

THE WORKING MOM'S SHRINK

Photo by Shel Secunda



The doctor and her daughter.

SINGLE Parenting Is DOUBLE the Work . . . Especially When Your Ex Can't Be Counted On!

Here's How to Protect Your Children

By Marcia Eckerd, Ph.D.

Many of us get married in a delusional state. We think a man will change after we marry him: he'll drink less, listen more, whatever. What's even less likely is that a man will change after you divorce him. If he was inattentive, unreliable, argumentative or controlling before, why are we surprised that he's still that way after the divorce?

So it should come as no surprise that co-parenting with your ex can be extremely challenging. If he wasn't reliable before, he'll probably be unreliable in picking up or returning the kids on time, when you're counting on him covering for you while you work over a weekend. If he was cheap before, he'll probably fight about ballet lessons and basketball camp. If he never paid bills on time before, he'll probably be late with the child support. When you're a divorced single parent, you have to juggle kids, work, and negotiate with someone you specifically decided to do without or who decided to do without you.

Being a single mom is hard—with or without an ex. The single mom who has an ex has advantages and disadvantages. The

advantage: the best-case divorce scenario, where parents make a commitment to co-parenting, helping each other and sheltering the kids from any disagreements between the two of them, is possible. I've seen it happen. You still may shoulder most of the day-to-day burden, but you have the emotional and financial support of another caring parent. I've been in school meetings where four parents (two ex's and new spouses) shared equally in their care and concern.

The disadvantage: the worst-case divorce scenario could happen, where you don't have cooperation, support or control over your kids' lives and needs. As hard as it is to have solo responsibility for all the decisions concerning

your child, having to fight over every decision (even medical care) is even harder. I've seen a father who made false allegations to prevent a mother from seeing her own children. We all know of parents who use their kids as pawns, withholding visitation, money, or necessities to "get back at" their ex. These parents can't let go of their anger even in the interests of their children and often put them in the middle of character assassinations, complaints and spying.

**Take care of yourself!
You're doing the work of TWO,
and there's only ONE of you.**

SINGLE-MOM SURVIVAL GUIDES: By Choice or By Chance

Being a parent is hard, and being a single mom is harder—with or without an ex. The number of issues can seem overwhelming: day care, flexible jobs, financial stability, dating, decision-making—juggling it all at once and all by yourself. Good resources for support can be found online: I recommend www.singlemoms.com, www.singleparents.about.com/od/singlemoms and www.singleparentsnetwork.com. There's also a Web site for single mothers by choice: <http://mattes.home.pipeline.com>. The best thing about talking with other single parents, on or off line, is that you realize that others have made this work, and you can, too!



Photo by istockphoto.com/Alison Hausmann

Remember the Children . . .

Despite your best intentions, you may find yourself locked into conflict with your ex. The basic rule is that the needs of the child must come first, no matter how angry you may be. Children need to feel that two parents love them, period. They need parents who allow them to love both parents. As I told one mom who disapproved of her husband, it didn't matter if Dad acted like Big Bird; her daughter needed his love. Co-parents need to find a way to compromise. If you and your ex need professional support to get past your anger, get it.

Also, remember the serenity prayer: change what you can change, accept what you can't change, and know the difference. If you have no control over something, let it go. Your ex will be true to form—whatever that form was. Take a self-searching look at your own reactions. Are you dealing with a major issue or differences in style that your child can handle? Children can adapt to households with different rules—one home that's all health food and one that's Burger King—and differences in routines or limit-setting.

Yes, he may have a girlfriend or take them to see movies you disapprove of. Sometimes you need to prioritize your children's emotional needs over your own strongly held beliefs. Don't be swayed by family members pushing you to rock the

boat if you feel your child is best served by compromise.

On the other hand, make sure that you're not dealing with something that can genuinely harm the child: physically unsafe conditions (drunk driving, for instance), failure to allow needed medical attention, failure to pay for basic necessities (no, private school is not usually a basic necessity), destructive emotional behavior (regular failure to show up for planned visits), failure to get the child to school. In these cases, you have to do something. If talking directly with your ex doesn't work, seek the services of a mediator, a professional representing the interests of the child, or your attorney.

This is really important: whatever you do, don't put your life on hold. There are support groups that can help you find ways to better your career and develop your own needs as a person. Find ways to empower yourself, even if you only take one small step at a time.

And Don't Forget Yourself!

Here are some tips to help you stay sane—and your children feel loved—as you negotiate the solo-parenting minefields:

1. Children need their parents to respect one another. Get professional help if you need it, so that neither of you is cutting down the other in front of the kids.
2. Don't interrogate your kids when they →

come back from a visit with their father. Give them time to transition and some privacy about their relationship with Dad.

3. Talk to your ex about maintaining the kids' schedules and priorities. Allow for differences in style in achieving these ends, but try to maintain as consistent a message as you can.

4. Always have a backup plan, in case your ex lets you down.

5. Agree to revisit visitation rights as your kids get older. They'll have lives and ideas of their own, which need to be taken into account.

6. Shield your children from disappointment. It's an awful situation when one parent repeatedly fails to show up for a visit. A friend of mine was stuck like this. Her solution was not to tell the child about visits, so that if Dad showed up, it was a nice surprise. She also got her son a therapist.

7. Deal with holidays realistically: recognize that they're going to be different and create new rituals that take these changes

into account. Example: if the kids are gone every other Thanksgiving or Christmas, plan events before or after those holidays to make

them your own. And if the kids are away on a holiday, plan something for yourself.

8. One of the hardest parts of single parenting is the 24/7 responsibility of handling what comes up. If you have an ex and

he's no help, or if you're alone, create a support system to help you cope: family members, friends, the pediatrician, a minister, anyone who can serve as a reliable and trustworthy sounding board.

9. Take care of yourself! You're doing the work of two, and there's only one of you. Be realistic about what one person can do in 24 hours. □

Marcia Eckerd, Ph.D., is a partner in Associates for Children and Families, a practice that specializes in enhancing relationships and empowering individuals. If you have a question that you'd like her to address in this column, e-mail her at workingmoms@makingbreadmagazine.com.

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