

# Another place at breakfast

## Advice on how to introduce your new partner to your children without tears

By Steve Greenhalgh

There will come a time when you will feel ready to move on and find a new partner and at some point you will want to introduce her to your children. It's a huge milestone for you and your children. There are things you can do to minimise or even eliminate the potential for hurt and confusion for you and your

children. If handled correctly, bringing a new person into your children's lives will enrich their time with you and help to show them that life is about change and that positive things can come out of even difficult situations.

In time they will build up a healthy relationship with your new

partner and a better understanding of how the grown-up world works, which will help them to grow up happy and confident in their own relationships.

This article is written by Steve Greenhalgh primarily for single dads, but the tips and points work equally well for single mums too.

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### Introduce your new partner gradually

If you can, plan the first meeting carefully. Don't introduce your new partner with a great fanfare, but let your children and your partner meet casually at a party or barbecue, or another similar event where there are other friends around. Work up to going to the cinema or out for a pizza, but still in a small group, if possible.

### Let your children see you and your partner as friends before she stays the night

Depending on the age of your children, it is certain that they will know, or at the very least have an idea about your relationship with your new partner before you actually tell them. Despite this, it is good to have a period where you just "hang out" as friends together, so that they can get used to the situation and feel that they have a chance to have input in how you all are together. Chat to your children about "you all" inviting your "new friend" over for tea. Work with your children to make it nice for "your guest", so that they know that they are involved and that "you and they" are still a unit together, inviting a new person in to your home as a friend.

### Make sure your children call your new partner by their first name

However young your children are, make sure they start by calling your new partner by her first name, even if she has children of her own (and they come round at the same time). Kids are very

good at working things out, and it is much more confusing for them to be told that they should call the new person auntie (or worse still, mum) when they know that the new person is really neither of these.

Never impose your new partner as a 'new mum'. To start with, (in most cases) your children already have a mum, and in any case they will immediately see your partner as "dad's new girlfriend". What she becomes to them over time will depend on how her relationship develops with them as they become friends with her and they feel comfortable with the situation.

### Balance the affection

At the very least a new partner can threaten the way your children see themselves in your affections, at worst a new partner can really make your children feel excluded from your affection. In life they know that they have to share you with others (your friends and your work for example), but in general they don't feel threatened by these relationships because they know that as your children, they are more important to you. However, when a new partner comes along they suddenly see another grown-up giving and receiving affection from you instead of them, and they can begin to think that they are not as important to you any more. Given that they love you unconditionally, this is likely to be devastating for them and can result in bad behaviour as they act out their emotional turmoil and withdrawal, as they pull away from you so as not to get more hurt.

Make them certain of your affections, and show them that nothing has changed between you

and them. If you hold hands with your new partner, then do the same with them; just as much as you always have. Make sure you keep to your favourite routines, until, together with them and your new partner, you have had time to develop new routines.

## Talk to your children about your new partner

Be matter of fact about the situation. Reassure them that they are the most important thing in your life and that you would not have a relationship with someone who they didn't like or who didn't like them, but remember; the most important aspect of talking is listening.

Listen to their thoughts and fears on the subject, don't lie, but don't tell them things that you would rather their mother didn't know right now. You don't want them having to hold secrets in when they go back to their mother's house.

## Talk to your new partner about your children and the situation

Discuss your plans and feelings with your new partner, so that she feels comfortable with the fact that when your children want to sit next to you, then that's fine. Reassure her that making your children feel special isn't a threat to your new relationship. Make sure that she doesn't see your relationship with your children as competition.

## Accept that your children might be a bit "clingy" for a while

Realise that your children might want more cuddles than usual for a while until they understand that the new relationship isn't a threat to them and the relationship you have with them. Don't brush this clinginess off or dismiss it. Be sensitive and reassuring but gently distract them away from the behaviour by involving them closely in the things that you are doing together with your new partner.

## Don't be possessive of your relationship with your children

Give your new partner space to develop their own relationship with your children. You don't have to be involved in every conversation, nor be the leader of every suggestion. Allow them to develop their own friendship. The day will come when your child feels upset by something or falls over and hurts themselves and goes to your new partner to be comforted, or confides in them about something; don't be jealous of this, or feel

threatened, be proud and happy that you have built a situation where your children feel at home and comfortable with your new partner and you have begun to make another family unit.

Your children love you unconditionally because you are their father and making friends with your new partner won't change that.

## Remember that all these rules apply to your children's mother's new relationships as well

Be generous hearted about your children's relationship with their mother's new partner. It is such a time of change for your children and they are trying to make the best of what can be a changing and sometimes confusing situation. Being jealous and feeling threatened by new people in your children's lives only makes things harder for them (and you). You are your children's father and their hero, be pleased for them that they are happy when they are not with you.

## Consider your new partner in the context of your children

This is perhaps the hardest tip of all. Where do your own needs start and take preference over your children's? When are your children demanding too much and not letting you build a new life? What if your children seem unable to accept your new partner?

These are all very difficult questions and there are no clear answers that apply to every situation equally.

Nevertheless, you helped bring your children in to the world, and in doing so you agreed to bring them up and protect them from life's dangers and prepare them to be fulfilled in their lives as grown-ups themselves. Part of bringing them up is teaching them to be considerate and think of other people's feelings. The best way to do this is to be considerate of their feelings and show them by example. Explain to them how you see the situation; talk things through, listen, talk to your new partner about any issues that arise.

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Finally if you have done all this and followed all these tips and still you are forced by your new partner to make a choice between her and your children, consider seriously that she may not be the ideal partner for someone like you, who has children that need him to be part of their life... a very important part.