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# TEENS AND DATING

 parenting  
today's teens  
with mark gregston

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## TEENS AND DATING:

### GUIDELINES FOR SETTING BOUNDARIES IN YOUR FAMILY

I often run into parents who are anxious about their teen's dating life. Do you ever worry about their choices?

Perhaps your child is in middle school and you're thinking about what's over the horizon. Or maybe you're struggling with the decisions your seventeen-year-old is making with her boyfriend. Whatever the case, this area of parenting is tough!

Here are some guidelines and other tips for setting boundaries in this area with your teen that we've found helpful over the years that may encourage you, as well as stories we've experienced in ministry at Heartlight and with hundreds of parents and teens.

As you learn to balance trust with boundaries, hopefully your son or daughter will make wise choices in the friendships they pursue.

#### *Tips for Setting Boundaries for Your Teen's Dating Life*

Remember the old television program, *The Dating Game*? The host would introduce some bubbly contestant who, through a series of really ridiculous questions, would have to choose between three eligible bachelors that remain hidden to everyone but the audience. At the end of the show, she would make her selection from the bachelors and accompany them on a date ... sight unseen.

We're entertained by the ridiculous notion that someone would blindly stumble into the dating scene. But without clear boundaries and expectations, our teens are in a similar position. It's our job as parents to teach our kids to approach dating with responsibility and discretion.



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Unfortunately, there's not a cut-and-dry formula. I've known couples that have dated since they were fifteen, and have been married for decades. I've also known couples that have gone the courtship route, and testify to its success. When it comes to teen romance it's not the style that we should concern ourselves with. What is important is nurturing and protecting each individual child during these important times in life.

## *Write the Playbook*

Before your child even reaches their teen years, sit down with your spouse and write out the family playbook for guy-girl relationships. Both mom and dad may have strong feelings one way or the other about certain aspects of dating. Now is the time to talk about guidelines you will both establish and reinforce.

When you consider the type of dating you will allow, make sure you consider the personality of your child. An introverted son or daughter might flourish within a courtship setting. Try to put those restrictions on a social butterfly, and it's a recipe for rebellion! Remember, there is no wrong or right way to frame the dating scene. Arranged marriages have flourished for thousand of years without the help of our modern dating psychology. Then again, successful relationships have grown out of close friendships and blind dates. Don't get hung up on the style of dating you want to see. Focus on behaviors for positive interactions between guys and gals in your home.

Perhaps the most often question I hear from parents on this issue is *what age should my teen date?* To which I reply, *you tell me!* Choosing the appropriate age to allow your kids to date one-on-one is a decision that parents need to make in light of their unique family situation.

I told my kids that when they turned sixteen and had their own transportation, that's when they could go on individual dates. Studies have shown that when kids start dating at the age of twelve, they have a 90% chance of losing their virginity before marriage. When they postpone romantic engagements till sixteen, the statistic drops down to 25%.



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But don't get stuck on a number. As a parent, you know what's best for your child. If he or she is immature at sixteen and has had trouble with dating in the past, then consider pushing that back to seventeen or eighteen. What's important is that you and your spouse decide together what the playbook for dating is going to be.

Consider these quick guidelines that may help you navigate the process...

- First, get on the same page with your spouse as to dating rules for your kids.
- Second, talk openly with your teen about those rules... and what you expect.
- Finally, consider loosening your grip in appropriate ways as your child gets older.

## *Share the Playbook*

Once you have established the guidelines for dating, share those with your kids. Clue them in to the rules and explain why they're in place. To get you started, here are some boundaries I implemented in my home:

- Nothing good happens after midnight. End a date before then.
- If a boyfriend or girlfriend is in your room, leave the door open.
- Boys, treat girls with respect. She is someone's daughter.
- Girls, don't give your heart away on the first date. Have fun, but be reserved.
- If you need to end a relationship, you must do it in person.
- Don't stay in the car. Once you put it in park, get out and walk into the house.

That's a short list. Trust me, I had plenty more household rules when it came to dating! But these will give you some ideas to develop your own boundaries. By the way, don't assume your teens know the rules. Be open and honest with them about dating expectations.

When rules are broken, be consistent about discipline. Let your kids know the consequences, and carry them out. A word of caution—never forbid a relationship as a punishment. Forcing a break-up will only backfire and drive your teen further into unhealthy patterns. Your son or daughter might chase after that



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person all the more, as a way to have control. Or, they could resent you and blame you for their relationship issues. Instead, when the rules are broken, dish out a personal consequence. Be open and share your concerns if you feel that the person your teen is dating is less than desirable. But if your son comes home with alcohol on his breath, or your daughter admits a sexual mistake, the consequence shouldn't be a broken relationship. Love is a powerful emotion, and you don't want to force your teen to make a choice between you and the person they care about.

When navigating to the complicated subject of teen romance, it helps to hear from other parents about their successes and failure. On the *Parenting Today's Teens* radio broadcast this week, we've invited Tim Kimmel to share some insights for dealing with raging hormones, marriage talks, and keeping kids pure. Tim's sense of humor and practical knowledge is a great resource for any parent needing a little guidance.

For me, the excitement of the old *Dating Game* television show was seeing whether the contestant picked a stud or a dud. And that's how the dating scene with your kids will be. They'll make some good choices, and occasionally, they'll make some bad ones. Our job is to make sure they know one from the other.

## ***Coach or Bodyguard? Understanding the Role of Parents in Dating***

*"I told my daughter that she could start dating when her age was not a number on the clock. Then I set all our clocks to military time."* ~ Concerned Father

You know it when you see it. It could be the way your daughter talks about the boy at school. Maybe it's the spark in your son's eye when he spots a particular lady from youth group. For many of us, when we begin to notice the signs of attraction in our teens, we start to feel nervous and queasy. *"Oh no, my teenager wants to start dating!"* We realize that in today's culture, concerned parents approach the subject of their children dating with caution. When it comes to that stage in your children's life, what do you do? What is the role of mom and dad in a teen's romantic life?

### **To Date or to Court**



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One of the questions plaguing parents of dating-age children is whether their kids should practice dating or courtship. In the last few years, there have been many books, lectures, and debates on both sides of the argument, each clamoring for our attention. It runs the gamut from *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* to *I Gave Dating a Chance*. So what's the best option for your teen?

First, we have to understand what the basic tenets of each side. Boiled down to fundamentals, courtship and dating can be defined by the amount of parental control. The traditional sense of "dating" does not call for a rigorous parental role. However, "courtship" does allow for more involvement from mom and dad in teen relationships. While this is an extremely broad stroke of each approach, it is one of the primary aspects of both. Now, regardless where you fall on the dating and courtship debate, we also have to understand some of fallacies that accompany each view.

The vehement proponents of courtship, who oppose dating in any form, tend to see the strength of courtship lying in its reversion to more traditional ways of getting acquainted. In days of yore, courting kids would sit out on the porch swing while parents kept a careful eye on the proceedings. Or prospective partners were invited over for dinner and all conversation and actions were observed by the entire family. These courtship guidelines were thought to develop friendship before intimacy, and make for stronger marriages. However, those who push for courtship as the only correct method of interaction for teenagers may have a romanticized view tradition. Perhaps courtship dampened teenage sexual mistakes, but there were still many troubled marriages back then. Abuse, infidelity, and divorce were still part of the fabric of society. And courtship was not, and is still not, the solution to these problem areas.

Our modern methods of dating also have pitfalls. With the freedom that dating brings, parents may be left in the dark about who their child is with, or what is going on. Teenagers need guidance when it comes to navigating the perilous world of dating. It's not just keeping our boys away from pornography or making sure our girls keep their virginity. It's teaching them how to love and appreciate someone else. To sacrifice for someone else and have self-control. Dating should be the time we are teaching our young men how to properly love and care for a young woman. And it should allow for guiding a young woman in loving and caring for a young man. However, if we throw our kids into the modern dating



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world according to our culture's rules, they'll never have chance to develop those qualities.

## *To Coach or to Bodyguard*

Above our decisions to allow courting or dating, the role we play as parents in our teens lives is most important. We can either be a bodyguard who shadows and controls our kids to zealously protect them from any perceived harm. Or we can be a coach, training and instructing our kids as they learn how to have relationships with the opposite sex.

If you realize you're more of a bodyguard, how can you switch to being a coach? It begins by letting go of the anxiety and giving up some of the control. If you do everything for your teen—from making their lunch, to cleaning their room, to deciding who they date or like—then you know that you wield too much control, and it's not healthy for you or your teen. I realize that taking a step back can be scary, especially when it comes to dating. But if like helicopter parents we hover over every aspect of our teen's life and dating scene, they will either rebel to prove we don't control them, or they'll be emotional handicapped, and they won't *know* how to take care of themselves.

Secondly, remain involved in your child's life. Ask questions about the person they like or the person they're dating. Invite your daughter's boyfriend on the family picnic or camping trip (just make sure he has a separate tent!). Invite girlfriends over to the house for dinner and a movie. When it comes to your role in your kid's dating relationship, be involved, but don't control.

Thirdly, be supportive. When your daughter brings home the guy with pink hair and tight jeans, don't immediately seek to throw the guy out. Interact, talk, and encourage your daughter to evaluate her date to see if he is spouse material. When we hold our tongues, often kids will come directly to us and ask, "*Mom what do you think about him?*" But when we jump the gun and blast away with our opinions, we may write-off any influence we may have had to speak into our kid's lives. I know this happened with my own mom. She didn't like Jan, my wife, ever since we first start dating. She'd tell me, "*Mark, you can do so much better!*" which couldn't be further from the truth. Jan was out of my league when we first



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got together, and she's *still* out of my league today. But the hurtful or harmful words my mom spoke all these years ago left their mark, and it took awhile for all of us to be move past those tensions. Don't allow your comments about who your daughter or son dates to influence your future relationship with them.

Lastly, picture yourself as a coach, rather than the bodyguard. Coaches encourage, inspire, and train their students. They offer advice when needed, and allow the athletes to learn and grow through experience. Arranging your teenager's dates so that they are never alone together won't teach them to avoid temptation or have self-control. Instructing them on the benefits of staying pure before marriage and letting them know that they can achieve something good by holding to their values goes a lot farther. Criticizing their boyfriend or girlfriend won't force them to break up with an undesirable character. But coaching and teaching them not to *make* love happen, but to *let* love happen, can be much more effective.

So what is your role in your teen's dating life? Is it coach rather than bodyguard? If you force yourself into your teen's life, your impact lessens. But if you act as a guide and supporter, your influence will actually grow! We don't need to be frightened of our teens dating. With the right perspective on our role in the process, we can help our teens develop qualities that make for lasting relationships.