



Co-Parenting: Dating When You Have Children

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Co-Parenting for Resilience

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After a divorce, time is needed to heal from the loss of the family unit, the relationship you once had, hopes and dreams you had for the future as well as other changes. Children need time to adjust and parents need time to form a new identity. This period of adjustment can take one to two years. It may be tempting to begin dating, but dating another person will not speed up the healing process or make you whole. You must first work through your emotions and form your new identity. Remember, remarrying or dating is not a healthy way to avoid loneliness. Instead, spend time with your children or form new friendships to feel less lonely. The following are some things to consider about dating when you have children.

Children Experience a Range of Emotions

It takes children time to adjust to the changes divorce brings to their life. If you begin dating too soon, this creates more changes children must adjust to, which can become even more overwhelming and confusing to them.

Children need their parents during this fragile adjustment period. This is especially true for younger children as they rely on their parents to provide support and stability. When parents begin dating too soon, they may be less available emotionally and physically for their children. Your child may also experience feelings of jealousy from having to share you and feel like they have to use different ways to get your attention.

If a parent gets a new boyfriend or girlfriend, it may be confusing for the child. They may feel that if they like this person they are being disloyal to the other parent, as it is common for children to want to protect their parents from hurt and pain.

Change is usually difficult, but taking special consideration by planning your path with your children's needs in mind will make for a smoother transition. Consider the following ideas when introducing and adjusting to family changes:

- Prepare your children before introducing them to a new partner.
- Children may experience confusion. Let them know you are not dating because you do not want to spend time with them. Explain to them that adults like to spend time with other adults who have similar interests much like they like to play with their friends.
- Have a healthy balance of how you spend your time.



Spending too much time with your partner can be difficult for children. A natural progression in time is best and allows for adjustment.

- Continue keeping the special times you spend with your children just for them. For example, if Friday night is family movie night, keep that tradition.
- Meet your date in places away from your home to keep things separate from the children.

Some important things to consider when beginning a new relationship are:

- Listen to your children's feelings about the new relationship. Avoid getting defensive or giving explanations. Show your children you understand and keep in mind that their dissatisfaction may not be permanent.
- Make your actions match your words. For example, if you tell your children you will be back home before they go to bed; make sure you are home on time.
- Times when your children are already away (when they are with your co-parent) are good times to spend dating or with your new partner.
- Just remember to be patient while everyone adjusts to the new changes.

Dreams of a new parent

Children often fantasize about their parents getting back together, or they may dream about having a "new" parent, which may result in a quick attachment to your new partner. Younger children often attach to new adults quickly, so it may



be good to wait an extended period, even up to a year, before introducing someone.

Worries about a new parent

With the lost dream of their parents getting back together, children may fear that you are actually replacing their parent with a “new” parent. It is important to reassure your child that this person is an addition to their life and not a replacement of their other parent.

Affection and Sexuality

Being affectionate with your new partner in front of your children may be uncomfortable for them. Seriously consider the well-being of your children when it comes to displays of physical affection and your romantic life.

Limit sleepovers with your new partner to times when your children are not in the home.

Plan for how you will respond to the possibility of your co-parent’s values differing from your own. For example, if your child mentions that mommy sleeps with her new partner or that daddy’s new partner stays the night, how will you respond? Preparing your reaction and response ahead of time will allow for a more reassuring and successful response that focuses on your children’s needs.

When a Relationship Ends

Remember that your actions affect your children. The loss of a dating or romantic relationship, if you have involved your children, is a loss for them as well. Remember, children often blame themselves for things that happen and may feel responsible for your relationship ending. Reassure them that they are not at fault, that you love them and you are available to listen to them and acknowledge their feelings. Your children learn by watching you, so be a good role model for your children when dating and navigating relationships.

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