

When will the press and politicians stop making single mothers a scapegoat for all society's ills, asks **Susannah Hickling**. Why don't they appreciate what a great job we do?

Support single mums!

“How did you manage for childcare in the holidays?”

I asked a fellow single mum in the school playground.

“My sister took him, thank God,” she replied, before adding. “But then I got made redundant.”

With no financial support from her son's father, surely this was a disaster. But Marise didn't see it that way.

“I'm already looking for something else. Job hunting's like a full-time job—I spend all day contacting the agencies, revamping my CV, searching the web. I'm sure I'll get something soon.”

I had my doubts. Four other female friends had been made redundant and, a year later, only one had found employment. The others—whose husbands worked—said they'd had it up to here with the stress of combining a career with children. They were looking half-heartedly and getting nowhere.

But two weeks later, Marise made a beeline for me in the playground. “I've got a new job,” she enthused. “A much better one, too. I start on Monday.”

She strode off to make sure her son had one of the places at the after-school club. And recently, in spite of her work commitments (she also runs a record label in

“You can't win when you're a single mother”:
Susannah with her six-year-old son Joshua



her spare time), Marise handed me an invitation for her son's birthday party three weeks in advance.

What's the moral of this story? If you want something done, ask a single mum. Work is not a bit of extra money for us to buy luxuries; it's to eat and pay the rent or the mortgage. To do that *and* have a fair crack at turning our kids into well-balanced citizens, we have to be supremely well-organised.

And yet politicians and the media use us as a punchbag, whipping up the public into an ill-informed frenzy: "Half of single mothers 'do not want to work', says report", or "Judge links crime to broken homes".

We're an easy target. Why? Because we're too busy to complain. You rarely hear our voice. The charity Gingerbread does a great job of defending sole parents on the poverty line, often unable to work because they're stuck in the benefits trap. So let me stick up for the rest, the hard-working, responsible majority. We're not what you think.

Forgotten the salt? You can't ask your husband to pop out and get it. Ill? Forget it. There's no one else to take your child to school or cook the dinner. A work-related do in the evening? That's £30 for a babysitter, in the absence of a better half to slob out in front of the TV while the kids sleep. And there's only so much you can ask your friends, no matter how supportive, to do.

My son's school, which prides itself on its "inclusiveness", held an evening meeting at short notice to discuss a disappointing Ofsted report. No children were allowed and there was no crèche. Now, my partner died suddenly when our son was still a newborn and I have no relatives in the area to

help out. Attending that meeting was a logistical nightmare. Is it any wonder that, traditionally, the children of lone parents do worse academically?

Money is more often than not a problem. Two-thirds of lone parents (and 90 per of them are women) receive no cash from their former partner. It's not just that there's one person working—that happens in lots of families—but there's only ever the potential for one income. In a couple, there's scope for two. It takes a lot of pressure off.

We have to be creative about earning enough to live on. And I'm not talking about wangling more, apparently undeserved, benefits or time off work. It happens, I'm sure, but not to any single mum I've met. What I'm talking about is finding honest ways to make a living that bring us in sight of that holy grail of single parenthood: flexibility.

A friend of mine retrained as a teacher so she'd be able to keep the same hours as her daughter. Another temped all the years her son was at school before retraining for the career she'd coveted. They are typical of lone parents who work—and 56.3 per cent of them do.

SINGLE MUMS ARE AN EASY TARGET. WHY? BECAUSE WE'RE TOO BUSY TO COMPLAIN

Some single mothers are spectacularly successful. Take J K Rowling. Would Harry Potter ever have had the chance to delight millions if his creator hadn't been a divorced mother writing in that Edinburgh cafe because it was too cold at home? And what about Lauren Luke, the 28-year-old make-up sensation from Tyneside? She dropped out of school at 16 to look after her baby and started posting video tutorials on the internet of herself applying cosmetics in her bedroom. She now has her own product range, a book out and a Nintendo DS character based on her.

But on the whole, you can't win when you're a single mother. If you don't work—and it's not easy when childcare is in such short supply and costs so much—you're labelled a scrounger. If you do, you're penalised in your pocket.

You can't benefit from any tax breaks for married couples, including the double capital gains and inheritance

tax allowances enjoyed by the wed. If I were run over by a bus tomorrow, my estate—of which my six-year-old son is the beneficiary—would be liable for tax at 40 per cent on any amount over £325,000. On the other hand, the estate bequeathed to a child of married parents, however dysfunctional their relationship, would have a tax allowance of £650,000. In other words, my son, an orphan, would, through no fault of his own, lose an extra £130,000 from property and savings that I've worked and saved hard for.

In the end, it's always the kids who suffer for the "sins" of lone parents, however hard-working and prudent. There's something wrong with that in a civilised society. So give us a break, please, and not just a tax one.

» Do you think single mums are an easy target? Tell us at readersletters@readersdigest.co.uk.



Fount of dubious knowledge

Users of the online encyclopaedia Wikipedia should take care. In their miscellany of misinformation "Complete and Utter Zebu" (Old Street Publishing), Simon Rose and Steve Caplin recount some of the fictional nuggets reported as "facts" on Wikipedia:

Alan Titchmarsh is writing a new version of the Kama Sutra.

Robbie Williams made a living before Take That "by eating domestic pets in pubs in and around Stoke".

David Beckham was a Chinese goalkeeper in the 18th century.

Margaret Thatcher is fictitious.

The village of **Denshaw**, Lancashire, was "home to an obese population of sun-starved, sheep-hurling yokels with a brothel for a pub and a lingering tapeworm infection".

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