

# New girlfriends and your kids



**Just because you're a single dad doesn't mean you have to be single. But dating again after a relationship breaks down can be tricky for all concerned – especially your kids. Dan Roberts looks into how to help them accept a new woman in their life.**

Having been a single dad for nine years, I know only too well how tricky it can be to combine a rewarding love life with the needs of your children. It's only natural that, after a healthy period of mourning for your old relationship, you should start dating again.

**It's also natural that your kids should find this difficult**, perhaps resenting new girlfriends because they're not their mum; that the new girlfriends should have some issues about taking on a man with kids and an ex; and that your child's mother should worry about new women entering her children's life.

“The most vulnerable people in this situation are your kids.”

**In short, it's a potential minefield.** To help you negotiate it safely, I asked Relate counsellor Mo Kurimbokus for advice – and spoke to some single dads to see how they juggle kids, new partners and their child's mum.

## What your kids need

The most vulnerable people in this situation are your kids. Whatever the reasons for your breakup with their mum, **they will be hurt, confused and possibly angry with you both.**

"Remember that **your children will be going through a bereavement process after the end of their parents' relationship**," says Mo. "When you first start seeing another woman it's a good idea to speak to the kids, let them know there's somebody else in their father's life and find out how they feel about it."

- Tell your kids that this new person is **not there to replace their mum**. She is an addition to the family, someone they can form a friendship with or even look to as a mum if they want, but she will never try to replace her.
- Keep introductions light and **take things slowly at first**. Don't expect too much from your kids, or force them to spend time with your new girlfriend if it seems uncomfortable for them.
- **Expect some acting out**. They may well feel angry or bitter towards your new girlfriend. This is perfectly normal, so try to put yourself in their shoes and don't punish them for it.

## What your child's mum needs

The other person who may well have a hard time with you seeing new people is your child's mother – especially if the choice to break up was not hers. "The mum may not have moved on, especially if it wasn't her idea to separate," says Mo. "If she's jealous or angry, **good communication is the key** – try to be patient and understanding and tell her, as you told the kids, that this new person is not going to replace her or try to take her kids away from her."

- Your kid's mum may be worse off not being in a relationship with you, both financially and having to cope with the kids on her own for much of the time. Like you, she has suddenly found herself a lone parent – try to remember that if she reacts badly to your new relationship.
- **But if she is hostile to you or your new partner, she needs to deal with those issues on her own and not use the kids as a weapon against you**. Remind her that their needs come first and that you are handling the situation as sensitively as you can.

## What new girlfriends need

The last person who may struggle with this situation is your new partner, especially if she doesn't have kids herself. "If your relationship is really solid, the fact that you have kids needn't be a problem," advises Mo. "Some women may accept them easily and treat them as their own."

"For others it may be more difficult, depending on the issues they have – they might want a man who gives them all his attention, not one they have to share with his kids."

- **Be honest with any potential new partners about your situation**. Without trying to put them off, make it clear how important your kids are to you and how much time you spend with them. That way they are entering the relationship with their eyes open.
- **Don't expect her to plunge straight into a hands-on parenting role**. If she doesn't have much experience of kids, that can be daunting. Take it slowly, perhaps starting with an hour in the park, then gradually build the time she spends with them.

# Dads' stories

## Tony Graham

"My wife left me for someone else a couple of years ago, which was very painful and totally put me off dating for a while. I've only just started seeing someone, but I'm taking it really slowly, as I'm not up to anything serious yet. I haven't introduced her to my two boys, and won't do so until I think it's definitely going somewhere."

"But she knows all about them and the problems I've had with their mum. She's been really kind about it all so far, but I wonder how it would be when she actually meets them. That's another reason I'm taking things slowly – and because I'm worried about how my boys will react to her. Sometimes I think it would be easiest to stay single for ever!"

## Grant Rennell

"After my separation, once I had lifted myself off the floor, I started dating again. I've only introduced two women to my six-year-old daughter, one a childhood friend and another my current girlfriend. She loves having the adult female company around, and latches on to them in a very affectionate way."

"But it can be rough on a relationship when your partner sees you putting your daughter first in some decisions. Some girlfriends have been more understanding than others. I think it's best to be upfront about these things, however, to avoid misunderstandings down the road."

## 1 John Davies

"I've seen a few women since I split from my long-term partner. Some have been fine with the situation but one really hated it – she said she couldn't share me with my kids, so we broke up. Then my kids got really attached to another one, so it was rough on them when we split."

"Basically, I always put my kids first, so anyone who takes me on gets them too. I think that is hard for a lot of women, but my kids are a much bigger priority for me than a girlfriend."