



# Single Parenting

Nearly one half of the children born in this country today will live in a single parent household at some point in their childhood years. The living and parenting arrangements of single parents are as diverse as the individuals themselves. Regardless of their unique situation, however, single parents everywhere face some common challenges. This guide provides tips and strategies for coping with challenges associated with single parenting.

## Organization

Single parents, by necessity, must operate on a higher level of organization than two parent families. It is crucial to streamline the organization of your time, responsibilities and household.

## Time Management

Managing time can be a huge challenge for single parents, especially those who are also working. To help simplify your life and save valuable time, consider the following tips:

- **Make “to-do” lists.** Make to-do lists and prioritize the tasks in order of importance. Ask yourself if everything on your list is essential. Consider whether your expectations are realistic and scale them down to attainable levels if necessary. Accept that some things may not get done.
- **Simplify tasks.** Purchase food that is easy to prepare, combine errands into one trip, and set aside a block of time to do tasks (e.g., returning telephone calls, paying bills, etc.).
- **Plan ahead.** Avoid waiting until the last minute to meet deadlines or fulfill obligations. Prepare your workspace for the next day; make to-do lists; lay out clothes; and pack briefcases, lunches and book bags at home the night before work. The more organized you are, the less time you will waste scrambling to get things done.
- **Get organized.** Keep all of your appointments clearly marked on one calendar and update it regularly. Schedule in work appointments, social obligations, birthdays, anniversaries, holidays and other important dates so you are aware of important events.
- **Use your time off to your advantage.** Cook and freeze meals for the week; fill your car with gas; take care of your laundry/dry cleaning, etc., so you have more time during the week when you have more demands on your time.
- **Enlist help.** Break up the household tasks and make them more manageable. For example, ask a trusted neighbor or friend to look after your child while you shop, or hire someone to mow your lawn. By getting the help you need, you can save time and concentrate on one task at a time.
- **Prioritize your activities.** If you feel overwhelmed with requests for your time and help (e.g., coaching your daughter’s soccer team, chaperoning your son’s field trip, volunteering for a local organization), choose those activities that are most important to you—and learn to say “no” to others.

## Managing Family Responsibilities

Managing family and personal responsibilities as a single parent can be challenging, but by planning ahead, staying organized, and keeping lines of communication open, it is manageable. Consider the following tips:

- **Make reliable dependent care arrangements.** Secure, safe, dependable child care arrangements are absolutely critical for single parents. When choosing a caregiver, take into consideration your child's unique needs, your budget and your scheduling needs. If you are confident that your children are being well cared for, you will have crucial peace of mind.
- **Plan for the unexpected.** Even the best-made care arrangements will have occasional breakdowns. These are difficult for two parent families, but can be absolutely chaotic for a single parent. As critical as your regular child care arrangements are backup care arrangements in the event that your regular dependent care arrangements fall through.
- **Spend quality time with loved ones—** A child needs to feel a sense of family and belonging. However, children in some single-parent households may have limited or no interaction with their other parent and his or her family. If this is the case, it is crucial to develop and reinforce a sense of family by having your child spend time with relatives and loved ones, such as grandparents, aunts, uncles or even close friends.
- **Keep the lines of communication open.** When there is only one parent as the emergency contact, it is vitally important that you can be reached easily. Make sure your child knows where you are at all times and make sure caregivers know how to reach you in the event of an emergency. Designate a family member or trusted friend who can also be contacted in the event you are unavailable.

- **Develop a united front.** Make sure caregivers, teachers and others who form your support network know your rules, discipline styles, etc. Keep in close contact with your support network to make sure you provide your children with a united front.

## Household Management

Getting your household organized is a tremendous time-saver and stress reducer. While this may initially require some time and commitment, it will ultimately help you gain control of your time and allow you to focus on what's important. Consider these tips for getting organized at home:

- **Use a family calendar.** Keep one calendar that includes all family members schedules, activities, commitments, birthdays, appointments, in one place.
- **Review the schedule of activities and commitments weekly—or daily if needed.** Each week—for example, on Sunday night—look over the activities you have listed on the calendar to make sure you haven't forgotten anything or over-committed yourself. This is also a good way to see where your time is being spent and what activities you may want to scale back.
- **Set up a central command station.** Designate one spot in your home for sorting mail, hanging up keys, paying bills, keeping the calendar, etc. Consider purchasing some inexpensive organization tools—a mail bin, pen/pencil holder, hooks, bulletin board, etc. to help you keep the area neat and organized.
- **Say “no” to clutter.** Clean out drawers, closets, cabinets, basement, garage to get rid of items you don't need. This will not only help you get organized but it will save you time that can be otherwise wasted looking for things.

- **Use checklists for chores, shopping, and other errands and responsibilities** Write down items needed from the grocery store on a designated pad of paper and/or create a checklist of weekly chores that can be checked off as they are completed. If your child is old enough, ask them to help you create the chore list—he or she may enjoy using color coding, stickers, markers, etc. to make the list. It's also a great way for you to evaluate what chores can be done less frequently or delegated out to others to help you make more time for yourself.
- **Enlist help from others.** Don't try to do everything. If friends or family offer help, take them up on the offer. Or, consider hiring outside help to assist with household responsibilities from time to time.

### Spending Quality Time Together

The life of a single parent can be very busy. You may be juggling work, home, and school in addition to parenting. However, one of the most important things you can give to your child is quality time with you. Consider these suggestions for spending quality time together:

- **Spend one-on-one time with your child** with no other distractions or people involved.
- **Enjoy being with your child in a relaxed, quiet way.** This can mean reading a book together, sharing a meal, going for a walk or bike ride, or playing a game. Quiet time allows you to focus more intently on each other, creating critical intimacy and trust.
- **Establish rituals.** Create rituals that celebrate your family. Particularly when a family has undergone major change, for example, a separation, divorce or death, maintaining traditions becomes something that can be depended on. They can be simple—such as a once-weekly family

dinner that all family members prepare and eat together or reading together each night before bed time—or more elaborate—such as holiday or birthday celebrations, vacation rituals, etc.

- **Let your child see your fun side.** While your child needs a parent, not a pal, ask yourself if you are allowing your child to see that you can be fun and interesting (as well as interested), and not just a parental figure. Share your excitement about hobbies you have in common or your enthusiasm for a new film. These are the ways your child begins to see you as a full person, not just a parent.
- **Develop common interests.** A child into baseball will enjoy talking with a parent who follows a favorite team. An art-loving child will appreciate a parent who can discuss the Impressionists or the modern movement.
- **Allow your child space.** Don't take it personally if your child isn't in the mood to have a close chat, or if he or she wants to be alone or spend time just with his or her friends. Allow your child the right to alone-time and privacy (within safe limits).
- **Set up rules for mutual respect.** Mutual respect is win-win for you and your child. You are helping your child feel good about him or herself, and you are modeling what you expect in return—for yourself and others in the family. For example, apologize when you are wrong, listen without interruption to what others have to say, and respect others' rights to privacy, property and independent thoughts.

## Focusing on the Positive

When you are struggling to keep all the balls in the air it can be easy to lose sight of your achievements. Experts continue to find evidence that our expectations—positive and negative—have physical and emotional effects on our wellbeing. It is important for you and your family to focus on the positives and successes in your lives, rather than dwelling the negatives. Consider the following:

- **Your Family:** Parents who view their single parent family as part of a spectrum of healthy, loving families raise children who are more resilient to narrower viewpoints. Focus on the benefits of single parenting, such as less conflict and stress in the home and the ability to make the choices you feel are best for your child without interference. If your relationship with your child's co-parent was not healthy, living as a single parent may allow your child to see and experience healthier relationships. Single parents often develop a stronger and deeper bond with their children. Single parenting is an opportunity to be a total parent for your child. It will challenge you—but you will be stronger for it.
- **Your Child:** If your previous living situation was filled with anger and conflict, your child will benefit from an environment with less stress and anxiety. And while a major change in your family situation, such as separation, divorce or death, will challenge your child—these experiences are valuable growth opportunities, helping your child learn essential coping skills and become stronger and more resilient. Your child will learn how to handle being different, giving him or her a better sense of self, greater empathy and more acceptance of diversity. He or she will have more opportunities to take on responsibility, developing self-reliance and pride in the value of his or her contributions. Your child may have the opportunity to have extended family and

friends play a significant role in his or her life, learning that close, supportive, healthy relationships come in all sorts of varieties.

- **Your Co-Parent:** Time and separation may help to allow you and your child's co-parent to interact more positively. Your child will see how people (you and your co-parent) can collaborate and work together effectively, despite differences. When it comes to showing respect, you are modeling what you expect in return—for yourself, for your child and for others in your lives. And most children can see a positive in having two opportunities to celebrate holidays, birthdays and other events.
- **Yourself:** You are one person doing the job of two! You will be stronger, more confident and more self-reliant. You will have excellent time management, organizational and problem solving abilities. You are in control of your home and your life, with the freedom to focus on your needs and those of your child and make the choices that are best for you both.

Know that you are being the best parent you can be and be proud of it. Don't beat yourself up for not being perfect—perfection is not realistic. And don't feel, or let anyone else make you feel, guilty or sorry for yourself. It is often easier to criticize yourself than to be constructive, but it is crucial to be accepting of yourself and the life you lead. Keep your expectations realistic and focus on your successes, not your failures.

## Communicating About Single Parent Issues

It is important for single parents to communicate with their children about issues associated with being a single parent family. By addressing issues and questions, you provide your child with accurate information as well as instilling the values that are important to you. This is particularly critical



when dealing with difficult issues such as separation, divorce, death, or abandonment. Consider the following strategies for communicating with your child about being a single parent family

- **Talk Early.** Children are very sensitive to behaviors and situations and often know more than you realize, sooner than you think they might be aware. It is important to address issues early, so you can provide your child with accurate information as well as instilling the values that are important to you. For example, if you are a single parent who has never had a co-parent, take the opportunity early on to talk your child about what makes a family, how families can be different and equally loving and whole, and share information about the child's absent parent (as appropriate). When co-parenting, talk to your child as soon as possible about any changes—e.g., a parent is moving to another state, marrying, having another child; changes in visitation/custody, etc. In addition, a child who has already been subject to a major family change such as death, divorce/separation, abandonment may be more sensitive to subsequent changes and may need more explanation and lead time to adjust.
- **Initiate the conversations.** You may need to be the one to start the conversation. How does your child feel about living with only one parent? If the event that led to being a single parent family is recent, how does he or she feel about what happened? Explore your child's thoughts, feelings and beliefs and correct any misconceptions.
- **Be open.** It is critical for a single parent to develop a relationship with their child in which the child feels comfortable expressing his or her feelings and asking questions freely. A child needs to feel his or her parent is open to questions and concerns.
- **Tailor the message.** Tailor the conversation to your child's level of maturity and understanding. Children of different ages—or even different children of the same age—need different information, have different sensitivities and require a different vocabulary. In most cases, it's usually best to keep explanations short, simple and straightforward. If you have more than one child you may want to talk to them separately and tailor your explanations to their individual developmental levels. This will also allow each to talk about issues and questions specific to them without being inhibited or interrupted by other sibling(s).
- **Be encouraging, supportive and positive.** Don't try to avoid topics because you are uncomfortable, unsure of the answer or don't have time to have the discussion. If you can't address the question right at that moment—if you're in the middle of the grocery store when your child asks why other families have two parents and his only has one, for example—that's okay. You might say something like "That's a really good question and I think it's important for us to talk about it, but now is not the best time. Let's discuss it in the car on the way home." Then follow through. If you don't have an answer, be honest about it, but try to find out, and when you do, make sure you tell your child. You might say something like "That's an interesting question, but I'm not sure what the answer is at the moment. Hopefully I will know soon and when I do, I'll let you know."
- **Listen.** Listening carefully to your child builds self-esteem by letting your youngster know that he or she is important. Listening, and responding to what your child is saying, can help you get a feel for what he or she thinks or feels about an issue, what he or she knows and can be a path to discussions.

- **Be honest.** Give your child straightforward and honest information and address all the issues. Honesty builds trust. Avoidance—in whole or in part—can lead a child to seek answers from another source, which may not be accurate and may not promote the values you want your child to have, or to make up his or her own answers. You don't have to give every single graphic detail, but cover the important points.
- **Be patient.** Allow your child to talk without interruption until he or she gets to the point. It may take your child a few minutes to state what is really on his or her mind. It may be tempting to jump in and move the conversation along more quickly, but resist and let your child set a pace that's comfortable for him or her. Your child may need some time to absorb and reflect on what he or she has learned. Let some time pass, then revisit the issue. This will allow you the opportunity to answer any additional questions.
- **Communicate with your support network.** Make sure caregivers and others who form your support network know your rules, discipline styles, etc. Keep in close contact with your children's teachers, caregivers, etc. to make sure you provide your children with a united front.

### Establishing Healthy Communication Skills

Time and other pressures may make it more challenging for a single parent to communicate. You may be trying to get everything done, protect your child from hurt or worry, or coping with your own emotions or issues. However, a lack of communication may result in confusion, misunderstandings, and the development of poor communication patterns within the family. Healthy communication is essential for families. Consider the following strategies to foster healthy communication skills in your family.

### Listening

Listening, and responding to what your child is saying, builds self esteem, can help you get a feel for what your child thinks or feels about an issue, what he or she knows and can be a path to important discussions.

- **Don't interrupt.** Allow your child to talk without interruption until he or she gets to the point. It may take your child a few minutes to state what is really on his or her mind. Focus on what your child is saying. Approach the discussion as an opportunity for you to learn something about your child.
- **Empathize with your child.** Listen without judgment and connect on an emotional level. For example, you might say, "I'm sorry if it made you feel left out that the other kids in class made father's day cards and you don't have a dad in your life. Your grandfather is a really important guy to you and loves you very much, would you like to make a card for him instead?"
- **Reserve judgment.** Keep an open mind and keep judgmental thoughts to yourself. Avoid blaming and criticizing and focus on coaching your child to constructively handle the issue at hand.
- **Show respect** for your child's point of view, even if you don't agree with it. Use phrases such as "I understand your point of view, but consider mine..."
- **Listen to what isn't being said.** Pay attention to your child's emotions and attitudes, voice intonation and body language.
- **Use body language** to indicate your interest and attention, and encourage your child to speak.
  - Keep up good eye contact.
  - Use body language, lean forward, nod your head, make acknowledging noises and encouraging gestures.
  - Relax, try not to fidget or seem tense or impatient.

## Talking

Make yourself available, talk with your child, and let him or her know that you are always there if he or she needs to talk.

- **Use “I” phrases** such as “I feel . . . I need. . . I would like . . .” This allows you to communicate your feelings in a non-threatening way.
- **Encourage open-ended conversation.** Avoid questions that will end up in a one word answer. Use open-ended questions that promote a response, such as “tell me about . . .” “what do you think about . . .”
- **Restate what your child has said.** Reassure your child that you heard and understood what he or she said by restating his or her comments and offering empathy, support and guidance.
- **Respond, but don’t react.** Be respectful, calm and positive. If the discussion is escalating into anger, take a short break from it. Agree on a set time to resume the discussion and be sure that you do.
- **Be specific.** Avoid generalizing statements such as “always,” “ever” or “never.” Stick to the subject; try not to digress into broad personality issues or revive past issues.
- **Avoid lecturing.** Kids generally don’t like to hear how things used to be or how you think they should be—and may tune you out.
- **Be positive.** Focus on your child’s positive points. Be specific, generous and public with your praise. Make sure that positive feedback outweighs criticism.

## Managing Emotions

Emotions—even negative ones—on their own, are not good or bad. But if they are expressed and channeled in negative ways, they can cause problems for yourself, your child and your family. If being a single parent family is the result of a major life change such

as death, divorce/separation or abandonment, you will need to help your child understand and deal with his or her emotions in response to that change. Even if not, helping your child learn to handle his or her emotions is a large part of parenting. Consider the following ideas to help your child deal constructively with his or her emotions:

- **Self awareness and control.** Emotions are not always easy to control—particularly for a child. Two crucial skills in managing emotions are self-awareness and self-control. A child needs to be encouraged to recognize and identify his or her feelings. This is especially true for emotions such as anger and sadness. Once the feeling is identified a person can then think about the appropriate response.
  - **Self-awareness** is being conscious of thoughts and feelings. Help your child learn to examine how and why he or she is feeling to better understand and manage these feelings. For example, talk to your child about his or her feelings, ask questions such as “why are you angry?” or “What is making you feel this way?” to encourage self-analysis. Encourage your child to do this on his or her own. Encourage him or her to learn to recognize their personal warning signs for negative emotions such as anger or sadness.
  - **Self-control** means stopping and considering actions before taking them. Help your child learn to stop and think before he or she acts or speaks in response to a strong emotion. For example, encourage your child to envision a stop sign when he or she is angry—and to take the time to think about how to react. Teach your child techniques to calm down such as counting backwards from ten to one; deep breathing; or just walking away.

- **Relaxation.** Teach your child relaxation exercises, such as breathing deeply from the diaphragm (the belly, not the chest) and slowly repeating a calming word or phrase like “take it easy.” Or to think of relaxing experiences, such as sitting on a beach or walking through a forest.
- **Positive thinking.** Remind your child that he or she is just experiencing some of the rough spots of daily life, help him or her focus instead on some of the positive aspects of the situation.
- **Problem-solving.** Identify the specific cause of the emotion and approach it head-on—even if it does not have a quick solution.
- **Communicating with others.** Angry people may jump to conclusions and speak without thinking about the consequences of what they are saying. Teach your child to slow down and think carefully about what he or she wants to say. Encourage him or her to listen carefully to what the other person is saying.
- **Managing stress.** Encourage your child to set aside personal time to deal with the daily stresses of school, activities, and family. Ideas include: listening to music, writing in a journal, exercising, meditating, or talking about his or her feelings with someone he or she trusts.
- **Changing the scene.** A change of environment may help reduce negative emotions. For example, if your child’s friends are angry frequently and/or make him or her angry, encourage your child to consider making some new friends who may contribute more to his or her self-confidence and well-being.
- **Distraction.** If your child just can’t seem to let emotions go, it can help to encourage him or her to do something distracting, for example, read or watch television or a movie

- **Model appropriate behavior.** If you are teaching your child to control their anger, make sure you practice what you preach. Show by example how you manage your own emotions.

### Resolving Conflict

A certain amount of conflict is a natural part of raising a child. Conflict can be difficult in any relationship. However, it is often particularly challenging for a single parent since there are no reinforcements to back you up or give you a break from the situation.

While it’s neither possible nor desirable to prevent all conflicts—families will disagree and quarrel—effective families get conflicts out in the open in a way that enables members to express themselves and feel heard, not criticized. It is a valuable lesson for a child (and adults) to learn that anger is an okay emotion and that people can be angry with each other and still love each other. Here are some tips which may make help you resolve conflicts constructively:

- **Determine the underlying cause of the conflict.** Think beyond the argument to determine the underlying issue. Frequent arguments about similar issues may indicate a need to re-evaluate some of the rules.
- **Pay attention to your child.** If the conflicts with your child tend to be spontaneous outbursts that have no central theme it may indicate that your child is seeking your attention.
- **Don’t attempt to resolve a fight when tempers are flaring.** In the heat of an argument, it may be difficult to agree on a reasonable solution. Instead of shouting, take some time to calm down. Agree to come back to the problem later, when you both have had time to settle down and think about the issue.



- **Set up regular discussion times with your child.** Having a scheduled time to talk together can be enormously helpful. A critical part of this is offering suggestions and ideas about changing or updating rules. Having a forum where even-handed discussions among family members can take place underscores your child's sense of being heard. When your teen knows you are listening, he or she is more apt to listen to you.
- **Seek outside help if necessary.** Should the conflicts with your child escalate, become more intense, or become destructive to your relationship, consider seeking help. Talk to your child's doctor or guidance counselor; or call the local YMCA/YWCA, your church or community center; or ask if your employer offers counseling services.

### Building Self Esteem

A lack of self-esteem can often be an issue for children in single-parent families. Many issues faced by single parent families—separation or divorce, abandonment, death or even simply feeling different—can be difficult for a child.

As a parent, you play an integral role in developing your child's self-esteem. There are many ways you can help to build your child's self-esteem; keep the following tips in mind:

- **Sincerity**—Be free with your praise, but make it sincere and selective. There may be a temptation to praise your child for every accomplishment no matter how small, but eventually these compliments will become meaningless. Rather, make sure the achievement was meaningful and give feedback about what you liked. For example, saying "That was a great catch you made in the second inning," instead of, "Good job," will do much more to help build your child's good feelings about him or herself.
- **Security**—Provide a loving, stable home environment that will help your child feel secure. Assure—and show—your child that loving, happy families come in a wide variety of shapes, sizes and colors.
- **Involvement**—By being involved in your child's activities—sporting events, school plays, etc.—you send the message that his or her choices and achievements are important. With your encouragement, your child is more likely to take part in activities that help him or her experience success.
- **Belonging**—Help your child to feel accepted and loved by others. Emphasize the importance of sharing, consideration and kindness. Incorporate positive role models into your child's life. Arrange for him or her to spend time with his or her non-custodial parent and the other parent's family. If the other parent is not part of your child's life, try to have him or her spend time with caring adult of the same sex as the absent parent.
- **Purpose**—Help your child realize goals that give him or her purpose, direction and a focus for his or her energy.
- **Trust**—Build your child's trust by keeping promises, being supportive and giving him or her opportunities to be trustworthy. If your child promises he will take a nap if you first play hide and seek, trust that he will.
- **Responsibility**—Have faith in your child's judgment and abilities. Within the bounds of safety, allow him or her to perform tasks without constant supervision.

- **Decision-making**—Allow your child to make or influence decisions compatible with his or her age and abilities. For example, if your child shows an interest in taking karate, encourage him or her to take lessons. After giving it a chance, he or she doesn't like it, allow your child to decide whether to continue or find another hobby.
- **Acceptance of failures and mistakes**—Make your child feel comfortable, not defeated when he or she makes mistakes or fails. Praise your child when he or she has done something well of his or her own. And when he or she fails, let him or her know that problems and setbacks are a normal part of life. For example, if your child doesn't make the swim team, let him or her know that you are proud of the effort as long as he or she did his or her best.

### Structure, Limits and Discipline

Structure, routines and consistency and predictability help make your child feel secure. Limits, boundaries, discipline and consequences keep your child safe. For a single parent, these issues can be challenging—especially since you, and you alone, have to be the enforcer. While establishing discipline and rules can be difficult at first, it will make life easier for you—and healthier for your children—over the long-term. The following strategies may help:

- **You're the boss.** Your child needs to be a child and needs you to parent him or her. Your child should not be your confidant, peer, or equal partner in running the household. Adult problems, responsibilities and issues are too much of a burden for a child, regardless of how mature he or she may seem.
- **Be clear about rules and expectations.** A child needs structure and limits to feel secure and be safe. Set house rules and personal expectations and make sure they are well known to all. You may even want to post house rules in a common area. It may help to get input from your child when making the rules. For example, when setting your child's curfew, decide together on the time he or she must be home. This may help your child be more responsible in upholding the rule.
- **Consistency, predictability and structure.** This is important for all children, but can be particularly critical when the single parent family is due to a major change in your family situation. For example:
  - Your child should know where you are and how to reach you at all times.
  - Try to maintain a reasonably consistent schedule (for example during the school week).
  - Believe in the rules you set, be consistent and stick with them. Most likely your child will come up with many reasons why “this one time” you should bend the rule, and occasionally, there may be a valid reason, but consistency is usually the best policy.
  - Follow through on promises and any commitments that you make. Your child needs to know that he or she can count on you and you will be there for him or her. Expect the same of your child.
  - If you are co-parenting, create a consistent, predictable, straightforward sharing schedule so the child always knows where he or she will be and who will be taking care of him or her. Also, try to work with your child's other parent to ensure that rules, expectations and discipline are consistent across households.

- **Consequences.** The most effective lessons for teaching children are consequences, and the seriousness of the consequence should match the crime. A teen who stays out two hours after curfew needs a strong enough penalty to underscore the seriousness of the offense, perhaps being grounded for two weeks. Not completing an assignment—and getting a poor grade as a result—is an example of a natural consequence that for some children may be the best teacher.
- **Pick your battles.** This is true for any parent, but particularly for single parents who have less time, and no backup, to enforce lots and lots of rules. Just as you should de-clutter your home, de-clutter your rules—prioritize and choose what is really important to you. Overreacting to actions and attitudes that don't actually hurt anyone, including your child, shifts the focus away from what really matters. For example, if you really don't like your child's latest music or fashions, but they are not offensive or inappropriate, you may choose to let it go.
- **Remember the power of praise.** Remember to compliment your child for handling life well. Verbalizing what a good job he or she is doing can do wonders for your child's confidence—and his or her willingness to cooperate with you.

### The Co-Parenting Challenge

While a single parent may not be living with the other parent, that doesn't always mean he or she is parenting alone. Co-parenting is a term used to describe parents who are not living together but are sharing parenting responsibilities for their children. Co-parenting is about putting your own issues and interests aside and doing what is best for your child. It is asking the question, "How are my children's needs going to be met?" How you and your co-parent behave

and act towards each other and towards your children is the most important determinant of how your children will feel and cope, not just now but throughout the rest of their lives.

Here are some basic strategies that may help you to have a constructive relationship with your co-parent:

- **Cooperation:** Create a parenting plan. Work with your child's other parent to create agreement on important issues, such as:
  - Financial, medical, transportation, religious, education and other essential issues
  - Consistent discipline, rules and rewards between households
  - A consistent, predictable, straight-forward sharing schedule so your child always knows where he or she will be and who will be taking care of him or her
  - Advance notice about changes in plans and reasonable flexibility in accommodating each others' needs/changes
  - Communication about co-parenting issues (e.g., custody, visitation, support, etc.) and problems to ensure they are worked out in private and NEVER discussed in front of the child
  - Agreement that the child's time with the other parent is valued and valuable
  - The child should be encouraged to resolve issues with his or her other parent directly. Listen and empathize with your child, but where appropriate try to allow your child to work out his or her issues without interference.
- **Respect:** Regardless of your personal relationship with your co-parent (and, perhaps, his or her partner or spouse) speak respectfully about him or her in front of your children. When it comes to showing respect, you are modeling what you expect in return—for yourself, for your child and for others in your lives. If you need to vent, find an adult to listen to you and don't do it in front of your children.

- **Communication:** Communicate appropriately, clearly and often with your child and your child's co-parent. By communicating in healthy ways, you are teaching your child how to do so as well. Even more importantly, you are building a relationship of trust with your child that he or she feels comfortable coming to you with issues. Studies show that children who learn these crucial lessons early in life are more likely during the later years to trust in and discuss tough issues with parents.

Many communities offer classes on co-parenting and mediation, which can be helpful in developing skills to establish and maintain a constructive co-parenting relationship.

### Establishing Support

Support is crucial for single parents. Get as much help as you can from as many sources as you can. Practical and emotional support can make a critical difference in successful single-parenting. Let everyone who is willing to help do so.

- **Establish a good support system** Raising a child can be difficult with two parents. It can be overwhelming for one. It is critical for single parents to have backup from caring, reliable individuals. A good support system will give you peace of mind, a healthy and appropriate outlet when you need to vent, help when you are overwhelmed, time for yourself. It may include extended family, a consistent "play group," neighbors, friends, or single-parenting groups. If your child's other parent is absent, a caring adult of the same sex as the absent parent is an invaluable asset. Your child needs good role models of his or her gender to pattern him or herself after, and needs to learn to relate to genders opposite of your own. A positive role model can fill those needs and be someone with whom your child can discuss gender-specific issues that he or she may find easier to talk about with a person of the same sex.

- **Develop a social life separate from your child.** This could include an exercise group, similar interest group, church organizations, etc. These are also good sources for support.
- **Seek professional help if serious problems develop.** Sometimes life throws you a curve ball. Seek help for yourself and/or your child if you need it.

### Taking Care of Yourself

"Single parent" and "taking care of yourself" may seem to be mutually exclusive. But burnout is a very real possibility for single parents. Keep in mind that taking care of yourself is the best way to take care of your child. Your physical, mental and emotional health and well-being is an integral part of being an effective parent. Consider the following tips.

- **Set aside some time for yourself each day to do something you enjoy,** whether it's reading, meditating, taking a bath or simply watching television.
- **From time to time, use a vacation day from work** to spend time with family or friends, or just relax alone at home.
- **Eat a balanced diet and drink plenty of water.** Whether at work or at home, drink plenty of water and try to eat a healthy diet. When you're busy, it's easy to eat fast-food or junk food that is not good for you. Take time out to make healthy food choices by packing healthy lunches and snacks and having plenty of water at your disposal. When your body and mind are healthy, you will be more productive.
- **Schedule physicals and dental appointments regularly.** If possible, have your doctors send you reminder cards to avoid missing an appointment. Don't let health issues slip because you are too busy at work. It may lead to more serious conditions.



- **Exercise regularly.** If you don't have time for a formal workout every day, try to fit exercise in elsewhere—take the stairs instead of the elevator, park a few blocks away from work and walk the rest of the way, etc. *Note*—Always consult a doctor before beginning any exercise regimen.
- **Get enough sleep.** Most adults need seven to eight hours of sleep per night—though it varies among individuals. Get enough to feel well-rested and alert throughout the day.
- **Make a date with yourself.** Write the appointment in on your calendar—and use the time to try a fun new activity, or to do a favorite hobby that you haven't had much time for.
- **Re-evaluate your goals regularly.** It's important to periodically revisit to keep yourself focused on your priorities, make sure you aren't spinning your wheels on unnecessary distractions, and readjust as your roles and goals change.

## Managing Stress

Even if you are doing a great job being a single parent, stress is inevitable. To help combat stress, keep the following tips in mind:

- Stay positive
- Practice healthy habits
- Make time to relax
- Focus on constructive problem-solving
- Avoid isolation
- Join a support group
- Try relaxation techniques
- Seek professional help

In addition to the tips previously discussed, practice simple relaxation techniques, join a yoga class, or if your stress is excessive, seek professional help. Do not use alcohol and drugs to reduce stress. If you feel the need to use drugs or drink in excess, seek help from a trusted friend or professional.

For more information on parenting please refer to the other guides in the education series.

## Helpful Resources

### The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP)

141 Northwest Point Boulevard  
Elk Grove Village, IL 60007  
847-434-4000  
www.aap.org

The AAP dedicates resources to the mental and social health, safety and well-being of infants, children, adolescents and young adults. It provides parents with state of the art answers to medical and parenting concerns. Its web site provides education, advocacy and a list of resources covering a wide variety of child care issues. Parents can also call, write or e-mail the AAP for information on services or to order publications.

### American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP)

3615 Wisconsin Avenue, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20016  
202-966-7300  
www.aacap.org

This organization helps parents and families understand developmental, behavioral, emotional and mental disorders affecting children and adolescents. The web site offers fact sheets for parents and caregivers and information on child and adolescent psychiatry.

### Parents Without Partners

1650 South Dixie Highway, Suite 510  
Boca Raton, FL 33432  
561-391-8833

Parents Without Partners is an international, nonprofit membership organization devoted to the welfare and interests of single parents and their children. Chapters run programs balanced between educational activities, family activities and adult social/recreational activities. The web site provides chapter information and single-parent resources.

**A Single Parents Network**

[singleparentsnetwork.com](http://singleparentsnetwork.com)

Provides an online hub for single parent information and support including articles, information, web sites, government resources, online discussion forum support boards and more.

**The National Parenting Center**

22801 Ventura Boulevard, Suite 110

Woodland Hills, CA 91367

800-753-6667

[www.tnpc.com](http://www.tnpc.com)

This web site offers online articles written by parenting authorities, live chat and a list of book reviews and related web sites. Topics addressed include body image, communication, drug use, sex, suicide, education and family relationships. Members receive a monthly newsletter.

**Family Education Network**

[www.familyeducation.com](http://www.familyeducation.com)

This web site offers message boards, as well as tips and articles on a variety of family subjects, including advice from parenting, health and medical experts on school violence, education values, discipline, date rape, sex education and more. It also provides links to related web sites.



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