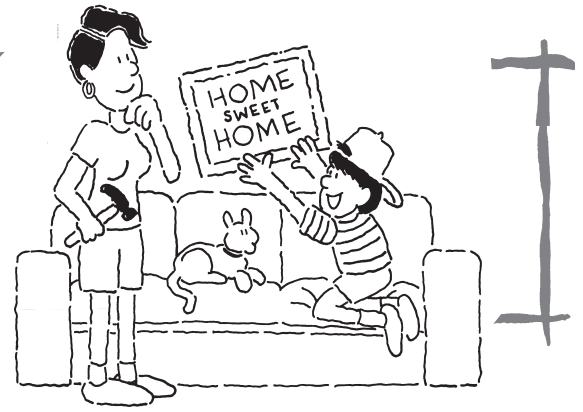


Single Parenting



Single-parent families are more and more common in today's society. While raising children alone isn't easy, children in single-parent homes can grow up just as happy as children in 2-parent homes. Read on to find out how single parents can better cope with the special challenges of raising children on their own.

Ways to cope

Single parenthood can bring added pressure and stress to the job of raising children. With no one to share day-to-day responsibilities or decision-making, single parents must provide greater support for their children while they themselves may feel alone. The following suggestions may help reduce stress in your family:

Get a handle on finances. Learn how to budget your money. Know when your paycheck or other income will arrive, and keep track of household bills. Do what you can to improve your finances. If you need a job, contact employment and temporary agencies for help. If you need more education, consider getting your high school diploma, a college degree, or other special training.

Talk early and often. Let your children know about the changes in the family. Sit quietly with your children and allow them to talk about their feelings.

Find support and use it. Don't try to handle everything by yourself. You will need the support that family and friends can give. Get to know other single parents through support groups. Your pediatrician can also be a great source of help and information.

Take time for family. Being a single parent can be overwhelming. Set aside some time each day to enjoy your children. Spend quiet time playing, reading, working on arts-and-crafts projects, or just listening to music together. Your time is one of the most important things you can give to your children.

Take time for yourself. Time spent away from your children is important for you and for them. Being a single parent doesn't mean you can't have an adult life. Get a babysitter and enjoy some time alone or with friends. Do things that you like. Go to a movie. Find a hobby.

Keep a daily routine. Schedule meals, chores, and bedtimes at regular times so that your children know what to expect each day. A routine will help them feel more secure.

Maintain consistent discipline. Divorced or separated parents should work together to discipline their children the same way. Check your local library for books on parenting. Local hospitals, the YMCA, and church groups often sponsor parenting classes. Learning good ways to handle your children's behavior will reduce stress for all of you.

Treat kids like kids. Though being a single parent can get lonely, try not to treat your children like substitutes for a partner. Try not to rely on them for comfort or sympathy.

Stay positive. Be aware that your children will always be affected by your mood and attitude. They will need your praise and your love through hard times. It's okay to be honest about your feelings of sadness and loss, but let them know better times lie ahead for all of you.

Take care of yourself. This is a difficult time for you, too. Exercise regularly, eat healthy, and get enough rest so you can better deal with stress. Visit your own doctor on a regular basis.

Find good child care. Good child care is essential for your children's well-being and your peace of mind. Finding quality child care may be one of the most difficult tasks you will face. Keep the following in mind:

- *Never* leave your children home alone. Find someone you trust to take care of them while you are working.
- Don't rely on older brothers and sisters to babysit for younger siblings.
- Be careful about asking new friends or partners to watch your children, even for a short time. They may not have the patience, especially if a child's behavior becomes difficult.
- Children need to be cared for by an adult with proven experience in child care. The best way to make sure your child is getting good care is to visit the child care center or watch your babysitter when he or she is with your children.

Your pediatrician can offer advice on finding the best child care for your family. Your local city or county government may also have a list of licensed child care centers or homes.

Divorce and separation

Most single-parent families are the result of a divorce or separation. For some children, divorce can be just as hard as the death of a parent. It can take a long time for children to heal. Some children may feel they are the reason for the divorce and dream about getting their parents back together.

The age of your children may also make a difference. Preschoolers may regress in such things as toilet training or may have nightmares. School-aged children may feel angry, guilty, or sad. Teens may worry about moving away from friends or not having money for college.

If you are considering separation or divorce, you may find it helpful to discuss it with your pediatrician. A visit with a counselor may also help by giving you and your children a chance to talk about any problems and to plan for the changes ahead.

Dating and the single parent

Be choosy about which dates meet your children. Try to form a solid relationship before bringing someone new into your home. Overnight guests may confuse your children. If you are dating someone special, talk to your friend about your children before they meet. When you feel the time is right, let your children meet your new partner. Don't expect them to be close right away. Give them time to become friends.

If your partner is new to child rearing, he or she may feel awkward with your family. Watch how your friend gets along with your children. Your partner should be patient and understanding. Before leaving your children with a new partner, be sure that he or she can be trusted.

Talking with your children

Talking with your children is a very important way for you to help each other through tough times. Being able to share fears, worries, and feelings can make your children feel safe and special. The more often you talk, the more comfortable you all will feel. While your children may have lots of questions, don't feel you have to have all the answers. Sometimes just listening is more helpful than giving advice. If needed, don't hesitate to get help from your pediatrician or a family counselor.

The following suggestions may be useful in talking with your children about the changes in your family:

Be honest. If your spouse has died, your children may not understand what has happened. Young children often see death as a temporary situation. It is very important not to talk about death as "going away" or "going to sleep." Your children may believe that the parent will come back or wake up or that they will die while asleep. If you are going through a divorce, talk about it in simple terms. Try not to blame your ex-spouse or show your anger. Explain that parents sometimes choose to live separately. Give your children all the comfort they need to feel safe and loved.

Make sure your children know they are not at fault. After a separation, divorce, or death of a parent, children may blame themselves. They may feel alone, unwanted, or unloved. Let them know the changes are not their fault, that you love them and won't leave them.

Talk with your children about their fears. Confusion about a parent leaving or dying can be scary for children. In their minds, if one parent can leave, maybe the other one can too. They may think that if they behave better, the parent will come back. It is important to talk about these fears and to be as reassuring as possible.

The information contained in this publication should not be used as a substitute for the medical care and advice of your pediatrician. There may be variations in treatment that your pediatrician may recommend based on individual facts and circumstances.

From your doctor

