Study of single parents' dating, sexual activity contradicts assumptions

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Contrary to what is often assumed about single parents, particularly single parents of young children, a new study from The Kinsey Institute has found that single parents of children younger than 5 date and are sexually active as often as singles without children—and more so than single parents of older children.

The study, "Dating and Sexual Behavior Among Single Parents of Young Children in the United States," was published online in the *Journal of Sex Research* prior to appearing in print. Co-authors are lead author Peter B. Gray, University of Nevada, Las Vegas; Justin R. Garcia, Indiana University; Benjamin S. Crosier, Geisel School of Medicine, Dartmouth College; and Helen E. Fisher, Rutgers University. All are affiliated with The Kinsey Institute.

"These data are counter to theory and what was previously assumed about patterns of dating and sexual behavior among U.S. singles," said Garcia, an evolutionary biologist, research scientist at The Kinsey Institute and assistant professor of gender studies in the College of Arts and Sciences at IU Bloomington. "Our data sample is large enough that it allows for analyses like this to be informative about the intimate lives of single parents."

Male and female parents of young children experience hormonal changes that can affect their sexuality.

"There has been a modest amount of research on the sexuality of parents, particularly mothers. That small body of research suggests that, while it takes sex to have a child, a child can have a disruptive effect on parents' sex life," said Peter Gray, associate professor of anthropology at University of Nevada, Las Vegas. "This new study was unusual in focusing upon the sexual and dating behavior of single parents rather than partnered parents of young children."

Gray and Garcia are co-authors of "Evolution and Human Sexual Behavior" (Harvard University Press, 2013).

"We know that on average, singles have relatively less sexual activity than coupled people—singles tend to have lower rates of sexual frequency likely because they have to first find a partner to have sex with," Garcia said. "And, for single parents, there is only so much time and so much energy to be used for a variety of competing demands in their life. Without the help of a partner, singles often have to divert more energy to parenting and so in theory one might think single parents would not be dating as much. But that's not what we found."

Garcia is also scientific advisor to the international online dating site Match.com and, along with Fisher, is principal investigator of its annual nationally representative survey of American singles, "Singles in America." The 2012 wave of the Singles in America study provided the data set for the current analysis and has provided much insight into the behavior of U.S. singles ages 21 and older.

The authors described humans as "cooperative breeders" because of the amount of care children require. From an evolutionary perspective, the single moms and dads—the study found no gender differences—may be looking for a partner to help with the kids but also to provide adult company.

The study involved 5,805 single adults (2,830 single women and 2,975 single men), with 84 percent noting previous romantic relationship experiences. The sample included heterosexual (86.2 percent), gay/lesbian (10.6 percent) and bisexual (3.2 percent) singles. Of this sample, a total of 2,121 were single parents; and 342 were single parents with children 5 or younger.

Provided by Indiana University

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