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A COMMON CONFLICT FOR THE SINGLE PARENT

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It's in the title, SINGLE PARENT, that a crucial conflict often lays - between wanting to be a SINGLE person free to date and find a significant other, and wanting to be a responsible PARENT by honoring family commitment to one's children.

This conflict feels like a double bind because it often is, satisfying one want sometimes coming at the expense of satisfying the other. To make time for dating and developing a serious relationship can mean energy and attention taken away from parenting; while putting offspring first, treating children as a top priority, can mean placing romantic interest second. One outcome of this conflict can be an HONEST AMBIVALENCE. Sometimes the single parent can feel like having children is a mixed blessing when their needs or demands make it difficult or impossible to cultivate a serious adult relationship. Other times the single parent can feel the significant other is a mixed blessing when his or her needs and opinions complicate or conflict with parental management of the children.

Resolution of this conflict by siding totally with one extreme or the other can be costly. Total focus on the children can deny the single parent of loving adult companionship, create undue dependency for love on children, and cause great pain from loss when it is time to let grown children go. Total focus on a significant other can deny children of needed parental attention, cause actual neglect, and foster feelings in children of emotional abandonment. So what resolution should the single parent seek? There are two. One is making a COMPROMISE ABOUT ATTENTION and the second is making a DISTINCTION ABOUT LOVE.

The Compromise About Attention.

The compromise between balancing needs for adult companionship and parental responsibility requires knowing that between the extremes of total absorption with children and total romantic preoccupation with another adult is a middle way. Children have to understand that it is important for their single parent to have loving adult companionship so that child love is not the only love that mother or father is bound to have. The significant other has to understand that the single parent is married to a previous and ongoing commitment to children that will not be forsaken for romantic love.

To find the middle way, the single parent must honor relational needs with children and with significant other by dividing availability out. "Neither one of you can have all of my

attention, but there will be sufficient to go around. You can't always have as much from me as you ideally want to get. I can't always provide as much for you as I ideally want to give. Many times none of us will be totally satisfied. And that is okay." Resolution of the being SINGLE vs. being PARENT conflict means that all parties concerned - single parent, children, significant other -- will have to be content with the compromise: SOME ATTENTION IS ENOUGH.

The Distinction About Love.

Sometimes, in the conflict between wanting to act SINGLE and wanting to act PARENT, the single mother or father can feel torn - love for the romantic other in seeming conflict with love for one's children. On these occasions it helps if the single parent can separate the concept of love from the concept of attention. Showing one party less attention on a particular occasion and the other more does not signify less love for one and more for the other. As mentioned above, compromising how attention is given is the best a single parent can do. Attention is not the same as love. Attention shifts around, but love is constant. Equality of attention does not signify equality of love.

Not only is love a constant, but there is an important difference between PARTNER LOVE and PARENT LOVE. They are not the same. They are not in competition. Neither one need be or should be at the expense of the other. Partner love is committed to deepening adult intimacy. Parent love is committed to care-taking a growing child. To give partner love to a child inappropriately treats that son or daughter as a source of adult intimacy. To give parent love to a significant other inappropriately treats that man or woman as a dependent child.

The resolution of the SINGLE PARENT (acting single vs. acting parent) conflict is compromising how attention is given, and maintaining the distinction between partner love and parental love