

And the Answer is... "Yes, No, Maybe"

By Joan Callander, author, speaker and free-lance writer

If you are a single parent today, chances are good that your children's birthmother or father may have a drinking or drug problem; heck chances are high for married parents too but each scenario presents similar, but different, twists. As singles it is extremely important to establish an open and honest relationship with your son or daughter. Being the sober and stable parent in their life, you have to be there for them through all of their emotional ups and downs and to answer all their questions.

Don't assume that not talking about issues shields kids from knowing or worrying. To the contrary, **"Grownups keep too many secrets... They think we can't handle what's real. But guess what? We can't handle what's not."** [1] The difficulty for single parents lies in knowing what to say, when to say it, and how to read your child's body language so that you stay in control of the conversation and add to your child's self-esteem and self-confidence—that in part comes from the genes and influences of both bio parents. Many single parents or parenting grandparents, struggle with issues such as:

Should I tell my kids the truth about their birthparent?

Yes - *when responding to their questions.* They need to know about both of their parents to satisfy the human desire to know where did I come from and why is my life turning out the way it is. They wouldn't ask if they weren't wondering, and regardless if the prompting comes from observation, personal experience, or comments by others they have a right to the truth.

No - *you shouldn't volunteer information or give them more details than they can handle at their age.* Start with "Daddy's sick and can't be with us," for a toddler and build upon it gradually until as a teen you discuss appropriate facts of public knowledge. These can range from, "Yes, dad was drunk on Christmas again," to "I don't know if your mother was selling sex to support her habit. What made you ask that?"

Never divulge personal marital details or rant about your ex-partner. Stick to the facts but do not lie for when the truth comes out—and it always does eventually—lies even with good intentions--will damage their trust in you.

Maybe - is the dialogue you play in your head while sorting out variables that you alone can navigate through based on your child's existing knowledge, personality and their need/desire to know.

Sadly, for safety reasons including the possibility of their being left alone at night during a visitation, parental abduction, or exposure to sex, guns or drugs most kids need more information than you would want to give a child in a family where drugs or alcohol are not a problem. The upside is that kids learn how to communicate and evaluate information and often develop the ability to make better decisions than many of their peers.

Do I take my son or daughter to visit their birthparent if they are incarcerated?

Yes *if you are under court order to do so.* If not, the choice is up to you and the child if they are old enough to be involved in the decision.

No *if your kids or you were physically, verbally or sexually abused.* No if they don't want to go or you don't want to take them. Whatever action landed the prisoner behind bars took the decision out of their hands.

[1] *Luanne Rice, The Geometry of Sisters (a fictional work).*

Maybe if reunification is the goal or if the child needs to see that their other parent is alive and safe. Some children need the closure of saying goodbye while others emphatically do not want to see their missing parent. Consider carefully the physical layout of the facility, the emotional impact on your child and again their ages if you are torn.

Should I share with my child's teacher what is happening at home?

Yes if your child's schoolwork or behavior at school is being impacted or if you feel that your "ex" might try to abduct them. Carefully edit the information to include only what the teacher or counselor needs to know to qualify your child for special education plans or to get them through a tough patch and keep them safe. Unwittingly, children can get mislabeled or stereotyped and that helps no one.

No if you simply need someone to talk to. Call a trusted friend, join a support group or see a counselor—we all need to vent and to get advice but this is not the appropriate venue. Sufficient to let school personnel know that you are a single-parent family and you want to know if there are any unusual concerns...and ask them to praise any positives regarding your child's social and/or academic progress.

Maybe if the information under "yes" applies or if your child is having difficulty getting along with their peers or there is a change in their grades, attitude or they are hanging out with students who may be bad influences. Listen and ask questions. Don't divulge information impulsively. "I'll get back to you," is an excellent strategy if you are blindsided. Children suffering from death, abandonment (physical or emotional) or separation may need some extra TLC. Kids with learning disabilities qualify for special programs. Pursue all options and be their advocate. *I cannot emphasize enough that teachers, school counselors, and other administrators are generally good, kind and important influences in your child or teen's life.* Request teachers who have experience in relating with and educating children similar to yours and who model the values you want instilled.

Play with your kids, limit the amount of time they are on computers or isolated from family by earphones or texting. Talk "with" them rather than "at" them and pursue what they are interest in to form the bridge for relationships that grow them into healthy adults.

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