
You Are a Family

The word *family* used to mean a husband, a wife, and their biological children. Today, *family* means many things. Parents may be married, never married, divorced or widowed. Families might be small, large, adopted, blended, separated by distances or headed by same-sex parents. So no matter what your situation is, you are a family. And your family can be a healthy family.

All families have special traits and problems. They also share some common concerns. If you're parenting alone, the feelings and stories of these five parents may sound familiar.



1. Carol has never been married. She is a mom with two young boys. She and the boys' dad lived together for many years. When they separated, he took a job in a town about an hour away.

“Being a single parent is hard. Sometimes people don't understand how hard it's been for us. They think because Ray and I weren't married that it's easier. Yet in a lot of ways it's like getting divorced. It was awful when we separated. For so long it was “we” and now it's just “me.” I know it's the right thing to do. But it's hard for me to do all the things that Ray used to do. I have to work harder to make ends meet.”

The boys spend time with their dad on weekends and in the summer. Still, Carol feels that most of the responsibility is now hers.

“The boys act up and test me more than they used to. They seem to sense that it's harder for me to discipline them all by myself. But other times I feel really close to them. We like to take day trips to the lake. They help me pack a lunch and get ready. That's when I know we're okay. That's when I feel we can be a strong family.”

2. Antonio has been divorced for about a year. He and his ex-wife share legal custody of a 7-year-old girl and a 12-year-old boy. The children live with their mother most of the time.

“I think the hardest part is not really being sure what kind of dad I'm supposed to be. There aren't many role models out there for fathers like me. I want to be more of a parent than just signing a check each month.”

Antonio has created a warm home for his children. Still, he feels out of touch with their day to day lives. Sometimes his older child wants to play with his friends rather than spend time at his home.

Antonio also has trouble planning activities that both children enjoy. Still, with time and effort he's finding ways to stay involved.

"At first, it seemed like everyone viewed me as a disposable parent. I wouldn't be told about teacher conferences or planned sleepovers. The tension between my ex-wife and me was so strong we couldn't be in the same room together. I had to make a real effort to get involved in all the things she used to take care of. I went and talked to the kids' teachers and coaches. I got to know their friends. I also stopped planning so many special things when the kids come over. Sometimes we just hang out at home. This way it feels more relaxed and normal, not like a vacation."

3. Lin lost her husband to a terminal illness 16 months ago. Now she is raising three children alone.

"Grieving is a long process. I have gone through many feelings and stages of loss - shock, anger, resentment, sorrow, self-pity, depression. Of course my children were grieving at the same time, in their own ways. They had so many questions I couldn't answer and sadness I couldn't take away. On top of this, I had to adjust to parenting by myself. I'm responsible for everything. I had to learn to manage our finances, the home, my job, and also, take care of the kids. Luckily, I had a lot of help. I still need friends and family around. Even though my house is buzzing with children and their friends, I miss having another adult around."

4. Mike is a dad who was divorced about two years ago. His son lives with him the majority of the time.

"Now that the legal fight is over, I feel better. I used to doubt if I was doing the right thing. I knew that my ex-wife had some problems. She wasn't taking good care of Tommy. Still, she accused me of being selfish and taking him away out of spite. Sometimes I wondered if she was right. Lots of people believe that children belong with their mothers."

The changes in his life have been difficult for Mike and his son. Tommy misses his mother and often takes his anger out on his father.

"I'm glad he can get his anger out, though. It's healthier that way. For awhile we would get caught in this cycle. He would act up and I would let him get away with it because I knew he was missing his mom. Still if he pushed too much, I would blow up, and then I would feel guilty. Now I really try to stick to the rules. I also try to help Tommy talk about his feelings. I'm getting used to taking care of him every day. It's hard not having someone right there to ask advice and share the responsibility. I do get help; my sister has two little ones. Also, Tommy and I have been seeing a counselor. I remind myself that even though the change is hard, we can be a strong family."

5. Emilio and Nicole have shared custody of their daughter. Both parents are having a hard time handling their parenting differences about discipline, chores and bedtime. Emilio knows that it's important for their daughter to feel comfortable in both homes.

"I have a hard time knowing how to answer my daughter when she says 'When I'm at Mom's, I don't have to clean the table and I get to stay up later.' I try to explain that different homes have different rules. Still, it doesn't seem to make a difference. We started writing down what behavior is expected and why it's important. It seems to help to have this list posted. Then it's clear what behavior is expected."

Emilio also worries that his former wife is having problems with her new boyfriend and it might be affecting their daughter.

“I know that it has nothing to do with me. Still, I just can’t help thinking about our daughter listening to them arguing. Sometimes I suggest that she invite a friend over when he’s there. Maybe that will help the situation. I also talk to friends to see what has helped them. I make sure that the neighbors and my relatives know when my daughter is with Nicole. It helps to feel I can support her.”

Coping with guilt

Many parents must cope with feelings of guilt. They may feel guilty for divorcing, separating children from parents, disciplining children or working too much. Guilt can sometimes get in the way of setting firm limits for children. Parents may be inconsistent or permissive.

Some parents try to make up for the losses their children experience. They may even feel the need to apologize. Yet apologies send the message that someone did something wrong. Instead, look at your decisions and your situation realistically. Working toward being happy and strong at home and work is the best thing you can do for your children. Children with consistent, loving parents will develop in healthy ways.



Meeting the challenges: building strengths in your family

There is no one way to raise children. Still, researchers suggest that single parents need to pay attention to the following special needs of their children.

Security

When security is shaken, children may be more frightened of new and unusual events. After one parent disappears from their home (and sometimes their lives), children may worry the other parent will disappear. Show understanding and patience. With time you will build your children’s sense of trust.

Independence

You may feel the need to protect your children from feeling hurt again. Because of this fear, you may be overly protective. Still, children need to test their wings to become independent. Ask yourself: Am I being overly protective, or am I trying to watch out for my children’s health and safety? Am I meeting my children’s needs, or am I meeting my own needs by having my children close to me for companionship?

Acceptance

Let children know you love and accept them no matter what. No one is perfect. Children need to know you will always love them, even when they make mistakes.

Love

Tell children you love them. Show your love through hugs, kisses and words, such as “I love you. I’m so glad you’re my daughter (son).”

Time

Spend time doing everyday things with your children. Reading, taking a walk, talking about your day and setting the table for dinner are times to spend together. It's also important to share special events. Taking family trips, attending baseball games, going to the movies or going out for ice cream are special treats for children. Spending time together builds relationships and lets children know they are loved.

Sources

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