



Parents Partner

PARENTING ALONE

Effective parenting is a high energy experience. Two important energy refuelling resources are:

- 1 Doing things we love.
- 2 Having a positive relationship with our spouse.

But what if we are a single parent? Does that mean we are destined to be poor parents because we don't have access to this energy source?

There are a significant number of single parents in our society. These families differ as to how and why they became single parents and the circumstances under which they live and work. Most single parent families are headed by the mum, but single parent homes headed by dad are becoming a growing family group within our society. Most single parent homes are the result of marital separation or divorce.

Parents need the same skills whether they parent alone, or as a couple. But parenting alone does have some added challenges. I believe our primary need as humans is emotional closeness with a few irreplaceable others - to belong. Whether it's driven by the need to pass on our genes, to experience intimacy, or to feel safe, we have an inner drive to be connected to others. When we feel disconnected, or socially isolated, it becomes harmful. There is an abundance of research showing the harmful effects of loneliness on not just emotional health, but physical health as well (see research findings at end of document).

So does that mean single parents are at greater risk of experiencing less than optimal wellbeing? Research findings would suggest yes. But let's 'unpack' the research to hear what it is really saying.

It's not being a single parent per se that causes harm; it's being socially isolated, and you are more

IDEA IN BRIEF

- ▶ Attachment research shows that our most primary need is to feel securely connected to another person. This isn't just applicable for young children; emotional closeness is important for adults too.
- ▶ Our adult love relationships play an important part in determining how mentally, physically and emotionally healthy we are.
- ▶ We all need emotional support from another adult - kids aren't enough.
- ▶ While couples have a natural bonding state, single parents need to intentionally create adult emotional connections to receive the love and support they need.
- ▶ If a single parent feels emotionally bonded with another person the same positive benefits flow into their life like occurs within a couples relationship.
- ▶ When we are close to another person we can share our thoughts and feelings - our frustrations don't become bottled up. Closeness also helps us feel understood. It's easier to be empathetic with our child when we feel emotionally understood.

vulnerable to feel alone as a single parent. To illustrate, if you are separated there is a possibility that family and friends might take sides and you are excluded from former social contacts. As a single mum, in particular, you might feel that other women don't want you getting too close to their husbands which results in you being excluded from couples social interactions. So the very nature of being a single parent can limit your interpersonal interactions, thus leading to feelings of aloneness.

All parents need practical and emotional support, whether you are single or not. Parents need mutually supportive relationships with adults (kids aren't enough), as well as people they can talk to about their child. Such supportive relationships provide emotional understanding and energy.

The Clint Eastwood type parent (“*I’m strong and can do it myself*”) isn’t a healthy role model for parents! If you become too independent your child will grow up believing they must do everything on their own as well. Such a belief can lead to perfectionism or workaholicism - addictions that ruin relationships and personal happiness. Model to your child that you need other people to support you. Remember, it’s not a sign of weakness to ask for support. Say to yourself, “*Because I can doesn’t mean I have to.*” Don’t wait until a crisis before you ask for help. When parents feel supported they become more patient, flexible and emotionally responsive to their child.

Taking care of your personal emotional needs is a responsibility of all parents, whether you parent alone, or as a couple. You need to become intentional about cultivating relationships that support and encourage you.

When you have important adults in your life, and you can ask for what you really need, you develop in healthy ways.

While intact couples naturally have access to such a system, single parents potentially have other relationships that meet the criteria of commitment and personal intensity that are necessary for being

IDEA IN PRACTICE

- ▶ We all need personal relationships that are available and appropriate. Being a parent was never intended to be done in a ‘silo.’
- ▶ Seeking or asking for support is not weakness. It’s a basic need and all basic needs are good.
- ▶ As a single parent, welcome other adults into your life and your child’s life.
- ▶ If you have been wounded in your past relationship find a trusted friend who can listen non-judgmentally to your hurt. When we express our hurt it heals. When we bottle it up it either explodes or implodes - not good!
- ▶ Single parents can be tempted to ‘be soft’ with their child’s discipline to compensate for the absent parent.
- ▶ Don’t feel guilty, or blame yourself when things go wrong. Things go wrong in couples families as well. See any behavioural problems as part of every child’s development.
- ▶ If you feel you are getting emotionally stuck seek support. We (Parents Partner) can encourage you and suggest ideas to find the closeness you need.

emotionally healthy.

As a single parent you might have to work harder to build meaningful relationships with other adults, but it’s certainly possible; for example establishing ongoing relationships with neighbours, parents at kindy, family and friends. Kids from single parent homes also greatly benefit from having other grown ups in their lives with whom they can develop loving relationships. Single mums need to enlist their own dads, other dads, brothers, uncles, grandfathers to contribute a male presence to their son or daughter’s life. And single dads need to enlist their own mum, grandmother, sisters or aunties too.

Some further points:

■ **You need others to grow.** When you receive social support you gain perspective on both your personal strengths and your growth opportunities.

■ **Need a listening ear.** In divorce situations you will not only have your own tangled emotions to deal with, but those of your child. Having a supportive adult will bring understanding and healing to these fractured parts of your life. When you feel wounded you need the healing touch of a friend who will listen and not blame or condemn.

■ **Discipline is often more difficult as a single parent.** Single parents have more demands on their time and energy so are more likely to feel greater stress, overburdened or feel lonely. When you feel this way there is a strong tendency to fall into parenting traps, particularly when it comes to discipline. The temptation is to compensate for the absent parent by spoiling your child, giving them too many material things, or by doing everything yourself and not asking them to help out at home. Don’t create spoiled indulged children to try to compensate!! All children need to see themselves as competent and to feel good about contributing to the family.

■ **Don’t be hard on yourself.** Finally, single parents often assume that all things they can’t do, or everything that goes wrong, is the result of being a single parent! They feel guilty for not spending enough time with their child. My advice would be to stop blaming yourself for problems that occur and see them as part of every child’s development.

Interestingly, the vast majority of single parents will not stay single parents. It would seem primary relationships are hard wired into us and most of our genes will be seeking (unconsciously of course) Mr. or Mrs. Mate. Such a genetic drive must be because it has good benefits for us as individuals - like energy renewal!

Another issue I haven't mentioned (but it's equally important) are those couples who might be still living in the same house, but in reality they are emotionally divorced and living like single parents. If that is your situation don't give up your dream for closeness. The emotional walls of misunderstanding, blaming, criticism and hurt need to be pulled down.

Remember at the workshop I suggested that both partners are always seeking closeness. We think our partner needs to change for the relationship to be satisfying, but the truth is it's how we interact as a couple that needs to change. So don't try to change each other - instead change how you interact with each other. The enemy is the relationship interaction - how you are 'dancing' together. And like good discipline you change the dance when you change the music.

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Marital dissolution has serious consequences too:

Increased risk of psychopathology (mental sickness), increased rates of car accidents including fatalities (*Bloom, Asher, & White, 1978*).

Increased incidence of physical illness and suicide, violence and murder, and increased mortality from diseases (*Burman & Margolin, 1992*).

Significant immunosuppression – breakdown in ones immunity (*Kiecolt-Glaser, Malarkey, Cacioppo, & Glaser, 1994*).

Professor Sue Johnson (University of Ottawa) sums up the research: *“The quality of our love relationships is a big factor in how mentally and emotionally healthy we are.”*

The strength of our love relationships promotes important health benefits.

References:

Gottman, J.M. (1999). *The marriage clinic*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.

Johnson, S. (2008). *Hold me tight*. New York: Little Brown and Company.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Married men and women live longer than their single peers (*Friedman, Tucker, Schwartz, & Tomilson, 1995*).

If you are lonely you have double the risk of having a heart attack or stroke (*Hawkey, Center for Cognitive and Social Neuroscience, University of Chicago*).

Emotional isolation is a more dangerous health risk than smoking or high blood pressure (*House, University of Michigan*).

Researchers asked men with a history of angina and high blood pressure, “Does your wife show her love?” Those who answered “No” experienced twice as many angina attacks over the next 5 years compared to those who answered “Yes.” (*Case Western Reserve University*).

Women who had experienced a heart attack had a three fold higher risk of having another if there was conflict in her marital relationship.