



Family Matters

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DATING AS A SINGLE PARENT

Dear Dr. Berlá,

My girlfriend and I have been dating for five months. She has joint custody of two young children to whom she is extremely devoted. Her qualities as a parent are part of what I admire so much about her, but since she has not introduced me to her kids, we don't get to spend as much time together as I would like. I don't want to be pushy, but when is it okay for me to expect to meet them? How will I know if this relationship can work if she is only my part-time girlfriend?

--C.M., Louisville

I get a lot of questions on this topic; the issue here is twofold. First, what is the right way to parent when you have a dating life, and second, what is the right way to date when you are a parent?

Many newly-single parents contemplating dating find that they are contending with issues they didn't have the last time they were in the dating pool. Conventional wisdom dictates that there should be a certain amount of time before one introduces a new love interest to the children. Ultimately the decision about when the right time is, and whether a new boyfriend or girlfriend is a good risk, is an individual one. Most experts agree that kids can be uncomfortable, for a variety of reasons, with the idea of mom or dad dating, and that exposing children to a sexually charged environment is never a good idea. At the same time, you have to realize that no matter how much you minimize the public displays of affection, your kids aren't dense; they will catch on pretty quickly what it means that you have a new "friend." There can be positive elements to this. Your children can benefit from you modeling respectful, verbally affectionate behavior with another adult. Your children should not be privy, however to the "adult" aspects of your relationship, be they sexual or emotional. That is why it is advisable to ensure that your romantic relationship is on the most solid ground possible prior to introducing your children.

Now to the second question: Even if one is clear about one's parenting philosophy, it doesn't make clarity of one's dating philosophy automatic. The reality is that being newly-single can feel extremely lonely. As harsh as it sounds, kids can offer impediments to building an adult social life. Nowadays, single parents will find that most potential partners understand the demands of parenting. Children really should be the priority for every parent. If your love interest does not seem to "get it," or seems resentful of the time constraints presented by your child, then this individual *is not the right person for you*. It doesn't make them a bad person—they just aren't your match.

On the other side, what if you are the childless person trying to date a single parent? You have been understanding and flexible with the needs of your new friend's lifestyle with her children, and have always striven to work around the obstacles to seeing each other in a solution-focused manner. Now though, it seems like the relationship is not moving forward and your patience is beginning to wear thin. You aren't certain how you and the children will mesh because you haven't yet met. It is getting increasingly difficult to picture a long-term relationship with this person you care about due to the unknown quantity of the dynamic with the children. There cannot be one answer to fit the circumstances of every relationship, but there are some elements that are reasonable for anyone to want no matter what the situation.

First, it is reasonable to want to know where the relationship—any relationship—is headed. It is always okay to express your desire to have your relationship be a committed one, and to know what the other person's idea of commitment is. If notions of the terms and goals of your relationship are different for each of you, you have the right to get out and pursue what it is that you want. There is no shame in wanting to be committed and married; there is also no shame in knowing that is not what you want or are ready for. What you shouldn't put up with, after a reasonable amount of time together, is someone being vague or evasive with you about the subject. You shouldn't nag or pressure them, but you do have a right to know.

Second, you have a right to know what your partner's provisional plan is for you and her children. Nothing is written in stone, but I guarantee you that she has some idea of what she envisions between you and her kids if she plans on keeping you around. She should be able to give you some indication of what she is thinking. She may only be able to give you an estimated time frame--she does not owe you a specific date and time for the introduction, nor should you expect to hold her to an exact plan. She should, however, be able to give you a sense of where she sees the relationship heading. She should be able to communicate that to you in a way that builds your feeling of security with her, not in a way that makes you feel uncertain, shut out, or wrong for asking the question. That doesn't mean that you won't be coming in second for a long time to come, but when kids are in the picture, that just comes with the territory. You are an adult and are supposed to have more resources for dealing with your uncomfortable feelings. The kids can't help where they are, and they can't just get out of a relationship if they are unhappy.

If your girlfriend is not able to engage in the type of discussion described above, it probably means one of two things: she is not that serious about you, or she has issues independent of you that she needs to resolve on her own. Either way, at this point, she isn't capable of giving you what you want in the relationship. You might want to give serious thought to moving on.

Hopefully, she will be able to tell you what you want to hear and the two of you will continue working together and moving forward. Only you can decide if the answer you are getting is the right one for you.

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