

Single parenting



Tip Sheet 5

Parenting in a single or sole parent household is different in many ways from parenting in a two parent household. Some people choose single parenting, others have it thrust upon them. There are those who choose to rear a child alone, those who decide to leave a two parent relationship and to become a sole parent and those who are left behind with the children. Each path has its own issues to deal with.

This Tip Sheet uses 'he' and 'she' in turn. Change to suit your child's sex.

How is single parenting different?

- While doing things on your own allows you the freedom to make your own decisions it can be very hard. There can be times when you miss, or wish you had, someone to share the workload and the feelings of parenting.
- Single parents are more likely to involve their children in the day to day running of the family. Children may have more responsibility for sharing the chores as well as caring for themselves.
- Single parents often discuss things with their children that adults in a two parent household often share together. For example, talking over what to buy, where to go for holidays.
- Many parents and children have to get used to children moving between the homes of both parents.
- Children from single parent households who have been given a lot of say at home sometimes have difficulties at school because they expect to be treated in the same way by teachers.
- Often there is less money to manage with than in two parent homes where many have a double income.
- Parenting a baby alone can be very stressful for any parent. Babies need 24 hour care and parents need breaks, someone to talk to and someone who can provide help and support.

What parents need to think about

- Children need to be 'children' and sharing the load shouldn't take over. They need time to do the things that are usual in a child's world, such as being with friends, playing sport, doing homework or just dreaming.
- Children need to know that the parent is the grownup and has the responsibility to look after them.
- Children need to know that you need to have adult company too. It is not a good idea to rely on your children all the time for companionship.
- For parents who have just separated, feelings can be very strong. This is also an extremely difficult time for children. Seek support from other family members and friends, rather than talking with your children about what is worrying you.
- Sometimes it can take a while for children to settle down after a family break-up and children may need extra help and understanding from parents, other family members, carers and teachers.
- Children are often torn between loving both parents who live apart. They can feel disloyal and confused when they love both parents strongly and have to listen to 'put downs' from parents about the other. This is very distressing to children for they often want to defend the other parent but are afraid of getting into trouble. It is most important to keep children out of issues between parents.

any family, any day, any thing

- Some children are more likely to misbehave for the parent who has them most of the time and does most of the disciplining and routine day to day things. It is often easier for children to behave better and enjoy spending a short time with a parent doing lots of fun things.
- Give thought to and make arrangements for your children's future in case anything should happen to you.

Discipline

- Discipline in a single parent household has both pros and cons. It is often easier for one person to make the rules and carry them out. On the other hand, carrying out the discipline can be demanding and you might sometimes wish you had the support of another adult to make it easier.
- Check with other parents if you are unsure about what limits are reasonable. Have rules in your house and make it clear what will happen when rules are broken. Then follow this through if needed. Mean what you say.

Note: *If parenting alone, it is helpful to have support from an adult who is the same sex as your child but be choosy about who this is. You need to be confident that they can be trusted to care for your child.*

Visiting the other parent

- It can be very difficult for parents to accept the excitement and joy a child shows when he is about to see the other parent. Feelings can run high for the parent who does the daily discipline and work, and has the main responsibility for a child only to watch that child go off for a fun time.
- *Children want to be able to love each parent without feeling guilty.* Let your child plan and enjoy time with the other parent if you can. It will make a difference for your child to see that you are pleased about this contact.
- Children who have no contact with the other parent need to have some understanding of where that person fits into their lives.
- Make changeovers as natural and friendly as possible. If you are unable to do this, try to avoid contact with the other parent, eg pick-up at a neutral place or with a friend present.

- Allow time for your children to 'fit back into home' when they return. Some children take a few minutes, others hours, and some take days to adjust. Some act out, some become quiet and sad. Some need time to get used to the 'swapping'. They may feel sad about leaving the other parent and guilty about feeling this way. They may feel disloyal to you. They might be upset if they have not had an enjoyable visit.
- Talk happily about what has been happening at home while they have been away but not so they will feel they have been left out. Allow them to talk about what they have been doing. Don't pressure with questions, as this may make them close up to protect the other parent.
- Avoid using your children to find out what your ex-partner is doing and don't use children to carry messages between parents.

Note: *If your child takes days to settle and this doesn't seem to improve over time, you may need to get professional help.*

Growing up in a single parent household

Growing up in this type of home can be a very positive experience for children, who often have a close and special relationship with the parent. Sometimes children envy their friends in two parent households, but it may help them to know that all families have their ups and downs.

- Following the loss of a parent and the family unit as they knew it, children require time to grieve. They need to feel supported in the range of emotions or behaviours they experience.
- Children in single parent households are often more mature because of the extra responsibilities they have. Let them know you feel proud of their achievements.
- Make sure they have time to spend with their friends.

- If you are very close to your children, it might be hard for them to leave home when they are ready or they may feel guilty about leaving you on your own. Let them know that you have your own life to live and that you will be proud, not unhappy, when they grow up and are ready to make their own choices.
- Take new relationships slowly. This may mean some sacrifices on your part. If you decide to have a partner for yourself, it can often create problems for your children. They may show this with behaviour and feelings, no matter how old they are. Talk things through with them, listen to how they feel and let them know that they are still just as important to you.

Reminders

- **Being in a single parent home can be a very positive experience for children.**
- **Help your children feel proud of their lifestyle.**
- **Children need to know where they come from and who their parents are.**
- **Children need to be able to love both parents without feeling guilty.**
- **Make sure you have your own life so your children can see you are happy.**

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Parentline 1300 30 1300

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- Being a Dad
- Being a Mum
- Stepfamilies
- Families that work well
- Discipline (0-12)
- Discipline (teens)