



Piecing It Together

ESSENTIAL SKILLS FOR SINGLE PARENT FAMILIES

DATING

Dating is a time for enjoyment and for testing compatibility between two people. It can be a wonderful experience for single parents. Dating offers the opportunity for self-discovery and for learning about others. You see how people live, learn about their likes and dislikes, and find out how good you each are at putting yourselves in the other's world. Single parents in dating relationships have many things to consider, including how it affects their children. Dating can be a beautiful experience, but you need to be patient and wise, and keep a positive outlook.

ESSENTIAL SKILLS

- # 1. Live your family's values
- # 2. Closely examine new relationships
- # 3. Highly value your sexuality

Essential Skill # 1:

LIVE YOUR FAMILY'S VALUES

Our values are the ideals that we live by. They are, in part, what determines our behavior. Your values are like road signs made just for you. They are there to help your dating "journey" be a safe and fulfilling experience.

The best romantic relationships are between people who share common values. For example, living with your children in a secure and loving home may be important to you. Keeping this key value in mind will help you to avoid dating persons who are abusive in their words or actions. If your family values financial stability, then dating someone who saves and spends

VIDEO SUMMARY: Like many single parents, Jim and Emily moved quickly from a budding romance to full commitment in their dating relationship. It was so quick that they did not have time to get to know each other really well. They didn't test their compatibility. Emily expresses her frustration over the relationship to her friend, claiming that she feels like she is already married—a false or "pseudo-marriage." And she wants a divorce!

money wisely will fit with your family's beliefs. Are you active in a church, synagogue or temple? Then you will probably be more comfortable dating someone who also enjoys these kinds of activities.

We may try to convince ourselves that dating a person with very different basic values is all right. We may make excuses for his or her behavior. We might say things like, "He just has trouble controlling his temper," or "She does drink a lot, but . . ." Don't ignore these red flags. You may regret it later.

Before you go out on your first date, you will find it helpful to examine your family's values. Keeping key values in mind will guide you in making the dating process a healthy and enjoyable experience.



Dating an individual who is quite different from you can be interesting and growth-producing. But watch out if your basic values clash. It will be very difficult to maintain a healthy relationship.

Here are some points that will help in identifying your key family values:

- Be open and honest in talking with your family about values. Welcome independent thinking.
- You may find it helpful to explain values to your family as road signs or maps you want to follow in life. We get to where we want to go by following maps and road signs. Values are like directions we can follow to help us live the way we'd like.
- Write down five statements which you believe sum up the ideals that you live by and that you want your children to model.
- Take time to sit down as a family to discuss what you value as individuals and as a family. Allow each family member a turn to speak. Encourage them to say what is important to them as individuals. Also ask them what they see as important family values.
- If your children are young, they might enjoy drawing pictures of your family. Then let them describe what they have drawn. This may give you an idea of what each of your children thinks is important at home.

Essential Skill # 2

CLOSELY EXAMINE NEW RELATIONSHIPS

Besides being fun, dating offers a chance for two people to see how compatible they are. Dating gives you the opportunity to look at the person you are with and decide if his or her character fits well with what you are looking for.

For a variety of reasons, some solo parents date very little or not at all. Others date occasionally for social reasons, but are not interested in marriage. However, the majority of previously married persons go on to date and remarry. If your desire is to get married, ask yourself if the person you are dating has what you are looking for in a mate.

Even though you do not have all the commitments and obligations of marriage while dating, it can be easy to fall into an unhealthy marriage-like relationship. We call this “pseudo-marriage,” or “false” marriage. In a pseudo-marriage, the couple usually hasn't taken time to test their compatibility in a range of situations. They often miss out on the fun and exploration that dating can provide.

In a pseudo-marriage, one or both partners may try to control the other's time and activities. They usually make demands on each other and face decisions similar to most married couples. This often involves disciplining each other's children. Most couples involved in a pseudo-marriage are sexually active, sometimes living together. They also may have a degree of control over the other person's income.

Single parents can easily find themselves in a pseudo-marriage. Instead of using the dating relationship as a time to get to know one another, they jump to an unhealthy, marriage-like relationship. This is not good for the couple, and it's not good for the children. While it may be very easy to get into such a relationship, getting out can be painful and difficult. As single parents, it is wise for us to closely examine new relationships.

Let's look at some suggestions and issues you might want to consider when dating:

- Feel free to ask plenty of questions. You need to know what you're getting yourself into. Besides, expressing interest in other people is a great way to get to know them.
- Keep your family's values in mind when dating. Don't settle for less.
- Be genuine. Don't in any way pretend to be different than the wonderful person you naturally are.



Just be yourself. Healthy relationships are built on openness, honesty, and acceptance.

- Give yourself a year with a dating partner before making any decisions about your future. This will allow you the time to get to know the other person. It also lets you deal with any issues from your past that might be spilling over into your current relationship. Of course, if any kind of abuse is taking place, don't wait a year; end the relationship now!
- Date someone whose goals in life are similar to yours and who will support your dreams for yourself and your family. Dating a person who is comfortable in your world will help both you and your children.
- Reserve the right to break off the relationship. If the other person is being dishonest with you, it's time for a change. If you start feeling uncomfortable—for whatever reasons, you have the right to back away.
- Work to remain true to yourself in a dating relationship. You do not always have to go along with your dating partner's likes and wishes in order to remain in the relationship.
- Be sure the relationship is a partnership, with your voice counting equally.
- Listen to feedback from family and friends. They often notice things in a dating partner—positive and negative—that we may not see as clearly.
- Be sure to carry on with your own interests and personal growth while you are dating. You, your family, and the person you decide to date all stand to win from your continued learning and growth.

Give positive attention to your children when you are involved in a dating relationship. When you sense it is the right time, introduce your children to the person you are dating and allow them time to get to know each other. You may already have an idea of how your child will react upon meeting your date.

Occasionally children are overly eager for a "new" parent. Much more frequently, they see another person in their parent's life as a threat to them. They

may resent having to share Mom or Dad with this person. Your child may even try to get you to break off a relationship. Be sure to listen to your child's reasons. Children sometimes pick up on little things that adults miss. Although it is very important to consider your child's well-being and point of view, decide for yourself who you will or won't date.

Don't look for your own happiness in someone else. That's far too much responsibility to give to any other person. If you are unhappy within yourself, marriage or a dating relationship will not fix that.

Essential Skill # 3 HIGHLY VALUE YOUR SEXUALITY

Our sexuality is a beautiful and natural part of who we are as human beings. Working to keep it that way is important. Sexuality is a wonderful way for two people to express their love and commitment to each other. Sharing ourselves sexually is a precious gift—a gift which many people believe is ideally enjoyed in a healthy marriage.

When someone cares about another human being they should willingly respect and value the other individual's sexuality as well as their own. As a single parent, be wary of someone who pushes you to enter into a sexual relationship. The emotional effect on you and your children can be negative.

Get to know your dating partner by spending time together without sexual intimacy. This will enable you to see if that person really fits what you are looking for in a partner. Keep the lines of communication between you and your dating partner open. Have plenty of fun, and also talk about and respect each other's values.

Dating offers you the opportunity to take your time in deciding if the person you are dating is really someone you want to become intimate with. Many couples decide to live together—or cohabit—as a way of “testing the waters.” This is particularly true when one or both partners have been previously married. But there can be potential problems with cohabiting.

Although every couple is unique, on the whole, those who live together before marriage tend to have a higher divorce rate. Studies also suggest that violence may be higher among some cohabiting couples.

Couples who cohabit may have less commitment and more uncertainty about the relationship. When this is the case, it can be a problem. Successfully living with a partner requires a clear and strong commitment, particularly when the going gets rough. Commitment is also a key ingredient in building a strong family.

Think before you take the plunge, and weigh the odds. Chances are you may want to reserve the gift of your sexuality for a partner who is loving, compatible, and committed to you and your children.

Some helpful ways to highly value your sexuality:

- Recognize that premature sex in a relationship can hide the differences between two people. It also carries with it an emotional risk.
- Sometimes dating partners who push for a sexual relationship have a hidden agenda. Be aware of this possibility and keep your options open. Take care of yourself first.
- If you do not clearly communicate your feelings about sexual intimacy, you may be putting yourself at risk for a sexually transmitted disease or even an unplanned pregnancy.
- Work toward building trust before jumping into a sexual relationship. Trust is something that we learn and build upon through a variety of experiences. It takes time. Dating is intended to give you that needed time.

Use your sexuality in the most sensible and wondrous way you can. Highly value your sexuality. And highly value the special, gifted and beautiful person you are.

Types of Intimate Relationships. The chart on the following page lists different stages of intimate relationships. Where do you fit in the chart? Are you a divorced single parent who would like to remarry, but wants to avoid unnecessary problems? If you are a never-married single parent who is looking for a marriage partner, you might want some help identifying signs of a healthy relationship.

Or maybe you have decided that marriage is simply not for you—at least not at this time. Still you may want to peek at what you are (or are not) missing! Look over the three columns and the relationships they represent. Then decide for yourself, “Which Marriage Do You Want?”



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Which Marriage Do You Want?

PSEUDO-MARRIAGE	HEALTHY DATING	HEALTHY MARRIAGE
“Me First” Attitude	Proper Priority	Precious Privilege
“I’m more important than your children, family, or personal activities.”	“I’m important, but I know that your children and other concerns may come first.”	“You are the love of my life. I offer you a place of precious privilege in my heart.”
Unhealthy Control	Friendship	Proven Partnership
“You’re mine and I’m yours. We have control over each other. We belong together for better or worse.”	“I enjoy your company a lot, but I realize we’re testing our compatibility. I’m not glued to the outcome.”	“Our values and goals compliment each other. Let’s journey together to our highest potential.”
Lack of Privacy	Freedom	Faith
“I have the right to know. Your activities should have our mutual agreement.”	“We have separate lives. Thank you for the time you share with me.”	“I trust you with whomever, whatever, wherever, whenever, forever.”
Unlimited Access	Respectful Access	Intimate Access
“I can come to you at any time without notice.”	“I respect your right to privacy.”	“In mutual respect, I open myself intimately to you.”
Acting Parent	Natural Interaction	Support in Parenting
“Be a parent to my children. Discipline, care for, and spend time with them.”	“Please relate to my children in ways that are comfortable for you and them.”	“Thanks for your support and feedback as we guide and love our children.”
“Prove-It-To-Me” Sex	Self-Control	“Soul-Mate” Sex
“We can’t have a meaningful, lasting relationship without sex.”	“Let’s first build a solid foundation of trust, understanding, and commitment.”	“No fears, no regrets, no pressure. We know and love the authentic us. Take all of me, baby!”
Shared Space	Safe Space	A Special Place
“We must live in the same home to be happy.”	“My home is a safe sanctuary for my family.”	“This isn’t just a home; it’s a dream factory!”



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NOTES:

Personal Action Plan

Think about Dating and the three target skills: *Live Your Family's Values*, *Closely Examine New Relationships*, and *Highly Value Your Sexuality*. 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 _____