

[Family]



Issa Mas lives in Manhattan with her 3-year-old son, Theo. A single mom, Mas created a resource website for single parents like herself who were ready to start dating.

Dating mom

A few guidelines for single mothers who are ready for romance

By Heidi Stevens
TRIBUNE NEWSPAPERS

Issa Mas is hardly pining away for a man. She's not entirely sure where she'll find room for one, actually, in her blissfully full life.

But she has done the single-mom thing for 3½ years, after calling off her engagement at two months pregnant. And she's ready to test the dating waters — murky, terrifying and uncharted as they may be.

"One day my son was giving me kisses and stroking my face gently, and I thought,

"This is the only physical affection I get," says Mas, who founded **yoursingleparenting.com**, a resource site for single parents. "That was startling. I felt like, you know, I'm not getting any younger, and I'm still fairly attractive, and this isn't going to last forever: I might as well not waste it on play dates with 3-year-olds."

Hurdle No. 1 — deciding to get back out there — cleared. Now what? Mas and a few experts lent us their wit and wisdom.

Say yes. To dating, to being set up, to guys you previously deemed not your type.

(Within reason, obviously.) "I don't believe a single person should ever dismiss a potential partner because of a preconceived value about something such as, 'I don't want to date any men who have children, who are too young, who are short,'" says Ellie Fisher, author of "Mom, There's a Man in the Kitchen and He's Wearing Your Robe: The Single Mother's Guide to Dating Well Without Parenting Poorly" (Da Capo Press). "If your friends and family offer to fix you up, don't turn them down. If it's someone you're not sure you want to go out with,

meet the guy for a drink and look at it as practice."

A worthy pursuit, after all. "I'm really comfortable," says Mas. "I could see myself being alone forever because I'm not the kind of woman who needs a man. But by the time (my son) is maybe 13, I will be the least cool person for him to hang around with. And then what? What do I do when my kid's at the movies or with his friends and my physical nearness is no longer a necessity?"

Break it to your kids. "We think we'll

wait until a relationship turns serious, and then we'll tell them — why upset them when we're merely dating?" says Fisher, who was widowed when her children were young, remarried and later divorced. "But we don't know what will turn a relationship serious, and suddenly we're involved with somebody, and our kids don't even know we've begun to date."

Whether or not they're ready for you to date — "they may never be," Fisher says — sit them down and speak to them candidly. "You are the most important things in my life, and I can't stress that enough," she recommends. "But just like you like to spend time with your friends, I'd like a male friend to go dancing with or go to the movies with or just to talk to." Give them a heads-up, and give them time to process that.

Spare them the details. Once they're up to speed on your dating status, it's OK to stay mostly mum on the topic. "Kids are not going to be as happy about your new relationship and want to share in all of the joys of new love with you," says Debbie Devine, co-founder of O-Mama.com and single mom of two. "They are selfish little creatures who want and need you to keep them first and foremost. They don't care that you found yourself and feel sexy and fabulous again. They don't care that you're dating and happy. And they really don't care if you've broken up with your boyfriend and are sad. All they care about is what it means for them:

Is mommy going to be happy or sad? Is she going to be with me more or less?"

And while they know you're out meeting potential mates, the kids don't need to meet those mates for a long, long time. "Therapists differ on this, but the general

rule of thumb is to wait at least six months before introducing your kids to your beau," says Devine. "The more people your kids meet and bond to, and then have to detach from, the less credibility you have with them. Save all the pretend insta-family stuff for when you do find the guy you want them to bond with, because it's not as easy as it looks in the movies. It requires a lot of patience and engagement from all parties involved: mom, boyfriend, ex and the kids. We've asked them to survive divorce. Asking them to survive multiple breakups is just too much."

Enjoy the ride — slowly. The dating process, and possibly your dating goals, are different this time around. "You're not in a race to have children anymore and the end of the road is not 'I have to get married and have a big white wedding,'" says Devine.

So date for dating's sake. "Don't rush into anything permanent," says Fisher. "When you've been out of the dating field for so long it's easy to mistake passion and lust for love, but we've got to be smart and responsible as dating single moms."

"You had your chance to be a single gal, footloose and fancy-free," says Devine. "And guess what? It's over. You have kids. You should always remember that you are a mom first and a dating gal second. This is not a bad thing; there's still a lot of fun, romance and love to be had, but you have to use your head more than you did when you were first in the game."

Which, she hastens to add, is a good thing. "This is your do-over, and you get

to take your time and pick who you want, now that you know what you don't want," she says. "Experience and wisdom are on your side now, Mama. Use them."

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When you're seeing a single mother

Debbie Devine, a divorced mom of two, and Michelle Tingler, raised by a single dad, know a thing or two about single parenting. The two pals and co-founders of O-Mama.com, a website where moms talk about current events, offered a few tips for the folks who are dating single moms.

Don't ask to meet the kids. "Let your girlfriend decide when you can meet her kids," says Tingler. Want to show your interest in them? "That's super doops. Ask her about them," she says. "Get to know them on a periphery basis."

Limit the PDA (public displays of affection). When you do meet the kids, tread lightly. "Don't kiss your gal or hold her hand or show affection toward your gal," says Devine. "It's disrespectful and confusing to the children." No sleepovers. "Never sleep over when the kids are home," says Tingler. "Awkward and confusing on so many levels."

Don't play dad. Devine and her boyfriend were recently dining with her kids when her daughter, 8, asked for some croutons. "He said, 'Take two more bites of your peas, and you can have some croutons,' and she said, 'You're not the boss of me!'" recalls Devine. "If Michelle told my kid to eat more peas, I'd say, 'You have to do what she says. Adults are the boss of kids.' But there's the whole 'Don't get in the daddy place with me' thing that's a logical reaction."

Seek a defined role. Ask your girlfriend what role she would like you to play in the family. If it's a role you're comfortable playing, great. If not, maybe it's time to move on.

— H.S.

The Parent 'Hood

Where moms and dads share their expertise

Mom's gift: Her advice

What's the most memorable advice (good or bad) you received from your mom? Our favorite parenting experts (that includes, of course, regular ol' parents) shared the advice that has stuck with them all these years.

Never leave the house without lipstick. Also, addressing my tendency to rationalize purchases based on how much they were discounted: Don't go broke saving money. — *Erika Carpenter Rich, Los Angeles-based clinical psychologist*

Look for the good in people. — *Amy Rubinstein*

You don't have to be the perfect mother. You just have to be good enough. — *Suanne Laqueur*

The most memorable advice my mom gave me was when, at the tender age of 10, I began to menstruate. I remember her walking me into the bathroom, smiling at me with beaming love and pride, and saying: "Now you're a lady, so always keep your legs crossed." This was very insufficient information and confusing advice. I was left to interpret its meaning. I took it literally. Keep your legs crossed so no one sees your private parts?

My mother is the kindest, warmest, most generous and nurturing person I know. Like each of us, she is an imperfect human being. We all come with unfinished business left over from our relationships with our own mothers and fathers. My mom has inhibitions that left her very uncomfortable talking directly with her children about sexuality. This is a great example of why the courageous task of self-exploration is required of parents. — *Fran Walfish, child and family psychotherapist and author of "The Self-Aware Parent" (Palgrave MacMillan)*

When a man wants to have sex with you, it's not a compliment. — *Debbie Devine, co-founder, O-Mama.com*

From my mother to me on her deathbed: Be yourself. — *Paul C. Holinger, psychiatry professor at Rush University Medical Center*

Best advice: The best time of your life should be today; what's past is past and the future holds no guarantees. So find joy in every day, no matter what.

Worst advice: Clean your plate. — *Dawn Lantero*



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A motto my mom lives by: "When there is love, nothing is too much trouble and there is always time" (from the Baha'i writings). — *Homa Sabet Tavangar, author of "Growing Up Global: Raising Children To Be at Home in the World" (Ballantine Books, \$16)*

In our adulthood, whenever my siblings or I would complain about some rotten parenting practice in which my mother engaged in our childhood (forgetting to pick us up at Hebrew school, staying out all night riding the mechanical bull) she would say, defensively, "You kids didn't come out with an instruction book stapled to your foreheads." Which was lucky for her (ouch!) and me: In response, I wrote one. — *Brett Berk, author of "The Gay Uncle's Guide to Parenting" (Three Rivers Press)*

Don't ever lie, especially to your mother. — *Amy Knife Gould*

When I was a teenager, my friends were making plans to see Fleetwood Mac in concert and I desperately wanted to go. I'd never been to a concert. But my mom was a widow raising four kids on a teacher's salary, so we didn't have a lot of extra money. To my surprise, my mom said I should go. I asked her how we could afford it and she said spending money on an experience is much more worthwhile than spending it on things. Things will get broken, lost or forgotten, but the memories of that experience will stay with you for the rest of your life. She was right. Not only do I remember the concert in vivid detail, but I've also chosen to spend my money on experiences over things my entire life. It has made all the difference.

— *Mary O'Donohue, author of "When You Say 'Thank You,' Mean It ... And 11 Other Lessons for Instilling Lifelong Values in Your Children" (Adams Media)*

Compiled by Heidi Stevens, Tribune Newspapers

Got a solution?

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