Single parenting

Summary

- There are different reasons why a person becomes a single parent.
- Single parenting differs from dual parenting in many ways, but the most common difference is that single parents may involve their children in more decision-making.
- Children may have more duties and responsibilities around the home from an earlier age, simply because there isn’t another adult around.

Single-parent families are different to families with two parents living under the same roof. There are different reasons why a person becomes a single parent. They may choose this lifestyle, they may have separated from their partner, or perhaps their partner has died. The challenges faced by the single parent vary according to their circumstances, but there are also common experiences that are shared by most single-parent families.

Single parenting and dual parenting

Single parenting differs from dual parenting in many ways, but the most common difference is the way in which the parent interacts with the child. In dual-parenting families, the mother and father usually decide together how to run the household, while in single-parent households, issues such as holidays or major family purchases may be more likely to be decided with the children.

Other common differences include the following:

- Children of single parents may have more duties and responsibilities around the home from an earlier age, simply because there isn’t another adult around.
- The single parent may feel stressed because they try to be the perfect parent and the sole breadwinner when there are only 24 hours in every day.

Children and single parenting

Some of the common problems faced by children in single-parent households include:

- The need for ‘extra hands’ around the house may sometimes reduce the time a child can take part in typical children’s activities such as hanging out with friends or playing.
- If a child is used to having a near-equal say in the household, they may clash with teachers and other authority figures who expect unquestioning obedience.
- The child may not appreciate that their parent needs adult companionship at times.
- In separated families, the child may feel torn between their two parents and feel they must ‘pick sides’ – this is especially the case if the parents are hostile towards one another.

Single parenting problems

Some of the common problems faced by single parents include:

- The child is more likely to misbehave for the day-to-day disciplinarian than for the parent who lives outside the home.
- It can be hard work to be the only disciplinarian in the house – you may feel like you’re the ‘bad guy’ all the time.
- You may feel grieved if your child envies friends with two parents at home.
- A single parent may lack the opportunity to compare ideas and discuss solutions to problems. They also do not have the option to delegate responsibility of certain decisions to the other parent.
New relationships may be difficult, particularly if your child is suspicious or jealous.

A lonely parent may cling to their children for support and company, making it harder for the child to eventually leave home.

The demands of income earning, child raising and housework mean the single parent may have little or no time for themselves.

Contact issues with single parenting

Common issues facing separated or divorced families include:

- The single parent may (even if not deliberately) make the child feel guilty for having fun with their other parent.
- Some parents involve their children in their marital disputes, instead of discussing the issues in private.
- Some separated parents find it difficult not to fight at changeover time, which can place the child under stress.
- Some parents ask their child about what they did or who they saw during the visit (perhaps asking about their ex-partner’s new partner).
- The child may take some time – from a few hours to a few days – to settle down again after visiting their other parent.

Positives for the single parent and child

Some of the positives of a single-parent household include the following.

- A child from a single-parent home who is loved and supported has no more problems than a child from a two-parent home.
- Whether or not the child uses their free time constructively (for example, reading or playing sports) depends on discipline, family routine and quality time between parent and child – not whether the child has one or two parents living in the house.
- The child is typically mature and responsible.
- The parent is typically self-reliant and confident.
- The relationship between parent and child is close.
- Single fathers are more likely to use positive parenting techniques than married fathers.
- Single-parent families are less likely to rely on traditional gender-specific roles than two-parent families.
- Single parents tend to rely on positive problem-solving strategies rather than punishment or discipline when faced with difficult child behaviours.

Where to get help

- **Parent Line** Tel. 13 22 89 a phone service for parents and carers of children from birth to 18 years old. Confidential and anonymous counselling and support on parenting issues.
- **Council of Single Mothers and their Children Victoria** Tel. (03) 9654 0622 or 1300 552 511 outside metro Melbourne.
- **Mensline Australia** Tel: 1300 78 99 78 information for Dads and Fathers
- **National Council for Single Mothers and their Children** Tel. (08) 8354 3856 or 1800 758 150
- **Relationships Australia** Tel. 1300 364 277 services include: counselling, mediation, dispute resolution, relationship and parenting skills education.
- **WIRE – Women’s Information** Tel. 1300 134 130 free support, referral and information for all Victorian women, nonbinary and gender-diverse people.