

Ep #22: How to Introduce a New Partner into Your Child's Life Post-Divorce



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With Your Host

Lauren Fair

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You're listening to *The Sensible Split* podcast, Episode 22.

Today, I'm sharing tips on how to make the introduction of a new romantic partner to your child's life go as smoothly as possible.

The Sensible Split is a podcast for smart but overwhelmed women in search of a roadmap to a successful separation and divorce. If you are looking for guidance in navigating the practical, legal, and emotional aspects of divorce with confidence, this is the show for you. Here's your host, Master Certified Life and Divorce Coach, Divorce Attorney, and Mediator, Lauren Fair.

Hey there, welcome back to the podcast. I hope that your week is off to a great start. We are about a week into the month of October, at the point that I am recording this. And I love October. My birthday is this month. It's so very fall vibe-y.

I am getting excited for Halloween. My kids and I went to the Spirit Halloween store last weekend with my husband, and we did the annual selection of costumes, we bought a new outdoor decoration. My husband likes to decorate the front yard with zombies and such, much to my children's dismay. But it's just such a fun time of year getting ready for the holiday season in general. Really just diving into what it feels like to be in fall and have pumpkin spice things and all of that. I love it.

Also, we're preparing to make our annual trip to Disneyland during Halloween time, which my kids love, and my favorite ride is the Haunted Mansion when it's done up in its holiday theme. So I'm looking forward to that.

I hope that you're enjoying your fall as well, even if it's going a little different this year than it has in the past.

Today, I want to talk to you about my tips on how to make the introduction of a new romantic partner to your child's life go as smoothly as it can. It's the case oftentimes, when we're in a post-divorce scenario, that you get to the point where you want to have a new relationship and you are navigating for the first time how to introduce a new partner to your children.

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So even if you're at the stage right now of, "I have no interest in dating somebody," this probably will become important to you at some point. Usually there is a decision that's made at some point to have another relationship, and if not, that's okay, too. But for most people, this is going to be something that you'll tackle at some point. Or maybe you're at the point now of thinking about it and so this is very timely for you.

But what we want to do is be very mindful about how we are approaching this, because the introduction of a new partner to your child's life is a really big event in their lives. And so we want to think about what is the best way to approach this in a child-centered way, to reduce any kind of negative impact on them of having a new partner in their lives.

Because for you, it's probably a really exciting time if you're on the cusp of introducing a new partner to your child's life. It's probably relatively new, it's exciting, you have really good feelings about this person, but your child may not be ready for it.

And so the first thing that you want to do is assess where the child's readiness is for this event to happen. You might be ready to introduce a new partner, but your child may not be. So what you want to do is determine, do I think my child is ready for this to happen right now? And sometimes that means kind of putting the brakes on things, maybe being a little disappointed in having to delay the incorporation of a new partner into your life fully in the way that you want to do.

But it can be a decision that ultimately serves the relationship between your child and that new partner, if it's done at a time where the child is as ready as they can be for this. So you want to validate your child's feelings about where they are in the divorce. And try to determine what those feelings are before you approach introducing a new partner.

Your child may be experiencing the loss of a two-parent household still. So you might be very much over your ex, and really not grieving that relationship anymore, but your child may be in a very different place, a very different emotional stage of grieving the end of the marriage than you are. So they may be experiencing feelings of loss of a two-parent household.

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Then they may be experiencing other feelings that go along with grief, like anger, sadness, confusion, among others. So it's important to pay attention to the things that your child says, and the behavior that you're seeing from them, to try to assess how they are doing with this transition of not having a two-parent household anymore.

If it's a relatively new transition, like there hasn't been a lot of time that has passed, it's been a month or... There's not a magic kind of time when this becomes something that they are ready for, it's going to vary by child... but you have to separate your own excitement and desire to move forward with this from your ability to assess where your child is in terms of readiness for this.

So you want to allow your child adequate space to grieve before you're introducing someone new into the dynamic. Why is this important? This is important because a new partner can be perceived as a threat to your child, in the sense of your child losing your attention, losing the care that they're getting from you, right?

This can be a perception on their part that they're not going to have the same level of attention from you when they are already grieving the loss of what was a two-parent household. And if the child is not in a place to receive a new partner into the dynamic, then the child may not bond with the new partner. So you want to make this introduction at a point where it has the best chance of success, right?

You don't want to introduce a child to a new partner and it goes really poorly. So we're trying to reduce the risk of that. Because if the introduction goes really poorly, then that not only is not a good thing for your child, but that may not also be a good thing for your relationship. So we want to make sure that they are emotionally ready for it and are not in a space of feeling like their parent is going to be taken away in some fashion by this new person. Okay?

If you think your child is ready for it, then the next step is, do we think the relationship is ready for this? You want to approach the introduction and integration of a new partner slowly and gradually. And we want to make sure first that the relationship with a new partner is serious. It can be very confusing and

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disruptive to a child's life to introduce someone who is not around for the long haul.

It is also confusing and disruptive to a child to introduce multiple partners in a short amount of time. So you really want to be sure that this relationship is serious enough to have your child go through this experience of integrating a new partner.

Next, you want to assess whether your divorce legal process is ready for this. What I mean by that is ask yourself, what impact might this introduction of a new partner have at this stage of the legal process, based on where the co-parent is with processing the end of the relationship. You may not totally know exactly where your co-parent is with processing the end of your relationship, but in many cases, you're going to have some kind of indication.

So you've got to think about, if you bring someone new into this, it's likely to bring up raw emotion in your co-parent. Even if you think they're totally over you, and even if they think they're totally over you, sometimes you can be surprised what the introduction of a new partner brings up.

Sometimes it brings up emotions that you thought you were past. And so you've got to think about the timing for introducing a new partner, and what the likely impact is on your co-parent. And if it seems like that might just kind of throw fuel on a fire right now, that's just information for you to consider in determining what you think the timeline that is best for your situation is.

That might lead you to a conclusion of 'perhaps this needs to wait until we're at a point where this may not derail progress that we are making in advancing the divorce legal process.' Or just in your co-parenting relationship in general, that you perhaps have been working on to get to a good place.

All right, so if you determine that your child is ready, your relationship is ready, and your divorce legal process status are all ready for this, then I have some tips for you about how to make this introduction go as smoothly as possible.

The first is to consider having that first interaction between your children and your new partner be in a group activity. The focus here should be on creating a

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shared experience, like having fun, right? Going out and having fun doing something and not being focused on getting to know the new partner.

The best chance of success for this to go well is if it is just a fun thing for the kids and it's a natural incorporation of this person into it, and it's not like a sit down, 'here's this person that I'm in a relationship with, and I want you to get to know them.' So start with something where you're going out to, I don't know, the zoo, right? Or a baseball game.

Or something that the kids will enjoy, and that it would make sense that you have someone else there with you, like maybe something you otherwise might bring friends along to. Some kind of fun outing that will make it easy on the dynamic of everybody.

Secondly, whenever it is appropriate, once that initial kind of dynamic has happened, you want to have that new partner explain that they're not there to replace the other parent, right?

I think having a frank conversation with a child... depending on how old the child is, right? Obviously, you have to gauge where they're at developmentally... but whether it's kind of an overt conversation or whether it's just evident in their behavior, you want to have them reinforce that they are not there to replace the child's other parent and that's not what their intention is.

You want to have them take the lead in establishing a relationship with the child, even if initially the child does not seem interested. You don't want them to be overly enthusiastic about it. Meaning, you don't want those attempts to be too intense, but some interest on the part of the new partner in the child's life and in trying to create a relationship can go a long way.

And you want to make sure that the new partner is not functioning as a parent. For example, they're not in the role of disciplinarian of the child, like a parent would be. So having that relationship kind of be easy as a friend of the parent rather than them trying to take on parental roles. This is, at least, early on. Okay? This may change over time, depending on the situation. But what I'm talking about is those early stages when we are incorporating the new partner into the child's life.

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Third, at least initially, try not to overdo it with the PDA in front of your child. Meaning, you've got to think about the child's comfort level. They probably have never seen you before in some kind of a romantic interaction with anyone other than your co-parent. So this may be uncomfortable for the child to experience early on, right?

They may not be super comfortable seeing you making out with a new boyfriend or a new girlfriend. And so we want to be sensitive to that and kind of take it slow.

Fourth, you want to maintain an open dialogue with your child about how they're feeling. We want to pay attention to what they're saying, what they're doing, maybe what they're not saying or not doing, and check in with them. Like, "How are you doing with this? What can I do to make this easier for you?" But you don't want to overdo it. You don't want to bombard them with check-ins.

But just be open, and do take some time to check in periodically to see how they're doing. And make clear to them that they're a priority to you in this as well.

Also, you want to spend time one-on-one with the child to reinforce them feeling secure in their relationship with you. So even though you have a new partner, you still are making the time to spend one-on-one with the child. This is one of the places where you see some conflict come up with children, when they feel like their only ability to spend time with their parent is when the other partner is also there.

They really value time alone with you, so don't forget that. And try to make time, even if that means taking some time away from your new partner. Because hopefully, if they're the right new partner for you, that's not going to be a problem for them if you need to spend some time alone with your child.

And lastly, you really want to be mindful of the impact of this introduction of a new partner on your co-parenting relationship and try to maintain a positive relationship with your co-parent through it.

For example, think about how you would want to be treated if your co-parent is going to introduce a new partner into the dynamic. You probably would want to

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know about it rather than your child coming home and telling you about it. So consider informing the other parent in advance if you are going to introduce a new partner.

Letting them know that is a token of respect, and it allows them to not be caught off guard. Because if they're caught off guard, because your child went home and told them about this new partner, they may not have enough of an opportunity to work through that on their own and they might say something or do something in that moment that isn't ideal for your child. Okay? We want to give them some time to have that information in advance whenever appropriate or possible.

Also, consider sharing with your child, as part of helping them understand the role of the new partner and that new partner not being a replacement for their parent, that love can change over time and your love for their other parent has changed, and you really, at this point, love them as a friend or as their parent, right?

That other person is your child's parent, so if the only way that feels even remotely digestible to you is to say that you love them as your child's parent, that's great too. Something to explain to the child that love can change over time and that this new partner isn't a replacement for their parent; you still care for their parent, you still appreciate their parent as a co-parent to the child.

All right, lastly, if you're on the receiving end of this and your ex is introducing a new partner, your co-parent is introducing a new partner. You want to be supportive of the presence of the other parent's new partner.

And when you're interacting with your child about the new partner, you want to make sure that the messaging that you're giving your child, in both the verbal and non-verbal cues that you're giving them, is that it's okay for them to be spending time with your co-parent's new partner and that that's not somehow a betrayal of you that they're doing that.

So you want to make sure that they understand that it's okay for them to like the new partner, it's okay for them to love the new partner, and that in no way changes their love for you. Because if they feel like they like or they love or they

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enjoy spending time with the new partner, that that's somehow going to change the love that they have for you, that will create a lot of inner conflict for them, okay?

You want to be supportive of that relationship even if that's difficult to do. Because you want to decide that your child is more important than your feelings, and act accordingly. Truly, that may seem harsh, and this can be hard to do, but it directly affects how your children adjust to divorce, and how comfortable their post-divorce life is when they have to navigate events when both parents and new partners are present, okay?

So it's super important that regardless of how you feel about the introduction of the new partner in general, or who the new partner is or any of that, if you just remember that what comes first is your child's well-being, in both the short term and the long term, then that will help you determine how to handle any situation that comes up.

Once you make that decision, that how they adjust to this transition is more important than how you feel about it, that helps you determine how to handle things going forward, okay?

Well, I hope this is helpful for you. I know introducing a new partner is a complex matter and there's a lot to think about, and you want to get it right. I know you do. So consider these tips that I've given you today. I hope that your introduction of your new partner goes very well, and that you are set up for success in integrating them into your child's life going forward.

All right, I will see you in the next episode.

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