

HOW TO BE A CHOICE PARENT

derived from Chapter 14 in Mikki Morrisette's

CHOOSING SINGLE MOTHERHOOD: THE THINKING WOMAN'S GUIDE

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A mother loves her child like no one else, yet in the end, after the child is grown and we breathe a heavy sigh as the door closes and they eagerly depart for college and family and friends of their own making, what will our years of questions and hard work have added up to? How will our child turn out? Will we have raised a well-balanced person?

Here are the top tips for conscious single parenting, culled from conversations with Choice Moms and child development experts Kyle Pruett, Michael Gurian, Mary Sheedy Kurcinka and Richard Weissbourd.

For more information:

On how boys and girls are wired differently, and on the importance of community, check out books by Michael Gurian.

On understanding the innate temperamental styles of children (which you can't yell out of them), check out books by Mary Sheedy Kurcinka.

On establishing rituals, check out books by William Doherty.

CONTINUITY — Children do not need perfect lives in order to grow up whole. They learn from mistakes (yes, even Mom's) and can develop strength from bad times. What they *do* need are a few essential Cs designed to make them feel secure, connected, accepted and hopeful: Consistency, Community, Challenging and engaging interactions, and a Continuous relationship with a Caring adult who sees the child as special.

HELP — Research indicates that children grow up best when they have a balance of influences. A team of secondary caregivers—at least one of them male—should be in place at the earliest age to help Mom:

- encourage both connection to others *and* independence;
- instill a sense of personal safety *as well as* assertiveness;
- offer predictability *and* flexibility;
- be duty-bound *as well as* empathetic;
- provide an environment that is demanding *and* responsive.

OUTLETS— Debates about the impact of single parenting often overlook the vital ingredient to quality parenting in any family structure: the emotional stability of the primary caregiver. A depressed caregiver who feels helpless and hopeless can do as much damage to a child emotionally as secondhand smoke can do to them physically. All mothers, single and married, need outlets and routine breaks to help them deal with inevitable stress and isolation. Establish rituals that include predictable time alone, time together, and time with other family and friends.

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On practicing authoritative parenting, check out books by Laurence Steinberg. As he wrote with co-author Ann Levine in *You and Your Adolescent: A Parent's Guide for Ages 10-20*, the authoritative parent:

- solicits the child's opinion,
- allows the child to voice disagreements,
- can be persuaded to reconsider a decision,
- values curiosity and self-direction
- wants their child to understand the reasons for their demands and restrictions, so explains why behavior is inappropriate,
- does not hesitate to assert their authority if reasoning fails,
- does not demand unquestioning obedience,
- sets limits based on love.

INNATE FACTORS — Accept the fact that you don't choose your child's temperament, and that there are neurological differences between boys and girls. Rather than attempt to mold children to a parents' vision of who they should be, the attentive parent attempts to understand a child's strengths and weaknesses, and teaches that child how to recognize and handle their own feelings. As the child develops this "emotional intelligence" it will be easier to tackle challenges, negotiate differences, maintain self-esteem, cope with ups and downs—and cooperate with Mom and others.

COMMUNITY — Children not only need a primary caregiver, but also other members of community as they grow and mature. For example, they need access to wise elders and group situations to absorb basic norms and social expectations, opportunities to explore their environment independent of Mom, and meaningful activities that build self-confidence.

ESTEEM — Some believe a child without two loving parents in the home miss out on the lessons of seeing adults work out conflicts in a healthy way and relate to each other with love, trust, and respect. However, many of the older children of Choice Moms I have interviewed don't agree with this concern, indicating that the strong relationship they have with Mom was example enough. What I do see with those kids who have loving connections with their Choice Moms is a great deal of mutual respect. A respectful parent can more easily establish authority over time, practice constructive discipline, set limits, and maintain rules and control.

ENJOY THE JOURNEY!