



Column: What to know and say about post-divorce romance

BETH FAWVER MCCORMACK
Law Bulletin Columnist, Akron Legal News

Olivia Newton-John and John Travolta taught, and sang, about summer love so well. As the weather cools down, the heat of a summer romance may still be going strong. New relationships raise questions. New relationships after divorce raise many more questions.

How will the kids react? How about the ex-spouse? What will friends say? How about family? Is this going to last long enough to tell all of those people?

The answers will depend on each relationship, however, there are some precautions to use no matter the duration or seriousness.

As far as the kids are concerned

There is no reason to rush. While it may be exciting for the couple, it will not be as riveting for the children. Divorce puts children through a proverbial wringer. Children of divorce have to cope with a separated family, at a minimum. Obviously, there are many other implications of divorce. If parents cannot get along, children are often put in the middle. Even if they are not, they always feel the tension between their parents.

If the parents happen to get along well, bringing another adult into that dynamic often destroys the repertoire. It doesn't have to.

Most professionals suggest waiting six months before introducing a significant other to children. However, this number can be dependent on when the couple met. If the divorce is either not final or newly finalized, six months may be too soon. If you have been divorced for a year or more, six months may be sufficient. Being cognizant of timing is important for the children's emotional stability.

Each child's personality and age should also be considered. No professional can explain a child's personality to a parent. Professionals should, however, encourage parents to make this a consideration when deciding whether and when, to tell a child about a new partner.

Age is also important. Emancipated children often fare better than younger children simply because they have the maturity to do so. However, age is similar to personality. If an emancipated child is also a highly sensitive one, it is probably better to wait.

Keeping an open dialogue about this change is also important. Be aware of your children's doubts and fears. Talk with them regularly to make sure they are sharing their feelings. Seeing one parent with someone other than the second parent is unnatural and sometimes intimidating for children. By remaining open to their criticisms, worries and questions, it will foster coping mechanisms and increase the chance of acceptance.

Breaking the news to your ex-spouse

An ex-spouse, as the other parent, should know of a relationship before the children. It sounds counter intuitive yet is important. If children find out first, and in turn, share that with their other parent, it is often a recipe for disaster.

Children should not be explaining one parent's new romance to their other parent. Their focus should remain as carefree as possible, as children have enough of their own stressors in today's society.

It will help to sit down with an ex-spouse and speak about the new relationship directly. While it may be uncomfortable, it is better than the alternative. There is no good time to tell a child's parent that another adult is entering their child's life. There are many fears associated with such a change.

It is important to use common sense during this time. Do not sneak off with the children and a new partner and ask the children to conceal that from their other parent. That is disrespectful to the children, ex-spouse and the new partner.

Tips and tricks for the new partner

It can be hard to enter a divorced family. There are many boundaries to be aware of. Children continue to need their parent's attention, leaving less for a new relationship. It is important to realize this and encourage the attention to remain on children.

They were there long before the relationship and will continue to exist no matter the destiny of a romance.

Stay the course. Children will be slow on the uptake. In fact, most of the time, they will not like a new partner at all. Continue making an effort and it will not go unnoticed. Small gestures will suffice.

For example, movies, concerts and other activities that engage the child without forcing full-on interaction, at least until the children are comfortable. It may be awkward at first, but continuing to make those efforts will foster a healthy relationship in the long run.

Do not play house. By acting like a new family unit, children often get protective of the other parent. It takes years for children to delineate between, and become comfortable with, their two separate families.

Instead of forcing children to act like a family, allow them to adapt to two major changes: One, their parents are no longer together, and two, one (maybe both) of their parents have moved on. These are big changes and children need time to adjust. While the marriage may have been long over before the divorce for parents, it was not for the children.

Be mindful of the attention you are giving. Children of divorce often feel as though attention is being taken away from them and giving to everything but them. Even without divorce, siblings often feel as though the other is the favorite or gets more of the attention. Divorce amplifies these feelings for children. When another person is added to the equation, these feelings can be magnified.

Balance is everything

Introducing a new significant other after divorce is never easy. Children can feel confused by their parent dating again. Ex-spouses can also be fearful of another adult, who could potentially be a parent figure, entering their children's lives.

Taking time and care with your approach to integrating your new partner into your family's lives will always create a better recipe for success.

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Beth Fawver McCormack is a partner at Beermann. She practices exclusively in family law matters and is a collaborative law fellow, mediator and child representative.

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