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Stronger Than Two: A Case Study on Social Development of Children in Single-Parent Households

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ABSTRACT

Children in single-parent households develop within family, school, and community environments that may be shaped by limited time, financial strain, reduced parental presence, and social pressure. Guided by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, this qualitative case study explored how three single parents in Davao City supported their children's social development. Participants were purposively selected, and data were obtained through semi-structured in-depth interviews, field observations, and document review. Thematic analysis identified challenges involving family responsibilities, school demands, inconsistent caregiving arrangements, community pressure, time constraints, financial limitations, limited maternal presence, and communication difficulties. Parents responded through regular parent-child communication, emotional support, positive behavior guidance, social opportunities, extended-family assistance, parent-teacher communication, monitoring, community support, time management, and personal resilience. The study further revealed that patience, communication, quality time, school partnership, parental strength, appropriate boundaries, and responses to social pressure shaped parents' understanding of their children's social growth. This study concludes that children's social development in single-parent households is influenced by interacting conditions across home, school, and community settings. Consistent communication, emotional support, collaborative school relationships, safe social participation, and accessible support systems can strengthen children's confidence, adjustment, and social competence.

Keywords: *single-parent households, social development, children, qualitative case study*

INTRODUCTION

Family structures have become increasingly diverse, with single-parent households representing an established part of contemporary family life. This diversity has generated sustained scholarly interest in understanding how family environments influence children's development, adjustment, and well-being. Research indicates that children living in single-parent households may experience emotional, behavioral, social, and economic challenges; however, these outcomes cannot be attributed solely to family structure. Socioeconomic conditions, family relationships, and available support systems also contribute to differences in children's experiences. Grüning Parache et al. (2024) found that socioeconomic status accounted for some differences in children's mental health across family structures, while Naito et al. (2022) reported a higher probability of emotional instability among children in single-parent households during the COVID-19 pandemic in Japan. Likewise, Erdogan et al. (2023) identified relationships among bullying, family support, and life satisfaction among adolescents from single-parent households across 42 countries. Stritzel and Crosnoe (2023) further demonstrated that associations between single-parent households and adolescent adjustment may vary according to developmental timing and social circumstances. Collectively, these findings suggest that children's development within single-parent households is shaped by an interaction of family structure, socioeconomic circumstances, relationships, and the broader social environment.

In the Philippine context, studies have also documented the experiences and challenges associated with single-parent families. Gallego (2022) examined learners raised by solo parents and identified challenges related to their academic experiences and development of twenty-first-century skills. From the perspective of parents, Dela Luna et al. (2023) found that single parents encountered difficulties involving financial resources, time constraints, child-rearing responsibilities, and household demands. Similarly, Pinatil et al. (2023) documented challenges related to financial and time management, disciplining children, and social stigma among solo parents in Cebu City. More recently, Bugayon et al. (2024) described the emotional, financial, and work–life challenges encountered by Filipino single mothers in raising their children. Although these studies provide important insights into the realities of single-parent families in the country, much of the available literature has focused on parental challenges, academic outcomes, or the general difficulties associated with single parenting. Comparatively less attention has been given to children's social development from their own perspectives, particularly how they form interpersonal relationships, interact with peers and other people, respond to social challenges, and understand the influence of their family experiences on their social lives. This gap highlights

the need for a more child-centered examination of social development within single-parent households.

Addressing this gap, the present study examined the social development of children raised in single-parent households, with particular emphasis on their lived experiences and the conditions that shape their social interactions. The study recognizes that developmental outcomes are influenced not simply by family structure but also by the quality of relationships and everyday interactions within the family and the wider social environment. Savell et al. (2023) demonstrated that positive parent–child relationship quality was associated with lower levels of adolescent maladaptive behavior regardless of family structure, while Wang et al. (2023) found that parent–child relationships played an important role in the social–emotional development of children from single-parent families. In addition, Piotrowski (2024) emphasized the contribution of family relationship quality to children's prosocial behavior, and Ratliff et al. (2023) showed that supportive parent–adolescent relationships were associated with emotion regulation, prosocial behavior, and overall adjustment. Therefore, guided by these perspectives, the present study sought to provide a more contextualized understanding of how children raised by single parents develop and navigate social relationships.

Research Problem

Although studies have shown that children in single-parent households may experience challenges in social adjustment and well-being, these outcomes are shaped by family relationships, socioeconomic conditions, and available support systems (Stritzel & Crosnoe, 2023; Erdogan et al., 2023). In the Philippine context, Gallego (2022) documented the challenges experienced by learners raised by solo parents, but limited attention has been given to how single parents specifically support their children's social development across family, school, and community settings. Thus, the study examined the challenges single parents encountered, the strategies they employed, and the insights they developed in supporting their children's social development. Understanding these experiences may contribute to more responsive family-, school-, and community-based support for single-parent households.

Assumptions of the Study

This study assumed that children's social development in single-parent households was influenced by experiences within the family, school, and community. It further assumed that single parents could provide credible accounts of the challenges they encountered, the

strategies they used, and the insights they gained in supporting their children's social development. The study also assumed that participants would provide honest and meaningful responses and that a qualitative case study approach was appropriate for examining these context-specific experiences. These assumptions served as the foundation of the inquiry and were not treated as predetermined findings.

Objectives of the Study

The overall objective of the study was to explore how single parents supported the social development of their children within family, school, and community contexts.
Specifically, the study aimed to:

1. identify the challenges encountered by single parents in supporting their children's social development in relation to family, school, and community factors;
2. examine the strategies employed by single parents to guide and support their children's social development across family, school, and community contexts; and
3. describe the insights and understandings developed by single parents regarding their children's social development based on their experiences within family, school, and community settings.

Conceptual or Theoretical Framework

This study was anchored in Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, which explains that child development is influenced by interacting environmental systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). These include the microsystem, such as family, school, and peers; the mesosystem, which involves relationships among these immediate settings; the exosystem, which includes external influences such as community institutions and parental workplaces; the macrosystem, which covers broader cultural values, social norms, and socioeconomic conditions; and the chronosystem, which reflects changes and life transitions over time. Moreover, the theory guided the study in examining how family, school, and community contexts influenced the ways single parents supported their children's social development. These interconnected environments provided the basis for understanding the challenges encountered, strategies employed, and insights developed by single parents in supporting their children's social relationships and adjustment.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study employed a qualitative case study design to explore how single parents supported their children's social development within family, school, and community contexts. This design was appropriate because it allowed an in-depth examination of participants' experiences within a bounded, real-life setting and emphasized contextual understanding rather than statistical generalization. Specifically, it enabled the researchers to examine the challenges encountered, strategies employed, and insights developed by single parents in supporting their children's social development.

Research Locale or Study Setting

The study was conducted in a selected community in Davao City, Philippines, which served as the bounded setting of the inquiry. The locale provided an appropriate context for examining the everyday experiences of single-parent households across family, school, and community environments. Its social, cultural, and socioeconomic conditions provided relevant context for understanding how single parents supported their children's social relationships, adjustment, and participation in different social settings.

Participants or Data Sources

The participants were three single parents residing in Davao City who served as the primary caregivers of their children. They were selected through purposive sampling because of their direct and relevant experiences in supporting their children's social development. To qualify, participants had to be single parents residing in Davao City, primary caregivers of at least one child, directly involved in the child's daily care and guidance, and willing to participate in the study. Single parents who were not primary caregivers, did not reside in Davao City, did not have their children under their care, or were unwilling to participate were excluded. Moreover, the three participants were considered appropriate for the qualitative case study because the inquiry emphasized depth, contextual understanding, and information-rich accounts rather than statistical representation. Their firsthand experiences provided detailed information needed to address the study's objectives.

Research Instruments or Materials

A semi-structured interview guide served as the primary data-gathering instrument. The questions were developed in accordance with the research problem and objectives and focused on three areas: the challenges encountered by single parents, the strategies they employed in supporting their children's social development, and the insights they developed from their experiences. Open-ended and probing questions were used to encourage participants to elaborate on relevant situations and experiences. In addition, tThe interview guide underwent expert validation by specialists in child development and qualitative research. Their comments and recommendations were incorporated to improve the clarity, relevance, cultural appropriateness, and alignment of the questions with the objectives of the study.

Data Gathering Procedure

Before data collection, the researchers secured the necessary ethical clearance and institutional permission. Potential participants were identified based on the established inclusion criteria and were informed of the purpose and procedures of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, their right to withdraw, and the measures used to protect their identities and responses. Written informed consent was obtained before the interviews were conducted.

Data were gathered through individual semi-structured in-depth interviews using the validated interview guide. Participants were encouraged to describe their experiences freely, while probing questions were used when clarification or elaboration was necessary. With their consent, the interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Confidentiality was maintained throughout the recruitment, interviewing, transcription, analysis, and reporting processes.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, which allowed the researchers to systematically identify, organize, and interpret recurring patterns of meaning in the participants' accounts. The analysis began with repeated reading of the interview transcripts to achieve familiarity with the data. Significant statements and recurring ideas related to family, school, and community experiences were then identified and assigned initial codes. Moreover, related codes were grouped into potential themes reflecting the challenges encountered, strategies employed, and insights developed by the participants. The themes were subsequently reviewed, refined, and interpreted in relation to the research

objectives and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory. An analytic narrative was developed to present the resulting patterns and meanings. Additionally, to strengthen the trustworthiness of the analysis, the researchers employed member checking and peer debriefing. Participants were given opportunities to confirm the accuracy of the researchers' interpretations, while peer debriefing was used to examine the consistency of the analysis and minimize possible researcher bias. An audit trail and reflexive documentation were also maintained to support the dependability and confirmability of the findings.

Ethical Considerations

The study observed ethical principles governing research involving human participants. Ethical clearance was obtained, and the necessary institutional approval was secured before data collection. Participants received adequate information regarding the study's purpose, procedures, voluntary nature, and their right to withdraw before providing written informed consent. Moreover, participant privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity were protected throughout the study. Identifying information was excluded from the presentation of findings, and interview recordings, transcripts, and research records were securely handled and used solely for research purposes. The researchers ensured that participants' experiences were represented accurately and respectfully and that the study complied with applicable institutional research policies and ethical standards.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings showed that children's social development in single-parent households was shaped by interacting conditions across the family, school, community, and the parents' everyday circumstances. Three broad sets of findings emerged: challenges that constrained social development, coping mechanisms used by single parents, and insights developed from their experiences.

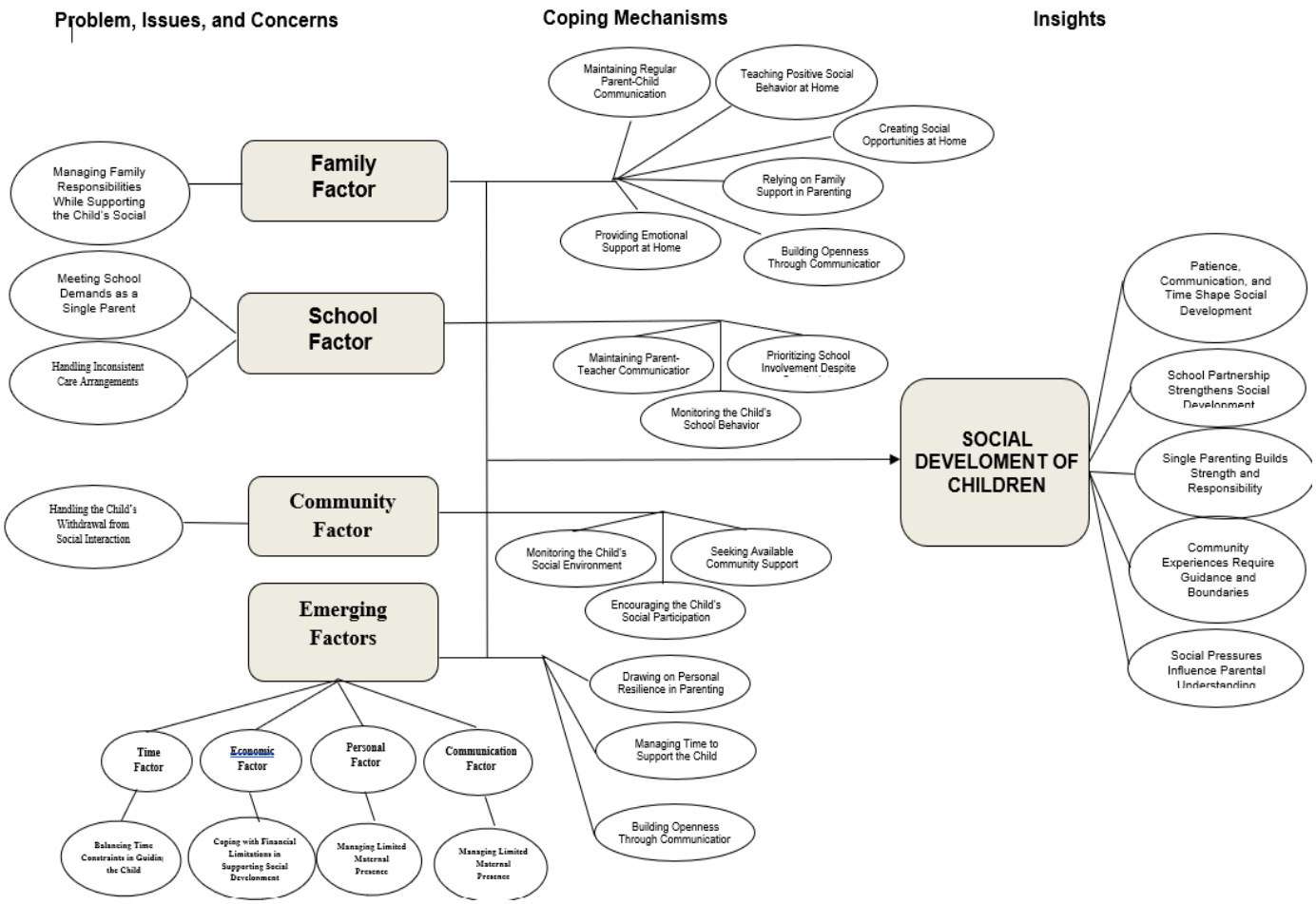


Figure No. 1 Modified Paradigm of the Study

Results for Objective or Statement of the Problem 1

Context	Challenge Themes
Family	Managing family responsibilities while supporting the child's social development
School	Meeting school demands; inconsistent care arrangements
Community	Withdrawal from social interaction; social pressure and judgment
Emerging factors	Time constraints; financial limitations; limited maternal presence; communication difficulties

Table No. 1. Challenges in Supporting Children's Social Development

Discussion of Objective or Statement of the Problem 1

Family responsibilities were a recurring concern. Some children helped with household or livelihood tasks, reducing time that might otherwise be spent playing or interacting with peers. Parents also described exhaustion after work, which limited their ability to provide consistent guidance. Sabel explained, *"There are times when my child has to carry heavy things like butane tanks and big containers of oil. I feel that he gets stressed because instead of playing or talking with his peers, his time is spent helping me in the store." (Sabel, Transcript 1, Line 51-52)*

School-related responsibilities created a second set of challenges. Parents valued participation in meetings and school activities but often faced schedule conflicts. Inconsistent caregiving arrangements also affected children's adjustment when expectations differed across households. Community experiences produced additional difficulties, particularly when children or parents encountered social pressure and judgment. Some parents observed that such experiences could lead children to avoid going outside or interacting with others. Calyx shared, *"There are really times when I cannot go to school because I am working, so I cannot see how he interacts with others, especially his classmates." (Calyx, Transcript 1, Line 94-95).*

Across contexts, four emerging conditions intensified these challenges: limited time, financial constraints, limited parental presence, and communication difficulties. These conditions often overlapped and affected the extent to which single parents could consistently guide and support their children's social development. Time constraints were particularly evident among parents who had to balance employment and caregiving responsibilities. Calyx explained, *"Maybe as a single parent, one huge challenge is balancing work and taking care of my child. Because of the lack of time, I cannot always closely guide how my child socializes with others."* (Calyx, Transcript 1, Lines 21–22). This illustrates how competing responsibilities may reduce opportunities for direct supervision, communication, and guidance during children's social interactions.

Financial limitations also influenced children's opportunities for social participation. Limited resources could restrict involvement in school and community activities that provide children with opportunities to interact with peers and develop social skills. Mae succinctly expressed this difficulty, stating, *"It is really difficult when you do not have money." (Mae, Transcript 1, Line 190).* Her response reflects how economic constraints can affect not only the family's daily needs but also the child's access to experiences that encourage social engagement and participation.

Limited parental presence emerged as another significant concern. Work, distance, and other responsibilities sometimes prevented parents from being physically available to observe their children's daily experiences and provide immediate guidance. Mae shared, *"The hardest part is my physical presence as a mother. It is difficult because I cannot just*

keep calling every day to ask what happened that day." (Mae, Transcript 1, Lines 38–40). This account highlights the difficulty of maintaining consistent involvement when a parent cannot be physically present. In some cases, communication depended heavily on video calls or brief conversations, which parents felt could not fully replace face-to-face interaction. Taken together, these findings indicate that time, finances, parental presence, and communication are closely interconnected conditions that influence parents' capacity to provide continuous guidance, emotional support, and opportunities for their children's social development.

Results for Objective or Statement of the Problem 2

Context	Coping mechanisms
Family	Regular parent-child communication; teaching positive social behavior; emotional support; creating social opportunities at home; relying on extended family; building openness through communication.
School	Maintaining parent-teacher communication; monitoring school behavior; prioritizing school involvement despite constraints.
Community	Monitoring the child's social environment; encouraging social participation; seeking available community support.
Emerging factors	Managing time intentionally; drawing on personal resilience; sustaining openness and communication.

Table No. 2. Coping Mechanisms Used by Single Parents

Discussion of Objective or Statement of the Problem 2

Parents responded to these challenges through a combination of practical and relational strategies that allowed them to remain actively involved in their children's social development despite the demands of single parenting. Within the family, regular communication emerged as one of the most important strategies for maintaining connection and understanding children's experiences. Parents intentionally created opportunities for their children to talk about school, friendships, and everyday concerns. Mae shared, *"I really encourage my child to share things with me… when he comes home, he tells me what happened… sometimes he shares that he plays with his friends after school."* (Mae, Transcript 1, Lines 440–441). In the same way, Calyx emphasized the importance of setting aside time for daily conversations: *"As a single parent, my strategy is to really give time to talk to my child every day… I ask how he is… simple things, but they help my child a lot."* (Calyx, Transcript 1, Lines 207–208). These responses show that even brief but consistent conversations can strengthen trust, encourage openness, and allow parents to remain aware of their children's social experiences.

Parents also used the home as a setting for directly teaching appropriate social behavior. They guided their children on how to interact respectfully with classmates and playmates and corrected behavior when necessary. Calyx explained, *"I also teach him not to fight with classmates or playmates and that he should really behave well."* (Calyx, Transcript 1, Lines 198–199). At the same time, parents recognized that children need actual opportunities to interact with others in order to develop social skills. Mae expressed her support for allowing her child to engage with peers, stating, *"I like it when she goes outside and plays... she can still socialize, interact, play, and go around with others."* (Mae, Transcript 1, Lines 204–207). Taken together, these strategies indicate that parents supported social development not only by teaching appropriate behavior but also by providing opportunities for children to practice communication, cooperation, and relationship-building in everyday settings.

School-based coping centered on communication, monitoring, and continued involvement despite limited availability. Parents made deliberate efforts to remain informed about their children's behavior and peer interactions by communicating with teachers and visiting the school whenever possible. Sabel explained, *"When I pick them up in the afternoon, I pass by the classroom to ask how their behavior has been. I monitor their behavior because as class goes on, the child's true behavior really comes out..."* (Sabel, Transcript 1, Lines 266–267). This reflects how parent-teacher communication helped compensate for situations in which parents could not be physically present throughout the school day. By seeking feedback from teachers, parents were able to compare their children's behavior at home and in school and provide appropriate guidance when concerns emerged.

Community-based coping involved monitoring children's surroundings, encouraging participation in social activities, and drawing on available support networks. Parents recognized that neighbors, teachers, peers, and other members of the community could contribute to children's social growth. Calyx noted, *"The community, our neighbors, also helps a lot. Sometimes the teacher guides me on how to help my child improve his social skills. Sometimes his basketball playmates also help him make friends and socialize."* (Calyx, Transcript 1, Lines 258–260). This response highlights that social development extends beyond the household and that informal support systems can provide children with additional opportunities for interaction and belonging.

Alongside these external strategies, parents also relied on personal resilience to sustain their caregiving responsibilities. Mae described resilience as an essential part of how she continued to support her child despite exhaustion and other difficulties: *"For me, my strategy is really myself. I am a very resilient person. I do not give up... I believe in mind over body... if I give in to exhaustion, it is my child who will suffer."* (Mae, Transcript 1, Lines 218–219). Her account illustrates how perseverance and a strong sense of parental responsibility enabled single parents to continue providing guidance even under demanding circumstances. These findings suggest that single parents coped through interconnected strategies involving communication, behavioral guidance, social exposure, school collaboration, community support, time investment, and personal resilience. These

strategies allowed them to remain actively engaged in their children's social development despite limitations in time, finances, and physical presence.

Results for Objective or Statement of the Problem 3

The findings revealed five key insights among single parents. They emphasized the importance of patience, communication, and quality time in building their children's confidence and openness; the value of parent-school collaboration in supporting social behavior; and the role of single parenting in developing resilience and self-reliance. Parents also recognized the benefits of community interaction when accompanied by proper guidance and boundaries, as well as the need to cope with social judgment and external pressures.

Discussion of Objective or Statement of the Problem 3

Five central insights summarized how parents understood their experiences in supporting their children's social development. First, patience, communication, and quality time emerged as essential in helping children develop confidence and openness. Parents recognized that social development requires consistent interaction, even when the time available is limited. Calyx explained, *"I really learned that patience, communication, and giving quality time to my child are very important... even small amounts of time... have a big effect on his confidence and ability to socialize."* (Calyx, Transcript 1, Lines 385–386). This insight suggests that the quality of parent-child interaction may be more important than the amount of time alone, particularly when parents intentionally use available moments to listen, guide, and connect with their children.

Second, parent-school partnership was viewed as an important source of support because teachers can provide information about children's behavior and interactions that parents may not always observe directly. Calyx emphasized this realization by stating, *"I also realized that teachers and the school play a very big role, not just in academics but also in my child's social development... parents and schools need to work together."* (Calyx, Transcript 1, Lines 388–389). This reflects the parents' understanding that children's social development is strengthened when home and school maintain communication and share responsibility for guiding behavior, relationships, and adjustment.

Third, single parenting was understood as an experience that develops strength, responsibility, and self-reliance. Parents described learning to depend on their own resilience while continuing to meet their children's needs despite financial, emotional, and practical difficulties. Sabel reflected, *"My lesson learned is that you really need self-reliance because you are the only one your family can depend on... it is not easy, but you just have to keep fighting for your children's future."* (Sabel, Transcript 1, Lines 401–402). This realization shows that the challenges of single parenting may also contribute to personal growth, perseverance, and a stronger sense of responsibility toward the family.

Fourth, community experiences were viewed as valuable opportunities for children to learn social behavior, provided that these experiences were accompanied by appropriate guidance, monitoring, and boundaries. Parents recognized that children need opportunities to interact with others, but they also remained aware of possible risks in the social environment. Sabel expressed this concern by saying, *"My only worry is that sometimes they go too far... so I still need to correct him if it becomes too much... because we do not know the dangers."* (Sabel, Transcript 1, Lines 454–455). This insight highlights the balance parents attempt to maintain between allowing children to explore and socialize independently and providing sufficient supervision to protect and guide them.

Finally, social pressures and judgment influenced how parents understood and adjusted to their roles. While negative opinions from others initially created emotional strain, some parents gradually developed acceptance and learned to focus less on external criticism. Mae shared, *"At first, I realized that people will really judge you... However, what I did was not respond to them anymore because I had already accepted my situation."* (Mae, Transcript 1, Lines 467–468). Her experience reflects a process of personal acceptance in which social judgment became less influential over time. Taken together, these five insights show that parents viewed children's social development as closely connected to patience, meaningful communication, school collaboration, parental resilience, guided community exposure, and the ability to cope with social pressure.

General Discussion

The study shows that children's social development in single-parent households is shaped by the interaction of family responsibilities, school involvement, community experiences, time, economic conditions, parental presence, and communication. At the same time, the findings demonstrate that single parents actively respond to these conditions through communication, emotional support, monitoring, collaboration, time management, and resilience. Viewed through Ecological Systems Theory, these findings indicate that social development emerges from interconnected experiences rather than from family structure alone.

Family Demands, Communication, and Emotional Support

Family responsibilities sometimes reduced children's opportunities for peer interaction and limited parents' capacity to provide consistent guidance. This pattern is consistent with research on parentification and responsibility in single-parent families, which suggests that children may assume additional household roles that can create strain while also contributing to independence under supportive conditions (Shamsaee et al., 2024; Pratiwi et al., 2025). The present findings also align with qualitative work showing that single parents rely on emotional closeness and adaptive caregiving to manage family demands (Dela Luna et al., 2023; Viterbo, 2025). The importance participants placed on communication is further

supported by evidence that parent-child communication and meaningful time together are associated with well-being and social adjustment (Li & Guo, 2023; Zapf et al., 2024).

School Partnership as an Ecological Support

Parents' difficulty attending meetings and observing school behavior illustrates how work demands can weaken direct involvement even when parents highly value the school relationship. However, maintaining communication with teachers allowed parents to remain informed and respond to behavioral concerns. This supports research showing that parent-school connectedness and social support can strengthen children's adjustment and engagement (Plesko et al., 2021; Štremfel et al., 2024). The finding is also consistent with evidence that supportive school conditions and teacher involvement can influence children's adaptation and motivation (Zhao et al., 2023). In ecological terms, the home-school connection functions as an important mesosystem link that can compensate, in part, for limited parental presence at school.

Community Exposure, Social Pressure, and Boundaries

Community experiences offered both opportunities and risks. Parents encouraged children to join games and activities because these experiences developed interaction skills, yet they also monitored peers, surroundings, and possible negative influences. This dual role is consistent with research showing that neighborhood and community conditions can shape children's self-regulation, social participation, and well-being (Ursache et al., 2022; Joseph et al., 2023). The parents' concern about judgment and stigma also corresponds with studies showing that social expectations surrounding single parenthood may influence parental well-being and family experience (Ballerini & Guetto, 2024; Aloro et al., 2024). Supportive communities therefore appear important not only for children's opportunities to socialize but also for reducing stress experienced by parents.

Time, Economic Conditions, and Parental Resilience

Time and financial constraints operated across family, school, and community settings. Limited resources restricted some children's participation in activities, while work schedules reduced direct supervision and communication. Nevertheless, parents described deliberate time management and resilience as ways of maintaining support. These findings resonate with evidence that resilience and adaptive coping can contribute to positive functioning in single-parent households (Sia & Aneesh, 2024; Dai et al., 2025). The results also suggest that resilience should not be treated as a substitute for social support; rather, parental strength is most sustainable when accompanied by responsive schools, extended family, community networks, and accessible resources.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study concludes that the social development of children in single-parent households is not determined by single parenthood itself but by the quality and consistency of interactions across the child's ecological environment. Family responsibilities, school demands,

community pressure, limited time, financial constraints, reduced parental presence, and communication difficulties can restrict children's opportunities for social participation and guidance. At the same time, open communication, emotional support, positive behavior guidance, family assistance, parent-teacher collaboration, safe community participation, time management, and parental resilience can strengthen confidence, adjustment, and social competence.

Based on these findings, schools should maintain accessible parent-teacher communication systems and flexible family-engagement opportunities for working or time-constrained single parents. Community and local support programs should provide safe child-participation spaces, parenting support, and practical referral networks. Parents may benefit from structured opportunities for communication, shared caregiving support, and guidance on balancing supervision with children's growing independence. Future research should include larger and more diverse samples, incorporate children's own perspectives where ethically appropriate, and consider longitudinal or mixed-method designs to examine how family, school, community, time, economic, and communication factors interact over time. Because the present study relied mainly on the self-reported experiences of three parents within one local context, the findings should be interpreted as context-specific rather than statistically generalizable.

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