

RELATIONSHIPS

The mother of all challenges

Parenting is no cakewalk, but it's doubly tough when you're a single mother, writes SAVIA RAJAGOPAL

Being a single mother is no easy task. Handling the finances, a household, a job, and kids to boot is as challenging as it could get. But, there are an increasing number of women who are raising children all by themselves, and tackling various issues head on.

Biggest challenges...

"Maintaining a great relationship with your ex-husband is very important for the emotional stability of the kids," states Pooja Bedi, mother of seven-year-old Aalia and five-year-old Omar. The duality of roles can prove to be quite demanding for some mothers. Tanya Paul, 27, who has a three-year-old son Tannujh, says, "Playing two roles, require me to be a father who earns and deals with discipline, and then I have to be a mother, too." Other challenges may involve making major decisions that could have life-long repercussions. Says Nirmala M, an ex-kindergarten teacher, who has a 16-year-old son, Arjun, "For me, the greatest challenge was sending him to a boarding school at 11. It can be overwhelming since decision-making is done alone." Dr Shamsah Sonawalla, Assistant Professor of Psychiatry, Harvard Medical School and Consultant Psychiatrist, Jaslok Hospital, explains, "A child is used to seeing the conventional triad — 'mom, dad and me' — so that's something the mother has to deal with. The circumstances related to single motherhood—whether it's an unwed mother or a financially independent woman, as well as the support she receives, can affect the situation."

A lot to do...

Many single mothers successfully shoulder the responsibility of being the sole parent who provides for the child. Says Tanya, "I provide the best I can for my child as he's all I have." Nirmala elaborates further, saying, "You do go the extra mile to ensure that the child lacks nothing as our society teaches them that a family with one parent is not a normal situation." She also highlights the emotional responsibility a mother faces during the teen years. "I explained about the 'birds and the bees', to my child at the age of 1. Though I was not too comfortable, I knew I was the only one who would have to do it."

Doing too much?

It is very easy to slip into the habit of overcompensating — emotionally and materialistically. Nirmala says, "I overcompensate in terms of material things but one has to know when to draw a line." Dr Sonawalla clarifies that overcompensation happens even in two-parent families, and should not be identified only with single mothers.

All mine...

When she is the primary care giver, the single mother could feel overpossessive, and overprotective. Nirmala disagrees with popular notions saying, "Yes I am overprotective at times, but not over-possessive. As kids grow, letting go is difficult but I know it is important for his well being." Dr Sonawalla points out the signs of overcompensation. "If the mother is feeling drained emotionally, or if the child is clinging onto her, or if there are changes in the mother or child's behaviour, it should be looked into." Dr Anjali Chhabria, psychiatrist, says, "The child

could become over dependent on the mother and not form relationships with anyone else. Also, the child may compare every other relationship in his or her life, to the one shared with the mother."

A life of her own...

Having a partner in her life can be a delicate situation that many single mothers are apprehensive about. Dr Sonawalla explains, "In a natural setting, the child may feel threatened by the new entrant, especially since he's been the sole centre of attention. Hence, it's important for the mother to keep the child involved in any major decisions." Says Nirmala, "Although, my son says, all that matters is I have someone to share my life with, it is important to me that my partner and my son get along. I would not want to be torn between them."

The final word...

All psychiatrists emphasise the importance of having other central figures in the child's life, like grandparents, friends, etc., who share the responsibilities of the child. Also, it's imperative to have a healthy, open relationship with the child, but still remember that the mother has an identity of her own.

