

## Personality Traits of Children with Single Parents: Is there a Difference?

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### ABSTRACT

With nearly 13 million single mothers and 1% of marriages ending in divorce in India, there is a need to examine the impact of single-parent households on adolescent personality development. This study uses one of the most widely used personality theories, the Big Five, to measure differences across three family structures: single-parent, nuclear family and joint family. The tool used in this assessment was Goldberg's IPIP, and an ANOVA was used to compare the mean scores across the three family structures. A sample of N=293 of adolescents between 15 and 19 was obtained. There were two hypotheses – H1: Emotional Stability will be lower in individuals from Single-parent families than in Nuclear or Joint families, and H2: Conscientiousness will be higher in individuals from Single-parent families than in Nuclear or Joint families. Both were confirmed and an additional finding about higher Agreeableness in children from Single-parent families than in Nuclear or Joint families. The study shows that children in single-parent families are more responsible and agreeable, perhaps due to social norms and familial expectations, and the lower emotional stability supports the literature about higher incidence of disorders like depression, personality disorders, OCD and others. The study gives scope for qualitative studies on personality, as well as mediating and moderating factors that influence personality changes in children of single-parent families.

**Keywords:** *Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Emotional stability, Personality, Single Parent families*

A Japanese proverb says a father's goodness is higher than the mountains, and a mother's goodness is deeper than the sea. Well, what about those adolescents who live with one parent? Do they lack the protection of the mountains? Or come to fear the depth of the sea?

In India, 1% of marriages end in divorce (n.n, 2023), and there are over 13 million single mothers in the country (Bhattacharya, 2021). The number of single-parent households (SPHs) is steadily increasing, and the natural question is, what do adolescents lack, apart from a second parent? Several studies show that children of SPHs are at a disadvantage in several spheres of their development. Children of divorce or separation are at a heightened risk of

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## Personality Traits of Children with Single Parents: Is there a Difference?

academic difficulties and mood disorders (Lee & McLanahan, 2015). Risky sexual behaviour is also more common (D'Onofrio & Emery, 2019). Less effective parenting, conflict between parents, limited contact with one parent and economic disturbances are all cited as possible reasons for lower mental health status (Emery, 2016). Several studies have found a causal relationship between single-father or mother households and social problems in adolescents (Pharaoh, 2004; Symeon, 2007; Cavanagh & Fomby, 2012).

However, what of personality? Personality develops slowly throughout childhood, from a pure, innate temperament into a fully-fledged persona shaped by life experience. The critical period of personality development is often cited as the first six years (Freud S. , 1901). However, Erikson tells us that identity, which is one of its parts of personality, develops in adolescents (1968). Additionally, we also know that personality changes over time, often in response to the environment, giving rise to epigenetic changes (Loehlin, 1992). So naturally, the question arises, do adolescents in single-parent homes have significantly different personalities than adolescents from intact households?

### *Theories of Personality*

One of the earliest theories of personality can be traced to Freud (1901). He believed the personality had three parts – Id, Ego and Superego. He believed that these developed through experience in society. A child is born only with Id, which works on the “Pleasure principle” and controls biological drives. The Ego develops out of necessity, based on the child’s interactions with the real world, where it does not always get what it wants, hence operating on the “Reality principle.” The Superego is the voice of reason, operating on the “Morality principle”, created based on rules, norms, and customs of the society they live in. In the case of children of single-parent families, there is a pressure to be more “mature and responsible” – possibly overdeveloping the Super-ego. Children subject to parental separation are particularly likely to engage in “splitting” as a defence mechanism – deciding that their custodial parent is good and the other parent is evil (Woodall, 2020). Early divorce, before the latency stage, may interfere with identity development through identification with the same-sex parent and successful resolution of Oedipal and Electra complexes.

Social cognitive theories believe that social learning enables the development of personality. Bandura (1989) put forth that the pattern of personality and behaviour developed from the reciprocal relationships of three factors – the behaviours, cognitive factors and the environment. In the family of a child with a single parent, the environment is often stressful due to economic pressures or marital conflict before the divorce (Sobolewski & Amato, 2005). This could cause lack of reinforcement of positive behaviours, causing withdrawal and social inhibition. Further, initiative may not be taken by the child to showcase behaviours since single parents often do not have time for their children. These could lead to negative cognitions like, “No one cares about me,” or “It doesn’t matter what I do.”

Locus of control is also an important social learning theory of personality. Rotter (1966) proposed that personality was a relatively stable set of potential responses to situations that developed based on whether people assume they have control of the events and consequences of their lives. In single-parent households, whether due to separation or loss of a parent, the child learns early on that some things are out of their control and, hence, are more likely to develop an external locus of control. This makes them fall quickly into a pattern of learned helplessness, predisposing them to depressive symptoms (Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1978).

## Personality Traits of Children with Single Parents: Is there a Difference?

The humanistic perspective brings us to Roger's view of the real and ideal self (1961). He believed that congruence between these two self-concepts was essential to create what he called a "fully functioning human." In most children of single-parent households, the ideal self is likely to be one that can be with both parents or perhaps one that supports the parent they live with without being a burden. This may cause incongruence since the everyday needs of the individual are dependent on the same parent, i.e., the real self needs help. Additionally, the unconditional positive regard he suggests may not be available to them due to the economic pressures of single-parenthood.

Finally, we come to the Big Five theory of McCrae and Costa (1996). The five traits are – Openness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness and neuroticism. This trait theory has gained much popularity and can be used in studies of adolescents and adults (Goldberg, 1993).

### **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

This section will focus on studies with the variables Single-Parenting and Personality. Studies from several reputed journals over 40 years have been collected and reviewed.

One of the early studies on this theme is from Howarth (1980). This study had over 300 participants and was a comprehensive study that examined parenting style, structure and birth order and its relationship with personality. Using the Howarth Personality scale (Howarth, 1973), he found that individual tolerance was higher in children reared by both parents rather than a single parent and children brought up by both parents were more dependent than those reared by single parents. Children with more permissive parents were more phlegmatic in both cases, and those reared by single parents were less phlegmatic.

Peretti and Di Vitorrio (1993) examined the effect of the loss a father due to divorce on preschool children. Social withdrawal, guilt, depression and self-confidence were all found to be characteristics of these children. They often believed that they were responsible for the divorce and felt guilty that the father had to move away. Negative and conflicting acts, such as fights between parents, were seen as consequences of their actions. They have less interest in social relationships, social initiative and motivation.

A large-scale Chinese study with over 5000 participants examined the prevalence of personality disorders in children with different family structures (Huang, Ling, Yang, & Dou, 2007). Students from single-parent families had significantly higher scores on the schizotypal scale, and students from poor families showed significantly higher scores than those from average or wealthy families for schizoid, schizotypal, antisocial, borderline, narcissistic, avoidant, obsessive-compulsive, passive-aggressive, and depressive disorders. Considering the economic pressure of most single-parent families, these results offer insight into familial and economic reasons for higher prevalence of PDs in SPHs.

A meta-analytical review used moderator analyses to find that personality–warmth relations varied by parent and child age in the case of the Agreeableness and Neuroticism (Prinzle, Stams, Deković, Reijntj, & Belsky, 2009). The study showed that parents who manifest higher levels of Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, and Openness and lower levels of Neuroticism engage in more warm and structured parenting. The older the parent and the child, the less strong the relations between Agreeableness and warmth and between Neuroticism and warmth.

## Personality Traits of Children with Single Parents: Is there a Difference?

Another study in Malaysia examined personality and parenting style in single-mother families (Ghani, bt Roeswardi, & bt Abd Aziz, 2014). In their survey, they found that authoritarian parenting style has a significant relationship with Openness to Experience and Conscientiousness personality profiles. Agreeableness was found to be the most common personality profile, with 21.27% in the sample of 82 respondents. It was surprising that Neuroticism was the least profile, with no child having “high” scores. Children in single parent families are usually seen as emotionally unstable, but this study brings that to question.

Another ground-breaking study with 78 adolescents between 15 and 19 years from SPHs (Moldovan, 2016). They used the 16PF scale along with tests for self-esteem like ETES and ETES. It was found that adolescents from single-parent families tended to overestimate themselves and had more objective self-esteem than adolescents from families with both parents. They had better control over emotions, a more objective view of school performance and tended to overestimate their social and communication skills. They explained this by the lower parental control or emotional investment by single mothers. In terms of ego strength, they found that teenager raised by a single mother, or divorcee is relatively stable, with a reasonable control of emotions, calm, realistic, with a strong Self against adolescent from families with both parents having emotional stability and a lower degree of realism.

Another study on female undergraduate students with single parents was conducted with 189 participants (Oke, 2015). They found that single parenting and undergraduates’ interpersonal relationship has a significant positive relationship with personality factors, with an  $r$  value of .567. The study further found that conscientiousness, neuroticism, agreeableness, openness to experience and extraversion are potent personality factors in the prediction of interpersonal relationships. Conscientiousness was the strongest predictor in this relationship.

### **METHODS**

This study focuses on adolescents between the ages of 15 and 19. Students were recruited from schools and colleges through online and in-person methods. The sampling method was random sampling. The IPIP Scale based on the Big Five personality was used. (Goldberg, et al., 2006). Demographic details regarding age, gender and family structure were collected.

#### *Sample*

294 responses were collected, of which one was excluded due to incomplete filling. The mean age was 16.46 years ( $SD = 1.055$ ). There were 33 participants from single-parent families, 175 from nuclear families and 37 from joint families. There were 142 male and 151 female participants.

The data was separated based on family structure (single-parent, nuclear or joint family). ANOVA was conducted for each of the five personality traits– Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Emotional Stability and Intellect. The average scores are – Extraversion 28.51 ( $SD = 6.169$ ), Agreeableness 32.09 ( $SD = 5.003$ ), Conscientiousness 31.75 ( $SD = 4.913$ ), Emotional Stability 31 ( $SD = 6.100$ ) and Intellect 34.95 ( $SD = 5.54$ ).

#### *Hypothesis*

- H1: Emotional Stability will be lower in individuals from Single-parent families than in Nuclear or Joint families.
- H2: Conscientiousness will be higher in individuals from Single-parent families than in Nuclear or Joint families.

## RESULTS

### *Extraversion*

The ANOVA results suggest that the Extraversion scores do not differ significantly ( $F_{2,290} = 0.734, p=0.481$ ).

**Table 1: ANOVA - Extraversion in Single Parent, Nuclear and Joint Families**

Family Structure	Mean	SD	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p
Single Parent	29.727	5.647	55.937	2	27.968	0.734	0.481
Nuclear	28.314	6.861	11055.272	290	38.122		
Joint	28.447	4.687					

### *Agreeableness*

The ANOVA results suggest that the Agreeableness scores of the group differ significantly ( $F_{2,290} = 8.064, p<0.01$ ).

Since the Levene Statistic is significant, an equal variance was not assumed. In order to check for the individual differences between groups, a post hoc comparison using Dunnett's T3 was performed. The test indicated that the mean score for single-parent families ( $M=34.939, SD=5.226$ ) was significantly different from both nuclear families ( $M=32.137, SD=5.080$ ) and Joint families ( $M=30.918, SD=4.310$ ). The mean differences were significant at 0.01 level. However, no significant difference was found between nuclear and joint families. No hypothesis was constructed for Agreeableness.

**Table 2: ANOVA - Agreeableness in Single Parent, Nuclear and Joint Families**

Family Structure	Mean	SD	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p
Single Parent	34.939	5.226	385.119	2	192.559	8.064	< .001
Nuclear	32.137	5.080	6925.011	290	23.879		
Joint	30.918	4.310					

### *Conscientiousness*

The ANOVA results suggest that the Conscientiousness scores of the group differ significantly ( $F_{2,290} = 39.569, p<0.01$ ).

Since the Levene Statistic is significant, an equal variance was not assumed. In order to check for the individual differences between groups, a post hoc comparison using Dunnett's T3 was performed. The test indicated that the mean score for single-parent families ( $M=38.091, SD=3.076$ ) was significantly different from both nuclear families ( $M=30.771, SD=4.494$ ) and Joint families ( $M=31.306, SD=4.525$ ). The mean differences were significant at 0.01 level. However, no significant difference was found between nuclear and joint families. This supports Hypothesis 2.

**Table 3: ANOVA - Conscientiousness in Single Parent, Nuclear and Joint Families**

Family Structure	Mean	SD	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p
Single Parent	38.091	3.076	1511.181	2	755.590	39.569	< .001
Nuclear	30.771	4.494	5537.631	290	19.095		

## Personality Traits of Children with Single Parents: Is there a Difference?

**Table 3: ANOVA - Conscientiousness in Single Parent, Nuclear and Joint Families**

Family Structure	Mean	SD	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p
Joint	31.306	4.525					

### *Emotional Stability*

The ANOVA results suggest that the Emotional Stability scores of the group differ significantly ( $F_{2,290} = 65.790, p < 0.01$ ).

Since the Levene Statistic is significant, an equal variance was not assumed. In order to check for the individual differences between groups, a post hoc comparison using Dunnett's T3 was performed. The test indicated that the mean score for single-parent families ( $M=21.455, SD=5.368$ ) was significantly different from both nuclear families ( $M=32.137, SD= 4.877$ ) and Joint families ( $M= 32.365, SD= 5.360$ ). The mean differences were significant at 0.01 level. However, no significant difference was found between nuclear and joint families. This supports Hypothesis 1.

**Table 4: ANOVA - Emotional Stability in Single Parent, Nuclear and Joint Families**

Type of Family	Mean	SD	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p
Single Parent	21.455	5.368	3391.415	2	1695.708	65.790	< .001
Nuclear	32.137	4.877	7474.585	290	25.774		
Joint	32.365	5.360					

### *Intellect*

The ANOVA results suggest that the Intellect scores do not differ significantly ( $F_{2,290} = 0.026, p=0.974$ ).

**Table 5: ANOVA - Intellect in Single Parent, Nuclear and Joint Families**

Type of Family	Mean	SD	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p
Single Parent	34.758	5.943	1.636	2	0.818	0.026	0.974
Nuclear	35.000	5.814	8973.872	290	30.944		
Joint	34.953	4.833					

## **DISCUSSION**

As Peretti and Di Vitorrio (1993) found, high emotional instability is seen in children of single-parent families, as seen by low scores in emotional stability. This is also linked to the findings of Huang, Ling, Yang, & Dou (2007), who found a higher incidence of personality disorders, OCD, and depressive disorders, all of which have a component of emotional dysregulation.

The pathways of this could be related to higher levels of parental stress, higher economic distress (Emery, 2016) and less social support. When seen through a psychodynamic lens, early parental divorce, perhaps in the anal stage, can lead to a stressful environment without adequate care during toilet training. This can explain the manifestation of neurotic and anxiety-prone disorders. Rotter's theory of locus of control may also be significant and, along

## Personality Traits of Children with Single Parents: Is there a Difference?

with learned helplessness, can also explain emotional dysregulation. Parental stress can also be modelled, leading to a fearful personality, when examined through a social learning perspective.

Agreeableness was high in this study, as was seen in the Malaysian study of single mothers (Ghani, bt Roeswardi, & bt Abd Aziz, 2014). This is one study that had the opposite result with respect to emotional instability and found that children from single-parent families had low neuroticism in their personality profiles. This is an intriguing finding since most studies indicate increased risky behaviour (D'Onofrio & Emery, 2019) and poorer quality of social relationships (Pharaoh, 2004; Symeon, 2007; Cavanagh & Fomby, 2012). However, the results of this study show that agreeableness is highest in single-parent families and least in joint families. Perhaps the dynamics in families in a collectivistic culture are different than those in individualistic cultures. More research in this area could provide better answers.

The finding about conscientiousness is supported by the evidence from the study of Oke (2015). There is some evidence that divorce leads to a heightened sense of responsibility in children. The stressful situation of a single parent could create feelings of guilt that inflate the super-ego, creating a need for children to “step up” and support the parent, usually a mother. This is only further heightened by Indian social occurrences where children are encouraged not to be troublesome and to be grateful that their parent does so much for them.

### CONCLUSION

This study has shown that there is a difference between personality factors of children from single-parent families and other family structures, namely, joint and nuclear. There was support for both hypotheses – that emotional stability is lower and conscientiousness is higher in adolescents from single-parent families than those in nuclear or joint families. An unexpected finding regarding higher agreeableness was also found in children of SPHs.

As far as the limitations of this study is concerned, it became evident that the tool IPIP is not constructed specifically for the Indian population. Thus, there may be some cultural factors that can influence the way the questions were answered. Qualitative studies can help mitigate this limitation. Further research should examine the possible factors that increase agreeableness in children from SPHs. Further studies can also examine the mediating and moderating factors that cause increased conscientiousness in children of single-parent families.

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### **Conflict of Interest**

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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