adolescents in single-parent homes
Do you know other teenagers from single-parent-headed-families? In what ways are their experiences: similar or different from yours?

Demographic data
Age
Grade
School and number of years in that school
Visitation with other parent
Involvement in activities

Other emergent issues

# Appendix B

## Consent Form for Single-Parent's Participation

I understand that the purpose of this study is to learn about the meanings of experiences of single-parents and adolescents in single-parent families. I understand that interviews will be conducted with me to learn about my experiences of being a single-parent. I understand that I will be asked to describe in detail my thoughts and feelings regarding these experiences, how I have coped with them, and my perspectives of what helps and what hinders the development and well-being of my family.

I understand that I will be asked to provide my address, phone number, occupation, the number of children in my family, and the length of time that I have been a single-parent.

I understand that one to two interviews will be scheduled with me will last approximately one to one and one-half hours.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I can withdraw at any time during the research without explanation. Furthermore, any concerns or questions I wish to discuss at any time will be dealt with immediately.

I understand that the interviews will be audiotaped. The tape will be erased after the thoughts, feelings, and experiences that I talk about are transcribed into typed copies. I understand that all information will remain confidential. All copies of the interviews will be kept in a locked file drawer and will be destroyed upon completion of the research report.

I understand that my anonymity will be protected in all reports by the replacement of my name with a code name identifiable only to the researcher. The code system and the consent forms will be filed confidentially in a secure office that is separate from the location of the interview transcriptions. I understand that my name will not be attached to any published results and that any information that would allow others to identify me will either not be used or substituted.

I acknowledge that the researcher has discussed with me the protection of privacy of other individuals that I may mention during the interview.

I understand the contents of this consent form and agree to participate in this study.

Yes_____ No_____

Signature: _____
Date:_____

Researcher: _____

Address: _____
(to send summary of research)

Parental Consent Form for Adolescent's Participation

I understand that the purpose of this study is to learn about the meaning of experiences of parents and teenagers in single-parent families. I understand that interviews will be conducted with my daughter/son to learn about her or his experiences of being a teenager in a single-parent family. I understand that my daughter/ son will be asked to describe her/ his perceptions, thoughts, and feelings regarding these experiences. I understand that my child will be asked to provide her/his age, name of school, and current grade.

I understand that two interviews will be scheduled with my daughter/son: the first interview will last approximately 30-40 minutes; and second interview will be a short, 10-minute telephone call to ask your daughter/son to validate the researcher's summary of the first interview.

I understand that my daughter/son's participation is voluntary and that she or he can withdraw at any time during the research without explanation. Furthermore, any concerns or questions my daughter/son has about participating in the study will be dealt with immediately.

I understand that the interviews will be audiotaped and that the tape will be erased after the thoughts, feelings, and experiences that my daughter/son talks about are transcribed into copies. I understand that all information will remain confidential. All copies of the interviews will be kept in a locked file drawer and will be destroyed upon completion of the research report.

I understand that my teenager's anonymity will be protected in all reports by the replacement of her/his name with a code name identifiable only to the researcher. This code system and the consent forms will be filed confidentially in a secure office that is separate from the location of the interview transcriptions. I understand that any information that would allow others to identify her/him will either not be used or substituted.

I acknowledge that the researcher will discuss with my daughter/son the protection of privacy of other individuals that she/he may mention during the interview.

I understand the contents of this consent form and agree to give permission for my daughter/son to participate in this study. yes _____ no _____

Signature of Parent: _____ Name of Adolescent: _____
Date: _____
Researcher: _____
* Adolescents will be requested to sign a separate consent form.

Consent Form for Focus Group Participants

I understand that the purpose of this group is to explore different perspectives and experiences of single-parents who are raising adolescents. I understand that in the group the facilitator will ask me about what challenges and supports are important to me as a single-parent with an adolescent. I understand that as a group member I will be asked whether and how issues brought up by other group participants fit with my experiences of being a single-parent. I will also be asked to add my own thoughts, feelings, and experiences.

I understand that the focus group will last approximately one and one-half hours.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I can withdraw at any time during the group without explanation. Furthermore, any concerns or questions I wish to discuss about the research will be answered in the group.

I understand that the group will be audiotaped. The tape will be erased after the information expressed by the group is transcribed into typed copies. I understand that all information will remain confidential. All transcriptions will be kept in a locked file drawer and will be destroyed upon completion of the research report.

I understand that my anonymity will be protected in all reports by the replacement of my name with a code name identifiable only by the researcher. This code system and the consent forms will be filed confidentially in a secure office that is separate from the location of the interview transcriptions. I understand that any information that would allow others to identify me will either not be used or substituted.

I recognize, however, that I will not be anonymous to the other participants in the focus group. I agree to maintain the confidentiality of information expressed by other group members. If I talk about the focus group later, I will not identify other participants by name.

I acknowledge that the researcher has asked the group participants to consider the protection of privacy of other individuals that they may mention during the group.

I understand the contents of this consent form and agree to participate in this focus group.

Yes_____ No_____

Signature: _____ Date:

Consent Form for Adolescent Participation

I understand that the purpose of this study is to learn about parents' and teenagers' perspectives about single-parent families. I understand that interviews with be conducted with me to learn about my experiences of being a teenager in a single-parent family. I understand that I will be asked to describe my perceptions, thoughts, and feelings regarding these experiences.

I understand that I will be asked to provide my address, phone number, number of siblings I have, and length of time that I have lived with a single-parent.

I understand that one interview will be scheduled with me that will last approximately 30 to 40 minutes. I also understand that the researcher will call me on the telephone in about two weeks to ask me whether her summary of what I said in the first interview is accurate.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I can withdraw at any time during the research without explanation. Furthermore, any concerns or questions I wish to discuss at any time will be dealt with immediately.

I understand that the interviews will be audiotaped. The tape will be erased after the thoughts, feelings, and experiences that I talk about are transcribed into typed copies. I understand that all information will remain confidential. All copies of the interviews will be kept in a locked file drawer and will be destroyed upon completion of the research report.

I understand that my anonymity will be protected in all reports by the replacement of my name with a code name identifiable only to the researcher. The code system and the consent forms will be filed confidentially in a secure office that is separate from the location of the interview transcriptions. I understand that my name will not be attached to any published results and that any information that would allow others to identify me will either not be used or substituted.

I acknowledge that the researcher has discussed with me the protection of privacy of other individuals that I may mention during the interview.

I understand the contents of this consent form and agree to participate in this study. Yes_____ No_____

Signature: Date:

# Appendix C

## Overview of Findings of Single-Parent Interviews

## Summary Sent to Participants

May 9, 1996

Dear

It has been awhile since we talked, but I'm finally able to send you an overview of findings from my research project, "Single-Parenting with Adolescents." I have talked with 16 single-parents individually and 10 other single-parents in a group. I have learned a great deal about resourcefulness and resilience in single-parenting. I am thankful for everyone's participation.

Now that I have reached this stage in the research, I would really like to hear what you think about this summary. What does and doesn't fit for you? What have I missed? I know everyone is busy and that time is a scare commodity, but I would really appreciate any feedback you could offer.

I have thought of a few options for hearing your thoughts. One possibility is to attend an informal discussion group at my house on May 21st from 6:30 to about 8:00 PM. Other options include a short meeting at a place that is convenient for you or a telephone conversation.

My phone number is 598-8191. I hope to hear from you soon.

Very Sincerely,

Sandra Hamilton

## Single-Parenting with Adolescents

There was great diversity among participants in how they became single-parents, the arrangements and relationships with the other parent, and their available resources and supports. However, one common theme among all participants was the commitment to do the best they could for their children, despite many changes and challenges.

### Changing Roles and Added Responsibilities

Single-parents assumed all parenting responsibilities in their households. As such, participants had to take on tasks that at first they were not be prepared for, for example, household repair and financial management, as well as balancing both limit-setting and nurturing. However, parents emphasized that it was the emotional demands of "being the only parent in the house to respond to children's needs and wants" that was the greatest challenge. Making decisions about family matters alone with no support, particularly when 'the crunch' was on and a decision had to be made immediately was also trying.

### Social Relationships

Most participants talked about feeling socially isolated. With far less time, more demands, and lives centering around children, social relationships changed for most participants. Some found that they became distanced from old friends who seemed to prefer to socialize "in couples." But, being absorbed with work/school and family made finding and cultivating new relationships very hard. This left many single parents feeling alone and wondering, "Am I the only one doing this or feeling this?" As children became more independent in adolescence, parents had more time and energy to pursue social connections.

As well, the majority had experienced or witnessed

negative expectations or stereotypes about single-parent families. At times, these experiences provoked surprise, anger or a sense of isolation. A few people had experienced discrimination in the work-world on the basis of being a single-parent.

Balancing Needs, Time, and Energy

The constant demands of work/school, children, meals, keeping up the house, while having little time to oneself, pushed most parents to exhaustion at times. Some participants tried hard to meet their ideals of being a "good parent" or to make up for things that they believed their children were missing. Given their demands on time and energy, falling short of ideals and expectations and then experiencing frustration was common. But, with time and experience, most parents let go of their oppressive expectations and created their own priorities and style of parenting. As well, they began to encourage their children to share a little more of the household responsibilities.

The Other

There was always the other parent. Whether present in the family's weekly schedule or not, he or she is present in the children. Participants talked a great deal about the challenges associated with this reality. For some parents this meant relating to and about the other parent in a way that supported the child, and yet was tolerable for the parent. It sometimes meant negotiating and renegotiating visitation schedules and dealing with all of the "back and forth" transitions and details over many years. For some people it meant accepting and dealing with the presence of a step-parent in their children's lives. For others it meant helping the child find role models and mentors to substitute for the not-regularly-present parent. It also meant experiencing and dealing with the child's expression of

sadness or anger about their arrangements with the other parent.

A few participants described their relationship with their ex-spouse as a co-parenting partnership. These parents had been able to arbitrate cooperative boundaries and lines of communication to with their ex-husbands to allow an ongoing arrangement of shared parenting. Co-parenting seems to reduce some of the intensity of parenting alone as it provides support and consistency for the children and more personal time for each parent.

Financial Challenges

Despite more limited financial resources, most participants stated that they enjoyed the autonomy and choice of how their money was spent. However, when there were constant financial worries about "making ends meet" or irregular support payments, life became harder and an ongoing sense of insecurity prevailed. For some participants, part of the financial challenge also included finding affordable, safe housing with adequate space for their growing teenagers.

How did the financial situation affect adolescents? On one hand, adolescents begin to understand the limitations on resources better. Some parents felt that financial limitations challenged their teens to develop creativity and responsibility in making their own money. On the other hand, as they became more aware of the world around them, they sometimes felt frustrated or angry when they compared themselves to more affluent peers.

Phases of Single Parenting - Growing into the Role

During the first couple of years of single-parenting, the emotional impact of loss and adjustment lessened, and parents gradually gained confidence in their abilities to parent alone. However, if the parents did not have adequate supports that provided practical assistance with day-to-day tasks and

childcare, as well as emotional support, it was more difficult to grow beyond the first phase of single-parenting.

Some people began their journey of parenting alone with a negative vision of single-parents as being "poor, distraught, and having children who were out of control." A number of people were so sensitive to this single-parent stereotype that they kept their feelings and needs as well as their status as a single-parent to themselves. This contributed to their sense of isolation and loneliness.

Most people described specific turning points in their lives as single-parents. At these turning points, parents gained a greater sense of confidence and legitimacy as a single parent and as a person. For some people, turning points were spurred on by finding the "right" living situation, book, job, or course. For other people, turning points occurred when certain beliefs and expectations about families, marriage, and single-parenting were challenged. Examples of these beliefs were; "a woman needs a man", "single-parent homes are broken homes", "married happily ever-after", and so on. Yet, for others, the turning points occurred as a result of increased self-awareness, self-determination, and confidence that they acquired through counselling or support groups.

Supports

All parents agreed that finding support systems was essential for practical assistance, such as transportation, home repair and maintenance, and childcare/supervision, as well as emotional and spiritual support. It seems that the less the 'other' parent is involved, the more this is true.

Some parents grew closer to and gained support from their own parents or other relatives. Two people interviewed experienced a great loss when the parent (s), with whom they had become very close, died. Others maintained their emancipation from their own parents was a necessary step to

enable their own development and sense of efficacy as a parent.

Asking for help was extremely difficult for many participants. Some people felt that they might be viewed as inadequate parents and not measuring up to their family or cultural standard of being self-sufficient. Asking for help became easier as parents became less isolated and more confident as single-parents.

Many participants sought information, programs, services, and supports from various agencies and organizations, for both themselves and their adolescents, such as the Single Parent Resource Centre, Boys' and Girls' Club, Divorce Lifeline, and Transition House. These formal supports were extremely beneficial for parents who received little informal supports from their ex-spouse or family, or when their adolescent needed help for health, learning, developmental, or adjustment problems.

Supporting and Nurturing Oneself

Everyone emphasized the importance of taking care of themselves and meeting their own needs. Several people talked about their experiences of always putting their children's needs ahead of theirs and the negative impact this had on both their well-being and on their parenting. Creative expression such as writing, sewing, painting, gardening, and reading; interpersonal contact with others who were affirming; and physical outlets such as walking, jogging, and yoga were referred to as "lifelines." Several people felt their work, school, or volunteer commitment nurtured their sense of self and enabled them to parent more effectively and with greater enjoyment.

Parenting Adolescents

Several parents sometimes thought that when adolescents had emotional upheavals or behaviour changes, as all

adolescents do, they were caused or aggravated by the fact that they were single-parents. For example, while passionate confrontations during adolescence may occur in most families, they thought that the intensity may be greater in single-parent families where there is no other adult to diffuse or interrupt the intensity. Yet, despite these concerns, parents emphasized that from their perspective it is the quality of parenting and their relationship with their adolescent, and not the family type that made the important difference to their adolescent's development.

Learning about adolescent development and parenting with adolescents through books or courses helped many parents build their parenting skills and esteem as parents. Participants whose parenting models from their own family were negative found this essential. Others found that participating in counselling helped work out personal issues that enabled them to parent alone more effectively.

Some mothers worried about whether their children got enough male contact, particularly for boys when the father was not present on a regular basis. Finding male role models and mentors through community activities, friends, and relatives helped to alleviate much of this concern. However, this was not as easy as it sounds considering the time and transportation involved, as well as the importance of consistency and a good match between adolescent and mentor.

Adolescent Development

Participants felt that their adolescents took a lot of responsibility for themselves, the household, and sometimes a younger sibling. Many of these teens were described as mature, self-sufficient, and capable of handling these responsibilities. As well, most single-parents described that the close relationships they had with their adolescents was one of the benefits of single-parenting. They felt that the

close bond provides their sons and daughters with a sense of security.

Participants also described a more equal relationship in their families, with the adolescents being more like joint partners in the family firm. However, many people talked about being cautious that the closeness and implied equality in their relationship with their teenager didn't prompt their teenager to grow up too soon by taking on too much adult responsibility.

Shifts in adolescence

The balance of the parent-adolescent relationship shifted in many families as the adolescent began to establish their own identity and autonomy. Most adolescents at times became more moody, spent less time with the parent, and began to question the family's values and ways of doing things. Some parents experienced sadness and hurt feelings at these times, particularly in the context of their close relationship with their teen. However, a new type of relationship gradually developed as the adolescent matured; a relationship in which the parent and the adolescent had greater mutual understanding as separate people. As well, these adolescent developments prompted and allowed the parent's pursuit of their own personal development.

Another type of shift occurred for a few parents who had begun to develop a new intimate relationship. Their teens accepted this relationship on one level, but at the same time were concerned about losing the close parent-adolescent relationship and their role in the family structure. These parents talked about the challenge of rebalancing roles and relationships among all family members at this time, including the ex-spouse.

# Appendix D

## Summary Sent to Participants of Focus Group

April 13, 1996

Dear Group Participant,

First of all, Sue and I would like to thank you very much for coming to the group and sharing your experiences and perspectives. Here is a summary of what the group discussed. Many really important issues were raised in the short, two-hour period. Hopefully this summary represents them accurately.

I would really like to hear any further thoughts about or reactions to the group and this summary. A stamped, self-addressed envelope is enclosed in case you wish to jot anything down and mail it to me. My telephone number is 598 - 8191 if you would rather phone than write. Wishing you well,

Sincerely,

Sandra Hamilton

Challenges - What's hard

A common theme among single-parents is the intention to do the best they can for their children. This may mean dealing with many dilemmas, for example, relationships with ex-spouses, or perceptions of not meeting social standards and expectations.

The following challenges were identified in the group. While single-parents often face many of the same challenges, how those challenges are experienced and dealt with is unique to each individual:

More Responsibility

The single-parent often plays both the father's and the mother's roles in the family. One person said, "It's like being everything instead of being 50% of everything." They are required to take on tasks that at first they may not be prepared for - for example, household repair, finances, being in charge of all the discipline, as well as all the nurturing.

Some single-mothers worry about whether their children get enough male contact, and worry about the possible effects of that, particularly for boys. Finding male role models and mentors through community activities, friends, and relatives alleviates much of this concern for some parents.

Decision making alone has both a positive and a negative side. On the positive side, there is no interference from another adult. On the other side is having to make decisions with no-one to back you up, particularly when 'the crunch' is on and a decision has to be made 'now'.

Sibling rivalry over the single parent's attention can be challenging with no other adult to attend to one child while you attend to the other.

Balancing Needs, Time, and Energy

The constant day-to-day challenges and responsibilities can push the single-parent to exhaustion. Some days there doesn't seem to be enough energy for all family member's needs and demands.

Some single-parents try harder to make up for things that they believe their family is missing. Some feel that they need to be superwoman and do the work of two parents. These expectations sometimes lead to a sense of helplessness, frustration, or guilt about some aspects of their parenting.

Emotional Challenges

A really hard aspect of single-parenting is experiencing the child's expression of sadness and/or anger when missing their dad or a dad. It is also very difficult to have to continue to negotiate with an ex-partner who you would rather not deal with.

Feeling socially isolated; not knowing where you 'fit in' to society. Sometimes the negative expectations and stigma about single-parents makes a single-parent feel many things, including anger and isolation.

Financial Hardships

Part of this might include finding affordable and safe housing. Part of it might be the sense of insecurity that comes with worry about "whether there will be enough money to meet the family's needs." However, some people have found that financial hardships have challenged their teens to develop creativity and responsibility in making their own money.

Phases of Single Parenting

Single-parents go through several phases of development from the time they become single parents to the time their children leave home. During the first few years, the emotional impact of loss and adjustment lessens and gradually the parent gains confidence in themselves.

Some people began to parent alone with a negative vision of single-parents as being" poor, distraught, and living on Kraft Dinner and peanut butter." This vision created a sense of being a victim, as well as a set of negative expectations for the family's future. Feeling this way, some parents "closed in on themselves" and became more isolated.

Another important part of becoming a confident single-parent is to find a new, acceptable sense of oneself. One person said, "I didn't have a slot in my brain for a positive image of myself as a single-parent." The parents who had parented alone for a long time reported that with time and lots of support they began to believe that they could parent alone effectively. Supports of all kinds are essential to pass through these phases.

Supports for Parents

The following supports were mentioned in the group:

Learning about adolescent development and learning some parenting skills in dealing with adolescents helps build confidence in and a greater sense of esteem about parenting. Books, courses, exchanging information with others are important sources of this type of support. The Single Parent Resource Centre offers many groups that are recommended by other single parents, for example, Parenting with Teens, Directions, Self-Esteem, How to Talk So Your Child Will Listen, and others.

Nurturing oneself is essential. Meeting one's own needs helps the parent to be able to give to their children in a balanced way. For example, take time-out to walk by the ocean, listen to music, have a long bath, talk with a friend, or whatever helps reduce stress. Doing something for one's own personal growth and development, for example, learning a new skill, or going back to school can be very empowering.

When seeking professional support, it was recommended to try to find someone who will validate you and your experience, and will give you options so you can choose your own journey.

Asking for help and support is hard. Many single-parents expect themselves to be "in control" of themselves and their families. Some perceive that society expects them to be able to 'do it all" and not ask for help.

Supports for Adolescents

Some community groups are supportive of teens from single-parent families, for example, sports organizations may provide sponsorships, Cubs or Scouts may provide transportation. The Boys and Girls Club has many fun activities for your kids and the membership is $10.00 per year. Teens gain confidence, self-esteem, and may contact good role models and mentors from such involvement.

Parenting Adolescents

Single-parents have many of the same issues in raising children as two-parent families. Young teens are moody because they are teens, not because they are in a single-parent family.

Teens in single-parent families often take over more responsibility than children in two-parent households and may become more mature and self-sufficient. As well, many single-

parents have very close relationships with their teens. This close bond can be empowering for the teens as they learn empathy and responsibility through such a relationship.

But this closeness may make the "letting go" process more difficult for the parent and teen. Parents need to ensure that their teens have opportunities to be teens and to develop their own lives apart from the family.

Suggestions for Coping When Tension Rises

Many suggestions were made for coping with tensions and conflict that arise with adolescents in the family. Leaving the scene of the conflict, going for a walk, writing in a diary, calling a friend who will listen without judgement, listening to music, or painting.

Find regular support systems. It helps the parent get a "time-out" from the intensity of parenting and it models effective coping for adolescents.

Don't take it personally when teens rebel, test limits, or experiment with certain behaviours. They need to create a space to become their own person and to learn to make their own decisions. But, parents need to see that the limit testing is basically socially acceptable; not hurting others, and not hurting themselves.

Positive Aspects of Parenting Alone

While there are many challenges and struggles and at times they seem overwhelming, most people felt there were some positive aspects to single-parenting. For example, becoming more independent and in control of their own lives, or seeing your teens manage and cope well and be able to talk to you about important things.

Or, the single-parents of older adolescents felt proud when they realized that their work, support, and commitment to their teens contributed to the growth and development of these "individuals that they are proud of."

# Appendix E

## Sample of Field Notes

Background to Interview

I went to Cindy's apartment at the scheduled time and she was not there. When I returned home, I called her and left a message on her answering machine. She returned the call late that afternoon with apologies for not being at home at the scheduled time. We rescheduled the interview for the following week. She explained that she did not usually miss appointments, but that something had happened in her interactions with her ex-husband that morning before she went to school that had upset her. She described in detail her estranged, conflicted relationship with her ex-husband.

Comments on Interview

The interview had been scheduled before but Diane was called into work and could not make the interview. It was rescheduled for today (January, 10, 1996). The interview took place in my home. Diane presented as a pleasant, verbal, intelligent, self-possessed woman. She easily engaged in the interview and had obviously given considerable thought to this interview and what she wanted to say about single-parenting.

Comments about Procedures

Telephone interviews have ranged from 15 minutes to 60 minutes. This contact seems to be a very important process. In some ways the anonymity of the telephone conversation may be helpful, or at least does not seem to interfere with the candidacy of the participants' responses and descriptions. This data adds a temporal dimension to the participants' accounts and seems to open up a more dynamic view of their experiences. It has been useful to ask the participants to have a pen and paper at hand to jot down notes of points that they would like to comment on later as I read the summary of the first interview to them.

Theoretical Notes/Hunches

I am becoming aware of the parents' process of adult development and the connections with their adolescents' development; including increasing self-reliance, future career planning, increasing flexibility in life choices.

Personal Reflections

How I as a person/researcher present myself and my purpose of doing this study, my approachability and apparent legitimacy are at the forefront of the sampling process. Whether participants will refer me to other potential participants and how they will engage in the interview seem to be dependent to a degree on how they interpret and transact with me.

Appendix F

Sample of Coding of Transcriptions

**(I=Issues; T=Theme)**

Another challenge that I'm particularly aware of now is the whole values of our society. There's much more acceptance of being a single-parent now on the surface (emphasis). But underneath I don't feel I meet the standards.... **(I=Challenge - negative social expectations; T=Others' assumptions/perceived societal standards)**

There are many things I can't provide, for example, I don't have a piano and (daughter) wants to play. So I swap with a friend. She gives her piano lessons and lets her practice piano and I will pay her back somehow. But it puts great pressure on me. How am I even going to repay the favour with all the time pressures. **(I=Challenge-financial contraints; T=Insecurities and doubts/opportunities for daughter)**

Along with that is the challenge of stigma of being a single-parent on social assistance.... **(I=Challenge-financial constraints; T=On social assistance/perceived stigma)**

How do you experience the stigma?

I'm not measuring up. I see it in what I've been able to accomplish. I have to aware of it and I have to deal with my feelings about it. Some of me knows that but there's an impression out there that I'm not measuring up. There's always something I can't do - time, resources. (very sad affect and a long pause before continuing)... It's OK. It's good for me to talk. In the long run I know it makes me strong, but it's still hard. I'm strong,

but it's still hard. **(I=Challenge of negative social expectations; T=Measuring up to societal standards)**
**(I=Self-definition; T=Effect of perceived standards on "self"; hope and/or belief that challenge will lead to greater strength)**

How do you get help to deal with these challenges? There is help but you have to look for it and be tenacious. Part of it is getting informal networks. They are better. There are formal resources but they can be.... Alot of single-parents become good at finding resources but its hard tracking them down and it's hard to ask for help. And the time. These are good lessons in learning how to ask for help but its not easy. Society acknowledges independence and autonomy. **(I=Supports/Formal and Informal; T=Preference for informal supports; T=Need resourceful coping to find and use supports; T=Difficulty asking for help/perceived societal value on independence)**