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# Dating When You Have Children

## Take your time

After a separation, divorce or the death of a loved one, it takes time to cope with feelings, and move on to another relationship. Before beginning a new romance, people need to work through stages of loss from previous ones. Usually, it takes at least one to two years to resolve feelings from a previous relationship. People also need time to form a new identity.

One of the keys to success is to work on your emotional and psychological growth. Don't look to another person to make you feel whole. Instead, work on making yourself whole by identifying personal goals.

Remarrying is not a way to avoid loneliness. Form friendships rather than romances to help develop stability, independence, self-esteem and a sense of belonging.



## Children experience a range of emotions

Feelings of loss, anger and hurt are common among children whose parents have separated or divorced. Children who have lost parents through death have similar feelings. Because children lack experience, they don't know that things will get better. As a parent, you can help your children. Encourage them to express their feelings in ways that are acceptable.

Children of all ages will react to lifestyle changes, including the separation and/or divorce of their parents. It's important, however, to discuss and accept all of your children's feelings. Following the separation of their parents, children may feel sad, insecure, afraid, hurt or confused.

Children may think if they love mom or like her new boyfriend, dad won't love them. If they love dad and like his new girlfriend, mom won't love them. They're confused about being loyal to both parents. It's common for children to want to protect parents from feeling hurt and pain.

When a parent begins a new relationship, children commonly feel jealous. They may compare your new friend to their father or mother who doesn't live in the home anymore. Or your children may seek a lot of attention or interrupt conversations you have with your new friend.

Many parents have found the following ideas helpful when introducing and adjusting to family changes. Remember, change rarely comes without pain. Yet it's possible to make the transitions smoother by talking with your children.

- Explain that dating is similar to their spending time with friends.
- Prepare your children before introducing a new date.
- Children may be confused. Let them know you're not dating because you don't like spending time with them. Rather, you need to spend time with adults who have similar interests.
- Don't spend too much time with your new friend. As everyone gets used to one another, gradually increase the amount of time you all spend together.
- If there are times you usually spend with your children (e.g., Thursday night out or Sunday afternoon movie watching), continue to keep that time for them only.
- Spend time with your children before and after your date. They will be less likely to feel your friend is taking you away from them.
- Meet your new friend in places away from your home.
- If you know of something specific that upsets your child, let your date know ahead of time.

When beginning a new relationship, consider the following:

- Take time to listen to your child's feelings about your new relationship without being defensive or giving explanations. Tell your child that you understand his or her feelings. And, remember dissatisfaction may not always be permanent.
- Ask your child if she or he would be willing to listen to you, and why you want to spend time with your new friend.
- Make sure your actions match your words. For example, if you tell your child you will be back from your date before he or she goes to bed, be sure to get home on time.
- Do some problem solving to find solutions that work for everyone concerned. For example, you may decide only to date on weekends when your children are with your ex-spouse.
- If there are certain times of the week that your children are away (i.e., with their other parent), this is excellent time to spend with a new romantic interest.
- Above all, be patient. It will take time for your children to adjust to your having relationships with other adults.

## **Dealing with change**

### ***Changes in routines...***

It's sometimes difficult for children when there are changes in routines. This is especially true when it involves a parent's new friend. For example, be sensitive to how your child feels when there's a new adult at the dinner table. Be sensitive about seating arrangements. Have your children sit where they usually sit.

Encourage your children to share their feelings. Let them know it's OK to feel excited about meeting mom or dad's new friend. Tell them it may also feel confusing or sad, and that's normal and OK.

### ***Feeling insecure...***

Some children may feel their security threatened when their parents begin to date. They may become angry and aggressive. It's common for children to have difficulty relating to new adults in their lives. They wonder if they'll still be loved and wanted if their parents find new companions. Tell and show your children how much you love them. Show an interest in their schoolwork and congratulate them for small successes.

### ***Dreams of a new parent...***

Dating may also encourage children's fantasies of having a "new" mommy or daddy. Children may become attached to a regular in the household. Because of this, some parents decide not to introduce a new friend to their children until the relationship seems to be one that will last.

### ***Worries about a new parent...***

When children hear others mention the phrase "new parent," they may worry that one of their parents will *literally* be replaced. Reassure your children that if your relationship with your new partner becomes permanent, that it will be an addition to the children's lives, not a replacement for an existing parent.



### **Affection and sexuality**

Children may feel uncomfortable with physical displays of affection. Older school age children and teens are attempting to cope with their own emerging sexuality. They may feel jealous, confused, angry or frustrated if they must deal with their parent's sexuality as well as their own. Seriously consider the well-being of your children when it comes to displays of physical affection and your romantic life.

It's better to keep displays of affection and sexual activity, including sleepovers, for times when your children are out of the home.

You should also be prepared to handle your former partner's behavior with new friends, especially if your values differ. Consider how you would respond if your children say that daddy sleeps with his new girl friend or that mommy had a new boyfriend spend the night. If this is a serious concern for you, you need to talk calmly to your former spouse about what can be done. It will not help the situation to get angry. Instead, try to find solutions that will work for everyone involved.

*Remember, your children need comfort and reassurance. They need to know their parents will always love them, even if and when their parents form new relationships.*

### **When a relationship ends**

Remember that your commitment to your child is lifelong. Your child doesn't have to approve of your date. Yet it's important to remember that what you do affects your child. When a dating relationship ends, your children may feel the loss as well. Remember that children tend to believe that things happen because of what they do. They may feel responsible for the end of your relationship. Reassure them that the relationship and its ending was an adult matter that had nothing to do with the children or their behavior.

Communicate with your children. Remember, your children learn by watching you. Be a good model. Experience and express your feelings, but talk with other adults about adult issues.

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