



# Going It Alone

WITH A QUARTER OF KIDS NOW LIVING WITH LONE PARENTS, TO SINGLE MOTHERS LIKE **NINA FARR**, THE SUGGESTION THAT THEY COME FROM A HOME WHICH IS 'DAMAGED' OR 'INCOMPLETE' IS NOT ONLY INFUSED WITH GUILT, BUT IS HURTFUL AND UNTRUE. IN HER NEW BOOK, NINA REJECTS THE 'BROKEN FAMILY' LABEL AND ENCOURAGES READERS TO SHIFT THEIR FOCUS FROM THE RELATIONSHIP THAT HAS ENDED, AND INSTEAD DRAW STRENGTH FROM THE RELATIONSHIPS THEY HAVE WITH THEIR CHILDREN...

“My eldest son was 17 months old and I was 14 weeks pregnant with my second when I split with their father. My memories from the immediate time after we separated are very sad. Packing up my toddler's first (and until then) only home was very hard, he didn't understand and to be honest, at that point, neither did I. Feeling my baby growing inside me knowing I wouldn't be sharing those moments with his father was heartbreaking. I have a strong memory of feeling my unborn son's hand sweep across the inside of my belly, touching him with my hand through my skin, and feeling both connected to my baby and yet terribly alone. I remember being afraid that I wouldn't be enough for my babies as they grew.

I also remember waking up at 6am to the sound of infant laughter. Sticky fingers and little faces laughing, kissing, snuggling. I remember early morning trips to the park together to listen to birdsong and my two-year-old trying to catch our tall shadows on the pathway as the sun climbed in the sky. I remember feeling incredibly tender towards them, as well as exhausted beyond all reasonable capacity to carry on. I remember weeping with fatigue after putting them to bed, and rushes of love and pride when a stranger complimented me on their behaviour when we were out. It was the best of times and the worst of times, as they say!

When it came to trying to explain our breakup, there is no way to completely prepare for how it feels to share bad news with a child. The absolute best advice I can give any parent who will have to do this, is to spend enough time on your own recovery and acceptance to be able to talk about what has happened lovingly, kindly and gently. If you need to say something painful, make sure you don't give your child responsibility for your pain too. Your job is to soothe and support them with theirs, so invest in getting whatever support you need to cope with your own sadness or anger beforehand if you can.

“THE TRUTH IS THAT BOTH MUMS AND DADS STAY. WHAT MAKES A PARENT IS NOT THEIR ADDRESS, IT'S WHETHER THEY SHOW UP AND STAY PRESENT FOR THE CHILDREN THEY SHARE.”

If I was speaking to a family member or friend going through the same situation now, the thing that I would most like to tell them is to first of all be sure that you are done. Some separations are necessary and should be swift. If there is violence or abuse of any kind walk out of the door with your baby and do not look back. But if you are both struggling, tired, overwhelmed with the pressure of parenting small children and adjusting to the real grown up demands of becoming a family... pause. Breathe. Try and find your centre. They are small for such a short time. What is being poured into your babies today can soon be poured into your relationship again. Be sure that you are done, because parenting apart is a real and tangible loss.

However, when you know you are done, know that it's okay. There will be things you lose by leaving. But an ending is only a beginning in disguise. Many new and different things will begin to arrive in your life. You are allowed to enjoy them, celebrate them, make room for them. There is no such thing as 'normal' any more when it comes to family. You can tear up the rule book and write it again in your own way.

Staying in an unhealthy relationship for the sake of your children is a mistake. There are only two options if you find yourself here. The first is to figure out if you can develop a healthy relationship with your partner and stay together. The second is to develop a healthy relationship with each other apart. Sometimes the only healthy relationship you can achieve is one with no contact at all between the

unpacking. Find a friend, a coach, a counsellor. Anywhere you can be vulnerable and find the safety you need to travel onwards. Because your sense of safety, security and peace with your choices will help your child to feel safe, secure and at peace within themselves.

There is no such thing as a broken family. There is only family. Whether we are healthy or not in our relationships is a completely different conversation. My family is not broken because I do not live with my oldest children's father. Our relationship and capacity to parent together has increased and developed over time, and we have both introduced step parents, step siblings and half siblings over the years. These new partners and children are also simply part of our family.

The idea that families are either intact or broken just does not reflect the truth of how human beings love, live and build homes and families together.

In the UK today, a quarter of all families are classified as a single parent household according to the most recent census. Nine out of 10 of these families are headed by a woman but this still means there are almost 100,000 single dads with residential care of their children. The majority of those families where a woman is at the helm day to day also have fathers who are parenting those children alone, they just aren't parenting alone with their children staying with them in their homes as often as they are with their mums. Single dads with anything less than 50 per cent care of their children don't show up on a census as having dependent children, which is demonstrative of an out-of-date attitude that hurts both men and women – that a mother is the default or more natural parent. The truth is that both mums and dads stay. Both women and men leave. What makes a parent is not their address, it's whether they show up and stay present for the children they share. We need to have better conversations about how we want to share our lives with the people who matter the most to us. A parent who loves, supports and commits to raising their child should always be recognised and respected for the role they are undertaking.

Don't feel single parent isolation. Get out of your head and out of your front door! You are neither alone, nor an oddity. Make sure you aren't doing other people's thinking for them and assuming there is judgement or isolation where there isn't any. Accept yourself and others will follow. You are absolutely 100 per cent enough and you have totally got this!

*Nina is a leadership coach for parents and specialises in working with parents who are raising families alone. I Am The Parent Who Stayed: Joyfully Parenting Alone by Nina Farr is out now. RRP £7.99*



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One of the great surprises of parenting alone is that I have had to give the bad news that I won't, and can't, be with their father to my children over and over again. I expected that they would grow up never knowing any different and therefore not being as hurt by us parenting them apart. The reality is that both of them have had moments of deepening understanding as the years pass. They have asked harder and harder questions over time about what happened, when, and why.

My resolution was always to tell them an age appropriate truth. Children need to know they can trust their parents to guide them and be honest and reliable. Lying about a fundamental aspect of their family makeup is a bad idea. Choose the kindest, most age appropriate and simple way to speak your truth and be prepared to repeat it often. Over time you will all adjust to what is. The journey of grief that comes with losing a 'together' home has the potential to bring you all closer, if you can show up and be present even in the tough times. I know it's hard, but you have honestly got this. Just be still, listen and love.

**"THERE  
IS NO SUCH  
THING AS A  
BROKEN FAMILY.  
THERE IS ONLY  
FAMILY."**

The quickest and surest way to balance your children's happiness against your own is to check in with your values as a person and a parent. What is your behaviour teaching your children about relationships today? How are you showing up as their mother (or father) today? If this example was how they went on to experience love in their future lives, would you be proud of the lessons you taught them in your home? If the answer to that question is no, it's time to commit to making changes on whatever level you need to, for both your sake and theirs. If your children feel sad or angry or scared by the changes, try to find the still and quiet place inside you where their turmoil can be soothed. It's very hard, if not impossible, to meet sadness anger or fear with stillness unless you have somewhere to take your own emotions for

parents. This is still preferable to an abusive, angry or unpredictable and unhappy home.

Toxic family relationships hurt children and set them up for stress and failure. If your home is characterised by bitterness, resentment, cruelty, a lack of affection or respect, then staying is not going to benefit your children.



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