

# Q

Tammy from Gilbert writes, "I am a single mother of a 2-year-old boy. His father, a.k.a. sperm donor, has chosen not to be involved in his life in any way. ...



Each month, Arizona Parenting contacts experts to respond to readers' questions with helpful suggestions and information.

*Note: Material contained herein does not necessarily reflect the opinion of Arizona Parenting or its staff. It represents information provided by reputable sources for your consideration.*

**Q:** My son is an extremely happy boy and gets plenty of male influence from two grandpas and an uncle. At this age, does he understand what a Daddy really is or how they are involved in the big picture?"

**A:** "As children approach school age, they usually become more aware of family differences," responds Mary Coonts, M.A. Ed., CDS, of CIGNA Medical Group. "They begin to think logically sometime between age 5 and 7 and can begin to compare their families with others." This may happen even earlier if the child attends preschool, but it's not likely that at 2 a child is aware of "the big picture."

Tammy's son will inquire about his dad eventually. When that happens, experts agree it's important to respond truthfully with age-appropriate information, being careful not to overload them with more details than they need or can process.

"Simple, true answers will satisfy a small child under 5 years of age," agrees licensed psychologist Marlo Archer. She suggests saying something like, "Your daddy lives in California" or "Your daddy can't be here now," or "Not all mommies and daddies live together, but they still love their children."

As the child matures to be around age 7 to 9, Archer says his questions may become more complicated. The best approach then is saying

something like, "Sweetie, I didn't know your daddy very well and we just didn't get along," or "your daddy wasn't ready to be a daddy yet," or "we might just have to do without your dad."

At this age, Archer says he might begin to think his mother deprived him of a father, which is natural. His anger might be expressed through bad behavior, declining grades, sassing or withdrawing. A professional counselor can help at this stage.

Fortunately, single parent Kristine Yee of Chandler didn't experience that phase. She wrote a letter to her son and kept it sealed in his baby book until her simple answers to his questions no longer satisfied him, which occurred during third grade.

In the letter, "I talked about how much of a blessing he was ... that even though getting pregnant young and being single wasn't part of what I wanted in my life plan, it was the best thing that could have ever happened," recalls Yee. "We sat and talked about it, about everything, and since then, he hasn't asked anymore questions about his dad." Her son is now 10.

In a single mom's conversation with her child, Coonts warns not to criticize or denigrate the absent father. She should also be prepared for a time, usually in adolescence, when the boy desires to seek out the father. "This is important to forming a positive identity," says Coonts. "Counseling may be needed at various stages to help the child understand."

Ashley Scardefield, B.S., a prevention specialist at Parenting Arizona, says the most important thing is not to dwell on the lack of a father. "Instead, focus on all the wonderful things that the child has and begin with a mother that loves him. Another thing to do is not assume that the child has an emotional void or problem because of the situation. Many parents tend to fall into the routine of giving the child things or privileges that make up for only having one parent. This is only going to cause problems for the mom and child in the future," explains Scardefield. "Finally, it is essential to not continually seek out men that could potentially be a father to your child. Before bringing a man into

**Continued on Page 12**

E-mail questions to [lynda.exley@azparenting.com](mailto:lynda.exley@azparenting.com); fax to 602-279-7978; mail to 2432 W. Peoria Ave., Suite 1185 Phoenix, AZ 85029. Include phone, e-mail, name and city you reside in. Submission are consent to publish name and question. Phone number, e-mail address, etc., remain confidential.

your child's life, consider the potential for a future with (him) and the appropriate role they may play in your child's life."

While it is wonderful Tammy's son has a male support system with his uncle and grandfathers, our experts caution that neither can "take the place" of a father.

"Male role models really help shape a boy's early development," says Archer. "But no one takes the place of a biological parent. That is a unique role that, by virtue of what it is, cannot be replaced 100 percent. However, a loving, involved grandfather is going to be much better for a boy than an unpredictable, irresponsible biological father."

**Q:** Christina Pedroza says she is uncomfortable letting her 7-year-old boy spend time at another child's house when she doesn't know the parents. "What is the correct way for me to explain this to him?"

She also wants to know the best way to decline the invitation without offending the other family.

**A:** "While it becomes more and more difficult as a child grows older to always know your child's friends, or friend's parents for that matter, at age 7, it is quite necessary," responds

Vickie Owen, crime prevention specialist for the Gilbert Police Department. "Gaining knowledge about another child and his or her parent is an important way to obtain information that may affect your child's safety. You do not have to be best friends with the parents, but it is a good idea to know something about them."

Lindy Marino, a crime prevention specialist for Mesa Police Department, agrees. "You want to be certain that they are responsible adults," she explains. "If the parents have weapons in their home, they should be secured and out of sight and range of the children. If you don't know the parents, you don't know if they are using drugs or alcohol in front of the children; or worse yet, including the children in their usage. You want to make sure they respect you and your rules."

"Always voice your concerns and communicate your rules concerning swimming pools, trampolines and playing outside," adds Owens.

How can Christina explain this to her son without frightening him? "Explain to your child that this will provide you with an opportunity to meet the other child's parents and to be confident that their home is as safe as yours," suggests Owens.

"Let your child know that (s)he is so valuable you want to make sure that those individuals

watching him/her are going to take good care of them," offers Marino. "And until you get to know (the parents) better, you are going to make sure your child stays in the safety of his/her own home."

How can Christina avoid offending her son's friend's parents? Owens explains, "It should not be offensive to another parent if you decline an invitation for your child to play at another child's home because you do not know them well enough. In fact, most parents will understand your concerns because they share them. If you decline an invitation because you do not feel comfortable with the parents, simply offer to have the child play at your home."

Consider having the friend's family over for dessert and friendly conversation, and tell them it's a way to get to know each other better so they feel comfortable with their child at your house.

"One mistake can cost your child his/her life," cautions Marino. "Take the proper precautions and always get to know the other parents – as they should know you – until you feel comfortable that they will treat your child with the utmost care," she says. If you wouldn't hand over \$10 million dollars to a stranger, "don't hand over your child. Your child is worth much more than that. They are irreplaceable." •