

'Single parent' label is unfair and inaccurate, tends to stigmatize committed caregivers who do their best

I'm a senior English major at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln who just happens to be a parent. And because I do not live with my son's father (to whom I was never married), I am labeled a "single" parent.

There are two definitions of the word "single" that I would like to utilize in relation to the label that has been placed upon me by society. This single-parent labeling is offensive to me. I am treated differently from others, stigmatized and talked about whenever this particular part of my life is brought up.

The definitions I am talking about relate to the definition of the word "single": 1. Not accompanied by another or others — sole; 2. Unmarried.

It is not the second part of the definition that I have problems with, because I have never been married. But the first definition defines my life, due to parenthood as a lone effort — alone.

I, at no point or time, from the conception of my baby to today, was or am alone. Labeling me a single parent implies that I should receive sole credit for my part in the responsibility taken for the care and raising of my child, as well as sole responsibility for bringing another child into the world without the benefit of a "stable," two-parent home. I made a thoughtful, conscious choice to have a child and to raise him to the best of my abilities. But I couldn't have conceived him alone, and I cannot raise him alone.

Further, "single parenting" implies that there was not an act of intercourse between two people, that the birth was performed by one, that no one showed up at the baby shower, that no one ever helps with the feeding, the diapers, the clothes, etc. It is impossible to raise a child (married or single) without sources outside the parent's home.

I had my son when I was a sophomore in college, and I'm going to graduate in August. It has actually become easier for me to study and prepare for classes because I just don't have the time to "play." I have to study at regularly scheduled times to get the minimum amount of class work finished and the maximum satisfaction out of my classes.

I miss classes sometimes for reasons those without children do not. My son was sick for four weeks last semester, and I had to miss those four weeks of classes. My mother and sister helped me through, and my son is healthy today because of all the work we did together.

Anyone who has ever seen a mother or father pushing a stroller with a diaper bag on one shoulder and a book bag on the other, trying to cross the street in the middle of slush and mud of winter, shouldn't look at that person's finger to see if there is

a ring on it. They shouldn't wonder what type of parent he or she is. Instead, they should wonder if there is anything that they can offer to do to help. I'd do the same for you.

Many people without children ask me questions about being a "single" parent all the time, like, "Isn't it hard?" and "How can you do it?" They tell me their family would never let them get away with it, and ask me if I think anyone will want to marry me since I have a child.

Well, my answer is simple and plain. I do it because I want to do it and I will do it.

Having a child in any relationship is a lifelong commitment — a person relies on me every single day to do whatever it takes to make sure he is safe, clothed and fed (and he eats a lot).

Some people should look more closely at the responsibilities involved in the parenting process before they say negative things about those of us who are doing the best we can.

On Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, I get up at 8 a.m. and go to sleep at 1 a.m. On Tuesdays and Thursdays, I get up an hour later and go to bed an hour earlier. It's no big deal. Many students do the same thing without the benefit of a 40-pound, always hungry, human alarm clock.

I work all day and participate in a few extracurricular activities. My grade point average is not important (and besides, most of you wouldn't be impressed); but, again, I am graduating in August and am in the process of applying for graduate school.

I utilize all the governmental, community-based and familial resources I can. It makes school easier because I don't have to worry as much about necessities; so I have plenty of time to "worry" about the extras — like money for the movies, toys for my son, clothes and beauty salons — that my friends without children sometimes take for granted.

I only have one child, and I can't even begin to imagine the amount of support and administrative/financial assistance a parent with two or more children has to try to find.

I am a parent and unmarried. But the joy my son brings into my life and into the lives of others doesn't warrant the negative feelings or thoughts that the definition of single causes. Because even if I do get married, I will still be the same person and continue to use a lot of the same techniques I am using right now. My ability to parent will not have changed; the label and negative sense of the word "single" will be the only thing that has dropped.

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Michelle Paulman/DN

Diana Campbell holds her energetic 2-year-old son, Darren, at her mother's house.