

Voices for VI Children, Judith Richardson, columnist  
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**Title: *Why Does it Matter Who's Raising the Children?***

Ask children to draw a picture of their families. Each child gets to work. When the drawings are finished, we see that each child has drawn himself or herself standing next to several other people who live at home: siblings, a parent or two, even a cat or dog. Who's actually in each picture? Why should we care?

The reason to care is because family composition really does matter for each child's future. As the outcomes for today's children ultimately affect all of us as community members, let's take a closer look at children's families, here in the USVI.

Most-recent research on the territory's children (through age seventeen), is found in the 2007 US Virgin Islands KIDS COUNT Data Book, showing that:

- About a third of VI children -- 32% -- live in a family headed by two married parents. (The national rate is 68%.)
- 40% of VI children live in a family headed by a single mother. (The national rate is 32%.)

USVI KIDS COUNT '07 further shows that:

- The portion of children living in married-parent households has been slowly declining over time: 43% of VI children lived with both parents in 1990.
- The portion of children living in single-parent-headed families has been growing over time: 33% of VI children lived with single mothers in 1990.
- Single-mother families now make up 49% of all families with children. (Nationally, single-mother families make up only 18%.)

A major difference between USVI families and those living in the rest of America is that a much higher portion of VI children are being raised in single-mother families, and a much smaller portion are being raised by two married parents.

Okay -- but does family composition matter for children? If so, how?

Yes, it matters. Research consistently shows that children raised in single-mother families, in cohabiting relationships or even in stepfamilies have poorer long-range outcomes than those raised in stable families headed by two biological parents.

While all families face challenges in raising children, the double stress of limited income and limited time characterizes households headed by single parents. These two strains -- financial and emotional -- may account for real differences in the well-being of children raised in single-parent households versus those raised in two-parent households.

Researchers have found that even after controlling for family socioeconomic status, race/ ethnicity, and other background characteristics, children from never-married or divorced households are less likely to complete high school, and more likely to be in low-wage jobs as adults, than children from two-parent households.

These results impact all of us. Every member of the community has a stake in our children's potential -- and as a whole, the territory is diminished by the compromise or loss of children's future success, productivity and well-being, due to fragile family structure, or any other risk element.

What to make of this information? All of us in the community can learn more about how children and families are faring just now in the USVI -- and are encouraged to lend a hand, your interest, or your time to help make improvements.

For more information on the specifics of VI children's data vs. national rates, island by island, or over time, see the most-recent USVI KIDS COUNT Data Book, posted online at [www.cfvi.net](http://www.cfvi.net) (click on the KIDS COUNT icon at the bottom of the homepage), or call the Community Foundation of the Virgin Islands, at 774-6031 for an *Executive Summary* of its contents.