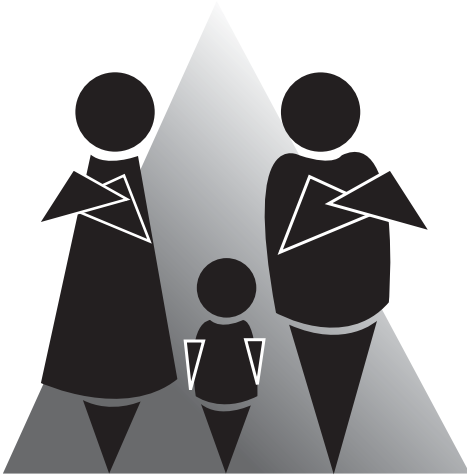


EXTENSION PROGRAMS

Agriculture and Forestry
Community Leadership
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Family and Consumer Sciences
4-H Youth Development
Natural Resources



Are Your Children in the **MIDDLE** of Your Conflict or Divorce?

Dating Issues

A new relationship in the life of one or both parents may require children to give up their fantasy of the family getting back together again. Children may feel threatened by a new relationship because they believe they will have to share their parent's time with another person, thus creating another loss. A new relationship may undermine the security the children are just beginning to redevelop after their parents' divorce. Children may feel conflicting loyalties with a new relationship. If they allow themselves to like a parent's new friend, they may feel as though they are betraying the other parent who does not have a new relationship.

Before entering into a new relationship, deal with your feelings of loss and loneliness first. Consider the emotional needs of your children and make sure they are met.

Take Your Time

After a separation, divorce or the death of a loved one, it takes time to cope with feelings and move on to another relationship. Before establishing a new romance, it's important to work through stages of loss from previous ones. Also, it takes time to form a new identity. Usually, it takes at least one to two years to resolve feelings from a previous relationship.

One of the keys to successful development is to work on your emotional and psychological growth. Don't look to another person to make you feel whole. Instead, work on making yourself whole by identifying personal goals.

Remarrying is not a way to avoid loneliness. Form friendships, rather than romances, to help develop stability, independence, self-esteem and a sense of belonging.

Children Experience a Range of Emotions

Feelings of loss, anger and hurt are common among children whose parents have separated or divorced. Children who have lost parents through death have similar feelings.

Because children lack experience, they don't know things will get better. As a parent, you can help your children. Encourage them to express their feelings in acceptable ways.

Children of all ages will react to lifestyle changes, including the separation and/or divorce of their parents. It's important, however, to discuss and accept all of your children's feelings. Following the separation of their parents, children may feel: insecure, afraid, hurt.

They may think if they love mom or like her new boyfriend, dad won't love them. If they love dad and like his new girlfriend, mom won't love them. They're confused about being loyal to both parents. It's common for children to want to protect parents from feeling hurt and pain.

When a parent begins a new relationship, a common emotion is jealousy. For example, your children may compare your new friend to their father or mother who doesn't live in the home anymore. Or, your children may seek a lot of attention or interrupt conversations you have with your new friend.

Other parents have found the following ideas helpful when introducing and adjusting to family changes. Remember, change rarely comes without pain. Yet, it's possible to make the transitions smoother by talking with your children.

- ▶ Explain that dating is similar to their spending time with friends.
- ▶ Prepare your children before introducing a new date.





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- ▶ Children may be confused. Let them know you're not dating because you're unhappy with their company.
- ▶ Don't spend too much time with your new friend. As everyone gets used to one another, gradually increase the amount of time you all spend together.
- ▶ If there are times you usually spend with your children, keep those times for them only.
- ▶ Spend time with your children before and after your date. They will be less likely to feel your friend is taking you away from them.
- ▶ Meet your new friend in other places and not always at your house.
- ▶ If you know of something specific that upsets your child, let your date know ahead of time.

Dealing with Change

When you do enter into a new relationship, tell your children about it privately without the new person there. It's sometimes difficult for children when routines change. This is especially true when it involves a parent's new friend. For example, be sensitive to how your child feels when there's a new adult at the dinner table. Be sensitive about seating arrangements. Have your children sit where they usually sit.

Don't abandon your children physically or emotionally. Encourage your children to share their feelings. Let them know it's OK to feel excited about meeting your new friend. Yet, it may also feel confusing or sad. Respect your children's physical and emotional boundaries. Allow them to warm up to the new person on their own.

Feeling insecure

Some children may feel their security is threatened when their parents begin to date. They may become angry and aggressive. It's common for children to have difficulty relating to new adults in their lives. They wonder if they'll still be loved and wanted if their parents find new companions. Tell and show your children how much you love them. Show an interest in their schoolwork, and congratulate them for small successes.

The other parent

Encourage a positive relationship between your children and the other parent. Develop and keep your agreements regarding a parallel parenting plan. Make it clear that your new partner is not a replacement for the other parent in your children's lives. Be sure your new partner understands and accepts the importance of a good relationship between the other parent and your children.

When you begin a new relationship, the other parent may feel the relationship represents a loss of potential reconciliation, even if they initiated the divorce. Your children may want to take care of the "uncoupled" parent. Don't let this happen. The uncoupled parent should find other adults

friends, family members or a counselor to help them to deal with their feelings. The uncoupled parent may feel threatened by another adult having some responsibility for parenting your children. This is normal, but your children should not be put in the middle by parents challenging custody or child support agreements. Try to keep your perspective, and calmly talk with the other parent if possible.

Dreams of a new parent

Dating may encourage children's fantasies of having a new mommy or daddy. Children may become attached to a regular in the household. Because of this, some parents decide not to introduce a new friend to their children until the relationship seems to be one that will last. Seven and eight year olds may be especially loyal to absent parents. It may be hard for them to relate to new adults.

Affection and sexuality

Children may feel uncomfortable with physical displays of affection. Older schoolchildren and teens are attempting to cope with their own emerging sexuality. They may feel jealous, confused, angry or frustrated if they must deal with their parent's sexuality as well as their own. Seriously consider your children when it comes to your romantic life.

It's better to keep displays of affection and sexual activity, including sleep overs, for times when your children are out of the home. If you have teen-agers, be honest with them if they ask questions, and avoid setting double standards.

You should be prepared to handle your ex-partner's behavior with new friends, especially if your values differ. For example, what do you say when your children say, "Daddy sleeps with his new girlfriend?" If this is a serious concern for you, you need to talk calmly to your former spouse about what can be done. It will not help the situation to get angry. Instead, try to find workable solutions for everyone involved.

Remember, your children need comfort and reassurance. They need to know their parents will always love them, even if their parents have new relationships.



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When a Relationship Ends

Remember that your commitment to your child is lifelong. Your child doesn't have to approve of your date. Yet it's important to remember that what you do affects your child. When a dating relationship ends, children may feel the loss as well. Also, children tend to believe that things happen because of what they do. Therefore, they may feel responsible for the end of your relationship, even when they are not.

Communicate with your children. Remember, your children learn by watching you. Be a good model. Experience and express your feelings, but talk with other adults about adult issues.

If you are interested in more information on this and other related topics, please call your local LSU AgCenter parish office. Below is the list of topics in the "Are Your Children in the Middle of Your Conflict or Divorce?" series.

A Child's View of Divorce
The Business of Co-parenting
Coping with Stress and Change
Costs of Raising Children
Custody Issues Today
Dating Issues
Disciplining Children
Friendship and Support
Help! I Feel Overwhelmed
Loss of a Relationship
Managing Income and Expenses
Not Enough Hours in the Day
Separating Your Finances
Sharing Parenting
Talking with Your Children
Talking with Your Children About Money
Talking with Your Children -- Communicating
Within Your Family: Active Listening
Visitation Do's and Don'ts

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Pub. 2799 - F

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Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, Acts of Congress of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the United States Department of Agriculture. The Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service provides equal opportunities in programs and employment.