

Arrested Development: Relive Every Moment of Benson & Stabler's Law & Order Relationship

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Olivia Benson and Elliot Stabler's Relationship Timeline on Law & Order

Has there ever been a more slow-burn “will-they/won’t-they” than [Law & Order: SVU’s](#) Olivia Benson and Elliot Stabler? Portrayed by Mariska Hargitay and Christopher Meloni, the pair started as recently-paired detectives in the Special Victims Unit when the show premiered in 1999. But over the past 25 years, they’ve risen in the ranks while simultaneously rising in the hearts and minds of fans who want nothing more than to see the pair take that final leap from partner to “best friend” to committed soulmate.

Traditionally, the *Law & Order* franchise loves to tease, rather than show, interoffice relationships. But no non-couple TV pairing has ever had this much time or faced these many major crises (Shootings! Births! Kidnappings! Deaths! Undercover Seminudity!) than Benson and Stabler. So as we eagerly await the (now delayed until 2024) Season 25, let’s take a walk down memory lane, through [Olivia Benson and Elliot Stabler’s relationship timeline on Law & Order: SVU](#).



Photo : Everett Collection

Season 1, Episode 1: The Introduction to Benson and Stabler Is Smokin'

The first time audiences caught a glimpse of Olivia Benson and Elliot Stabler was hardly a portent for the future, but nonetheless, a critical one to set up their rapport: In "Payback," the detectives arrive at the homicide scene at night, in the middle of the pouring rain, wearing hats. A man has been stabbed to death in the back of a taxi, which leads Stabler to note that *SVU* doesn't usually handle straight-up killings. "Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar," he adds.

The pair are then informed that the man's "cigar" has been lopped off and taken away. The partners do a double-take on the scene, then look at each other. "Works for me," quips Benson, and they're off to the races.

Later in the episode, we see Stabler at home, where he's married with four children, and Benson is shown to be single – and the product of her mother's rape.

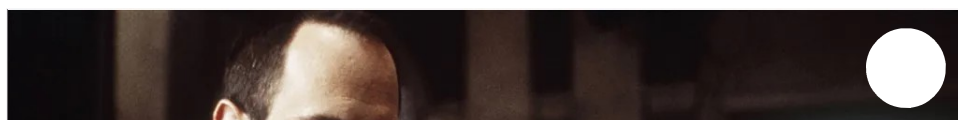




Photo : Everett Collection

Season 1, Episode 2: New to Us, New to Each Other

Benson and Stabler come across as so immediately in sync that it's easy to overlook that the start of the show is the start of their partnership. "A Single Life" lets us know that Stabler's previous partner "Alphonse" has retired to Florida, which makes Benson his new, junior partner. Nevertheless, this is the episode that can officially be said to kick off their maybe-more-than-partners connection; at one point Benson tells Stabler, "I'm never home. I'm always with you."

Meanwhile, Stabler stares at her with interest as she loads something into a car.



Photo : Everett Collection



Over the years, as both Stabler and Benson come under direct and indirect threats, there are plenty of opportunities for one to get overly concerned about the other. In “Stalked,” the killer of an ADA goes after Benson, and Stabler rises to the occasion to keep her safe. Based in Queens, Stabler drives into Manhattan to pick up Benson from her house, offering her a ride to work – and later, when he drives her home, he asks her to “blink your lights when you get inside.” Fans have since dubbed this version of Stabler “Protelliot,” and it’s not the last we’ll see of him during the Olivia Benson and Elliot Stabler relationship timeline on *Law & Order: SVU*.



Photo : Getty Images

Season 1, Episode 10: Stabler Gets Personal

In “Closure,” detectives investigate a series of attacks on women inside their homes, and Benson – who is revealed a few episodes earlier to have only been with *SVU* for a year and a half – sleeps with a fellow colleague (Detective Brian Cassidy). After learning of the one-night stand, Stabler takes more than a passing interest in her love life and asks



of a relationship. Her partner quips, “Can you blame him?”



Photo : Getty Images

Season 6, Episode 8: Stabler’s Home Life Fractures

Over the years, the one clear thing that has kept Stabler and Benson from becoming Stenson or Babler wasn’t just the reluctance of showrunners to go there – it’s that he was a married man. But in “Doubt,” that foundation cracks. A victim’s lawyer first accuses Stabler of sexually harassing her client (the audience knows nothing happened) – and then reveals that Kathy has filed for legal separation and moved out with the kids. Stabler doesn’t want to talk about it with Benson, but finally admits at the end of the episode, “The job – it makes me kind of hard to live with.”

“She should try working with you,” parries Benson. It’s a subtle shift in their relationship and reveals they can open up about tough issues with each other.





Photo : Getty Images

Season 7, Episodes 19, 20, 21: Protelliot Returns, The Partners Split

After several years of not paying much attention to the possible beyond-partners relationship between Benson and Stabler, their closeness is put under the spotlight in a series of episodes toward the end of Season 7 with “Fault,” “Fat” and “Web.” In them, we learn that yes, Benson and Stabler have now been partners for seven years – a fairly long stint in a division as fraught as *SVU*. While trying to save a child and arrest a sex offender, Benson’s neck is slashed and Stabler stays with her rather than rush off to save the child. The child is killed, which leads them to re-think whether they can be objective in the field. “We both chose each other over the job,” Stabler says. “We can never let that happen again. Otherwise, we can’t be partners.”

But Benson opens her heart, sort of, by saying, “You and this job are about the only things I’ve got anymore.”

She ends up requesting a new partner and is assigned to Computer Crimes while Stabler is poorly paired with Det. Lucius Blaine (played by Anthony Anderson who goes on to star in *Law & Order* in the role two years later). Stabler and Blaine do not connect, and in typical Stabler fashion, he is the newcomer. By the end of the three-episode arc, Benson



Photo : Getty Images

Season 8, Episode 11: Kathy Moves Forward with the Divorce

The odd not-quite-love triangle of Kathy, Olivia and Elliot plays out as we learn that the Stablers' divorce – which Kathy asked for back in Season 6 – is still not finalized in “Burned.” While the detectives look into a case where a woman says her estranged husband raped her, all kinds of emotions surface. Kathy says she counts on Benson to see the side of her husband she doesn't want to understand and to give him stability. (How's that working for you, Elliot?)

But in the wee hours of the morning, Stabler gets a text from Benson, who meets him on his porch with some hot beverages and they discuss their partnership. “Like you said, you're the longest relationship that I've ever had with a man,” Benson tells him, echoing something he'd said in the heat of an argument. “Who else would put up with me?”

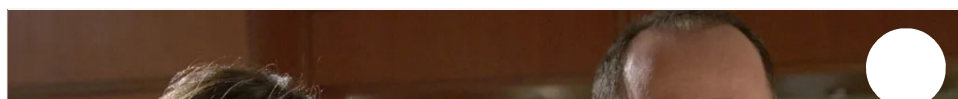




Photo : Getty Images

Season 9, Episode 9: A New Baby, A First Hug

If you want to point to the exact moment on Olivia Benson and Elliot Stabler's relationship timeline on *Law & Order: SVU* slid into full melodrama, "Paternity" is probably the episode. Olivia offers to take a very pregnant Kathy to a doctor's appointment, and the pair end up in a big car accident that pins Kathy – who then goes into labor. Stabler's off doing detective work at the time, which means Benson is the one who's there when Kathy gives birth to the newest Stabler, Elliot Jr.

Naturally, when Stabler Sr. arrives at the hospital, he's pretty worked up. When he and Benson meet in the hallway, he hugs her, a move Chris Meloni said in a 2016 interview with the SAG-AFTRA Foundation was a "spontaneous" decision on his part. "It has to be this outpouring of everything that, over all these years, has never been spoken [of] or physically acted on," he said at the time. "There was a depth and a little sexuality to it – something that went beyond that." This is the first hug shown on camera between the pair; the second comes in Season 12, Episode 17, in the episode "Pursuit."

The Stablers end up not divorcing.



Photo : Getty Images

Season 10, Episode 7; Season 12, Episode 19: Let's Get Physical

For a show dedicated to the crime and not the personal lives of the characters – oh, who are we kidding? By Season 10 it was clear that someone wanted Olivia and Elliot to get together ... eventually. (Though bear in mind that two of the children of franchise creator Dick Wolf are named “Olivia” and “Elliot,” so that could have something to do with the delay.) In any case, this interest in making them a couple brings us to the only real explanation for Season 10’s “Wildlife” and Season 12’s “Bombshell.”

In “Wildlife,” Stabler goes undercover as an animal smuggler (hey, animals are special victims, too) and after Benson surprises him at his undercover pad, they have to vamp in front of one of the smugglers that she’s just a sex worker. Half-dressed and cozying up against one another, it’s hard to see that this is really a struggle for them – but it’s the most physical they’ve been in a decade. Later on in “Bombshell” the show gets a similar reaction when both partners go undercover as swingers – and pose as a married couple, holding hands and everything.



Photo : Getty Images

Season 22, Episode 9: Stabler Is Back! Kathy is Dead!

Chris Meloni, and therefore Stabler, [stepped away from SVU after season 12](#), following a gunfight in the squad room and an investigation by Internal Affairs. While Benson didn't take it well at first, she moved on and had romances, and moments of danger that she survived without any Protelliot around, and even adopted a little boy, Noah. But 10 seasons after he departed, Elliot is back when Kathy dies after a car bombing. With Kathy out of the picture and Stabler back in it, interest has ratcheted to a fever pitch for the last couple of seasons.

In "Return of the Prodigal Son," Stabler and Benson share an important moment in the hospital hallway (hey, wasn't that also the location of their first hug, when Kathy gave birth? Hmm). Apparently, Stabler left his job and left Benson's life and neither has been in touch with each other since, not even for wee hours of coffee and tea on the porch. This was what really wrecked Benson: "You were the ... single most important person in my life, and you just disappeared," she tells him. After Kathy's death, they share their third-ever on-screen hug.



Photo : Getty Images

Organized Crime: Season 1, Episode 1: The Letter Gets Delivered

After time spent living in Rome, Stabler has now returned to New York and is working with Organized Crime (and Meloni is now starring on his own show, [Law & Order: Organized Crime](#)). In the show's pilot, he and Benson do a bit of catching up. He suggests she would have loved being in Rome, but this is already too emotional for Benson. "You know what, Elliot?" she tells him. "I can't."

As they part, he gives her a letter. He said he was going to



read it, throw it away. Whatever you decide, I understand.”
Later, when she finds him at his apartment building wanting to discuss the letter’s contents, he says he’s too distracted by work for the time being.



Photo : Getty Images

Organized Crime: Season 1, Episode 4: The Three Little Words Are Said

Stabler has consistently proven he’s just not a very stable guy – he’s a hothead who gets into all kinds of scraps, and



(This comes two episodes after Stabler told Benson, "Liv, you mean the world to me.")

"Elliot, tell us what you need," Benson urges him at the intervention. Stabler looks at everyone in the room (or directly at Benson, depending on your read of the scene) and says, "I love you." One beat later, he adds, "I love all of you."



Photo : Getty Images

Season 23: Episode 3/Organized Crime: Season 2, Episode 3:



Benson – which is the main mystery *SVU* fans care about at this stage. Crimes? What crimes? While dealing with the effects of being drugged, Stabler tells Benson that he actually ... um, didn't write the letter. At least, not by himself. Turns out that Kathy wrote the letter – because Kathy thought it was the best way to start Benson and Stabler speaking to one another after all these years.

Benson reveals that she's memorized the letter, and starts repeating some of what was in it aloud – including the line that the two of them “got in the way of each other being who and where” they had to be. Another sentence hoped that any man in Benson's life would be “the kind, faithful, devoted man” she deserved. Then it turns out that Stabler did write one line, added before sealing the envelope: “In a parallel universe,” says Benson, and Stabler finishes the sentence before falling over from the drugs: “It will always be you and I.”

Let's remember these two *have never even kissed*.



Photo : Getty Images

Season 24, Episode 9: Benson 'Fesses Up About Stabler ... to Rollins

As the latest season came to an end, Benson finally was able to put her feelings about Stabler into words, just not in front of Stabler. While sharing a box of wine in a motel room following a successful bust. Benson and her co-worker Det. Amanda Rollins (who's been around since Season 13, and who's just gotten married) gets tipsy and shares confidences. Rollins says she used to joke about Benson and Stabler hanging out in a hotel room, and wonders when Benson will be able to be as happy as she is.

"I did feel like Stabler was my home," Benson tells her. "But he left me, Amanda, and I'm not over it... And the thing is that I didn't have a right or a claim. He's somebody else's husband."

"He was your partner," Rollins adds.

Benson sighs that it might have been easier if Kathy was still with them, being that barrier between what they could do beyond being partners and friends. "With her gone, it's like there's nothing but possibility, which is paralyzing," says Benson.

Will there be more character arcs in Season 25? More



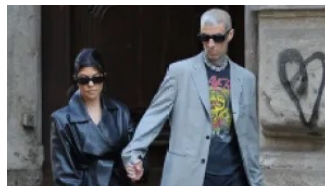
have to wait until 2024 to find out if these two crazy middle-aged kids will finally end up in each other's arms!

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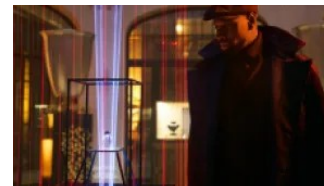
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