

TIPS FOR SINGLE PARENTING

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by Janet Frank, Ph.D.

Part One

One need only to look at our coworkers and neighbors to realize that there are many family arrangements other than the traditional nuclear family. There are many myths that surround the topic of the non-traditional family. One may be surprised to learn that the number of single parent families has doubled in last 25 years. Fifty-nine percent of children will live in a single parent home at least once, according to US Census estimates. Other myths include that children in single parent families suffer emotionally and do poorly in school academically and behaviorally, or that children in single parent families have low self esteem. These beliefs are now thought to be oversimplified and outdated.

Many factors come into play regarding the psychological well-being of a child in a single parent home. This includes the level of cooperation between divorced parents, and the quality of attention shown to the child. One study by Nelson (1993) actually found that income level is the deciding factor related to children's self-esteem. Regardless, no child in a single parent family is necessarily doomed to a life of maladjustment. The best approach as a single parent is to model self-respect and self-nurturance, and to establish a support network. This article will offer some resources and tips on single parenting, and articles to follow will address topics such as additional stress management tips and some dating do's and don'ts.

The National Organization of Single Mothers (NOSM) is a nonprofit group which was founded by Andrea Engber, a nationally syndicated columnist, in 1991. Its mission statement is "to meet the challenges of daily life with wisdom, wit, dignity, confidence, and courage." She began publishing SingleMOTHER, a bimonthly newsletter which soon had a readership of over 12 million people. The fastest growing group is what she refers to as MOMs (Mothers Outside of Marriage). Members are single mothers by choice or by chance, separated or divorced, widowed, and adoptive mothers. NOSM offers help and advice, and the support in knowing that single mothers are not alone and can link up with others for support. Their website provides multiple links regarding topics such as positive parenting, adoption, money and time management, the absent father, handling stress, custody, visitation, and more. For more information, check out www.singlemothers.org.

Ms. Engber elaborates on five traits of successful single mothers, which have worked their way into the mission statement:

1. **Wisdom.** This includes accepting that life is unpredictable. It does not entail knowing everything about custody, finances, or child rearing, but it does entail knowing when you have choices and when you don't. It involves a certain amount of acceptance that there are some things you simply cannot change, such as the other parent's input.
2. **Wit.** Research has shown that humor can actually assist in the healing of many kinds of physical and emotional maladies. Ms. Engber emphasizes that humor also helps a single parent distinguish between "fun time" and when you "mean business" with your children. She advises laughing some daily, both with and without your children.
3. **Dignity.** Forgo the stereotype of the single mother who lives in the trailer park. Ms. Engber has observed that all single mothers possess a "matriarchal dignity." She described how even a mother on welfare felt significantly less intimidated when seeing her caseworker simply by dressing nicely and presenting as very polished.
4. **Confidence.** To make decisions alone, you have to feel in control. This is greatly helped by taking care of yourself, through adequate eating, exercising, and stress management. Confidence grows with support from others.
5. **Courage.** Scary things confront us all, but things such as career changes and new relationships take on their own significance to a single parent. With confidence that has been developed, it's not as hard to muster up the courage to try new things.

Remember that you do not have to be courageous or funny or knowledgeable all the time! However, adopting these traits can help you organize your life around the realities of single parenting and your own strengths, rather than the expectations of others.

So what are the realities of single parenting? One glaring reality is that single parenting is a non-stop, demanding, often exhausting job. One question that single parents often have is how to make quality time for their children, despite their exhaustion. Many single parents feel the need to be "superparents," participating in elaborate activities with their kids, and putting their own needs on the back burner due to their own sense of obligation and guilt. A more reasonable approach is to be realistic and set goals for paying quality attention to your children that are not going to exhaust you. Here are some suggestions.

First, congratulate yourself for thinking of your children's needs in the first place! Second, you must replenish your own energy by seeking support in the community, in friends, family, or organizations such as NOSM. Next, try some simple ways to find special time without putting excessive strain on yourself. You would be surprised how far saving that "special seat" next to you at the table will go, or saving the seat beside you for TV time, or a short bedtime story. Quality time can be as simple as telling your child about something during the day that reminded you of him or her. Compliments are not time or labor intensive, but they are tremendously valuable. Tell your children what you like about their personalities.

Keep projects simple and relaxing. Put on your child's favorite song and sing together. Comb each other's hair. Do each other's toenails. Play a game of Uno, or a simple board game. It is important to accept your own limitations rather than pushing yourself beyond them. Each issue of Gainesville Parent usually has simple and creative suggestions for activities with kids. Take a look at the January 2002 issue, which offers some ideas for simple activities with children.

Be careful not to let the need for discipline interfere with quality time. Your child may have to go to bed 15 minutes early because of some misbehavior, but that does not have to interfere with or undermine your quality time together.

Reassure yourself that you are a "good enough" parent to your child, and do not be afraid to be honest in sharing when you are tired. You cannot be a good caretaker unless you are taking care of yourself.

Lastly, it is important to note the recognition of single fathers. Many of the challenges that face single mothers represent areas of difficulties for single dads, too, only they tend to get even less support from employers. The website www.fathermag.com offers some specific information geared toward fathers. The tips offered in this Gainesville Parent article, while slated toward women, are applicable to single parents of both genders and are not meant to exclude.

Tips for Single Parenting, Part 2
by Janet Frank, Ph.D.

Have you ever noticed how "the other guy" often seems to have it so well put together, even as a single parent? Chances are they have gained mastery over some of the stress management and organizational techniques that can help single parenting seem less daunting. Last month's article helped to challenge some of the myths about single parenting. This article goes a bit further, and offers some practical tips that can help make your family life run more smoothly.

Single parenting can be a demanding, exhausting job. However, there are several ways to organize your life to help you prevent burnout. Andrea Engbert, the founder of National Organization of Single Mothers (NOSM), suggests that you avoid wasting time regretting failures or feeling guilty about things you don't do. Here are some tips:

1. Get a day planner and make sure your next day is mapped out before you go to sleep. This enables you to feel secure that the important things are noted, and you can fall asleep more easily. Review it upon awakening to get your plan of action started.
2. Learn to prioritize. Do the things that are most important first. One way to help you do this is to distinguish between "want" and "need." Do you need to do that load of laundry right this minute, or is it just something you would like to get done? Avoid catastrophizing. Always ask yourself, "Will something horrible happen if I don't get to this right now?" Most of the time, the answer will be, "no."
3. Part of organizing means only handling each piece of paper once. Use a file system of some sort.

Useful bins include those labeled, “Urgent,” “ASAP,” and “To be filed.” Get a filing cabinet and some manila folders. Do not avoid some of the scary, but essential elements, such as planning your death, obtaining life insurance, and choosing a guardian for your kids.

4. Delegate all you can. There is no shame in asking for help, and there is nothing wrong with expecting your children to pitch in. Even a five-year-old can help with simple things such as setting the table, feeding the dog, or folding towels. Give up on perfectionism, from yourself, or from others. Consider hiring a consultant to help you organize if things feel too out of hand. Check out www.lifeorganizing.com.

5. A kitchen timer can be your best friend, with multiple uses. Try setting the timer for 15 minutes a night during which time everyone does some specified household chore. You’d be surprised how much gets done. You can also use a timer to allocate and structure undivided attention time for your child. But when the timer goes off, it’s time to move on to something else. Use the same technique for your own private time. Timers are also useful if your child has to be in time out. Usually one to two minutes per year of age will suffice.

6. Save short errands to do in a once a month marathon. Ask a friend to come along.

7. You can make the most of driving time by listening to books on tape. If your child is in the car, consider bringing a few music tapes they will enjoy, or chatting to catch up on their day. Use your judgment about safety regarding traffic flow and what activities you choose for the car!

8. Make lists together of what everyone likes to eat. Shop together to eliminate complaints about undesired meals. This also kills two birds with one stone-- you get the shopping done, but it’s family time (This of course depends on your children’s ages and abilities to conduct themselves appropriately). Meals do not have to be elegant affairs. An occasional frozen pizza is OK for most families.

9. Accept that some things are out of your control, such as traffic jams or long waits in doctors’ offices. Use the time in an office to read or write. Use heavy traffic for time to reflect, breathe, or relax. While stuck in line at the store, use the time to people watch. When frustration starts to rise, remind yourself that even a long line usually only adds five minutes to the wait.

10. With relatively young children, put them to bed by 8 or 8:30. Try going to bed yourself at about 9 or 9:30, but get up at 5 or 5:30. This gives you a little bit of alone time at each end to do things that are important to you.

11. Post household rules if your kids are preteens or younger. These serve as helpful reminders. You can be as general or specific as you like. Try, “Do not do anything that will create more work for someone else.” Then you can discuss how this has implications for eating, tidying up, and so on.

12. Try to use weekends for you and your child. Leave work at work if you can.

13. Live in the here and now. You and your child can make any activity fun, even cleaning the child’s

room, if your attitudes are right. Be sure to be yourself, however. Don't try to be both mom and dad. Don't try to keep a stiff upper lip if you tend to be a more relaxed disciplinarian, or don't try to fake emotions if you tend to be more cool. If you are genuine, it will benefit both you and your child.

14. One way to stay organized and manage stress is to avoid giving in to your child's every whim. So many single parents feel guilty, as if they must in some way make up for the absence of the other parent. This tends to lead to more battles for control, and more wasted time. You are the parent. Your word is final. By being firm and consistent, you will raise children who are more secure and will not need to carry around your extra guilt as adults. Children actually like structure and predictability, and it prevents them from becoming anxious and agitated.

15. Feel free to be unique. Some single parents find it easier to do a load of laundry every day. This prevents battles over what to wear, and keeps the tasks more manageable. One single parent put all socks in storage and bought every child identical white ones. You can be as creative as you like or need. Remember, it's your family.

16. Seek support in other single mothers, in family, in friends, in the community, in mental health professionals, in NOSM.... but seek support somewhere. If you feel strongly, be vocal about single parenting by contacting your representatives, newspapers, magazines, and TV stations. Do not be afraid to stand up politely but firmly against negative remarks. If you are proud of yourself and your family, others are more likely to treat you with respect.

Tips for Single Parenting, Part 3

Dating Do's and Don'ts

The needs of children are many and constant, but even the most devoted single parents must understand they have their own lives to care for. Single parents cannot hope to adequately care for their children if they are not taking care of themselves. Single parents and their children are not less of a family, and single parents are not any less deserving or desirous of outside relationships and comfort than their married counterparts. Some single parents may find it difficult to let go of others' expectations about dating. However, what works for your married friends or even for other single parents may not work for you.

Get rid of the "guilties," as Andrea Engber calls them. If you are going to feel guilty about getting a sitter and going out, then you are not doing your children any favors. Children want and need happy parents. This goes back to taking care of yourself.

Starting slowly is highly recommended. Dating is all about getting to know someone. Many people coming out of long relationships have forgotten this. Once the initial excitement dies down, a person's true colors begin to show. Some nice men and women will still seem nice; others will turn out to be disappointments. If you dive head first into dating because you are seeking a replacement parent, your chances of disappointment, and likely disaster, are huge. Identify what you want in a partner. This is

often more difficult than identifying what you don't want.

Don't rush into commitment. Many single parents feel as if they have to justify a romantic relationship into more than it is, with the first person to whom they feel attracted. You are allowed to have a casual relationship with someone. Just recognize it as such, and limit your encounters to time away from the kids.

Furthermore, don't lose yourself in a new relationship. In an exciting new relationship, it's easy to forget your own interests or needs. For instance, if you hate football, don't spend every weekend watching it with your new partner.

In the early stages of a relationship, it may often be appropriate to keep your kids in the dark. Your children do not need to meet every single person you date. If you are going to the beach for the weekend, kids don't necessarily need details. Simply saying, "I'm going out of town with a friend," will do. There is a fine line between keeping details to a minimum and being secretive, however. Being matter of fact about going on a date makes it OK and honest. Children are likely to respond to a parent's level of anxiety.

Be clear on your own values first. Questions may come up about issues such as premarital sex. You should be able to explain to your children (in terms and details appropriate for their ages, and to the extent that you perceive them to be anxious) why and under what conditions you believe this is appropriate. If you cannot offer this explanation, then don't have extramarital sex. Behave as you would want your children to when they grow up.

Keep your priorities straight, and do your best not to make decisions based on your hormones. Sometimes the Little League game is more important than the weekend out. However, don't use your kids to avoid intimacy. Sometimes the weekend out is more important than the game.

When you are on a date, be on a date. It is a common experience for single parents to sabotage relationships and act out their guilt by talking about their kids the whole night. Keep it to a minimum, especially in the beginning.

Boundaries are important. If your date turns out to be someone special, the roles can expand gradually as you grow closer. If you and your partner share feelings about wanting a commitment, let him or her share in family activities a little at a time, starting with neutral activities. Look back at past articles on step parenting for additional tips about introducing a partner.

Don't panic if your kids treat your partner horribly. They may like your partner perfectly well, but act out their fear of losing you or their resentment at having to share you. Acknowledge their feelings, but gently reassure them that sometimes you like to spend time with your friends, just as they do.

Even if a partner has become a significant part of the family, don't stay in a relationship if the person is not right for you just because it's someone your kids care about. Change and loss are part of life. If the

bond is really strong, there may be a way to maintain a connection.

Most importantly, though, is that before you jump into the dating scene, be sure that your best relationship is with yourself. There are countless stories of single parents who, after separation or divorce, were able to develop new skills in themselves through returning to school, or discovering hobbies, skills, or abilities they never knew they possessed until they were in a position to explore them. Don't fall prey to the belief that only a mate can fulfill your dreams.

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