How clutter is stealing your joy
[and what you can do about it]
Being a single dad is not just about having fun but also about listening to your kids and giving them their space

By Avidan Milevsky

Singled out?

DURING A RECENT PARENTING lecture I gave to a group of young parents, I noticed a member of the audience was visibly distressed—distressed by scientific findings on the difficulties faced by single parents raising their children. Parenting is a hard and challenging task in all circumstances; trying to do it alone makes the task that much more difficult.

After the presentation, I was approached by this disheartened individual, Kevin, who told me that he was recently divorced and was trying to do the best job he could at being a single father. He wanted to know if I had some advice for him about how to parent more effectively.

First the bad news: Single parenthood is a challenge—particularly for fathers

Unfortunately, the father’s role in raising his children has been neglected until recently. Based on theories which emphasised the irreplaceable role of mothers for life-long development of their child, the majority of clinical research and social service work has focussed on the relationships between mothers and their kids.

In fact, in one of the most important child development theories, called the attachment theory, the role of the father was described as being a source of support to the mother, as she worked on developing an attachment to the child. Basically, our job as fathers had always been viewed as: making sure that the mothers have everything they need to take care of the children—that’s it. This view unfortunately has not completely disappeared from today’s world. It makes me cringe that when the mother is away and the father is taking care of
their children, it is referred to as ‘babysitting’—it’s not babysitting, it’s fathering. You wouldn’t call a mother taking care of her children as babysitting, would you?

Let’s get back to Kevin, the disheartened father in my audience. My advice to him involved the following:

**Be a Father**

Yes, it is important for single fathers to continue being what they are: fathers. Be the active, playful, and lively person you are with your children. One single father I worked with used to make a deal with his children that once a week after homework, dinner, and clean-up was done, they would move aside the furniture in the living room and have family soccer night. This was the highlight of the week for the children. These games were eventually moved to the play room once a picture frame came crashing down after an impressive kick by his six-year-old daughter. Another single father in my neighbourhood bought a tent and used it for indoor camping with his children. His kids would put on pyjamas and they would all go into the tent, eat marshmallows, tell stories until late, and then sleep in the tent.

**Be a Parent**

However, being that you are also the parent, it is important that you not forget the parenting basics. Sometimes it is easy to just go with the fun father things and forget to do the basic things our children need from us as a parent.

Over 40 years of research on parenting points to three ingredients of healthy parenting:

1. Having demands
2. Being responsive
3. Providing autonomy

**Having Demands**

The world is a chaotic place and the only way children can learn to manage this chaos is when they are provided some semblance of order in their home. Placing demands regarding behaviour, manners, and scheduling helps create order in the lives of children. Having rules at home is not being an ‘evil’ parent; it is helping provide some order in the lives of children.

**Being Responsive**

Demands need to be met with being unreservedly responsive to your children. Your children need to know that they can come to you with whatever issue they have and that you will be there for them unconditionally. When your child comes to you with a question or request, put the phone down, stop texting, move away from your laptop. Your children need you and you should show them that you are there for them—always.

**Providing Autonomy**

The final piece of the puzzle is autonomy. This involves allowing your children to make their own decisions, think independently, and act according to their thinking. The opposite of this would be being psychologically controlling of your children. For example, psychologically-controlling parents insist that their children never do things that would make them worry. Imagine how difficult it would be for children to actually have the freedom they need to enjoy the playground if what drives every one of their moves while playing is that ‘my parents should not be worried’. No more tree climbing, running too fast, or football games—to name a few.

Children need to feel that they can be children and make good decisions about their life independently without constantly thinking about their worrisome parents. Controlling parents also express to their children that they know what their children think and feel. This type of parental control is a mental intrusion that serves to only manipulate children psychologically. It prevents children from voicing their own thoughts and feelings, inhibiting their ability of self-expression, autonomy, and empowerment.

Studies have clearly found that minimising psychological control together with having demands and being responsive provides the healthiest home environment for children. Children raised in homes where these three criteria are met, emerge from childhood better off, academically and psychologically, in comparison to children raised in other types of homes.

Our friend Kevin started following this trio of parenting basics and is seemingly doing a lot better now. Kevin wrote in a later email, “Balancing fatherhood and parenthood is not always easy but these basics are making a big difference in my kids’ lives. I am having lots more fun with my kids—and even the picture frames are intact!”

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