

By Jessica Yadegaran

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Doug Duran/Contra Costa Times

Rachel Sarah, columnist and author of "Single Mom Seeking: Playdates, Blind Dates and other Dispatches from the Dating World, rejoined the dating scene when her daughter was 2.

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WHEN SHE HIT 30, Rachel Sarah added a must-have item to her milk-caked mommy wardrobe: A date skirt.

The Berkeley single mother spent the first two years of her daughter's life dateless, and happy. But when her libido returned, and with it, a longing for companionship, she joined the scene.

"I was scared and unsure about getting back out there," says Sarah, now 34. "How would I balance the challenges of raising a healthy and happy little girl with the chaotic, emotionally charged world of dating?"

She read. She learned what the experts say about putting your child first and getting a tribe for support and childcare. But what about sex? And when was it OK to introduce Mae to a man?

"There was nothing out there written by someone in the trenches," says Sarah, a relationship columnist and author of "Single Mom Seeking: Playdates, Blind Dates and Other Dispatches From the Dating World."

It's good timing. According to a 2005 U.S. Census Bureau survey, 27 percent of households are run by single parents. And, while a conservative therapist may suggest waiting until the kids are out of the house, more and more single parents are choosing to date with caution, and date now.

"Parents shouldn't date? Give me a break," says Rona Renner, a registered nurse and host of Childhood Matters, a radio show for parents that airs at 9 a.m. Sundays on 98.1 KISS and 105.1 KOCN. "They're going to be much better parents if they're getting their needs met as an adult."

Psychologist Ian Kerner says nobody should approach parenting like it's a jail sentence.

"Different ages pose different issues, but most children really want their parents to be happy," says Kerner, author of "DSI: Date Scene Investigation." "If you find someone who loves you and loves your child, it's just going to make for a happy home."

Still, that can seem far away when you're on a yet another blind date.

Cathy Schultheis is a Moraga mother of two teenagers. She dates once a month and only dates friends of friends. When her daughters were younger, she only went out when they were at grandma's for the weekend.

"I am very cautious," Schultheis says.

As youngsters, the girls grew close to a beau of mom's. When they broke up, it was tough on the girls. Schultheis stopped dating. Now that they're older, they're past that point, she says. They want to know the details of the date, including the physical stuff. Schultheis keeps it clean.

Her overall philosophy: kids first.

"I don't regret one minute that I've spent with my kids," she says, "but I've regretted a lot of the dates I've been on."

If Rachael Huang of Oakland posted a dating profile, it'd read something like this: blonde, cherubic 38-year-old music lover seeks like-minded guy for fun and swing dancing. Unlike Sarah, she probably wouldn't mention her two kids, who are 12 and 15.

When it comes to dating, Huang's learned that kids can be overwhelming to potential suitors.

"I give them a chance to get to know me before they have to deal with that," she says. "There's a perception that single mom equals looking for a new husband. And I'm looking to have fun. I don't try to find someone for my kids because my kids have me."

Liz Martin of Dublin has done it all -- from set ups to Match.com, which is 40 percent single parents. Martin is up front. She talks about her son on the first date, saying he's "part of the package." Perhaps for that reason, a recent date assumed he'd get to meet her son early on.

That wasn't the case.

"Until I'm in some kind of committed relationship with a future, I wouldn't introduce him to anyone," Martin says.

She struggles with trust, as it relates to a new beau.

"It's one thing to have regular trust issues," she says. "But when do you know that you can leave your child with this other person?"

With smaller children, supervising visits is helpful, Kerner suggests. Then, you can transition to short, alone-visits.

If your ex is dating, too, realize that your child is not a detective.

"Adopt a 'never hear it from the child' policy," Kerner says, meaning you will always disclose and discuss dating issues with each other before exposing the child to them.

Couples ask Kerner and Renner about attachment -- between their child and the new person -- and, of course, about sex and intimacy.

There are no cookie-cutter answers, Renner says. It depends on your own value system, and the age and temperament of your children. Bottom line: don't bring a new romantic partner into a child's life too quickly, only to be taken away.

In general, Kerner says, the older the child, the more complicated these issues become.

"If the child is young, you can introduce them as mommy's or daddy's friend," he says. But remember: Overnight dates should always take place elsewhere.

Eric Peterson of Oakland is newly separated. He doesn't plan on dating anytime soon. He doesn't want to expose his young son to an unstable environment.

A child of divorce, Peterson recalls a "parade" of people coming and going when he was growing up. Sometimes he was introduced to them; sometimes he wasn't.

"I don't want that for him," Peterson says.

When and if you do make introductions, remember that children are perceptive. Listen to them, Renner says. Do they like your new boyfriend? If not, why? Is he mean, or are they jealous of your relationship?

"Look for red flags," Renner says. "A child who used to sleep fine waking with nightmares. Continue to put the child's emotional reactions in the center of the equation."

That's what Eric Reynolds of Emeryville does. He is the full-time father of four, with a 6-, 8- and 13-year-old living at home. He practices mindful parenting.

"I'm not big on dating," says Reynolds, founder of Single Parents Rock, a support group. "I'm bigger on friendships and seeing if they go that route. I just feel that dating loosely while having children full-time is a difficult way of having a relationship."

He dated a woman for eight months whom he met on Craigslist and never brought her home. Then he met another woman and fell for her. So did the kids. When it ended, everyone was sad.

"Yet there's so much going on in their lives that they realized these things happen," Reynolds says. "They went through the divorce with my ex-wife, and it wasn't as bad as that."

Jessica Yadegaran is a lifestyle writer for the Times. Reach her at jyadegaran@cctimes.com or 925-943-8155.

DATING TIPS

RESOURCES

Dating is daunting, but it can be even more difficult as a single parent. Here, experts provide tips to help you navigate the challenges:

- Don't feel guilty. Date, but do it carefully, and keep your child as your top priority.
- Don't discuss your dates with your child. He/she is not your confidante.
- Early on, stick to short dates, like coffee. If the relationship progresses, move to longer dates, like dinner.
- Create a network of people willing to baby sit and provide emotional support for the higher degree of rejection.
- Don't introduce your child to your date. Wait until a serious commitment or relationship develops.
- Avoid overnight visits when your child is in the house.

- When it comes time to make introductions, plan family dates around your child.

-- Sources include Ian Kerner, Rachel Sarah and Rona Renner

DATING TIPS

RESOURCES

- Bananas Inc.: Northern Alameda County's child care resource and referral service holds its next single parent support group meeting at 6:30 p.m. March 5. For location, call 510-658-7353. www.bananasinc.org.
- Single Parents Rock: A local nonprofit and support group for single parents. Dating comes up at their meetings, 6:30 p.m. Mondays at Tumble & Tea Cafe, 4210 Telegraph Ave., Oakland. www.singleparentsrock.org.
- "Single Mom Seeking": Single mom and relationship columnist Rachel Sarah's book (Seal Press, \$14.95) about dating. Readings: 7:30 p.m. today, Books Inc., 1344 Park St., Alameda; 7 p.m. Thursday, Barnes & Noble, 5604 Bay St., Emeryville. www.singlemomseeking.com.
- "Mom, There's A Man in the Kitchen And He's Wearing Your Robe": Ellie Slott Fisher's book (Da Capo Press; \$14.95) for single dads and moms about dating-while-parenting twice -- as a widower and as a divorcee.
- Parents Without Partners: Del Valle branch of the international nonprofit group serves single parents in Contra Costa County. Call 925-373-2112 or visit <http://pwpdelvalle.tripod.com/> for upcoming social events, including a Feb. 10 dance.

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