

# Single Parenting: When It's All Up to You

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[This is the third article in the first issue (Volume 1, Number 1) of Glenn Latham's *Parenting Prescriptions* magazine. As one of the four Founders of TIBI and a *Behaviorology Today* staff writer, Dr. Latham's work has appeared in the pages of this journal before. We are thankful to have received permission to occasionally reprint one of his helpful, science-based practical articles, like this one, for parents and other child caregivers. (Readers can obtain all four issues of *Parenting Prescriptions* magazine through the "Products" section of [www.parentrx.com](http://www.parentrx.com) which is the web site that Glenn established as an information resource.)—Ed.]

Single or married, parents need the same basic skills to parent effectively. The most basic of parenting skills is the ability to elevate the general level of positive reinforcement [See Cautela, 1994.—Ed.] in the home. Readers of *Parenting Prescriptions* will hear about positive reinforcement over and over again. I don't apologize for this repetition. Positive parent-to-child interaction is too essential to say only once. A wise person once noted that a genius is a person who does what he is supposed to after having been told to do it only 12 times.

Of course, environment may (and often does) complicate parenting. With the right skills, however, you can minimize or even eliminate these complications.

This article explains what you can do to minimize or even eliminate some of the complications of being a single parent. Of course, one article cannot possibly address every concern single parents have, but this article can lay a foundation on which to build solutions to the myriad parenting concerns single parents have.

In interacting with children, parents must employ humor, attentive listening, and appropriate touching. In my experience working with families, I have observed that children in single-parent families need these kinds of parent-child interactions even more than other children, and if they don't get these interactions at home, they will search for them elsewhere.

The single parent must double his or her efforts to ensure that these interactions are never in short supply. If these interactions are implemented by plan, with a clear purpose in mind, you will experience astounding results.

## Laughter is the Best Medicine

Being a single parent often means having to bear the burdens of wage-earner, home-keeper, child-rearer, and disciplinarian alone. With all this responsibility on your shoulders, you may not think you have the time or the energy to exercise your funny bone. However, I have a few suggestions for implementing humor in your family. These suggestions don't require too much effort but can make a huge difference.

To help keep the level of humor up, make note of good jokes and funny experiences and then share them with your children at an appropriate time during the day: at mealtime, in the car, before the children go to bed, or whenever.

You may want to keep a paper and pencil handy to write down jokes and humorous experiences. Left to memory, such experiences will be forgotten and lost—along with an opportunity to lighten the home environment.

You may also want to encourage your children to tell you jokes and humorous experiences. A colleague of mine has priceless memories of telling her mother funny experiences that happened during the day while her mother listened attentively.

Sound corny? Not so! Such simple interactions can work wonders in the home. Smiles and laughter are, almost without exception, the ingredient most lacking in homes where the general level of positive reinforcement is low; smiles and laughter are most evident in homes where the general level of positive reinforcement is high.

## Listening Can Change Your Home

As a single parent, you may also think that you have little time to listen to your children. Despite all the claims on your time, however, you should try to spend some time each day just listening to your children. A few minutes may be enough to let your children know they are important to you.

Let me emphasize the word *listening*: Don't give advice, counsel, gems of wisdom, or sage insights. Simply listen to what your children have to say. Smile, make eye-to-eye contact, and gesture your attentiveness.

## Appropriate Touching Can Lighten Children's Load

With young children, touching, kissing, hugging, and holding are easy. You use hugs and kisses to soothe a hurt, to send a child off to school, to welcome a child home, or to show affection as you read books together. These interactions are all easy and natural.

As children get older, however, parents naturally tend to touch children less often. And sometimes, touching can be a problem, particularly with children of the opposite sex. This change usually occurs at the onset of puberty. So, I emphasize *appropriate* touch.

For a father or a mother, a traditional hug is certainly appropriate, but other touching must be done with great care. For either a boy or a girl, a pat on the back, typically at or slightly below the shoulder level, is generally appropriate. Touching the arms at or below the elbow is also generally appropriate, regardless of the child's gender.

A mother's touch is typically more acceptable to either a boy or a girl. A mother tends to be less threatening: Mothers tend to spank children less often than fathers, and mothers tend to be more nurturing than fathers. However, a father's touch must be given with great care, particularly where an adolescent daughter is concerned.

For fathers, touching needn't be intense or prolonged for either a son or a daughter. The function of a touch is to heighten the acknowledgment of a job well done: For example, if a daughter performs at a piano recital, the father can say "Good job, you did well," then briefly and gently hug his daughter.

Appropriate touching can be a quick and pleasant way to stay close. For example, when a daughter comes home from a date, the father can gently hold her hands, give her a peck on the cheek, and say, "Glad you're home. Hope you had a good time."

Appropriate touching can help keep the father-daughter relationship bright and cheerful. For example, if a daughter is doing her homework, the father can, in

passing, draw his fingers across her shoulders, smile, and walk on.

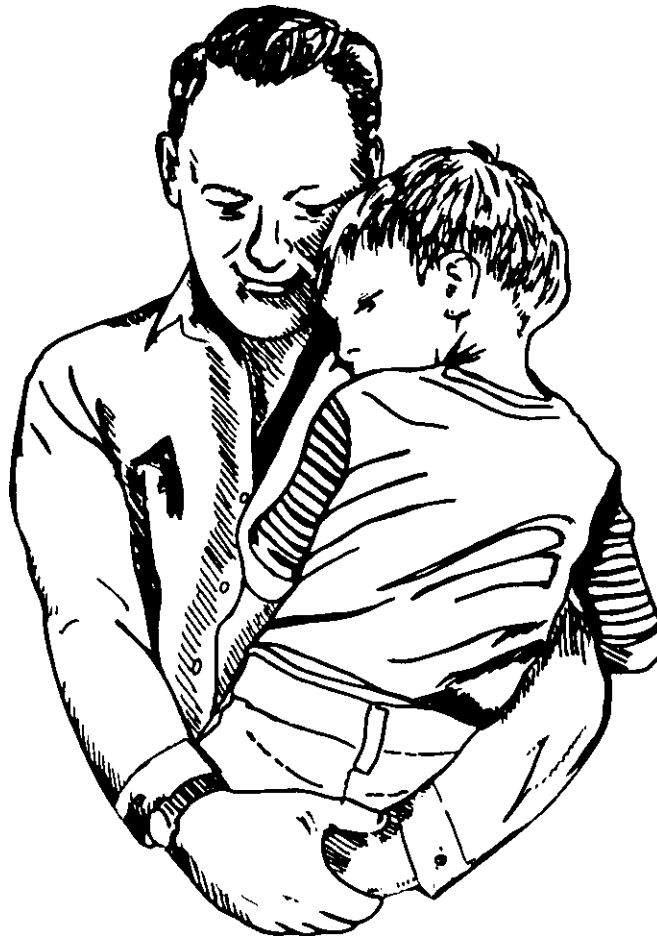
These are examples of "safe" touch—touch that makes a parent safe to be around. I can't emphasize enough the importance of a parent being safe to be around. How parents touch their children can let a child know in an instant just how safe he or she is.

I emphasize this point for a reason, particularly where fathers are concerned. In my clinical work with families, I have read much research about the importance of a father being "safe" to be around. To single fathers, I extend a special caution: Use appropriate touch to get and stay close to your children, but do so with care.

Mothers can be more assertive, more direct, and more attentive. Both sons and daughters tend to feel safer with a mother's touch than with a father's touch.

Recognizing appropriate touch is even more crucial in single-parent situations. Without the balance created by the presence of both parents, it is possible for the momentum of the moment to find things getting carried away, beyond the bounds of propriety, and into dangerous territory that can have life-long negative effects.

In my clinical experience, I have observed that inappropriate touch is far less likely to be a problem for single mothers. An experience I had with the single mother of a 14-year-old boy illustrates the profound effect a mother's



touch can have. The boy was angry with his mother because she had divorced the boy's father.

The boy loved his father and missed him very much. Since the boy was living with his mother, she was an easy and readily available target for the boy's anger. In fact, the boy's anger was reflective of the father's anger. The father's anger was one of the things that had contributed to the divorce.

On one occasion, the boy was being particularly unkind to his mother. What she wanted to do was slap his face. However, I had previously cautioned the mother against taking any such response.

Finally, unable to take it any longer, the mother flung her arms around her son, gave him a "great big kiss on his lips," then held him close and quietly said "I know that you are upset. I can understand that. But, I love you more than anything else in the world."

The boy's anger drained away. He stood before his mother as if in awe. She held his hands, and they looked at each other. No one said a word. Finally, the boy said, "I'm sorry, mother. I love you too."

Mothers can get away with that! A mother's touch, a mother's affection, a mother's kind and gentle words—and it was over. Appropriate touch and kind words go a

long way. This interaction is what we call raising the general level of positive reinforcement in the home.

This article has just scratched the surface on minimizing or eliminating the complications of being a single parent. [For further information, see Latham, 1994, 1999, video program, CD program, and Ledoux, 2000.—Ed.]✦

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