

Literature Review

The Role and Function of Single Parents in Special Needs Children to Combat Loneliness

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Abstracts

Received: June 24, 2024
Accepted: August 19, 2024
Published Online: December 2, 2024

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Introduction: Caring for children with special needs often poses various challenges, including coping with stress in parenting. Single parents have an even increased vulnerability to stressful conditions in parenting, especially from feelings of loneliness and alienation. This literature review aims to obtain an effective intervention model for overcoming loneliness for single parents with special needs children. **Methods:** Various studies were searched with the keywords “role of a single parent,” “function of a single parent,” “children with special needs,” and “loneliness.” Selected studies are evaluated and critically reviewed. **Results:** Various challenges of parenting children with special needs include stigma, efforts to overcome communication and behavior problems of children, adjustments to parenting according to special needs conditions, economic burdens, and intrapersonal problems of single parents. These challenges can be significant stressors that further degrade the quality of life of single parents and their children. However, they can be opportunities for personality development and parenting skills through self-care efforts and seeking psychiatric help, including efforts to find a community that understands the experience of being a single parent. **Conclusions:** Efforts to help single parents cope with loneliness include improving self-efficacy, emotional stability, positive parenting, and social intelligence by being part of a supportive community.

Keywords: Single Parent, Children, Special Needs, Loneliness, Psychological Wellbeing

Cite this as: Kalalo. R. T., “The Role and Function of Single Parents in Special Needs Children to Combat Loneliness”. *Jurnal Psikiatri Surabaya*, vol. 13, no. S11, pp.119-124, 2024. doi: [10.20473/jps.v13.isi1.62669](https://doi.org/10.20473/jps.v13.isi1.62669)

INTRODUCTION

A single parent is a man or woman who lives alone caring for his child(s). Naz Iram and Fatimah Kushnood (2020) stated that this happened due to the death of a spouse or divorce or a woman who experienced an unwanted pregnancy [1]. Single parents care for and raise their children without help from their partners and will have a combination of roles as the roles of father and mother, for example, business in the economic sector in meeting various household needs while carrying out the care of their children [2]. Caring for children with special needs often poses various challenges, such as attention to aspects of child growth and development that are different from typical child growth and development milestones and determining the best efforts to overcome various problems related to children's special needs conditions. These challenges in parenting efforts often lead to parenting stress. Single parents have an even increased vulnerability, especially due to feelings of solitude and alienation.

The purpose of this study is to determine the details of the role and function of effective single parents, as well as assistance in the form of proposed effective intervention models in overcoming loneliness for single parents who have children with special needs, so this study seeks to answer various questions such as: 1) What are the roles and functions of single parents who have children with special needs? 2) What are some challenges and potential of single parents with special needs children? 3) How do interventions address loneliness in single parents with children with special needs?

REVIEWS

Based on the search keywords "role of a single parent," "function of a single parent," "children with special needs," and "loneliness" on literature search platforms such as PubMed, Psychiatry Online, and Google Scholar, a total of 197 studies were obtained, and after conducting a selection process, 20

studies were obtained as the basis for the preparation of this literature review.

Roles and functions of single parents of children with special needs

Studies by Cantwel-Barti (2009), O'Neil (2004), and Gupta & Kaur (2010) showed that parents with children with special needs often felt trauma, sadness, feelings of guilt, rejection, tension, and sometimes had ideas to the point of harming their child or committing suicide [3], although this sometimes varied from family to family and could show potential adaptation for parents [4].

In the aspect of gender roles, single parents will develop a variety of roles. Things that may be socioculturally viewed/expected as certain gender roles in society, e.g., domestic tasks at home (female/maternal role) and the role of the head of family who earns a living by working outside the home (male/father role) [2] will all become integral in the role of single parents. Single parents also need to motivate their other child(s), who have typical growth and development, to help their siblings with special needs [3]. Parents need to invite siblings of children with special needs to discuss anxiety conditions felt as siblings, various behaviors that show rejection and even aggressiveness, sadness because they feel inattentive, develop an attitude of compromise, develop an attitude of compassion for parental sacrifice, overcome negative emotional problems, and embracing living with a disabled sibling [5].

Single parents guide the development of the child's optimal potential [2]. Something that will be very helpful is the active participation of the community. The social model of disability theory emphasizes the importance of eliminating significant differences between disability conditions and the general public by creating inclusive communities that accommodate the various needs of children with special needs [3]. The form of group support for single parents will be very meaningful if it pays attention to increasing parenting confidence, full sup-

port discussion, openness, and reflection [6]. Various topics often discussed in the community are feeding, types of food for infants and children, breastfeeding processes, equipment products for infants and children, toilet training, and sleep. Parents are expected to provide constructive comments to each other actively [7]. The openness of single parents in collaboration with the community will greatly help better parenting functions for their children.

Challenges and potential of single parents of children with special needs

Various challenges that single parents often face are adjustment of parenting children with special needs, the stress in parenting can experience physical and emotional fatigue when carrying out multiple parental roles, the anxiety of the inability to provide various needs for children, various psychiatric medical processes that must be carried out by children (the process of determining diagnosis, challenging behavior, continuous intervention, various comorbid conditions and complications that can be occurred), financial problems, conflicts between work and care, housing availability, feelings of uncertainty about parent future and the future of his/her child, pressure from the environment including extended family, facing stigma, social isolation, and feelings of loneliness [1 - 3, 8 - 11].

The recent pandemic showed even greater mental health challenges for parents of children with special needs, including single parents. When single parents are infected with COVID-19, they feel very isolated, and it is very difficult to ask for help from other people or other families because of their fears of being infected. At the same time, they must still pay attention to their children [1, 12, 13].

In addition to the existing challenges, the potential of single parents with children with special needs is: getting the opportunity to see the parental level of awareness of their child's disability condition (from a study de-

veloped by Ulrich & Bauer (2003)), starting from the evaluation of various information that has not been obtained (level 1 uninformed phase) to level 2 special designation, level 3 normalization, level 4 self-actualization, to level 5 school engagement [14]. Single parents have the potential to make the best decisions for their children actively, become experts who understand their children's conditions, find transformation processes, and define identity [15]. Single parents can also independently determine various cooperation efforts with many parties, schools, other single-parent communities, religious communities, and the wider community that cares, even through advocacy to the government as a broad policy maker. This cooperation aligns with promoting mental health broadly/multi-sector coalition (intervention process by social-ecological level) [16]. Single parents also have the potential to develop resilience that will further improve the quality of life and their children; this is done through coping models (such as passionate attitudes, faithfully accompanied children, and getting a support system) to achieve psychological adjustment (adaptation efforts and finding solutions) [1]. Another potential that can be developed is psychological mindedness, namely the ability, and motivation to explain and understand various psychological processes (psychological knowledge) so that parents can carry out parenting by understanding children as individuals who have their own minds [17] and get valuable opportunities how to create connections through the process of being present, listening, taking time, patience, trust, empathy, compassion, being mentally well, going with the flow, discernment, and acceptance [18].

Interventions to overcome loneliness in single parents who have children with special needs

Single parents who have children with special needs have a higher risk of loneliness. This risk increases when the single parent is

female [19]; a mother usually has more burden in caring for a child with special needs [20]. Other risks are unemployment, sleep pattern problems, and lack of physical activity.

Measurement of loneliness in older people can use measuring instruments such as the UCLA Three-Item Loneliness Scale (UCLA-TILS) and the Direct Measure of Loneliness (DMOL) [19].

Efforts to overcome loneliness in single parents who have children with special needs are improving in various important aspects, including 1) Aspects of self-efficacy, 2) Emotional stability, 3) Application of positive parenting, and 4) Social intelligence by being part of a supportive community. Table 1 summarizes efforts to overcome loneliness in single parents with children with special needs.

Table 1. Various efforts to overcome loneliness in single parents who have children with special needs (modification of various references)

Aspects	Efforts
Self-efficacy	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Set and prioritize daily goals. 2. Health-seeking lifestyle (physical activity, good sleep hygiene practices). 3. Undergo counseling. 4. Generate parental acceptance. 5. Have hope. 6. Redefinition of identity as “single-parent presence.”
Emotional stability	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Healthy coping techniques. 2. Psychological adjustment. 3. Psychological mindedness. 4. Psychological knowledge. 5. Undergo counseling. 6. Do a variety of fun activities. 7. Spiritually based approach (child as part of God's plan).
Application of positive parenting	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Have a positive outlook. 2. Parents refocus on life to support their children.
Social Intelligence	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Take the initiative to ask for help. 2. Work closely with social workers. 3. Networking with supportive communities, including other single parents, for example, with online support groups. 4. Working with communities that apply the concept of The Social Model of Disability Theory (inclusive communities that accommodate various needs of children with special needs) and support communities that focus on parenting confidence, full support discussion, open, and reflective. 5. Intensively communicate with the school in child planning. 6. Hiring a babysitter. 7. Together with the community initiated a playground friendly for children with special needs. 8. Find an inclusive faith-based community.

CONCLUSION

In parenting roles and functions, single parents can develop various gender roles as a single role to help their children and motivate siblings to participate as well. The single parent will then serve to guide the child's optimal potential while actively seeking help from the community.

Although single parents have many challenges in caring for their children with special needs, there will also be many potentials that can arise and be developed; there is still an expectation of "a gift in parenting," such as the opportunity to see the parental level of awareness of their child's disability condition, actively make the best decisions for their children, become experts who understand their child's condition, find the transformation process, identity definition, independently determine various cooperation efforts with many parties, the potential to develop resilience, develop psychological mindedness, and valuable opportunities how to create connections. The development of this potential will be very meaningful, along with efforts on aspects of self-efficacy, emotional stability, the application of positive parenting, and social intelligence in overcoming loneliness, a major challenge that single parents must face.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to thank the Division of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, Department of Psychiatry, Faculty of Medicine, Universitas Airlangga – Dr. Soetomo Academic Medical Centre, Indonesia.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

FUNDING

None.

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