

Supporting single parents

Mention the words 'single parents' and most people immediately think of teenage mothers.

This is quite simply not the case. There are around 1.9 million single parent families in the UK. The average age of these parents is thirty five. 87% have been married or in long term relationships, with one in ten of the families headed by a father.

There are few who choose to become a single parent. It happens for a variety of reasons - widowhood, separation and divorce, choosing to adopt alone, or never marrying.

I didn't believe in divorce

A brief phone call changed my life forever! It was a Friday night and as my husband was getting up to go to work, the phone rang. I remember him answering it briefly then calmly announcing that he was having an affair and would return in the morning, after work, for his things. We had only been married two years and I was five months pregnant.

Still blurred

Although it is still a blur, friends came and helped me through that long night and the following days. Four months later, my husband was present when our son was born and I hoped things would be ok. But ten days later he told me his girlfriend was pregnant! Still reeling from shock and disbelief of all that had happened, I was totally unprepared for the waves of emotions that would follow - anger, jealousy, grief, loneliness, rejection and despair. It was hard living in the same town knowing I could bump into either of them - miraculously that never happened.

Having a tiny newborn to care for helped me focus on a daily routine. Even though I just wanted to hide away, I had to keep going for my son's sake. It's amazing how quickly you can adapt to a new situation, even one you didn't choose.

Not my choice

Friends were very supportive and helped me find my way round the benefit system and deal with mortgage arrears. They also helped with practical things such as babysitting and house repairs and occasionally included us at their family gatherings. One of the most painful things to face was when two family members suggested the marriage breakdown was entirely my fault. I must have been a bad wife!

The shock of finding themselves with sole responsibility for their children is only one of the numerous emotional and practical issues they have to face. Many feel stigmatised and are unaccepted by society.

We hope the following stories will help increase understanding and support for those who manage so well, often in very difficult circumstances.

I didn't believe in divorce but found I had no choice in the matter when, years later, my husband divorced me. We had been separated for several years and when the divorce papers arrived I can honestly say I didn't feel anything. I had built a new life with my son. It took time to work through the pain and move on but I do believe I have become a stronger, more confident person as a result. I discovered it wasn't easy, but it was possible to parent alone.

Liz

How to help those going through divorce

- Be prepared to accept them where they are, whether angry, confused, upset or relieved
- Look beyond the initial 'I'm fine'
- Be inclusive in conversation - talking about your own partner may exclude them
- Listen and follow their leading - they may or may not want to talk about their situation
- Don't pry
- Don't judge them - you haven't 'walked a mile in their shoes'
- Offer practical assistance and help with the children
- Be patient with them - hurts take time to heal
- Remember they will need help long after the first few months so be prepared to stay in for the long haul

Died at sea

How did I become a single parent? It was something I never thought would ever happen to me, but it was suddenly forced upon me late one night during December of 1997.

We had been married for ten years and had two children, a two-year-old son and a five-year-old daughter. Yes, there were ups and downs which come with normal family life and also a lot of comings and goings. My husband worked in the Merchant Navy and he would be away from home for four months at a time, followed by two months leave. Life was full of adjustments but despite all that, we were a family.

A long December

December arrived, a busy month ahead for everyone. My husband's leave was coming to an end, he would very soon be returning to his ship in the Falkland Islands for his next four month tour of duty. The flurry of all the Christmas preparations was under way, as well as all the children's Christmas activities to attend to.

Late one night during that Christmas month, I had only just gone to sleep when I was awoken by the doorbell. On opening the door, I was amazed to be greeted by two police officers. I immediately thought something had happened to my parents. However, they informed me that there had been an accident on board his ship and that my husband had died. (He had only left home three days previously). The police were unable to give me any more information as they had no further details. I would have to wait for my questions to be answered.

I couldn't take it in, it just seemed so unreal. Within seconds my life as I knew it was turned upside down. My husband was dead. He would never be coming home again. A 'blankness' set in, and I found myself making polite conversation with the two policemen wondering how they were after delivering such shattering news. I also remember thinking about our two children upstairs fast asleep, totally unaware of what had happened. How on earth was I going to tell them what had happened to their father. Our son would never remember his father and our daughter, a real daddy's girl, how would she cope?

Reason to believe

The memory of the last weekend my husband spent at home was of him teaching our daughter how to ride her bike. Family life - why had this come to an end?

It took a week for my husband's body to be flown back home. It was the most difficult week of my life. The waiting was unbearable. I wasn't sleeping much and couldn't settle to anything during the day. I could only visualize him lying on a cold marble slab, having no-one he loved near him. I knew I would have to see him to say goodbye, otherwise I would think he was still away at sea. During that time, my son was very ill. In some ways that helped as I had something to focus my mind on, but it was totally draining,

physically as well as emotionally.

The funeral was held between Christmas and the New Year. I can't really remember much about it - only that I got through it. Those weeks are very hazy.

Being a Christian was very hard at that time as my faith was challenged - put to the test so to speak.

I was angry with God, and kept asking Him 'WHY?' Not necessarily for my sake but for the children's. Why had God let this happen and deprived them of their father? Surely He's a God of love. I just didn't understand it. Yet, despite all that had happened, deep down I knew He was right beside me, even carrying me through that difficult time. Many remarkable things happened confirming His presence and loving concern for us as a family.

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Being Mum and Dad

Time passes and the pain has eased. You never get over losing a husband, but you learn to live with it. My life has changed drastically and my faith in God has grown deeper. Friendships have changed, losing old friends who knew us only as a couple, but also making new friends. Loneliness is very much part of life, having no-one to share things with, walking into that room full of people on your own, making decisions and of course trying to be Mum *and* Dad to your children. This is all part of the single parent life. The future seems daunting at times, yet exciting. I know that with God's help and guidance we as a family will cope with whatever happens.

Jane

Support for those bereaved

A Different Journey is Care for the Family's support network for those who have been widowed early in life, and their families. It offers day and weekend events, and a regular newsletter.

Cruse Bereavement Care

PO Box 800
Richmond
Surrey
TW9 1RG
Tel: (020) 8939 9530
Helpline: 0870 167 1677
Web: www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk

The Way Foundation

For those widowed up to the age of 50
Suite 35, St Loyes House
20 St Loyes Street
Bedford MK40 1ZL
Tel: 0870 011 3450
Web: www.wayfoundation.org.uk

Single parent by adoption

I loved my first job in residential Childcare, but after a few years realised I was sadly lacking in life experience. I was trying to prepare young people for a working world about which I myself knew very little.

Several jobs and thirteen years later, I was struck by the plight of the young people who were struggling to live independently after leaving care. They had minimal home-making skills and were often very lonely.

Around this time I bought my first house and started making enquiries about offering lodgings to care leavers. Not long after, Shelley, a young woman about to leave care, came to stay, which enabled her to study at a local college. Through Shelley's social worker I learnt there were still many children growing up in children's homes. Many of them were available for adoption, and I discovered single people were now acceptable as adopters!

Tanya

Soon our home was enlivened by the addition of Tanya who was just about to start secondary school. (I recall that we only had two weeks to find all the new school uniform). Being re-introduced to the world of school after so many years was quite a culture shock and I was not looking forward to parents' evenings. However, Tanya's first one was very funny. Many of the teachers had been dreading meeting me, expecting 'Tanya's mum' to be larger, angrier and louder than Tanya herself! There I was, quiet and reasonable.

I soon realised that full-time work would not be compatible with looking after the children, so I left the Civil Service and became a child-minder, which fitted in with school hours and provided extra income.

Two years later eleven year-old Martin joined us. Three years after this Gareth, who was just ten years old, joined the family. It turned out that the two boys had serious problems at school and so we resorted to home schooling, which was a lot of fun for all of us.

An awesome responsibility

So I became a single parent by adoption. I found it an awesome responsibility. I was often at the end of my own resources and physically exhausted keeping up with everything. Helping these young people deal with their hurts and anger was often emotionally draining at times. But I soon became adept at DIY, fixing the house after an angry outburst had wreaked havoc. Although our finances were stretched, God was faithful and we always had money for the mortgage.

Although I often longed for another person to share the responsibility, I did have good friends who helped in their own distinct ways. Some were able to help with transport while others gave up their time to help with home schooling. One or two really brave ones even shared holidays with us! Once, a noble neighbour spent his Saturday morning replacing the glass in our front door because one of the lads had put his fist through it just as we were leaving for a wedding.

Negative reactions

I'm sad to say there was a negative reaction from some people, who sincerely thought that by adopting as 'single person' I was somehow depriving these children of a normal family life. In fact, all of the children were in the 'hard to place' category, and may otherwise have grown up in children's homes or foster care. Tanya and Gareth will tell you positively that, "One parent is better than none!"

"One parent is better than none!"

I could probably write a book about the happy times, as well as the heartache and trauma. It was very precious to see those hurting young people make good friendships and begin to trust again. To see them look forward and believe that good things could happen to them, to learn and acquire new skills, and to think better of themselves, was like watching a miracle. I thank God that he let me be a part of it.

I feel really blessed to have had the privilege of being a parent, and through the many ups and downs, we all learnt from each other. Martin left us when he was eighteen. He decided that for him adoption was finished. Sadly, he has not been in touch since. But I still have wonderful relationships with Tanya and Gareth and now enjoy being an adoptive grandmother!

Edith

Support groups

Adoption UK

Linden House, 55 The Green, South Bar Street,
Banbury OX16 9AB

Tel: (01295) 752240

Helpline: 0844 848 7900 (Mon to Fri 10am to 4pm)

Web: www.adoptionuk.org.uk

Supports adoptive families before, during and after adoption. Training and a variety of publications are available.

BAAF

Saffron House, 6-10 Kirby Street, London EC1N 8TS

Tel: (020) 7421 2600

Fax: (020) 7421 2601

Email: mail@baaf.org.uk

Web: www.baaf.org.uk

Describing itself as 'The leading UK-wide membership organisation for those concerned with adoption, fostering and child care', BAAF also produces a monthly newsletter 'Be My Parent', a journal 'Adoption and Fostering' and a wide variety of publications.

www.adoption.org.uk

This popular adoption website offers relevant and up to date information on adoption issues, and has launched a new website for people throughout the UK who are looking for online information about children that adoption agencies wish to place in their area.

Forced into it, but loving it

“Do you see much of his father then?”

This has always been the question that I’ve dreaded coming up in conversation. It also happens to be the hardest to answer. I hate admitting how my adorable son Thomas was conceived - through an act of violence when someone put something in my drink.

Keeping the baby

I hate it because I nearly always get one of two reactions. Either people discover something fascinating on their shoe and stare at it, and then they find themselves unable to talk to me and throw disgusted looks at Thomas, as if he is stained in some way. Or they come over all sympathetic and gush out things like ‘sorry’ and ‘what a monster!’ - reminding me of how awful that kind of thing is. Personally I find this the most difficult reaction to deal with.

My faith helped me to overcome the actual event. But what I found most distressing was finding myself *forced* into



the position of being pregnant, and having a life-changing decision ahead of me.

My sub-conscious mind dragged me back, forcing me to confront my very passionate 17 year-old self in a debate I’d had with friends about abortion. I had been so certain that abortion was wrong under any circumstances. I listened to that 17 year-old in my mind, and I couldn’t find anything to say back - so the decision was made. I would keep the baby.

The slow journey

I can’t say that I enjoyed my pregnancy or that I looked forward to being a mother. The truth is I was terrified - what if the baby was born and I saw the face of someone I thought was a friend? (I’m told these attacks are normally committed by people you already know.) It took me nearly a whole year to bond with Thomas, and ironically, it was Thomas that made the miracle happen! It was the first day in our own home and we were saying goodbye to my parents. I was crying - terrified of being on my own with him. Then he kissed me, and at that moment I knew it would be OK.

It has been a slow journey so far. I am a full-time mum to my little boy (who looks like his grandfather), a part-time college student doing a Diploma in Pre-School Practice, and I’ve even begun to plan for the future. I am hoping to start a degree at the Open University next year when Thomas is at nursery. I thank God for Thomas every day, and as he grows up, I will never forget to tell him how much I love him.

It doesn’t matter how he was conceived, the only thing that is important is that I chose to keep him, and I have never regretted it!

Hannah

Support

If you find yourself in a similar situation you may find it helpful to talk to someone at CAREconfidential
Tel: 0800 028 2228
Visit: www.careconfidential.com

Extra help

Bookshelf

All Alone? Help and Hope for Single Parents
Jill Worth and Christine Tufnell,
Paternoster Press, £5.99
ISBN 1850784396

Inside Grief: A Personal Account of Coping With Grief
Kathy O’Brien,
Authentic Media,
ISBN 1869244637