

Dating and the Single Parent

By Jodi Seidler

Dating as a single parent is an interesting and complex topic that single parents, at one time or another, face either with trembling trepidation or heartfelt joy.

Single parents, regardless of the circumstances surrounding their 'singlehood', do not want to spend their time alone in the world. The question then becomes: what are the rules and regulations of dating and when do they bring the children into the mix.

In my mind, there are two types of dating for single parents. The first type, which I prefer to classify as "What's your custody schedule" dating is when you begin to date another single parent. These odds are great, being that close to 62% of all parents these days are single parents. There is nothing worse than finding someone you're attracted to, only to discover you're on opposite custody schedules...and neither of you are able to change your weekends. You might as well have a pen pal.

So, when dating a fellow single parent, the first thing you're going to want to discover is their custody arrangement. This way you can schedule your dating without taking time away from your children, which is your first priority. You can save on guilt and money by only getting a sitter for special events; or if your children are the same age - you can share a sitter, as long as you don't do it often in the beginning. I feel it is most wise to spend quality time with your children and keep your dating separate.

When you do introduce your children to your 'date'...introduce him/her as "your friend". Try to keep affection focused on your child and not your 'date' while in your child's presence, so they continue to feel secure with the idea of you spending quality time with someone other than them.

How does one meet other single parents? These days there are groups for single parents to get out and socialize (Parents without Partners is one), you can also meet single parents in your synagogue or church, and even in your children's schools. Years ago, I put together a single parent group in my son's school when I discovered there was no support for single parents in the schools. Now, that group is going district wide. More and more

organizations are creating support for single parents in the form of educational, dinner groups, matchmaking, networking and social events.

The second type of dating is what I call Non-Parent dating. These dates have little idea what the single parent lifestyle really entails, unless they have dated a single parent before. There may be some frequent or surprising issues that prevent the relationship from really getting off the ground. It is challenging for a non-parent to understand the ins and outs of sharing custody with an "ex". Sometimes that means you have to see the "ex" frequently, speak to them frequently, and emotions can get elevated during those times. Another challenge for non-parents who date single parents is that they are always on call for their kids...the children come first.

It is very wise not to introduce your children to your date unless it is in a group or activity setting; and you should not introduce your date to your children one on one until you are very serious about your relationship. Don't forget, your children have already suffered one loss, it is wise not to set them up for another if you introduce your dates too soon or too often. You are a role model for your children and you don't want them to see your love life as a revolving door.

If you've ever flirted or had a very personal conversation with someone in front of your child, I'm sure you saw some territorial flags go up in them and perhaps some reactions of jealousy occurred. Children don't want to feel like they are losing you to someone else, they are very protective of their parents and their parent's affections.

The great thing about dating another single parent is that they know what it's like to go through the challenges of parenting alone. I do suggest, however, you spare them your marriage or divorce horror stories until a relationship has been a little bit established. There's nothing like scaring off a date more than letting them know how you've suffered or what a jerk your ex is...that is a dating NO-NO for sure! However, dating someone with children is comforting. Sometimes it is important after a loss to spend some time alone, and build up the relationship with yourself and your children.

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So, as a single parent entering the world of dating, you need to be careful here in your choices. You need to keep yourself safe and most importantly - your children safe. As single parents, our plates are already full with the responsibilities of school, home, work, and elements like time management (better known as 'juggling') and financial concerns. Dating almost seems frivolous. As women and men, though, we need to be nurtured and loved as much as your children do; we need to be fed so we can feed and nurture our young. Having companionship is a very important piece (and peace) of our sanity. So is finding the appropriate person to date and develop a relationship with.

So, I say -- go for it! Be wise and go slow as you begin to date. Keep in mind as a role model, you're responsible for choosing your dates wisely. When it is time to introduce your dates to your children, start the process out by introducing them as your 'new friend'. If your date has children, arrange for a 'group date' at a playground, amusement park, planned hike or special event. Give your children a chance to feel a part of your life outside of the relationship they have with you. Just make sure it's safe.

When you're ready, let go of any remaining guilt, honor yourself, respect your children's emotions, and put your best dating foot forward.

And remember, you get what you settle for.

Jodi Seidler is the creator of Making Lemonade and a columnist - all inspired by being a single mom to Sam, who is now a teenager...and has a more active social life than she does!

Jodi Seidler is a single parent spokesperson and the "Mother of Re-Invention".

Because of her passion, she has been profiled on hundreds of websites and publications, including: Single Parents Magazine, Child Magazine, USA Today, The LA Times, and The Milwaukee Journal; she has been crowned an expert in the field of single parenting and in the art of reinvention.

She has carried the *Making Lemonade message* to national radio as well as TV talk shows, such as: "Inside Edition", "Men are From Mars, Women are from Venus", "Berman and Berman: For Women Only", UPN, Channel 13 News, "The Other Half", "From Inspiration to Realization" and even an Eharmony TV commercial. Most proudly, Jodi is Sam's single mom.