

SEX MOM AND THE SINGLE

The true adventures of single mothers looking for romance—
or how not to let your dating life mess up your child

BY JEANNINE AMBER

There's no greater escape than a fine romance. I adore everything about it, from the first spark of attraction to the whispering and giggling late into the night. For most of my life I've tumbled giddily, recklessly from one infatuation to another, figuring whatever happens, happens. If I made a mistake, picked the wrong guy or ended up in a messy situation, then I dealt with it. I decided that even the most disastrous episodes were just another adventure. That is, until now.

Three years ago I became a single mother. I threw myself into my new role, quickly reconfiguring my life to incorporate my daughter and her endless needs. I learned to soothe and rock and change and burp; I set up a college fund and learned to function without any sleep. And then, when I got the hang of it and motherhood ceased to be all-consuming, I began to get restless. How I missed adult conversation, the kind you have over dinner with a hand on your knee. I wanted to get dressed up, preen and flirt and swish. I wanted to date. What a shock to learn I no longer had the slightest clue how to do it.

Of all the mysteries of single motherhood, nothing is as perplexing as trying to integrate a man into the mix. Just arranging an evening out is a logistical nightmare: Who'll watch the baby? How much is >

the babysitter going to cost? And should I really be spending \$50 on a sitter just to have some fun when my daughter needs a new winter coat? Do I even have \$50? Maybe I should invite the guy over instead. And then, what if we want to do more than have dinner? What happens to the baby then?

That's just the tip of the iceberg. Once a child is old enough to talk, once she becomes a thinking being who can repeat things and ask questions and make connections, you have a whole different, and more complicated, set of issues to wrestle with. Am I setting a good example? Am I sending the right messages? Is my child getting too attached to this man? Is she feeling neglected? Jealous? Angry? Confused?

Even without a kid, entering into a relationship is like stepping onto a minefield. No matter how carefully you tread, there's always the possibility that the whole thing will blow up in your face. But when you have a child, suddenly you aren't the only one who might get hurt.

THE RISK OF ATTACHMENT

You would think that with all the information there is about how to be a good parent, there'd be some practical guidelines for how to date without messing up our kids. But most of the advice I've come across (such as don't let your child meet your boyfriend unless the relationship is headed toward marriage) seems intended for women with unlimited funds for sitters, homes large enough for privacy and ex-spouses who take the kids a few nights a week. That's not my reality. And I'm certainly not alone. Almost half of all African-American children are being raised by single mothers. Many of us are the sole caretakers of our children. Money is tight, apartments are small and often there is nowhere to leave the child if we want an evening alone.

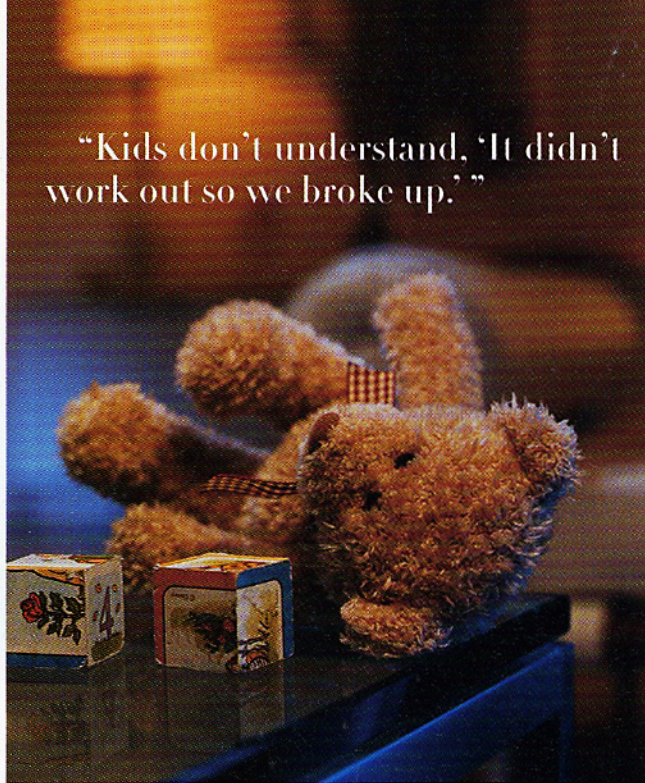
"There is no way I could date a man for more than a few months without having him meet my kid," says my friend Anna*, 31. "What am I supposed to do? Send her to a sitter every time my boyfriend comes over? Besides, if a man can't deal with my daughter, I want to know before I get in too deep."

Until recently Anna lived in an apartment with only a curtain separating her child's room from her own. After a couple of months of dating Andre, Anna decided it was okay for him to spend the night. That same night her daughter woke up crying with an earache and wanted to climb into the bed. "There was a lot of my getting up and putting her back in her bed," Anna recalls. "By three in the morning I was so exhausted I just let her get into bed next to me."

Before I had my daughter I would have found Anna's decision appalling. *How could you let your child into the bed with your boyfriend?* For many people, there's nothing more distasteful than a woman whose maternal instincts are overtaken by earthly desires. But now I totally get it: When you're trying to quiet a wailing youngster in the middle of the night, you'll do just about anything.

Still, having your child in bed with you and your boyfriend is never a good idea, says Daniel Lobel, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist in New York who regularly evaluates children in custody cases. This is the kind of behavior that could be used against you in a custody battle, he points out. It's that serious.

Anna says that, despite their inaugural evening, in the two years she's been dating Andre she hasn't made a habit of allow-



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ing her daughter to join them in bed. But as their relationship deepens, what Anna really wants to know is, how bad is it for a child to be playing house with a man who isn't her father?

Lobel, who has a practice in family therapy, says it's important for single mothers to date. "You are delivering a message to the child that you can deal with your situation," he says. "You can pull yourself up and create a life for yourself. The child should not be looking at the mother as a sexless hermit, because that's not a good model either." But Lobel believes that a youngster should not be included in the dating scenario unless the situation is stable and committed. "And by that I mean moving toward cohabitation or marriage," he says. He cautions us to be aware of the effect that serial relationships, especially those that come and go quickly, can have on our kids.

Sure, an instant romantic connection can be electrifying. It sets some women off like a runaway train. But while you may be exhilarated by a relationship that moves at lightning speed, your kid may not survive the ride. Lobel explains that children, especially little ones, form attachments to adults very easily. A few months of shared meals, outings and cuddling in front of the television, and your child may be hooked. If the relationship falls apart, you may be happy to have the man out of your life, but your child may feel a tremendous sense of loss.

"Kids don't understand 'It didn't work out so we broke up,'" says Lobel. "They understand that this guy they liked is suddenly gone. And then three months later when you start dating someone new, your child is supposed to try this again." Put your kid through that enough times, Lobel warns, and you're going to end up with a child who has problems connecting with anyone you're dating. "They have experienced the loss of man after man, and they no longer want any part of it," he explains. "The child will say, 'I don't want to know anything about anyone in your life.' And it will stay that way forever. They are just *done*."

A NEED FOR BOUNDARIES

Veronica, 39, is a pretty woman with a mass of dreadlocks who lives across the street from me. She produces documentaries and

works long hours. For the first seven years of her son Trevor's life, all her free time was devoted to taking care of him. "When I wasn't at work I was doing whatever Trevor wanted to do because I felt so guilty for not being around all week," she says. "It was just me and my son, so we had a really intense connection. He used to wake up in the middle of the night and climb into my bed."

Just after her son turned 8, Veronica met Richard and the two started to date. "That," she says with a sigh, "changed everything. You have sex and all of a sudden you're like, 'I want to do this again!' So it becomes, 'I don't care if you're crying... I'm going out.' It was hard on my son. He got really needy and clingy."

Veronica, Richard and Trevor have now been living together for three years. During that time, Veronica says, Trevor has flourished. "He's much more confident and outgoing now that there is a man in the house," she reflects. "But the transition was very tough."

Single motherhood can be terribly isolating. Sometimes all you do for weeks on end is go to work and talk to your kid. It's

so easy for a child to become a single mother's primary source of comfort, entertainment and companionship. I often put my daughter to sleep in my bed, not because she's sick or distraught but because I love the way she cuddles up beside me, presses her little hands on my face and says, "Ma, I really, really like you!"

My friend Kelly shakes her head when I tell her this. While she understands the temptation to keep a little one in the bed, she says she made a very conscious decision to move her daughter into her own room when she was 6 months old. "It was totally planned because I figured one day I was going to have a boyfriend, and I didn't want to wait until then to deal with it," she says.

The bedroom is not the only place where you need to establish boundaries with your kids, says Sheila Walker, Ph.D., an associate professor of psychology at Scripps College in Claremont, California. "The message needs to be clear: You are the parent and they are children, and you do live in separate worlds part of the time," Walker says. "You can send this message >

DO'S AND DON'T'S: A DATING SURVIVAL GUIDE

When it comes to advice on how to manage romance as a single mom, the experts don't always agree. But on these points they're crystal clear:

BE REALISTIC ABOUT THE FUTURE OF THE RELATIONSHIP. "The message has been ingrained in us that a relationship should lead somewhere," says Andrea Engber, director of a national organization of single mothers and coauthor of *The Complete Single Mother*. But lots of relationships don't go anywhere. Beware of getting your hopes up and introducing your kids prematurely. "Keep your child's involvement with your boyfriend three steps behind yours," suggests Engber. While you're still figuring out where things are headed, keep dates outside the house and your man away from your child.

INTRODUCE YOUR BOYFRIEND SLOWLY. "Introduce your kids, especially younger children, to your man in a casual social setting," suggests therapist Nicola Bird. "Or he can come over, spend some time and leave." Kids should feel comfortable with your relationship before you have breakfast together.

ASK FOR HELP. It may seem like an indulgence, but ask friends and family if they can watch your children so you can have a night to yourself. Or rotate sleepovers with another single mother so that each of you has an evening free, suggests psychologist Daniel Lobel.

CHECK IN WITH YOUR KID. Sometimes children won't volunteer that they're feeling jealous or rejected or angry over your new relationship. Ask them how they're feeling. Be sensitive to their moods and notice if they're acting out or withdrawing. Your young one might need extra time alone with you or reassurance that you still love her best. "Your child needs to know that this man isn't going to take you away from her," says Engber.

EXPLAIN A BREAKUP. From the child's perspective, a man shouldn't just suddenly disappear. "Ideally, you sit down with your child and the boyfriend, and you say to the child, 'We aren't going to be seeing each other any more, but John really loves you,'" suggests Lobel. "Explain that your separation has

nothing to do with the child, that it's because of grown-up things.'"

DON'T PARADE A CHAIN OF MEN THROUGH YOUR CHILD'S LIFE. "If a woman is dating several people at once, it can be very unsettling for the child," says psychology professor Sheila Walker. "For older children, it can raise question about mom's judgment." If you must introduce your casual relationships to your youngster, she says, "describe these people as friends and do not have them stay in the house overnight."

DON'T TREAT YOUR CHILD AS YOUR CONFIDANT. Save the adult conversation for your girlfriends. "Your child, no matter how precocious, is not the person to confide in, complain to or ask for advice," says Engber. "Your relationship is not their responsibility."

DON'T DATE IN DESPERATION. While the arms of a man might seem like the perfect place to forget your troubles, try turning to your friends instead. "When you're feeling overwhelmed, rely on good friends you trust, who will give you a reality check on your situation," says Walker. "Your friends will understand what you need and at the same time remind you that you have young children who need you." Save the dating for when you're feeling less vulnerable.

DON'T HAVE ONE SET OF RULES FOR YOURSELF AND ANOTHER FOR YOUR KIDS. Expecting your kids to behave one way while you behave another can cause conflicts at home, especially when your teens start dating. How can you teach your son to be respectful of women when he sees you putting up with all kinds of bad behavior from your man? "Inconsistency is a real problem," says Walker. "It can raise issues of trust and credibility, and cause confusion in an older child who is really processing what you say versus what you do." Walker says it might take a lot of sacrifice on your part, but you must model the behavior that you want your child to follow.

—J.A.



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gradually by not including the child in every activity, but you do have to establish this separateness early on, when your child is young.”

With small children, she says, try partially closing your door for a “private” phone call to demonstrate that Mommy has her own set of friends. Older children should be taught to knock before entering the room and that it is not okay to climb into Mommy’s bed every night. And no matter how savvy your teenager is, do not discuss the intimate details of your dating life with her. Keep that to yourself, and focus your conversations on issues that are important to her.

THE JEALOUSY FACTOR

When I talk to my single-mother friends who are in relationships, they all say the same thing: I did everything you’re not supposed to do, but somehow it still worked out. More than following rules, these women hooked up with men who were committed to making the relationship work and were patient and understanding with their kids. These friends have chosen really decent guys. But most of my friends aren’t in relationships. Many of us are happy with the family we’ve created with our children, and we aren’t on the hunt for stepfathers. We’re dating just to date. And can you blame us?

Just because we have a little one hanging off us 24 hours a day doesn’t mean we don’t pine for companionship and warmth. If anything, since I became a mother, my urge to escape for a night is even greater than before. Of course, some single mothers date to find a life partner, but many of us date for fun and affection or because we’re lonely or bored. We want to feel adored and sought after, and sometimes we just crave a little grown-up conversation. But trying to get that can be so frustrating.

“My son thinks he’s the parent,” complains Dorothy, 42, of her teenage son Rashid. Dorothy has been divorced for 12 years, and for the past two years she’s been dating Marcus. Rashid isn’t too pleased. “If Marcus comes over, Rashid will hang around and not leave us alone,” she says. “If he thinks I’m going out, he’ll do things to make me late. One time he locked my car keys in the car to keep me from going. He said it was an accident, but I ended up having to cancel my plans.”

When my own daughter was only 2, I had my first taste of this sort of jealousy. I was sitting on the sofa with a man I was dating whom my daughter was quite fond of. I moved next to him and he put his arm around me. Suddenly my daughter, who I thought hadn’t been paying any attention to us, yelled from across the room, “Mama! No, no, no! You sit there!” and pointed to the side of the sofa as far away from my friend as possible. “Move!” she commanded. I’ve since learned that even children of married couples get territorial like this at age 2. But at the time I thought I was traumatizing my kid. My friend left and I vowed, “No more men around. I’ll wait till she’s in college.”

THE UNBREAKABLE RULE

Nicola Bird, Ph.D., is a Toronto therapist and the single mother of an 11-year-old son. She says trying to come up with one-size-fits-all guidelines for dating is impossible. Too much depends on a mother’s values, the temperament of her child and the nature of their relationship. “Some children are extremely sensitive, and others are completely oblivious,” says Bird. “Some women have very conservative values; other mothers are more liberal. Every situation is different.”

Bird says that one thing every mother must do before she brings a man around is to make sure the child knows she is your priority. “Make sure your child feels safe and loved and secure,” Bird says. “And be consistent with this message. As women date and form relationships, different issues will undoubtedly arise because life is not perfect. You need to have a relationship with your child that allows you to manage these issues. If your child does not feel nurtured, if your child senses that she comes second to your relationship, then you’ve created emotional insecurity for her. In a situation like that, any other relationship you have is going to be a problem.”

I still love a fine romance. But now I date for more than just excitement and escape. I date because I want to show my daughter what healthy, respectful relationships look like. I want her to appreciate a good man and know what it looks like when he appreciates you back. That’s the ideal, although I’ll admit I’m not quite there. But since my daughter was born I’ve kept a mental list of things I will never do again—my do-not-repeat-this-mistake list. And every time I meet a man, or go on a date, or get into a relationship, I try to do better—to be more mindful, wiser, more aware of the consequences. Not because prudence and caution are attributes that have always been important to me, but because they are qualities I’d like my daughter to learn. Now I date as a woman with a child. I date with my daughter’s well-being in mind. For now, that’s the only rule I have. □

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*Some names and identifying details have been changed.