



Piecing It Together

ESSENTIAL SKILLS FOR SINGLE PARENT FAMILIES

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS WITH YOUR CHILDREN

The life of most single parents is a hectic one, to say the least. We are usually so busy that it is hard to just slow down. It's even harder to take the time to put ourselves into the world of our children. There are so many things to do and so little time in which to do them. One consequence of being so busy can be that before you know it, your children will be grown and gone. Making time for your children today will help you build relationships with them that will prove invaluable for their future and yours.

ESSENTIAL SKILLS

- # 1. Play with your children
- # 2. Listen to your child's feelings and dreams
- # 3. Be involved in your child's life

Essential Skill # 1

PLAY WITH YOUR CHILDREN

Play is an essential part of a child's overall development. It has been described as a child's work. Play is as important to a young child as your job is to you. It gives children a fun way to learn skills that will prepare them for adulthood.

Play motivates children and teaches cooperation and trust. Play builds a child's self-esteem, independence, and self-sufficiency. It also gives children the chance to get to know themselves, the world, and people around them. Play continues to

VIDEO SUMMARY: A single mother is taking the time to play and interact with her two children over a game of Junior Monopoly. As they play, the mother and children speak to each other about what they hope to do with their lives in the future. This family is demonstrating the three essential skills highlighted to the left and discussed by the commentators in the video.

be important as children grow into the teenage years and beyond.

There are many delightful ways to play with your children. Here are some idea-starters:

- Play board games with your children. They're fun, and it's a good way to teach children how to pay attention and take turns. Board games can also teach children that winning and losing aren't the most important things in life. How you play and how much you enjoy the game are much more important.
- If you have more than one child, chances are, they do not all like to play the same things.



Take turns picking what you will play as a family. Even older brothers and sisters can enjoy some of the games that younger kids like to play. Encourage siblings to participate in and take interest in what each other is doing.

- Here's another idea for helping young children play together: Put suggested activities in a hat and draw one out. Everyone has to participate—no grumbling.
- Turn housework into play. Take the time to share chores with your children by making a game out of them. Washing dishes in lots of detergent bubbles can be loads of fun, especially if you cover parts of your face with them while you work. Your children will enjoy this activity and get in on the working fun.

Play can be a wonderful tool for you as a single parent for building relationships with your children. When you play with your children, you are putting yourself into their world. Children like to have you there!

- Find out what your child likes to play and participate with him or her. Encourage outdoor or physical activity. If your children are older, why not join them in a game of tennis, volleyball or basketball?
- Try to limit the amount of time you play video games if your child prefers only this type of play. Encourage your child to develop other interests as well.
- Set aside an hour or two each week for family play time. This will open up the lines of communication between you and your children. Let the kids lead the play time. It will build their leadership skills. It also gives them a chance to feel like they are in charge for a change.

- Make one night a “no-TV” night. Don't even turn it on. Use the time to play games of hide-and-seek, charades, Pictionary, or put on your own production by acting out a skit or drama. Chances are it will be much more entertaining than that rerun you would have watched on TV.
- Make up stories with your children. Create imaginary characters. Follow your child's lead. You never know where your story might take you.

Maybe you don't think you have time to play with your children, or perhaps you feel too tired to play with them. Very young children can wear you out quickly with their high energy and activity. One parent said he got tired just *watching* his daughter play.

But before you decide you cannot play with your child, think about how important the play time is to your child's growth and development. Consider the valuable communication that you and your child will share during this time together. Then remember how relaxed you feel when you play. Let the child in you come out and play with the child in your home.

Essential Skill # 2

LISTEN TO YOUR CHILD'S FEELINGS AND DREAMS

Children want to know that they are being heard. Assure them by taking time to express your interest; and then listen to their feelings and dreams. By doing so, you show that you respect what they have to say.

As you listen wholeheartedly to your child, he or she will learn by example to listen respectfully to you and others. Listening also helps children express themselves and builds their self-confidence.



If you listen to and respect your children's feelings, they will learn to treat others with similar sensitivity. Equally important, your children will learn to pay close attention to their own feelings, instincts and intuitions. It's hard to overemphasize how important this is. It's one of the keys to healthy adult relationships.

Being in tune with one's feelings and inner guidance promotes competence in every area of life. So, all of us busy single parents need to slow down, listen up, and tune in. Our children will benefit enormously, and so will we.

One of the deepest longings of every human being is to be heard, understood and appreciated. It's true for you and me, and it's true for our children.

Here are some ways you can let your children know you are listening to their feelings and dreams:

- Gently touch your child before he talks to you. This lets him know he has your attention.
- Give your child your undivided attention. You are not truly listening to her if you are reading the paper, or if your mind is thinking about supper or what your boss said at work. Stop what you are doing and look at your child to let her know she has your attention.
- Sit or place yourself at the same level as your child. It is important to not always stand over your child. When we stand above children, they tend to feel overpowered and "little."
- Acknowledge that you are hearing what your child has to say by occasionally summarizing back her statements. This also helps her know that you understand what she is trying to say to you.

- Be careful not to offer advice too quickly or to nag. Sometimes children just want to talk without getting advice or being told what to do.
- Praise your child for his independent ideas. Don't use unkind words with your child, even if you have concerns about his ideas. Unkind words teach children they aren't good enough and always have a negative effect.
- Get in the habit of reaching out to your child. Try to understand and *feel* the world from his or her point of view: "You seem sad today. Are you missing your old home?" "That was a hard shot you made in today's game. I bet it felt really good!"

Essential Skill # 3

BE INVOLVED IN YOUR CHILD'S LIFE

Being involved in your child's life means more than seeing to it that they get on the school bus safely or that they make it to day care without any problems. It means getting to know your children by spending time with them.

How often do you sit down with your children and ask them questions to find the common interests you share? Do you and your children watch television together or rent movies every once in a while? Below are a few suggestions for becoming more involved in your child's life.

- Get to know your children's friends and their parents. Let your children know you care who they hang out with.
- Read what your children are reading so you can develop an understanding of what things are like from their point of view.
- When parents are invited to attend, try your best to go to activities your children participate in, whether it's a soccer game, Scouts or a chess match. Kids like seeing Mom or Dad there



when they are involved in an event that is important to them.

- Regularly make time to just sit with your children and speak openly about your day and theirs. This tells your children you are available to them and that you care about what is going on in their lives. It also gives your child a feeling of importance.

Take advantage of the little moments that you and your children have together. Enjoy breakfast together before school and work. Chat, sing or tell jokes when making a snack together or while running errands. Times of peaceful silence can also be a refreshing way to enjoy being together.

- In the back of your mind, always keep the idea that you can make a positive impact in your child's life. Think of ways to enrich the time you spend together. Work on making a lasting difference in your child's life.

Get involved with your child's schooling.

Find out what is going on at school. Children sometimes forget to give their parents the take-home notices about upcoming events. Be sure to ask your child daily about these kinds of things. Involved parents produce good students.

Make the time to meet your children's teachers. Explain your home situation to their teachers so they will know when you can meet for conferences. If scheduling meetings is impossible, try writing notes. It's an excellent way to keep teachers informed and for them to inform you about your child's progress.

When possible, volunteer to be a parent participant in your child's school or other activities. This may be difficult for a single parent, but there are usually some things you can do.

Maybe you could send goodies to school with your child for an activity. Perhaps you could be the keeper of the class phone list. This makes you responsible for calling other parents to remind them about special events at school. Your children will be proud that you are taking part in things that affect them!

No matter how limited you may think your time is, try always to make time for your child. It's been said that parenting is the hardest but the most important job in the world. It can also be the most rewarding.

Make the most of your time with your children. Get to know your children by playing with them, listening to their hopes and dreams, and being involved in their lives.



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BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS
WITH YOUR CHILDREN

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NOTES:

Personal Action Plan

Think about Building Relationships with Your Children and the three target skills: *Play with Your Children*, *Listen to Your Child's Feelings and Dreams*, and *Be Involved in Your Child's Life*. 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 _____