

Single Dads: It's a Small Club, Right?

You're not alone. Not by a long shot, guys. Did you know that since 1980 the number of single dads in the US has doubled to nearly 1.6 million? That's a lot of us. I'd bet the census count missed a few too. Single dads are growing 6 percent a year—that's double the rate for single moms. That means almost 15 percent of us men are running a dad-only household.

DOWN AT THE MOUTH? THINK AGAIN

It's so easy to fall into the "Poor me, I'm just a single dad" attitude. For one thing, everything around us promotes the stereotype. Stop and think. What words and phrases come to mind when you think of yourself as a single dad? "Mr. Mom." "Absentee Father." Or maybe "Deadbeat Dad." You never saw yourself this way before you were a single dad, right? So what makes you any less valuable as a father now? Nothing does. If anything, you're more valuable now—more of a stabilizing factor, more of a necessary dad than you ever were.

Maybe you remember your first days as a single dad. Maybe you don't enjoy remembering? I remember asking a friend of mine who was a single dad that question and he said, "I don't enjoy remembering. My kids were only 1 and 3 at the time. I was into bottles, diapers, day care and Winnie the Pooh. It was a time of holding them, nurturing them, and wiping tears away. And watching them go. That Christmas may have been the hardest. When it was Mom's week, starting the afternoon of the 25th, I watched them drive off and felt the punch to my stomach. You know what punch I mean. It feels like the first one you got back in third grade."

THE CHOICE IS YOURS; MAKE IT A GOOD ONE

Here is the deal: Right then and there you can decide to spend the rest of your life feeling down and out or you could do what is best for you and your kids. I guess you could say he took the road less traveled in this case and became a proactive single dad. His time with his kids became the most valuable asset he had. He needed to provide for them, but his career and its satisfaction didn't come close to what they did together. And boy, did they do things together. These were times that only a dad could invent. Still, there's a strong message that parenting is really all about mothering.

CAN A DAD REALLY BE A MOM?

Somehow, single dads are supposed to raise kids like moms do. But what happens? We fail miserably. Or we walk away. That makes the kids very miserable. As a single father, raising children should feel natural. Simply remember to raise them as a man would. Sure, moms have a way of raising kids, but dads do too. Our way of showing love and laughter are not a mom's way. It was never intended to be like a mom.

What do I mean by "a dad's way?" Spending time with the kids. That can mean letting them sit on either side of you while reading a story from the sports page-out loud. Or laughing about the pile of laundry, and taking off for a little fishing, knowing that it will be waiting for you when you get back. Maybe you recall a walk you took with your son when you walked up and down the alleys in town, looking at old cars and barking back at the fenced-in dogs. Maybe you found a really glorious mud puddle and started tossing rocks into it. And maybe pretty soon you both were into and got covered with mud. Then along came the mom. Yep, she was horrified. And then you tried to save yourself in trying to point out that kids were "wash and wear," and she got this blank look on her face. Dads are different, and kids love it.

ENJOY MANHOOD, ENJOY FATHERHOOD

Whatever you do, know that you're not alone. Know that being a proactive single dad is a blast. Be a man, be a father, get muddy and let the wash pile up. Most of all ignore the stereotypes that tell you what to be. Don't try to be a mom. Don't see yourself as "nothing but a single father." That outlook will take you nowhere-fast.

Let me leave you with a couple more statistics. This one comes right off the pages of Newsweek, from an article entitled, "It's Not Like Mr. Mom." Describing single dads, the authors say: "... and they're not the stereotypical wealthy widowers or fathers raising only boys or older kids. According to a recent study, about two-thirds of single fathers are divorced, but 25 percent have never tied the marital knot; only 7.5 percent are widowers. 44 percent of their children are daughters and one-third of the men care for preschoolers." Keep your chin up and enjoy being a dad. Don't let anyone tell you you're not the best.