

Single parenting



Being a single parent can have both challenges and benefits. Things work best when you have good relationships with your children and a strong support network.

Growing up in a single-parent home can teach children important life skills. With your support, they can learn to adjust to major life changes and become resourceful, independent and resilient. Children benefit from good relationships with parents, whatever family structure they live in.

Single-parent families

Becoming a single parent can happen through separation or divorce, the death of a partner, assisted conception or other circumstances. Both men and women can be single parents.

If there has been a separation or divorce, it is often the mother who is the resident parent, with children spending time with both parents separately. Children need to adjust to not having both parents around all the time. Some children have to adjust to a new house, school or other changes. If a parent has formed a new relationship, there may be new adults or other children to get used to.

Some children have lived with a single parent their whole life and may not have to deal with the changes that children from two-parent families can face.

Challenges and benefits for parents

Challenges for single parents can be:

- managing without someone to share the load, especially during tough times
- working out living and parenting arrangements
- handling any conflict with the other parent
- dealing with money pressures.

Benefits for single parents can be:

- feeling happy or relieved to be on your own, particularly if there has been conflict
- enjoying the freedom to make more of your own choices
- spending more time with your children and building a closer bond.

Effects on children

Research shows that children living with a single parent are just as happy as those living with both parents or in step-families, regardless of income. Having a good relationship with a parent, whether living with them or not, and a settled home life free from conflict or violence is what matters. Getting on well with siblings, having fun with the family and good relationships at school are also important.

Children need to feel they can love both their parents, without feeling guilty.





Helping children adjust

Moving to a single-parent household is a big change for children who have been used to living with two parents. There may be other big changes such as moving house, changing schools, losing touch with friends or adjusting to living on less money.

You can help children by allowing them time to grieve. Whatever their age, separation from a parent or other big changes can cause feelings of grief and loss. Each child is different, and how they react can depend on their age, maturity, and the circumstances of the change. Children may need extra support from parents, other family members, carers and teachers. Don't expect too much too soon.

It can help to:

- spend one-on-one time each day with children, playing, doing homework, reading or just talking about the day. It helps strengthen your bond with them
- support them to have a relationship with the other parent (if it is safe to do so), even though this may be hard for you. Children want to love and be loved by both their parents
- have a range of supports for your child. It may help to have the support of another trusted adult who is the same sex as your child
- let them know all families have their ups and downs, not just single-parent families
- make plans for your children's future in case anything should happen to you.

It can take time for you and your children to adjust to being a single-parent household.

Children's behaviour

In times of change children may 'act out' their feelings.

It can help to:

- have regular routines
- help children name their feelings and learn that all feelings are OK, even difficult ones

- talk about the kind of family you want to be and have reasonable rules and expectations
- stay calm when children's behaviour is challenging and try to work out what's going on for them. Listen to their feelings and ideas
- deal with issues as they arise
- know that children might go back to things they had grown out of, such as tantrums or wetting the bed. This is common in times of major change, and should pass. Talk to your doctor or child health nurse if you are concerned
- agree with the other parent about common rules and limits if your child moves between two homes. While children can adjust to different rules, common rules about things like bedtimes and use of electronic devices might help prevent problems
- expect that some children might misbehave for the parent they spend more time with. Shorter times with the other parent can make it easier for children to manage their behaviour, especially if they get to do more fun things.

It helps children feel secure when they see you are 'the parent' and are able to take care of them.

Being children

Children living with a single parent can often be more mature because of the extra roles they have. Many are involved in chores and decisions, and need to do things for themselves and siblings. If they have been given a lot of say at home, some children may have problems at school if they expect to be treated in the same way by teachers.

Tell your children you are proud of them and value what they do. However, it is important that children don't lose their childhood too soon. Try not to burden them with adult concerns, including money worries. Being with friends, playing sport, being creative or just daydreaming are all important parts of childhood which help them have balance in their lives.





Shared parenting

Whether parents are together or apart, children benefit when each parent is positive, supportive and involved (as long as this is safe). The quality of the relationships is what's important. Frequent or regular contact makes it easier to have a good relationship.

It can be hard to see your child excited about seeing their other parent. It is important not to make them feel guilty about this.

It is also important not to involve children in your problems with the other parent, or speak badly of them in front of children. Children are very loyal and protective of parents and it hurts when someone they love is criticised.

Keep changeovers as calm as possible. Conflict and tension stresses children. If tensions are high, you could choose a neutral place or have a friend present. There are also Children's Contact Services where you can have changeovers without talking to the other parent. If there is violence or you or your children are in danger, call the Police on 000.

When children return

Allow time for your children to 'fit back into home' when they return. Children can take a few minutes or hours, and some take days. Some may act out, or become quiet and sad. Some need time to get used to the 'swapping'. They may feel sad about leaving the other parent, and guilty or disloyal to you for feeling this way. They might be upset if they didn't enjoy the visit. If your child takes days to settle and this doesn't improve over time, you may want to speak to a health professional.

Let children talk about what they've been doing. Don't pressure them with questions, as they may 'close up' to protect the other parent. Don't use your children to carry messages, or to find out what your former partner is doing.

Children who have no contact with the other parent still need to know where that person fits into their lives. They may be able to have contact with grandparents or other relatives of your former partner.

Looking after yourself

The stronger you are physically, mentally and emotionally, the better you will adjust to your new life. When you find ways to be happy in your own life children learn that even big problems can be dealt with.

For parents who have just separated or lost a partner, feelings can be very strong. Get support from other family members or friends rather than talking with your children about your feelings. It may help to talk with your doctor or a counsellor if you need extra support.

It can help you and your children if you:

- keep your sense of humour and try to see the positive side of things
- make regular time to do things for yourself, including having fun and a social life
- are aware of your own stress and find ways to manage it
- try not to feel guilty or over-compensate for children not living with both parents. This won't help you or them make the most of the life you have now
- plan to do enjoyable things when your children are with the other parent
- don't try to do it alone. Create a supportive network of friends, family or others for yourself. Make use of the services that are available to help and support single parents
- help children understand you need to spend time with other adults just like they need friends their own age. It is best for you and your children not to rely solely on each other for company
- take any new relationships slowly. Talk things through with your children. Listen to how they feel and let them know they are still just as important to you.

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Your children are likely to cope better with becoming a single-parent family if you are coping well. Creating a support network for yourself and making use of services can help.

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Want more information?

Emergency

Police, Fire, Ambulance 000
Police attendance 131 444
Lifeline 13 11 14

1800 RESPECT

Phone 1800 737 732, 24 hours
Telephone and online counselling for anyone experiencing family violence www.1800respect.org.au

Services providing legal advice or support with relationship issues

Legal Services Commission of SA

Phone 1300 366 424, Mon to Fri, 9am-4.30pm
For free legal help and advice
Phone the Child Support Unit on 8111 5576 for legal advice regarding child support
If you need a translator, phone the Translating and Interpreting Service on 131 450 and ask for 1300 366 424. Has 24 hour online Legal Chat and amica, an online program helping couples make parenting and property agreements simply (<https://amica.gov.au>) www.lsc.sa.gov.au

Family Relationships Online

Phone Family Relationships Advice Line 1800 050 321, 8am-8pm, Mon to Fri; 10am-4pm Sat
A confidential national service helping families affected by relationship or separation issues.
Can help you find legal, financial and dispute resolution information, advice and counselling, and refer you to local services, including Children's Contact Services www.familyrelationships.gov.au

Child Support Scheme

Phone 131 272, Mon to Fri, 8.30am-4.45pm
For information about the Australian Government child support scheme and assistance with payments www.servicesaustralia.gov.au/individuals/child-support

Family Court of Australia

For information about family law and dispute resolution. Has online chat service www.familycourt.gov.au

Centrelink

See www.servicesaustralia.gov.au for information about benefits available
Centrelink phone self-service, 136 240, 24 hours
For child support enquiries phone 131 272, Mon to Fri, 8.30am-4.45pm

Relationships Australia SA

Phone 1300 364 277 (cost of a local call) or 1800 182 325 (country callers)
For programs and services supporting parents and children during and after separation
Provides safe, supported Children's Contact Service www.rasa.org.au

Anglicare SA

Phone 8305 9200
For programs supporting parents and children after separation
Has Children's Contact Service (phone 8392 3180) for safe, child-friendly visits or changeovers
www.anglicare.com.au

Uniting Communities

Phone 1800 615 677
For family and relationship counselling and programs www.unitingcommunities.org

Centacare

Phone 8215 6700
For parenting and family relationships counselling and programs www.centacare.org.au

Support for children and young people

Kids Helpline

Phone 1800 55 1800, Any time, Any reason
Free, confidential phone and online counselling for children and young people 5 to 25 years
www.kidshelpline.com.au

ReachOut

Online mental health support for young people 12 to 25 years, and their parents. Provides help with everyday questions or tough times <https://au.reachout.com>

Headspace

Mental health information and support for young people 12 to 25 years, and their families.
Find eHeadspace for online support or your local Headspace centre www.headspace.org.au

Parenting

Parent Helpline

Phone 1300 364 100, 24 hours
For advice on child health and parenting
www.cafhs.sa.gov.au

Child and Family Health Service (CaFHS)

Phone 1300 733 606, 9am-4.30pm, Mon-Fri for an appointment. The child health nurses can talk with you about your child's health and development
www.cafhs.sa.gov.au

Raising Children Network

For information about raising children, including single parenting and supporting children after a separation or divorce www.raisingchildren.net.au

Parenting SA

For more Parent Easy Guides including 'Blended families', 'Thinking separation?', 'Family break-up', 'Families that work well', 'Positive approaches to guiding behaviour: 2-12 years', 'Grief and loss', 'Family violence' and 'Dealing with a crisis'
www.parenting.sa.gov.au



**Government of
South Australia**

Parenting SA

A partnership between the Department of Human Services and the Women's and Children's Health Network.

Ph: 08 8303 1660

www.parenting.sa.gov.au

Parent Easy Guides are free in South Australia.

Important: This information is not intended to replace advice from a qualified practitioner.

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