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Dating and the single parent

Re-entering the dating world can be stressful and complicated -- especially when you have children. Here are a few tips to make dating easier on you and your kids.

By Sabrina Toucinho

Now that you're separated or divorced, everything is different. Take dating for instance: before your marriage, you wondered when to introduce your boyfriend to your parents; now, it's your children you have to worry about.

Many single parents avoid the whole question of dating by devoting all their time outside of work to their children. At first glance, this seems like the "right thing to do"-- and it's probably what your children would say they wanted if you were to ask their opinion. But this approach can backfire. "Becoming socially active again is important because it helps free a parent from becoming obsessive about his or her parenting role," writes Vicki Lansky in her *Divorce Book for Parent* (Signet Books, 1996). "Letting your adult life revolve around your child's is actually very hard on your child."

Adult one-on-one interaction is an important ingredient to successful parenting. It allows you time to be a person as well as a parent, to rejuvenate, and to find help and friendship. Adult interaction is also vital to avoid the pitfall of relying too heavily on children to fill the gap left by an adult. As a single parent, you have adult needs for intimacy, understanding, companionship, reassurance, encouragement and romance that can only be fulfilled by another adult. "The children will end up feeling the burden and the responsibility of making their parent happy," says John Gray, Ph.D., author of *Mars and Venus Starting Over* (Harper Perennial, 1998) and the founder of the Mars and Venus seminars and workshops. "All a child wants is for their parents to be happy, but an adult has other needs that a child cannot meet."

In the short term, you run the risk of burn-out if you don't take some time to care for and enjoy yourself. In the long-run, your lack of social life could make you emotionally dependent on your children, which is unhealthy and stressful for everyone concerned.

On the flip side, don't feel you have to run out and find a new mate to provide another parent for your kids. Your kids are probably better off with you alone than with your rebound-romance interest.

Where to start

Before embarking on a new relationship, you should think about what you're looking for in a companion. What specific qualities do you find attractive? What specific qualities will complement you, your children, and your lifestyle? What type of companionship are you seeking: do you need a friend, a date, or are you hoping to remarry? Are you willing to date a single parent (scheduling can be a real problem, but another single parent should have true empathy for you and your situation)?

"Getting back into the dating scene again can be terrifying," says Jill Fein, a licensed clinical social worker and a certified Imago therapist in Chicago. "The best place to meet new people is in settings where you are most comfortable -- at your church or synagogue, at a volunteer organization, or you might even want to try out your flirting skills by testing them safely on a web chat line."

Socializing with your kids along can be a good way to ease back into the social scene. A group called Parents Without Partners offers discussion groups, workshops, children's programs, and social events (check your local phonebook for the number in your area). You could also start your own family-oriented social group by inviting all your single-parent friends and their children to some event, such as a picnic or a day at the zoo. If you don't know any other single parents, a divorce support group is an excellent place to meet some (see "Divorce Support Services" in this issue for some names and locations of appropriate groups). You could also ask your friends to invite their single-parent friends or acquaintances to enlarge the social circle.

If you regularly set aside time for outings with friends, support groups, or dates, you and your kids will reap the benefits: you'll be calmer and happier, which will make you a better parent. Once a week is a good goal for getting out with another adult. Whether you see a movie, spend a day window-shopping, take a walk, attend a support group, or grab lunch or a coffee, try to make a resolution to give yourself adult interaction on a regular basis.

Kids' reactions

When most divorced parents start dating, their children's reaction is usually negative. Your children may see your dates as competition for your love and attention, and it will damage or destroy their fantasies that you and you ex will get back together. Your dating can also reawaken the fears of abandonment they felt when you split up with their other parent.

"Be aware, too, that children are usually more accepting of Dad's dating than of Mom's dating," notes Vicki Lansky. "It's hard to say whether it's a sexist reaction or just that Mom, more often than not, is the caretaking parent and is expected to maintain the status quo."

Shelley Joffe of K.I.D.S First in Toronto advises asking yourself these questions when deciding whether you should let your kids know you're thinking of (or have already started) dating again:

- Has your child had the time and outlets to deal with his or her emotions over the divorce? Making sure kids have successfully dealt with their emotions can decrease anger and negative behavior directed towards you and your new partner.
- You may be ready to try again, but are your children ready? Children may be more traumatized over the divorce than either of the parents.
- Do you have good communications with your child? Would your child come to you if he/she were feeling threatened, unsure, or concerned? Reassure your child that he or she will always come first and that you're always willing to listen.

"By being aware of your children and their emotional needs, and keeping them part of the equation, you're helping them to be happy. And a happy, secure child will be more open to meeting and accepting your new partner," says Joffe.

Consider your children's needs carefully before you expose them to a potential partner. You are better equipped emotionally to handle a series of up and down dating relationships than your children. Also, give your children whatever amount of time they need to adjust to your new lifestyle. Talk to them openly about your need for adult companionship. Lovingly reassure them that no relationship will come between you and them.

Dr. Gray also reminds single parents not to feel guilty about dating. "When a single parent wants to go out on a date, often they'll feel guilty that they should spend more time with their children. But what parents don't know is that even if they were still married, their children would want more. It's a child's job to want more, and a parent's job to set reasonable limits." Reasonable limits means that you don't sacrifice all your needs for the sake of your children.

Introductions

When you decide that your children are ready to meet your date, try a movie or dinner. Don't start with him or her spending the night. After the children get to know and establish a relationship with this new person, then and only then can you expect your kids to be able to handle waking up to a new person in the house.

"For the first three months, Hal and I only dated when his kids were at their mother's place," says Sara. "Hal shares joint custody of eight-year-old twins, Tim and Sam, with his ex-wife: they spend alternate weeks with each parent. "When our relationship became serious, we decided that I should meet the kids on neutral ground. So we all went to the zoo -- Hal introduced me as a friend,' and we saved our kissing and cuddling for when we were alone later. We had a great time," she remembers.

According to Lillian Messinger -- a marriage counselor who specializes in post-divorce remarriages-- this was the right thing to do. "You should introduce your kids to your new love interest only when you feel that the relationship is a significant one -- when you feel this new person will become your partner by marriage or living together," she says. "Don't introduce them while you're in the flush of a new romance. You need to know that the relationship is serious and committed on both parts."

If you were having an affair before your marriage ended, you may have known your lover for a long time, but this doesn't mean your kids are ready to meet him or her. Margaret made the mistake of introducing her "new" man -- who she had actually been seeing for more than a year -- one week after her husband moved out. "It was awful," she recalls. "My kids just hated Alex, and they were furious with him because they thought he broke up my marriage." Margaret has three children aged 9-15. "Alex was a symptom, not the cause of the split, but that didn't matter to them. It's been a year since they met Alex, and they still hate him. I don't know if they'll ever accept him, and it puts a huge strain on our relationship."

In reaction to a new partner, a child may throw fits and tantrums. The way a parent can deal with this is by listening patiently and understanding their pain. "A wise parent is able to recognize that the expression of these feelings is a necessary adjustment and that they will pass," says Dr. Gray.

Your children may attempt to sabotage your dates by being rude and obnoxious, or by "forgetting" to pass along phone messages. Let your child know that you understand that he or she is feeling angry and upset, but make it clear that this type of behavior is unacceptable.

Remember not to take it personally if your child doesn't immediately fall in love with the new person in your life. He or she is probably still angry that mom and dad are divorced, and that anger is often directed at your new partner. Until a child's hurt, anger, and fear are healed, he or she may not like anyone you pick, so instead of trying to convince a child that your new love is wonderful, you should focus on helping a child feel and express his or her loss.

Making time for your kids

When you're caught up in the excitement of a new romance, you run the risk of inadvertently neglecting your children emotionally: your new couple relationship can threaten your parent-child relationship.

You must make spending time alone with your children a priority when a new relationship is taking shape. If you're a non-custodial parent, or if your children are with you for short periods of time (e.g., alternate weekends), make sure to have lots of one-on-one time when your kids are visiting. For instance, your date could come over for dinner one night, and then spend the evening with you after you've put the kids to bed (if the kids ask, your date could help you put them to bed, too).

Overnight Guests

This is a very hard issue for both parents and kids. And there isn't a "one size fits all" answer.

Jill Fein advises single parents to listen to their instincts. "If you aren't ready to field questions about having your new partner stay over and feel uneasy about the situation, don't issue the invitation."

Many single parents avoid having an overnight guest until they've been with the person for several months, when their children are comfortable with him or her, and when they expect the relationship to be long term. "Instead of confusing children, opt to having your overnight somewhere else," says Brook Noel, the co-author of the Single Parent Resource (Champion Press, 1998). "Consider a weekend getaway, or staying at your partner's residence on a night the children will be with their other parent. It's okay to have your partner over and stay late, just try to avoid your children wondering 'Who's in the shower?' or 'Who is sleeping in your bed?'"

No matter how well everyone is prepared, there'll be some uneasy feelings the first time you expose your kids to your love life. They may ask you some surprising questions. Depending on their age, your kids may want to know whether you and your ex slept together before you were married, whether you were monogamous in your past marriage, or how many partners you have had. Be honest, but also be

appropriate: base your answers on your child's age and level of maturity. "Remember that your children will take your example whether or not they're already dating," says Shelley Joffe. "You don't want your actions to come back to haunt you when your kids begin to date." Teens, especially, may be looking for reasons to say "no" to peer pressure, so make the answers to their questions constructive for them. But also remember that while children should know the basics of your social life they do not need graphic information about your sex life.

Time is on your side

One of the greatest challenges of single parenting is to nurture your own adult needs and your children at the same time.

By minimizing how many potential partners your child is exposed to, you'll minimize conflicts, objections, and angry outbursts from your child. Whether you choose to continue to sail solo or embark on a new relationship, be patient and take your time. Move forward slowly with a new partner, and get to know him or her really well before embarking on remarriage or living together -- for your own sake as well as your children's.