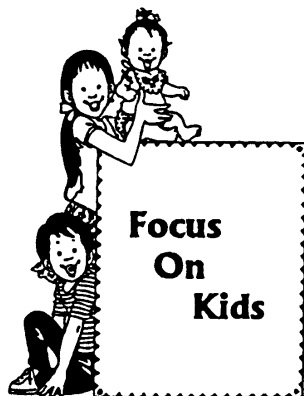


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MOVING?

Please update your mailing information so you can continue to receive this important newsletter. Contact the Specialist listed above in the County where you attended FOK .

Dating, Remarriage and Children

Diana Milne
Human Development Specialist

Without a doubt, parental dating and remarriage has a big impact on children. According to researcher Constance Ahrons, who recently completed a 20-year study on children of divorce, about half of all American children will experience a parent's remarriage before they reach the age of 18.

In Ahron's study, nearly all the children reported that their parents dated or remarried within two years of the separation/divorce. One-third said that one of their parents had already formed a new relationship before the divorce. Most of the children consider their parents' dating lives "strange."

How do Children Feel?

How does dating and remarriage make children feel? Children, age 5 – 10, are more possessive of their mother, and may feel threatened or resentful of having to share their mother with another person. Older children and teens resent seeing their mothers show affection to other men.

Because children typically see their fathers less, they are often more upset when their fathers date than when their mothers date. This can lead them to feel more threatened by a dad's new relationship. Children can also view a parent's new partner as an insult to the other parent—especially if they believe the "other person" was the cause of their parents' divorce.

When a parent decides to live with or marry a new partner, it is a major adjustment for most children. In the study, one-third of the children reported that when a parent remarried, it was more stressful for them than their parents' divorce! In addition, a significant number of children didn't find out about their father's remarriage until after it happened. These children felt left out, abandoned and less likely to trust their fathers. Children tend to know their mother's new husband before the remarriage takes place and have more time to adjust to the changes, which can lead to greater acceptance.

When a parent starts dating, it presents new issues. Over time, children usually come to accept the fact that their parents are moving on with their lives. Most children aren't interested in being involved or included in their parents' dating lives—however, when a relationship becomes serious, that's another matter. Children need to get to know the new partner **gradually!** A common mistake is trying to form a "new family" too quickly. Children need time to adjust to the separation/divorce of their parents. It is also important for children to have "alone time" with their biological parent without having to share that time with their parent's new partner. An adjustment period may save children from experiencing strong emotional resistance later.

Reference: Ahrons, Constance. We're Still Family, New York: Harper Collins 2004

Stepfamily Life Presents Challenges

Between 75--85% of all divorced people remarry. There are also significant numbers of couples who choose to cohabit rather than marry. About one-third of all children in the U.S. will spend some part of their life in a cohabiting or remarried stepfamily. Because most of these families involve children, it is troubling to know that second marriages fail at a higher rate than first marriages.

Stepfamilies are becoming one of the most common family forms in our culture. Parenting can be a daunting task at times, but becoming a stepparent and adjusting to stepfamily life brings special and sometimes serious challenges. While the couple may be overjoyed at the prospect of a new start, children often don't see it the same way. Depending on the age of the child, expectations and acceptance will vary. Problems may arise when different personalities come together, not to mention the meshing of new family "rules" or routines. Research shows that it usually takes four or more years for a stepfamily to feel comfortable and to actually start thinking of themselves as a family.



Tips for New Stepparents

- ◆ Be understanding and flexible.
 - ◆ Have realistic expectations of stepfamily life.
 - ◆ Don't expect them to love you.
 - ◆ Don't expect them to view you as a father/mother figure.
 - ◆ Expect conflict. Learn how to negotiate and compromise. Make sure you communicate clearly and at the child's level of understanding.
 - ◆ Make "alone time" for each parent to spend with their biological children.
- ◆ Let the biological parent, in most cases, handle discipline of their own children. However, family "rules" may need to be revamped if both parents bring children into the marriage. Consistent rules and discipline for all children will help dispel anger and resentment.
 - ◆ Learn what works best in your new stepfamily and stop doing what does not work well.
 - ◆ Remember that stepfamilies are the result of some loss—divorce, separation or death. Understand that children may grieve that loss for a long time. Let everyone talk about those feelings.
 - ◆ Assure children that it is okay to like or love new stepparents and step siblings. That does not mean they no longer love the absent parent.
 - ◆ Be willing to accept change when it comes to family celebrations, holidays and special occasions. Create new traditions and let go of some of the old ones. **Reference: Missouri Family Newsletter, 2005**



Questions and Answers

Q. I have been remarried for nearly two years now and only one of my stepchildren has warmed up to me and made me feel halfway accepted. What can I do to get my stepchildren to like me?

- A.** Building a positive relationship with stepchildren can take a lot of time. Children often rebuff the attempt to be nice to them. Stepparents who are successful at building good relationships with their stepchildren are often stepparents who don't push too much and try to take it slowly. One of the most effective ways of building a positive relationship is having one-on-one time doing something the child really enjoys.