

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.

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. Ideally, you should only introduce those people who are becoming a significant part of your life. Begin with a few short outings, and focus on things that are fun for your children. Remember that initial reactions are just that, and your child will likely have a different experience as time goes on.

How do I introduce to my children 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.

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.

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.