

Coach or Bodyguard? Understanding the Role of Parents in Dating

Parenting Today's Teen

Mark Gregston

September 21, 2012

"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

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 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 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.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mark Gregston is an author, speaker, radio host, and the founder and director of Heartlight, located in Hallsville, Texas. For more information and helpful resources for moms and dads, check out our website. It's filled with ideas and tools to help you become a more effective parent. Go to www.heartlightministries.org. Or read other helpful articles by Mark, at www.markgregston.com. You can also call Heartlight directly at (903) 668-2173. Hear the Parenting Today's Teens broadcast on a radio station near you, or download the podcast at www.parentingtodaysteens.org.