



Piecing It Together

ESSENTIAL SKILLS FOR SINGLE PARENT FAMILIES

RELATING TO OTHER FAMILY MEMBERS

When you become single parents in a variety of different ways. The majority of children in single parent homes have two living parents who are involved in their lives to one degree or another. Relating well to our former partners and in-laws can be a major challenge, but it's vitally important to the well-being of our children.

Hurts from painful break-ups usually go away very slowly. You may have stored up lots of anger from the pain your former partner caused you. However, that person is a key part of your child's life. Do what you can to make the relationship between your former partner and your child a positive one. The skills highlighted in this publication can help you and other family members work together to raise a healthy, happy child.

ESSENTIAL SKILLS

- # 1. Focus on your child's well-being in shared parenting
- # 2. Support your child's affection for the other parent
- # 3. Be kind and honest

VIDEO SUMMARY: Jenny, daughter of a single mom, receives a birthday card from her Dad. Instead of congratulating the daughter, the father's message in the card attacks the mother. Very upset, Jenny runs to her room. Her mother follows and uses the incident as an opportunity to help Jenny openly express her feelings. Mom passes up the chance to verbally attack the father. Instead, she recognizes her daughter's feelings of loss and her need to see her father again.

Essential Skill # 1

FOCUS ON YOUR CHILD'S WELL-BEING IN SHARED PARENTING

A youngster thrives when both parents are involved and have a healthy relationship with their child. Regardless of what reasons you may have for not wanting to communicate with your former partner, you owe your son or daughter the chance to have the best relationship possible with the other parent.

Use the following suggestions as guidelines for relating to your child's other parent:

- Keep your children out of adult arguments. Children can suffer emotional damage when they are pushed into the center of adult conflicts, leading them to feel insecure, bitter and fearful.
- Control the urge to verbally "trash" the other parent. As single parents, sometimes we fling unkind claims or cruel attacks toward the other parent or family members. Using such hurtful



words is never in the best interest of the children. In fact, your child may resent such comments and stick up for the other parent.

- Try treating your relationship with your former spouse or partner as if it were a business arrangement. Make the most important goal of your business to keep the product— your child—safe, nurtured and healthy. This means no arguing or word wars in front of your child.
- Work out in private any child-related problems. As your child's parent, take responsibility for making the right decisions for your child.
- Remember that not every solution will be the right one for your children. Disagreeing parents or family members can arrive at solutions that benefit themselves, but which may not be what's best for the children. For example, the other parent may want to visit your child at a time that would be convenient for her, but it might be during your child's piano lesson or nap time. Emphasize that your main concern is your child's well-being. Find solutions that are good for your child.
- It can be a real challenge for children to move from one household to another, adjusting to new rules and a new environment. Temporary moodiness is common. Try to see things from your child's point of view. Do what you can to smooth these transitions.

Help your child prepare emotionally for the times when he will be visiting or living with the other parent. Tell him you hope he has a good time. Without making him feel guilty, let him know how much you will miss him while he's gone.

You may want to make a list of events and activities of which the other parent could be a part. This might include regular visitation, sharing photos, birthday parties, and special events during the winter and summer holidays. You may be able to share expenses for summer camps. If your child is involved in sports, encourage the other parent or family members to actively support, or maybe even coach the child's team.

Discuss your list with your former partner, either in person or by phone. Present the items as suggestions, not expectations. Be prepared to accept the possibility that he or she may not be interested in participating in many or any of the activities. Ask for his or her suggestions, too.

Once you have reached an agreement, share the plans with your child. Above all, be considerate of your child's feelings. Do not let her know how many of the suggestions from your list her mom or dad declined to do.

Essential Skill #2

SUPPORT YOUR CHILD'S AFFECTION FOR THE OTHER PARENT

A child's love for a parent is naturally strong, even if the parent is absent from the family. The fact that the person is his parent is more important to a child than the circumstances behind a divorce or other reasons for the parent's absence.

Children will feel love and anger, excitement and disappointment toward their other parent. They will even recognize their parent's faults, criticize certain behaviors, and still love them. By allowing this natural expression and development of your children's feelings toward their other parent, you show the depth of your love for them.

Here are some ways you can make your home a place where your children can feel free to show their true feelings:



- Set aside your own negative feelings about your child's other parent and family members. Children need space to form their own opinions. They can usually do a good job of sizing up a person on their own, without your help. You may be surprised at what your child picks up on and understands.
- Don't tell your child how she should feel. Listen well. Be receptive and accepting. Expressions of anger, sadness and guilt, as well as silence, all are OK. Even if she has an unhealthy attitude, be patient. Allow her to express her feelings.
- It's an old proverb, but it's tried and true: If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all. This can easily be the rule when dealing with your child's other parent. While it may be quite tempting to make unkind comments, try very hard not to do so. Consider it an investment in your child's future.
- Bear in mind that you cannot speak for your child's other parent. You can only speak for yourself. Don't offer excuses for the other parent's actions or words.

Whenever reasonably possible, your children need guidance and love from both parents. The parent-child bond is special; some would say sacred. Do what you can to nurture it.

- Stay out of arguments between your children and the other parent. Although you may want to help, your involvement can actually make things worse. It's usually best to let them work out their own problems.
- Encourage your children to telephone, visit, and send cards on special occasions. You can even help buy the stamps. Make it easy for your children to communicate with the other parent,

- and support them in their efforts.
- Do your best to maintain harmonious relationships with grandparents, stepparents and other extended family members. Your children benefit when the people they love work together. Extended family is a valuable resource for your children, both now and in the future.

Are you still battling negative feelings toward your child's other parent? If so, you may be ready to forgive your former partner, or perhaps to forgive again at a deeper level. This doesn't mean letting your former partner off the hook for what may have been done, but it does mean giving him or her a break. Most importantly, it means freeing yourself from bitterness and resentment.

If you have tried to forgive and cannot, or if your feelings of anger have grown stronger, consider getting professional help. Keeping strong negative feelings alive inside you is harmful to your physical, emotional, and mental health. A talented counselor can do wonders toward helping you deal with, learn from, and let go of painful memories and self-defeating behaviors.

Essential Skill #3

BE KIND AND HONEST

Being fair to someone in their absence shows good character. It's also just plain smart. What goes around comes around. As we increasingly treat others with kindness, we find that unexpected blessings come to us from many different sources.

The way you treat your former partner will help or hinder your child's healthy development. Try to find the right balance of kindness and honesty when speaking of your former partner.

- When talking about your child's other parent, be honest about the facts, but speak with understanding and wisdom. Open bitterness and negativity hurt you and your children. On the



other hand, don't sugar-coat unacceptable or abusive behavior. Trust your inner guidance. Sometimes it's best to say nothing.

- Don't use your child as a weapon or bargaining tool in your fights with the other parent. For example, threatening to withhold visitation from a parent because you are angry with him hurts both the child and the parent.
- While it may seem to be a convenient way to find out more about your former partner's present life, *never* use your children as spies. Don't question them in depth about their weekends with the other parent or in-laws, especially if they are hesitant to talk about it.
- Never make up anything untruthful about your child's other parent. Lies about improper behavior, such as abuse, can ruin a person's reputation, self-confidence, and career. Likewise, it causes deep pain to the child.
- As hard as it may be, don't bring up your former partner's faults in front of your child. If she asks you about it, be honest, but do not try to make the other parent out to be "the bad guy."
- As much as you can, focus on positive aspects of your former partner: "Jesse, your dad is really good with his hands. Maybe he can help you with your Cub Scout project." "Michelle, you dance with such grace and enthusiasm! You obviously have inherited your mother's talent."
- Offer occasional gestures of kindness to your former partner: "I'll be glad to drop the kids off at your place. Just tell me what time would be good for you." "Susan, I mailed an extra check yesterday. I thought you would appreciate a little additional money during the holidays."

Former spouses and partners. Stepparents and their children. Grandparents, aunts and uncles from the other side of the family. Difficult individuals in your own family. Relating to all these people presents abundant opportunities for learning and growing, and for appreciating the good in others.

Allow your heart to gradually awaken to a feeling of great kindness and love. Carry this kindness and power and love into all you do, allowing it to guide your thoughts and actions. Let its radiance shine through you and light up the world. This is one of the greatest gifts you can give to your child.

Know one thing for sure: Your children are watching you closely. Their ears and eyes are wide open. They drink in your words, attitudes and actions. As they watch you relate to other family members, they are learning critical lessons on making the best of challenging circumstances.

Without question, you are your child's most important teacher. Teach kindness. Teach strength. Teach forgiveness. Teach courage and wisdom and creativity. Teach your son or daughter to listen well, to put first things first, and to be sensitive to other people. Most important of all, by your example, teach your child to feel and express love.



Prepared by project team members, this publication is one part of the 10-part "Essential Skills for Single Parent Families" series. Funded by Community Connections for Children—Bluegrass Area Development District.

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FAMILY MEMBERS

Page 5

✧ ESSENTIAL ✧ SKILLS ✧ FOR ✧ SINGLE ✧ PARENT ✧ FAMILIIES ✧

NOTES:

Personal Action Plan

Think about Relating to Other Family Members and the three target skills: *Focus on Your Child's Well-Being*, *Support Your Child's Affection for the Other Parent*, and *Be Kind and Honest*. 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 _____