

ROLES AND RELATIONSHIPS

ParentLink guides use 'he' and 'she' in turn. Change to suit your child's sex.

A growing number of children in Australia are being raised in single parent households. The breakdown of relationships causes some parents to choose to leave a two-parent relationship to become a sole parent. Others are left behind with the children when a partner leaves. Other people become single parents through a range of life choices and circumstances, including the death of a partner. Each path has its own issues to deal with.

Parenting alone is different in many ways to being in a two-parent household and it can have its difficulties and challenges. It can also have positive benefits such as being able to make your own decisions about parenting and having more time to spend with your children and develop a closer connection.

Children can have a very positive experience in a sole parent household. It's important for them to know where they come from, and to know and love both parents without feeling guilty. Single parents usually find it helps to have a strong network of friends and family for support.

How single parenting is different

Single parents have a different experience of parenting than two-parent families. While there are challenges and difficulties in being a single parent, there are also joys and benefits for parents and children.

Some challenges:

- Some single parents feel grief or loss over the breakdown of a relationship or loss of a partner. You might feel alone and isolated at times and miss having someone to share parenting with.
- Your child's contact with and visits to their other parent, and movement between homes can become part of your lives and something you have to get used to. It's important to work out how to do this well.
- Sometimes it's stressful and tiring to care for children 24 hours a day without help, especially babies, toddlers, or children or young people with special needs or challenging behaviours. Ensure you are able to take breaks, talk to someone supportive or seek support from professionals.
- Single parent families often have less money than two parent families where many have a double income.

Whatever the challenges it's important to live your life in ways that shows your children you are happy. This will help them accept and value their lifestyle.

Some benefits:

- Some single parents feel happy and relieved to be on their own and out of a conflict situation. You may enjoy the freedom of making your own parenting choices without consulting or arguing with someone else.
- You may find you have more time for yourself and can choose how you spend your time.
- You may develop a closer connection with your child as you can spend more time together. Single parents often discuss things with their children that they might have discussed with the other parent, for example, what to buy, where to go for holidays.
- Many children develop a broader range of skills by being more involved in the day to day running of the household, sharing chores and looking after themselves. While this is valuable learning, it's important it doesn't 'take over' and they still have the time to do the usual things of childhood, such as being with friends, playing sport, doing homework or just dreaming. If they have been given a lot of say at home, some children may have difficulty at school if they expect to be treated in the same way by teachers.



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What parents need to think about

- Children need the security of knowing you are the parent and the grown-up and it's your role to look after them. It's not a good idea to rely on your children all the time for company.
- For parents who have just separated or lost a partner, feelings can be very strong. This is also a very difficult time for children. Get support from other family members and friends or professionals, rather than talking with your children about your concerns.
- Children need to know that you need adult company too. Spend time with supportive family and friends.
- Sometimes it can take a while for children to settle down after a family break-up. Children may need extra help and understanding from parents, other family members, carers and teachers.
- Children are often trying to have a relationship with parents who live apart. They can feel disloyal and confused when they love both parents and have to listen to 'put downs' from parents about the other. This is very distressing to children. They often want to defend the other parent but are afraid of getting into trouble. It's most important to keep children out of issues between parents.
- Develop a range of supports for your child. It may help to have the support of an adult who is the same sex as your child. Be choosy about who this is, and be confident they are trustworthy.
- Give thought to and make plans for your children's future in case anything should happen to you.

Children's behaviour

- Some children are more likely to misbehave for the parent who has them most of the time and does most of the disciplining and daily routines. It's often easier for them to behave better for the parent they see for a shorter time and do more fun things with.
- It is often easier for one parent to be in charge of parenting including guiding what children can do. On the other hand, being responsible for all the discipline can be demanding. If your child moves between two homes it may be useful to talk to their other parent about some common limits.
- Check with other parents if you are unsure about what limits are reasonable for your child. Develop limits and routines that will work for you and your child, for example bedtime, computer access.

Visiting the other parent

- It can be very difficult for parents to accept the excitement and joy a child shows when he is about to see the other parent. Feelings can run high for the parent who does the daily discipline and work, and has the main responsibility for a child only to watch that child go off for a fun time.
- Children want to be able to love each parent without feeling guilty. Let your child plan and enjoy time with the other parent if you can. It will make a difference for your child to see that you are pleased about this contact.
- Children who have no contact with the other parent need to have some understanding of where that person fits into their lives.
- Make changeovers as natural and friendly as possible. If you are unable to do this, try to avoid contact with the other parent, for example, pick-up at a neutral place or with a friend present.
- Allow time for your children to 'fit back into home' when they return.
 - Some children take a few minutes, others hours, and some take days to adjust.
 - 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 about feeling this way.
 - They may feel disloyal to you.
 - They might be upset if they did not have an enjoyable visit.
 - If your child takes days to settle and this doesn't improve over time, you may need to get professional help.
- Talk happily about what has been happening at home while they have been away but not so they will feel they have been left out. Allow them to talk about what they have been doing. Don't pressure them with questions, as they may 'close up' to protect the other parent.
- Avoid using your children to find out what your ex-partner is doing and don't use children to carry messages between parents.

Children in single parent households

Growing up in this type of home can be a very positive experience for children, who often have a close and special relationship with the parent. Sometimes children envy their friends in two parent households, but it may help them to know that all families have their ups and downs.

- Following the loss of a parent and the family unit as they knew it, children require time to grieve. They need to feel supported in the range of emotions or behaviours they experience.
- Children in single parent households are often more mature because of the extra roles they have. Let them know you feel proud of them.
- Make sure they have time to spend with their friends.
- If you are very close to your children, it may be hard for them to leave home when they are ready or they may feel guilty about leaving you on your own. Let them know that you have your own life to live and that you will be proud, not unhappy, when they grow up and are ready to make their own choices.
- Take new relationships slowly. This may mean some sacrifices on your part. If you decide to have a partner, it can often create problems for your children. They may show this with behaviour and feelings, whatever their age. Talk things through with them, listen to how they feel and let them know that they are still just as important to you.

Reminders

- Single parenting is difficult and challenging, but can have benefits as well.
- Being in a single parent home can be a very positive experience for children.
- Help your children feel proud of their lifestyle.
- Children need to know where they come from and who their parents are.
- Children need to be able to love both parents without feeling guilty.
- Make sure you have your own life so your children can see you are happy.

Contacts

Centrelink Family Assistance Office		13 61 50
Child and Family Centres (parenting information and support)	9am–5pm Monday–Friday: Gungahlin	6207 0120
	9am–5pm Monday–Friday: Tuggeranong	6207 8228
	9am–5pm Monday–Friday: West Belconnen	6205 2904
Family Relationships Advice Line	8am–8pm Monday–Friday, 10am–4pm Saturday, except public hols	1800 050 321
Parentline ACT	9am–9pm Monday–Friday, except public hols	6287 3833

Websites

www.centrelink.gov.au	Centrelink
www.cyh.com	Parenting and child health information
www.familyrelationships.gov.au	Support for families at all stages in their life
www.parentlink.act.gov.au	Other parenting guides including Being a dad, Being a mum, Families that work well
www.raisingchildren.net.au	Raising Children Network—covering topics for parenting newborns to teens

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