



When you hate your date's kids...  
By Bob Strauss



If there's anything we've learned from glossy magazines and afternoon talk shows, it's that kids — little kids, big kids, 30-year-olds with their own kids — always have a hard time warming up to that new special person in their mom's or dad's life. But although there's plenty of sound advice about how to win over your potential stepchildren, you don't hear a whole lot about the vice-versa situation: When you instinctively, immediately dislike your date's kids. Here are some practical tips, lest you wind up throwing out the babies (that is, your date's kids) along with the warm, bubbly bathwater of an otherwise pleasant relationship.

**Sort out your feelings.** There's an old saying to the effect that there's no such thing as an unlikable kid—so unless your honey's six-year-old has the number "666" tattooed on his neck, it's likely that your feelings for him are colored by his claim to your main squeeze's affections. "If the kids get between the two of you — if they bite you, throw up on you, sit on your date's lap so you can't get close or move into the bed so you can't sleep there — you may take a dislike to them," says Lisa Cohn, author of *One Family, Two Family, New Family: Stories and Advice for Stepfamilies*. "And that's probably because you feel as though you have to compete with her kids for her attention." Recognize that the child is acting to protect his or her own interests rather than seeing it as a direct strike against you.

**Be the adult.** A nine-year-old boy has the luxury of pretending not to hear you or "accidentally" spilling a cup of hot cocoa onto your lap—but society (despite what you see in TV sitcoms) frowns on grown-ups who respond in kind. In the long run, a simple, direct "Have I said something to upset you?" or "Why did you do that?" will be much more effective than retaliation with a spoonful of mashed potatoes or (even worse) the silent treatment in reverse. If a kid draws you down to that level, he makes you play by his rules—and there's no way you're going to win that game.

**Put things in perspective.** "If you're not used to kids, you may not understand their developmental stages and what they're going through at their ages," says online advice columnist April Masini. "For instance, if you're not acquainted with the behavior of teenagers, for all you know your date's kids are acting perfectly normally." It's also important, Masini says, to understand that you may not be the first "special friend" to show up in these children's lives. "For all you know, you're not the first date this person has introduced them to, so they're not sure if you're going to stick around." Talk to your date if you feel the kids are throwing attitude your way or being snarky (I'll explain how in a second).

**Don't suffer in silence.** Since, as dating coach Lori Gorshow says, "children don't have the experience and vocabulary to express that they're sad about the divorce, worried that this new person may wind up leaving, or angry that their mom or dad is being taken away from them." For this reason, a serious word with your sweetheart (out of earshot of the kids) is a constructive way to tackle any behavior issues. Gorshow suggests getting the ball rolling this way: "You know, I usually don't have trouble getting along with kids. However, I seem to be having some trouble with yours. Can you suggest a way I can make your child(ren) feel more comfortable with me?"

Remember: things change (or they don't). One key way kids differ from adults is that a five-year-old inevitably grows, matures, and learns to deal with his or her feelings, while a 40-year-old is likely to remain set in certain ways (which is why the tearful line "He/She'll change, I know he/she will!" is such a staple on soap operas). It's unlikely that a child's hateful behavior will persist longer than a few months after you've started a relationship—and if it does, you and your date have a much larger problem on your hands. "Kids can indeed be deal-breakers in marriages and relationships," Masini says. "If it turns out that you're not compatible with the kids, and your date doesn't agree that there's a problem, then the fact is that you're facing a deal-breaking incompatibility." Sadly, an honest talk with your date about this big obstacle is the best way to go, with a clear-eyed look at the odds of the relationship going the distance and some brainstorming of whether there's anymore that can be done to smooth out this bumpy road. Good luck!

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