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Number of Single Fathers Growing

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My nephew, Joe, is doing something that most of us who know him, never would have imagined. He is twenty-one, a Marine and is experiencing one of the most difficult but rewarding jobs he will ever undertake. Joe has conquered diapers, runny noses, clammy hands and a growing child's insatiable need for stimulation. A single father raising his now seventeen-month-old daughter alone, he takes her to the park, shops, cooks, cleans, reads with her, and laughs and wrestles with her. He is unfailingly and consistently there for her. He lovingly puts her to bed at night no matter how exhausted he is at the end of the day. Joe is part of a growing number of men who are the primary caregivers for their children-- those who understand that the measure of success comes from those moments when a drooly, smile lights up their day. Today a quiet but monumental change is taking place in the American family. The number of fathers solely responsible for the care of their children is growing at a rate almost twice that of single mothers. Fully one-fifth of single parents today are single fathers. More men are choosing to be hands-on, hearts-on fathers than ever before. It is hard work, but the intrinsic rewards of a day to day relationship with their children is incomparable.

Twenty years ago when I started out as a counselor working with families, I worked primarily with mothers and their children. Lately, I have noticed a trend in the families coming in for counseling. There are as many men bringing children to therapy as women. Many are men who are single parents raising their children alone. According to the most recent information from the U.S. Census, there are approximately 13 million children living in single-parent households: 2.5 million of those children are being raised by single fathers. That is nearly 1 in every 40 households in which custodial fathers are raising children. These are the fathers that choose to make the sacrifices necessary to raise their children; fathers who give up executive jobs in order to have the flexibility to provide the love and attention their children need. Some drive hours every other weekend in order to be with their children, others are the primary or full custodial parent. Often these fathers call on the many resources of the women in their families to provide input to help them raise daughters. Fathers are now bringing their children to counseling because they recognize the need for help and guidance to navigate the murky waters of single parenthood.

At one time or another, all parents struggle with discipline--establishing and enforcing limits. For single parents who going it alone and exhausted, this is especially difficult. However, it is important to be consistent and stay the course. This may include developing a workable coparenting course of action for both homes with all parents being on the same page regarding boundaries, house rules, and discipline. And if that is not possible, it is important for fathers to provide consistency in their own homes.

Establishing reasonable limits is paramount to promoting self-confidence and a sense of security. Consequences should always match the behavior--try not to overreact. Picking your battles is important. Some issues, such as those that involve health and safety are non-negotiable. Other issues and behaviors may not be a priority when addressing more serious behavior. Encourage your child to be independent, by giving limited choices within the boundaries of some structure.

Try to understand the reasons for your child's behavior. All behavior is a message; children typically misbehave for one or more of the following reasons: they want attention or control, they are experiencing emotions they do not understand or cannot directly express, or the behavior allows them to avoid unpleasant situations. The bottom line is that although children often do not readily admit it, they need you to be the parent. It is important to stay attached and connected to your child by spending time with them, listening to them, letting them see you express emotions, and valuing them for who they truly are. Most importantly remember the words of Jim Valvano, "My father gave me the greatest gift anyone could give another person: he believed in me".