

Introducing New Partners to Children After Divorce

How To Make it Positive for Children and Parents



RHODE ISLAND DIVORCE MEDIATION CENTER



Timing & COLLABORATION

Introducing children to new partners should be a positive experience for everyone but if children are not ready or prepared to meet mom or dad's new partner, it may be more stressful than pleasant. Divorce brings big changes to a child's life and it can take them one to two years to fully adjust. While a parent may be happy to be in a new relationship, children do not always share those same feelings at first.

Children under 10 years of age tend to be more possessive of their parents and may perceive either parent's new partner as a threat or someone they must compete with for their parent's affection and attention. They can exhibit sadness, anger or confusion. Children over 10 years of age generally tend to be more open and receptive to new partners, but they may also perceive a new partner as a threat.

While parents may want to include their children in their happiness, introducing them to casual partners and displaying outward signs of affection too soon can exacerbate a child's confusion and anger. It is best to wait until the relationship has moved beyond casual which prevents children from bonding with someone who may not be a long term or permanent part of your lives.

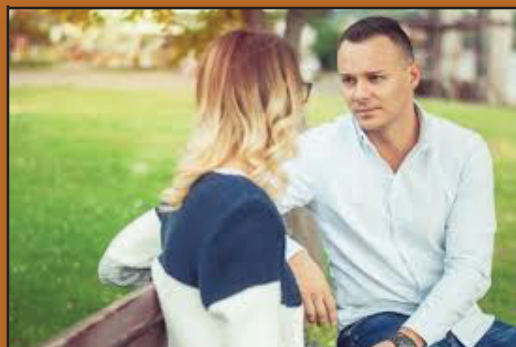


Seeking companionship and intimacy are a normal part of adult life but it is better to keep these relationships separate from time with children until the relationship moves beyond casual dating. Having a partner stay overnight should only take place when children are not present, and after the child has developed a relationship with them.

COLLABORATION & A PLAN

Prior to introducing a new partner to children, it is beneficial and comforting to them if their other parent knows about the upcoming meeting and has met the person before they do. Informing the other parent and including them in the introduction process is respectful, and allows everyone to prepare for someone new coming into their lives. Parental unity around such a big event in a child's life helps them feel at ease, and it prevents surprise reactions from the other parent that may sabotage the relationship before it has a chance to develop.

Since children can be protective of one parent or the other after divorce, a well planned introduction can prevent them from rejecting a new partner out of loyalty for their other parent or feeling resentful towards the partner. When possible, parents should tell their children about new partners and the coming introduction together. This can help children feel more open and accepting of the new person without taking on responsibility for how the other parent feels.



When both parents are involved with bringing new people into their child's life, they also have a comfort level knowing who will be spending time with them. This kind of parental collaboration also prevents children from feeling responsible for telling their other parent about the new partner or feeling the need to protect them emotionally.

The most important aspect of children meeting new partners is timing and giving them the time they need to adjust to the divorce. Moving too fast can put pressure on children to accept and adjust to more changes before they are ready..

SUCCESSFUL

FIRST MEETINGS

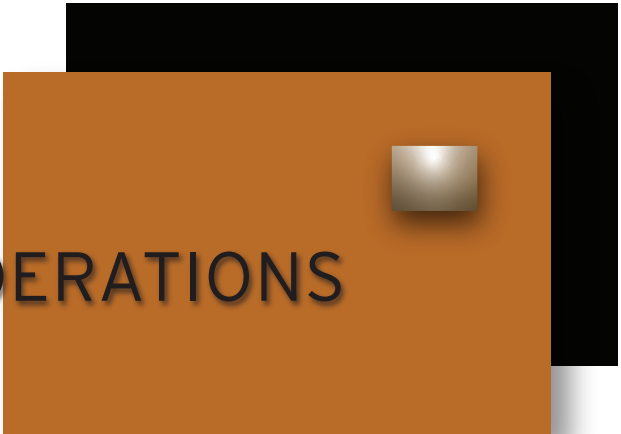


Following 20 years of studying children and divorce, renowned researcher Constance Ahrons concluded that most children find the courtship behaviors of their parents confusing and strange.

First introductions can be awkward for children so it is important to refrain from setting expectations that can make the child feel pressured to think or feel a particular way. The best settings for first meetings are neutral informal locations such as parks, restaurants or ice cream shops. It can be helpful to get input from children as to where they would like to meet, but their home - especially if it is the former family home, should be avoided the first time.

Generally, it is best to keep the first meeting brief so children do not feel pressured or uncomfortable. During first meetings some children can appear shy, guarded or even detached while others may engage without hesitation. It is important for parents to read their children and know when it is time for the meeting to end so the child has a positive experience.

After children have met a new partner, parents should refrain from questioning the child about how they feel about the person. Allow them time to process and share their feelings when they are ready.



KEY POINTS & CONSIDERATIONS

FOR PARENTS

Every child goes through the grieving and transition process of divorce differently depending on their age, gender and level of maturity. While some children transition easily, which is typically seen when the divorce was amicable and parents remained amicable and cooperative, children who experience an adversarial divorce can take longer to fully transition due in part to ongoing conflict or hostility, and a lack of parental unity. In either case, part of the grieving process for every child is holding out hope that their parents will reconcile, and a new partner for mom or dad can complicate or extend their adjustment if they are introduced to a new partner before they are emotionally ready.

If children experience prolonged difficulty adjusting to a divorce, it can be beneficial to consult with a mental health professional before any new partner introductions are made, or the child is told about either parent's new partner.

This guide is for informational purposes only and is not intended as a substitute for professional mental health advice.