



## June 2014 | Lone Parents and Shame

Every month we invite a response to our short, 3 question survey. Our survey for June 2014 was in relation to shame experienced by those parenting alone or sharing parenting. The aim of the survey was to identify the situations in which people may have faced shame or embarrassment and any potential emotional effects felt by lone parents as a result of this.

### The Questions

1. In your opinion, do you think members of one-parent families experience shame or embarrassment because of their family type in Ireland today?
2. In what circumstances do you think this occurs?
3. As a member of a one parent family how do you feel about your family type?

### The Results

Figure 1

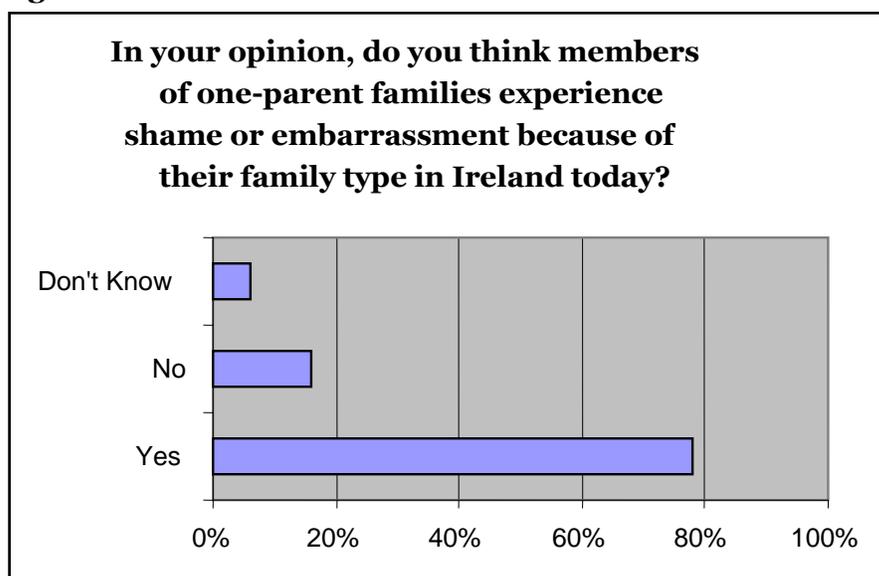


Figure one above shows that the majority (78%) of those surveyed think that members of one-parent families have experienced shame or embarrassment because of their family type. Another 16% do not think that lone parents experience shame or embarrassment and the remaining 6% stated that they did not know. Many respondents associated shame or embarrassment with social stigmas and financial strains.

*“We're stereotyped. It's an automatic assumption from people when you introduce yourself as a lone parent that you must be a 'scrounger' hell bent on taking the social welfare for everything you can. It's not often said out loud but there's a look, there's always a look, I've experienced that look many times and it's hurtful.”*

*“As the traditional family unit is still so central to the primary school curriculum, it almost feels at times as though you are having to defend your own personal family unit when it does not comply to the idea of what is “normal”.”*

One male respondent who is sharing parenting spoke about the shame and discrimination he has felt as a result of his gender.

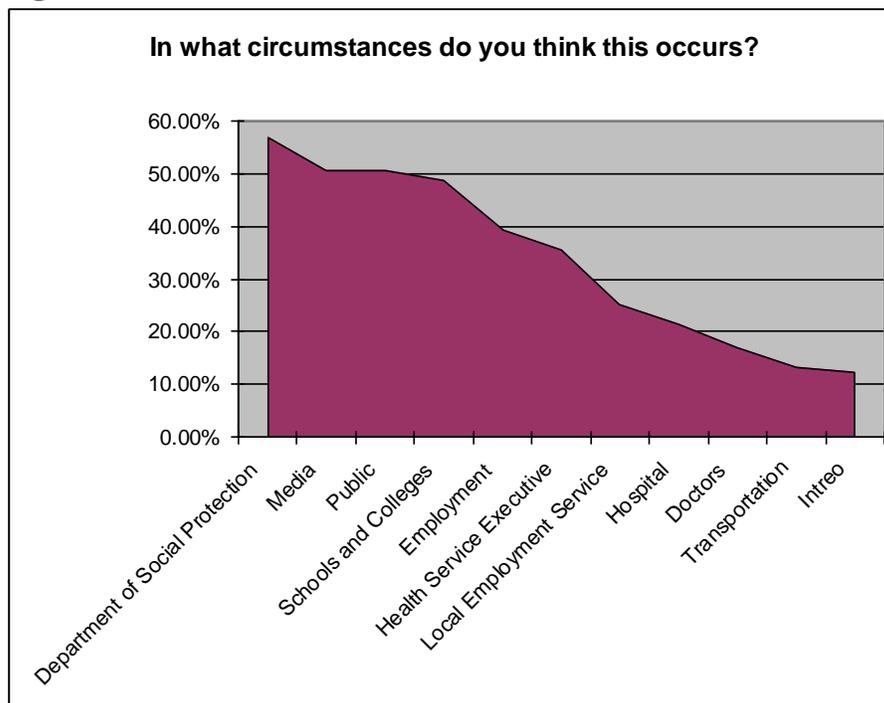
*“I am a lone parent with shared care arrangements of our child on a 50/50 basis. I have found myself to be marginalised as a result of my gender, particularly in a financial capacity. For example, the payment of child benefit and the single parent child tax credit automatically being afforded to the child's mother. Financial restraints preclude me from being able to afford providing any extra curricular activities for my child or with my child. Constantly having to say to my child “we can't afford that” is a source of shame/embarrassment for me as a father. Thankfully my child is understanding however this does not negate my personal feelings.”*

Others felt that shame was irrelevant and expressed personal contentment with their families.

*“I am proud of how I cope wearing both the mummy and daddy hat in our house - and the people who count, friends and family, often express positivity about our situation. The naysayers, who know nothing about us, count for nothing”*

*“There is no need to feel shame for doing the most rewarding job. I am proud to be a single parent because I know I'm doing a two-man job and doing it well.”*

**Figure 2**



The top four areas where people experienced shame or embarrassment were within the Department of Social Protection, from the media, public perceptions of lone parents and within the education sector. As shown in Figure two, 57% of respondents felt shame or embarrassment when dealing with the Department of Social Protection.

*“I feel that its the social welfare system that puts shame on one parent families.....we are treated very badly by those working in that sector...we are seen as beggars but all we want is enough to feed/clothe our children to a decent level.”*

*“I am a lone parent and was spoken down to in the social welfare office. I was made feel 2inches tall by the end of their interrogation when I was applying for one parent family payment.”*

*“Stereotyping has come right from the top. Joan Burton has dumped a whole heap of shame on us, she single-handedly has made me feel worthless.”*

Half of the respondents (50%) recognised the influence of negative portrayals of lone parents within the media which in turn results in negative public attitudes towards lone parents.

*“Constant bombardment in the media about single parents getting houses, getting special payments for this and that - all lies.”*

*“I recently read an article with the headline "Single mum caught stealing" or something to that affect. You would never see an article with the caption "Married mum caught stealing" or "Gay man caught stealing". I feel that this article portrayed single parents in a bad light and her marital/relationship status should not have been targeted in the headline as it leads to people forming negative preconceptions about single parents.”*

A large proportion of those surveyed felt that discrimination exists within the education system and lone parents are not properly supported to engage in further training or education.

*“I didn't get a course I wanted last year as apparently the work load was too much for a single parent.”*

*“I have been told in the past by the principal that 'unfortunately' they are seeing more and more kids from single parent families.”*

*“There is lack of support/encouragement for one parent families to achieve. I returned to full-time education, September 2013 and I feel excluded from participating further e.g. in the 2014/2015 academic year.”*

Despite the challenges that lone parents face, the majority (61%) reported that they are proud of their family type. Only 8% of those surveyed felt shame about being a lone parent and the remaining fell somewhere in between. It is clear that many people who

are parenting alone have learned to overcome negative stereotypes and focus on the positive aspects of being a lone parent.

*“I am proud that I escaped domestic violence. I have made a good life for my children, on my own. My children are well behaved, well educated. I work hard to disprove the stigma surrounding Lone Parents, but I find barriers everywhere. From the courts, to my ex, to the media and even my family. I hold my head high because I know I have done a good job!”*

*“I will not succumb to being shamed by society, especially Irish society. Raising a child or children alone, in a society the forces everyone to think that a 'normal' family is one that consists of a mother, father and children, is probably the most difficult thing a person can do. Therefore successfully raising my child alone against a tide of negativity and shame has made me a better, stronger, more resilient person and is something I (and I am happy to say my family and friends) are immensely proud of. It's not always easy though and sometimes the constant negativity and 'social norms' can wear a parent down.”*

*“I'm a single working mother, I work and sacrifice to give my child the best life possible. I get no breaks or time to myself. I'm proud that I am strong enough to do it. Single parents are among the strongest people in the world.”*

*“My family unit is myself and my son and the relationship we have is far too special to even begin to try and put into words. I believe I was meant to become a mother first to allow me to become the person I am today. I am extremely proud of the son I have raised and when people ask how I do it? I think of one of my favourite quotes: "What if I fall? But my darling, what if you fly?”*

In conclusion, it is clear from this month's survey that many people parenting alone face feelings of shame or embarrassment as a result of social stigmas which still exist in Ireland today. This can have a direct influence on parents' self-confidence and sense of worth. It is particularly concerning that lone parents have met with discrimination within the education sector, given the importance of education in improving future employment prospects. Society needs to become more understanding of the difficulties faced by lone parents and the varying circumstances that each individual faces. Negative perceptions need to be lifted so that all lone parents can have pride in themselves and their families and feel like accepted members of society.