

Growing Up with One Parent-

How Your Children can Benefit.

Social Worker

Child-upbringing is a major concern of all parents. Such a responsibility can be said to be felt most by single parents who need to play the double role of mum and dad to the children. The fear of loneliness, meeting various demands of daily living and the uncertainties of daily living without a partner can make it difficult for you to see and achieve a positive family environment for yourself and the children. The traditional view that single parent families are not beneficial to children can easily reduce you to despair.

However, be it a two-parent or one-parent family, both family patterns can offer a healthy living environment provided that each type of family realises its own strengths and resources and builds on these to create an effective family.

Stephen Atlas, a single parent and author of *Single Parenting – A Practical Resource Guide* said, “From my personal experience and comments from other single parents, I have found that a single parent family can offer its children many benefits.”

The Home Environment Is Less Tense And Hostile And There Is More Unity And Consistency

Where there is tension and bitterness between both parents, consistency in family rules is often lacking. Children learn to manipulate one parent against the other to meet their immediate desires. Such unhealthy ways unless discouraged can cause difficulties in future relationships with others. As single parents, you may be more free to offer support, help and acceptance to your children, hence providing greater security and consistency vital for their growth.

Opportunities For Working Together, Sharing And Growing

Where single parents encourage children to take part in problem-solving and activities planning, the family will grow closer in understanding and support for one another.

This is particularly useful for single parents who do not have full-time partners to consult. You need the cooperation of your children. In sharing your feelings and needs with each other, individual members of the family achieve greater satisfaction and security for having a “say” in the family.

The Extended-Single-Parent-Community

With the increasing awareness of the occurrence and needs of single parent families, many single parent organisations such as Parents Without Partners (PWP) in the United States and the Single Parents Encounter (SPE) group in Singapore have been formed. These groups offer members a sense of belonging and mutual support in facing similar problems

and challenges. Both parents and children can gain support and help through joining these groups. Interacting with other children from a similar family background can help your children to develop a more positive outlook to their own situation. Besides, these groups offer the families opportunities for relaxation and recreation which may be limited if the family remains isolated.

Here are some practical tips on how to help your child deal with the physical and emotional demands of life with one parent.

Try To Bring Some Order To Daily Living

One way to start dealing with a lot of emotional chaos is to look for some order in day-to-day living.

1. Work towards a comfortable routine at home. Let your child/children know when you'll be at home and what the arrangements are for the meals, babysitting etc. Be consistent.
2. If your children are old enough involve them in planning and decision making. This will ease your work-load especially if you work fulltime. However, do not over-load youngsters with responsibilities. Give them time to adjust. Children should never be made to feel that they are in any way to be blamed or that they must now carry an adult load.
3. Money may be your biggest hurdle. Be honest with your children about your financial situation. Let them know where you stand on money for clothes, entertainment and such. Work out together plans for minimizing expenses.
4. Try to include others into your small family. Handling the family alone is a heavy responsibility. Try to draw on the support of relatives, friends and fellow single parents. This can give your children a greater sense of "family" too.

Don't Run Away From Emotional Problems

It must be recognised that children are easily affected by changes in the family. After a family break-up or a loss, a child often feels he has lost both parents. One is absent, the other is preoccupied with loneliness, fatigue and guilt.

1. Help a youngster to express his feelings. Set aside some time on a regular basis for family chats. Often, this is neglected because of your pre-occupation with household chores. But "talking out" helps foster a happier home.
2. Your feelings about the child's other parent and your new social life, may touch a youngster deeply. Feelings of guilt or loneliness can be taken out on your child. Try to start life afresh-together. Remember though, that you have the right to some activities of your own. Help your child to understand this too.

3. Watch for behaviour signals. Losing a parent, moving to a new home or school can hurt a lot. Moodiness may set in. School work may slip. Give your child time to adjust and the support that he needs.

In striving to build life anew with your child/children, it may be helpful to watch out for the following mistakes often made:

Trying too hard

This can lead to frustrations and eventually burn-out if you get caught up with every single detail at home. Relax. Remember that children are active and ever changing in their ways and attitudes.

Expecting too much

Don't dump your unfulfilled dreams on your children. Let them discover for themselves, their strengths, abilities and interests so they can grow at their own pace.

Making comparisons

Don't compare your children with another. Each child is unique. Avoid comparing yourself with other parents who seem to be doing a better job. Parenting styles are as varied as situations.

Feeling guilty

This is the hardest mistake to avoid. Parents are too quick to accept responsibility and easily blame themselves when something goes wrong. Go beyond guilt. Find a constructive remedy. However, parenting is probably the hardest job you will ever undertake. You learn by doing. As one parent said, "The secret of good parenting is to do the best you can. You combine love, patience and faith and hope that these will be enough."

References:

Stephen L. Atlas: Single Parenting, A Practical Resource Guide.

Journal of Parents Without Partners: The Single Parent May/June 1966.

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