

**Q & A: How can I get my girls to accept my boyfriend?
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Question: I'm a recently divorced mother of two girls, ages 12 and 13. They see their Dad on Wednesday evenings (spending the night) and stay with him every other weekend. He's not in a relationship, but I've been dating an affectionate, nice guy for the past six months, and really hope that this romance will go somewhere. My boyfriend enjoys the girls, but becomes easily offended when they ignore him or avoid going places with us. We have an active social life and I stay at his house when the girls are at their father's home. On my weekends with my daughters we like to spend one evening together on a date, and my mother stays the night with the girls. Recently they've been complaining that I "never spend time with them" (which is not true!), and seem to resent my boyfriend more as we get closer. I'd like to think that some day we'll be married, but I'm afraid that the girls' attitude toward him will break us apart. What can I do to change their minds, and behavior, toward him?

Answer: How about beginning with changing your behavior toward, and expectations of, the girls? Put yourself in their place—you've apparently moved on emotionally from your previous marriage and found a new, comfortable relationship with another man. But, perhaps they are still adjusting to the marital breakup, and are not yet ready to consider dealing with another guy in your life. Think of it this way—most likely they didn't cause, suggest or agree to the divorce nor were they probably consulted. It was an adult decision made between their mother and father, one with large personal ramifications to two young teenagers. The changes that they've experienced probably range from financial disruption, perhaps a move from their old neighborhood to a new one, new schools and friends, and missing seeing their Dad on a daily basis. To add insult to injury, most likely their mother is acting somewhat flirtatiously (probably for the first time since they can remember!), which falls, according to most of my kid clients whose divorced parents are beginning to date again, somewhere between creepy and gross. I can't tell you the number of kids who would cherish the remembrance of their parents kissing or hugging who now cringe at the thought of another man even holding their mother's hand. Accept it—it's a very difficult thing for kids to understand, especially so soon after a divorce. Knowing this, it's probably a good idea to tone down the show of affection when the girls are present, and explain to your boyfriend that this is part of respecting their needs at this time.

Now, take a look at their complaint that you "never spend time with them". Most likely, that's an exaggeration, but what they may really be saying is that when you're with them it's time spent completing the more mundane necessities of life—school pickups, checking that homework is done, showers taken, and lunches packed. It could be that their time with you is full of chores, errands and chauffeuring. When's the last time that you had a date with your daughters? Taken them to a restaurant of *their* choice without your boyfriend in tow? Had a pajama party in the living room complete with pillow fight, popcorn and pedicures? Probably a long time, and I know there's a list of reasons why there just hasn't been the time for that sort of foolishness. Well, perhaps now's the

perfect point to consider that relationships (even mother-daughter ones) need consistent tending, nurturing and fun time spent together in order to thrive. Most likely the girls see your excitement and anticipation when getting ready for your boyfriend to appear, and they'd like to be coveted in the same manner. Of course you love them, but have you shown how much you *enjoy* them lately?

Finally, consider the message that you're sending when Grandma spends Friday or Saturday night (*your* Friday or Saturday night!) while you're with your boyfriend. Sure, you deserve some time without the kids to have fun, foster the romance and continue to get to know each other, but at what price? Again, from the girls' point of view he's coming first, and they are the runner-ups. If the relationship continues they'll begin to get used to the routine, but perhaps it's just too soon for them to accept their mom giving up time with her girls to be with a man other than Dad. And, one sure-fire way to guarantee their continued negative attitude toward your romance is to ignore their feelings, hoping that they'll "just get used to it". Don't count on it, and the smarter move is to listen to their concerns ("Dad's alone, but you're having fun"), compromising and making some adjustments (spending more fun time enjoying each other) and trying to think like a kid yourself ("How would I have felt if I saw my mom hugging a new boyfriend?").

Fair or not, the kids must come first. That does not mean that you need to give up your needs for a warm adult relationship, but you may have to tone down, tune in and focus upon the kids a bit more during this sensitive time in their family's evolution.