

How to Cope as a Single Parent

Proper child rearing is a serious challenge even with both father and mother present. But single parents face even more difficulties. Here are practical suggestions for single parents.

By Richard Rice

Rearing a child is never easy, but for one person to function as both mother and father is the toughest job of all.

Yet it is increasingly common today for a parent to find himself or herself in this double role.

Already there are nearly six million single-parent households, more than half a million headed by a father, the rest by a mother. The U.S. Census Bureau reports that more than 13 percent of all U.S. families are now headed by women. The number of families headed by women has increased more than 73 percent since 1960.

God's Church also has a growing number of single-parent households. Besides the age-old tragedy of one parent dying, many parents come into the Church divorced or separated from their mates, having to rear their children alone.

Those who have enjoyed the loving companionship of marriage understandably find readjustment to single life difficult. Loneliness and frustration often creep in. The responsibilities of shouldering the roles of both mother and father can be physically and emotionally draining.

Consequently, many parents in this situation find themselves overworked, tired and, as a result, more easily upset and irritable. Others may still be recovering from the trauma of

a divorce or the death of a mate.

Children also suffer in a single-parent home. They may have difficulty being fully understood by a parent of the opposite sex. For example, a son may find his mother failing to appreciate his interests. Similarly, a daughter may learn that her father has difficulty understanding some of her feminine needs.

The problem of adjusting can be just as traumatic for a child having a single parent of the same sex, since the care of both parents is necessary to completely fulfill the emotional needs of the child.

Often children with only one parent have more difficulty at school. A study showed that single-parent children require far more help and attention from school than they receive.

To become self-supporting as a single parent can also be a major struggle. Few single parents escape the financial difficulties inherent in bringing up children alone.

Some women may have been so dependent on their former husbands that they lack the right kind of confidence to make decisions for themselves and their families. Often those with older children need to go out and find employment. And after many years at home, they may be out of touch with the work environment or their skills may be rusty or outdated.

Here are some practical suggestions to help you as a single parent boldly face your responsibilities.

These suggestions have worked for other Church members who found themselves in this situation.

Look to God

Being a single parent can be like living without an arm or leg. Succeeding in such a situation is never going to be easy.

Therefore, realize that you have to rely and lean on God as never before. Even with the increased demands on your time and energy, make sure you take sufficient time for personal prayer and Bible study. Schedule your time wisely and keep first things first. If necessary, get up earlier so you can devote adequate time to these priorities.

God promises to supply all our needs, including those of single parents, and will not allow us to experience trials greater than we can bear (Phil. 4:19, I Cor. 10:13).

As a single parent, you can claim many special promises God makes in His Word. For example, Psalm 146:9 says that "The Lord . . . relieveth the fatherless and widow." Here is a promise that God will relieve the weight of any burdens single parenting may bring, whether physical, emotional, social or spiritual.

Psalm 68:5 (Revised Standard Version) describes God as the "Father of the fatherless" and also as a protector of widows. You can therefore have extra confidence when appearing before God's throne with your heartfelt prayers.

God is specially concerned for children whose parents are single. God promises to help the fatherless (Ps. 10:14) and to plead their cause (Prov. 23:10-11).

A Church member who had been a single parent for 17 years related: "No matter what trauma and suffering one has gone through, and for how long, God always blesses both the mother and children in the end. He does not forget the suffering and obedience to His laws. . . . The only way is to rely on God, who always takes care of things, even the minute details."

Put God and His way above everything else in your life, then trust Him to provide for and guide you in every situation. By learning to depend on God and asking Him for special help, you will be able to face your problems squarely. God will always supply the need, sometimes in totally unexpected ways.

We are God's workmanship

Sometimes we forget that God is the Potter and we are the clay (Isa. 64:8, Rom. 9:21). If we can always remember the promise of Romans 8:28 — that all things work together for good (including single parenthood) to those who love God — none of us need be overcome by excessive grief or allow ourselves to slip into self-pity and depression.

It can also be of immense encouragement to realize that there are others who are experiencing trials similar to yours. Spend time in positive fellowship with others in your situation, uplifting and encouraging one another.

Single parenthood is not an easy road to trek. Yet Christ has promised to help bear our burdens (Matt. 11:28-30). Jeremiah was inspired to write, "Behold, I am the Lord, the God of all flesh: is there any thing too hard for me?" (Jer. 32:27). In Philippians 4:13, Paul wrote, "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me."

With the help and strength of God, you can accept the challenges of your situation, no matter how difficult they may seem. You must, therefore, cultivate a positive attitude toward your circumstances and make a bold commitment to face your problems with God's help.

Often single parents are not aware of the void that exists in their lives until they need their mates. But the realization eventually hits home, especially when problems arise. Career decisions, discipline problems, emotional stress and neighbor difficulties, to name a few, can quickly swell out of proportion without wise counsel.

Seek abundant counsel

In order to continue growing personally, single parents need sound counsel and advice, just as anyone else does (Prov. 11:14, 24:6). The value of guidance is priceless. Some try to go it alone and cause themselves unnecessary hardship.

God has set His ministers over the congregations to help brethren in His Church (Heb. 13:17, II Cor. 1:24). Seek out and consult with the ministry when problems get tough and help is needed. Also teach your children to seek wise counsel before making major decisions.

influenced by the good example of their children.

Where possible, don't overlook counsel from your own family. Family members can know you better than anyone else, and may be able to help in a particular situation. Quite often single parents who learn to successfully cope with their problems do so by keeping in touch with their own family and friends.

Chat with close friends who will simply lend an ear without forcing their advice or opinions on you. Occasionally difficulties can be resolved by simply airing your feelings. This enables you to step outside a situation and thus view it more clearly. Often, the solution then becomes obvious.

Organize your life

Life sometimes may seem hopeless and bewildering for single parents. They are pulled in a dozen directions, all at the same time, with many roles to fulfill — homemaker, breadwinner, bookkeeper, nurse. By organiz-



In addition, seek the advice of others who may be able to help with specific problems. If you are experiencing discipline problems, observe families in the Church whose child-rearing practices are producing good fruit, and then ask them for help and suggestions. If you make friends with these members, your children can be

ing, you will be more effective in fulfilling all your roles.

If you have not already done so, begin to set realistic goals in your life — and teach your children to do the same. Don't allow each day to just happen, without experiencing any progress or growth.

Make a daily list of things you

Photo by Warren Walson

need to accomplish and set priorities. But be flexible — never allow yourself to become obsessed with a schedule that's impossible to complete. Your schedule is only a guide to help you be more organized.

Have a calendar where the activities of every person in the family can be noted. This gives the family direction, goals and structure. You will be more in control and life will not tend to rush along, thus carrying you and your family wherever it will.

Create and maintain an efficient filing system for important papers, letters, bills and other documents.

Let the children take an active part in domestic duties such as cooking, cleaning or laundry. This will help them feel needed and useful, and they will learn responsibility. In addition, you will be able to devote more energy to other areas.

Don't let clutter collect around the house. Often this happens because the house is too small to store all the family belongings. Give away, sell or throw out what is not needed. Have a place for everything. Put things away when you're finished with them, and teach your children to do the same.

Build a close family

One of the best ways to offset the handicaps of a single-parent family is by building closeness and teamwork. Spending time with the children is the most essential, though perhaps the most difficult, task of a single parent.

Empathize with your children. The lack of one parent and the subsequent feelings of rejection and insecurity can make them crave the single parent's attention more than they normally would. A strongly united family enables each family member to give and receive the emotional and moral support needed. When one is down, the others will be able to provide strength and encouragement.

It is imperative for single-parent families to share regular meals together. Meal settings provide security, time for communication and unity. This is also an ideal time for sharing thoughts, feelings, ideas, dreams and concerns.

Be open and honest with your children, and allow them the freedom to be open with you. Let your children share with you the things that inter-

est them, be it science, homemaking or sports. Guide them to align their interests with God's law.

Always set an example of care, concern and thoughtfulness. This will further build a warm, happy home for your children, providing them with needed support.

Try to avert school problems by taking time to help with your children's studies. Also, take a personal interest in school activities.

Set aside one or two evenings each week to spend as a family. Plan these evenings in advance, perhaps including a special dessert, so that everyone will be home. Often anticipation is half the fun.

The Sabbath can be ideal for family Bible study. During the week, when opportunities arise, teach your children about God, pointing out blessings your family receives or sharing how God helps each family member that day.

Sundays can also be spent as family time. Take a drive in the country, go on a hike, spend a few hours at the beach, visit a museum or have lunch in a park. Other Sundays can be spent working together around the home, shopping, preparing for the next week or simply relaxing together. These activities need not consume the whole day, only a few hours of it, so that personal goals can also be accomplished.

Obtain input from your children on what they would like to do, and ask their opinions on suggested activities. Try to insure that whatever you plan will be enjoyed by the whole family.

Fellowship with brethren

Besides spending time as a family, include other Church members and their children in your activities. Invite brethren over for a meal, or have a potluck dinner at your home after Sabbath services. Invite both single people and families. This will not only help you and your children build friendships but also provide examples of the father or mother image for your children to imitate.

Encourage your children to participate in Church activities such as YOU, team sports or SEP. If you are a mother, try to insure that your children have the opportunity to interact with some of the men in the Church

who are strong fatherly figures.

Whenever possible, volunteer to help in Church activities. If your children are old enough, they can be involved in this kind of service as well. As you help and think of others, your own problems will seem less difficult and severe.

A word of caution is needed to the single parent who dates with the hope of remarrying. A delicate balance is involved here. Any decision involving a new mate needs to be carefully considered both from your vantage point as well as that of your children — their input, feelings and intuitions are important. Children should play a more decisive role than single parents like to admit. A prospective mate must be genuinely interested in both the parent and the children.

Counsel with the ministers as well as family and friends. Do not marry out of a sense of necessity. Your children do need a second parent, but that parent must be the right one.

Don't be weary in well doing

How can we as members better serve those who are single parents? In what ways can we follow the example of Job and cause "the widow's heart to sing for joy" (Job 29:13)?

Here are some suggestions for brethren in God's Church:

Show the single parents in God's Church that you really are concerned for them. Make it a point to get acquainted with them and to fellowship at Church and Bible study. Invite them to your home for an evening meal and games with you and your children. Offer to babysit on occasion when there is a singles' activity in your church area.

Befriend the children of single parents — invite them to share in the activities you plan for your own children such as camping, fishing and hunting. Offer rides to young mothers who may have difficulty driving to and from services because of the ages of their children.

God promises blessings to those who remember to help and serve the fatherless and widows: "Because I delivered the poor that cried, and the fatherless, and him that had none to help him. The blessing of him that was ready to perish came upon me: and I caused the widow's heart to sing for joy" (verses 12-13). □