



FRIENDSHIP AND SUPPORT



We all need to feel needed. One of the joys of parenthood is being loved and needed by our children. But one of the pitfalls of parenting on your own may be that your “world” consists of yourself and the kids — and few other people. It is easy to feel isolated and alone. As a single parent you may find yourself wanting to have conversation with another adult or maybe just someone to help out occasionally. Research has confirmed what most of us know already: having friends and others who are supportive makes us feel better.

But one of the difficulties of being a single parent is that there may not be a lot of people to lean on when you need help. Sometimes friends or relatives may not be supportive at the moments you need them the most.

Perhaps the best way to begin to think about support is to look at what types of support you want and see who is available to assist you.

What Is “Support”?

You probably already have a good idea about what “support” means. Providing aid, comfort, or assistance to others is support. Different kinds of support are:

Practical support. Such support includes specific items such as money, food, clothing, and housing. This support may also include services such as child care, car and household repairs, transportation, or assistance with buying or preparing food. When any of these goods or services are provided, support is being given.

Psychological support. Generally, this means providing a person with the personal resources necessary to cope with a stressful situation. Sidney Cobb, an early stress researcher, describes three aspects of this kind of support. He says that the person needs emotional support, information that leads to the belief that he or she is cared for and loved. Second, the person needs esteem support, knowledge that he or she is valued and admired. This reaffirms the person’s own sense of self-worth. A third essential form of support is network support, the sense that the person belongs to a community of people who

share common joys and sorrows, and who are committed to one another. Thus, general psychological support may be provided through emotional, esteem, and network support.

Information support. This means providing knowledge for or teaching skills to another person. Though providing information is somewhat like tangible support, it is important to mention it separately because, in many ways, it may serve special functions. In particular, providing information may equip persons to provide or use their own tangible or psychological resources more effectively. Such information ranges from where to get a good bargain to how to manage a personal problem.

Referral. Knowing where to go or how to ask for help may aid us in obtaining needed assistance. Sometimes our needs may be beyond others’ resources for help. For example, a personal problem might be handled best by a professional counselor. Or, in terms of tangible or informational support, there may be agencies or organizations that can be helpful. Providing support through referral means getting assistance in finding the right type of help.





"I never thought I'd lose friends after my divorce. I thought they were all educated, no way. Wrong, you're going to lose friends and it's going to hurt. I felt sad, lonely, betrayed."

Who Provides Social Support?

Most of us receive social support from our friends and relatives. When parents are asked who they generally turn to for advice on child rearing, they frequently cite their own parents and friends. Even in these modern times much of the aid, advice, and comfort we give and receive is provided through informal social ties. Social scientists use the term "social networks" to describe the personal ties that bind people together.

- Who can provide psychological support?

- Who reminds you that you're cared for, valued, or part of a community of concerned people?

How Can the Social Network Be Strengthened?

Social support provided by friends and relatives can be a source of strength, but how can a person find out about his or her own social network? The following activities provide some ways to find out about your social network and how it might be strengthened.

Assessing support. One way to begin is by asking questions about the types of support you now have available. Consider the following questions and write down the names of persons who provide you with each type of support. You may find yourself listing the same people over and over, or maybe different people provide various types of support.

- Who can provide information when it is needed?

- Who can answer questions or make suggestions about handling personal, family, legal, or medical concerns?

- Who can provide tangible support such as money, food, or clothing in a time of need?

- Who can make referrals and help find additional services or information?

- Who can provide emergency assistance, transportation, child care, or other needed services?

You are already beginning to get some idea about who provides support. Perhaps you have found that there is no one to list under a particular kind of support. Consider this situation, and ask yourself if you need this support. Why or why not? Perhaps this is a portion of your network you would like to strengthen.



Size. You now have a list of the members of your social network. One of the simplest measures of your network is its size. Count the number of people you have listed. In studies of networks, most people have between ten and thirty-five people with whom they stay in touch and share some type of support. How does your network compare? If it is smaller than ten or larger than thirty-five, why is this the case? How does the size of your network feel to you — too large, too small, or just right? Why?

If you feel your network is too small or too large, you may want to think of ways to change this. If it is too small, think of people you might want to get to know better. Or think of places where you might meet interesting people. When a network gets too large, it may become difficult to maintain contact with people, or others may make too many demands. If your network is too large, consider how you might reduce its size without hurting others' feelings.

Connectedness. It is also possible to look at how all the people in the network are connected or related to one another. In this case related means that they know one another and have contact with one another. Social networks can vary a great deal in the degree to which members have contact with each other. For example, a person may live close to parents, brothers, sisters, aunts, and uncles. All of these people may have contact with each other on a regular basis. Figure 1 shows this type of network:

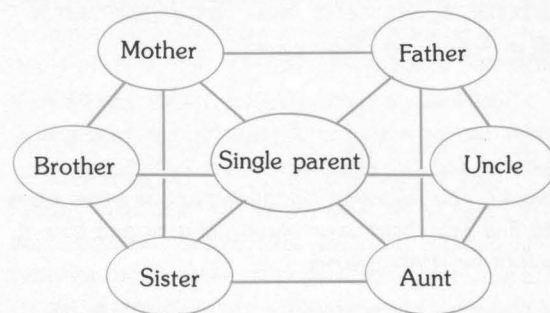


Figure 1. Highly connected social network.

Sometimes a person's network is not very connected. For example, a person may have just moved to town and met only a few people in different places, perhaps two people at work, a neighbor, and a relative. Figure 2 illustrates this type of network:

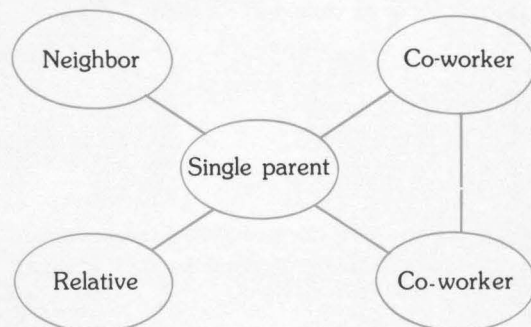
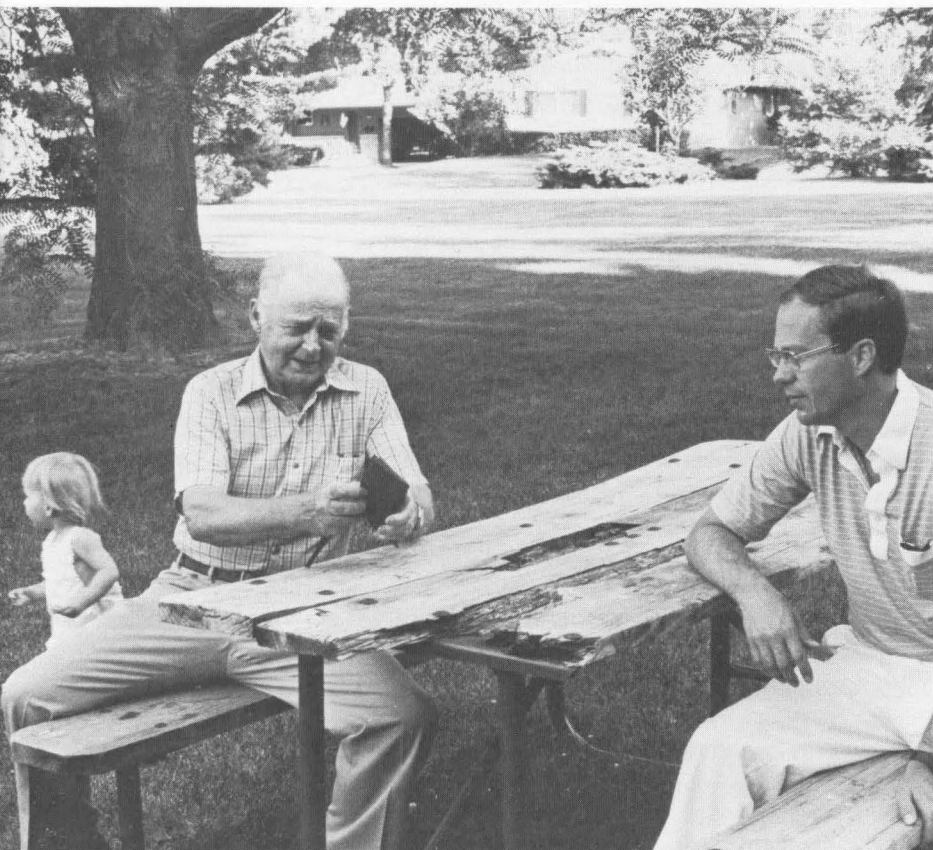


Figure 2. Social network with few connections.

In this example only the co-workers are connected to one another. The neighbor doesn't know the co-workers or the relative, so there are no connections there.

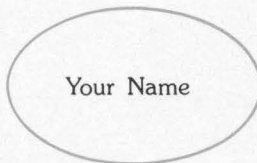
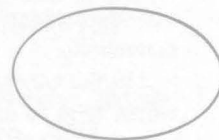
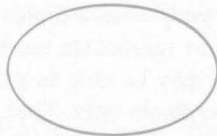
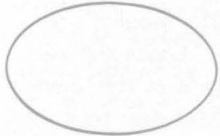
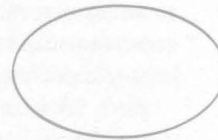
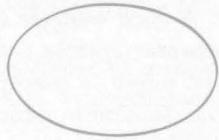




"The value of friendship shouldn't be underestimated. Like it or not, we are all interconnected with one another. The easier I make your load in life, the easier mine becomes. The more I contribute to your world, the richer the living gets for both of us."

Your Personal Community

Write the names of all the people who provide you with support in the circles below. Draw a line between all of the people that have contact with each other.





“When I was first divorced I had this friend that about every day I would call up and just beg for him to come over and talk with me . . . and he did it. I can’t believe it. He would just talk to me for hours, give me hugs, tell me I was all right and go home.”

When we think about a sense of community — a sense of togetherness — the highly connected social network comes to mind. This network sometimes seems to be the ideal. But in most urban areas today, such networks are not common. Recent studies have found positive and negative aspects to *both* closely connected and loosely connected networks.

First, let’s consider the closely connected networks. Barry Wellman, who studied the social ties in a Canadian community, found that more support was offered where people were more closely connected. This seems reasonable because there are more people who may be able to get together to provide and coordinate help. Thus, for example, if one spouse leaves town, the other close network members can work together to provide assistance to the one who remains in the community.

On the other hand, closely connected networks tend to exert more control over their members. This may at times restrict behavior or information that could be helpful. When you have

recently become a single parent, your network may consist only of other couples who have little understanding of what you are experiencing. Though these couples can be helpful, you may feel the need to meet other single parents.

A good example of how loosely connected networks operate comes from studies of women who return to college after raising their families. The decision to return to college often necessitates some changes in activities. The demands of classes and studying can cause some strain. Sometimes, support for the older student’s new actions and attitudes is needed. Loose-knit networks may provide a wider range of role models who might be supportive of these new behaviors, thus helping the person adapt to the new college environment. The loose-knit network may exert less pressure on the person to stay home and maintain the status quo.

These studies of close-knit and loose-knit networks indicate that each type of network offers specific opportunities for support. The close-knit network is more likely to provide support in times of crisis, while a loose-knit network may offer more assistance in adapting to new situations. Each type of support can help single parents adapt to experiences they are facing for the first time.

You may take a look at the connections within your network by listing all the names in the section titled “Your Personal Community.” Begin by putting your name in the middle circle, then draw lines that link persons who spend time together or talk to one another. Are there few or many connections among your network members? Does your network seem to be close-knit or loose-knit? If your network is too close-knit, do you feel restricted or unable to attain your personal goals? Why or why not? If your network is too loose-knit, do you have a feeling of isolation? Are you satisfied with the number of connections among members of your network? Why or why not?

If your network is too close-knit, can you add new people to your network? If your network is too loose-knit, can you introduce network members to one another? How else could you change your network to fit your needs?





“Friends listen to you from the heart, and tell you things from the head.”

Is Social Support Always Helpful?

This article has emphasized the positive aspects of social support. But there is some evidence that social networks may not always be beneficial.

Network members can sometimes be a drain on resources rather than a help. In some cases, networks appear to restrict us by exerting control over us. The woman who wants to go back to school after raising her children may be discouraged from making this change by her network of friends and family. The network in this case uses its resources to maintain stability rather than support change.

Sometimes there is conflict with some of the people who provide support. For example, a single parent may rely on a brother or sister for child care. In some cases, this might lead to conflict over what types of discipline to use or what the child is being fed. This could be a source of little or much conflict. In either case, even though there is support, there is also some conflict.

As you think about your own network, it is important to examine both the positive and negative effects. Are there people in your network who you feel restrict you? Are there people with whom you have some conflict? Look again at your drawing of “Your Personal Community” and note those relationships in which there are some difficulties. Are there many of these relationships? What types of support do these people provide? Can you limit your contact with these people? Why or why not? Can you strengthen those ties in which there is no conflict? How? Both the benefits and limitations of your network will affect the changes you may want to make.

Summary

The support provided by friends and relatives is a potent buffer against the stresses and strains of everyday living. Careful study of social support shows that family health and well-being are intimately tied to the help offered by members of our social networks.

Because social support can be a powerful resource, it is important for you to maintain and strengthen your social networks.

In the past, our social networks were relatively assured. Most people lived their adult lives in the community in which they grew up. But as more people left family and friends to seek opportunities elsewhere, traditional neighborhoods and communities began to dissolve. Like everyone else, single parents must begin to reach out in new ways to build an intimate, personal community that provides emotional and practical support.

For Further Reading

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- Rubenstein, C., and Shaver, P. *In Search of Intimacy*. New York: Delacorte Press, 1982.
- Weiss, R. S. *Going It Alone: The Family Life and Social Situation of the Single Parent*. New York: Basic Books, 1979.



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