

Parenting alone


Challenges

Making decisions

Parents often want to discuss their parenting dilemmas, seek reassurance and get more information to help with decision making.

Here are some ways to do this:

- Share your questions with a trusted friend or relative—someone who will listen without judging and preferably has some parenting knowledge or experience.
- Join a parenting group. Groups are run by health nurses, the Play Group Association and many others—call the Parenting Line or check your local council or newspaper for details of those in your area.
- Contact a parenting service which can give help either by telephone, face to face or through parenting courses. These services are easy to access and are operated by people who will listen, offer support and give practical ideas to help.



As a parent you experience times of great joy, closeness and sharing as well as times of boredom, irritation and even anger. The bond between child and parent is most important to see us through these times. Sharing the practical and emotional pleasures and difficulties with other adults is also vital.

When you parent alone added effort is needed to find others to share your parenting triumphs and crises with and to help you in practical ways. Lone parents have been taking up this challenge with creativity and initiative.

What is parenting alone?

You are parenting alone if your partner is absent. This could be for a variety of reasons—by choice of one or both parents, through death, because work commitments mean long periods away from home or because one partner works shifts.

Parenting alone often means taking on family decision making and the tasks and financial responsibilities of child rearing on your own.



Beating tiredness

Many parents lack sleep, particularly during the first years of their child's life. Frequently missing out on sleep can cause some people to experience symptoms similar to those of depression such as lethargy, poor motivation and irritability.

If your child is waking regularly during the night and your efforts to soothe him/her are not working it can affect whether you enjoy being a parent or see each day as an endurance test.

One excellent source for support and advice is Ngala Family Resource Centre which offers practical strategies—matched to the age of your child—to help your child sleep.

Another excellent resource is the Parenting Line which can provide suggestions to assist your older children sleep.

Sharing worries

Finding someone to discuss your daily successes and concerns can be difficult. There may be a temptation to share your worries and thoughts—which would normally be discussed with adults—with your children. By doing so you might pass on concerns which your child may not fully understand or be able to manage.

It is best to keep discussions on such issues with adults, preferably those who are good listeners.

Taking time out

Whether it's making time for a coffee alone, visiting friends for a chat without the distraction of your children or just reading a book at the beach, taking time out for yourself helps you become a better and calmer parent.

Once you've decided on your activity or treat you need a plan of action:

- You will need to organise a babysitter—call in a favour from a friend or relative or agree to babysit for your sitter at a later date.
- Let the children know where you are going, for how long and who will look after them while you are out.
- Consider how you are feeling. Many parents feel guilty about taking even a little time off from parenting. Remember, after this break you will return feeling rested, have more patience and a positive attitude.
- Finally, enjoy your break and think about planning the next one!

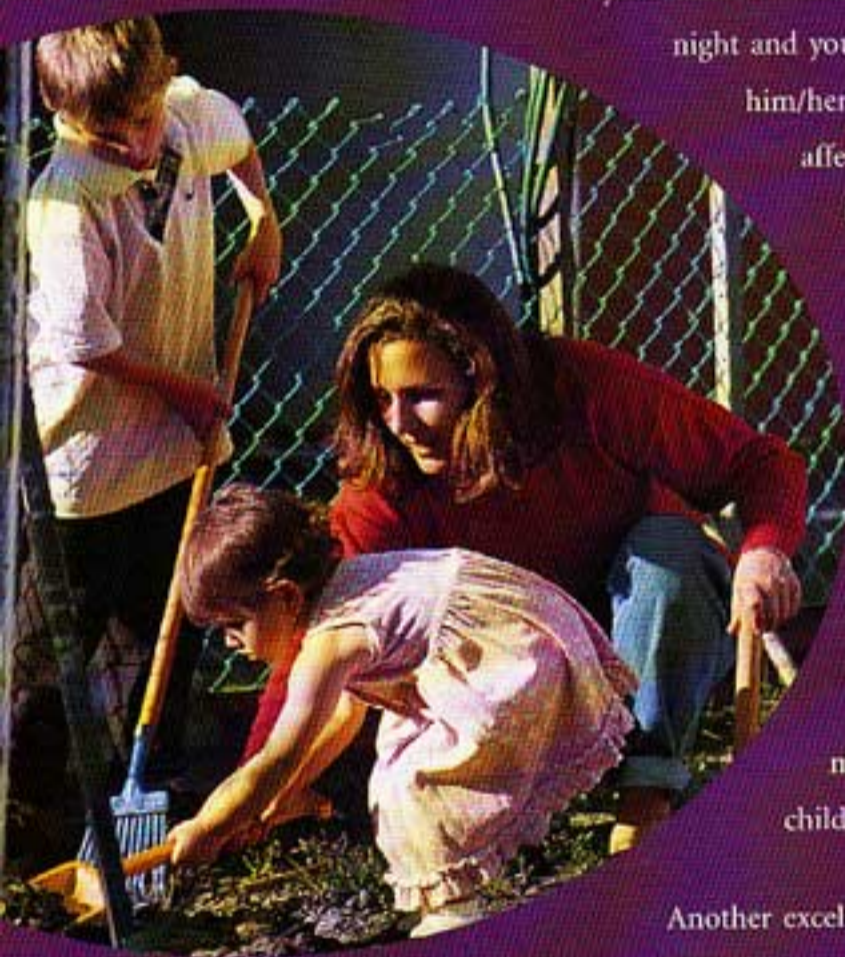
Overcoming loneliness

At times parenting can be lonely, particularly if you are parenting alone.

Extending your contact with other adults is an excellent way to increase your support network. You may wish to attend a parent group or spend time with adult relatives and their families.

When planning a get together consider the times—usually mid afternoon to early evening—which are the most stressful and the day(s) of the week which you most need company. Try to arrange activities to coincide with these times.

You will probably find other parents have a similar need and are grateful for the suggestion to meet.



Dating

When considering introducing a new partner to your children take into account their age. The younger your children the more cautious you should be.

Young children, especially those three years and under, are at a crucial stage as they are developing bonds with adults around them and gaining self esteem. Their need is for stability with one adult or set of adults around them.

Older children are probably aware of your status in the 'dating game' and may tease you. Behind the good humour there may also be fears—for example, having to share you and your time or having to 'take orders' from a 'stranger'.

Make sure your new partner is going to be around and that the relationship is serious before you introduce him/her to your children.

Give your children a clear message that they are important, loved and special and that your new friendship is something to be added to the family.

Special circumstances

Death

When one parent dies there are added challenges for you as a parent.

Questions about what happens when someone dies are normal in these situations.

How you explain the loss depends upon the age of your children. For a younger child talking about the parent going to 'heaven' (or a similar pleasant place) is appropriate. It is also comforting, if this fits with your belief system, to get across the idea that although the parent won't come back they still love and care about the child.

With an older child having an open discussion about feelings and worries is helpful. Death often raises concerns about mortality and particularly a fear that the remaining parent will die. It is best to bring these issues out into the open and talk them over.

Remember to pay attention to your own sadness and grief and get any support you may need.

Separation

A child's experience of their parents' separation is often similar to that of a death in the family. It involves loss, sadness, sometimes loneliness and often anger.

How you explain the separation to your children will make a difference to how they cope. Children often blame themselves and feel considerable guilt when parents separate—make sure to tell them it is not their fault. Explain that while the two of you can no longer live together (or whatever explanation is appropriate) both of you love the children very much and this will not change.

It may be difficult to keep a cooperative relationship with an ex-partner however there are overwhelming benefits to the children if you can reach agreement on parenting and contact issues.

Single parent/two parent families

For families where one parent is not available for extended periods, usually through work commitments, there can be periods as you adjust from 'single' status to a two parent family. Children may be aware that house and behaviour rules change—there could be appeals to one parent to change decisions of the other.

At these times it is doubly important that both parents work together and agree on parenting rules and responsibilities. Take some time together, perhaps by telephone, to catch up on issues and agree on decisions before the family are all together. This preparation will not be wasted and may avoid tension.





Remember

Parenting alone is rewarding and challenging. Balancing the needs of you and your children with the practical demands of running a family can keep you on your toes.

In recent years, often through the energy and initiative of lone parents, supportive services have developed and lone parenting need no longer be such a one person enterprise.

Useful parenting services

Parenting Line	(08) 9272 1466 or 1800 654 432 (free for STD callers)
Family Helpline	(08) 9221 2000 or 1800 643 000 (free for STD callers)
Ngala Family Resource Centre	(08) 9367 7855
Parents Without Partners	(08) 9389 8350
Lone Parent Family Support Service	(08) 9389 8373
Lone Fathers Support	(08) 9421 1114

Some helpful books

So Now You're on Your Own: A Positive Approach for Single Parents,
Lyn Henley, Bay Books (1994)

Teen Guide to Single Parenting,
Herma Silverstein, Franklin Watts (1989)

Do I Have a Daddy: A Story About a Single Parent Child,
Jeanne Lindsay (1991)

For more information

Living with babies, *Living with toddlers*, *Living with children*,
Living with teenagers and *Living with stepfamilies* parenting
magazines are available free of charge from Parenting Information
Centres or by telephoning the Parenting Line. Videos based on
these magazines can be borrowed from the Parenting Line and
public libraries.

On the internet: www.fcs.wa.gov.au/parenting