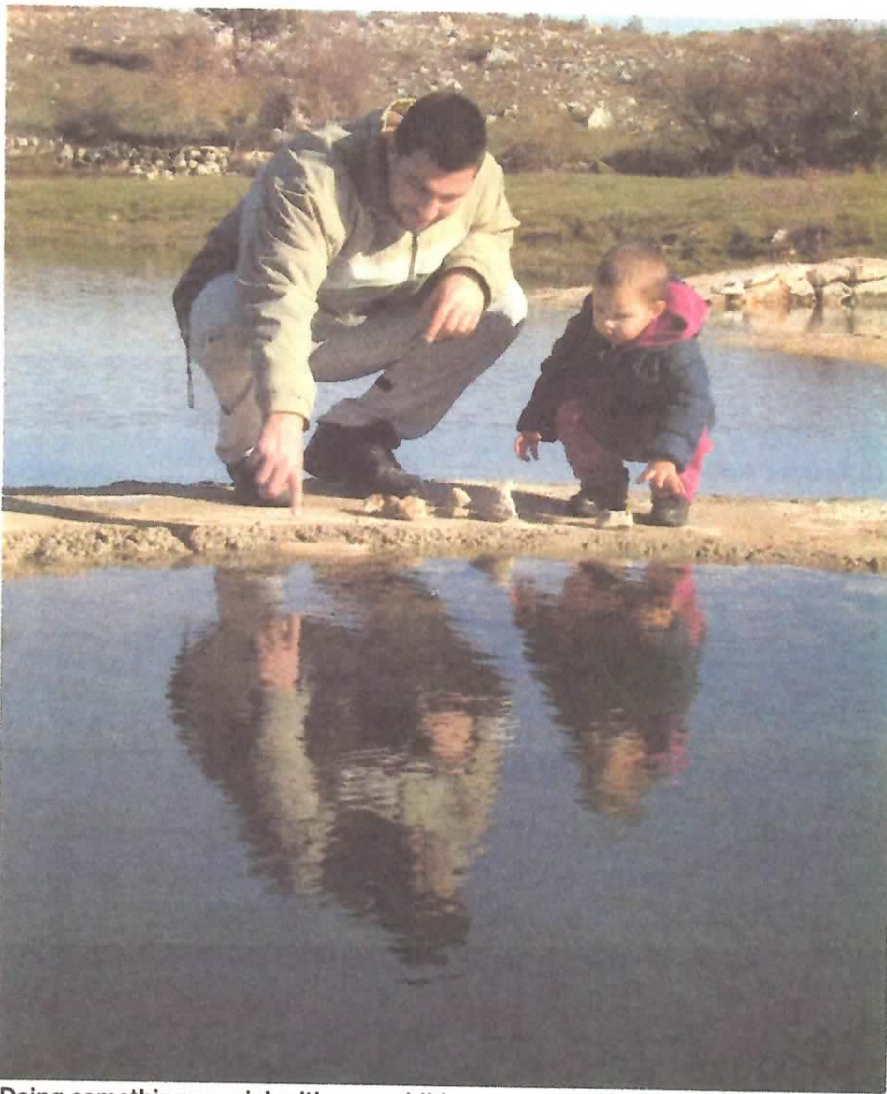


Keeping Family Traditions in a Single-Parent Home

By Sheila Fields



Doing something special with your child on a regular basis, whether it's going fishing every Saturday or just taking a walk in the afternoon, helps create memories that your child will treasure for a lifetime.

Strawberry picking signals the end of school and the beginning of summer vacation for my sons and me. We try to go each year, but as my boys grow into men, it gets increasingly complex to coordinate schedules.

One warm, breezy morning several summers ago we found ourselves

hunched over berry plants at a local pick-your-own farm. My intrepid threesome (then 7, 10 and 13) took to the task without a second reminder. If only they viewed chores with the same enthusiasm!

"Mom, is this a good one?" asked Dan, my youngest.

"Yep. We only want the really red ones, with no mushy spots," I instructed him.

He popped the really red one in his mouth and off he went. He did a great job of picking, but needless to say his berry box was the least filled!

Matt and Ben, my older sons, wandered off in different directions. Stopping to select only the best, sampling a few, they seemed lost in their surroundings and thoughts.

I love berry picking with my boys each summer. It has become one of our new family traditions.

I remember the first time we went on our own. My husband had left the year before and Dan was chubby kneed and not yet two. I recall his wearing a red beard that day with the juices dripping down his chin and permanently staining his shirt.

We were at a farm in Red Hook. The view was glorious, showing a wide expanse of mountains. I experienced a mixture of emotions that morning. I was happy watching my little ones, but I was sad and angry, too. The boys should have their dad here sharing this moment, I thought, not off building a new life without us.

That's what it was like for me back then – a jumble of emotions on a never ending roller coaster ride. It took me a long time to work through the aftermath of my divorce. However, deep inside me was the notion that somehow, somehow we would make it.

And we have. There have been cuts and bruises along the way as we've traveled a rocky road, with some mishaps worse than others. But we have survived as a family – even though we are down one parent – united by faith and love and supported by our church, family and friends.

Establish family traditions to create lifetime memories

I've learned much on this unexpected and unwanted journey into single parenting. One such lesson is the importance of establishing new family traditions that will hopefully become fond memories for my sons, regardless of their parent's marital status. Besides

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strawberry picking, other fun rituals we've developed include:

- **Birthdays Bucks:** Some years, as a struggling single mom, the only gift I could afford was a box filled with crisp new singles in the amount of their age.
- **Snow Days:** We always make chocolate chip pancakes – always. If snow

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is predicted, I make sure to buy a bag of chips, along with the requisite bread and milk. A young neighbor pal, now a teenager, has for years trudged up our hill, wearing pajamas under his snow pants, to join us. Unbeknownst to the boys, the chocolate chip pancakes are a treat with an ulterior motive. This breakfast gives them lots of quick energy for shoveling my driveway!

- **Christmas:** Our traditional brunch consists of smoky cheese and eggs and French Breakfast Biscuits – nutmeg-scented muffins that we dip in melted butter and cinnamon sugar. We read the biblical account of Jesus' birth before opening our gifts. And Christmas wouldn't be Christmas without the annual viewing (and a dose of good-hearted groaning as they have gotten older) of "The Best Christmas Pageant Ever."
- **First Fridays:** We take turns designing a fun family night. The "leader" picks the menu, the activity and a

special dessert. The one rule for First Fridays is that everyone brings a great attitude and joins in, regardless of the leader's choices.

- **Sick Visits:** Trips to the doctor when my sons were younger were followed by a trip to the dollar store for a pick-me-up treat. This did not apply to annual physicals, even though they tried to convince me it should!
- **Hot Seat:** Building each other up with encouraging words is a way to honor family members and strengthen family bonds. My middle son once commented about my older son, "He likes to help people. He'll stop what he is doing to help you." My youngest boy once quipped about his middle brother, "I like how he swung the golf club and said, 'Where did it go? Where did it go?' The ball never even left the tee!"
- **Sunday Dinners:** Periodically, we eat in the dining room by candlelight, with good china. My boys never get tired of sitting there listening to favorite family tales about their parents and grandparents and laughing over their baby antics. Some nights we pull out the baby albums or videos, too.
- **Prayer:** It is said that the family that prays together, stays together. We do, and we have!

The need to create memories like these for just the four of us was driven home by a disturbing announcement from Ben: "Mom, we're not a real family anymore."

I assured him that of course we were. I understood, from all the reading I've done on children of divorce, that comments like these are not unusual, albeit untrue. We are, and will continue to be, every inch a real family.

It's tough, but we single parents can make a positive difference in our children's lives.

By learning from our mistakes and growing through them, we can guide our children into healthy, successful adulthood and make warm and cheerful memories along the way.

Sheila Fields lives in Wappingers Falls with her three sons.