

The Dating Game

Four steps to help guide your teens as they interact with the opposite sex.

by Dennis and Barbara Rainey

See if you can recognize this story:

A teenager looks across the room and spots a beautiful young girl. He catches her eye ... they are entranced ... they've got to meet each other.

When they first talk, incredible sparks fly between them, and they resolve to meet again. Over the next few days, they spend more and more time together. Their parents and friends are against the match, but they fall in love anyway, and before long they cement their love by sleeping together.

Sound familiar? It should; it's the plot for *Romeo and Juliet* and countless takeoffs ever since. Even the movie *Titanic* is the same old story, with minor variations.

We've all grown up hearing and watching stories like these, which are part of what we like to call the myth of fantasy love. It's a phantom fueled by popular music, television, books, and movies.

The dating game, as currently played by most people, is a dangerous trap for teenagers because it encourages them to pursue this type of romantic, fantasy love at an age when they lack maturity, character, and wisdom. And that, in turn, results in a number of problems:

- One-on-one dating leads couples to spend too much time alone at the peak of the sex drive for a young man.
- Teens make poor choices about whom to date and are negatively influenced by those who do not share their values.
- Teens develop emotional attachments that cause them to desire a physical relationship of the same intensity.
- Acting either from peer pressure or from a need that is not met at home, teens begin pairing off as boyfriend and girlfriend when they are too young and immature to make good decisions.
- Eventually the dating game sets up young people to move from one short-term relationship to another. They seek romance, security, self-fulfillment, and physical gratification. But when the initial infatuation begins to fade, they either move on to another person or form a close, emotional attachment at an age when they are unable to make long-term commitments. And while there are many causes for divorce, it's interesting to note that this pattern of short-term relationships leaves many people unable to fulfill the long-term commitment required of a married couple.

We think it's time for parents to take a long, hard look at the dating game.

There's no doubt that adolescents need to begin learning how to relate to the opposite sex. But that doesn't mean we need to let them follow the same path we did when we were young. It's time to provide some alternatives.

The truth is that we didn't have our convictions in place when dating caught us by surprise as our oldest daughter, Ashley, turned twelve. Like so many parents, we thought we had plenty of time to talk about this—later. But then Ashley took a walk with a boy at a Christian conference to go get a Coke. Harmless as it was, it was something of a date. They liked each other and were alone.

We panicked! We didn't want our daughter starting a dating career at age twelve. It was time for some focused attention on dating. So we talked with her and had several healthy discussions. But it occurred around something Ashley was already experiencing. It would have been much better if we had discussed these issues with her prior to her encounter with the young man. It could have made it easier on her ... and us!

Four Guidelines

In forming our own convictions as parents about dating, it's not good enough for us to just back off a step or two from what the world says is acceptable. We believe there are four convictions regarding dating that all parents should consider and uphold:

1. Our teenagers need our training, guidance, and ongoing involvement as they approach the issue of guy-girl relationships and dating.

Because our culture tells parents to stay out of the dating lives of our teenagers, we realize this may not be an easy conviction to embrace. We're told that our teens are old enough to begin making their own decisions, that parents who do get involved are old-fashioned, intrusive, and "patriarchal."

To us, it seems, very few parents of teens are involved enough in their children's dating relationships. That's why you need to be involved—because other parents aren't! What we have is a youth culture with far too many liberties and not nearly enough parental involvement and boundaries. The result is the moral meltdown of our youth.

2. We must set rules and boundaries for our child.

Perhaps the best way to help corral your ideas on what to do about your child's interaction with the opposite sex is to write out your family's dating policy.

This will require some extended conversation between Mom and Dad.

What are your standards going to be? What about dating—are you going to let your kids date or not? At what age? Whom will they be able to date? Will you allow them to date another person exclusively?

Be proactive. Too many parents today allow their children to develop exclusive guy-girl relationships at 13 or 14 because that's what everyone else does. Parents tend to think, "What harm can they do? They can't go out in a car alone." But the pattern of romance and emotional involvement gets established.

As Ashley and then Benjamin and Samuel began adolescence, we looked more closely at this issue and over the years developed some family guidelines for the following: When a child can date, whom they should date, acceptable kinds of dates, telephone use, Internet communications, and so on.

3. *We (especially dads) need to interview our daughters' dates.*

I started conducting these interviews when our oldest daughter, Ashley, was 17 and was mature enough to go on a date. Ultimately I came up with an eight-point checklist that I reviewed with the guys who wanted to take her out. See the complete list in my book *Interviewing Your Daughter's Date*.

First, if your daughter knows in advance what you will be asking and is prepared for what it will be like, she will usually feel honored, protected, and loved. All our girls knew this was normal procedure at our house. They expected it, and, yes, they liked it.

Second, because the interview takes place well before the date, dads can evaluate the young man's character in advance. Should you feel it would be unwise for your daughter to spend time with this boy, you can intervene.

Third, we've found that knowing he will have to meet with me before he can date my daughter has automatically weeded out a number of unacceptable prospects. It takes a courageous young man or an arrogant one to go through the interview for a date with our daughter. We've met with both kinds!

If you begin talking about interviewing her dates before your daughter begins adolescence, this should not become an issue when you actually begin doing it later on.

Doing these interviews is one of the best things I've ever done for my daughters as a dad. And instead of creating tension and separation between my daughters and me, it has actually drawn us closer together.

4. *We need to teach our children how dating fits into the process of finding a mate.*

Barbara and I were good friends for several years before our relationship turned from friendship to dating toward marriage. We have noticed that God often seems to follow this pattern. We've heard countless couples tell basically the same story, including our own daughter Ashley and her husband, Michael. They were good friends at the University of Mississippi when God began to speak to Michael's heart. In the next few months this friendship grew into something much deeper, and they were married in 1997.

The teenage years are not the time to be looking for a mate, or to form deep emotional romantic attachments. Children need to learn to use their single years to focus on the Lord and trust in Him rather than basing their hopes and their self-worth upon a relationship with someone of the opposite sex.

Dating contracts can also be very useful tools in clarifying parent-child expectations related to dating guidelines in your home. We have used these on several occasions. The purpose of the contract is to enforce the idea of holding to convictions and remaining accountable in a dating relationship. It also alerts the child that the parents are paying attention and have great interest in their son or daughter's involvement with a person of the opposite sex.

Be careful to not become obsessed with the sex and dating issues. When you are working so hard to go against the flow of the culture, there's a tendency to become so preoccupied with how your child is doing that you are constantly harping at them, asking them questions. Remember that how you handle your relationship with your child is like playing a solo on a fine violin. It's difficult, and much practice is required. Be very careful how you hold the instrument and don't turn the strings too tight!

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