When Should I Begin Dating, and How do I Tell My Children?

We continually stress the importance of taking care of yourself as a means of taking care of your children. Making new friends and starting to date are very personal decisions. Parents will need to trust that enough time has gone by to begin integrating new people into your children's lives. Feedback from close friends or family members can be particularly helpful at this time. Many people rush into a new relationship because they don't want to deal with feelings of abandonment or loneliness. People who rush into new relationships tend to have the same problems in these new relationships. You should work through these issues on your own or with a qualified mental-health professional before entering into another serious relationship. You will be in a much better place to make good decisions for yourself and for your children. As hard as it can be (especially if your ex is in a relationship), spending time alone and working on yourself can be the best thing for yourself and your children.

Make sure to take the amount of time you need to grieve the emotional investment of the previous relationship to get closure. This amount of time is different for everyone so follow your feelings. Some people achieve that before they move out, while others remain emotionally connected after the relationship is over. If you are still thinking about your ex and what they are doing, it may not be the time to start dating.

When you are ready to begin dating, introduce the idea to your children (in age-appropriate ways) well beforehand. Let them get used to the idea that you will be seeing other people. In the beginning, meet new dates away from your home. Limit the number of people who spend time with the children, providing them with consistent and responsible role models whenever possible. Make room for a variety of reactions from your children. Often, children are ready for their parents to begin dating before the parents are. At the other extreme are children who are angry that their parents are dating. Reinforce to your children that they come first, and that you are not trying to replace their mom or dad.

You should introduce your children to someone you are dating after you have gotten to know that person on your own. Ask yourself whether this is a person who will have a positive impact on your children. Remember that initial reactions are just that, and your child will likely have a different experience as time goes on.

Helpful and Harmful Parental Behaviors Around Dating:

- Validate and reassure, they are your first priority
- Don't introduce your children to every new friend, wait until you're in a serious relationship
- Understand that the reaction of your child will depend on their individual temperament and developmental stage.
- Begin with the first few meetings that are short with fun and neutral activities
- Don't rush into "sleep-overs"
- Continue to respect your co-parent in front of your child
- Don't force them to like your new friend and listen to their opinions about them. They may notice things you haven't yet

- Don’t leave your child alone with your new friend until you know them well enough and if your child is comfortable with the situation
- Inform your new friend of the family rules and routines
- Ask your child if they like them and follow up with why or why not

Emotional Impact on Children

Children experience a range of emotions when they know their parents are dating. These include:

- **Feeling insecure:** Some children may become angry and aggressive believing their security might be threatened when their parents begin to date. They may wonder if they will still be loved if their parent finds a new partner. Reassure your child by showing and telling them how much you love them regularly and that nothing can change that. Continue to have interest in everything they do and be an active participant in their day-to-day life.
- **Feeling jealous:** It’s common for a child to feel jealous of this new person in your life and they may even compare them to their mother or father. Some children may demand a lot of your attention, just be patient. It will take your child some time for them to adjust to this new person in your life.
- **Worries about the role this person will have:** When dating leads to a new marriage, children may question how this person will fit into their life. Make sure to reassure your child that your new partner will be an addition to their life and not a replacement for their other parent.
  Your children will always need comfort and reassurance that their parents will always love them, even when their parents have new relationships.

How do I Introduce the Idea of a Step-Family and Getting Remarried?

Step-families have many rewards. However, couples who have children from a previous marriage or relationship may not have an easy adjustment to re-married life. There is no honeymoon period, and the first two years are usually the most difficult. Nonetheless, there are several things parents can do to ease the transitions:

Take it Slow

- There is no such thing as ‘instant love’; love and relationships take time to develop. You and your new partner have chosen each other, but the children may not even want a new step-family.
- One of the biggest mistakes step-parents make is trying too hard. Be yourself and be patient. Let your new partner get to know your children gradually. Be willing to accept any response that the children have initially.

Friendship, Not Discipline

- For the first several years as a step-family, a step-parent should concentrate on playing a warm and supportive role. Think about what this might be: coach, mentor, or friend. A step-parent should support you as the child's biological parent, but leave the discipline role initially to you. In time, a stepparent can begin to enforce consequences and initiate discipline when appropriate.
- Be aware that a step-parent's role will develop according to the age of the children involved. Toddlers will more quickly accept a step-parent in a parental role than will a teenager who is usually not interested in having another parent telling them what to do. You will be more successful with a teenager if you take on a coach or friendship role instead.

Keep Your Couple Relationship Happy

- As busy as your lives are, take time to be alone with your partner, because a strong, caring, and respectful couple relationship is key to the success of the family.
- You and your partner may have very different ideas about parenting. Read books or take a parenting course together to become familiar with new ideas. Find time for private discussions about how the children in your new step-family should be raised. You need to talk about how your household will operate. Remember that you need not agree on everything. What is important is that you discuss these issues, respect the other's opinions, and compromise.

Respect Parent/Child Bonds

- Children and their biological parents need to spend time alone. Although this may make you feel jealous at times, it is important to respect the bond between your partner and his or her children. The more secure the children feel in their relationship with their parent, the more likely they are to be open to an improving relationship with their step-parent.
- You cannot replace their absent parent, nor can you compete with them. Simply be yourself, and concentrate on developing your own unique relationship with them. Remember not to take negative behaviors or attitudes too seriously or personally. These are normal reactions for children, and the more you make room for them, the sooner they will disappear.
- Encourage your children's relationships with their other parent. Some parents fantasize that life would be wonderful if the other parent were not part of their children's lives. Most studies indicate that children need both parents in life. Even in situations where parents cannot imagine the other parent giving their child anything positive, there are usually some valuable qualities or experiences that will be helpful to your children. Protecting the relationship with your child's mother or father will make it easier for them to accept a step-parent. A step-parent can be a positive role model and a wonderful influence on your child, but should not be seen as a replacement for a biological parent.

Respect History

Step-parents enter a family that already has a way of doing things—an established history of traditions that affect everything from who takes out the garbage to how people behave at mealtimes. As the newcomer, it is important that the step-parent watch and learn the

family's traditions without being critical or trying to change them overnight. Over time, as a step-family, you will develop your own traditions together.

Maintaining Connection Across Distance and New Family Dynamics

Long-distance parenting presents unique challenges that become even more complex when your children are living with a stepparent. The physical distance can make you feel disconnected from your children's daily lives, while the presence of a new parental figure may trigger concerns about your role and importance in their lives. Remember that your relationship with your children is irreplaceable, regardless of geography or new family members. Consistency in your efforts to maintain connection, rather than the frequency of in-person visits, often determines the strength of long-distance parent-child relationships.

Establish predictable communication routines that work within your children's schedules and respect the household rules in their primary home. This might include regular video calls at bedtime, morning check-ins before school, or weekly "virtual dates" where you engage in activities together online. Be flexible about timing, understanding that your children's lives include school, activities, friends, and family time in their current home. When scheduling conflicts arise, work collaboratively with the custodial parent and stepparent to find alternatives rather than creating tension about communication time.

Building Bridges, Not Walls

Approach the stepparent relationship as an opportunity rather than a threat. A stepparent who genuinely cares for your children provides additional support and love in their lives, which ultimately benefits everyone. Make an effort to communicate respectfully with the stepparent, acknowledging their role in your children's daily care. This doesn't mean you have to be best friends, but basic courtesy and recognition of their contribution to your children's wellbeing can reduce household tension and make your children more comfortable maintaining a relationship with you.

When appropriate, include the stepparent in important communications about your children's needs, medical information, or school events. This demonstrates that you view them as a legitimate part of your children's support system rather than an outsider to be bypassed. Children feel caught in the middle when the adults in their lives are in conflict, so creating a collaborative approach—even from a distance—helps them feel secure in loving everyone involved.

Creative Connection Strategies

Distance requires creativity in maintaining meaningful relationships with your children. Beyond regular phone calls, consider activities you can share virtually: reading the same book and discussing chapters, watching movies together over video chat, playing online games, or helping with homework via screen sharing. Send care packages with items that

reflect your knowledge of their current interests, inside jokes between you, or materials for projects you can work on together during your next call.

Stay involved in their school and extracurricular activities by communicating with teachers and coaches, attending virtual school events when possible, or watching recorded performances. Ask your children to show you their rooms, pets, friends, or special places via video calls. These virtual tours help you stay connected to their physical world and show genuine interest in their current life. The key is finding ways to be emotionally present even when you cannot be physically present.

Navigating Loyalty Conflicts

Children in blended families often struggle with loyalty conflicts, feeling they cannot love or enjoy time with one parent without betraying another. Be sensitive to these feelings and actively give your children permission to care about their stepparent and enjoy their life in their primary home. Comments like “I’m glad you have someone who takes good care of you when I’m not there” or “It sounds like [stepparent’s name] really understands your interests” can help relieve this pressure.

Avoid making your children feel guilty about their life circumstances or putting them in the position of having to comfort you about the distance. While it’s natural to miss them, focus your conversations on their experiences, interests, and achievements rather than dwelling on how hard the separation is for you. Children need to know they can share positive experiences from their daily life without worrying about hurting your feelings. Your ability to celebrate their happiness, even when it doesn’t directly involve you, strengthens your bond and demonstrates mature, unconditional love that children deeply value and remember.

Understanding the Emotional Reality for Children

The responsibility for maintaining long-distance relationships lies primarily with you as the parent, not with your children. This can feel unfair and emotionally challenging, especially when you’re already dealing with the pain of physical separation. Children, regardless of their age, are not equipped to manage the complex emotions and logistics involved in maintaining relationships across distance and family dynamics. They are focused on adapting to their immediate environment, processing their own feelings about family changes, and navigating their daily lives. Expecting them to initiate contact or reciprocate your communication efforts with the same enthusiasm places an unfair burden on them and sets everyone up for disappointment.

Don’t Take It Personally

It’s crucial to understand that children’s lack of responsiveness to phone calls or seeming disinterest in communication often has nothing to do with their love for you. Initially, children may be hesitant to engage fully in long-distance communication for several reasons: they

may feel awkward talking on the phone or video chat, they might be protecting themselves from the sadness of missing you, or they could be trying to avoid loyalty conflicts with their current household. Some children, particularly younger ones, live very much in the present moment and may not fully grasp the importance of maintaining connection during separation.

Rather than interpreting reduced communication as rejection, recognize it as a normal part of children's adjustment process. Your consistent efforts to reach out, even when met with short responses or apparent disinterest, communicate your unwavering love and commitment. Over time, as children feel secure in your continued presence and develop comfort with long-distance communication methods, their engagement typically increases. The parent who remains patient, consistent, and non-demanding during this initial period often sees the strongest long-term relationship outcomes. Your persistence in showing up, calling regularly, and expressing love without requiring the same level of response in return demonstrates the kind of unconditional parental love that children need, especially during times of family transition.

Where do I Turn for Help?

Before marriage, new couples should look for a marriage-preparation program that focuses specifically on couples who will be forming a step-family. Another alternative is to contact a family-service agency, many of which run step-family support groups and may offer workshops on building successful step-families. Many step-families find that establishing a relationship with a family counselor is time and money well spent. An initial meeting is suggested before everyone moves in together, affording an opportunity to talk about what kinds of roles and responsibilities would be acceptable to everyone. Later, the counselor can be used as a mediator to help family members sort out various issues.

Stepfamily Resources:

https://www.stepfamilies.info

https://stepfamilysolutions.com

https://www.helpguide.org/family/parenting/step-parenting-blended-families

Tips for Step-Fathers

- Build a friendship with your step-child before attempting discipline. Be patient. Research shows it can take up to two years before the child will be comfortable with your discipline.
- Work as a team with your new partner to establish new house rules and methods of discipline.
- If you feel the biological mom is being unreasonable with her child, take the side of your step-child. This will begin to build some trust between you and the child.

- Take part in family meetings, and be open for suggestions from the children on chores and special tasks that need to be done.
- Talk to your spouse in private if you feel undermined or left out.
- Respect each other's privacy. Knock on doors before entering. Be an example of respect and courtesy

Tips for Step-Mothers

- Accept your role of step-mother, and don't try to become the mother.
- Understand that relationships take time to develop. Love for your stepchildren will not happen overnight. Work on liking them first. Look for the good in them, and respect their privacy.
- Avoid the blame game. You are not responsible for the misbehavior of your step-child.
- Seek understanding instead of blame.
- Make yourself available for your stepchildren. Do one-on-one activities with them to build rapport.
- Work as a team with your partner to build new house rules and traditions.
- Take care of yourself. Participate in your own activities and hobbies. The better you feel, the easier it is to accept and love others.

Case Study

Craig (31) and Susanne (29) had a relatively smooth transition during the divorce process. Neither one was very explosive and they both had very practical side to them. Though they were quite levelheaded, that did not mean they were immune to encountering some realistic challenges during the divorce process. It is important to remember that every divorce presents at least some challenges and this in no way means that something is necessarily wrong or that you are failing.

Though the divorce was relatively amicable, and things were going well, they eventually hit one of the classic obstacles facing newly divorced couples with children. This was the inevitable stage of post-divorce dating, and the way in which it tends to affect children. It is quite normal for children to be unsure how to react to new significant others coming into their lives. The parental response here has to be considered and subtle. It is one of most delicate situations that one can ever encounter.
In the case of Craig and Susanne, the issue of dating came to a head a few months after their divorce. Both parents had found new partners, and after a while things were getting serious in both of these relationships. For a while they managed to keep their new found relationships separate from their parental lives, but keeping it this way forever was never a real possibility. Their children reacted coolly and showed no signs of accepting these new parental figures in their lives, and so something had to change.

When they arrived at my office, things were quickly deteriorating in the respective households. Craig believes Abbey, his new girlfriend, should be allowed to act in a parental role when the kids were in their care. Suzanne felt like she was being replaced as a mom and resented Abby doing any parenting. Suzanne believed it was a matter of respect and

she reiterated that her boyfriend Sam had no role in parenting, as this would be disrespectful to Craig. Although both parents had reached positive arrangements between themselves concerning childcare, financial issues, visitation schedules etc., nothing had prepared them for this.

My first task was for both parents to feel as if the other parent was hearing their concerns and needs. This tends to interrupt the familiar cycle of blame and attack common with many couples striving to adjust to the inevitable changes that divorce brings. Once they felt like the other understood their core concerns, they were also able to see that their concerns were not very different from their co-parents. They both wanted their children to be held accountable for their actions and for there to be consequences when appropriate. They both wanted their respective new partners to be respected. So in this case, it was a matter of timing. With some of the anger defused, Craig could see the matter of respect that Suzanne was championing. At the same time, Suzanne was able to see the necessity of their new partners being at least somewhat involved in the parenting process. Like many couples, they had originally framed this as an either/or dilemma. When they both were able to take the conversation further and in a supportive and safe environment, they could see that they both had points.

In this case, Craig and Suzanne both feared that their presence would be disruptive, but they were both reasonable, and so were willing to work through matters. This allowed me to put forward an accommodation between all parties wherein all involved could ally each other's fears.
The crucial factor here was, as it always tends to be, open and honest dialogue. Oftentimes people underestimate the willingness of other parties to come to an agreement. But once I was able to sit down with them, I could see a change in attitude emerging quite quickly.