



# Piecing It Together

ESSENTIAL SKILLS FOR SINGLE PARENT FAMILIES

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## FAMILY MANAGEMENT

**M**ost single parents are amazing people! To realize this, talk with one who has years of experience going it alone. You'll probably discover someone making the nearly impossible happen. Being a loving parent, balancing work and family, finding the time and money to keep things going—it's all part of solo parenting.

*Do you remember when you first became a single parent? Remember the "How-am-I-going-to-do-this" feeling? Did you ever start feeling down because the task seemed overwhelming? Single parenting is not easy. Even those of us with years of experience can benefit from sharpening our family management skills.*

### ESSENTIAL SKILLS

- # 1. Set routines
- # 2. Plan ahead
- # 3. Think safety

**VIDEO SUMMARY:** A single father and his daughter are taking time on a Sunday afternoon to do some planning. We see that by communicating their schedules for the coming week, both have peace of mind about their individual needs being met. Single parents then discuss the importance of setting routines, planning ahead, and thinking safety.

#### Essential Skill # 1:

### SET ROUTINES

Routines may seem boring, like the same thing over and over. But some routines are necessary and can be very helpful.

We all need some structure in our lives. Routines, especially for single parent families, provide structure. Routines give a sense of security and stability to your children. They take much of the guesswork out of planning for your week. They reduce the number of decisions you and your family have to make. Routines can even help your family financially.

Fit routines into the various areas of your home life: what time you get up and go to bed; meal planning and grocery shopping times; homework time; church,

club, or sports schedules; bath times; family quiet time; and times just for yourself.

While routines do bring structure into your life, you still need to stay flexible and creative. Be open to unexpected opportunities. Learn to flow with the unexpected changes that make life so challenging and interesting.

If your job has you "on call" or if your work shifts change, you'll need to think about "flexible routines." The key is trying to make even flexible routines as "routine" as possible.

The longer you live in your routines, the more natural and easy they will feel. Setting them up is simple. Look at your present schedule. You'll



probably be able to identify routines you've already established.

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## ***Routines simplify your life and decrease stress.***

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**Here are some examples of routines you may find helpful:**

- Pick a family dinner day. Do little things to make it special and fun. This way your family will have a special family dinner to look forward to each week.
- Have a regular bedtime and wake-up time. This helps ensure proper rest for all family members.
- Plan your meals ahead of time. Sometimes, just deciding what to have for supper can be frustrating and waste a lot of time.
- Prepare a regular pick up and drop off schedule for your children's school and daily activities. Consistency is important.
- Schedule a daily homework hour for your children. This will allow you to talk with them about what is going on at school. It will also give you the chance to help your children if they need assistance with their homework.
- Decide when your children can and cannot watch television.

**Let your children help carry the load.** As a single parent, an important part of your routine should be letting your child help out. Children who regularly do chores learn to feel valued and accept responsibility. They also gain self-respect and learn how to master different tasks. If they learn that certain jobs depend on them, they know they are contributing to the family.

Children can help a lot with all the household chores necessary to keep a home running smoothly. Single parents usually have little time to give to household chores, but children can be team members in getting the job done. Then everyone is happier, and

there is more free time to enjoy life and each other. Chores should be a part of family life, not a punishment.

Very young children can begin by helping you put the toys in the box before going to bed. Even if children haven't begun learning to help early in life, it's never too late to start.

***Things to remember about involving children:***

- ✓ Allow your children to take part in decision making. Divide responsibilities equally and fairly. Compile a short, simple and clear list of who does what. If your child doesn't do his designated tasks, don't do them for him. Decide beforehand as a family what the consequences will be.
- ✓ Give assignments to your child that are right for her age. Don't ask her to perform a chore that she has not been shown how to do or is too young to handle.
- ✓ Avoid giving your child the same old job week in and week out. Give her different jobs. Variety adds spice and gives youngsters lots of different experiences.
- ✓ Don't complain if your child doesn't do it "right." He'll be less eager to help out. Rarely will any child do a job as well at first as a parent might. Be patient and appreciative, and be generous with your praise.
- ✓ Put work before fun to get children motivated. Set aside a time for work and give advance notice of upcoming work periods. This will help children be able to plan other activities around home responsibilities.
- ✓ Children—particularly as they grow older—are usually capable of doing more than we ask, so don't be afraid to assign more than one task. However, do remember to balance work with play.
- ✓ Break larger jobs down into parts. Don't tell your 12-year-old to do the laundry without first showing him how to sort the clothes, operate the washer, select the proper drying cycle and fold the laundry.



*All family members should take part in running the household. The knowledge, skills and sense of responsibility children gain will last a lifetime.*

## **Essential Skill # 2: PLAN AHEAD**

Looking ahead is one of your best survival skills as a single parent. Think of challenges that might come up, and be ready with a plan of action.

For example, you may be asked to work overtime. What problems do you foresee that causing for you and your children? Pre-arrange a back-up plan with your childcare service. Have a short list of people you could call to pick the children up, prepare their meals, and take care of them until you can come home.

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***Don't wait for an emergency to arise before you plan for it. Be prepared.***

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Vehicle breakdown is another example of a possible challenge. Whom would you call for assistance? Can you car pool? Do you know someone who could give you a ride while your vehicle is in the shop? Have you scouted out a garage you can trust with repairs?

**How might you do a better job in planning ahead? Here are some idea-starters:**

- Set goals for yourself and your family so that you are able to plan ahead.
- Make a list of what you want to get done over a very specific time period. Writing your goals down, and putting them where you'll see them often, helps get your goals accomplished.
- Talk about your daily schedule as a family. Then post it on a family calendar.
- Stay informed. You need to be aware of what is going on at work, school, and at home in order to plan ahead.

- Plan ahead by doing it today. Try not to let things pile up. Do what you can now. Avoid putting things off until "tomorrow."
- Clean as you go! By not letting the messes pile up, you can make your jobs a lot easier. This is also a good habit to teach your children.
- Free yourself from clutter and work by eliminating excess items. Get rid of anything you haven't used in the past few years and probably won't need.
- Keep your family's values in mind. Plan activities that support what's really important to you. Don't spend too much time thinking about or doing what's not truly important to you and your children.
- Be comfortable saying no. Don't take on more than you can handle. Know and respect your limits.

## **Essential Skill # 3: THINK SAFETY**

Whether your child is a toddler or a teenager, safety is important. So many injuries and heartaches can be avoided if you learn to "think safety" and teach your children to do the same.

How to keep our children from being abused sexually, physically and emotionally is a big safety concern for parents. Get in the habit of talking with your children. With words and actions, let them know they can feel safe talking to you about *anything*. Your children need to know that you will always accept them, love them, and believe them.

Also very important is teaching your children to pay attention to their instincts and the feelings of guidance in their hearts. Even very young children know when something doesn't feel right. Guide them in learning when and how to say "no." Encourage your children to trust their gut feelings. It's one of the best ways to keep them safe.

**Some additional safety tips:**

- Notify neighbors when your children are at home alone. Have a very trusted neighbor whom your kids can call for help.



- Post emergency numbers by the phone. Tell your child when and when not to use 911.
- Inform your children about being cautious with people they do not know.
- Pick a family password that only you and your family use in emergency situations.

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***Teach your children to trust their danger instincts—their feelings about when things are OK and when they are not.***

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- Clean up spills right away. Keep toys, games and other items off the floor when not in use.
- Use smoke and carbon monoxide detectors in your home. Keep spare batteries to make sure the detectors are always in working order.
- Keep a flashlight handy or have emergency candles with matches stored in a secure place, in case a storm causes your home to lose electricity.
- If your children are young, place safety plugs on electrical outlets. Put safety locks on kitchen cabinets and refrigerators. Keep small items that children might choke on out of their reach.
- Teach your child basic first aid and how to operate a fire extinguisher.
- Children should also know the safest place in your apartment or home to go if there is severe weather.
- Store dangerous products and medicine out of a child's reach.
- If you can afford one, consider getting a pager. A pager can help you stay in touch with your children and others close to you.

**Food safety is an important part of family health.** Most food-borne, illness-causing bacteria don't grow well at refrigerator temperatures. That's why it's important to properly store perishable foods like meat, poultry, fish, eggs, and dairy products. Bacteria can multiply rapidly at room temperature. Hot temperatures can destroy harmful bacteria.

Cook meats and other food thoroughly.

Wash your hands with hot soapy water for at least 20 seconds before starting any food preparation. Keep raw meat, poultry and fish and their juices from coming in contact with other foods during preparation, especially foods that won't be cooked. Wash fresh fruits and vegetables with cold running water. If necessary, use a brush for scrubbing.

**Controlling household pests helps keep your home safe and free from germs and disease.**

Control bugs by keeping your place reasonably clean and free of clutter. Don't let old newspapers accumulate; they can be a fire hazard. Vacuum regularly and wipe up spills immediately. Keep window screens in good repair. Caulk cracks around windows and door frames to keep bugs out. Use chemicals if you need to get the bugs under control.

Cover spices, cereals, and grain products tightly. If you suspect any food product of being infested, throw it away! Buy tight fitting lids for all your garbage cans. Take trash outside before it accumulates, or after you have thrown away food products.

***Establishing routines, planning ahead and thinking safety are vital keys to successful single parenting. Use these skills wisely, and your family will benefit in so many ways.***



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NOTES:

## Personal Action Plan

Think about Family Management and the three target skills: *Set Routines*, *Plan Ahead*, and *Think Safety*. Now zero in on one of these areas and choose one small but important change you really want to make in the next few days. Visualize yourself successfully following through. Tell a supportive friend or family member about your goal. **Write your action plan in the space below.**

Beginning Date \_\_\_\_\_

Signature \_\_\_\_\_