



Divorce and New Relationships: How to Introduce your Children to a New Partner

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Dating after divorce is a complicated matter especially when children are involved. While happy parents do make happy children, if a new partner is part of your newfound happiness, be conscious and purposeful in the action you take in involving your children in this new relationship. Deciding when and how to make introductions between children and a new partner is challenging. When not done in a thoughtful manner, the introduction of new partners can become an obstacle to children recovering from divorce and may directly affect the parent-child relationship. On the other hand, when done in a child-focused manner, the involvement of new partners can be another healthy transition in the divorce recovery process.

Parents should always remember that their children's needs must come first. For adults, a new relationship following divorce can feel like a relief – a break from the turbulence and unhappiness that can accompany a marital break-up. Keep in mind that, although you may feel like your new partner is the best thing that has happened to you in some time, your children may not share your excitement. For children, new partners can trigger the hurt that accompanied the break-up and the loss that accompanies divorce. Further, children almost always desire the reunification of their parents and the involvement of a new partner stands in the way of that wish becoming reality. It is essential for parents to accurately assess and respond to their children's tolerance for further change before introducing another transition. Failure to do so is likely to result in children feeling resentful and angry towards the new partner. Fortunately, however, following clear strategies can put children at ease with the involvement of a new partner in their lives.

Do:

Do base the timing for introduction on your children's needs, not your own: Far too often, parents engage in a new relationship prior to separation or immediately following the marital break-up. Simply because adults choose to quickly engage in another intimate relationship does not mean that children need to be immediately part of these new unions.

Do remember that your children grieve the loss of their intact family unit: Respect your children's grief process. Realize that children are experiencing a number of changes as a result of the parental separation. Allow children to express feelings openly without worry of what their parents want. Another addition to the mix will only create further need for adjustment. Take it one step at a time.

Do understand that trust building takes time: Once you introduce your children to your new partner, do not expect that your children will welcome him or her with open arms. Encourage your new partner

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to respect the children's boundaries, whether verbal or behavioral. Avoid direct or indirect efforts to pressure your child into accepting your new partner into their life.

Do consider your child's age and temperament when introducing your new partner: You know your children best. Consider their age, their ability to adjust to changes or transitions, and how they are responding to the new parenting arrangement prior to introducing another change.

Do be child focused in introducing the new relationship: While it is important to be honest with children when introducing relationships, keep it simple. For example, "This is my friend, Tonya. Tonya and I enjoy spending time together and I hope that you will like her as you get to know her". Teens may want to know the "status" of the relationship and may ask whether your new partner is your girlfriend or boyfriend. Be honest. Do not allow lies surrounding your new relationship to destroy trust with a teen.

Do not:

Introduce new partners too quickly: Divorce is a difficult transition for many children. Ensure that you use your words and behaviour to demonstrate that they are your priority. Children can easily interpret that they have been "replaced" by new relationships. This is especially important if the new partner has children.

Introduce multiple partners to your children: Ensure that the relationship is of importance and has "staying power" before introducing the new partner into your children's life. Remember that children need meaningful relationships, not relationships that come and go.

Pressure children to accept a new relationship: Allow children to express feelings regarding new parental relationships without making them feel guilty. Although you may think your new partner is wonderful, children should have the opportunity to come to their own conclusions over time.

Include your new partner in all of your time with your children: Remember that children want time with you. Avoid allowing your new relationship to become a priority over your parenting time with your children. Set time aside to spend time solely with your children.

Allow your new relationship to interfere with your parent-child relationship: Children require consistent love and stability following separation and divorce. It is essential that new relationships complement your relationship with your children; not interfere. New partners must understand that children's needs are first.

Committing to a child-centred approach when introducing your new partner will ensure that your children continue to feel unconditional love when you move forward in a new adult relationship. Ensure that the needs of your children inform how and when you make the introduction and your expectations of your children's relationship with your new partner. Although you are understandably enthusiastic about a new partner, remember that your children may be in a different place. Taking conscious, purposeful steps will support your children's acceptance of this new partner and prevent risk to your relationship with the people that matter most - your children!