

Parenting – as any parent will tell you – is hard to define. It’s a process – and according to the American Psychological Association – it involves “ensuring children’s health and safety, preparing children for life as productive adults, and transmitting cultural values.”

For much of history, parents took on gender-specific roles as mother and father to raise a family. Now, less than 60 percent of children are born to married parents. Society is trending away from the traditional family as single parenting and other family structures become more common.

Kids raised by their natural, continuously married parents benefit from the intimacy, cooperation, and stability of their family. Where does this leave single parents? Single parents, unfortunately, have to work harder and fill more roles to help their children grow and mature.

The U.S. Census counts single-parent homes as those where children live with an unmarried parent, including those who do have a live-in partner. The data shows that between one third and one fourth of all children in the U.S. live in a single-parent home. That’s about 24 million children. Because relationships change over time, it’s also very likely that a child born today may experience a variety of family structures through their childhood.

Effects of Single Parenting

As we talk about these effects, please know that this data speaks in generalizations. **Not all of these are true for every child in a single parent home, and certainly, children raised by single parents are capable of growing up as healthy children into successful adults. Raising children in a loving, safe, and supportive environment provides them with the best opportunity to thrive.**

Not surprisingly, parents who raise children on their own can often feel stretched thin. Managing the household and children’s needs can be overwhelming. **As a single parent, you must be aware of how these stresses are affecting your mental health.** If you begin feeling overly anxious or depressed, please seek out help from a provider or mental health professional.

Children who grow up in single-parent families are more likely to have challenges emotionally and behaviorally. This can be linked to a variety of factors, including exposure to parental conflict or stress, changing schools or neighborhoods, less family cohesion, and a lack of relationship with the non-custodial parent. Research suggests that children from divorced or single parent homes have lower academic performance on tests and may be more likely to repeat a grade in school.

On a more positive note, some recent studies have shown that children of single parents may develop a stronger bond with their custodial parent than children in a two-parent home. They also may have a greater sense of responsibility from contributing more to household chores and may cultivate more resilience and problem-solving skills.

Parental separation, death of a parent, or divorce are considered an Adverse Childhood Event -- ACE for short. ACEs are experiences that are traumatic for children and can cause an extended stress response in their bodies, which is called toxic stress. This can have long-term effects on their well-being and physical health.

Fortunately, parents can help protect children from toxic stress through strong, caring relationships and positive childhood experiences. Small things – like reading books together or having a special tradition as a family – can make a big impact on a child’s development despite the challenges they may be facing.

Tips for Single Parents

Here are some tips to help as you navigate raising a family as a single parent:

- 1) Make routines. **Children like consistency and clear expectations.** Set routines for the morning, meal times, chores, and bed times so that everyone knows what to expect.
- 2) Keep a budget. **Getting your finances in check by balancing your income and bills will guard against financial stress.** You can find help securing basic needs through the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services at [hhs.gov](https://www.hhs.gov), as well as many state and local programs.
- 3) Take care of yourself. Find trusted caregivers to watch your children so that you can get a little time away to do something you enjoy. Also, eat healthy foods as much as you can, get some exercise, and try to get enough rest!
- 4) Get support. Ask for help from family or trusted friends when you need something. Talk to your healthcare provider about support groups, counseling, or other resources that may be available.

Ultimately, good single parenting is just good parenting, and good parenting doesn't have to be complicated. Psychology Today lists 4 C's of parenting that are helpful for parents in all family structures.

1. **Care** – give children affection and acceptance
2. **Consistency** – provide structure and stability in your home environment
3. **Choices** – allow children to express opinions and make age-appropriate choices
4. **Consequences** – teach children that their choices have effects, both positive and negative

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