Excerpt from “Chapter 12: New Relationships, Dating, and Remarriage,” (pages 296-299) in “Putting Children First: Proven Parenting Strategies for Helping Children Thrive Through Divorce,” by JoAnne Pedro-Carroll, Ph.D.

*Twelve Strong Recommendations*

1. Thoroughly end one relationship before you begin another—carefully. Make sure your divorce is settled not just legally, but emotionally, too. Take care of yourself emotionally so that when you meet a potential new partner you can forge a new relationship as a reasonably whole and confident individual, not one who feels broken and wounded, in need of a healer or caretaker. Generally, it takes *at least one-and-a-half to two years* to work through the emotional and financial issues surrounding a divorce and be well enough prepared to undertake all that a new relationship requires in order to become sustained and mutually rewarding.
2. Take care to tend and maintain healthy relationships with your children after your divorce. Their need for your love and help in adjusting to changes is especially great at this time. In maintaining strong relationships with them, you ensure that they feel secure in the knowledge of your strong connection, so when a new relationship comes along that is right for you, your children remain confident of their special place in your heart.
3. When you feel ready to date, go slowly. Introduce your children to the idea that you will be meeting new friends. Give them time to prepare for the possibility before it becomes a reality. Ask them how they feel and allow them to ask questions, listening for the meaning behind their questions. Often what children really want to know is whether you will continue to love and care for them if you have someone new in your life.
4. Continue to talk with your children about the divorce and the changes in their lives, checking in frequently to see how they’re feeling about “stuff in general” and changes in the family specifically. For a long time, children grapple with the loss of having two parents together. They need time to adjust to this loss before they adjust to a significant new person in their lives.
5. Get to know a potential partner well as a friend and confidante, as well as a lover. If you are considering him or her as a mate, explore thoroughly whether this person shares your commitment and values as a parent. Consider not only whether this individual will be a good partner for you, but equally important, whether he or she will be a good stepparent for your children. Make sure that he or she understands that your children are a priority in your life, and is very willing to support your important role as a parent.
6. When you are ready for an intimate relationship, do not bring your date into your home when your children are present. Arrange to meet during a time when your children are away from your home, not when they are with you. It is very unsettling for children to meet a stranger in the bathroom or at the breakfast table. And having casual sexual relationships with one or more individuals sets an example for preteens and adolescents that most parents would not want them to follow.
7. Eventually, if and when you meet the right person and agree to enter a committed relationship, tell your former partner before telling your children. In so doing, you protect the children from having to keep a secret from their other parent. You also ensure that your children’s other parent does not hear the news from them before they hear it from you. Your ongoing relationship as parents for your children benefits from the respect this demonstrates.
8. Make early meetings between children and potential partners brief and casual, preferably in a child friendly setting such as a park. Children need to get to know them gradually over time and form their own impressions. In these early meetings, avoid showing physical affection. It comes as a real shock to see a parent as a romantic partner to someone they don’t know.
9. Arrange for your child to spend significantly more time with the person when you think it likely your relationship will be long term. Then, prepare your children before you bring your prospective partner to meet them. Explain your relationship in age-appropriate terms—with young children initially as “a new friend.” Avoid “selling” the individual to them, expounding on their good qualities or setting up an expectation that the children will like him or her. Introduce the person by name, not as a relative—that adds to confusion for young children and may seem false to older ones.
10. Understand that children have fears about what a new person in your life will mean for them and their relationship with you. They worry that they will lose your love, time with you, and even available family resources. Reassure them and demonstrate that they will never lose the special place you have for them in your heart. Act on your words by keeping time with your children a priority when they are with you, especially during the first year following your separation. Set aside regular one-on-one time with each child.
11. Keep dating and parenting separate. If children feel pushed aside or ignored when you are with another person, they feel resentful—a feeling that is likely to last and undermine a future partnership.
12. If you plan to marry someone with whom you’ve had an affair, recognize that your children (and your former partner) will see that individual as responsible for the breakup of your marriage. Their feelings and acceptance of your new relationship are very likely to be complicated and colored by these circumstances, even if they like the individual.

Keeping all these recommendations to guide you, remember that a solid loving relationship with someone who shares your dreams and values can add stability and meaning to life for you and your children. New relationships all take time, care, and patience but can be well worth the wait and the effort in the long run.