



Dating, Remarriage and Children

According to researcher Constance Ahrons, who completed a 20-year study of children of divorce, about half of all American children will experience a parent's remarriage before they reach age 18. Ahrons found that parent dating and remarriage has a significant impact on children.

Many institutions, including the U.S. Census Bureau, have only recently begun to recognize this trend. Ahrons suggests that this lag, which results in institutions considering only one type of family as normal, makes other forms seem deviant. From a child's standpoint, all family arrangements constitute a family, whether they include parents or parental figures. However, when the arrangements include more than one household, changes in one household can influence the others.

The courtship process

Nearly all the children in Ahrons' study reported their parents dated or remarried within two years of separation. One-third said one of their parents started dating within a year of separation. One-third said one of their parents had already formed a new relationship before the divorce.

Ahrons found that most of the children she studied consider their parents' dating lives strange. It is rarely easy for children to witness their parents dating. Parents may enjoy the courtship process, but children may worry about how the process will change their lives.

Children age 5 to 10 are more possessive of their mother than older children. They may feel threatened or resentful at having to share their mothers with new men. Older children resent seeing their mothers showing affection to other men. Dealing with their mothers' overt sexuality can be troubling and confusing for teens. For example, one child in the study said he thought his mother was "behaving like a teenager."

Older children who have witnessed their parents' bad marriages are more receptive to their parents' new relationships. Still, few teens accept a new partner as a parent figure. Many will challenge authority at every opportunity, and the more a stepparent or new partner tries to serve as a parent, the more resistant children will be. Ahrons says it is best for the new parent figure to serve as a friend rather than an authority figure.

Children may become more upset when their fathers date than when their mothers date. Ahrons says this may be because they already see their fathers less, leading them to feel more threatened by new relationships. A father's attention to another woman is often seen as an insult to the children, especially when that woman is believed to have caused the divorce. Ahrons found that most children prefer not to be involved in their fathers' dating lives.

Cohabitation and marriage

A parent's cohabitating with or marrying a new partner is a major adjustment for children of divorce. The child's opinion of the new relationship depends largely on the opinion of the other parent.

Young children do not notice a difference between cohabitating and marriage. Instead, they are concerned about the new partner's reliability and stability.

One-third of the children in Ahrons' study reported that their parents' remarriages were more stressful than their divorces. When a primary custodial parent remarries, it may involve a change of home or school, loss of friends, or moving farther from the non-custodial parent.

Children found their fathers' remarriages more difficult than their mothers' remarriages. Ahrons found that a significant number of children in the study didn't know of their father's plans to remarry until after the remarriage occurred. Some barely knew their new stepmothers. Fathers said they did not want their ex-wives to know they were remarrying. As a result, children felt left out, abandoned and less likely to trust their fathers. Ahrons says that children who knew their new stepmothers well before remarriage were more accepting of the new relationships.

Children tend to know their mothers' new husbands very well before remarriage. When the remarriage takes place, children are not as affected as they may have been if they had been surprised by the remarriage.

What to know after remarriage

It is important to spend time alone with your biological children rather than always having the new stepparent present. Children also like to have a special place to keep their things in your new home. They can be protective about belongings.

A common mistake is trying to form a new family too quickly. It is important to make time to establish rules and rituals that pertain to all of the family's children.

Most often, children live with their mothers and stepfathers. Ahrons found that the children she studied had five views of stepfathers:

1. *Like a dad.* When a child is young (under 7 years) at the time of the remarriage, he or she sees the new husband as a father.
2. *Substitute father.* When a child is not close to the biological father before the divorce, he or she often views the stepfather as the father he or she wishes the biological father had been.
3. *Bonus dad.* When parents are cooperative and children are not caught in conflicting loyalties, a child may have a close relationship with both the father and the stepfather.
4. *Friend, mentor or pal.* The stepfather is viewed as a friend, but not as a parent figure.
5. *Wicked stepfather.* Happened most often with remarriages that lasted less than five years. Alcoholism pervaded this group. Some children chose to move from the biological mother's house to the biological father's house and some chose to stay with the biological mother to protect her.

Ahrons also identified six common views of stepmothers:

1. *Almost a mom.* When a child thinks of the stepmother as mom-like, but loyalty remains with the biological mother.
2. *A good friend.* A close relationship may develop over the years.
3. *Mediator.* The stepmother's intervention can benefit the father/child relationship.
4. *Civil and polite.* When the stepmother/child relationship is not close, but not awful either.
5. *Interloper.* When the stepmother is viewed as "in the way" of a relationship between the child and the father. The child feels jealous and the relationship does not improve over time.
6. *Wicked stepmother.* Children tolerate their stepmother, but avoid her as often as possible.

Stepmothers typically do not live with their stepchildren. Ahrons says only 8 percent of all stepmothers live with their stepchildren. Because fathers tend to remarry sooner, children often have a stepmother before they have a stepfather. Ahrons says that when a father remarries soon after a divorce, the mother feels betrayed and angry. The second wife is usually younger than the first wife. Adolescent boys may feel sexually attracted to their new stepmothers. They may also have difficulty relating to their youthful stepmothers. Daughters may see a younger stepmother as an enemy.

When there are stepsiblings, anger and resentment among children will increase. Sharing a bedroom with new stepsiblings can be difficult for a child. Children need time to adjust to new stepsiblings. It is common for jealousy to arise between stepsiblings. In Ahrons' study, three-fourths of the children had stepsiblings. One-third lived with their stepsiblings for a period of time.

Stepsiblings are commonly seen by each other as cousins, acquaintances, friends, distant relatives, strangers or enemies. Age differences, frequency of contact and personality affect the kind of relationships made between stepsiblings.

Most children in Ahrons' study lived with a half-sibling, which was more likely to occur on the father's side than the mother's. Adult children considered their half-siblings brothers or sisters, though older children had more difficulty with their half-siblings. Older children may feel like surrogate parents. However, the greater the difference in age between the half-siblings, the more likely there will be a decrease in sibling rivalry.