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YOUNG VOICES

Growing up in two homes

By Jessica Bauer
Journalism student, University of Maryland

I wouldn't say my life is harder than that of the average American. I go to a great university, have two jobs, great friends and an amazing family. In general, my life is pretty good.

Ever since I can remember, I've always had two homes. That means two bedrooms, two bathrooms, two kitchens, two family rooms – I even have two dogs to keep straight.

But life is still difficult, and having divorced parents definitely adds to these challenges. Little things that many people don't think about have a large effect on the day-to-day lives of children with divorced parents. One thing from my childhood sticks out drastically in my mind: living in two different places.

Luckily, my parents didn't move to different states when they got divorced. My dad moved a county away, and later my mom ended up moving into the neighborhood right next to my dad. Today, they still live within five minutes of each other.

Each week my sisters and I had to split our time in between our houses. Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday mornings we were with mom; Wednesday night, Thursday and Friday morning we were with dad.

Every other weekend we stayed with a different parent. I had two completely different homes.

And even though I lived this way from age 6 until I was 18 years old, I still can't remember where the cookie sheets go in my mom's kitchen or where

the cutting boards are stored at dad's house. I can't remember where the vacuum cleaner is or where our extra toilet paper is kept.

And, now that I am off living on my own as a senior in college, I have an even harder time keeping my parents' homes separate in my mind. My mom always pokes fun, asking, "How can you forget where everything goes? This is your house!"



But, ever since I can remember, I've always had two homes. That means two bedrooms, two bathrooms, two kitchens, two family rooms – I even have two dogs to keep straight. Sure, my room at mom's house is blue and my room at dad's is purple. But, now that I have a place of my own, I've definitely realized how hard it was to live in two different places.

My parents were really awesome about the whole situation, though. They never complained about having to take us over to each other's houses. And we all knew that this way was far better than living only with one parent because that meant seeing the other parent less often. In fact, this situation was one of the first things my parents agreed on when they got divorced.

Still, as soon as I went off to school, I finally had my own place with one spot for everything. I'll admit it is really nice. But I think that living with both parents, even if it meant not being sure where anything ever was, was the way to go.

As the saying goes, "more is better," and in my case I definitely agree.

An Inspiring Mom

Single Mom With A Mission:

*By giving Chinese orphan a family,
she leads him home*

By Linda Blachly, Managing Editor

A Chinese proverb states: “It is better to travel ten thousand miles than to read ten thousand books.” For Julia Norris, single mother of two adopted children from China, no truer words have been spoken. In fact, she has traveled many tens of thousands of miles, not just to learn about children in need, but to make a difference.

Julia, 42, has definitely made a difference in the lives of her daughter Madison, now 6, who was abandoned at birth on the doorstep of a Chinese government building with her umbilical cord still attached, and her son Christian, now 17, who was found abandoned under a bridge in Luoyang, at the age of 7. After years of searching for his roots and unraveling the circumstances of his mysterious disappearance from his birth parents, Julia’s travels led her back to China in August with her son to introduce him to the family members he vaguely remembered.

A seed planted

For Julia, who lives in Easton, Md., her travels began when she was in college in 1987 as an international studies student in a program called “Semester at Sea.” She visited 13 countries by ship. “Many of them were third-world countries,” says Julia, who recalls getting off the ship in India to visit some of Mother Teresa’s orphanages. Even though she never met the famous humanitarian, she was inspired by those who followed in her footsteps and cared for some of the world’s neediest children.

“As soon as we got out of the port’s gates, a woman came up to me crying and handed me her newborn baby, who couldn’t have been a week old. It was heartbreaking. She kept on repeating, ‘Feed her. Feed her.’ I wanted to take the baby and get back on that ship, give her a bath and food. I had never seen this type of poverty,” said Julia. “A seed was planted on that trip. I definitely had visions of working with orphans someday.”

Visit to a Chinese orphanage

In 1999, her church was offering a trip to a Chinese orphanage sponsored by an agency called America World Adoption. Health reasons prevented her from making that trip, but the agency ended up hiring her. “That very first summer, at the age of 33, I led a



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missions trip of 30 volunteers to a Chinese orphanage where I found my son,” said Julia.

“In my heart, I knew that eventually I would adopt from China. But I wasn’t married yet, so I thought I’d wait,” recalls Julia. “I also thought I’d be captivated by

“People asked, ‘Why don’t you adopt him?’ And I thought: ‘Here I am, single; he deserves a mom and a dad. My first choice for him would be to have a mom and a dad, but I felt God put in my heart to help that boy.’”

the baby girls in the orphanage. But it was the older kids who grabbed my attention. I wasn’t prepared for meeting older kids – kids that knew there was a big piece missing from their life. It was hard to look at the sadness in their eyes. It was not something I expected and it changed my whole focus.”

He stole her heart

The two-week trip, in June 2000, took them to the Luoyang Children’s Welfare Center, which housed 500 orphans, most of whom were young girls abandoned because of their gender or innocent victims of their parents violating the “one child” rule. Julia and the group of volunteers changed diapers and fed the children as well as cleaned, painted and refurbished furniture.

One day, the volunteers took children on a trip to the zoo. “When our bus pulled up, each of us selected a child. That day I was sitting in the back of the bus. All the people who got off first went for the little babies. When I got off the bus, there were only a handful of school-age children left, mostly boys, and I just went to the closest one. I took him by the hand and got back on the bus.” His name was Jin Jiacheng and he didn’t speak a bit of English.

“The first thing I remember was letting him use my digital camera to take pictures of his friends. Until then, I hadn’t gotten any reaction out of him. When he saw that first picture, he had a big smile on his face.”

Little by little that day, he stole her heart. “He was by my side the entire time we were there. He was really sweet. After we went to the zoo, we went to lunch. I remember he wouldn’t let me put my purse on the floor. I learned it was customary in China to not put anything on the floor because it was so dirty. Every time my glass was empty, he would refill it. He was such a little gentleman. The sadness in his eyes was piercing. It just went through my heart.”

Welcome to the family

Before Julia left, she asked the director of the orphanage if he was legally available for adoption. He said Jiacheng had been there for almost two years and, since his family hadn't come for him, he was available for adoption.

"When I returned to the States, I searched the database to see if any of our agency families were interested in an 8-year-old boy. People asked, 'Why don't you adopt him?' And I thought: 'Here I am, single; he deserves a mom and a dad. My first choice for him would be to have a mom and a dad, but when I was unable to find a family interested in an 8-year-old boy in our database, I felt the Lord was leading me to be his mom.'"

Two weeks after returning home from China, she decided to adopt him.

"I sent him a photo album. Each page had photos of her family and in Chinese what the relationship would be to him so he could get to know us. It said 'Welcome to the family.'"

Settling in

Nine months later, in April 2001, she was back in China to bring him home. She named him Christian Jiacheng, but he chose to be called Christian.

Those first months were fun – all his first experiences, like going to the beach swimming or going out on a boat," says Julia.

"There were adjustments. He was scared to sleep in his own bed by himself because he was worried about his safety and security. I had to share his twin bed with him. He was used to having a lot of people around him, and then all of a sudden he's living in this three-level condo with this single mom. Slowly he became more comfortable and slept alone in his bed."

Meltdowns

One of the biggest challenges was Christian's "meltdowns" over seemingly simple things like turning off the TV or doing homework. "It would escalate to the point where we would both end up in tears," said Julia. "This is typical of the way kids grieve. We



Left: Lisa with her granddaughter Samantha Rice. Right: Lisa with her daughter, Jenn, after the Baltimore marathon.

eventually realized that he was finding some reason to make himself cry. It's not about turning off the TV or doing homework, it's about other things."

"We had a lot of tears, but it always ended in the two of us becoming much closer," said Julia. "The tears eventually turned to, 'I'm sorry Momma. I love you.'"

Sometimes when he had a meltdown, he would say he wanted to go back to China. "After a couple of months of that, I said, 'Okay, you want to go back to China?' I went to his room, opened his dresser and started throwing his clothes into the suitcase. Of course, I have tears rolling down my face as I'm doing this. I turn around and he says, 'Momma, no China. No China. I'm sorry, Momma. No China.'"

But it took time. "The way I coped was with a lot of prayer and support from others. Focusing on just him and making him feel secure and safe in his new home is what got me through it. I think it helped to be a single mom because I could focus all my attention on him. It would have been tough on a marriage, because I really did devote my time entirely to him."

A new sister

In April 2004, Julia wanted to give Christian a sibling. "I thought, 'I'm a single mom and if I don't get married, I don't want to regret not doing the baby thing,' so I adopted Madison, who was 9 _ months old."

"Christian was 12 when Madison came," said Julia. She was a relatively easy baby. Madison is 6 now and is in first grade. "She's had some challenges," says Julia. "She has a sensory processing disorder, which is common in children who've been institutionalized. When babies are not exposed to a very sensory-rich

environment, the brain doesn't develop in certain areas and doesn't know how to react to certain sensory input. She lay in a crib for her first nine months and didn't get to experience different textures, sounds and smells. She is sensitive to loud noises and bright lights. She still has low muscle tone in her core and fatigues easily, but with time, she will improve."

Fragmented memories of China

As Christian grew up, he was frustrated by his fragmented memories and, at age 14 asked Julia to help him find his birth parents. According to Julia's blog, he remembered his grandmother had taken care of him. The place he slept at home was a cement stove or "kang," (a traditional bed, which is a cement slab with quilts on top for cushion. The kang is heated underneath with straw).

Christian remembered that his father often went to the city to sell grain and food. They grew corn and potatoes and had yaks. "He liked to mix vinegar with potatoes," said Julia. The use of vinegar in cooking helped them to identify which province he was from. "He remembered there was a lot of garlic in the foods and that his mother and grandmother would make noodles and hang them to dry."

Unraveling a mysterious past

Piecing all the information together, Julia now knows that Christian was born in 1991 in Yinchuan, a city in the Ningxia region, to a couple who already had a son. Because they could have been penalized for having a second child, his parents sent their newborn to his father's home village to be raised by his grandmother and an uncle, who pretended that Christian was his son. When Christian turned 6 and was ready to start school, they sent him back to the city to be with his birth parents. He thought they were his foster parents.

He had lived with them only briefly when he and his father were getting a ride back to the home village, and his father got out to buy food at a market and Christian stayed on. When his father returned five minutes later, the driver had left with Christian.

Christian remembered being on a bus for three days and then being in Luoyang, where he was eventually found by the police under a bridge in shock and unable to speak and sent to the orphanage. His memory is very spotty about what happened during the 10-month period between when he went missing and when he

was found.

Julia explains that there is a lot of child trafficking in China with a demand for boys because they help take care of the fields. "I'm really convinced now that he was kidnapped by child traffickers and maybe sold to another family. There is a 10-month gap. I know he wasn't on the street for that long. He was found over 700 miles away. My guess is that he got away from the child traffickers. There is a lot more that we don't know yet."

Birth parents found

After three years of piecing together his fragmented memories, and with the assistance of a Chinese nonprofit called "Baby Come Home," Christian's birth family was located in May 2009. Julia and Christian traveled back to China in August for a reunion.

While the reunion went well, Christian still has lingering doubts about how he was lost and whether his family really searched for him. Julia and Christian returned to their home in Maryland with a renewed commitment to each other. Christian is processing it all and has a newfound appreciation for his American family.

'I won't settle'

As she looks back, Julia says she has no regrets about adopting two children as a single parent. "The greatest reward is the love and the joy they've brought to me and the joy in raising them. People told me, 'You're never going to get married. This is going to ruin your life. You're not going to date anymore.' I was okay with that. I had dated and had been engaged once. It wasn't working out for me. I was ready to have the love of a child."

Since raising Christian and Madison, Julia says she has had no serious relationships but has dated some. "I'm even more cautious now," she says. "Those two relationships were hard – one was abusive and the other one cheated on me. I'm super picky now. Not only do I have myself but I have kids now. I'd love to see my daughter grow up with a father in the home, but it would have to be the right one. I won't settle."

Full circle

"My mom's done a lot for me and my sister and I thank her for that," says Christian. "She's a strong woman and can handle herself and provides for us,

In Style:

Grooming 101 For Men

By Scott Brainard
Designer and colorist

Guys, it's time to break out those plastic combs, shaving kits and razors you found in your Christmas stocking. Even though the holiday season has passed, this could have been the most contact guys have with good grooming, because they usually trip over it only when it comes in the form of a gift.

Think about it. How many guys have received, and how many girls have given, a cheap plastic comb as a gift? I remember as a boy getting my first comb for Christmas. I would use it throughout the day, making sure every hair was in place,

Most guys' first introduction to grooming is through gifts they are given and – for most men – their knowledge doesn't progress much beyond that.

and jam it into my back pocket when done. Of course, the comb wouldn't last long. The boredom of hair combing would soon give way to experimenting with how far I could bend the comb before it broke. That's what boys do.

As I grew older, I remember getting not one, but three, different shaving kits for Christmas. You know the ones, with the camel hair brush for whipping the jar of cream into a foam and the manual adjusting safety razor that looked like it would remove your nose if you slipped. It was very intimidating – the art and ritual of a classic shave. Funny thing was, as deeply as I tried to connect to the Zen of shaving, I get a better shave when I just stand in the shower and blindly scrape my face with a cheap disposable razor.

Where is this going, you may ask? The point of all this is most guys' first introduction to grooming is through gifts they are given and – for most men – their knowledge doesn't progress much beyond that. So I want to help guys, and the people who give them grooming products as gifts, with guidance about personal style and grooming. With this knowledge, I hope the men who read this will have the confidence to venture out and try some new things, whether those are products or looks.

What is your personal style?

The elements of personal grooming come down to personal style. You groom for the style or look you want to achieve. And if your goal is to achieve a style, then grooming needs to become regular habit. Styles do not maintain themselves. Among the elements are your basic hair length and texture, color, facial hair and products used. With hair length and texture, most guys do not wander too far out of the box – though it is more common now to see a lot more variation in what men wear and are comfortable wearing in terms of hair styles.

A good stylist will evaluate your hair texture and design a cut with your desired style. The faux hawk and short hair cuts have had their day. Short to mid-length, classic hair for men is making a strong comeback. Inspiration from this comes from stars like George Clooney

and popular TV shows like "Mad Men." The comb back, or swept back, styles evoke feelings of calm confidence and stability, of having control. It is truly a quintessential American look.

If you're after the slick back look there's one important thing to first consider: is your hair wavy or straight. Guys with straight hair – stick to a longer cut

The boredom of hair combing would soon give way to experimenting with how far I could bend the comb before it broke. That's what boys do.

on top. Guys with wavy hair – go for short hair on top, perhaps a few inches in length depending on the strength of your wave. For both straight haired and wavy haired men – short on the sides. And for those who have neither straight nor wavy hair? Consult your stylist. You're going to have a real time getting the slick back hair style with curly hair and, unless you're willing to dedicate vast amounts of time each morning to your hair, you might want to seek a chemical curl relaxer. You will also need the right product to maintain that look.

How about color?

Color for men has always been a touchy subject. However, we have seen a steady increase in the number of men getting color services. We see more younger men willing to use color as part of their personal style. We have also seen more men getting color to not necessarily hide gray hair, but to blend it with their natural color. Color blending services have come a long way and can be done at the shampoo bowl in 5 to 15 minutes. Again, this comes down to personal style. The important thing here is to know that guys have choices.

Nothing says 'I am a man' like having facial hair

Facial hair can play a crucial role in the creation of a personal style. Nothing says "I am a man" like having facial hair. The kind of man, of course, depends on how you wear it. No guy wants to be the butt of the "Who's that crazy guy with the wild beard?!" remark. It is important to remember that beard style is like hair style. It can complement the face or distort your features. For instance, if you have a round face, having a full bushy beard only makes it

rounder, and you start to look like Santa. If you have a large face, having just a little soul patch or small facial hair will by contrast make your head look even larger. The biggest thing about it though is play with it and have fun. I say this to any male reader out there. If you have worn the same beard for more than two years, shave it off. Period. End of story. People will notice you more, you will get more compliments about your looks, and you will feel like a different person.

Make the right use of the right product

The final bit of advice I would like to give is about products. It is extremely difficult to maintain a good style and grooming without the right use of the right product. Not all products are created equal, and they certainly don't do the same thing. First of all, you pick the product first according to your hair type. Do you have fine, medium or coarse and curly hair? You know if you have fine hair when you put product in it and it immediately gets weighed down and lays flat against your scalp and your only recourse is to shower the goop out of your hair. Likewise, people with coarse and curly hair know who they are. They fight for hours to get their hair under control and it still won't obey. People with medium hair are, by default, everyone else.

Now that you've identified your hair type, you will want to find a product designed for it. Short fine hair only needs a light pomade to give the hair some texture and ensure that it doesn't go flat. If it does, usually just running the fingers through the hair will refresh the look during the day. If you are trying the swept back look, fine hair just needs a polishing cream to keep it together. Gels and waxes are generally only good for medium and coarse curly hair as they are heavier and give more control. You can get them for a wet finish or a matte look. The waxes are good for controlling the short cuts; gels are better for short to medium length. Mousse should never be used unless you are planning to blow-dry your hair. It will add volume and fullness, which is great if that is what you are looking for.

This is just an overview of style and grooming choices every man should consider. There are tons of great websites out there that give detailed advice, and I urge guys to seek them out.

Take control of your look; don't find it in a stocking.

FIREPLACE SAFETY

By Terry Ober
Community Traffic Safety Program Coordinator

Cold temperatures outside encourage us to use that fireplace to warm up the room. Our fire departments get busier this time of year as some of us don't exercise the proper cautions before, during and after the fire is lit.

- Install both a smoke and carbon monoxide detector. (Make sure the batteries work.)
- If you have long hair, tie it back.
- Avoid wearing loose fitting garments while tending to the fire.
- Have chimney cleaned/ inspected before using the fireplace every year.
- Ensure the flue is open before starting a fire.
- Keep a fire extinguisher on hand.
- Make sure the area around the fireplace is clear of furniture, books, newspapers and other potentially flammable materials. (Two feet away is a good rule.)
- Always have some type of flame retardant rug or tile/brick in front of the fireplace.
- Never use gas to start a fire.
- Keep small children and pets away from the fireplace.
- Burn only dry wood.
- Wear fireproof mitts when working with the fire.
- Never leave a fire unattended.
- Don't close the damper until the embers have completely stopped burning.
- Make sure the fire is completely out before going to bed or leaving the house.
- Be sure all coals are out before cleaning out and disposing of ashes.
- When cleaning out the fireplace, store the ashes in a noncombustible container with a tightly fitting lid and place the container well away from the house.

Unhappily, these tips have resulted from bad experiences. Call your local fire department to see if it has a program where firefighters will come out and check your detectors and give some safety pointers, depending on the layout of your house!

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HIRING A NANNY? HERE'S WHY YOU MUST DO A BACKGROUND CHECK

By Lynn H. Levy
President of L.H. Levy Investigations, Inc.

My baby!!!!!! What do you mean he's gone? Your baby. He has looked up into your eyes with love from the moment you first fed him. You nurtured him for two months and then had to return to work. That's what single parents do.

According to the United States Department of Justice, there are more than 500,000 sex offenders supposed to be registered in the United States, but at least 100,000 may be "lost" in the system. No one knows where they are.

So you hired a nanny. How did you do it? Ad in the paper? Referral from a friend at the gym? Or perhaps an acquaintance of your mother's?

You interviewed. She was middle-aged, a motherly type and very friendly. You connected and you immediately hired her. You believed what she told you or had written on her resume. Where did she come from? Does she have a criminal record? Is she so in debt that she would steal? And, heaven forbid, is she on the National Sex Offender Registry? You don't know!!!!

According to the United States Department of Justice, there are more than 500,000 sex offenders supposed to be registered in the United States, but at least 100,000 may be "lost" in the system. No one knows where they are. Maryland had over 1,400 registered in 2001.

A nanny background check could be one strategy to avoid some of the "not knowing." This is conducted by trustworthy agencies, licensed private investigators and other sources.

What should be included?

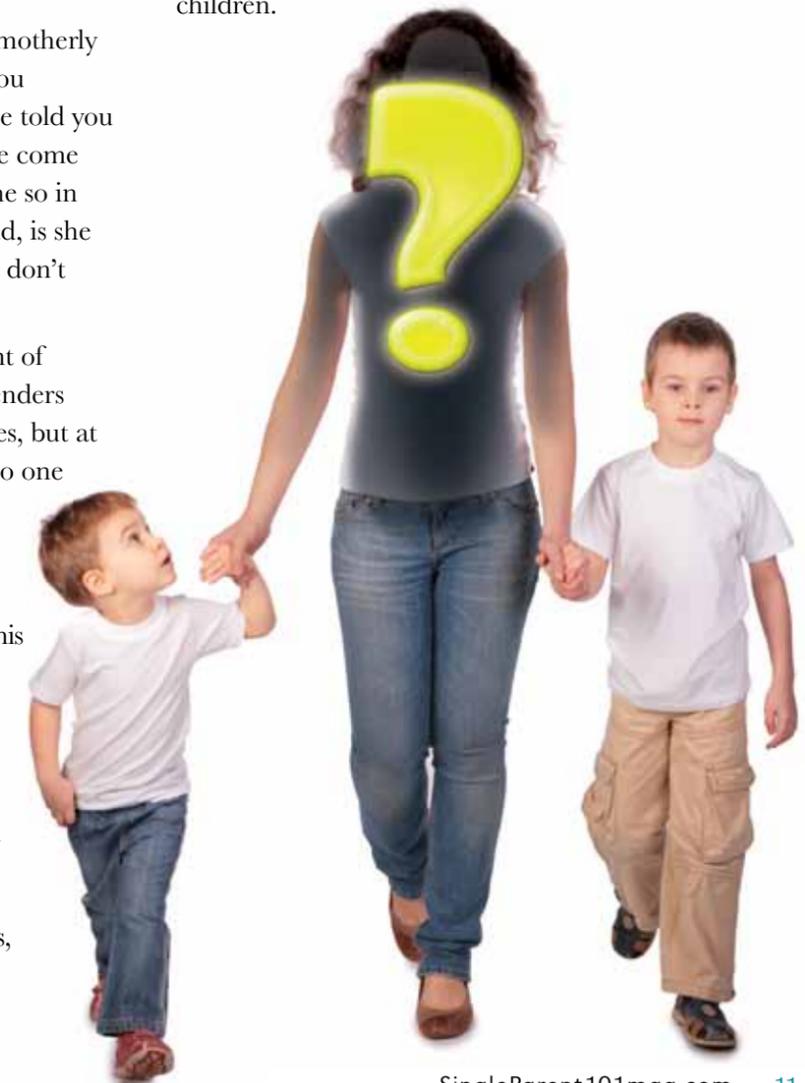
- Past residences (A perfect Maryland record doesn't eliminate the possibility of criminal activity in South Carolina)
- Traffic and Motor Vehicle report (DWIs, failure to appear, etc.)
- Civil debt and other lawsuits searches

- Check references carefully (are they related to your hiree?)

What does this cost?

A comprehensive background check with a report by a reputable agency runs about \$80-\$150. There is usually an extra fee for each state researched. The turnaround time can be from 1-3 days.

You will be paying your nanny thousands of dollars a year. Relatively, the cost of a nanny background check is an excellent value. And for that matter, consider the same for senior caretakers, housekeepers and anyone who has access to your home and precious children.



Finding Happiness Again

(aka, the Sky is Not Falling)

By Teresa Hummel, MA/LMT/NCMT
Owner, Balance Therapeutics Massage &
The Balance Center for Natural Health

You know why it is so soothing to look at a beautiful sunrise, or out over the water? Because it reminds us to keep everything in perspective, and that our daily dramas are only a small part of a bigger, wonderful thing out there around us all the time, if we remember to see it.

Part of my daily ritual, like most of yours, includes checking out the news headlines to keep in touch with what is happening around me. I'm sure I'm not alone when I say that sometimes doing this only adds to my existing stress—it can be downright depressing!

Good grief....stock market woes, satellites crashing from the sky, corruption in the ranks of big business, politics, and even within the ranks of our revered professional athletes. Help!! This makes it pretty hard for those of us just trying to keep on track,

enjoy life a little, and feel more happiness and less stress. (Note to self: avoid the Drudge Report.)

Focus on positive news

Lately I've come to love the positive news sources that can be found if you look for them. They say "dirty laundry" is what sells, but I'm thinking that our happiness can be improved by looking at more of the good stuff. How about the story of the 10 year old in Wisconsin who mobilized a community to donate over \$16,000 toward the construction of a new dwelling for a homeless person? Or the anonymous check for \$5 million sent to Temple University, to help educate women? Or the guy who pedaled a stationary bike for 85 hours, raising \$25,000 for an organization in Illinois that helps families of crime victims? These are stories of hope and generosity, of people out there who have it together, and are helping others get theirs together.



Do something for someone else

When life is stressful, there are times when it all seems like too much. When everything is rushing at you and past you in a blur, it can feel like all you're doing is "managing" your life and not enjoying it—much less doing anything nice for anyone else. But it occurs to me that in the simple act of doing for someone else, however small or big, we can all find a little calm and happiness once again. For many people, doing something thoughtful for others is like an instant recharge that will give you the fuel to go out and tackle the world again.

Think life, not stuff

Your act of kindness or generosity doesn't have consume your time or money either. Think life, not stuff. Sure, tickets to the theater would perk up your sister, but it may be just as good to stop what you are doing and drop off a hot cup of tea at her office when she is not expecting it. Or, for your new haggard-looking parent-friend next door, give them an evening off, and handle the diapers and burp cloths for them for a little while. (Don't you wish someone had done that for you?!) Your husband may appreciate an evening with the guys...or the remote control. And your wife might appreciate some time of her own, to get her hair highlighted or just read an adult book.

One of my favorite passages is called "The Art of Happiness":

You can't pursue happiness and catch it. Happiness comes upon you while you are helping others. The philosophy of

happiness is expressed in an old Hindu proverb: "Help thy brother's boat across, and lo! Thine own has reached the shore." Happiness doesn't depend upon what happens outside of you but on what happens inside of you. Happiness grows out of harmonious relationships with others, based on attitudes of generosity, good will, tolerance, understanding and love.

So, try taking a step back from your own life and consider changing the news channels you tap into each day. Look for opportunities to reach out to someone, who may be having a more stressful day than you. It'll come back to you tenfold.

You know why it is so soothing to look at a beautiful sunrise, or out over the water? Because it reminds us to keep everything in perspective, and that our daily dramas are only a small part of a bigger, wonderful thing out there around us all the time, if we remember to see it.

Insure Your Child's Success... Consider a Personal Coach

A personal college coach can provide:

- Focus and direction
- Career choices
- Effective communication
- Independence
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From Waitress To CEO, Carolyn Gable Inspires Single Parents To Expect A Miracle

By Linda Blachly,
Managing Editor



Carolyn Gable's success story proves that dreams can be achieved and miracles can happen for the single parent. The divorced single mother went from waiting tables for 15 years to president and CEO of New Age Transportation, Distribution & Warehousing, Inc. – a \$30+ million dollar enterprise based in Lake Zurich, Ill. Today, Carolyn, who has seven children (ages 9 to 34) and is still a single parent, serves up plenty of inspiration – and financial help – for single parents who need to still believe in miracles.

Carolyn is not your typical CEO. Always mindful of her years of struggling waiting tables, her good fortune in the business world has prompted her to give back to single parents through “Expect a Miracle Foundation”, a nonprofit organization that grants wishes to the children of single parents by providing funds for the “little extras” such as music and dance lessons, Christmas gifts, park and camp programs, school supplies, organized sports fees and after-school programs. “It’s those little extras that make life easier for a child,” says Carolyn. Since 2001, the foundation has been able to help over 4,000 children.

Two years ago, Carolyn established another program, “Expect a Miracle 2,” which treats single moms to activities that are focused solely on them.

“Expect a Miracle 2” started after a weekend trip with some girlfriends,” says Carolyn. “As you may have guessed, the weekend included a trip to the spa and we

all received massages. Well, later that night, one of my girlfriends, who had been a widow for a year, confessed to us that the massage was the first time she had been physically touched since her husband died. At that moment, it occurred to me that while “Expect a Miracle” had been helping children of single working parents for several years, I had completely neglected the single mothers! A lot of single moms will always place their children first, and all too often their own needs are placed on the back burner. By creating “Expect a Miracle 2,” we now have the means to treat single moms to activities that are focused solely on them. Just because you are a mom doesn’t mean you aren’t allowed to enjoy yourself every once in a while.” Still in its infancy, this program has helped 100 single moms so far.

In her early years, Carolyn, who always had a philanthropic spirit, would have given anything for the help that she is now giving to other single parents.

Her formative teenage years were spent living in a single-parent household, and as a single parent herself who relied on food stamps to help ends meet, she has lived the struggles that many face today.

After graduating high school, she spent the following year as a beautician. Feeling unfulfilled, she entered the restaurant industry as a waitress. It was during this period of her life that her philanthropic nature morphed into providing excellent customer service. Over the next 12 years, working as a waitress at a Hyatt rooftop restaurant,

Carolyn perfected her people skills – having to deal with difficult kitchen staff, demanding bartenders, and of course, providing excellent service to her customers with her warm smile. Carolyn is quick to point out that being a waitress is the ultimate customer service job, and it provided her with life training and a better education than any Harvard degree.

Carolyn has outstanding people skills to which anyone who has ever been a waitress can relate, but it was difficult to raise two small children on a salary comprised mainly of tips.

Carolyn's job as a waitress was put on hold in 1982 when the hotel decided to renovate. She took part-time jobs in the meantime. However, the same night she was scheduled to return to the Hyatt, the roof blew off the building in a storm.

This simple twist of fate, as it turned out, changed her life. Wanting a better life for herself and her children, she walked into an employment agency looking for a change. Landing an interview at a transportation company, she was offered a job as a customer service representative. Dedicating the next two years to learning the business by day, and still a waitress at night, her hard work materialized into a sales position. Using her customer service skills, she quickly excelled in the position. Five years later, in 1989, she launched her own company, New Age Transportation, out of the basement of her home.

Carolyn's rise to success was hardly typical, especially in the male-dominated logistics industry of the late '80s. Yet, almost 30 years later, this single mother of seven children, has developed New Age Transportation into a thriving business, with over 60 employees and clients ranging from Fortune 500 companies to small, local businesses. The recipient of numerous awards, including Chicago Entrepreneur of the Year Award from the University of Illinois, Chicago, and the feature of many media stories including Good Morning America and 20/20, Carolyn has not stopped in her quest to help people realize their dreams.

Last year, Carolyn wrote a book called “Everything I Know as a CEO I Learned as a Waitress” to inspire others who want to achieve their dreams. Her book describes 12 skills she learned while waiting tables and why she credits them for her success today. These values are a reflection



of her strongly held personal beliefs and the foundation for conducting business at New Age Transportation.

They are:

- 1. Have fun**
- 2. Pay attention to details**
- 3. Learn to roll with the punches**
- 4. Practice patience: it pays**
- 5. Care about others**
- 6. Stick with it**
- 7. Join the circus**
- 8. Look good to feel good**
- 9. Honor honesty**
- 10. Mind your own business**
- 11. Be your own person**
- 12. Expect a miracle**

In her book, Carolyn says, “Looking back on my years as a CEO, I realize that it is not the product alone that has brought me to where I am today, nor is it the ebb and flow of the marketplace. It is the relationships I have built over the years. (At New Age Transportation,) my

goal is to create a work environment where every man and woman is able to grow and flourish as a person. My goal is to make every employee happy, because if they are happy, the customer will be happy.”

A golden piece of advice Carolyn gives in the book is: “Love what you do and do what you love. We travel few paths in our lifetime that turn out exactly as we planned them. So what happens when things do not go exactly as planned? We learn to acclimate. We learn to identify the joy and turn it into something fun. We choose not to be victims.”

We asked Carolyn to give our single-parent readers some of her wisdom.

Now that the holidays are upon us, what advice would you give a struggling single parent trying to provide Christmas gifts for his or her children with limited resources?

The holidays can be a very difficult time, especially when money is tight. As a parent, you always want to provide your kids with everything on their wish list, but most of the time it's just not feasible. But to the parents that are struggling right now, I urge them to reflect on their own childhood memories. For the vast majority of us, we can't remember all the “stuff” that our parents got us for each holiday season...what we remember, what we cherish, are the memories that were created. Perhaps the memory is grandpa reading a holiday story, or baking cookies with mom, or sipping hot chocolate while stringing popcorn for the tree. The memories are different for us all, but the common thread is that they are surrounded by love.

We all must remember that our financial circumstances will change, and next year will not be the same as this year. And while you may not be able to get them the latest

action figure, iPod, or newest fad, you can give children your love. Love doesn't cost a penny, and it is the gift that will always be remembered.

Can you recall a special holiday memory?

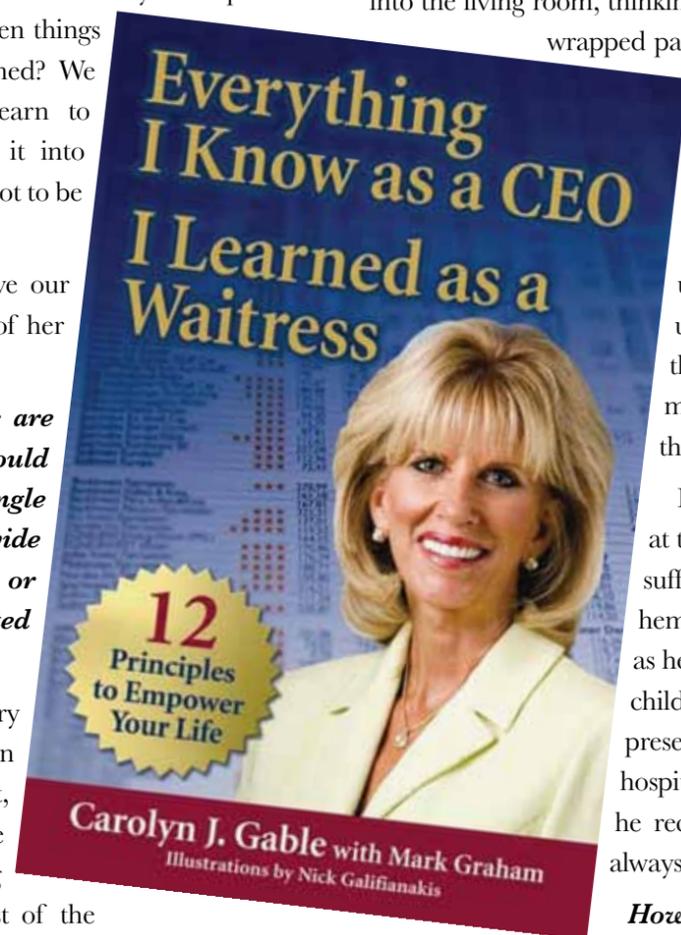
When I was 9 years old, I woke up on Christmas morning and I was so excited! As I turned the corner into the living room, thinking of what may be inside the wrapped packages under the tree, I was

greeted by the sight of my father sitting in his chair saying the rosary. He smiled at me as he prayed. When all my siblings had joined us in the room, he watched us all open our gifts. After the last gift was opened, he motioned to my mother to call the ambulance.

I didn't quite understand it all at the very moment, but he was suffering from gastrointestinal hemorrhaging. For as much pain as he was in, he wanted to see his children open their Christmas presents before going to the hospital. And the strength that he received from that rosary will always be with me.

How do you personally balance all your responsibilities while caring for seven children? What kind of lives do they lead?

First and foremost, I am only one person and cannot be everywhere at once. Single moms everywhere can relate to being pulled in many different directions all at the same time. I have taught my children to be independent, and that no matter what happens, I love them with all my heart. I may not be able to make it to every baseball game or cheer outing, but I explain to them why I may not be able to attend. They understand that I have other responsibilities, but they also see me take an active role in each of their lives.



What do you think is the most important thing a single parent can give their child?

Love. Attention. Touch. Kind words.

Can you talk about your faith and how it has played a role in your success and who you are today?

If I didn't have my faith, I don't know how I could get through the difficult times. My belief system is centered on the notion that everything is going to be OK. “Everything” may not always work out the way I have planned, but God never gives you more than you can handle. As a result, I also don't struggle with FEAR. God has presented me with opportunities, and I take them because they are gifts. I may not always have the answers from the beginning, but the answers will come.

What new endeavors do you have on the horizon?

I wouldn't say that I have new endeavors on the horizon, but rather a shift in my focus. My business is strong, and I want to spend more time and energy giving back. My foundation fulfills a tremendous need, and I really would like to expand its reach and help as many children and single parents as I possibly can. Ideally, I would love for the day to come where the services we provide are no longer needed ... but until then, there's a lot of work to do!

To learn more about Carolyn Gable, visit www.CarolynGable.com or www.expectmiraclefoundation.org. “Everything I Know as a CEO I Learned as a Waitress” is published by It's All Good Publishing, LLC, 1881 Rose Road, Lake Zurich, IL 60047. Copyright 2007.

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The Remarriage Wedding Checklist

By Paula Bisacre
Publisher, reMarriage Magazine



Illustration: Timothy Young photography: Paragon Light

Getting engaged can be such an exciting time. Bridal magazines and bridal websites will offer you scores of bridal checklists to help you prepare. Most of the checklists are organized by blocks of time leading up to your wedding celebration, often starting from 12-18 months out. I propose that remarriage couples, especially those with children, consider making some additions to those checklists. For remarriage couples, there is so much more involved than taking dance lessons for the first dance or choosing a photographer.

Of course, many of the items on the checklists are no different from when you married the first time. The lists recommend you start with determining your number of guests, setting your wedding budget, and selecting your ceremony and reception site. By the time you are entering into a remarriage, those starting decisions are probably fairly obvious to you.

But, keep in mind the unique and often unspoken issues and areas that need to be addressed before your wedding event, starting before or immediately after you are engaged to be remarried. Some of the typical bridal checklists that are available include financial and legal-related tasks such as opening a joint bank account, obtaining a marriage license, deciding upon a prenuptial agreement. But, the remarriage couple would benefit from expanding this area and discussing finances and legal matters to the umpteenth degree.

Starting in the financial arena, you may want to consult with a financial advisor. Since most remarriage couples are in their mid-30s and older, they usually have more money to manage than they did when they married the first time. Don't be afraid to delve into the smallest details. For example, you and your fiancé may agree that you will finance your children's college education. That's simply not enough said.

Take the time to discuss the next level of details on such a subject. Do either of you have a dollar threshold in mind? Or, is one of you assuming that the kids will go to state schools while the other is assuming the children can go to private as well? Will an ex-spouse be contributing to the children's expenses after their 18th birthdays? Avoid surprises down

the road. It can be pretty stressful when your child is a high school senior and you suddenly find out that your spouse never intended to support sending a student out-of-state.

Discuss other financial-related issues, such as estate planning, wills, insurance and 401(k) plans. Certainly most people would much rather enjoy discussing which exotic honeymoon locale they would like to visit rather than talking about whether they are going to add the children of their new spouse-to-be to their 401(k) plan. That kind of conversation can get even less preferable if people start thinking that their new spouse's ex can get anywhere near their assets by leaving it to their stepchildren. An estate planner could be well worth the investment in such a case.

Consider a stepfamily counselor or coach before getting remarried. Some psychologists say that it takes seven years for a stepfamily to blend. Being proactive and understanding stepfamily blending dynamics prior to becoming a stepfamily can be less stressful than reacting to issues once they have occurred. Stepfamily counselors and coaches can teach you skills to be an effective stepparent. If you've spent time and/or money learning about skills for your job, hobby, or health, why wouldn't you invest in your remarriage prior to the wedding?

These additions to your wedding checklist are more complicated and probably less fun than picking out flowers for your centerpieces, but other tasks on the planning list that can be very enjoyable for everyone involved. Hopefully, you find ways to include your children in your wedding event celebration. Ask them if and how they would like to be included. Perhaps your kids can be the members of your wedding party. If so, consider letting them choose colors or what they will wear. Do they have a favorite food that can be included on the menu for the rehearsal or reception? Can older children make a toast at the reception or read one of the readings during the ceremony?

Obviously, there is a lot to consider when preparing for remarriage with children. With careful and thoughtful planning, your wedding event and life after saying "we do" will go smoothly. Because when remarriage with children, it really is a "we do."

Will You Be Your Valentine?

By Shellie Monroe
President/CEO Parents Empowering

Valentine's Day can be an occasion that many people dread. Singles may yearn for a romantic mate delivering flowers or some other expression of love and affection. Couples may desire the same from their mate. Although

In hindsight, I understand why February 14th was always a big disappointment. I expected others to provide me with the things I desperately needed to give myself.

one of our greatest desires is to receive love, why do so many people rely on others for validation and self-worth?

I am guilty of this. My reliance on others and my unrealistic expectations left me in an abyss of despair. I dreaded Valentine's Day, whether I spent it alone or with my presumed prince charming.

My expectations and perspectives have changed. These changes are a direct result of my decision to focus on myself and conduct a much-needed self-assessment. Looking within isn't easy, but the results are enlightening and rewarding.

I struggled to acknowledge and accept responsibility for my low self-esteem, feelings of unworthiness and inadequacy. It was easier to hold others responsible and persecute them for their inability to keep my self-esteem tank full at all times.

Before you can love someone else, you must love yourself. You are responsible for your happiness and life in general. Foregoing these responsibilities disempowers you and places unrealistic expectations on others.

I realized that I was full of shame, guilt, regrets and harbored unforgiveness toward myself. Accepting and owning my past enables me to embrace and appreciate

all of me. Now, I see that everything that I've experienced was for a reason and contributed to my life's purpose.

Had I not struggled to transition from a teenager to an adult, I wouldn't have the desire and compassion to work with adolescents. There is a purpose in your struggles. Your mess becomes your message and your message becomes your ministry.

In hindsight, I understand why February 14th was always a big disappointment. I expected others to provide me with the things I desperately needed to give myself. Isn't it ironic that we can insist that others love, respect and protect us, but don't place the same requirements on ourselves?

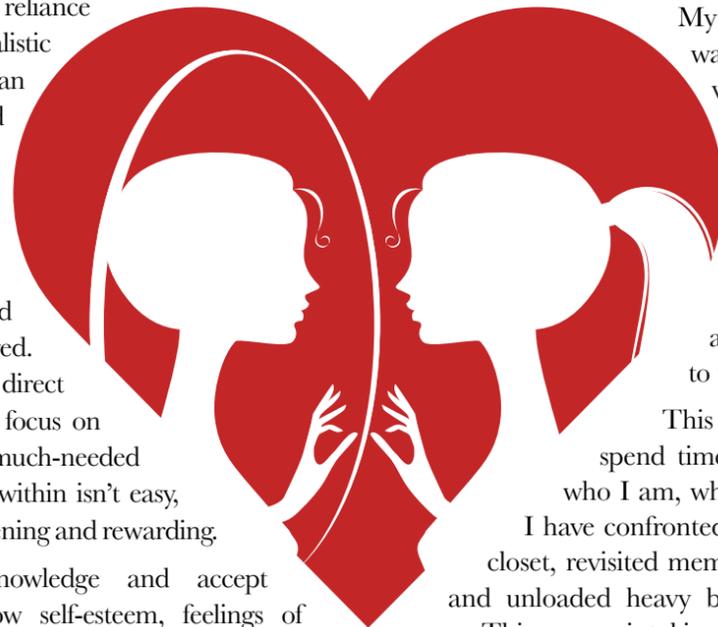
My journey of self-discovery was the result of my incessant voyage on the relationship merry-go-round. My relationships were not yielding the results that I anticipated or desired. I knew there had to be a better way. I decided to take a close look at myself and get to the root of the matter.

This process has required me to spend time with myself and discover who I am, what I want and what I need.

I have confronted skeletons in my emotional closet, revisited memories I have tried to forget, and unloaded heavy baggage I have carried for years. This process is taking me to a place of love, peace and forgiveness with myself, although grueling at times.

I am looking forward to Valentine's Day. It's an opportunity for me to honor and celebrate myself, where I've been and where I'm going. It's also an opportunity for me to reclaim my power and stop existing as a martyr. I'll provide myself with the affirmations and acceptance I need, rather than hoping that cupid will deliver prince charming.

Whether you're single or in a relationship, will you be your valentine?



Partners / Sharing / Planning

Before you commit, make sure you have a written understanding of the obligations and commitment of your partner

By Chip Brittingham and Wayne Humphries
Partners, International Money Management Group, Inc.

Life is about emotions, money, planning and growing. Did you ever notice that the strongest trees are those at the edge of the forest? Those that experience the worst stress and are unsupported by others become stronger.

We may become stronger and more disciplined because of our experiences. From our own experience in helping others, we can offer some advice.

First, remember that getting into a partnership is much easier than getting out. We have found this in assisting businesses and professional partners as well as with couples. Before you commit, make sure you have a written understanding of the obligations and commitment of your partner. Your partnership agreement will also need to cover what happens if one partner changes his or her mind, drops out or drops dead. What about rent, mortgages, children, and other assets and expenses? Who pays which obligations of the monthly budget, the cost of education, and the costs associated with travel? Sound like work? Absolutely, but an in depth understanding is required for such a significant event as beginning a new partnership.

The most commonly used method is:

- Take a picture of where each partner is today, including assets, liabilities and income.
- Discuss where you want to be in five to ten years.
- Decide what to do if either partner retires, becomes disabled or dies.

Full disclosure is essential to building a good foundation for a strong and enduring relationship. To enlighten your understanding of each other, discuss your feelings.

How do you feel about?

- Taxes
- Expenditures on clothing, travel, luxury cars, etc.
- Having alone time
- Who pays what bills
- Decisions related to the children such as discipline, education, financial assistance, etc.

1. Understand each other

- Ethically
- Financially
- Spiritually

2. Discuss your future as partners in this new adventure in your life in terms of "if all goes well."

3. Discuss your future as partners in this new adventure in your life in terms of "if all does not go well."

Chip recommends these discussions take place near the water, on the dock, with a glass of wine. Enjoy!!





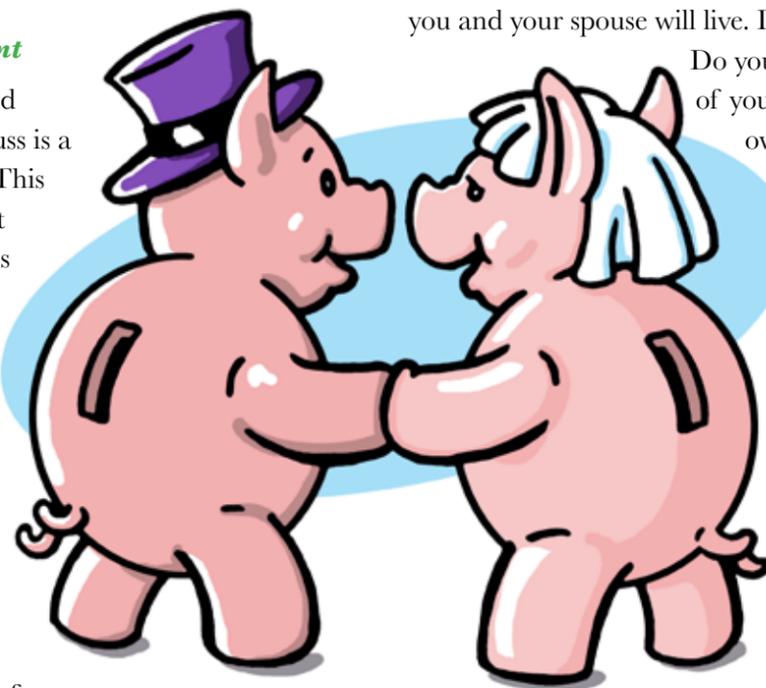
SAYING 'I DO' AGAIN: THINGS TO CONSIDER BEFORE MERGING FINANCES

By Todd Wilhoit
CRPC

You have decided to get married again and you may have many concerns, including how the kids will react, where you will live, how your ex-spouse will take the news, and possible other questions. Another issue to think about is how the combined finances will work with the extra income of the soon-to-be spouse. This brings up some very important topics that should be hashed out well before the "I Do's" come along.

Prenuptial agreement

The first topic you and your fiancé should discuss is a prenuptial agreement. This can be a very important document that functions well if you and your new spouse have accumulated assets that you would like to ensure are left to the children who are brought into the new marriage. In most states, once you are married, the assets are comingled and will be left to the spouse if something happens to either one of you. The prenuptial agreement can make sure those assets or accounts are left to the appropriate persons. Also, if the marriage were to dissolve, the prenup will make separation of the assets easier.



The "prenup" should be detailed and carefully thought over to eliminate any possible tension it could bring into a growing relationship. In addition, you should also consider using separate attorneys to draw up the document as this will make sure there is no pressure to make a decision with which you might be uncomfortable.

Where will you live?

The second issue you will have to decide is where you and your spouse will live. Do you own a house?

Do you both rent or do one of you rent and the other own? Is either of the houses big enough and in a location suitable for both families? If you are moving into the new spouse's house, then you have to make a big decision as to whether you want to rent or sell your current home. The next decision is how that money (rental income or

equity from the sale) is used in the new relationship. If you decide to move into a new place, then do both of you sell your current homes or rent them out? These are questions that need to be answered as a couple and decisions made as a family.

Work out a budget

These decisions can best be made by working out a budget and knowing what each person is bringing to the table every month. Make sure a budget is created so that you are on the same page for what will be spent on each child and on the combined household expenses. All of the children should be treated fairly, the bills should be paid on time, and you and your spouse should catch up on the things that you couldn't do with just the one income. The budget should outline how the bills will be paid, how the college planning will be funded, and who will be responsible for each expense. This budget should also cover what will happen to any additional income that arrives in the household: do you build up a reserve fund and how much should that be? How much should be put back for your retirement? You should reach out to a financial professional to help you in these areas.

Update your beneficiaries

Another very important issue is to make sure your beneficiaries are up to date. This includes updating your will, trust, life insurance and any other important documents that you might have, with guidance from your attorney. Be sure each of you decides what will happen with the children and the finances before you make this appointment with the attorney to make your appointment faster and to cut down on some of the costs.

Getting married is a very exciting time for a new couple. With all of the wedding planning, it can be very easy to forget about some of the important financial decisions that should be made before, during, and after this great day. Make sure you consult with a qualified financial professional to help along the way. He or she can help make sure you have a bright financial future to go along with the joys of spending the rest of your life with the person you love.



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Your Teens And The Social Networks Of Today

By Christa Puccio
Journalism student, Ohio University



Staying as tech savvy as your teens will leave surprises behind and help you sleep better at night, knowing they are using the Web safely. Keep involved in your teens' activities. If they don't understand now, they will when they're older.

Your teen hanging out with friends no longer ends when the streetlights come on. Driving to the next neighborhood isn't necessary anymore either. Social networking, such as Facebook, MySpace and Twitter, keeps your kids in touch with friends from all over the world, all hours of the day.

While this might sound like a convenient way for teens to network, it makes it more difficult for parents to keep up with their kids. Who are they talking to so late at night? What kinds of pictures are they posting online for the world to see?

You don't have to be in the dark anymore. Here are some things parents must know as their teen enters into the world of social networking.

facebook

Facebook has evolved as a college networking site to also include high school students. Today, it seems, even parents have Facebook accounts: "It's free and anyone can join." By joining the online social networks, parents can "friend" your teens and keep in an eye on the people they talk to and pictures they

post. All a person needs to join is a valid e-mail address.

I remember when I first went to college, a few states away from my parents and everything I knew, my mom added me as a friend on Facebook. I first looked at it as my mom not trusting me, but as I've gotten older and graduation's right around the corner, I can see this all in a different light. My mom's intention was only a parenting instinct, to watch out for her little girl.



MySpace and Twitter also only require an e-mail address. MySpace is a social network similar to Facebook, but it also offers a wide variety of users, including famous and as well as unsigned music artists, actors and actresses, comedians and much more. Users can listen to music on promotion pages and can also post music on their own accounts. It keeps you updated on friends by posting on your page the "status" of what they're doing. Users can also search for friends with common interests and similar backgrounds through a provided search bar. Furthermore, MySpace has games and videos for passing time.

twitter

Twitter allows for users to "follow" status "tweets" of friends and "news feed tweets," such as celebrity gossip, new music releases, local, national and international news, brand names and sports updates. It also provides an option to send and receive messages between users. Lastly, it includes a blog with Twitter advances and news.

Google

The easiest way to discover if your teen is using any of these social networks is to type in their first and last name into the Google search engine. These social networks make their accounts public knowledge and, unless the users are set to "Private," you can view them just by clicking on the link Google provides.

Keep your profile private

Parents can also join the network and search for their child by name or e-mail address. If your teen has, in fact, joined one of these social networks, it is important to make sure they set their accounts to "Private."

This can be done on Facebook by clicking on "Settings," "Privacy" and then "Profile." All settings on this page should be changed to "Only Friends" to prevent unknown users from viewing your teen's personal information.

Privacy settings on MySpace can be altered by clicking on "My Account" and then "Privacy." All settings listed should be set to friends only as well. This will potentially keep users from accessing your teen's account without your consent.

Twitter is much simpler to set to private. Just click on "Settings" and then check the box that says, "Protect my tweets." This will let only people who your teens approve to view their page and tweets and not posting them on the "Public Timeline."

Stay tech savvy

These social networks make it easy for parents to follow their teens discretely by offering an option to have selected friends' statuses sent directly to your phone. Facebook has a section under "Account Settings" and "Mobile," where you can subscribe to your friends' statuses and have them sent to your phone. The same is available through Twitter by texting "ON" and the user name you wish to follow to 40404. MySpace, however, requires you to access the m.myspace.com Web site to check on friends' statuses by phone.

The easiest way to communicate the importance of safety to your teen while using social networks is to become involved with them yourself. Join the websites with simply an e-mail address and add your teen as a friend to follow their pages, making sure they are using the networks in an appropriate manner. Ask questions on what services they take advantage of, like listening to music or keeping in touch with old friends.

Staying as tech savvy as your teens will leave surprises behind and help you sleep better at night, knowing they are using the Web safely. Keep involved in your teens' activities. If they don't understand now, they will when they're older.

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Is Your Child Slowly Building an Army of Webkinz®?

By Steve and Tim Woda
Co-founders, KidSafe

Are you worried your teen will develop arthritic thumbs from texting so much? Are your little ones slowly building an army of Webkinz®? If this sounds like your child, you're not alone.

Using the family computer is not the only way kids access the Web today. Our kids are accessing cyberspace through laptops, mobile phones, gaming consoles, handheld gaming devices and even some MP3 players. The digital world has tremendous benefits for our children but you should also be aware of what they are doing in the world of bits and bytes and what decisions they're making.

Most of us do not fully understand all of the technology our kids are using. Today, they are using SMS, MMS, IM, webcams, social networks, PictoChat, and gaming systems, to name just a few, and their texting lingo is just as confusing. The good news is that you can become more familiar with technology and learn about the issues affecting your kids online. Some of these issues include online predators, "sexting" and cyberbullying. Online threats are not a new phenomena, but it may surprise you that one in

five teens have been sexually solicited online, one in three teens have received a "sext" message, one in five have sent these inappropriate messages, and one in six tweens have been bullied online. Too often, these issues go unnoticed by parents because they occur online and out of sight.

You can help your child safely enjoy technology and steer clear of these risks by getting involved and providing adequate oversight. Talk to your child about the digital world – early and often – and set clear boundaries. Talk about the websites you visit and share your favorite YouTube® videos. Regularly ask your children about what they are doing online, about their favorite websites and online "friends." If you don't know as much about technology as your children, let them teach you. They will relish the opportunity to be the expert in the family for a change. The key is to keep an open dialogue – make sure your children know what is expected of them, and hold them accountable.

One way to ensure that your children know what is expected of them is for you to review, sign and post a Safety Pledge on the refrigerator.



INTERNET & MOBILE SAFETY PLEDGE

- ✓ I will talk with my mom or dad so that we can establish rules for using the Internet and my mobile phone. We will decide the time of day that these can be used, the length of time that I can use them, the appropriate online areas for me to visit, and the appropriate uses of my mobile phone. I will not access other areas online or break these rules without mom or dad's permission.
- ✓ I will not give out my address, telephone number, parent's work address/telephone number(s), or the name and location of my school without the permission of my parent.
- ✓ I will not use chat rooms and I will only use instant messengers, e-mail and text messaging to communicate with those people my parent has approved.
- ✓ I will not respond to e-mail, instant messages or text messages from someone I do not know offline (in real-life). I will not arrange to meet anyone in person that I "meet" online. This includes "friends of friends."
- ✓ I will never send my picture to anyone or post a picture of myself online without first checking with my parent, and I will not send or post pictures of other people.
- ✓ I will not use bad language, insult people or be rude to other people online. I will not forward instant messages, text or e-mail messages that are hurtful to others. I will respect the privacy of my friends and family.
- ✓ I will tell an adult right away if I come across anything online or receive any information that makes me feel uncomfortable.
- ✓ I will always follow the rules of Internet sites and I will not purchase products or services online without my parents' approval and help. I will not download anything, including e-mail attachments without my parents' approval.
- ✓ These rules apply whenever I am at home, a friend's house, school, and library or wherever I use technology.

Child Signature

Parent Signature





Parental Alienation

...Tips to Help



By Samantha Woods
www.divorcewisdom.com

Parental Alienation is an enormously emotional aspect of divorce. It is the mental manipulation of a child by one parent resulting in the estrangement of the other parent's relationship with his or her child.

This is far more prevalent in contentious divorces as opposed to amicable ones. Both parents are usually capable of parenting and the sad fact is that parental alienation results in the child paying the heaviest price.

Look at this from your child's point of view. Children of divorce, especially those 8-10 years of age or older, often remember that as when their childhood ended. The odds are that they will more than likely lose their home as the parents adjust to new living situations. They may change schools along with that move. They will have to forge new friendships just when they need the strength of old friends. They often see a lower standard of living as child support is inadequate and alimony is usually limited.

So what can we do as parents to help our children of divorce?



2. Establish Boundaries. Help your child establish boundaries. Every parent should teach what types of permissible and non-permissible behaviors your child can expect from others and how to handle each appropriately. No one has the right to dominate any child for selfish reasons. If you see your ex-spouse emotionally hurting your child, you have as much responsibility to protect and guide your child as if it were physical pain.

3. Talk & Listen to Your Child. Using neutral examples, discuss life, their future and goals, your continued support, and their hurts. Ask them how they feel and validate their right to have feelings. Help them work through their pain or anger. They don't have the right to lash out in unrestrained anger. Seek professional help for your child if necessary.

4. Our Responsibilities. Our goal as parents is to raise well-balanced, self-sufficient, faith-reliant adults who want us and love us but do not need us. Say nothing bad about your ex-spouse. It has been said many times but take this a step further. If your ex-spouse is truly a despicable character, your children will see it and you don't need to say anything. Remember what Thumper's mother told him... "If you can't say something nice, say nothing at all." It is also not your responsibility to demand they love the other parent. We are each responsible for the love in our life.

1. Be the Parent. Set the example for them. Reassure them, encourage them, provide for them, love them, and let them see your life of integrity. Remain the parent. Protect them. They are not your confidant or liaison.

If your ex-spouse is physically or emotionally abusive and your child hears you constantly proclaiming that this parent loves them or is not a bad person, they'll grow up thinking that this must be what love really is. Or, they'll think you're either an idiot or a liar...because if this is love, why does it hurt so? At a minimum, their confidence in their own understandings and observations will be questioned.

If you are the alienated parent, look at your actions toward your child and make certain yours are above reproach. Do not quickly bring in new partners. Allow your child to adjust to the changes. Children of divorce typically want their parents to reunite even years after the event.

Put aside all emotions toward your ex, act professionally with them because you love your child...not with a goal to "win" this battle with your ex. Many say they'd take a bullet for their child yet withhold financial support or create conflicts that ultimately hurt their child.

We are children for about 18 years—but adults for nearly 60. Your children will see and understand the events of their lives, the divorce, the lives and integrity of their parents with the understanding of a child. But, as they grow, they will re-filter those same memories with growing maturity. Give them the freedom to ask their questions and receive age appropriate answers at each stage of growth.

What will they see in your behavior?



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Job Searching AS A SINGLE PARENT

By Elana Washburn
ASA Certified Staffing Professional

Job searching is hard for everyone in these economic times, but the search for single parents is even more complicated. Here are some tips and things to consider when trying to find the best job for you and your family.

- **First, figure out what YOU want:**

To find a great position where you will be happy, productive and stay long term, you need to figure out what YOU want and what is best for your family. Consider things such as distance from home, how many hours you can work per week, and whether you want to work 9-5, shift work or part time. What is most important to you: salary, flexibility, work hours or insurance?

- **Make sure your childcare is dependable:**

Everyone has emergencies sometimes and most employers understand that, but you must make sure you have dependable childcare for the hours you are committed to work. Whether it is a daycare facility, school, family or friend who watches your child, make sure they are reliable. If your daycare situation isn't reliable, it will make you an unreliable worker. Consider back-up child care options for emergencies such as after-school programs, neighbors or someone you trust who can pick up or watch your child if needed.

- **Keep your skills sharp:**

Look into online classes, free seminars, job training programs, etc. Employers love to see candidates who are dedicated to improving their skills and learning new ones.

- **Be honest and upfront:**

It is not necessary (or even recommended) to divulge your status as a single parent during your job search. However, once an offer is made, and it is a position you think is a good match, it is okay to talk with your employer about your status and

find out if the company offers things such as flex time, telecommuting, job-sharing, on-site child care, and flexible lunch hours if you need to come in late or leave early. Large companies may have standard policies on all of these things, whereas smaller companies may not have written policies, but may be open to considering options. Not all companies allow any of these flexible solutions but the more you know about what they do and do not allow, the better you can decide if this position is going to work for you and your family. Let your boss know as far in advance as possible about scheduled days off, school closings, doctor's visits, etc. If you usually get a call at 3:00 every day from your child letting you know they got home from school, ask your employer if it is okay



and if they rather the child call the office or your cell phone. If your employer does not allow you to receive personal calls, have a back-up plan with a neighbor or someone else who your child can check in with. If you communicate with your employer about these things, he or she will know you are dedicated to your job and want to comply with the rules and procedures everyone at the company must follow. Don't expect an employer to make changes in the job or hours for you. Understand that some employers will not allow any

exceptions or flexibility to the position. If they allow you to be an exception to the rule, they also have to consider this for other employees. If your employer does make exceptions for your situation and needs, it should be seen as a privilege and appreciated.

- **Work with a recruiter or staffing agency:**

Find a local recruiter and meet with him or her. Recruiters have their fingers on the pulse of what is happening in the job market. If you have specific needs and requirements for your job search, recruiters are a great resource because they know the ins and outs of a company and its flexibility or inflexibility on things like flex time, telecommuting and job sharing. Recruiters will send you on interviews only with companies that are going to be a good match for you. Employment agencies also offer situations such as temporary employment, or temp-to-hire where you can try the job out before you decide if you want to accept a permanent position with that company.

- **Best jobs for single parents:**

Sales, public relations, marketing, health care, real estate and education are some of the best fields for single parents because they usually offer flexible schedules and work can be done from home or during nonpeak hours. With today's advanced technology, there are also a lot of work-from-home jobs that are legitimate and offer flexibility (but be careful when looking for a job like this – when it seems too good to be true, it may be a scam!)

- **General Job Search Tips:**

- ◆ Use many methods to apply for jobs. Apply online well as post your resume on job boards such as Monster and CareerBuilder. Update your profile often as this keeps you at the top of the list when employers search for candidates. Search online, in newspapers, and network with friends and family. If there is a company that you are very interested in working for and don't see any job openings listed, call them directly. Employers love to see candidates take initiative and who have an active interest in working for them.
- ◆ Resumes ideally should be one page; however, two pages are acceptable. Don't let it get longer than two pages. Recruiters and human resource

employees usually look at a resume for 30 seconds or less before judging a candidate so make sure your resume is clear, easy to read, and does not have any spelling or grammatical mistakes.

- ◆ When you get that interview, allow yourself extra time to get there so you are not late. However, don't show up more than 5-10 minutes early. Wait in your car if you arrive too early. Make sure you are well groomed, professionally dressed and bring along



a copy of your resume, references and any other pertinent information in a plain folder. Do not smoke before your interview. Don't wear strong perfume, chew gum or have any stains on your clothing! Turn off your cell phone or leave it in the car.

- ◆ Be prepared! Know about the job for which you are applying. Research the company and be confident in your skills. Having confidence, being genuine, maintaining eye contact and smiling will go a long way! Practice answers to basic interview openers such as: "Tell me about yourself. Tell me about your background, education, experience and accomplishments. What are your strengths? Weaknesses? What interests you about our company? Why should we hire you?"
- ◆ Ask questions! On the first and second interviews, it is not appropriate to ask about salary, vacation, benefits, flex time, etc. But feel free to ask these questions on the third interview or after a job offer is made. During the initial interviews, you should ask questions such as: "What would I be expected to accomplish in this position? What are the greatest challenges in this position? How would I be trained? How would my performance be measured?"
- ◆ Don't make derogatory remarks about your present or former employers or co-workers.

'Visitation Grandparents' can have fun times, too!

By Linda Blachly,
Managing Editor

When I was growing up, I always looked forward to visiting my grandparents in Alabama. My favorite memories are of my grandfather taking us on special "truck rides," which included riding all of the countryside, up and down mountains, to show us off to his friends other family members. Relatives – and we had lots of them – would drop by the house and act surprised about much we'd grown during the past year. Then, we'd sit outside under a shade tree in the swing talking and laughing until my grandmother called us in for a fried chicken dinner. I thought that was what it would be like when I became a grandparent.

What really happened was that when my three children were in high school, their father left us. By the time my middle son was 23, he was the single father of two daughters – and had tumultuous relationships with both their mothers. As a result, I haven't seen my 3-year-old granddaughter, who used to call me "Ema," since her mother took her out of the state two years ago. My other granddaughter is 7 and I get to see her every other Friday after school and on Sundays when my son has visitation.

So, I think of myself as a "Visitation Grandma." Even though I am thankful to have maintained a good relationship with her mother, I don't have the luxury of totally being included in my granddaughter's life. I can't, for example, call up her mother and say, "Hey, how about meeting me at the mall for pizza?" There is a "great divide" between the two families, and I often find myself riding the uncomfortable emotions of the latest rift between my son and the mother of my grandchild.

If I want to see my granddaughter outside of my regular visitation time, I have to make a special request of her mother. I am fortunate in that she does appreciate the importance of including our side of the family in her daughter's life, and tries to accommodate my requests, but sometimes the answer is "no", and I have to accept that.

Even though this isn't how I always pictured my life as a grandparent, I have learned a few things worth passing on to those facing this less-than-ideal lifestyle:

- Make it clear from the beginning that you are Grandma. Maintain neutrality when the parents fight. Your role is to be Grandma to that precious child who needs to be in your life.
- Don't waste valuable time by pouting over a situation that didn't work out quite as you expected. If you didn't get to see your grandchild on his or her actual birthday, then make sure to plan a special day for celebration for just the two of you on your next scheduled visit.
- Do "laugh out loud," fun things together that will make memorable moments for the both of you.
- When things are good, enjoy the moment! Take lots of pictures to remember that positive visit.

It will be soon enough that you are sitting in your backyard swing under the old shade tree looking back over these years. Don't waste a minute of them.



Welcome. We hope you will find practical suggestions as you endeavor to raise your children to live independent, productive and successful lives.

My goal as a parent when I was married did not change when I became single. I wanted to raise children who grew to be well-balanced, self-sufficient, educated, and God-reliant adults who loved me, wanted me but didn't need me.

I will share with you a glimpse into my life and the life of my clients. Names are changed for everyone's benefit. We do not get to choose all the cards we are dealt in life, but we do choose how we play our hand. Today, eight years after my ex left, we are healed, happy and successful. We are not wealthy or famous, but we are living life with hope, love, friends and family. That is living wisely.

Q: Dear Samantha: How do I connect with my teenage son and daughter as a single parent? When they were little, it seemed so easy: playtime, peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and bedtime stories. Their mother died two years ago and we've slowly rebuilt our life but I don't want to lose them too. They're 13 and 15 now.

-Hank, AR

A. Dear Hank: I'm so sorry for your loss. Your question is one that perplexes every parent. The short answer is this: talk, eat and do...together.

How did you connect when they were small? Nothing changes. Remember this is a lifestyle; one event won't create a connection. Make togetherness a regular part of your life. But give them freedom as well. Don't smother. Be transparent and truthful with them. Answer their questions and ask them questions. Today, my daughter is a senior in college and my son is a Marine in Okinawa. Let me tell you some of what we did.

We wrestled on the carpet, went bowling and to the movies. They played in a sports league for years and I watched every game and practice possible. I enrolled them in Cotillion classes (etiquette class – and often they changed from ties and dresses into soccer uniforms in the car). They had sleepovers with pizza for supper and pancakes for breakfast. I took my son out on a date to a nice restaurant: I taught him to open my door, pull out my chair, order for me, gave him my card and let him pay the bill. My daughter and I had a girls' day out shopping and makeup lessons. We all shot sporting clays at the gun range, went to car shows and knife shows. We enjoyed massages followed by lunch.

And we talked while doing these things... silly ideas and important issues. We always knew where they were, who they were with, and they always knew what was expected of them...but I found the more open my hand, the more secure they grew.

Q: Dear Samantha: I need help dating. I'm single—again. I was married for 19 years, then divorced. I thought I found Mr. Right the same month the divorce was final, but that relationship ended in disaster after six months. It's been three months and I haven't been out of the house except for work. My children are in college. I'm lonely. What do I do? - Megan, CA

A. Dear Megan: You do nothing for a while. You're going too fast. If you try to become part of another relationship with strings from your past still attached, whoever you meet won't see the real you. And, you want your next relationship to be with the genuine Megan.

But you do need to get out of the house. Feed yourself...your soul, your mind and your body. Join the Y. Learn new things. Meet new people. Read good books that broaden your interests: some self-help is okay, but include spiritually sound books, political, historical, mystery...all genres. Volunteer at organizations that you've researched and approve their endeavors. Go to your place of worship and meet people. Do what you enjoy and can afford. Take care of yourself physically: eat a well-balanced diet, drink alcohol in moderation and exercise regularly. Well-balanced, healed and personally happy people attract the same. Certainly we all have scars from our past, but you don't want to carry emotional crutches.

Do you have a question for Samantha? Email your questions directly to her at: Samantha@DivorceWisdom.com

REDISCOVERING THE 'HAPPY' IN THIS NEW YEAR

By Robin Latimer
"Hope Again" Leader

Throughout the world, New Year's Eve is known for grand celebrations. Ushering in 2010 was no different. At 11:59 and 50 seconds, the countdown begun. Midnight struck and everyone yelled "Happy New Year!"

You may have looked at that scene and thought, "What is there to be happy about?" Why should I celebrate when I have lost someone I love, and I find it difficult to simply move through my day? It just simply hurts too much." Let's journey into rediscovering the "Happy" in this New Year.

It was 1982, my first New Year's celebration with my future husband. It was such an enchanted evening. First, we went to Ford's Theater to see "The Christmas Carol." Then off to dinner at the Barley Mo at the Washington, D.C., wharf. It was such a magical time for us. Little did I know that 22 years later I would ring in 2005 without him. He had passed away four months earlier. I felt as if I was moving on and leaving him behind, but was I?

Grief is much like a maze. During times like these, it is quite easy to get lost in a sea of

sadness, depression, or just a loss of focus. Let's look at ways to regain our focus of living and not merely existing. It is time now to focus on finding the way out of that maze.

First, take a deep breath and close your eyes. Envision the person who has passed on. This person you loved dearly had a great role in your life and has left you great treasures that will last forever. Some of those may be material, but more important are the memories that person left you – the ethics, morals and principles he or she instilled within you and the legacy this dear one left behind. It is important to allow your mind to ponder these things. You could even make a list to help in your reflections.

To face the New Year, we have to look within. We need to evaluate ourselves and, in doing this, discover which season we are in.

As I sat at my computer, I picked up a journal I found sitting on my desk. I opened to the last entry. Amazingly, it was a letter I had written to my husband on December 31, 2005. I told him how I thought I survived that past year without him. I let him know what a gift he was and continues to be to me, and I will always love him. I then explained that I have had to make a very specific choice. The choice was to live and to be of service to God. I want Him to use me that I might be a blessing to my family and anyone He puts in my path.

Everyone has a choice to make. It may be different choices for each individual. The choices may vary depending on whom you have lost, what season you are in, your faith, your support and so on. We all must understand that not making a choice is still making a choice. It is saying you are content to remain where you are in life. Before you make your choice, take a moment to think about what your loved one

would choose for you. I sincerely think it would be to live.

Your journey through grief is unique to you. The choices that are right for you are also unique to you. There is no right or wrong way to grieve. However, there are choices that will promote your healing, and choices that may deter your growth and happiness.

Choose to live. Focus on living. You can change the way you perceive and experience this New Year. Look at the list you made earlier. All of those treasures will go with you forever, into every New Year. Those are things that can never be taken from you. This includes the love that you and your loved one shared. An additional way to maintain a positive focus is to try new things. For example: a new hobby, church choir, a new group, class, swimming and so on. Think about a desire you have always had – now is the time to put it into motion.

I heard it once said that life will give you what you accept. Accept to live on.



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Stepping into a Step- family

By Laura Petherbridge
International author and speaker

Stepfamilies are becoming the most common family in America today.¹ However, when one partner brings a child into the marriage, the divorce rate is 65 percent. When both partners have children, the rate rises to slightly more than 70 percent.² Therefore, it is vitally important for a single parent to understand what's involved in forming a stepfamily.

Preparing for the situations beforehand, rather than being ambushed by them afterwards, is one of the keys to successfully blending families.

Here are a few of the significant issues stepfamilies face.

1. All stepfamilies are formed out of loss.

A stepfamily is created due to the death of a parent or a divorce. There may be lingering grief and sorrow for the adults and/or children over the loss of the biological family. One erroneous assumption is that kids accept a stepparent much more easily after the death of a parent. While divorce does present numerous complications, children who lose a parent to death battle many of the same stepparent issues as kids of divorce.

2. The body and mind need time to heal

Because grief is painful, many people attempt to rush the process. They deceive themselves into thinking "I'm over it," and allow a new relationship to numb the wound. This prevents the body, mind and soul from taking the time required to heal. Imagine trying to run a marathon on a fractured leg. That's what occurs when a person enters a remarriage without healing from the first one.

3. Children have a different view.

While the couple may be blissfully happy, it's not uncommon for both adult and young children to view the remarriage as another loss. When that occurs, the stepparent is viewed as the intruder who is tainting the deceased parent's image, or destroying the dream of a family reconciliation. Some children don't reveal their disapproval until after the wedding. One stepmom shared, "I thought my stepdaughter was happy about our marriage. But she cried so loudly during the ceremony that it was embarrassing. She has been a nasty tyrant ever since. I don't understand

what happened." It's likely that during the ceremony the daughter was hit by the grief of losing her original family and now views the stepmom as taking her daddy away.

4. Kids are fiercely loyal.

A stepfather confided to me, "My stepdaughter's dad walked out of her life when she was 3. I raised her as if she were my own child. Recently, her father showed up saying he wants to make up for all the lost years. I couldn't believe it. She instantly allowed him back into her life, and started treating me like dirt. I'm furious." What this stepdad didn't realize is that even when a parent is unstable, neglectful or abusive, a child often remains loyal to them. This is because a child deeply craves the love, affection and admiration of a parent. Therefore, they will drop a stepparent – even one they deeply care about – in a heartbeat, if it means jeopardizing the relationship with the biological parent.

5. Stepfamilies take time to bond.

The Brady Bunch was a fantasy TV show where everyone got along (let's be real – they had a housekeeper). In real life the average stepfamily takes at least seven years to bond.³ And, each family member may move at a different pace towards accepting the new situation. Any attempt by the adults to rush the bonding typically backfires.

The most common statement I hear from stepfamilies is, "I had no idea this would be so complicated." Therefore, my goal in sharing these complexities isn't to be discouraging or negative but rather to provide information so people will be informed, equipped and prepared.

If you are considering a marriage that would form a stepfamily, please check out the quiz on my website www.TheSmartStepmom.com. It might help to determine the success of the relationship.

¹ Ganong and Coleman, Stepfamily Relationships: Developments, Dynamics, and Interventions (NU: Kluwer Academic/ Plenum Publishers, 2004.

² When I Do Becomes I Don't, Petherbridge, Bethany House Publishers, 2008, p187

³ The Smart Stepfamily, Ron Deal, Bethany House, 2002, p.64

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CHANGING FOCUS:

GETTING A CLEARER PICTURE OF YOUR PAST AND PREPARING FOR THE FUTURE

By Linda Blachly
Managing Editor

When a person loses a spouse, either through divorce or death, the one left behind must refocus his or her life to move on.

Changing Focus, a nonprofit, nondenominational organization in central Maryland, helps people get a clearer picture of what went wrong in their relationship and gives them support as they usher in a new phase of their lives.

Changing FOCUS™

Getting A Clearer Picture



The group also offers help for those who wish to develop better relationship and communication skills and helps prepare people for remarriage. Programs are offered continuously throughout the year with different topics presented each week by trained professionals. The group has locations that meet in Crofton, Columbia and the Baltimore area on various nights of the week.

Changing Focus offers four programs:

Single Again, an educational support group for adults experiencing the loss of a spouse or significant other through separation or divorce;

Healing Journey, focusing on bereavement for adults undergoing the loss of a spouse or significant other through death;

MOHR (Moving On to Healthy Relating), an intensive two+ year program geared at improving relationship and communication skills through a journey of self-discovery, personal empowerment and enrichment; and

ELR – Exploring a Loving Relationship, a 12-week educational counseling program for couples who are

considering a committed relationship, marriage or remarriage.

According to Rita Fullem, president of Changing Focus, people who come to the organization following a loss are usually between the ages of 30 and 75 with the majority younger than 65, and are evenly divided between males and females.

“Mainly, people are looking to find others experiencing the same thing and actually living through it,” says Rita. “They say: this is really happening to me. We’re all grieving in a different way for different reasons. Changing Focus brings people together in a nonthreatening environment.”

Fullem says it’s too much to address in one large group, so each group has its own clinically trained counselor who educates the group on various weekly topics. Each class also breaks for small-group discussion afterward, led by alumni who facilitate conversations.

Single Again

Mary Woznysmith, LCSW-C, leads the Single Again group. “I see my clients as people on a journey,” said Mary, one of Changing Focus’s four professionally trained counselors. She teaches the 12-week Single Again program, which includes topics such as “When to Let Go and When to Fight” and “Boundaries for Peaceful Living.”

Chris, 47, was married for 20 years and has been separated for one year. Now a single dad of a daughter, 20, and a son, 17, Chris says he has learned much from the group to help him as a single parent. “I’ve learned better skills in communication and have become more compassionate,” said Chris. “My first time here, it was intimidating. I walked in the door and



felt I didn’t belong here. But as I began to hear other people’s stories, they seemed relevant to my situation. I’ve learned from others in the group and it has helped me to figure things out. Every time I come, I learn a little bit. It helps me to understand where I’m at.”

Mary says that, as a testimony to the effectiveness of Changing Focus, many clients go through the program and remain connected. “Our alumni are very supportive,” she said, and they stay to become small group facilitators.

Jeanne, 51, has been coming to Single Again for eight years and is now a small group facilitator. She was married for 13 years and is the single parent of two daughters, ages 16 and 18.

“I am so grateful to this organization, I wanted to give back,” said Jeanne. “I was a mess eight years ago, but I’m a much more confident person now than I was when I first got here because of the skills I’ve learned. Parenting has been the hardest part of all, but through Changing Focus, I’ve learned that you can have a pretty decent life and be happy. I thought I’d never be happy again.”

Exploring a Loving Relationship

Carrie Hansen, MA, MSW, LCSW-C, teaches “Exploring Loving Relationship,” a class she developed as her thesis in graduate school.

According to Carrie, couples must address the following issues for a successful remarriage:

1. Couples must come to peace with their past, whether it is with the family of origin or with any issues surrounding any prior marriage.
2. Couples need a specific type of marriage

preparation, which focuses on addressing such issues as blending families and disciplining children.

3. Remarried couples need an ongoing support group of other couples who are trying to make their marriages work as well.

Of the couples who take the class, 15-20 percent decide not to marry. “They say, I love you but can’t live with you,” said Carrie. “But we consider that a success.”

“The first thing we do in the class is make a family tree and go back and describe different characteristics (alcohol, illness, mental illness) of each family member,” Carrie explained. “Then, once couples learn how to dialogue, they talk about these things.” Couples also talk about children issues, such as their beliefs about discipline. “More problems occur around discipline styles. We also talk about adult children and the potential problems there.”

“Couples are taught communication skills first,” says Carrie, “and then we address hot topics and hot button issues, like spiritual beliefs, finances and trust.”

According to Carrie, the number one cause of the breakup of a remarriage is children’s issues. The second is money. “Couples come in thinking like it’s the Brady Bunch,” Carrie said. “Kids need to be prepared for that remarriage. Each person has to make a relationship with their partner’s children. It doesn’t just come together. It’s work; it requires a lot of effort. Parents need to spend individual time with their own biological children. It’s not all group time. Kids get lost. Their uniqueness is not being addressed. They become part of the stew.”

Single parents contemplating remarriage also need to consider their biological children’s feelings if they decide to have another child, says Carrie. “Mom is remarried and pregnant and her biological child doesn’t know where he belongs and doesn’t feel a part of either family,” explains Carrie.

Carrie’s motivation to educate single parents comes out of a counseling session she once had with a single mother and her son. Carrie explained that the mother spent a lot of the session complaining about her ex-husband, within earshot of her son. “He hung his head and said, ‘I’m half of dad: am I that bad, too?’ I’ll never forget that scene.”

For more information on Changing Focus, visit www.changingfocus.org.

Are Changes on the Horizon for Maryland's Child Support Guidelines?

By Shellie Monroe

President/CEO of Parents Empowering Families & Communities

The Maryland Department of Human Resources (DHR) plans to lobby state lawmakers to modify the current child support guidelines when the General Assembly reconvenes on January 13. Almost 500,000 children in Maryland live in single-parent families and are eligible to receive financial support, according to state statistics.

Maryland has not updated its guidelines since 1989. They are based on 20-year-old economic data, when the median household income was \$27,225 (now over \$67,000) and a gallon of milk cost \$2.30 (now \$3.50). The proposed modification would update most of the child support rates to more closely reflect the current cost of raising a child.

Maryland ranks first in the nation regarding per-capita income, but ranks 41st in child support rates, according to state officials.

The proposal would increase the amount most noncustodial parents pay. Critics argue that an increase is not a viable option during this time of economic uncertainty and noncompliance would simply go up. State officials acknowledge the current economy, but believe that the modifications are best for the children.

Payments would decrease for custodial and noncustodial parents with a combined family income less than \$1,400 a month, a move that opponents consider counterintuitive. DHR believes that a reduction would encourage “dead-broke” parents to pay child support and ensure their ability to maintain a minimum standard of living at current price levels.

Child support represents approximately 20 percent of a poor person's income, but 16 percent of a wealthy person's income, according to Stacy Rodgers, deputy secretary for DHR.

The new guidelines would only affect future child support orders. Existing orders would remain the same, unless either parent requests and receives approval for a modification from the court.

Lawyers are also weighing in on this issue. Some fear the state would be the greatest beneficiary of the proposed changes. There are custodial parents who signed over their

child support rights to the state in exchange for welfare benefits. An increase in the guideline amounts would merely fatten the state's coffers rather than benefit needy children.

Federal law requires Child Support Enforcement Agencies (CSEA) to notify custodial and noncustodial parents at least once every three years of their right to request a review of their child support order and how to make the request. Many parents indicate that they have never received this notification.

CSEA are also required to review the guidelines every four years, in accordance with federal and state law. This ensures that appropriate child support amounts are awarded to families. DHR conducted reviews in 1993, 1997, 2001, 2005 and 2009.

This is not the department's first attempt to revise the guidelines. Attempts were made in 2001, 2002 and 2009. Ms. Rodgers attributes last year's failure (HB 1401) to the complexity of the bill. Several changes were attempted simultaneously. This time, the focus is on the basic guideline formulas.

Although many parents are concerned about the formulas, others are more concerned about enforcement. They surmise it is irrelevant whether the state uses current or antiquated formulas if the orders are not enforced.

DHR unveiled its proposal and solicited public comments during six regional forums held in October and November 2009. Community forums were held in Cumberland, Rockville, La Plata, Hanover, Salisbury and Easton, Md.

If enacted, this proposal would affect countless families. Single parents are strongly encouraged to do the following:

1. Visit the DHR website (www.dhr.state.md.us) to learn more about the proposal, submit your comments, and sign-up to receive e-mail updates.
2. Contact your elected legislative officials (<http://mdelect.net>) and voice your opinions.
3. Monitor this proposal during the 2010 General Assembly (<http://mlis.state.md.us>).

