

**Single Parents Guide to Dating After Divorce:
Tips for How to Guide Your Child Through the Process**

When parents begin dating after a divorce it can feel confusing and even a bit overwhelming to both parents and kids. The idea of dating elicits a multitude of questions: How long should I wait? When is the right time for my child? How will it affect him or her emotionally? And, what are my needs and how should that weigh into the equation? Although there is no one perfect answer to each of these questions, to follow are some helpful tips to assist you with navigating this process.

1) Consider recent events in the child's life

It's important to reflect upon the specific circumstances under which you divorced and the changes and losses children often experience during a divorce. When a parent begins dating, it provokes anxiety in even the most seemingly confident children. Children tend to hold onto the fantasy that their parents may get back together, sometimes even after one parent has re-married. The power of this fantasy and the subsequent reaction of the child should not be underestimated. It is also important to consider the experiences your child has had as a result of the divorce. For instance, was it a process marked by high conflict or was it amicable? And, has your child's relationship with the other parent changed drastically as a result of the divorce? These are questions will help you to anticipate your child's reactions and consider his or her feelings when deciding when to start dating.

2) Once you do starting dating – take it slowly!

Rushing into a new relationship increases the risk that you and your child may be negatively impacted by a relationship that may not work out. Be cautious about who you decide to introduce to your children. It is generally not advised to introduce your children to someone you're dating until you are relatively certain they will likely be a stable presence in your lives.

3) Talk to your children

Keep in mind your child's age and developmental needs and find ways to speak to him or her on their level about dating and what this will mean for the family. Although you may choose not to introduce your child to a dating partner, it does not make sense to keep this aspect of your life a complete secret. Give your child/children ample time to absorb the idea and answer questions they might have. Allow children to express their feelings about your dating. Listen and show concern, do not over react by yelling, judging, or criticizing them or their feelings. The goal is to help them express their needs and feelings about the situation without doing damage.

4) Plan introductions carefully

Once you've decided to introduce a new partner to your children, it is important to respect your child's reactions. Forcing your child before he or she is ready may do more damage than good. It is recommended children be given some involvement in the decision making about when and where to meet the person so they don't feel it is thrust upon them with no choice. Tell your child you are ready for them to meet the person you are dating whenever they feel ready, then let them articulate when they are ready. Ask them where they'd like to meet so they get to choose a setting that will be most comfortable for them. Having activities to do at the first meeting is often a good idea. As mentioned before, children may have mixed reactions to a new person in your lives initially, but negative reactions are likely to dissipate if the child is given a chance to gradually get to know your new partner. If you normalize your child's feelings and provide support, given time, your child will accept the relationship.

5) Reassure your children

Provide reassurance about your role as their mother/father and make sure to make extra effort to spend quality “special” time with children while dating. Subtle reassuring actions such as notes in the lunch box, story time at night, or a nightly check-in before bed will not change because you are beginning to date. If your child feels secure in their relationship with you, they are less likely to feel threatened or afraid. Don’t allow dating to interfere with visitation schedules or normal child/parent activities.

In summary, regardless of the situation, communication with your children is crucial to navigating the complexities of dating and parenting at the same time. Being accepting of their needs and working together will ultimately ensure the best outcome.