



Piecing It Together

ESSENTIAL SKILLS FOR SINGLE PARENT FAMILIES

FAMILY COMMUNICATION

In strong single parent families the lines of communication are open. Information flows freely. Family members make an effort to hear what the other person says and feels. They are comfortable voicing their opinions and are open to change.

When it comes to communication, one of our greatest needs is to be listened to and understood. When we listen to our children's feelings, they learn to sense and trust their own feelings and instincts. This means they will be more sensitive to us as parents. And they will grow up knowing how to respect and express their feelings and intuitions—one of the keys to healthy relationships, self-discipline and creativity.

ESSENTIAL SKILLS

- # 1. Praise your children
- # 2. Have family meetings
- # 3. Celebrate what is special about your family

VIDEO SUMMARY: Learn as you watch a single parent conduct a family meeting. The family uses the time to resolve problems, compliment each other's accomplishments, and discuss upcoming family events. Through courtesy and respect for each other, the family is able to successfully maintain healthy communication among all its members.

Essential Skill # 1

PRAISE YOUR CHILDREN

Have you noticed how good it feels when somebody gives you a sincere compliment? Or how nice it is to have someone notice an extra effort that you've made? Your children also like positive attention. In fact, they thrive on it. It's one of the ways they learn to feel good about themselves and others.

To praise your child means to express approval or admiration. Another word for praise is encouragement. When skillfully used, praise builds an individual's confidence and courage.

Whether a toddler or a teenager, your child is a marvel—a one-of-a-kind soul with special abilities and talents. He or she is a wonderful, precious human being who has so much to teach and learn and give.

One of your most important jobs as a single parent is to recognize the goodness, beauty and talents of your children. Then make sure they know exactly what you see in them and how filled with appreciation, pride and admiration you are.

As a parent, you are one of the most important people in your child's world. When you are



patient, kind and positive with your child, it makes a big difference. Never underestimate your influence. Praise your child for who he is, and for the many gifts he brings into our world.

Make it a point to catch your children being good. Concentrate on the positive. Believe in them. Encourage their talents.

The more you encourage your child, the more skillful you become. Children watch you and learn from you. When you praise their strong points, they learn to see the positive in themselves, in you, and in those around them. Some tips for praising and encouraging children:

- Catch the youngsters in your life being good; make a big deal about it. Be sincere.
- Focus on what you like about your child, and express your appreciation. Without overdoing it, give praise freely and frequently.
- Use a positive, caring tone as you regularly share words of encouragement from the heart, such as: Keep at it. Great! It's nice to have you around. I love you. We all make mistakes. That was very kind of you. Nice going. You'll do better next time. Thank you!
- Help young children feel capable. Instead of "That's not the way to do it," say "That's a big job—let's see if we can do it together."
- Help your child recognize talents he or she may have. "Jamaal, you draw *really* well. I think you inherited your grandfather's artistic ability." "Kayla, you must have motors inside your legs! How do you run so fast?"
- Ask your son what he learned in school today. Smile and give him your full attention. Say "Wow!" or "Hey, that's interesting."
- Talk with your daughter as if she were one of the most important people in the whole world, because she is.
- Another important way to encourage your child is by attending his school events or being involved in other activities or hobbies that interest him.
- By your words and actions, convey this message to your child: "I like you just because you're you." Similarly, let your children know that you love them no matter what, with no strings attached. "Sasha, I love you when you are happy, and I love you when you are angry or sad. No matter what, I will always love you."
- Think how blessed you are to have these marvelous children in your life. As a way of showing your appreciation, give each of them a hug, a kiss, a wink, or a smile.

Essential Skill # 2

HAVE FAMILY MEETINGS

Family meetings are usually held at a set time and place on a regular basis. A family meeting is a cooperative way of making decisions that affect all family members. Above all else, it is a time for being open and honest without fear. It's also a time for sharing concerns and hopes. Equally important, family meetings provide an opportunity for planning and having fun.

If you are a single parent with one child, you may be thinking, "Can just the two of us have a family meeting?" Absolutely. It can be a special time to plan fun events, listen to each other's dreams, and talk about problems that need to be addressed.

Many positives can come from family meetings. They are an excellent way to adjust to the changes that are part of everyday family life. Little problems can be resolved before they grow



into major issues. Children like it when their ideas and suggestions are requested and respected. Feelings of trust, caring and competence develop, and family members learn to listen and use good decision-making skills. And we're all more likely to follow through with a decision when we have had a voice in making it.

Consider the following important guidelines for successful family meetings:

- Schedule your family meetings on a regular basis, perhaps once a month or maybe even once a week. Give everyone advance notice.
- Prepare ahead of time what you would like to discuss during the meeting. Ask your children to make suggestions and help with what the family is going to talk about.
- Plan to hold the meetings at a time when you will not be hurried or pressured to finish up quickly. Allow enough time to discuss key issues in a relaxed way.
- In the first few meetings, focus mostly on planning fun or recreational activities. Once family members see the value of sitting down together to plan activities, they will be more open to solving problems and dealing with change.
- Start on time. Set a time limit and stick to it. Keep the meetings fairly brief. This is particularly important if you have young children.
- Appoint or vote on a different family member to run each meeting. Drawing names works well.
- Talk about specific issues that have come up that week. Make time during your family meeting for everyone to express their feelings without interruption.
- Focus on real issues. Stay away from criticizing individuals. No put-downs. Deal with problems head-on. Listen to feelings; talk about solutions; get everybody's input.
- When one family member talks, everyone else listens. Be patient with younger children. They may need more time to express their ideas.

- Expect conflict. The goal is not to start with agreement, but to end with it. Differing ideas can help the family arrive at the best solution or decision. Put agreements into action as soon as possible.
- Remember, don't just talk about family problems. Plan fun activities, too.
- End your meetings with something positive like a game, a joke or a simple snack.

During your family meetings, model good listening skills for your children. Look your children directly in the eyes when they are speaking. Use positive body posture showing your children you are giving them your full attention.

Essential Skill # 3

CELEBRATE WHAT IS SPECIAL ABOUT YOUR FAMILY

If you are a solo parent with one child, the two of you can enjoy wonderful celebrations together. This type of one-on-one time makes for rich sharing and leaves you with warm memories for the future. At other times, you will probably enjoy inviting friends, grandparents, or another single parent family to join in certain family celebrations.

Ask yourself: What is different and special about our family? What strengths, talents and learning experiences do we have? Raise similar questions with other family members. Ask young children, too. Often they come up with funny answers and interesting insights.

A healthy solo parent family can provide important benefits. For example, children in strong single parent families often learn to assume more responsibility. They know how to take care of their own needs and can learn to enjoy being on their own. Learning to be content when alone, as well as when other people are around, is a valuable adjustment skill.



Think about the benefits of your solo parent family. Pay attention to these blessings. Help family members see and appreciate them. Also make it a point to focus on some of the other strengths of your family, such as what your family has learned from hard times and fond memories that you share. All of these are reasons to celebrate.

As parent and child go through the joys and challenges of a one-parent home, they grow in their ability to support, communicate with, and love one another. This often creates a particularly close and strong parent-child bond.

Some suggestions for celebrating what is special about your family:

- Every now and then, have a Family Celebration Dinner. Prepare a menu that includes at least one favorite of each family member, or go out to a restaurant everyone enjoys. Propose a family toast for a recent family achievement—Nathaniel taking his first steps, Jesse getting two “A’s” on his report card, or Kristen making the basketball team.
- Taking one family member at a time, let everyone present say one thing they appreciate about each person. Conclude by singing a favorite song, saying a prayer, or having a family hug.
- Give each family member a chance to talk about some things he or she loves to do. Can you do some of these activities together as a family? Can you do one of them right away? Is there another activity you could do together in the future?
- Gather family members together, perhaps over a big bowl of popcorn. Let each person answer the following question: “What are two things

you really like about our family?”

- Celebrate your family’s history. Take a trip to see the neighborhood and home where you grew up as a young child or visit some of the oldest living family members. Take them fresh flowers or a homemade gift and ask them to tell you and your children what life was like when they were growing up.
- Create a family story. Start off by sharing the beginning of a story. Then let the next person briefly continue the story in any way he or she wants. Then it’s the next person’s turn. Whether there are two or five people in your family group, let your imagination go and have some fun. There’s no telling what kind of story you’ll wind up with!
- Hold a potluck picnic for your extended family. Besides a dish, ask those attending to bring along some special family photographs. After the meal, have a time for “show and tell.”

Praise your children. Have family meetings. Celebrate what is special about your family. By regularly using these skills, your family’s communication will improve and your home life will become more positive and enjoyable. As your children grow older, they will naturally tend to remember these skills and use them as they create their own families.



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.

Although this publication is copyrighted, you are free to reproduce it in its entirety for non-profit, educational purposes. Copyright © 1999 University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service, Assistant Director for Home Economics Extension, 206 Scovell Hall, Lexington, KY 40546-0064. *Educational programs of the Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service serve all people regardless of race, color, age, sex, religion, disability, or national origin.*



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

NOTES:

Personal Action Plan

Think about Family Communication and the three target skills: *Praise Your Children*, *Have Family Meetings*, and *Celebrate What Is Special About Your Family*. 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 _____