

EFFECTS OF DATING/REMARRIAGE ON GRIEVING CHILDREN

Dating and remarriage of the surviving parent can engender in grieving children any number and mixture of thoughts and feelings. At the very least, it is yet one more change to cope with following the death of mom/dad, and that fact alone may create resistance in your children. Even in the event that the change is welcomed, it is change nonetheless and, thus, will bring with it reminders of what has been lost (as well as what has been gained). Therefore, it is very common for children (and adults) to experience a renewal of or increase in their grief during this time. You can also count on your children presenting you with questions, challenges, and/or problematic behaviors associated with your dating/remarriage. What follows below are some suggestions from the professional literature on this topic and from our experience here at Bo's Place, on how to handle this period in your life, including how to communicate with your children about this issue, possible questions and concerns they may have, and thoughts and/or emotions they may experience.

Suggestions for communicating with your child

- **Prepare your children ahead of time.**

If possible, talk to your children when you are only just beginning to have thoughts about dating or remarrying. Ask your child what that might be like for him/her, what thoughts and feelings that brings up. If you have already begun to date or are already planning to remarry, ask your child what it has been like for him/her so far and what he/she thinks it might be like in the future.

- **Be prepared to answer a lot of questions (and don't be afraid to say, "I don't know").**

As you can see by the list of questions below and in the attachment, your children may ask for specific information that you can't possibly know at the time. They may also ask questions to which you may never know the answers. Remember that it is okay to **not** know and to admit that you do not know. Children are typically very accepting of this – after all, they are pretty familiar themselves with the concept of not knowing! They also will generally accept an "I don't know" if it is genuinely meant, and not used as a means to avoid the question. What is most important is to *hear* your children, to **help them explore their thoughts and feelings**, and to **be as open as possible** with them in this process.



- **Establish and maintain acceptable boundaries/limits.**

While experts generally agree that children should at least be advised of, if not included in, decisions that will directly affect them, it is also important to remember that it is ultimately the parent who is responsible for the children's welfare. Therefore, hearing your child and exploring his/her thoughts and feelings does not necessarily mean that he/she holds the right to the final word! Where you draw this line, i.e., what is an acceptable boundary/limit to you, is for you to decide given what you believe is best for you and your children. For example, if you are contemplating dating and your child demands to meet every person that you date, we would encourage you to explore this issue with him/her (e.g., what are the benefits and pitfalls of doing so; how will this help or hinder his/her grief process). At the same time, keep in mind that, as the adult, you have the right and the responsibility to decide where the reasonable limits lie on this issue.

- **Question the true meaning/purpose for acting-out and other behaviors**

As mentioned above, any type of change is often met with resistance. Your children may express this resistance in a wide variety of ways and in a wide variety of contexts, some of which may appear totally unrelated to the issue of your dating or remarrying. For example, a child may complain of physical ailments at or near the time you had planned to spend on a date or with your fiancé. You may start hearing complaints about the babysitter (or complaints **from** the babysitter!). Or your child may begin struggling with homework or express interest in new extracurricular activities, both of which demand more of your time and, thus, reduce the amount of time you have for developing a new relationship. An adolescent may exhibit an increase in typical adolescent behaviors, such as seeking conflict with you or other authority figures, withdrawing into silence (or sleep, or TV, or video/computer games), or preferring to spend time with friends rather than family. He/she may even turn to increased studying or extracurricular pursuits as a means of managing his/her feelings on this issue.

Regardless of your children's reaction to your decision to date/remarry, the change brought about by this development will inevitably raise some questions and concerns in them. So remain aware of their behaviors and be willing to consider that they may be an expression of their resistance to this change, welcomed or not. Of course, the most effective way to find out is to talk to them about it. If you haven't already done so, ask them how they feel about it. If you have already talked to them, check it out with them again. Their feelings may have changed as things developed.



Questions/concerns/challenges you may be confronted with by your children

Sources: Stepfamily Association of America, Inc. (1999). *Stepping stones for stepfamilies*. Kansas State University Agricultural Experiment Station and Cooperative Extension Service; Emswiler, M.A. & Emswiler, J.P. (2000). *Guiding your child through grief*. New York: Bantam Books.

1. Why?
2. You don't care about (the deceased parent) anymore! (Or you aren't sad enough, or you haven't waited long enough.)
3. Will you forget (the deceased parent)?
4. Does this mean you didn't love (the deceased parent)?
5. Does this mean you don't love me? Does this mean I'm not enough?
6. Are you doing this because you're angry with (the deceased parent)? Are you angry with me?
7. Do I have to like/be nice to/talk to (the new person)? How should I act?
8. Will this person die/leave too?
9. What should I call him/her? If I call him "mom"/"dad", will that be disloyal to (the deceased parent)?
10. If I don't like him/her, will you stop dating (or not marry) him/her?
11. How is this going to affect my life (e.g., discipline, every day routines and responsibilities, current connections with family and friends)?
12. Can we still keep pictures/watch videos of (the deceased parent)? Is it okay to talk about him/her?

Emotions dating/remarriage may engender in your children

1. Guilt
 - a. for being disloyal to the deceased parent because the child welcomes this change
 - b. for not liking or loving the new person
 - c. for "not wanting to share" the surviving parent
 - d. for not being happy for you
2. Fear/anxiety
 - a. of "losing" the surviving parent, too (to his/her new partner/friend)
 - b. of forgetting the deceased parent (or of one's parent forgetting the deceased)
 - c. of how this change will affect one's daily life
 - d. over not being consulted about or not having any control over the changes happening in his/her life
3. Sadness - Change represents loss as well as opportunity; your decision to date/remarry will likely highlight for both you and your children a number of ways your loss has affected your lives



4. Anger/resentment
 - a. over seeing you find some happiness without the deceased
 - b. over seeing the fact that life *does* move on after the death of a loved one
 - c. concerning any new responsibilities/obligations the dating/remarriage has created for the child
 - d. over not being consulted about or not having any control over the changes happening in his/her life
5. Hope
 - a. that the pain will be taken away by the new person
 - b. that he/she will be happy again
 - c. that the surviving parent will be happy again
 - d. that everything will go back to the way it was before the death
 - e. that the new person will be a better parent than the deceased

Further information for those who are remarrying...

Five realities of stepfamily living

Reality #1 – A stepfamily is born of loss (and children will grieve this loss, regardless of its nature).

Reality #2 – Stepfamilies are *not* like first time married families; work from the strengths everyone brings, rather than trying to re-create the original biological family.

Reality #3 – There is no such thing as instant love; the development of connections/love occurs over time; expectations other than this can create problems.

Reality #4 - Negotiation and conflict are normal.

Reality #5 – The absent parent always has an influence/impact on the stepfamily.

Survival strategies for step-parenting a grieving family

1. Learn everything you can about what stepfamilies are really like.
2. Respect multiple views of reality among the members of your new family.
3. Work on connecting with the members of your new family v. expecting love to develop in the first few years (per Emswiler & Emswiler (2000), it takes an average of **seven years** for love to develop among new family members).
4. Communicate honestly as a couple and as a family.
5. Don't compare your new spouse with the deceased.
6. Recognize that creating a stepfamily is difficult and, at times, painful for **all** adults who take on this challenge.



Sources

Emswiler, M.A. & Emswiler, J.P. (2000). *Guiding your child through grief*. New York: Bantam Books.

Rando, T.A. (1993). *Treatment of complicated mourning*. Champaign, IL: Research Press.

Stepfamily Association of America, Inc. (1999). *Stepping stones for stepfamilies*. Kansas State University Agricultural Experiment Station and Cooperative Extension Service.

K.R.Sweet/Sept. 2001



Bo's Place © Do Not Duplicate Without Written Permission