

THRIVING AS A SINGLE-PARENT FAMILY

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Most people would agree that family is what makes our lives meaningful, our most valuable resource. Family is multi-dimensional: it's what we're born into, develop out of, and continue to create throughout our lifetimes. Family carries on long after we are gone. Because of the increase in the rates of divorce and separation, today's family often includes children, stepchildren, and half-siblings; husbands, wives, ex-husbands and ex-wives; parents and step-parents; and a host of extended family members including grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins and in-laws.

Whether a mother, father or grandparent heads the family, single-parent families share many strengths and challenges. Among the important strengths derived from being part of a single-parent family is learning to work together. This fosters resilience, independence and competence. One of the foremost challenges is learning to become more flexible to be able to confront new and changing circumstances while maintaining important values. Like all parents, single parents need to help their children be strong, optimistic, and enthusiastic about life; and to develop good self-concepts, good relationships, and good coping skills.

Single parents can achieve these goals by adhering to certain *principles, attitudes, and methods* that are important to all families, and which can be adapted and modified to fit their circumstances. What's most important is to recognize that you can grow and develop strong, positive, constructive, and emotionally connected lives together no matter what form your family might be.

Take some time to assess what's really important to you and what you really want. It's easy to get distracted from your values by the day to day stresses and future worries. However, what carries you through is keeping in mind your *values* and the *positives* in your life. Find ways to implement these values and to keep practicing them until they are integrated into your every day life. This takes time. You don't achieve your objectives with one try. You have to keep working at it.

One important value to nurture in your family is *mutual respect*. A good way to learn this is to practice good communication skills. Ask everyone in the family to agree to not be critical of each other and share his or her feelings instead. Always emphasize how important it is for all family members to understand their own feelings and those of other's. You can model this skill by working hard when you listen to your children, no matter the subject, and take their feelings into consideration when making family decisions. Explain that good listeners do two things: first, they listen before expressing their own perspective; then, they acknowledge the other person's feelings – what the other person said – before speaking him or herself. When you express yourself, you try to take ownership of your feelings. This fosters mutual respect. Family members need to respect each other even when they disagree.

Along with the importance of *respect* and *good communication*, here are five other goals to work toward:

1. *Stay flexible*. As a single parent, it's important for you to be able to cope with transition and change. You may already be in the midst of this process, dealing with the circumstances that have led you to become a single parent. To best handle this transition and master new ones, develop and maintain a can-do attitude. Keep positives in mind, recognize your strengths and be realistic about what you can do. It's also helpful to develop a resource system that enhances your family's security and stability, and to feel confident that you can count on your resources when you need them.
2. *Don't try to do it all yourself*. Recognize that you can't do everything single-handedly, and try to be realistic about what you can accomplish. Learn to share the load with your family. To accomplish this, communicate to your children that your family is a team. Hold weekly family meetings to enhance the family's decision-making process. By doing this, you will improve your

- children's capacity to cooperate by listening to them and considering their points of view. If you involve your children in the process of deciding on family rules, your family life will run more smoothly.
3. ***Balance work and play.*** Playtime is important for children, and scheduling structured playtime with them helps you all grow as a family. Make sure that you save time for play and don't let work (household chores or professional duties) interfere with these play times. If it's hard for you to relax, learn some relaxation techniques to help you cope with stress, and share what you learn with your children. Allow each member of the family time to pursue his or her own interests separately from the family –and make sure you take time for yourself as well.
 4. ***Acknowledge your children's bond to their other parent.*** Though you may have problems relating to your ex-partner, you need to encourage your children to honor their relationship with him or her and be supportive when the children are under the other parent's care. The better you can communicate with the other parent, the happier your children will be and the better they will cope.
 5. ***Celebrating family rituals*** enhances everyone's sense of continuity and stability. Try to continue to celebrate traditions from your former two-parent family, and incorporate them into your new life along with more recent rituals that are unique to your present-day family.

These are only some of the principles and skills described in my new book, **50 Wonderful Ways to Be a Single-Parent Family** (New Harbinger, 2003). Each chapter is short, easy-to-read, and full of practical advice. I include brief vignettes and suggestions for incorporating the skills into your daily life. Practice is essential – the more you and your family use the skills, values, principles and methods found in my book, the more satisfied you will be with your family life and with yourself. Enjoy.

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