

# Single parents

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. Good relationships with parents make children happy, whatever family structure they live in.

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### Single parent families

Single parent families are becoming more common and don't carry the stigma they once did. You can become a single parent through separation, divorce, the death of a partner or for other reasons. Both men and women can be single parents.

Following 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 (see ParentLink Guide 'Blended families').

Some children have lived with a single parent their whole lives 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 things without someone to share the load. It could feel even harder if you are parenting a child with special needs
- working out living and parenting arrangements, especially if there is 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 makes children happy.

Getting on well with siblings, having fun with the family and good relationships at school also help them feel happy.

It is important that children 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 (see ParentLink Guide '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 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 is important to help them deal with the feelings behind the behaviour, and learn how to manage their behaviour.

It can help to:

- have regular routines
- help children name their feelings and to learn that all feelings are OK
- notice and encourage good behaviour. Have firm and reasonable limits and be consistent when responding to problem behaviour. Try to deal with issues as they happen
- know that children might go back to things they had grown out of, such as having 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 the big issues 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, and who does most of the disciplining and daily routines. 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 day-dreaming are all important parts of childhood which help them have balance in their lives.

## Shared parenting

When both parents are involved in parenting after separation, children adjust better. The quality of the relationships is what is most important. Whether parents are together or apart, children benefit when each parent is positive, supportive and involved.

Having frequent or regular contact is also important. It is harder to have a good relationship if you don't see someone that often.

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 Centres 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 (see ParentLink Guide 'Family violence').

# Single parents

## 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.

This guide's content was produced by Parenting SA, Women's and Children's Health Network.

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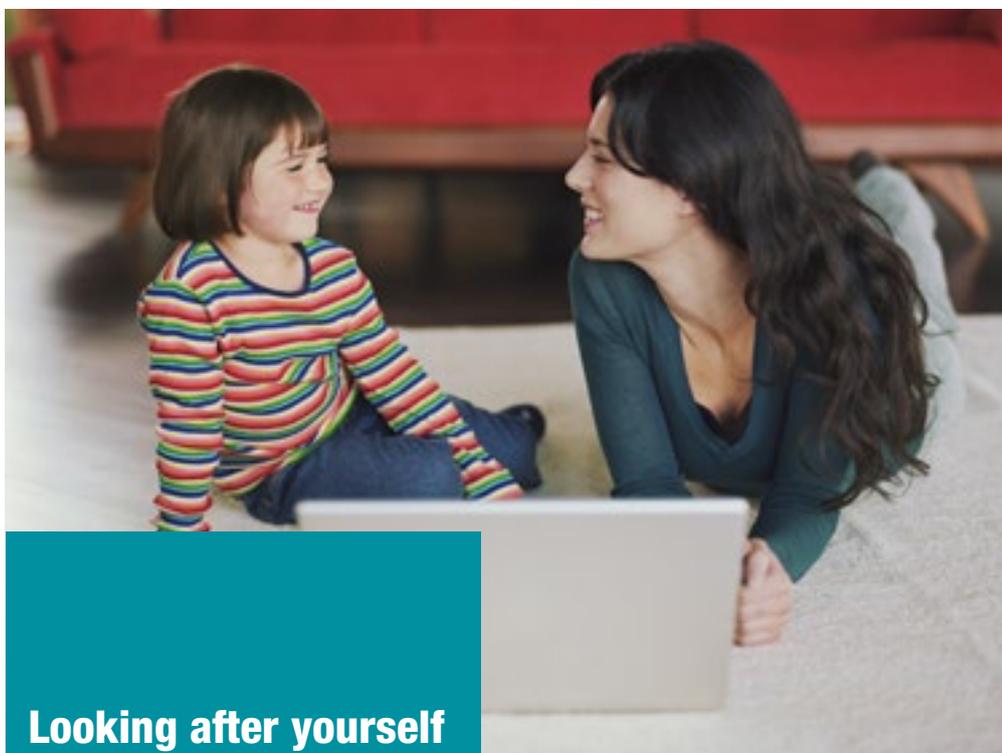
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## Looking for more information?

ACT Government Publication No. 17/0608 (August 2017)



## 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
- be 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
- create a support network and make use of the available resources
- 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 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.

Your children are likely to cope better with becoming a single-parent family if you are coping well.



ParentLink — for other parenting guides, online parenting information  
[www.parentlink.act.gov.au](http://www.parentlink.act.gov.au)

Child and Family Centres — for parenting information and support  
[www.communityservices.act.gov.au/ocys/childandfamilycentres](http://www.communityservices.act.gov.au/ocys/childandfamilycentres)

Raising Children's Network — covering topics for parenting newborns to teens  
<http://raisingchildren.net.au/>