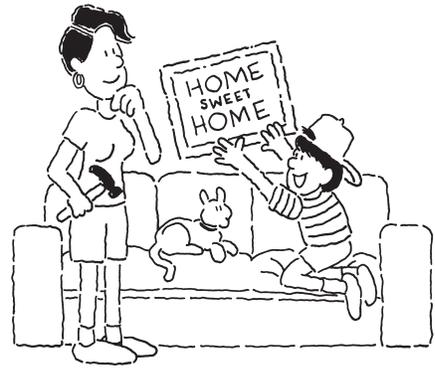


# Single Parenting

## Part I What You Need to Know



Single-parent families are more and more common in today's society. One of every four American children lives in a single-parent home. While most single-parent homes are the result of divorce, many parents are raising children alone for other reasons as well. Some parents may be alone due to the death of a spouse. Others choose to have or adopt a child without a partner. Whatever the circumstances, single parents cope with unique issues and challenges.

### A death in the family

Losing a parent is one of the most traumatic events that can happen to a child. A child under 5 years of age cannot understand that death is permanent. Older children may have an understanding, but will have many questions they may be afraid to ask. Where did Daddy go when he died? Why did he die? Who will take care of me if you die? Children can react to death in many ways. Some will be quiet and sad. Others may be angry, guilty, or refuse to believe the parent is gone. It's important to accept your child's response, whatever it is. If signs of sadness or anger continue, talk to your pediatrician. He or she may recommend professional counseling to help get the healing process back on track.

### Unplanned pregnancy

An unplanned pregnancy brings great change. The job of caring for a new baby is not easy, especially for single parents. Those who work may feel they aren't able to spend enough time at home with the baby. Money can be tight. Finding affordable child care might be hard. Be aware that help is available. Family, friends, and religious and community leaders are your best resources for support. If you need to find a job, employment agencies and temporary services can help. You may also qualify for government programs such as Head Start, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Women, Infants, and Children Supplemental Feeding Program (WIC), and Earned Income Credit (EIC).

### Single-parent adoption

It is increasingly common for a single person to adopt a child on his or her own. Adoption can bring special challenges to parents. The child may be a baby just a few days old, or she could be school age. The adopted child may be of another country, race, culture, or from an abusive background. As a result, adoptive families can easily feel different from other families. The differences are real, but the rewards of working through these issues can be great. Working with your pediatrician to prevent and solve problems can be very important to your child's happiness and success.

### Divorce and separation

Nearly two thirds of all single-parent families are the result of a divorce or separation. For a child, divorce can be just as hard as the death of a parent. A long period of grief and mourning can be expected. The age of the child also plays a role. A preschooler may regress in such things as toilet training, and may develop new fears or nightmares. A school-age child is more likely to show anger and feel guilty or sad. He may also do poorly in school. A teenager may worry about moving away from friends or not having money for college. No matter the age, some children feel responsible for the divorce of their parents and dream about getting them back together.

Divorce or separation often leaves parents angry with each other. During disagreements with your child's other parent, stop and ask yourself: How will this affect my child? You may disagree with each other, but try to set aside your differences for your child's sake. Use the following tips to avoid problems:

- **Never force your child to take sides.** Every child will have loyalties to both parents.
- **Don't involve your child in arguments** between the two of you.
- **Don't criticize each other in front of your child.** Even if you find out the other parent is saying bad things about you, explain to your child that people sometimes say mean things when they are angry.
- **Discuss your concerns and feelings with your child's other parent** when and where your child cannot hear.
- **Don't fight in front of the children,** especially about them.

If you are considering separation or divorce, you may find it helpful to discuss it with your pediatrician or ask for a copy of the American Academy of Pediatrics brochure *Divorce and Children*. A visit with a counselor may also help by giving you and your child a chance to talk about any problems and to plan for the changes ahead.

### Talking with your child

Talking with your child is a very important way for you to help each other through tough times. Being able to share her fears, worries, and feelings with you can make your child feel safe and special. The more often you talk, the more comfortable she will feel. Be patient as you listen to her questions. You don't 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 child about the changes in your family.

- **Be honest with your child.** If your spouse has died, your young child may not understand what has happened. Be careful what you say. 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 child may believe that the deceased parent will come back, wake up, or the child may think that she 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 child all the comfort she needs to feel safe and loved.
- **Make sure your child knows he is not the cause.** Children will often think that it's their fault that one parent has left. After a separation, divorce, or a death of a parent, children may blame themselves. They may feel alone, unwanted, or unloved. Let him know the changes are not his fault, that you love him and won't leave him.
- **Talk to your child about his fears.** Confusion about a parent leaving or dying can be scary for your child. In your child's mind, if one parent can leave, maybe the other one can too. He may think being away from a parent is temporary and that if he behaves, the parent will return. It is important to discuss these fears with your child, and to be as reassuring as possible.

## Find good child care

Good child care is essential for your child's well-being and your peace of mind. If you are a working parent, finding quality child care may be one of the most difficult tasks you will face.

*Never* leave a child home alone. Find someone you trust to take care of your children while you are working. Don't rely on older brothers and sisters to babysit for younger siblings. Even the most reliable brother or sister does not have the maturity to be responsible for a younger sibling on a daily basis. Also, 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 the 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 child.

Your pediatrician can offer advice on finding the best child care for your family. The local city or county government in your area may also have a list of licensed child care centers or homes. Ask your pediatrician for the brochure *Child Care: What's Best for Your Family* from the American Academy of Pediatrics. It includes a checklist of what to ask and what to look for when choosing child care services. You may also find the AAP book *Caring for Your Baby and Young Child: Birth To Age 5* helpful.

## Custody

All children need a place where they can feel truly at home. Although the parent who lives with the child takes care of the day-to-day needs, the parent without custody should remain as involved as possible. He or she can still help with homework, go to athletic or other after-school events, and contribute support.

Cooperation between parents is very important for a child's long-term well-being. Remember, it's the job of both parents to stay involved in their child's life. Work together to arrange a flexible schedule for visits. Neither parent should be kept from taking part in raising the child. Make sure your child knows that it is okay to love both parents.

## Dating and the single parent

Be choosy about which dates you introduce to your children. Try to form a solid relationship before bringing someone new into your home. Particularly, overnight guests may confuse your child. If you are dating someone special, you may not know how to present him or her to your child. Talk to your friend about your child before they meet. When you feel the time is right, let your child meet your new partner. Don't expect them to be close right away. Give them time to become friends.

If your new partner is new to child-rearing, he or she may feel awkward with your family. Observe how your friend gets along with your child. He or she should be patient and understanding. Before you leave your child with a new partner, be sure that he or she can be trusted.

## A new life

Raising a child on your own isn't easy. Single parents face unique problems, but children in single-parent homes can grow up just as happy as children in two-parent homes. Providing a loving, supportive home for your children is the most important factor in helping them grow up well-adjusted and happy. By seeking out the information provided here, you've taken the first step to adapting to the changes in your life. Making the right choices for you and your children will help all of you live a new and rewarding life together as a family.

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

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