

## **Success and the Single Parent**

**Millie Ferrer**

### **Abstract**

Over the past 30 years, the number of single-parent households increased dramatically. Being a single parent in today's society can be overwhelming and stressful. *Success and the Single Parent*, a five-part curriculum, was created in response to a call by single parents and educators for a curriculum specifically designed to assist with the inevitable challenges of single parenthood. Lesson topics include money and time management, positive parenting, and taking care of self. The curriculum includes marketing tools, lesson plans, activity sheets, post-it sheets, case studies, role play situations, and fact sheets. The curriculum also has an evaluation survey consisting of five domains (corresponding to the five lessons), with four to five questions in each domain. Results of the evaluation surveys for 2000-2001 indicate that the majority of single parents completing the series reported doing "much better" to "better" in each of the five domains (combined percentages ranging from 61-90). From further review, inferences can be made for planning future programs for single parents.

### **Relevance**

Over the past 30 years, the number of single-parent households has increased dramatically. Single-mother families increased from three million in 1970 to ten million in 2000, while the number of single-father families grew from 393,000 to two million (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2000). Single parents are not a homogeneous group; they come from all social classes, all racial and ethnic groups, and all age groups. However, single female-headed households tend to experience more financial burdens than single male-headed households. According to the 2000 Census, one-parent families maintained by women were more likely than those maintained by men to have family incomes below the poverty level (34 percent compared to 16 percent). In addition, of the twelve million one-parent families, the ten million maintained by women were more likely to include more than one child than the two million families maintained by men (46 percent compared to 36 percent).

Single-parent families encounter a number of stressful challenges. Role overload and income inadequacy place single parents at extremely high risk for anxiety, depression, and other health problems. Lack of essential resources and support can also lead to negative parenting behaviors (uncommunicative, unsupportive, and punitive) which result in adverse outcomes for children (Hamner and Turner 2001; Brooks 2001).

### **Purpose**

Being a single parent in today's society can be an overwhelming and stressful challenge. Every day the single parent is faced with raising children, financially maintaining a household, balancing work and home responsibilities, and trying to find supportive social networks. Single parents, as well as professionals working with them, need useful information to assist them with the complexities encountered in single-parent living.

The development of *Success and the Single Parent*, a curriculum especially designed for single parents, began in 1998 with a needs assessment distributed during an annual in-service training to county faculty programming in the area of family development. Agents were greatly concerned about the steady increase in the number of single parents requesting educational information and asked for assistance from the state specialist in meeting this need. Although single parents were attending the regular parenting classes, several single parents said they would prefer classes specifically designed for them. They felt uncomfortable sharing when married individuals or couples were taking the class and believed they would feel more at ease sharing their problems with other single parents.

### **Curriculum development process**

Input from single parents was essential in determining the topics to be included in the curriculum, the number of lessons, and the format of the lessons. Two focus groups in north and south Florida were conducted with assistance from several organizations such as Head Start, Family Preservation, Healthy Families, and the local Cooperative Extension offices. A total of 15 single parents participated in the two focus groups. The parents were asked about the most rewarding aspects and the most frustrating aspects of raising children on their own, the type of child development information they would like to learn more about to better understand their children, and any other information they needed to assist them in becoming a successful single parent were queried. Five lessons resulted from the input of the two focus groups of single parents.

- Success and the Single Parent: The Money Crunch.
- Success and the Single Parent: A Flash of Time.

- Success and the Single Parent: Positive Parenting: The Communication Puzzle.
- Success and the Single Parent: Positive Parenting: Guiding Your Children's Behavior.
- Success and the Single Parent: Taking Care of Yourself.

Before the final decision to develop a curriculum was made, existing Extension resources were investigated. The other Extension resources were very helpful, but because of feedback from the focus groups, it was decided to proceed with the development of a curriculum with a more experiential design at a lower reading level. Fact sheets accompanying the lessons are at a sixth- to seventh-grade reading level, and the lessons include numerous experiential activities.

*Success and the Single Parent* includes marketing tools, lesson plans, activity sheets, post-it sheets (on which participants list the tips they will try during the week), case studies, role play situations, and fact sheets. Initially, four county faculty volunteered to pilot test the curriculum. Participants recruited for the series attended five or more class sessions, depending on how the agent set up the series. After pilot testing, the curriculum was revised as suggested. While marketing the series, several of the agents discovered that numerous single parents wanted to receive the lessons as a home study course, so some minor revisions were made to enable agents to also use the curriculum as a home study course. *Success and the Single Parent* was distributed at the 1999 annual in-service training to Family and Consumer Science faculty interested in conducting programs for single parents.

### **Evaluation survey and results for 2000- 2001**

In 2000-2001, agents in 12 counties taught *Success and the Single Parent*. An evaluation survey consisting of five domains (corresponding to the five lessons), with four to five questions in each domain, was used to measure participant change. Questions were kept simple and easy to understand to accommodate varying levels of literacy among program participants. The resulting instrument contained 22 specific indicators. The county faculty favored a post-only design because of its simplicity for respondents and ease of administration.

The response categories were designed so that program participants could indicate the extent to which their behavior had changed since the start of the program. In 2000, the evaluation survey included the categories "better," "about the same," and "worse." The category "much better" was added in 2001 after county faculty indicated that some of their participants had commented they were doing much better in some of the categories. The results of programming using the *Success and the Single Parent* curriculum are summarized in Table 1. The total number of respondents ranged from 96 to 199, depending on the specific indicators they responded to.

Table 1. *Success and the Single Parent* Evaluation Measure

Compared to before you started this single parenting class, how are you doing at . . .		n	Much better %	Better %	About the same %	Worse %
The Money Crunch	1. Making and sticking to a budget?	194	3	58	39	0
	2. Trying to cut costs in a budget?	198	6	66	28	0
	3. Working toward short and long term goals for yourself?	199	8	56	36	0
	4. Knowing the difference between fixed, periodic, and flexible expenses?	198	8	72	20	0
A Flash of Time	1. Planning your time?	190	5	57	38	0
	2. Prioritizing your to do list?	185	6	65	29	0
	3. Being realistic about the number of activities you can accomplish in a week?	185	3	55	42	0
	4. Identifying the barriers you have that keep you from making good use of your time?	188	9	62	29	0
	5. Using time savers to make the most of your time?	110	6	61	33	0
The Communication Puzzle	1. Communication with your ex-partner that focuses on your child's needs?	163	2	59	38	2
	2. Communicating at eye level with your children?	171	7	83	10	0
	3. Spending one-on-one time with each of your children?	163	9	69	22	0
	4. Frequently encouraging your children to share their feelings	172	8	80	12	0

	with you?					
	<b>5. Using more "do's" than "don'ts" when communicating with your children?</b>	172	6	74	20	0
<b>Understanding Children's Behavior</b>	<b>1. Considering your children's input when making household rules?</b>	176	8	66	26	0
	<b>2. Guiding your children's behavior?</b>	112	17	72	11	0
	<b>3. Enforcing rules with appropriate consequences.</b>	179	7	71	22	0
	<b>4. Redirecting your children when they misbehave?</b>	178	6	74	20	0
<b>Taking Care of Self</b>	<b>1. Asking for help when you need it?</b>	96	5	65	30	0
	<b>2. Creating a strong support network?</b>	184	5	56	39	0
	<b>3. Knowing how and when to pamper yourself.?</b>	184	6	60	34	0
	<b>4. Having a positive outlook?</b>	183	6	78	16	0

In addition to rating changes in their behavior, participants also gave examples of specific strategies that they were using and reported improvements in their family relationships. The following are examples from single parents attending the workshops:

- "[I] make sure I set aside \$5 per week to save."
- "I make a list of what has to be done, and I try not to overdo myself or my children."
- "We have quiet time together just to talk or read."
- "I'm real good at redirecting him now."
- "I am learning to pamper myself more and ask for help when I need it."

Evaluation survey results indicate that the majority of single parents who completed the series reported doing "much better" to "better" in each of the five domains (combined percentages range from 61 to 90). From further review, inferences can be made for planning future programs for single parents. By looking at each of the domains and identifying which indicator received the lowest combined score ("much better" and "better," an agent can devote more time and effort in teaching that particular subject area. Curriculum developers can also benefit from knowing these results for the purpose of amending and enhancing the subject matter content. For example, for the five domains (see Table 1), the lowest percentages were found in question 1 for four of the domains -- money management, time management, communication, and behavior management -- and in question 2 in the self-care domain. Making and sticking to a budget, planning your time, communicating with an ex-partner in a way that focuses on children's needs, considering children's input when making household rules, and creating a strong support network can be challenging concepts to teach and difficult behaviors to change. These results will alert professionals that additional strategies and reinforcement are needed to teach these concepts and that program resources may need to be extended.

The total numbers reached for a two-year span are relatively low. It is very challenging to get single parents to attend a series because of their many obligations. To try to reach more single parents, agents have offered the curriculum as a home study in addition to the face-to-face workshops. For the home study courses, county faculty report low return rates for the evaluation survey and when they do receive feedback, participants report fewer changes. Even though there is a greater participation rate in the home study version, the agents report that the group learning experience seems to work better with single parents. When taking the curriculum as a workshop series, single parents form a support network and report greater changes.

### **Summary**

*Success and the Single Parent* was created in response to a call by single parents, as well as educators, for a curriculum specifically designed to assist with the inevitable challenges faced in single parenthood. Examples found in the curriculum are tailored to single parent situations. Every parent is faced with certain issues, such as time and money management, good communication, and discipline, but these issues are more challenging for single parents. Single parents are faced with making decisions on their own. They do not have a partner to bounce back ideas when making important decisions or a partner to tell them when they are being a little too harsh or lenient with the children. In parenting workshops with both married and single participants, single parents can be put off or made ill at ease by frequent references to "my husband" or "my wife" and may think "I can't do this by myself." In workshops designed with single parents in mind, single parents can find support through contact with other parents facing the same challenges.

**References**

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**Author**

Millie Ferrer, Ph.D., Associate Professor and Human Development Specialist, Department of Family, Youth, and Community Sciences, University of Florida.

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