

Ask the Experts

Compiled by Danilae Smith

Dating After Divorce

Q I'm recently divorced but I think I am ready to start dating again. How do you handle dating again when you have children?

Parent

A It is important to feel at least reasonably confident about the prospect of dating again after divorce—especially when you have children. It can be challenging to feel confident about knowing when the time is right, especially when navigating issues with your ex-spouse and your children are standing by reacting to all of the new family dynamics resulting from the fall-out after divorce.

You might be getting pressure to go out, meet new people and enjoy your new single status, but you may not feel ready. Ask yourself whether you have really taken time to heal and have been able to focus on self-care. This might include starting a healthy exercise routine, focusing on a new project, or talking to a therapist to increase self-awareness and self-esteem. If you have children at home, this is an opportune time to spend one-on-one time with them to promote and re-establish their feelings of security and well-being. These activities can help develop the setting of new standards for yourself when you are ready to date.

To help you avoid jumping into a new relationship too soon or feeling regret from doing what you might consider desperate, there are ways to avoid these pitfalls. Support is vital, especially from friends, and especially when they are new friends. Researchers have suggested that old friends may have ties to your past marriage and therefore may not offer the kind of unconditional and fresh, optimistic perspective that new friends can provide. Meeting new friends is an excellent way to get involved in new activities and to build a sense of optimism about the future.

If you have children at home and are contemplating a new relationship, consider the amount of time you have been divorced. If you date too soon, children may view your new dating partner as another parental figure that is being thrown into the mix and they are likely to feel resentment. Divorce typically results in having reduced time with parents, and having to share their parent with a new person can escalate feelings of anger and loss.

The age of your children will determine how to best talk with them. Children are highly likely to view your dating as a threat to their quality time with you so it is vital to acknowledge this so they know that you are aware and sensitive to their feelings. It is never healthy or appropriate to ask your child's permission for you to begin dating. Asking their viewpoint, however, is fruitful as it initiates on-going conversation. Always let them know that you will spend quality time with them, and start right away in setting up special activities with them.

It is also vital that you are very clear that adults need time with other adults, just as kids need time with other kids. Following up with a statement that they are the most important person in your life, but like them, you need to spend time with people your own age, can provide an appropriate reason as to why you want to start dating again. You can then ask how they feel about your decision as a way of helping them feel heard and that you care about their feelings about this additional change in their life. Also, talk to your child about your new serious relationship before you introduce him to your significant other. If your child is very young, such as a toddler or preschooler, refer to your date as your friend and explain that you enjoy spending time with special friends just as they like to spend time with friends. With pre-teens and young teens it is appropriate to refer to the new person as a date and you can ask how they feel about your dating to open up the discussion. Reassure your child that the time you are dating will not conflict with the times you would normally be spending with your child. Taking advantage of joint custody schedules can also help you target your dating on days when you wouldn't normally have your child home with you.

Most importantly, have a positive attitude and have hope that your new relationship is based upon a strong commitment to one another and that your new boyfriend or girlfriend is accepting of your children. When this is the case, your children can have a good opportunity to develop a fond relationship with your new partner



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