

Dating after Divorce: What it Means for Kids

by Katy Abel

Dating: For Kids, the Death of a Fantasy

Eva L. remembers the conversation she had with her two sons following one of their regular visits with her ex-husband. Both boys were brimming with news about Daddy's new friend, Joanne. But when she referred to their father as someone who was dating, the children were quick to insist that she was wrong.

"Daddy told us he won't date until we're in college," they declared. "She's just a friend."

Tears followed some time later, when the father asked his sons for "permission" to allow Joanne move in with him. Given the power to vote on the relationship, the children cast "no" ballots and told their dad that, per his earlier declaration, Joanne couldn't move in until after they went away to school.

The story illustrates the confusion and anxiety children often feel when parents, eager for some measure of happiness and success in a new relationship, struggle over how much distance to place between their children and a newly developing romance. "Seeing a parent date is an odd scenario for kids," says M. Gary Neuman, L.M.H.C., author of *Helping Your Kids Cope with Divorce the Sandcastles Way*. Neuman is creator of a divorce therapy program for children mandated for use in family courts by many states. "It sometimes hammers home the message that our parents are never going to get back together."

The power of the reunion fantasy is not to be underestimated, says Neuman, observing that some children cling to the belief that their parents will get back together even after one parent has remarried. The reason is simple: A child's own identity is very much tied to that of his family. When the family disintegrates, a child's sense of self is threatened, even if he maintains strong ties to both parents.

Neuman recalls, "This 13-year-old kid once said to me, 'I feel, now that my parents are separated, that I don't exist.'"

While most children don't articulate their feelings so strongly -- in fact, most shrug or say "okay" if asked how they're coping with a parental split -- therapists who work with children of divorce agree that divorce makes kids question who they are, where they came from, and where their lives are headed.

That's not an argument for or against divorce, for or against dating. It *is* an argument for honest, direct dialogue with kids about new relationships: Why Mom or Dad wants one, what Mom or Dad will do if a new relationship becomes serious, and how Mom or Dad's relationship with the child will be affected.

Introducing the Main Squeeze

Eva L. had been divorced for six years when she announced to her children that she was thinking of starting to date again.

“They fell on the floor laughing,” she recalls. “They told me I was too old to date.”

Since then, Eva and her 13-year-old son have had many discussions about her relationships with men and his with girls. He once waited up for her when she was out on a date and asked, “How did it go?” when she arrived home. Later, the two discussed her difficulty ending the relationship. The child urged her to say goodbye to the man she’d been seeing, and Eva is now moving toward doing so, in part because she was so impressed with her son’s observations.

But despite such late-night chats and an occasional “flurry of activity” on her social calendar, Eva has no interest in introducing any man to her sons.

“Some of the people I’ve met have said, ‘Why don’t my son and I meet you somewhere?’ Some men use their kids like dogs in a park to get attention. I think it’s horribly unfair to children.”

Joe B., father of 7-year-old Cathy, was initially very careful about how much time the two of them spent with his girlfriend and her son. The parents and kids enjoyed ski trips together, often in the company of other friends. From the start, Cathy said little about her father's growing relationship with a new woman.

“I didn’t really want her to know much in case it didn’t work out,” he recalls. “My daughter pretty much knew we weren’t just friends. But she never asked me anything. She made some comments to my roommate at the time, but not to me.”

“Don’t ask, don’t tell” dating policies are often the unspoken rule of parents who plan to keep their romantic lives separate from their children's lives, or who fear that introducing a new love interest who might not “stick around” will simply give their children a new reason for heartache.

Gary Neuman agrees that casually introducing every date to a kid is a bad idea; equally wrong, he believes, is minimizing the importance of a new love interest. Children who “discover” that their parents are in love often feel betrayed when the situation reveals itself. Already anxious about the changes in their lives due to the divorce, and often feeling closer to a parent than they did before, they may now feel that a trust has been broken -- exactly at the point when trust and reassurance are most needed.

Putting Happiness on Hold?

Rather than forgo romance, Neuman and parents interviewed for this article suggest addressing children’s concerns head-on *before* dating begins:

- Acknowledge to yourself that children are likely to view a date as a threat to their own personal time and experience with you. Whether or not they voice their concerns, children

may wonder: “Will *she* go to my soccer games now and talk to Dad and then he won’t watch me play?” Or, “Will Mom’s boyfriend try to boss me around and act like my father when he’s not?”

- Be very clear with kids that adults need time with other adults, just as children need time with other children. They may wonder why, as Neuman puts it, “A total stranger is being invited to join our special club.” A good response is something like, “You are the most important person in my life, but like you I need to spend time with people my own age, so I’m going to start dating again. I know some kids don’t like it when their parents date. What do you think?”
- Encourage kids to express their feelings, but don’t allow them to dictate the terms of your love life. Children who are manipulative are usually fearful that events in their life are spinning out of control. Rather than viewing it simply as bad behavior, parents should recognize it as a child’s attempt to regain control and restore a sense of order. Curb manipulative behavior by demonstrating with words *and action* that a new love interest won’t undermine your parent-child relationship. That may mean creating “sacred space” -- regularly scheduled parent-and-kid time when the new boyfriend or girlfriend isn’t part of the action. Neuman suggests telling children, “I’m going to date, but when you’re not with me, so it won’t affect our time together. If I get serious, then you’ll meet the person, but I’m not going to get serious until I know they’ll fit into our family.” Never tell children, “I’m not going to get serious with anyone you don’t like.”
- Make sure the introduction of your new significant other takes place only *after* you’ve had a private conversation with your child about the relationship. Then, Neuman suggests choosing a setting where the focus will be on an activity, not “getting to know each other better.” Meeting at a playground or going to see a baseball game will be easier for kids than making conversation with a stranger in a restaurant. On the other hand, casually introducing Sally or Pete at a huge Christmas party might not give kids a true sense of how important the relationship really is.
- Have hope: if the proper groundwork is laid, and if the new boyfriend or girlfriend is really committed to you and accepting of your children, they can indeed develop a fond relationship with your new partner.