What children from single parent families have to say about their lives:
Poverty, social exclusion and policy implications from a transnational, comparative project.
Project Funding

• Two year transnational research project funded by the 2nd Transnational Exchange Programme, 2002-2006 whose aim is to promote the exchange of knowledge and best practice among EU member states in order to develop policies and programs to combat poverty and social exclusion.
Countries and Organizations which Participated in the Programme

• Cyprus
  - Cyprus College (coordinator)
  - Center for the Study of Childhood and Adolescence
  - Pancyprian Association of Single Parent Families and Friends

• Greece
  - National Social Research Center

• UK
  - University of Lincoln
  - Single Parent Action Network (SPAN)
Aims of the Research

1. Investigate how and to what extent children from single parent families experience and understand phenomena like poverty and social exclusion in their everyday lives.

2. Investigate the ways by which the educational system and the larger social context of each country contribute through certain practices and procedures to the social integration or alternatively the social exclusion of single parent children.
Aims of the Research (cont)

3. Review of the various policies and legislative frameworks related to single parents families at the national level and across the different countries in order to make recommendations for changes and the development of new, innovative policies.

4. Disseminate the knowledge produced both locally in each of the countries participating in the project and at a European level with the goal of informing policy-making.
Methodology

- Through the use of a child-centered approach we tried to offer children from single parent families an opportunity to express their opinions so that all those involved with their lives and welfare can learn how these children experience their everyday worlds so that, in turn, they can inform their practices accordingly.

- Our sample included children from both single parent and two parent families ages 6 to 16 balanced in terms of age, gender, class, ethnicity and geographical location (including urban and rural). Our sample of children from single parent families included all major subcategories of this group, namely, children from divorced, separated, unmarried, and widowed families.
Methodology (cont)

- We have carried out in-depth, personal interviews and focus group discussions with the following:
  1. Children of single parent families
  2. Single parents
  3. Children of two parent families
  4. Parents of two parent families
  5. Teachers and other school-related professionals, e.g., school councillors, psychologists, social workers, etc.

- Review of school textbooks and curriculum guides in order to identify how the notion of family is treated and to make recommendations for changes where necessary.

- Visits in schools in order to identify the procedures and practices followed by schools in relation to single parents and their children and to make recommendations for changes where necessary.
Research Findings
Family and Family Life
Children from single parent families have a social understanding of their families and articulate experiences that do not always easily relate to the policy discourse. For many children ‘family’ was often defined in terms of significant relationships rather than necessarily only through close relatives.

‘I’ve a little sister who lives here, who’s got the same mum as me and another dad. My dad has other children. I’ve an older brother who’s 18 and two older sisters who are 16 and 17 I think. And I have a little brother who’s 12 and another on the way. I see my dad at weekends’ (Hannah, girl, 14 years, England)
The role of the extended family

- The extended family and grandparents in particular play a very important role in supporting the single parent family psychologically, financially, and in practical ways (e.g., helping with children’s transportation needs, etc)

‘At the weekends I go to Nanas. I sleep Saturday and Sunday night...so my mum can get some peace.’ (Annie, girl, 8 years, England)
Children’s perceived benefits of single parenthood

• Though children pointed out many negative aspects of living in single parent families, with economic difficulties being a major one, many of them also pointed out positive aspects such as:

  Ø relief from stress
  Ø absence of conflict and tension
  Ø stability and emotional security
  Ø freedom from violence
  Ø having closer family bonds.
Children’s relationship with their absent parent

- Children express a need for contact and access to the non-resident parent, even where, in parallel, they describe difficulties, tensions and problems with the relationships between the non-resident parent, the resident parents and themselves.

‘The most difficult thing is not spending enough time with my dad really. He might like expect me to phone him, but he’s a parent so he should be taking care of me and phone me. If he really cared he’d phone me every weekend and see how I was getting on at school, spend time with me and help me to do my course work’. (Leah, girl, 15 years, England)
Importance of quality time and the problem of time poverty

• ‘Time poverty’ was a key feature of the lives of the children and adults living in single parent families.

‘I mind that my mother has to go to work, I stay with my grandmother. When she comes from work she picks me up, then she goes to sleep. I need her to give me a lot of attention.’ (Girl, 7 years, Cyprus)

‘It’s utopia to expect more time with my mother. But if we had more time, I would like to talk more with her’. (Elias, boy, 15 years, Greece)
Financial Issues
Poverty is by far the most important factor responsible for the problems that children face in single parent families.

‘When you live with one parent, the most important problem is the financial one, because with only one parent ..., only one is working, only one contributes usually, therefore the most important [problem] is the financial [problem]. If, let’s say, you do not have a permanent home, if your parent does not have a permanent job, certainly the most important thing is the financial one.’ (Sophie, girl, 16 years, Cyprus)
‘There are cases, that is, when we do not manage with shopping at the supermarket, everyday. There are days when I am hungry and I call my father and tell him: “Come, take me and feed me.”’ (Lenas, boy, 15 years, Cyprus)
Coping with poverty

• Single parent children often employ specific approaches in an attempt to constrain the effects of poverty. Many children said they were sensitive to their parent’s situation and try not to ask for more money or request things that they cannot afford.
Who is to blame?

- Many older children in Cyprus and England believe government policy is directly to blame for their family’s financial predicament and often put forward substantive arguments as to why their family’s financial circumstances are unfair, and why their single parent should pay less tax or receive more benefits to compensate for the fact there is only one, not two parents.
• Many older children in England and Greece, especially girls, can experience stress and tiredness as a consequence of carrying the burden of childcare when their parent works.
The problem of housing

- Many children in all three countries describe how the lack of space in their homes is a major disadvantage in their upbringing.
Social Relationships
Friendships

• Children from single parent families have good relationships with children from both single parent families and two parent families and family background does not seem to be a factor in their relationships with others.

• Some children from single parent families prefer to share their intimate family problems only with those of their friends who have experienced similar problems.

‘I only listen to my best friend now because he is the only one who went through the things that I am experiencing now.’ (Leo, boy, 15 years, Cyprus)
‘The only person I could talk to about what went on at home with my mother and my sick sister was my best friend from the neighbourhood, whom I met in Kavala when I spent some time there with my grandmother. He was the only one who could understand me.’ (Yiannis, boy, 14 years, Greece)
Single parent children’s exclusion from friendships

- Many children from single parent families who experience financial difficulties report feeling socially excluded from their friendship groups because they do not have enough money to join in what their friends do.

‘Sometimes my friends go to the cinema and stuff and I haven’t got enough money to go so they just go without me. I can’t go so I have to stay at home.’ (Katie, girl, 16 years, England)

‘If they (my friends) go to places where you need to pay to enter, I do not go inside. Or if they go to some place to eat, I go with them, they eat and I watch.’ (Minas, boy, 16 years, Cyprus)
Some single parent children mentioned their parent was often unable to afford the cost of school trips or extra curriculum activities, further restricting their capacity to socialise.

‘The money mum earns isn’t that much amount. So every time we go somewhere like if there’s a school trip at school, most people go there, like school camp, and we can’t afford it and I can’t go.’ (Elizabeth, girl, 14 years, England)
Children from single parent families pointed out examples of misunderstandings, insensitive use of language, unintentional and sometimes intentional stigmatization, prejudice, and even discrimination by their peers or teachers which led them to feel socially excluded.

‘In my class, a comment may escape from some of the children concerning my family, trying to insult my father, my mother, saying that my father had a reason to leave, everyone thinks as they wish, but they should stick to their own issues and then look into other people’s affairs.’ (15 year old boy, Cyprus)
In Cyprus, children from single parent families were happy when they received psychological support from their teachers but were very unwilling to get professional psychological support (e.g., from a school counsellor or psychologist).

‘I don’t want to visit any psychologists because you always hear so much and if you go [to them] you end up becoming totally confused. For example, my friends are telling me to love my dad, some others are telling me that I should stop talking to him since he behaved in that way, some others are telling me different things, they don’t really leave you in peace… If you also visit the psychologist, you end up doing everything, and you really go crazy… I only listen to my best friend because he is the only one who went through the things that I am experiencing now.’ (15 year old boy, Cyprus)
Methodological Issues
How can children’s views and experiences seriously be taken into account?

- Given the wide age range we have looked at (6-16 years old) we were concerned about informed consent by children.

- Developed storyboard for younger children which guides them with the help of the researcher through the process and asks for their consent even if their parents affirmed to their participation: we found that this empowers younger children.
What works in child-centered research?

- Having time to build rapport and to explain the research purpose to the children.
- Avoiding formalities and speaking to children in their everyday language (e.g., in our case in Cyprus this meant the dialect).
What does not work in child-centered research?

- The presence of other adults (e.g., parents, etc) during the interview process creates problems for the free expression of children’s opinions.

- The larger the scope of the project, the less time available (usually) to explore issues in depth and the more likely it is that you move early on in structuring your approach; our comparative approach as well as time and money limitations meant that we had to proceed with a more structured approach rather than explore the ground for some time and then become more focused.
Policy Issues
The project is policy-driven; its aim is to inform policy-making by having policy makers consider children’s views when developing policies about single parent families.
Some examples of the project’s policy implications

- Policy makers should be cautious about taking ‘narrow’ definitions of the family and should consider the roles and significance of extended families, networks and communities.

- Policy makers should take into account children’s need to receive professional help in discreet ways that avoid stigmatizing them.

- Policy makers must take into account the need for parents to have full time employment and hence more financial stability but also the need of children for more quality time with their parents.
Has child-centered research been taken into account by policy makers in Cyprus?

- We have had no child-centered research in Cyprus, at least, in the sense of an in-depth exploration of children’s views and experiences from their own perspectives (though official documents mention the need for such research).

- As civil society is becoming stronger in Cyprus there is more pressure on policy makers to take into account the existing evidence when developing policies.
How can research meet the needs of policy makers?

• We want to make the research and our recommendations as widely available as possible.

• It was important for us to align the research goals with the priorities identified in the National Action Plan; we hope that this will make it more likely that they will be taken into account.

• We are providing the research results and recommendations in various formats to address different audiences (e.g., executive summaries for policy makers; longer, more comprehensive reports for government departments, academics and researchers, etc).
How can research meet the needs of policymakers? (cont)

• We aim to provide both short term policy and long term policy recommendations rather than one or the other.

• We tried to implicate relevant government units, NGOs and other stakeholders throughout the duration of the program (e.g., as partners, by inviting them in presentations and meetings, etc); we also identified Members of Parliament who are sensitive to children’s issues and tried to establish a closer relationship with them keeping them informed about the developments of the program and asking them to play a role in the use of results when developing policies.