

BOTTOM LINE PERSONAL

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YIKES! MOM OR DAD IS DATING AGAIN

How to Avoid a Family Rift

Divorced or widowed parents might feel excitement or hope when they return to the dating world after decades away. But their adult children might feel anxiety about the parent's safety and financial security (and their own inheritance)...renewed grief over the loss of the family unit...or discomfort at seeing the parent behave in a non-parental way.

Here's what parent and child should do—and not do—to protect their relationship during these emotionally difficult times...

WHY GROWN KIDS AREN'T HAPPY WHEN MOM OR DAD DATES

Parents often cannot understand why their adult children have a negative emotional response to the news that they are dating or in a new relationship. In fact, the adult children might not completely understand their own reactions.

The parent's return to the dating world forces a role reversal. Traditionally, it is parents who are asked to be happy for their children's happiness and parents who watch and worry while their children endure the ups and downs of meeting new partners and taking chances on new romances. When a parent dates, these roles are flipped, forcing unfamiliar and difficult-to-navigate dynamics for all.

If the parent settles into a new long-term relationship, that might force the adult child to finally con-

front the difficult fact that the family unit of his/her youth is gone forever. Intellectually, this adult child, of course, understands that the family unit ended when the parent was widowed or divorced—but some adult children manage to avoid psychologically confronting this fact until the parent starts seeing someone new. (This is especially likely if the parent is divorced, not widowed. The adult child might have been telling himself that his parents would get back together eventually.)

In these cases, the adult child is looking backward and grieving the loss of the old relationship just as the parent is looking forward in excitement to a new one. That difference in perspective virtually ensures that they will struggle to see eye to eye.

WHAT PARENTS SHOULD DO

To reduce the odds that a new romantic relationship will damage your parent/child relationship...

Share the news that you are dating again—or that you are in a relationship—in a calm, private moment. Present this news in a straightforward manner, such as, "I wanted you to know that I'm dating again." Or "I wanted you to know that I'm seeing someone." And then let the adult child process what you've said and ask questions. Do not phrase this in a way that demands happi-

ness from the adult child, such as, "Isn't it wonderful—I'm dating!"

Do not find fault with your adult child's reaction to your return to dating or a new relationship even if that reaction is negative. There is nothing immature or even unusual about an adult child's less-than-positive response to this news. This is an emotionally challenging situation, so be ready to take any reaction in stride. Telling your adult child to "grow up" or asking, "Don't you want me to be happy?" only increases the odds that the parent-child relationship will suffer.

If you find someone who you think could become a long-term partner, ask your kids if they want to meet this person rather than trying to force a first meeting. Offer the option of waiting to see whether the relationship lasts a while longer before agreeing to meet. Parents often have unrealistic expectations that their new partners will instantly become part of a happy family unit. That almost certainly will take time (if it happens at all).

Also: Dissuade your new partner from pushing too hard to form close bonds with your adult children when they do meet. Your partner should be pleasant and polite but should let your adult children take the lead in these relationships.

Continue to find as much time as possible for your adult children and your grandchildren—ideally *without* a date by your side. When parents of adult children start spending time

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dating, they often spend less time with their children and grandchildren. This gives the adult children an additional reason to find fault with the parent's return to romantic life.

Reassure your adult children that your money is safe. Your initial reaction to their financial worries might be, "My money is my business"... "My new partner loves me, not my money"...or "It's selfish of you to put your inheritance ahead of my happiness." But it is perfectly reasonable for your kids to be concerned. Relatively savvy people sometimes do fall victim to dating scams, and when they do, their entire families can pay the price. So rather than dismiss your kids' money concerns, you could reassure them that you are not splurging on extravagant gifts for this new partner...and that if you do someday remarry, you will get a prenup. Or you could agree to work with an estate planner (or some other trusted financial adviser) to make sure that your money remains in your family.

Reminisce with your adult children about the old days when your original family was intact. This subtly reinforces the sense that your search for a new relationship does not invalidate the family unit of their youth.

Do not discuss your sex life with your adult kids. It is surprisingly common for parents to share details about their revitalized sex lives with their adult children when they return to the dating scene. Doing this only makes a difficult situation even less comfortable for the adult children.

Do not denigrate your ex-spouse. Detailing everything that was wrong with your ex will not help your adult children understand why

you need someone new. It will only make them angry that they are being pushed to see their other parent in a negative light.

If you are divorced, do not ask your kids not to tell your ex that you're dating. That would put your kids in an uncomfortable position and make it harder for them to see your new partner in a positive light. One option is to contact your ex with the news around the same time you tell your kids, assuming that your lines of communication with your ex remain open.

WHAT ADULT CHILDREN SHOULD DO

To remain on good terms with your parent—and help protect your parent if necessary...

Stifle any negative initial reaction you may have. This negative reaction likely is rooted in your deep-seated emotions surrounding your childhood family unit, not in your true opinion of your parent's decision to date or of the new partner. If you can't say anything positive, say something noncommittal such as, "Thanks for letting me know. That's big news."

Raise any concerns you may have about your parent's finances in a way that does not imply that a new partner is a gold digger or scammer. Suggesting that a new partner might be after your parent's money will only make your parent rush to his defense. Instead, note that starting a romantic relationship can have financial consequences, and recommend that the parent meet with a financial adviser or estate planner.

If after getting to know a new partner, you still harbor fears that this person might be after your parent's money, discuss these concerns with one of your parent's trusted peers who has met the new partner.

A trusted peer is more likely than an adult child to be able to successfully discuss this difficult topic with the parent. Alternatively, you could discuss your concerns with an attorney who specializes in elder abuse. (You can find one through the National Academy of Elder Law Attorneys at NAELA.org.)

Don't be surprised if your parent's rekindled romantic life makes you experience doubts about your own marriage—and don't overreact to these doubts. It is not uncommon for adult children to leave their spouses when their parents start dating again. Our parents are our relationship role models—whether we like it or not. When we see a parent searching for (or finding) someone new, we might feel an itch to do the same even if our relationship previously was sound. Meet with a counselor, and talk through your feelings about your parent's return to dating and your feelings about your own marriage before taking any big relationship steps.

Reassure yourself that your feelings about your parent's new relationship are completely unrelated to your feelings for your other parent. Some adult children express negative feelings about a parent's new relationship because at some level they fear that accepting this relationship would be disloyal to their other parent (or to the memory of the other parent, if deceased). Such feelings are normal, but they are not accurate and are not helpful to anyone.

If you cannot shake negative feelings about your parent's new relationship, discuss these feelings with a therapist or clergy member. [BLP](#)