



# American College of Pediatricians

www.BestforChildren.org

## Patient Information Handout Series

### Tips for Single Parents

#### **Establish healthy every day habits to help your children thrive**

- Try to stick to consistent routines with mealtimes, bedtimes, chores, and other family functions. This will help your children feel secure and know what to expect. You may be tempted to let your children stay up late to squeeze in more time with them, but regular sleep routines are important for children.
- Take time out for fun time with your children every day, such as playing a game, talking a walk together, or reading together. Devote your full attention to them and avoid distractions.

#### **Be consistent with discipline and boundary setting**

- Having high expectations for your children's behavior is a powerful motivator for them (see [GoodParent.org](http://GoodParent.org)).
- This is especially challenging when you are exhausted from all you are trying to juggle in life or when you are at the "end of your rope" with frustration and don't have anybody to relieve you. Anytime you feel like you are at a point where you are responding to your child's misbehaviors out of anger or frustration, give yourself a "time-out" first to calm down before you deal with your child.
- Avoid making excuses for your children or withholding discipline due to guilt. You will provide security to your children by not letting misbehaviors "slide" and your children will actually be happier and better adjusted if you maintain consistency.
- Clearly explain your disciplinary expectations for your children with their caregivers. You all need to be on the "same page."

#### **Make Family Mealtime a priority**

- Try to find at least five times each week when you can eat a meal together with your children.
- Turn off the TV and put down your phone!
- Being consistent with family meals is often more challenging for the single parent but this will help your children to see that you value your family unit. This can be a very special time to promote family connectedness.
- For more ideas on being successful with family mealtimes, see [How to Have a Healthy Family Table](#) Handout at [acpeds.org](http://acpeds.org).

#### **Avoid "Parentification"**

- With the absence of a partner, it may be tempting to treat one of your children like a surrogate spouse or peer, and go to him or her for emotional support or even counsel on adult matters. However, a child does not have the emotional or intellectual capacity to substitute for an adult partner and this is an inappropriate burden to place on a child.

- Seek support from adult friends, family or your religious group. Despite your busyness, don't isolate yourself! Model for your children having a connectedness with others.
- Help your children develop individual identities that are independent of you by resisting the temptation to draw them in deeply to your personal issues. Strive to have a balance between meeting their needs for affection but not smothering them.

### **Build a support structure**

- Don't try to handle everything alone! Create a network of trusted friends or family members to help with responsibilities like childcare and carpooling.
- Consider connecting with other single parents and even trading babysitting responsibilities with them to save money.

### **Dating as a Single Parent**

- When kids predate your dating, use caution and wisdom to help your children deal with insecurity of how this new relationship will affect them. Moving slowly with a new romantic relationship will generally help your children to be less resistant. If you are considering starting to date, you may want to ask people who know you well if they think that you (and your children) are emotionally ready.
- Continue to spend daily quality time with your children and acknowledge their emotions about your new relationship.
- Consider carefully if the person you are dating is good "parent material." Delay encouraging a close relationship between your children and your dating partner until the relationship is stable and serious.
- Cohabiting with your boyfriend/girlfriend can be very destabilizing to the relationship and to your children, especially if you cohabit with successive partners.
- If you are moving towards marriage, commit to pre-marital counseling and seek to learn about how to create a successful blended family.

### **Help your children work through their difficult emotions**

- Children in single parent homes have often experienced loss. The pain of the past often leads children to be guarded and may cause a tremendous fear of the future. These painful emotions from the past must be dealt with so that your children can grow to trust and move on.
- When your children ask about changes in the family or about the absence of the other parent, answer in an honest and age-appropriate way. Avoid making negative, malicious comments about the other parent. Your children's identities are linked to their relationship with each parent.
- If you have divorced, consider enrolling your children in a local program to help your children process their difficult emotions such as Divorce Care for Kids (see [www.dc4k.org](http://www.dc4k.org) to find a group in your area).
- Try to think of positive things to say about the other parent, as this is typically pleasing for children to hear. Avoid putting the other parent down in front of your children and encourage your children to respect the other parent.
- If the other parent is involved in your child's life, do what you can to encourage a healthy relationship. Show your children by your words and actions that you want them

to have good experiences with the other parent. Don't compete with the other parent for your child's affection, particularly by buying them things or easing up your discipline, household rules and expectations.

- Parents need to work through their own painful emotions so they don't communicate anger and unforgiveness to their children and so they can help their children resolve their own struggles. Remember that your children are innocent parties in the midst of this conflict and it is unhealthy for them to be exposed to parental hostility or bitterness.

### **Dealing with the Other Parent**

- If children travel between households, it is crucial to strive for excellent communication with the other parent. Good cooperation between households typically results children being better adjusted and better behaved. This will also help decrease the potential for your children to manipulate and try to "play you" against each other.
- Put your differences aside and focus on being good parents for your children.
- Remember that you cannot control what happens at the other house; you can only control your own actions and words toward your child. Make them count!
- If your child gives an account of abusive activities at the other parent's house, first go to the parent in a non-accusatory way by politely relaying to them what the child is reporting to you. If this fails to correct the situation, then go to the authorities.
- If you and the other parent have significant problems working together, then consider co-parenting counseling.

### **Opposite Sex Children**

- Seek out positive, responsible adults of the opposite sex who might serve as role models for your child.
- When your child is nearing puberty, it may be helpful to ask a trusted same-sex relative to talk with them about issues regarding sexuality. Consider asking that relative to take your child through some type of sexuality education program, such as [Passport 2 Purity](#).

### **Help from Above**

- Many single parents find beneficial support in a faith community.
- Spiritual resources may help you and your children achieve forgiveness and find strength and grace for your journey.

### **Recommended Resources**

- ✓ [Dating and the Single Parent](#) by Ron Deal
- ✓ [My Single Mom Life: Stories and Practical Lessons for Your Journey](#) by Angela Thomas
- ✓ [The Single Dad's Survival Guide](#) by Michael Klumpp
- ✓ [The Single Mom's Guide to Keeping it all Together](#) by Elsa Kok Colopy
- ✓ Focus on the Family ([focusonthefamily.com](http://focusonthefamily.com))
- ✓ [Divorce Care for Kids \(www.dc4k.org/parentzone\)](http://www.dc4k.org/parentzone)