

THE COUNSELOR

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SINGLE PARENTING



“Your mom and I are getting a divorce.” These words cut like a knife, right to the hearts of so many kids today. Parents hurt inside when they break this news to their children.

Eighty percent of the children receive no warning that a divorce is about to take place. These children are pierced with grief again when the divorce becomes reality. Fifty percent of all first time marriages end in divorce today. Sixty percent of second marriages also fail. Thirty five percent of all children born in the 1980's will experience life in a single parent family for at least five years before their eighteenth birthday.

Single parent families come in all shapes and sizes. Many single moms have full custody of one or more children. Some have joint custody. Fathers may have joint or sole custody too. Some single parents go strictly by the divorce decree while others have flexible visitation arrangements. Some parents have good relationships with their ex-spouses, others have bad or no relationships with them. Absent parents, inconsistent visitation, and little or no child support payments magnify the stress on single parent households. Single parent families also result from the death of a parent.

Single parenting presents awesome challenges for everyone involved. For many, the situation seems hopeless – impossible. Don't despair. There is hope. The light at the end of the tunnel is not a train! Single parents can survive divorce, heal, and grow into thriving victorious single parents.

ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

Single parents and their children experience many of the following issues and challenges.

- **Divorce – impact and trauma** – Initial effects can be harsh, the family/household is torn apart.
- **Grief and loss – grieving the loss of the marriage and family unit** – Reactions of children and parents to divorce are similar to loss through death. Shock, depression, denial, anger, fear, and lowered self-esteem occur. Children often feel that they have been responsible for their parent's problems. They also feel rejected and abandoned. Children struggle

with aloneness, sadness, frustration, and resentment.

- **Anger and Unforgiveness** – Parents frequently have these feelings toward one another. Anger poisons people. Unresolved resentments lead to endless quarrels, coldness, and arguments over money and visitation rights. This generates intense fears in young children, placing a strain on them that is damaging.
- **Anger at God** – Parents and children become angry at God for allowing the family break up.
- **Divided loyalties** – Children feel pulled by love and loyalty in both directions.
- **Visitation** – The frequency of parent-child contact changes. Adjustments can be stressful. Many parents are constrained to spend less time with their children.
- **Single Mom** – Mother struggles with going to work, finding good day care, and limited financial resources. Additional challenges include raising boys or head-strong children single-handed.
- **Single Dad** – Father juggles work and children's schedules, school activities, day care and assumes housework he didn't do before. He faces the challenge of raising girls and strong willed children.
- **Emergencies** – Single parents face emergencies alone.
- **Discipline and house rules** – Children test limits, they act out. They experience different rules and consequences from each parent. The single parent has no back up to help enforce rules. Emotions run high and patience wears thin.
- **Boundaries** – Older siblings feel obligated to replace the missing parent, to be the “little man” or “little woman” of the house. Sometimes parents rely on their children for emotional support. Boundaries become blurred, enmeshment takes place.
- **Financial struggles** – One family becomes two, each with separate expenses. Medical bills, insurance, rent, child support, daily living expenses and debt, pressure single parents.
- **Compounding stress** – Stress accumulates. The little things, like flat tires, a note from a child's teacher, and discourteous drivers, unravel parents. Single parents feel like shock absorbers.



- **Exhaustion** – Single parents feel overwhelmed, tired, and played out from meeting everyone's needs.
- **No time alone** – Single parents are so absorbed with running a household single-handed that they spend no time alone.
- **Single adult life** – The abrupt shift from married to single life creates difficulties. Single parents lose their partners. They feel alone, drifting in a sea of single life
- **Career/job changes, choices, and problems** – Fluctuating job markets, mergers, layoffs, career decisions and more schooling generate stress.
- **Self-esteem problems** – Feelings of failure and rejection can lead to self-doubt and negative attitudes toward self. The single parent may feel undesirable, unlovable, and afraid that no one will marry them.
- **Friends and family relationships** – Many friends disappear with the divorce. Family relationships are altered, neighbors and couples pull away.
- **Dating** – Fears, anxiety, neediness, games, awkwardness, and baggage complicate the picture.
- **Rebounding** – Recently divorced singles meet other singles and begin relationships too soon.
- **Ex-spouse relationship** – Friction, pressure, power struggles, and resentments occur.
- **Blended family possibilities** – The prospects of remarriage and blending families bring additional changes which are usually met with resistance. Unfinished business from the first divorce generates considerable friction in stepfamilies.
- **Ex-spouse remarries** – This changes everything. It adds another stepparent and possibly more stepchildren. The single parent may feel threatened and replaced by the new stepparent.
- **Family and children transitions and milestones** – Birthdays, movement into the teenage years, graduations, awards, new jobs, and relocations impact the single parent family.
- **Dealing with regrets** – Single parents may regret dividing the family. They obsess over what could have been if they had stayed together. They regret losing their previous lifestyle, family income, uprooting the children, and forfeiting stability.



A Time for Healing



The new single parent family gradually moves from brokenness and shattered dreams to acceptance, healing and wholeness. Divorce is painful, it lingers, and the single parent lifestyle presents challenges. All family members are impacted by divorce. Everyone moves through stages of denial, anger, sadness, and acceptance. Move toward acceptance and healing slowly. As time progresses single parents will find it easier to let go of the negativity and resentment. Recovery from divorce or losing a spouse through death takes time. Mourn the loss of the marriage relationship, dreams, and old family system. Don't deny the pain, acknowledge it. The healing process cannot be rushed. Expect good days and bad days. Single parents and their children need time to absorb what has happened, express the hurts, recover, regroup, and heal.

- Do not hold on to resentments. Single parents should make it their goal, despite current hard feelings, to be free eventually from holding grudges toward their ex-spouses. This takes time too. Single parents should take responsibility for changing themselves.
- Single parents should keep their children out of the middle of disputes or conflicts with their ex-spouses. Avoid excessive conflict. Prolonged conflict hurts the children.
- Single parents should strive to cooperate with their ex-spouses on their children's material, physical, educational, and emotional issues.
- Seek professional help if necessary.
- The Church can help. Many churches have strong single parent ministries. Find one. Attend Bible study classes and single parent activities. Make friends with people who are or have experienced divorce and single parenting. This can be a tremendous source of healing.
- Develop friendships that are encouraging, and supportive. Encourage children to do the same. Rebuilding involves strengthening old ties and making new ones. Huddle up with friends. Don't isolate.
- Single parenting can be overwhelming. God understands a broken heart. Seek Him in prayer and worship. Draw close to God and believe that He wants to restore everyone.
- Single parents should make a concentrated effort to know themselves. They can begin a personal journey to find out who they really are and why they do what they do.
- View the single parent family as a whole family.
- Reorganizing and building a new family unit/identity takes time. Move slowly in developing routines, and traditions that depart from the past. Make changes gradually.
- The single parent should not devalue the absent parent to their children. Help them get Christmas and birthday gifts for the absent parent. Encourage communication and provide ways for the children to contact their missing parent (phone calls, letter writing, tape or video, etc.)
- Monitor children's attitudes and behavior. They will be vulnerable for a while after the divorce. Look for acting out, sadness, anger, and regressive behaviors. They are dealing with loss and grief of the divorce. Encourage them to express

their feelings. Single parents should let their children know that they understand their situation, and that they still love them no matter what. Allow expression without disrespectful behavior.

- Provide consistent, firm, loving limits for the children. Nurture them. Single parents should not give in because of guilt feelings by indulging their children with promises, gifts, and freedom beyond their maturity level. Consistent, firm, limits, communicate love.
- Single Parent Ministries foster good fellowship, understanding, and healing. Single parents should watch, however, that they don't hook up with another partner until both have healed from their divorces. They need time to heal. Don't fill the void of loneliness and pain with another rela-

tionship. Single parents should not rush into marriage to secure another parent figure for their children. Rebounding frequently results in more breakups, divorces and losses. Heal first.

- The key to ultimate healing is forgiveness. The way to communicate forgiveness is by behaving in a forgiving manner toward others. Single parents should be friendly toward their ex-spouses. They need to relate to them without malice. Parents can ask God to help them do this. Real forgiveness is a supernatural process.
- Single parents need to forgive themselves. They should stop blaming themselves for breaking up the family. They may always live with the consequences of their mistakes but they can let go, move on, and benefit from them.

Victorious Single Parenting

It takes a lot of courage to become a victorious single parent. King David (Psalm 126:5) eloquently describes the journey from tragedy to victory. "Those who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy." Victorious single parents live every day to the fullest. Each moment is precious. These parents still have challenges and feel lonely from time to time, but they are grounded. Many of them have come to know and rely on God like never before. Their faith grew as they experienced His love through the darkest moments, the hardest times. They give thanks daily in prayer for God's mercy and forgiveness. The victorious single parent faces adversity with the belief and expectation that they will emerge stronger and better each time. They live for the moment, forgiving themselves and others. These parents openly affirm, validate, and bless their children with kind words, prayers, and behavior. They are connected deeply with their children yet respect and encourage their independence. They have friends who love them and mentors who guide them when they need advice on single parent issues. The victorious single parent visions his or her family being completely restored. They see themselves and their families as overcomers

and winners, not defeated victims. They hold their head high in humility because they can relate to suffering. They comfort other single parents. The victorious single mom and dad feel complete. They don't cave in to worldly pressure to remarry too soon. They are patient and selective. Those not in possession of their kids maintain daily contact with them by phone. They know what's going on in their kids' lives. They are flexible enough with their schedules to trade off certain days to do special things with their children.



Victorious single parents maintain good working relationships with their ex-spouses for the benefit of the children. Most victorious single parents know they will probably remarry some day. They strive to become like the person they want to marry. Forgiveness, faithfulness, acceptance, diligence, endurance, and abiding in God, produce a harvest of healing, wholeness, and other incredible benefits for the victorious single parent family.

MY! Single parenting stretches a family beyond its limits. Joy comes to the single parent when they see their children emerge stronger than before the divorce. Their hearts pound with joy when they see the healing, the rock solid foundation from which they and their children can now withstand gale force type challenges with confidence. Single parenting originates from loss and brokenness, but makes lives sturdier. Tragedy molds us into more loving, caring, compassionate people. We rally to comfort other single parents.

I have counseled numerous single parent families. I have seen many broken hearts grow strong. I am also a single parent of eight years with two sons, and have served in leadership in a single parent ministry at my church since 1995. My heart goes out to all single parents. I know the hardships, challenges, victories, and joys of single parenting.



Steve Rossi with his 2 sons.

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SPEAKING ENGAGEMENTS

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1/23/99 - Becoming God's Man - A Call to Action - Grace Community Church

1/24/99 - Receiving God's Unconditional Love - Second Baptist Church

2/3/99 - Enhancing the Father-Son Relationship - St. Andrew's Presbyterian

2/20/99 - Raising Healthy Teens Christ Memorial Lutheran Church