

Meet the children...

When Helen Croydon fell in love with a man with teenage daughters, she found herself negotiating a modern dating minefield: getting on with the offspring

Remember when 'meeting the parents' was the defining milestone of a new relationship? If a man suggested lunch with Mum and Dad, we were going places. It was also the ultimate test; the seal of approval from your lover's creators. It was cause to swot up on world affairs and buy a dress with a longer hemline. Now, meeting the parents has been replaced with meeting the kids. Forget minding your Ps and Qs and find out who headlined Glastonbury because children, especially teenagers, can be harsh in their judgements if you're not 'on their wavelength'.

Eighteen months ago, I met a gorgeous man 10 years older than me (I was 39). Everything felt right except our timing. He had only recently separated from his wife and was in no emotional state to fall in love. I embraced our courtship

cautiously. For six months, there was no question of me visiting his home, where his three teenage daughters stayed at weekends. Our dates were always midweek, and he always visited my flat, near to his place of work.

My own life to live

It suited me as much as it suited him. After five years of being single, I had my own weekend agenda. My hobby is competing in triathlons and endurance sports, so I filled Saturdays and Sundays doing sporty things with clubs. I had no experience of interacting with teenagers and it was no hardship avoiding it. However, we fell in love and inevitably the day came when he invited me to stay – and meet the children.

It was New Year's Eve. I'd already met his siblings and mother, yet I felt far more nervous about meeting his

offspring. I guess I knew how important it was that we got on. Tensions with in-laws are *de rigueur*, but how can a parent dismiss the opinions of their own children? I was painstakingly conscious not to come across as the 'new girlfriend taking Dad away'.

The first meetings were fleeting and full of smiles. I met the 15-year-old at the train station – she was being dropped off as I was being collected. The 13-year-old and the 17-year-old returned sleepily from friends' houses the following morning, and promptly went to bed. But, on subsequent visits, I started to feel as if I was walking on eggshells. The girls didn't fuel this paranoia, it was me. I wanted to be chatty and interested, but I was worried that I would sound like the Spanish Inquisition. I wanted to be at ease in their home, but what if I helped >>>

PHOTOGRAPH: JOHN DRYSDALE/GETTY IMAGES

>>> myself to something they wanted for lunch? I wanted to spend enough time with them in order to become familiar, but was conscious that they may want weekends with their father.

Once, I was on my laptop on the sofa while my boyfriend took the youngest to a friend's house. The middle daughter came in to make something to eat and I didn't know whether to chat to her or leave her be. Chat is annoying to a 15-year-old, *right?* While silence may appear aloof...

The three girls are warm and welcoming, and a refreshing burst of energy and wit. Their reaction when their father first told them about his 'lady friend' was one of delight – because they were 'worried he would be lonely'.

Balancing act

So, why am I self-conscious about striking the balance between being interested and giving them space? Perhaps this anxiety is a result of my own experiences. My father died when I was 25. Years later, my mother met her new partner and he was perfectly likeable – yet, it felt weird and I was critical. If that's the reaction of a rational adult, how was a teenager likely to feel?

A relationship therapist for the charity Relate, Denise Knowles, assures me I'm doing OK. 'Being aware of the balance is the right approach,' she says. 'People go gung-ho into meeting the children, and feel they need to make an impression, so they try to change things or win them over by buying them gifts. They don't consider how children affect their relationship and become overwhelmed by the realisation that "I haven't got this partner all to myself". It's not uncommon for people to feel jealous – and that brings extra conflict because they know it's ridiculous to feel jealous of children, so then they feel guilty.'

I don't feel jealous, but children do alter the romance. They mean fewer weekends away. They mean he will drop everything if they need something.

“When I was dating against the backdrop of fancy city bars, I never imagined my relationship would involve dinners with a group of giggling 13-year-old girls”

On the flip side, I like my independence, so this setup affords me the freedom to do the things I did when I was single.

When I was dating against the backdrop of fancy city bars, I never imagined that my relationship would involve Saturday night dinners with a group of giggling 13-year-old girls on a sleepover. Yet, I find I enjoy their youthful energy. Also, his youngest daughter is involved in triathlon. She

recently did her first race and I was able to give her tips – and I took great delight in doing that.

My advice to anyone dating someone with children is: embrace it. I feel privileged to have fresh insight into teenage life, especially since I don't plan to have children of my own. On the other hand, don't go into it with fairytale expectations. I am a romantic, but the fact is I've fallen in love with a man who has greater responsibilities than me. This is no bad thing. When I see my boyfriend putting his children first, I see a generosity and selflessness that fills me with warmth.

In my dating life, I always found men with children to be more affectionate and tolerant. With the average age for first-time fatherhood in the UK standing at 33 (30 for mothers), and only 26 per cent of men over 40 having never married, it is more likely than not that anyone of my age looking for a partner will also have to meet the children.

relate.org.uk

In the family way: making a connection

Denise Knowles's insight into bonding with your partner's children

1 DON'T TAKE THINGS PERSONALLY.

'If you expect the same appreciation from children as you get from adults, you'll be disappointed. Children don't think that way. Teenagers, especially, push the boundaries – and you're really just another boundary.'

2 SHOW INTEREST.

For example, if they are using a gadget that you

didn't have at their age, say, "I didn't have that at your age," and ask them about it. Don't try to be their friend, especially if they're teenagers. Adults who do that are merely amusing.

3 BE OPEN. **If things feel uncomfortable, make light of it and say, "This is awkward, isn't it?" That shows you are open to dialogue, and navigating your relationship, just as they are. Or, ask them**

what their boundaries are – they may not want you in their room, say.

4 GIVE THEM TIME WITH THEIR PARENT.

The more things are perceived to change, the greater the scope for resentment. If you give them time with their parent, they will feel less that you've invaded their home. Remember that they have a mum or dad with a history, and don't want a replacement.'