

How to make friends with your partner's children

Ten ways to be a friend to your partner's children and make the most of the time you spend with them

By Dawn Stannard

The relationship you build with your partner is special and unique to both of you, as is their relationship with their children. Be supportive when they are with their children, whether you are all together or not. Any

feelings of resentment or jealousy towards the children are totally unreasonable. It is much more rewarding to feel pleased that your partner is able to spend valuable quality time with them, even if that

means spending a little less time with you, because when they are with you, they will be happier and more relaxed.

Don't feel like you are second best

A good parent should always put their children's interest first, but sometimes as a partner and not the actual parent to the children, you may find yourself feeling second best on many occasions, especially if you are not always included in all of their plans. It is important to remember that you are the adult and that the relationship between a parent and child should be unconditional. The children were obviously around before you were, and vying for your partner's time or attentions when they are spending time with their children is not productive for your relationship or beneficial to the children. It puts unnecessary pressure on all concerned and can make it feel like a competition for attention which will generally have a negative effect on all concerned.

Take time to get to know the children as individuals

Everybody is different. We all have our likes and dislikes, strengths and insecurities. Getting to know your partner's children and building their trust in you will not happen overnight. It will take time, patience and effort on your part. You will come into their lives as a stranger, perhaps even as an intruder and they certainly won't be looking for someone to take over from their mother.

First impressions do count and it may be prudent not to be too overpowering or ask too many questions at first. You will obviously want

to make a good impression or impress them in some way but just try to be friendly and approachable and let them open up to you in their own time and in their own way. By taking a genuine interest in what's going on in their lives, and really listening to them when they talk to you, you will hopefully encourage them to want to get to know you and to like and trust you as time goes by.

Don't pretend to be someone you are not

We all like to be liked, and it is obviously very important to both you and your partner that their children accept you and form a good relationship with you. Initially, it can be easy to behave in a way that you think the children might admire or be impressed with. But by trying too hard to make friends or even to show off and try and upstage them can have disastrous consequences. This sort of charade never works in the long term, the real you will eventually surface and that is the person you should be from the start. You will find that by being yourself you can relax around them and they in turn will also feel relaxed and gradually befriend and accept the real you for who you truly are.

Be careful, little voice, what you say

Children are like sponges, they soak up every scrap of the information available to them. They

constantly listen to the adults around them talking, often from two rooms away, and will even pick up on grown ups' telephone conversations and the sly comments you make when you think no one is listening. For this reason it is very unwise to ever discuss any grievance you may have about them or your partners' ex-partner, when they are around, even if you feel quite justified in doing so. It will be upsetting and confusing for the children and it will not endear you to them either. They love both their mum and their dad and will feel protective and defensive towards both of them.

Be flexible regarding arrangements and plans

Children can often be difficult and disagreeable, as can ex-partners! This is more prevalent when they are undergoing times of change or disruption and adapting to new situations and people. Your best laid plans for a 'lovely weekend' together with the children can often go badly wrong for any number of reasons ranging from a sick child to a resentful ex partner. Often the children may be feeling insecure, and this can lead to them acting out and behaving badly, or simply refusing to join in and being generally disruptive. They may well feel a little threatened by your presence and not even understand why they feel angry or know why they want to be disruptive.

Try to be sympathetic and understanding and not react negatively yourself because this will only exacerbate the situation and make things much more difficult for your partner to deal with. If the children are behaving badly, then your partner will very likely already be feeling very stressed by their behaviour, and desperately trying to make things go well for everybody. Placating the children and getting them to behave is difficult enough for your partner, without having to appease you too. When things start to go wrong, if you also behave like a sulky child, then you will make the situation much worse, upset your partner even more and set a bad example to the children.

Be flexible and understanding if plans are thwarted and try and support your partner by being flexible, calm and cheerful if things don't go exactly to plan. Children respond much better optimism than childish negativity.

Be understanding when family matters matter

There will be occasions when your partner will need to talk to or meet up with his ex in order to spend time with his children on special

occasions. This can be anything from two minutes replying to a text message or a whole afternoon attending a school sports day. This can be difficult for you, especially if you feel this time afforded to be unnecessary, or worse still, if it clashes with existing plans you have already made with your partner. Again a certain amount of understanding and empathy is necessary in this situation, especially when it comes to issues concerning the welfare of the children.

Obviously every situation is different, but by being resentful and awkward when these occasions arise, you will cause resentment to build within yourself, which will affect your relationship with your partner as well as with the children, who rightly feel that their parents should be there for them at these important times. It is vital that the children have constant support from both their parents, so when it feels tough, try and consider their needs as well, rather than focusing solely on your own.

Be kind and consistent

There will be times when your partner's children behave in a way that you feel to be totally unacceptable. Sometimes you may have to discipline the children, perhaps in your partner's absence, or if they are suddenly in danger, or if they behave disrespectfully towards you or each other. Correcting and disciplining someone else's children is a difficult and daunting task.

You may be wary of alienating yourself from the children or worse still upsetting your partner by how you deal with the situation. Again, every circumstance is different but it may be wise to accept that you are likely to be met with a certain amount of resistance, whatever you do. Whatever happens, you should never lose your temper, raise your voice in anger or use any physical form of discipline. As an adult and someone the children can look up to, you have to be the voice of reason to some degree and by being fair but firm and consistent will earn you their respect in addition to their confidence and friendship. By saying no when it is appropriate, you will actually show them your concern for their welfare and that you care about their safety.

To make sure that you have the full support of your partner, discuss the boundaries of discipline with them when you're alone together. This will be helpful to both of you to discover what you jointly feel is acceptable or unacceptable behaviour within your relationship and to also discover and resolve any differences in opinion you may have about discipline at an early stage thus avoiding bigger issues in the future.

You prove to them that there can be happiness after sadness

Being part of a broken home is not ideal for anyone concerned, least of all the children who are the main sufferers in any parental divide. They experience heartache and loss without really understanding why their parents have separated, and can even feel that it may be partly their fault.

Although you will never be able to replace their real parent (nor should you attempt to try to), you can play a very important and role in helping them to move on past whatever has happened in their lives as a result of their parents breaking up. One of the main things that should be noticeable to them is how happy you make their mum or dad and the example of how harmonious and loving a healthy adult relationship can be. By leading by example they will understand that it is possible to rebuild a caring and secure environment that can be stress free and fun again.

Know that you are an important adult in your partner's children's lives

As your partner's children grow to know and trust you more, they will feel able to turn to you in times of worry because they know that you can be a safe listener, or a shoulder to cry when they need to talk about things that they don't want to tell their parents for fear of causing further upset by hurting their dad's or mum's feelings. You can also act like a stabilising factor within the parent-child relationship that exists between your partner and his or her children by being able to be slightly more tolerant than your partner in stressful situations and by gently encouraging your partner to be a little more patient with his or her children when you feel that they deserve a bit of slack.

As an outsider you provide a fresh and unbiased view, which can be invaluable on occasions. As your partner's children grow up and trust builds between you and them, you will play an increasingly important role in their lives as they will come to treat you as their friend and confidant.

Find a place in their family unit

As you spend more time with your partner's children, and as they gradually get to know you, you will learn more and more about them and hopefully build a healthy and happy relationship with them. It is important that you spend time not only with your partner but with them and

their children too because, if you intend to become serious with your partner, the children will become a very big part of your relationship and how well you get on with your partner's children could easily make or break your relationship.

If you are eventually intending to make any sort of commitment to your partner, you must be aware that this will of course extend to the rest of their family. Your partner and their children come as a package and to start with, you will be the 'outsider' coming into their existing family unit who will have to earn their trust and respect as well as their love and affection. It is a two way interaction that will take time and patience, a tremendous amount of nurturing and a certain amount of dedication and commitment. But in return, the rewards can be endless as you play an important role in helping to make life happy and full of fun. As you become someone who they truly look forward to spending time with, laughing and learning with, and they see you making their mum or dad feel happy, loved and secure once again, they will be happier, all of which will enrich your life, help you have a great relationship with your partner and make you happy too.