

NAVIGATING EARLY CHILDHOOD PARENTING AFTER DIVORCE: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF SINGLE PARENTS

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Abstract

Parental divorce represents a significant family transition that reshapes caregiving experiences during early childhood. This study explores the lived parenting experiences of single parents raising young children after divorce within an early childhood education context. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, the research was conducted at PAUD Matahari, South Jakarta. Participants included three single parents with children aged 5–6 years, supported by early childhood teachers as triangulating informants. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation, and analyzed through iterative coding, thematic clustering, and synthesis of experiential meanings. The findings reveal that single parents experience parenting as an adaptive, intentional process centered on maintaining emotional closeness, open communication, and guided independence-building, despite time constraints and dual-role pressures. Parenting practices were enacted flexibly to support children's emotional security and social adjustment. In addition, collaboration with early childhood education institutions emerged as an important source of continuity and support. These findings underscore that parenting quality and relational processes, supported by educational collaboration, are central to early childhood development regardless of family structure.

Keywords: Parenting style, Early childhood, single parent

Abstrak

Perceraian orang tua merupakan transisi keluarga yang signifikan dan berdampak pada pengalaman pengasuhan anak usia dini. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi pengalaman hidup (lived experiences) orang tua tunggal dalam mengasuh anak usia 5–6 tahun setelah perceraian di konteks pendidikan anak usia dini. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan metode fenomenologi dan dilaksanakan di PAUD Matahari, Jakarta Selatan. Partisipan terdiri atas tiga orang tua tunggal dengan anak

usia 5–6 tahun, serta guru PAUD sebagai informan pendukung untuk triangulasi data. Pengumpulan data dilakukan melalui wawancara mendalam, observasi partisipan, dan dokumentasi. Analisis data dilakukan secara iteratif melalui proses pengodean, pengelompokan tema, dan sintesis makna pengalaman. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa pengasuhan orang tua tunggal dipersepsi sebagai proses adaptif dan penuh intensionalitas, yang berpusat pada kedekatan emosional, komunikasi terbuka, serta pembiasaan kemandirian anak di tengah keterbatasan waktu dan tuntutan peran ganda. Selain itu, kolaborasi dengan lembaga PAUD berperan penting dalam menjaga keberlanjutan dukungan emosional dan sosial anak. Temuan ini menegaskan bahwa kualitas pengasuhan dan proses relasional, yang diperkuat melalui kerja sama dengan lembaga pendidikan, merupakan faktor kunci dalam perkembangan anak usia dini tanpa memandang struktur keluarga.

Keywords: Pola Asuh, Anak Usia Dini, Orang Tua Tunggal, Perceraian.

INTRODUCTION

Parental divorce represents a significant family transition that reshapes children's daily lives, emotional security, and caregiving environments. For young children, whose development is highly dependent on stable relationships and consistent caregiving, parental separation may disrupt routines, attachment experiences, and learning processes.(Paquette et al., 2024). Previous studies have documented that children experiencing parental divorce are vulnerable to emotional distress, behavioral challenges, and social adjustment difficulties, particularly when caregiving roles and responsibilities change substantially after divorce. (Azizah, 2017; Trenggono, Achdiani, & Nastia, 2025). While these impacts are well recognized, less attention has been paid to how single parents who assume full caregiving responsibilities experience and navigate them.

In post-divorce family contexts, single parents often carry dual roles as primary caregivers and economic providers. These responsibilities may shape everyday parenting experiences, including emotional availability, time management, and caregiving decision-making.(Cano & Gracia, 2022). Such conditions are especially

critical during early childhood, a developmental period marked by rapid growth in emotional, social, and self-regulatory capacities, which are highly sensitive to the quality of caregiving interactions. Understanding how single parents experience and interpret their caregiving roles during this period is therefore essential for capturing the complexity of post-divorce parenting.

Research on early childhood parenting consistently emphasizes the importance of parenting quality and relational processes in supporting children's emotional regulation, independence, and social competence.(Garro, 2016; Setyaningsih, Mamma, Olua, & Sirjon, 2025). However, much of this literature categorizes parenting into predefined styles. It examines their outcomes, often overlooking the subjective meanings parents attach to their caregiving practices, particularly under conditions of stress and structural limitation. In single-parent families after divorce, parenting is not only a set of practices but also a lived experience shaped by emotional strain, adaptation, and negotiation in everyday life.

Existing studies on parenting after divorce have largely focused on child psychological outcomes, parental conflict, and co-parenting arrangements, such as cooperative or parallel parenting models (Arora, 2023; Laletas & Khasin, 2021). These studies predominantly examine school-aged children or adolescents and rely heavily on quantitative approaches. Research that explores the lived experiences of single parents raising young children aged 5–6 years remains limited, particularly within early childhood education settings in Indonesia. Moreover, few studies have examined how single parents themselves make sense of their parenting roles, caregiving challenges, and relational strategies in the context of early childhood development.

This study addresses these gaps by exploring the lived experiences of single parents raising young children after divorce within a PAUD (Early Childhood Education) setting. Rather than evaluating parenting effectiveness or testing predefined models, this research seeks to understand how single parents experience, interpret, and enact caregiving in their everyday lives. Baumrind's parenting framework is used as a sensitizing concept to support interpretation, while allowing parents' meanings and experiences to emerge inductively from the data.

Accordingly, the objective of this study is to explore the parenting experiences of single parents with young children following divorce. Specifically, this study aims to: (1) describe how single parents experience and interpret their caregiving roles, (2) explore challenges encountered in daily parenting practices, and (3) examine how emotional closeness, communication, and independence-building are understood and enacted in supporting children's development within post-divorce family contexts.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative research design with a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences and parenting practices of single parents following divorce in early childhood contexts. The research was conducted at PAUD Matahari, Pancoran, South Jakarta, from December 2025 to February 2026. Participants were selected through purposive sampling and included three single parents with children aged 5–6 years enrolled at PAUD Matahari. These parents served as the main informants, while early childhood teachers served as supporting informants, providing contextual and triangulating perspectives.

Data were collected through participant observation, semi-structured in-depth interviews, and documentation. In line with the phenomenological approach, interviews were designed to capture parents' subjective meanings, perceptions, and interpretations of their parenting experiences after divorce. Observations and interviews focused on key parenting dimensions, including emotional responsiveness, parental control, communication patterns, discipline practices, and caregiving strategies, guided by Baumrind's parenting style framework while remaining open to emergent themes.

Data analysis followed an iterative phenomenological process as outlined by Creswell, involving data reduction through coding significant statements, organizing meanings into thematic clusters, and synthesizing textural and structural descriptions to capture the essence of participants' experiences. Data credibility was ensured through triangulation of data sources and member checking. Ethical principles,

including informed consent, confidentiality, and participant anonymity, were strictly upheld throughout the research process.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Lived Parenting Experiences of Single Parents After Divorce

This section presents the findings as phenomenological themes that reflect the lived experiences of single parents raising young children after divorce. Themes were derived from significant statements obtained through in-depth interviews, observations, and documentation, capturing shared meanings across participants' experiences. (Creswell, 2022)

Experiencing Emotional Closeness as a Core Parenting Meaning

Participants experienced emotional closeness as a central and intentional aspect of parenting after divorce. Emotional responsiveness was described as a conscious effort to ensure children felt secure and emotionally supported despite changes in family structure. One parent expressed this experience as follows:

“Saya menjalani peran sebagai orang tua tunggal yang bertanggung jawab penuh terhadap pengasuhan, pendidikan, dan kebutuhan anak. Secara emosional tentu ada tantangan, tetapi saya berupaya menciptakan lingkungan keluarga yang hangat, aman, serta saling mendukung demi tumbuh kembang anak yang optimal.” (OC1, OC2, OC10)

This statement illustrates how emotional closeness was experienced not merely as affection but as a moral responsibility and adaptive response to post-divorce conditions. Consistent with observational data, parents were frequently engaged in warm communication, physical affection, and attentive listening, reinforcing children's emotional security. Previous studies similarly indicate that emotional closeness functions as a protective factor for children's socio-emotional development in single-parent families (Syifa & Selian, 2025).

Negotiating Parental Control Through Adaptive and Flexible Practices

Parental control was experienced as a process of continuous adjustment rather than rigid discipline. Parents described setting simple and consistent rules while remaining flexible in response to children's emotional states and situational demands.

This adaptive control was shaped by parents' awareness of their dual roles and limited time resources.

Observational findings revealed that discipline was applied calmly and without physical punishment, reflecting a positive and democratic approach to control. Such practices align with parents' efforts to guide children's behavior while maintaining emotional safety. Research suggests that adaptive parental control supports children's self-regulation and emotional stability, particularly in early childhood. (Han, Brussoni, & Mâsse, 2022; Maharany & Shofwan, 2025)

Communication as a Space for Emotional Expression and Meaning-Making

Open communication emerged as a significant lived experience through which parents and children navigated family transitions. Parents emphasized the importance of dialogue in helping children express emotions and understand daily routines. Communication was experienced as a means of rebuilding relational stability after divorce.

Parents described engaging children in everyday conversations about school activities, emotions, and routines, which strengthened trust and emotional connection. Teachers also observed that children whose parents practiced open communication demonstrated better emotional expression and social interaction at school. These findings support earlier research highlighting the importance of dialogical communication for children's emotional adjustment in post-divorce contexts. (Rachmawaty, 2022)

Encouraging Independence Within Emotional Safety

Independence-building was experienced as both a necessity and a developmental goal. Parents encouraged children to perform age-appropriate tasks independently while providing emotional guidance and supervision. One parent explained this approach:

"Kebebasan dalam menggunakan HP dalam waktu 1 jam seperti nonton YouTube Kids dan game dengan pengawasan saya dan anggota keluarga lainnya." (OC4, OC5)

This statement reflects how parents balanced autonomy and control by allowing limited freedom within clear boundaries. Independence was not understood as detachment but as a way to foster responsibility and confidence within a secure relational context. Such practices align with democratic parenting approaches that emphasize autonomy supported by guidance. (Nurfitri, 2021)

The Supportive Role of Early Childhood Education Institutions

Parents and teachers described early childhood education institutions as important sources of support and continuity. Collaboration with teachers helped parents monitor children's emotional and social development, particularly during periods of adjustment. Teachers noted that children from supportive single-parent households showed positive emotional regulation and classroom engagement.

These experiences indicate that early childhood education institutions functioned as relational partners rather than substitutes for parental roles. Previous research similarly emphasizes the importance of school-family collaboration in supporting children from single-parent families. (Koskela & Sinkkonen, 2025; Lv, Yan, & Wang, 2025)

Essence of the Parenting Experience After Divorce

Across participants, the essence of parenting after divorce was experienced as parenting within limitations while striving to maintain emotional continuity. Despite challenges related to time, emotional fatigue, and dual responsibilities, parents actively reconstructed caregiving practices centered on warmth, adaptive control, communication, and independence-building.

Rather than reflecting diminished parenting capacity, participants' lived experiences demonstrated resilience and intentional caregiving. These findings reinforce evidence that parenting quality and relational processes—supported by educational collaboration—are central to early childhood development, regardless of family structure (Otero-Mayer & González-Benito, 2025; Purola & Kuusisto, 2021).

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that single parents raising young children after divorce can sustain meaningful and adaptive parenting practices despite facing emotional strain, time limitations, and dual-role responsibilities. Through a phenomenological lens, the findings reveal that parenting in post-divorce contexts is experienced not as diminished caregiving capacity, but as a process of intentional adjustment centered on maintaining emotional continuity and relational stability for children.

Participants' lived experiences indicate that emotional closeness is the core foundation of post-divorce parenting. Parents consciously prioritize warmth, responsiveness, and open communication as strategies to support children's emotional security and social adjustment. Parental control is enacted through flexible and empathetic guidance rather than rigid discipline, allowing children to develop self-regulation within a supportive relational context. In addition, independence-building is understood as a gradual, relational process in which autonomy is encouraged alongside emotional support.

The findings also highlight the important role of early childhood education institutions as complementary support systems. Collaboration between single parents and educators contributes to continuity between home and school environments, reinforcing children's emotional regulation and social engagement during periods of family transition. This collaboration strengthens parenting efforts rather than replacing parental roles, emphasizing the value of shared responsibility in early childhood care.

Overall, this study demonstrates that parenting quality and relational processes, supported by educational collaboration, are central to early childhood development regardless of family structure. By foregrounding the lived experiences and meanings constructed by single parents, this research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of post-divorce parenting and challenges deficit-oriented perspectives on single-parent families.

Based on these findings, several recommendations are proposed. For future research, studies should involve a broader range of participants and employ

longitudinal designs to capture changes in parenting experiences over time. For practitioners, particularly early childhood educators, the findings underscore the importance of strengthening communication and collaboration with single parents to support children's socio-emotional development. For policymakers, this study highlights the need for accessible parenting support programs, family-centered educational policies, and community-based resources that recognize and respond to the realities of single-parent caregiving after divorce.

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