

Equipping your kids to navigate their dating years

It is safe to say that the dating landscape has changed significantly since the time you were a teenager. Today's kids are growing up online, with active social media lives and access to an incredible amount of information and images, many of which are sexual in nature. Teens may feel pressured to explore romantic relationships at a very early age, before they are emotionally ready or adequately prepared. This can be problematic because what they learn during these crucial years will set the stage for future adult relationships.

How can parents help prepare their tweens and teens for romantic relationships? The answer: information, information, information...and dialogue.

- **Have the sex talk early.** Most parents talk to their children about sex at 11 or 12 years old; yet by this point, most of today's kids know what sex is. A better way is to give age-appropriate information throughout childhood and later tie it into relationships.
- **Set expectations.** Discuss your ideas, values and expectations regarding issues such as sex, drinking, drugs or relationships from an early age.
- **Help them understand the power of peer pressure.** Ask your teen to think about what he or she would do if they were left alone. Ask questions such as, 'If nobody was drinking a beer, would you?' or 'If nobody your age was having sex, would you?' Let your child know that if he or she does not feel emotionally ready for a serious relationship, then it is okay to be the only one in his or her group who is not paired off.
- **Make them responsible.** Discuss birth control and safe sex. This can be a tough one for parents – and it is important to understand that your teens are not necessarily going to become sexually active immediately. However, when they do, they need to do so safely and responsibly, and understand the repercussions.
- **Use the media.** When a celebrity is involved in an abusive relationship or situation, use the corresponding news reports to start discussions with your teens about what constitutes healthy – and unhealthy – relationships. Talk about music videos, TV shows, movies and advertising that objectify women or promote violence as a means to control or solve problems.
- **Make sure they are not neglecting friends.** While your son or daughter may want to spend every waking minute with their new love, remind them not to abandon their other friends, since friends are, and will continue to be, an important part of their lives.
- **Explain the warning signs of unacceptable behavior.** Teenagers largely have not yet developed the emotional maturity to handle adult relationships. This can sometimes lead to controlling, obsessive and even abusive behavior by both genders. It is essential that your teens learn the warning signs of such unacceptable behavior, and have the confidence to end the relationship immediately – regardless of their partners' promises to change.
- **Lead by example.** Experts agree that the way you and your spouse treat each other will strongly influence your child's future partner choices, how they will treat others and how they will expect to be treated. Try to be positive role models for your kids.

- **What happens online stays online.** Dating has gone digital. Thanks to social media, dating sites and smartphones, young people are meeting and communicating in cyberspace. While it may seem like innocent fun to send naughty texts (“sexting”) or sexy “selfies” to your love’s cell phone, if inappropriate images or messages find their way online, whether intentionally or accidentally, they can unleash vicious cyberbullying by people known and unknown. It is important to remind your kids that words and pictures remain online, somewhere, forever.

Teens often have trouble with what is or is not appropriate in the digital realm. A good guideline is to have them ask themselves if they would send this picture to you, their grandparents or even their teachers. If the answer is no, then they should not send it to their friends. A good rule of thumb: if in doubt, do not send it. Remind them repeatedly that what is posted online *stays* online, and discuss what your family’s values and expectations are regarding the use of technology.

The most important thing we can do for our children is to instill in them the confidence and values they need to succeed in life. A child with good self-esteem and unshakeable personal ethics is less likely to be influenced by peer pressure or manipulative behavior – either online or offline.

Feeling like the fifth wheel?

You wouldn’t think you would need new friends in your 20’s and 30’s. After all, you have a number of friends from elementary school, high school, your neighborhood and university or college. You may have shared accommodations with them, travelled with them, gone out on weekends with them and spent hours sharing your problems with work, relationships and finances with them.

But then a new phenomenon began: your friends started to fall in love. They may now spend all of their free time with their significant others. They may have moved in together or gotten married and some may have even started having children. Suddenly you feel like you are the only single person left in your group and “a night out with the girls” or “guys’ night” is a thing of the past. On the rare occasions when you do get together with old friends, partners may often come along and you may feel like a third wheel to a bike, or a fifth wheel to a car. The feeling of being the extra, “unneeded” person can become overwhelming to many people. You may feel that your friends have moved into a new phase of life without you. You may feel out of place, disconnected and suddenly all alone.

Although the shortest month of the year, February may now seem like the longest month of the year, as you’re surrounded by Valentine’s Day advertising. It can certainly feel lonely. If you are feeling disconnected from those around you, there are a few things you can do to change this. But where can you begin?

Coping with loneliness

First, realize that you are not alone. Everyone feels lonely from time to time, particularly during major life transitions. Then take a deep breath and try the following:

- **Join a sports team or take a class.** Look for book clubs, faith groups, language or dance classes, and do not let anxiety stop you from trying new things.

Looking for additional support? Your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) can help through a variety of resources. Call your EAP at **1 866 468-9461** or visit shepell.com.



BALANCE

A wellness update for your work, health, life

- **Volunteer in your community.** This is a great way to meet people with similar social and political interests.
- **Attend functions alone.** This can be hard, but remember that it is quite common for people to attend events solo today. Try to go with no expectations of meeting people and just enjoy yourself. Look for activities that interest you such as concerts, sporting events, and art exhibitions.
- **Consider getting a pet.** If you are truly struggling without companionship, consider adopting a dog or cat from your local animal shelter. Meeting other pet owners at an off-leash area is a great stress-free way to meet new people.
- **Challenge yourself to take the initiative in social relationships.** Do not wait for people to approach you; approach them. Ask someone you want to get to know better if they want to grab a coffee or lunch.
- **Organize get-togethers.** It can be a book club, a work bowling league, or even a regular movie night. Ask people from various areas of your life if they would like to join in. You can also organize smaller get-togethers with a mixture of single friends and couples. You may be pleasantly surprised – even friends who may be in relationships could use a break from their partner or spouse for the night, to spend time with the girls or guys they haven't seen in some time!
- **Join an online community.** Share your thoughts and experiences with people going through similar experiences. Online forums and social media sites often allow you to help others while you help yourself. In addition, sites such as Facebook are a great way to reconnect with long lost friends, find new friends and stay in touch with friends near and far.

Remember that it is not the *quantity* but the *quality* of friends you have that counts. Two or three really good buddies whom you can truly depend on are better than many acquaintances. But developing close relationships takes time, so be patient and continue to stay as active and involved as you can. Finally, do not give up on your coupled-up friends. You may not see them as much as you would like, but they probably still care about you, regardless of their marital status.

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