

The Strengths and Challenges of Single Foster/Adoptive Parenting

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Single parenting is both rewarding and challenging. The strengths of single parent families are amazing, and the challenges are great. Like all parents, single parents struggle with issues of time, energy, work, stress, and dealing with children's challenging behavior. Like other foster/adoptive parents, single parents have to focus attention on issues of attachment, grieving, and loss, and these issues play out in unique ways in single parent families. Therefore, when working with children and parents, it is important to consider the specific needs of single parent foster and adoption families.

Who are the single parents of foster and adopted children? A study done by Groze and Rosenthal (1991) found that single adoptive parents are predominantly women and tend to adopt girls, older children, nonwhite children, and mentally retarded children. Their study also indicates that these women tend to be older, nonwhite and have lower incomes. Feigelman and Silverman (in Marindin, 2000) note that the majority of single parents live in urban areas and are more highly educated than their adoptive couple counterparts. Many of the single parents studied also had higher status jobs yet lower incomes than couples and work primarily in the fields of education and social work (p. 133). Another significant finding, and opposite of what one might think, is that the single parents were less closely affiliated with extended family than married couples.

Strengths

For some children, a single parent family is ideal. For example, for a child with certain special needs or attachment issues, a single-parent household may be the best placement. Groze and Rosenthal (1991) found that children who had been placed in group-homes or psychiatric placements prior to adoption managed particularly well in single-parent homes because there is also only one parent for the child to build an attachment with and that parent is also singularly focused on building attachment without having to additionally maintain an adult relationship. Shireman (1996) also points out that the simplicity of a single parent home may be a potential strength for children who come from difficult or disrupted backgrounds. There are no opportunities for the child to play one parent against the other or to stir up conflicts between two adults regarding parenting styles and strategies. Melina (1998) notes that for single parents there is no one else to blame for the decision to adopt and no spouse to disagree with about discipline or parenting decisions.

Another important quality Shireman (1996) discovered in her research was the close relationship which single parents have with their children. A single parent is the main source of love and support for their children and devotes much time and energy to the children's needs. A close bond develops, and parent and child know each other well. In addition, single parent families also learn how important it is to take care of each other. As a single parent, I am the one who must take care of my son when he is sick and when I am sick there is no one else around to help me out or to play with and take care of him. My son and I both remember the Saturday I had the stomach flu. After putting in some videos for himself, because I just couldn't get off the bed, he came in to check on me, looked at me quietly, went and got his blanket, and covered me up. This young three-year-old took the initiative to take care of me because there was no one else there. We talk a lot about our family and that we need to take care of each other, and he has seen that this is true.

Single parents and their children learn to function as a strong team in order to keep the household running smoothly. I learned quickly that if I want to get anything done while my son is awake then I need to find ways to include him, so he and I do laundry together. He helps get the clothes out of the hamper and put them in the basket. We carry the basket together, and then he helps load the clothes



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into the washing machine. When it is done, I hand him the clothes, and he helps put them in the dryer. Most household chores are done this way. He helps take out the garbage, wash the car, carry the groceries, etc. It took a lot of practice, time and effort to figure out ways he could safely, and happily, be involved. For example, although he'd like to carry the grocery bag with all the breakable glass jars, he now knows that if he waits just a moment I will help pick out a bag he can carry. We talk about being a team and working together to take care of our home.

Although these tasks seem small, they are monumental because getting them done while the child(ren) are up and about means there are fewer things that have to be crammed into the time when they are asleep. For a single parent, rest is extremely important and one should try to get as much as possible while the children are resting. "Never do anything when your children are asleep that you could have done when they were awake" recommends Jenista (in Marindin, 2000, p. 76). After my son goes to bed, I still have to pay bills, balance the checkbook, make phone calls, work, and do any other number of things, not to mention get some sleep myself. It is important for single parents to include the children in as much of the household activity as possible and save rest time for themselves.

Another important strength noted by Shireman (1996) is single parent's capacity to cope with crisis and persevere in the face of adversity. Shireman asserts that single parents are resourceful, seek help when needed, and find ways to handle whatever comes up. In crisis, single parents keep children's developmental needs in sight and excel in their abilities to develop and use networks for support, even in the absence of extended family.

Challenges

Support systems are critical. Single parents do not have a partner to turn to when they are tired, run-down, sick or need help in other ways. A single parent also does not have anyone with whom to share ideas, brainstorm activities, make plans, or determine parenting strategies. For these reasons, it is critical for single parents to develop a support system or even an alternative extended family. Melina (1998) states, "without adequate support, they [single parents] can become isolated, frustrated, and ineffective as parents" (p. 292). Foster/adopt children also have special issues and may exhibit challenging behavior which requires extra support and guidance. This work can be exhausting and difficult for a single parent to take on. The support needs, therefore, become even more critical.

Part of this challenge for foster parents is the issue of respite care. Foster parents are restricted to having their child(ren) with a licensed child care or school, other foster parents, or their respite people who have been cleared through the agency or county. This limitation can prove very challenging. For example, that day I had the stomach flu, I called all my respite people but they were all unavailable or unreachable, so there was no help. It is crucial for a single parent to have a sufficient number of respite people and back-ups. It is also important to think through who the respite people will be. My most reliable respite people were friends who were also parents. They understood what it is to be a parent and were more than willing to help out. They have their own children, however, thus making it hard for them to always be available. Single friends and friends without children are also important resources for single parents. The challenge is to find friends that are truly committed to being respite providers. Several of my single friends and/or friends without children did not really have an idea of what was involved in raising a young child and, in the long run, were not very available.

Flexible employment is also critical for single parents. Single parents should investigate the flexibility and family friendliness of their employer prior to having children. It is important to know the family leave policies, health insurance plans and whether or not a foster/adopt child can be added, sick leave policies, and whether or not children are allowed or welcomed into the workplace. Adequate benefit time is also critical so that a single parent can safely take time off if a child is sick or school is closed.

It may also be helpful to have some flexibility with one's work schedule to accommodate doctor appointments and teacher/parent conferences, or to attend school events.

As the sole income provider for a family, there are serious financial issues a single parent must consider. Foster/adoption parents may need assistance devising a household budget and planning for costs such as increased health insurance, medical care, and child care. Words of advice from Downey, (in Marindin, 2000) include developing a spending plan, accumulating an emergency fund, understanding one's employee benefits and getting life insurance. Downey suggests having at least three to six months living expenses in an emergency fund so that one is not worried about money and will be able to make it through crisis times such as temporary job loss, emergency medical situations, or car break downs. It is also important to get one's estate in order, Downey adds, so that if necessary, children will be cared for and provided for as one wishes.

Summary

Single-parenting is an effective and legitimate family structure. Some children may even fare better in single parent homes than in two parent families. Groze and Rosenthal (1991) found that children in single-parent homes actually experienced fewer emotional and behavioral problems than did children in two-parent homes. Feigelman and Silverman, (in Marindin, 2000) also state that single parents are as viable a resource for adoptive placements as couples" and add that despite "the absence of spouse [or partner] support and their more limited economic resources, these positive findings suggest that single adoptive parents possess unusually high commitments to parenting" (p. 137). Single parents are frequently mature adults that are stable in their lives and careers and have chosen to become parents and take these challenges on despite their relationship status. They have committed themselves to raising children and providing a safe and loving environment to children in need of a family. Although single parents face many challenges, they have many strengths to overcome hardships and build loving, supportive homes for their children.

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