

**Single motherhood and parent-child relations in Japan:  
The role of living arrangements**

James M. Raymo<sup>1</sup>

Hyunjoon Park<sup>2</sup>

Miho Iwasawa<sup>3</sup>

**Abstract**

The goal of this paper is to shed light on the implications of single-parenthood in Japan. Using nationally representative survey data, we compare parent-child interactions in single-mother families and two-parent families. We pay particular attention to the ways in which relationships between family structure and parent-child interactions may be moderated by the presence of coresident grandparents. Initial tabulations indicate that several measures of parent-child interactions and parent-child relationship quality are significantly lower for single mothers. We also find some evidence that these differences are greatest for single-mothers who are not coresiding with their parents. These preliminary results suggest that the rapid rise in divorce may have important implications for parent-child relationships in Japan and that the relatively high prevalence of intergenerational coresidence may temper the implications of single-parenthood to some extent.

---

<sup>1</sup> Department of Sociology and Center for Demography and Ecology, University of Wisconsin

<sup>2</sup> Department of Sociology and Population Studies Center, Pennsylvania University

<sup>3</sup> National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, Tokyo

A large body of research has examined outcomes associated with single parenthood in the U.S. and other western societies where levels of divorce and non-marital childbearing are relatively high. Much of this work has demonstrated that both parents (usually mothers) and children in single parent families fare less well on a range of life outcomes relative to their counterparts in two-parent families. Of particular importance is the relatively poor outcomes experienced by children living in single-parent families who complete less schooling and exhibit more behavior problems (McLanahan and Sandefur 1994). Explanations for these differences have emphasized both economic resources and parenting practices. The limited economic resources of divorced or never married mothers are well documented and this appears to explain a good deal of the less favorable outcomes of children from single-parent families (McLanahan and Sandefur 1994). Parenting practices also appear to be important, with less effective monitoring and more limited parent-child interaction also contributing to differences in the outcomes of children from single-parent families (Thomson, Hanson, and McLanahan 1994).

Similar relationships have received very little attention in so-called “strong family” countries in East Asia and Southern Europe despite recent increases in the prevalence of single-parent families. Comparative studies suggest that the implications of living without both parents may be less pronounced in these societies. For example, Park (2007) finds that the relationship between single parenthood and children’s educational outcomes is negligible in several Asian countries and suggests that this pattern may reflect relatively high levels of intergenerational support and interaction. The relatively high levels of intergenerational coresidence in countries like Japan and Korea may play a particularly important role in ameliorating the unfavorable consequences of living in a single-parent family. Not only does coresidence (typically in a home that is owned by the grandparental generation) limit the economic strains associated with

maintaining an independent residence on a relatively low income but may also provide important monitoring and adult-child interaction. Many middle-aged women in these countries are not employed outside the home, meaning that coresident or proximately resident grandmothers are able to care for children while their single mothers work (the large majority of single mothers in Japan are employed). The presence of grandmothers may also facilitate parent-child interaction and improved parenting by reducing the single mother's responsibility for domestic work and limiting the stress she experiences from competing work and family demands.

In this paper, we use nationally representative survey data from Japan to directly examine this hypothesized role of intergenerational coresidence (or proximity more generally) for understanding variation in parent-child interaction and parenting style. Japan is an interesting setting for several reasons. First, there is relatively limited heterogeneity in pathways to single parenthood. Unlike the U.S. and other western societies where non-marital childbearing is common, nearly all single-parent families in Japan are formed as a result of divorce. Recent increases in divorce (Raymo, Iwasawa, and Bumpass 2004) have resulted in substantial increase in single-parent families but little is known about the circumstances of these families apart from the fact that nearly all mothers are employed and have relatively low earnings (Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare 2005). Second, a substantial proportion of divorced, single mothers coreside with their parents (mothers receive full custody of children in the large majority of divorces in Japan). In most cases, this is presumably the result of returns to the parental home following divorce. A recent study notes that nearly one-quarter of divorced women in Japan coreside with parents whereas only a small proportion (2%) of divorced women in the U.S. are in similar living arrangements (Raymo, Iwasawa, and Bumpass 2004).

We use data from the 1998 and 2003 rounds of the National Family Research of Japan (NFRJ). The NFRJ is a large, nationally representative survey of Japanese men and women age 28-77 conducted by the Japan Society for Family Sociology. The response rates were 67% in 1998 and 63% in 2003. The total number of respondents to the two surveys was 13,287. Limit our focus to female respondents whose coresident children are all under the age of 21 leaves us with an analytic sample of 2,215 respondents, 128 (6%) of whom did not have a spouse present. The large majority (84%) of these single mothers were divorced and two-thirds (63%) were living independently while one-third coresided with parents. For our purposes, one important strength of the NFRJ data is that respondents were asked a series of questions about relationships with their children. In one set of questions, respondents were asked about how often (per week) they played with, instructed, and ate dinner with their children. These questions offered six response options ranging from “every day” to “never.” We examined these questions separately and in the form of an index (ranging from 3 to 18). Respondents were also asked to rate the quality of their relationships with their children on a four-point scale ranging from “good” to “bad”. We recoded all questions so that higher values always indicate greater interaction or better parent-child relationships.

We present initial tabulations in Table 1. In the upper panel, we compare mean values of the parent-child relationship measures by single parent status. In all cases, the mean values are lower for single mothers. As indicated, these differences are all statistically significant. In the lower panel, we examine differences between married mothers, single mothers who are not coresiding with their parents, and single mothers who are coresiding with their parents. These tabulations suggest that coresidence with parents does contribute to the interaction of single mothers with their children. For three of the five variables, the lowest values are for single

mothers not coresiding with parents. For these women, values are significantly lower than married mothers in all but one case (self-evaluated relationships with children). Among women coresiding with parents, parent-child interactions are significantly lower than for married mothers for only two variables – eating with children and the interaction index.

These simple tabulations indicate that, as in the U.S., parent-child interactions are lower for single mothers in Japan. They also provide some suggestive evidence that, as some scholars have suggested, coresidence with parents may partially offset the implications of divorce for parent-child interactions in Japan (and perhaps in other “strong-family” countries). Careful evaluation of these relationships is important in light of recent increases in divorce in Japan where roughly one-third of marriages are now projected to end in divorce and where support from non-custodial fathers is very limited. In subsequent revisions, we will reevaluate these relationships by estimating multivariate models that control for key maternal characteristics such as age, parity, and employment while also incorporating direct measures of financial and instrumental support received from parents.

Table 1: Mean values of parent-child interaction measures, by marital status and living arrangements

<i>Variable</i>	Two-parents	Single-parent
Playing with children	4.04	3.44 **
Teaching children	3.94	3.39 **
Eating with children	5.75	5.37 **
Relationship with children	3.82	3.76 *
Interaction index	13.74	12.22 **

  

<i>Variable</i>	Two-parents	SP-Not Coresiding	SP-Coresiding
Playing with children	4.04	3.26 **	3.77
Teaching children	3.94	3.31 **	3.53
Eating with children	5.75	5.48 **	5.16 **
Relationship with children	3.82	3.76	3.77
Interaction index	13.74	12.08 **	12.46 *

\*p < .05, \*\*p < .01 for comparisons with values for two-parent families

**References:**

- McLanahan, S. and G. Sandefur. 1994. *Growing up with a Single Parent: What Hurts, What Helps*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare. 2005. Report on the 2003 National Survey of Single-mother Households. <http://www.mhlw.go.jp/houdou/2005/01/h0119-1.html> (in Japanese).
- Park, H. 2007. "Single Parenthood and Children's Reading Performance in Asia." *Journal of Marriage and Family* 69:863-877.
- Raymo, J. M., M. Iwasawa, and L. Bumpass. 2004. "Marital Dissolution in Japan: Recent Trends and Patterns." *Demographic Research* 11:395-419.
- Thomson, E., T. L. Hanson, and S. S. McLanahan. 1994. "Family-Structure and Child Well-Being: Economic-Resources vs. Parental Behaviors." *Social Forces* 73:221-242.