



Introducing Your Children to Your Significant Other

and Learning to Deal with an Ex's New Partner

BY TERESA HARLOW



Falling in love again after a painful breakup from your children's parent can bring you back to life. You're thrilled to have been deemed lovable again, and you can see the light at the end of the very long tunnel you've been in. So naturally, you want to announce the news of your newfound love to the world. And you're ready to get on with living your happily ever after.

Bringing new adults into your family circle though? What is that going to look like? Of course, you're tired of sneaking around with your new partner and limiting your time with them. But are you ready to open up Pandora's box and begin the process of blending them into your family? Are your kids ready? Does your new partner have children to consider in this equation? And what does your new partner think? Oh, and let's not forget about your child's other parent. How will they respond? It turns out that creating your family sequel is far more complicated than it was to establish Family 1.0.

Let's start off by setting your priorities.

You might be thinking your first priority is the children. But not this time. Of course, your children are always your *overall* number one concern. But when it comes to picking a new mate, you first need to decide whether they are well suited for *you*, regardless of how great they may be for your kids. Certainly, there will be cross-over between these priorities. But if you don't pick the right person for yourself, the relationship will struggle and is likely to end in disappointment for all. Consider the fact that while about 41 percent of first marriages end in divorce, a whopping 67 percent of second marriages and 74 percent of third marriages fail, according to Micklin Law Group.

In light of this bleak outlook, I'm not going to tell you how to decide if you're in the right relationship. But I will suggest some qualifying questions to help you decide on the right time to introduce a new partner to your children.

When Should You Introduce Your Significant Other to Your Children?

How far removed from your divorce are you and your children?

For some of you, it's been years. For others, maybe only months have passed. And some will recouple before the divorce is even final. Have you given yourself and your children time to adjust to your life since your separation?

The longer it has been since your split from your co-parent, the better for both you and your kids. For you, you'll be more objective about this new love interest as you'll be more focused on it. And for your children, you'll be giving them time to absorb one set of changes without burdening them with another batch of unsettling new circumstances to navigate. Of course bear in mind that some children adjust

quickly, while others may never fully get over your divorce from their parent. This may be a product of their age, emotional maturity, or grief they feel in losing the former family structure. So, be sensitive to where each child exists on this spectrum as you consider introducing new partners.

Introducing a new person into your family equation only after a reasonable time period post-divorce allowing the family to transition to their new life will make the blending process easier when you do decide to take it on.

How Well Do You Know Your New Love Interest?

People tend to put their best foot forward in the early months of a relationship and then gradually reveal their true character over time. Spend adequate time getting to know each other and allowing your true selves to surface.

Take time to find out if they are responsible, honest, financially secure, and emotionally stable. Do they have annoying habits or troublesome addictions? What have you learned about their past? Do they want children in their life? How about more children? Do the two of you bicker or disagree a lot? What does their future look like? Are you in it?

You may think you know the answer to that last question. But what if you begin telling everyone about them only to find out that they thought you two were just having fun? That would be awkward.

Even if you confirm that you are both committed to the long haul, are they ready to meet your kids? If they're not, that doesn't necessarily disqualify them. But you may need to give them more time before throwing them into that situation.

When I began dating again after I divorced, I set a minimum timeframe of dating a person for six months before I would introduce them to my son. And then I'd only move forward if I saw a future for us and expected them to be in my life indefinitely.

While I can't give you a precise amount of time to wait in your situation, I can say with confidence that, if you haven't been together for months, it hasn't been long enough.

Is Your New Mate Parent Material?

OK, you may not be trying to replace the other parent. But you'd be ill-advised to commit to anyone who isn't enthusiastic about having your children in their life. Even more importantly, remember that you are your children's ultimate protector. So you must ensure that your new partner is safe to have around your kids and that they will be a good influence on them.

In 1985, Martin Daly and Margo Wilson wrote, "If their parents find new partners, children are 40 times more likely than those who live with biological parents to be sexually or physically abused." "Child Abuse and Other Risks of Not

Living with Both Parents," *Ethology and Sociobiology*. While this study is dated, it is worth consideration when bringing a new adult into your child's life.

Does your significant other need to have parenting experience? Not necessarily. But if they lack it, then they better have common sense, be teachable, and be willing to learn.

Final Thoughts on the Timing of Introductions

Children want safety. But they also like predictability and consistency—in other words they like knowing what to expect. They value your time, attention, guidance, support, and love. When you introduce a new person into their life, they may feel all these things are in question again. They also may judge you if they still harbor anger over your split with their parent.

To minimize your children's anxiety when it comes to a significant change such as this, introductions to new partners should be very infrequent. Older kids could perceive frequent introductions as reckless or morally questionable. Or they may be inclined to model your behavior. Younger kids may be confused by a constant parade of new adults in and out of their lives.

How Should You Introduce Your Significant Other to Your Children?

Now that you've figured out your timing for the introduction, how should you do it?



Consider Introducing Your Co-Parent to Your New Partner First out of Respect for Their Role as Parent

Having said that, I encourage you to break the news of your new relationship status to them gradually, even if you're sure you're both over each other. You can't predict how they may respond and whether old wounds might resurface with this news. So do it in steps.

Start by telling your co-parent that you've begun dating again. Then, weeks or months later, share that you're in a committed relationship, and finally that you plan to introduce the new person to your kids. I then would offer your co-parent the courtesy of meeting your new partner before your children do. After all, this person is a stranger to them *and* your children. Wouldn't you feel better meeting them first if the shoe were on the other foot? If your ex passes on the opportunity, that's fine. But you showed them respect as your children's parent by offering.

Above all, avoid accidental introductions to your ex. If you haven't shared the news of your new "special someone" with your child's other parent, don't have them answer your door or phone or drive your kids around for you.

You could just leave it to your kids to tell them. But would you appreciate learning the news this way?

Avoid Accidental Introductions of Your Significant Other to Your Kids

If you haven't introduced your children to this person, don't have them showing up at all their soccer games or at your house without expecting to raise suspicions. And don't spring it on them by having the new man or woman sitting on your couch when your kids come home from school or elsewhere. This is not the kind of surprise your kids will appreciate.

While accidents happen, do your best to avoid them, and don't leave matters to chance.

Be Intentional and Plan Out the Introduction of Your Children to Your Significant Other

Pick an activity that everyone can enjoy and that provides ample opportunity for them to talk to one another. For this reason, a movie or show is probably not the best choice unless they have some time before it to get to know each other first. Playing a board game together, having dinner, or doing some type of activity like bowling, hiking, or volunteering in the community are better choices. Ask your older children for input on the plan. I'd also recommend having the initial meeting out of the public eye to give everyone space to respond emotionally if needed.

Be Patient and Realistic with Your Expectations as You Bring This New Person into the Fray

In fact, your patience may be required for an extended period as everyone gets to know each other and becomes more comfortable. Don't expect everyone to hit it off right away. It will probably take time for your kids to warm up to this new situation and to accept your new partner into their lives.



Introduction Dos and Don'ts

- DO get to know your new partner well and be in a committed relationship with them before introducing them to your kids.
- DO make sure your new partner is on board before planning introductions or making any relationship announcements, including on social media.
- DO tell your ex before you tell the kids. It shows respect for their parental role.
- DO minimize the number and frequency of new partners introduced to your children.
- DON'T let an introduction happen accidentally.
- DON'T cast your new partner as your children's new mommy or daddy. It's not fair to the other parent and it's too much pressure on the new person.
- DO plan an activity that everyone can enjoy and that gives everyone a chance to talk.
- DO keep your children's safety always at top of mind. Remain vigilant once the new partner has been introduced.
- DO be mindful of showing favoritism if both you and your partner have kids.
- DO have patience and give it time. DON'T expect too much!

They may go through a period of resistance out of loyalty to their other parent. They may not have fully accepted that their old view of their family is gone.

Your new partner may be nervous when they first meet your kids. Who could blame them? It's a lot of pressure. And all parties may need time to adapt to each other's personalities.

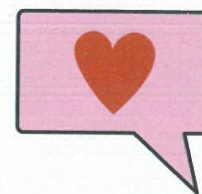
As your children's exposure to your new partner unfolds, observe how they interact with your kids. Ask your children how they're coping. Ask your ex what the kids are saying to them about the new partner. Remain vigilant.

Adjusting to Your Ex's New Partner

When your co-parent enters into a new committed relationship, you may encounter a variety of emotions. You may feel pain and grief knowing that they have moved on, even if you didn't think you still had feelings for them. It declares that once-promising relationship dead, which can be hard to face. You may be jealous that this new person has time with and influence over your kids. Or you may be fearful of being replaced by them in the eyes of your children. You may also feel like you've lost control over your parenting situation and may fear what will happen next.

Be sure to deal with your emotions by talking to a friend or family member; going to therapy; or seeking out books, online articles, and podcasts that will help you resolve these feelings. You can also lower anxiety by learning more about the new person. I know it can be tempting to pressure your kids for these insights, but doing this is unfair to them and puts them in the middle. Instead, meet the new person and get to know them yourself. Be sure to have an open mind, and given them a chance to adjust to you too. Who knows what they've been told about you?

Of course, it's a good idea to listen to your children's concerns about the new person if they share them with you. But, be careful. Don't take at face value everything your kids



say. They may be telling you things they think you want to hear out of a sense of loyalty toward you.

Likewise, don't pressure your children to dislike the new person or favor you as a means of coping with your insecurities. Don't talk them down or allow your kids to do this either. You'll benefit far more by enlisting this new party as an ally on your parenting team. Instead, model the behavior you want your children to show toward you. Encourage positive talk. In fact, it may be helpful for you to let your children know that it is OK for them to like the new partner.

If your child shares concerns with you, share this information with your co-parent in a nonaccusative way. Position it as information for their awareness only. If problems persist and become truly concerning, you can always become more assertive later. But, remember that you can't control who your co-parent has relationships with or what goes on in their home.

Only if a situation becomes dangerous for your children in the other home would taking action beyond a conversation, or several, be warranted. That is why keeping communication flowing between you and your co-parent is so crucial.

As you continue adjusting to having this new person in your life, focus on being a good parent yourself and enabling your co-parent to be the best parent they can be as well. And the best way to stay aligned to these goals is to treat your ex and their new partner the way you would want to be treated—not how you feel they may deserve to be treated. **FA**

Additional Resource

Teresa Harlow, *Combative to Collaborative: The Co-parenting Code*, Prometheus Publishing (2021).



TERESA HARLOW (teresa@teresaharlow.com) is a professional speaker, co-parenting coach, mediator, and best-selling author. She is a co-parent, stepparent, and has spent over thirty years working in top American companies helping teams and individuals transform conflict into collaboration and collaboration into results.