

When Mom or Dad hooks up with someone new Especially for teenagers and adult children, adjusting to a parent's new partner can be traumatic

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Divorce can drive a wedge between a parent and child, even more so when Mom or Dad hooks up right away with someone new.

While the transition is tough for any child, it can be more difficult for teenagers and young adults who may be more aware than younger children about what is happening and what it all means.

Take the relationship between former New York City mayor and Republican presidential hopeful Rudolph Giuliani and his son, Andrew, 21. The younger Giuliani revealed in published reports that he had "a little problem" with his father's third wife, Judith Nathan, and that he'd only recently spoken to his dad after some time.

Andrew's situation - which included his dad openly seeing Nathan while still married to his mother, Donna Hanover, and his parents' bitter divorce, played out in the public eye - may be more extreme than most. But parents on the verge of separation or divorce would do well to take heed, family and relationship experts say, lest they risk jeopardizing the bond they have with their own teenage or adult children.

Working through the grief

After a divorce, both parents must take care of themselves as well as their children, says Bob Lancer, an Atlanta-area marriage and parenting consultant and author of "Parenting With Love ... Without Anger or Stress" (Parenting Solutions).

"The left spouse must understand that resenting and blaming and feeling like a victim are part of the grieving process, but you need to work your way through it and not get stuck there because it does no one any good, least of

all the children," he says.

Likewise, the spouse who left should not wallow in their own pain and guilt, but honestly face their feelings and work through them, he says. "And definitely do not try to cover your guilt feelings under a mask of blaming the spouse you betrayed."

While parents may be giddy over a new relationship or spouse, experts warn that their kids may not feel the same way - and no one should try to force them to.

Permit the teen or adult child to feel what he or she is feeling about you, the divorce and the new person in your life, says psychologist Joel Block, who has a private practice in Plainview.

"Do not attempt - out of your own distress - to tell him or her how to feel about what's happened. They can feel what they want to feel, whatever they feel," he says.

Those feelings could range from anger and hurt to resentment and rage. Teens also might wrestle with feelings of loyalty to the parent who was left behind and betrayal if they spend time with the parent who left or that parent's new partner or spouse.

"In most of these situations the kids' feelings are justified," Block says. "You don't have to agree with the feelings, but you certainly can understand where they're coming from. ... You can say something that validates their feelings."

Even if your older child is angry with you or acts out in other ways, still strive to maintain your relationship, Block says. No matter what the child says or does, he or she "still needs and wants to feel you care."

Don't ask or expect your children to take sides. Also avoid disparaging the other parent or the new person in their lives in front of your kids.

"Divorcing parents of children of any age should try to avoid demonizing each other," says Michael Zentman, director of the postgraduate program in Marriage and Couple Therapy at Adelphi University in Garden City.

"Parents do this out of a need for emotional support, not to inflict emotional harm on their children. They also may do this out of a fear of losing the child to their soon-to-be ex-spouse's side."

Instead, Zentman suggests both parents own up to their part in the failure of their marriage. "That is not to say that a wife should take responsibility for her husband deciding to have an affair. Only he is responsible for his

decision," Zentman says. "But it is likely that they are both responsible for the relationship becoming sufficiently compromised to leave it vulnerable to this outcome. If both parents take some of the responsibility, this will diminish the intensity of the issues of loyalty and betrayal for the adolescent and young adult."

And parents of older children mustn't forget the basics, says Jeff Levine, a psychotherapist and relationship counselor in upstate Valley Cottage. They should "give their children clear reassurance that in no way are they responsible for what is happening and that they are loved by both parents."

Family forums

One of the best things parents can do is to help their children through the transition, the experts say.

Debbie Mandel, a stress-management specialist from Lawrence and author of "Turn on Your Inner Light: Fitness for Body, Mind and Soul" (Busy Bee Group), suggests that scheduling a series of family discussions might help your kids get their feelings out into the open.

"I believe in family meetings. I think that children, teens and young adults should be consulted," Mandel says. "This is a new family for them. Let them express their concerns. What do they want to see happen? What bothers them?"

It may require more than one meeting, Mandel says.

She also suggests establishing new family rituals that involve the new mate or family members. For example, you could get together and cook dishes none of you has ever tried before, or take up a new sport or hobby that you can do together and discuss afterward.

Exercising alleviates anxiety and helps you release cortisol, an inflammatory hormone caused by stress, as well as endorphins, which make you feel good, Mandel says.

"There are established family traditions with the original mom and dad. Now you want to create new family rituals and incorporate the new extended family. Gradually introduce the new partner and the new siblings into this. Slow and steady."

If one parent's affair led to the parents' divorce, it's important that both parents - and any new people in the picture - remain civil for their children's

sake, says Ruth Houston of Rego Park, author of "Is He Cheating on You? 829 Telltale Signs" (Lifestyle Publications) and founder of Infidelity Advice.com.

Even if the marriage ended in a bitter separation or divorce, the kids may want both parents to attend graduations, weddings or other special events in their lives.

"The best thing the parents can do is try to be civil and reduce inter-parental conflict," Houston says. "The better the parents get along, despite the situation, the easier it is for children of any age, but particularly for older children or young adults."

Be truthful about the reasons behind your breakup but without going into excruciating details. Don't try to win your kids' affection - or assuage your guilt - by giving them money or expensive gifts.

Parents also shouldn't try to be their kids' friend, Houston and others say. "They should still maintain their role as a parent and not have these types of girlfriend conversations about how bad the father was or the man-to-man conversations about what a tramp the mother was. The children don't need to hear that. If it's true or not, it's not something they need to be talking about with the parent."

The open door

Whether you're divorced, in a new relationship or remarried, experts say, don't let either keep you away from your children.

"Spend as much time with the children as you possibly can," Lancer says. "Definitely do not shut out the children, thinking it will be best for them to not have to deal with you. It is hard enough losing the dream of their parents' marriage; losing one of their parents makes it infinitely harder to bear."

Give yourself and your child time to heal and recover. Don't try to rush or force your teenagers or young adult children into a relationship with your new love or spouse. Remember that it takes time for children at any age to accept the loss of their family as they knew it and open their hearts to a new person.

"In some ways it can take even more time for teenagers and young adults," Zentman says.

"Assuming they are living apart from their family, they simply do not have the amount of contact that young children have with a new parent to develop a

personal relationship. But if teens and young adults are not pushed into a pseudo-relationship with a step-parent they will, over time, find their way into an authentic one."

Helping kids cope

Even if you're breaking up with your mate or spouse, you can keep the bond between you and your kids strong. Here are a few tips:

Take care of yourself. Deal honestly with the hurt of your breakup so that the residue doesn't splash back on your kids.

Let your kids express their feelings and concerns about your divorce and any new person in your life. Let them vent, but don't allow yourself to become their human punching bag.

Be honest with your kids about the breakup, but don't overwhelm them with graphic details - especially if infidelity was involved. If so, apologize to your child for past lies or deceptions.

Don't bad-mouth your ex - or the ex's new mate - to your children. Don't ask or expect your kids to take sides.

Don't permit problems with your ex to keep you away from your children. They've already lost the fantasy of Mom and Dad together forever. They don't need to lose you, too.

Take your time introducing the new person in your life to your kids. Don't force them all together, or expect your kids to feel the same way about that person as you do. They may grow to like the person - or not.

Don't turn your children into your buddies or confidants. Continue to be their parent.

Spend time alone with your child. If you're seeing someone, let the child decide when to join you both, and then arrange to do things together your child would enjoy.

If the situation becomes unmanageable, seek help from a therapist who specializes in families and divorce.

Be aware that teens' and young adult children's relationships will be colored by what they see you do in yours.

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