

New Relationships

It is common in many divorcing family situations for one or both parents to become involved with a new partner. This sometimes happens quickly. In some cases, there may be a rapid succession of lovers coming home at night with Mom or Dad. In other cases, one or both parents quickly, or eventually, remarry.

This can be a very confusing and dismaying experience for children. Nearly all children view their parents in a special light -- parents are a constant unit, the people who can always be counted on, a source of nurturance and guidance, protectors of children, role models for dealing with life. Few other people will ever be able to claim such an unconditional love from a child. It should not be surprising then, that a child will experience a feeling of deep betrayal as one's mother or father suddenly abandons affection for the other parent and becomes intimate with a stranger to the child.

Many children will feel a sense of competition for their parent's time, feeling deserted by the very parent whose help is so strongly needed during a period of great stress and turmoil. It is not uncommon for children to feel rejected, as the parent becomes involved in a new relationship, particularly if the parent is openly infatuated. For younger children, there is often a reaction of intense jealousy and resentment. For adolescents, the reactions include anger, anxiety, outrage, embarrassment, dismay, and sometimes envy.

When a parent becomes very sexually active, many adolescents, especially girls, become sexually active themselves at an earlier age or with greater frequency than their same age mates. Alternatively, adolescents may begin to worry about their own future safety and security in committed relationships more so than is normal at this age.

A single parent is certainly entitled to a personal social life, including a new partner or special person. When there are children in the home however, it is important to be sensitive to their needs, anxieties and jealousies. Proceed slowly. Give them a chance to get to know the new partner in a casual, non-intimate manner and setting, and to develop a sense of friendship and trust. Don't insist that the new lover share in all activities with the children. Parents should continue to reserve regular time alone with the children. It is not realistic to expect the children to like a new partner just because their parent thinks this person is wonderful. Spend time with your new partner when the children are with their other parent.

If a new partner is to spend the night, prepare the children by reassuring them of your continued love and affection. Discuss the situation with your new partner so he or she will also be sensitive to the children's emotions and worries. **Overnights with casual partners are best reserved for times when the children are with their other parent.**

Remarriage also requires special preparation. Discuss all decisions with the children, no matter what age they are. They need to be allowed to express their concerns (and hopes) so that the parents and new bonus parents can proceed as sensitively as possible. It would be helpful to encourage the children to participate in making plans for the event, and to play a role in it, if they are comfortable with the idea.