

Fulfilling life as a single parent

Life is full of myths and ideals, and one of them is the classic nuclear family of mum, dad and two kids.

While that family model may be accurate for some, there are many sole parents and children who make up a significant proportion of our community.

A Relationships Australia survey found that, while 96 percent of people in a partner relationship with children described themselves as being satisfied with their lives, only 74 percent of sole parents felt that life was satisfying.

So it's worth taking a look at the challenges sole parents face that may account for the drop in satisfaction level.

While it's obvious that being a sole parent is going to involve more work than if there are two parents to share it, how you feel about being a sole parent depends largely on how you came to be on your own with children.

If gay couples, gay people or single people have elected to be sole parents because they want a child, they are likely to see sole parenthood in a much more positive light than if being a sole parent has been forced upon them by separation or the death of a partner. And there are positives experienced by sole parents.

Some sole parents appreciate the fact that they don't have to consult anyone else and can make their own rules and decide on their own discipline without arguments with a partner.

These people are often quite independent and free, and feel their family unit is right for them.

However, if you have been part of a couple and feel that you were dumped and left literally holding the baby, sole parenthood does not seem so positive.

If you have become a sole parent because of a partner dying you will have your own grief to work through, and that has a big impact on how much emotional strength you have left to give the parenting role.

If you have separated and your ex-partner has moved interstate and doesn't have much to do with the children, you can feel totally bombarded, it seems as if there is no end in sight and no break.

In the past, a common post-separation model was mum having the kids most of the time while dad had them every second weekend and perhaps for one night or evening meal during the week.

Today it is becoming more common to share the parenting role, with children spending one week with mum and the other with dad.

Whatever model of sole parenting you use, the crucial truth is that children cope well with being in a single parent family if their parents cope with it.

Financially, separation is always going to be challenging.

Single mothers are by far the poorest section of the community, so financial burdens can be heavy.

If the children are small, the loneliness of being trapped at home at night can be distressing.

You may not want to go out and leave them as you are concerned about their emotional health.

If you have adolescents, you have the added trauma of coping with angry teenagers who will blame you for everything, which can be pretty hard to take when your confidence is not exactly at an all-time high.

To survive you need to create some networks and give yourself some social nourishment.

Joining a sole parent group is one way to do this, because it gives you the chance to talk to other people who are going through the same experiences.

Or you may prefer to do a course for sole parents or rebuilding after separation.

Meeting others in the same situation may lead to swapping babysitting or inviting a couple of other sole parents and their kids around for an informal meal.

There is life after losing a partner, and it can certainly be good.

You just have to take the first step forward, and you're on the road to the rest of your life.

Survival tips

- How well you handle sole parenthood can depend on your attitude
- Sole parenthood doesn't have to be lonely. Make new networks by doing a course on rebuilding after separation, or join a group of sole parents.