

## *Confronting Inappropriate Teen Relationships*

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**PARENT QUESTION:** I suspect my teen is involved in inappropriate sexual activity. Should I pry and spy into my teen's privacy to find out for sure?

**MARK'S ANSWER:** My answer is the same here as it is for any parent suspecting inappropriate behavior and poor decision-making in their teen – an unequivocal “Yes!” And here's how to deal with it...

Remember, for teens, violation of your family policies means automatic invasion of their privacy, until you are sure you know the whole truth. While it is important to trust your teen, if you suspect something is happening and the warning signs are there, action is required. Adolescents are capable of making poor choices, being deceived, and easily influenced in ways that could unravel your family forever.

Once you are sure of your child's inappropriate involvement, let that truth sink in to your mind and heart for a few days before acting to deal with it. Don't feel like you have to tackle the issue the minute you find out. Pray and seek wise counsel in order to gain more understanding, and move into a mindset for dealing with the problem appropriately. Patience will keep you from saying things you regret, or acting in ways that do more damage than good. Take your time, and trust that God will give you His direction as you walk along the path of this conflict. He's doesn't always give you an immediate answer, but He promises to not leave you while you are in the process.

Keep in mind that in today's culture, teens see nothing wrong with all sorts of sexual behavior that parents would deem inappropriate or immoral. And that includes kids in Christian schools. You certainly don't have to go along with it, but understanding why it might happen will help provide the right perspective during the correction process. In other words, don't automatically think your child has become a reprobate. It may just be a phase she is going through, or it may be because of a loss in the teen's life or her way of getting back at you for a breakdown in your relationship.

In any event, the issue needs to be confronted, and the sooner the better. When you are ready and have the evidence you need, I suggest you set up a series of three meetings for the purpose of exposure, expression, and for discussion of your expectations. Don't talk about everything in one sitting. These three meetings could take place over the course of a single day, or a few weeks. Whichever you choose, stick to the plan, and don't let your child's negative responses undermine the purposes for each meeting.

### **Meeting One: Exposure**

The first meeting is to expose what you know, reveal what you have been told, and talk about what you believe is happening. If both parents are present, then I'd encourage just one person to take the lead. Some of the following statements might help give you some direction:

*“Sarah, we have reason to believe that your relationship with a boy has moved into an unhealthy one.”*

*“Mark, we want to talk about the inappropriate sites you've been visiting on the internet and what you've posted on your MySpace page.”*

*“Kim, we've been told that your relationship with another girl has moved from friendship to a physical involvement.”*

Exposing the fact that you know what is going on will hopefully engage her thinking in new ways. It might be the wake-up call your teen needs, or it might open a Pandora's Box full of problems. Whatever the response, let your teen think about it and tell her that you want to get back together in a couple of days to talk again. Tell her “I want you to think about what's going on, and we want to share what we feel and think. But let's do this in a couple of days.”

Revealing what you know begins the process of your teen realizing the truth is known and it won't be ignored. Your child may respond in a number of ways. She might get mad as she realizes that her scheme

to keep you out of the loop isn't working. She might feel betrayed by friends or teachers. She may get depressed, run out in embarrassment, act out in anger, or simply deny it all. She might hide in her room in shame. Who knows?

Whatever the response, and whether she is yelling at you or sulking in her room, don't be afraid to let her know of your love, your commitment, and your willingness to continue to be a part of her life. That may be conveyed in words, whether written or spoken, a slip of a note under her door, a letter stuck in her notebook, a text message sent to her after a couple of hours. There just needs to be some type of affirmation of your love for your boy or girl.

*"Sweetheart, I want you to know that I love you just as much today as the day we brought you home into our family."*

*"John, your dad and I are happy that we get to put things on the table and discuss where you are in your thinking."*

*"Molly, we're not going to stop loving you and want you to know that we will never allow anyone to take you to a place that you really don't want to be."*

*"Randy, we love you."*

Anytime a teen is caught, or their misbehavior is exposed; their greatest fear is that they will no longer be loved. Saying these things, even if the response from the teen is negative, is an affirmation of your loving relationship. At this point, your child needs reassurance, especially as you move through the process of helping them make healthier decisions.

### **Meeting Two: Expression**

This meeting is the time to share how you feel about the inappropriate relationships. Your comments might be similar to these comments:

*"Suzie, we want you to know that we're not in favor of this relationship and feel like it's wrong. And it's wrong because it will take you to a place where you don't want to end up. Your future family will look so different than what we know that you want."*

*"Joe, we can't allow this to happen. It is against what we believe for you, what we want for you, and what we think you want for yourself."*

*"Amber, you know this isn't right and we want to help you any way we know how, but there is no way that we can be supportive of this relationship."*

*"Melissa, we love you, and love you enough to not allow you to walk down this path with our support. We will have to stand for what we believe to be right; just as you are standing to believe what you think is right."*

This is the time to bring your feelings to the table, and hopefully, she'll bring hers. When you begin to share your heart with your child, I would encourage you not to preach or quote scripture. She already knows it. You raised her in it, and you live it. Scripture can be reflected in your comments without having to quote chapter and verse. Your beliefs can be communicated without quizzing her with comments like, "You know what scripture says...", or "What you are doing goes against God." While these may be truthful, they may not be appropriate for this moment. Trust the Holy Spirit to impress these truths into your daughter's thinking. Try to draw your daughter into more discussion, without shaming or condemning. Be truthful and loving, and lead the conversation in a way that leads her to repentance and restoration; not in a way that drives her away feeling belittled.

### **Meeting Three: Expectations**

Meet again for the purpose of sharing your expectations for this situation. I implore you to receive godly counsel before you enter this meeting, as the directives you give during this time carry great importance. This is a difficult discussion where you detail what you are going to do or not do, and how you are going to deal with the problem. You'll notice the escalating intensity of your message:

“Alison, we can’t allow this relationship to continue, so we’re either going to ask you to control it and stay away from “x” or we’ll have to put some controls around you to protect you. We want you to meet with a counselor to talk about all of this, and make sure you don’t head in a direction that is going to eventually hurt you.”

*“Karl, your mom and I can’t allow you to go back to the same school because we feel you can’t break away from “x.” It seems like he/she’s controlling you and you can’t think on your own.”*

*“Karen, we’ve tried counseling, taking things away from you, pleading with you, and hoping that things would turn, but it just doesn’t seem to be happening. We’ve decided to have you go to a place where you can be protected and can also receive some help to get through this craziness.”*

*“Meg, you and I are going to get away for a while to talk, and spend some time thinking through all that’s been going on in your life. I want you to plan on being gone a month. This means no cell phones and no contact with anyone back home except Dad and your sisters.”*

*“Jimmy, we love you. But we don’t support what you’re doing with “x” and if it continues, you’ll not longer be able to live at home. We don’t allow living here and not adhering to our rules, beliefs, and principles. You’re almost 18 and we can’t make you do what you don’t want to do. But we won’t support this. As long as it continues, we will not support you at college, we won’t pay for tuition, and we won’t give you money for living expenses. You’ll be on your own.” This isn’t our choice, but it is your choice by not supporting what we’re asking of you as long as you’re in our home. We can’t support your lifestyle as your choices will only lead you to ruin, and we won’t have a part of them.”*

This is the time to state exactly what you will and won’t do. You can tell from the volatility of the discussion why it is vital you seek counsel before implementing any new rules. I always suggest a strong response to this particular problem, as I truly believe that it demands one.

When you pose a strong response, be ready for a strong reaction. Your refusal to support what your teen is doing means they won’t receive your full support while continuing to live a life that you disagree with. If they decide to leave home and live with a boyfriend or girlfriend, then still invite your child over for family dinner, birthdays, and holidays, outside the influence of unhealthy friends or inappropriate relationships.

During this difficult time, I also encourage you to surround yourself with like-minded parents, and engage your close family friends in this process. Ask your teen’s friends to talk with him or her and share their concerns as well. The purpose in surrounding yourself with support and using friends to help carry the right message is to counterbalance the secrecy your teen has built into their life, and undermine the time spent with no healthy input. Parents in this situation also need fellowship with other believers who are willing to listen, and help carry the burden without judging.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mark Gregston is an author, speaker, radio host, and the founder and director of Heartlight, a residential counseling center for struggling teens located in Longview, Texas. He has been married to his wife, Jan, for 40 years, has two kids, and four grandkids. He lives in Longview, Texas, with the Heartlight staff, 60 high school kids, 25 horses, his dog, Stitch, two llamas, and a prized donkey named Toy.

His past involvement as a youth pastor, Young Life area director, and living with more than 2,800 teens has prepared Mark to share his insights and wisdom about parenting pre-teens and adolescents. You can find out more about Heartlight at [HeartlightMinistries.org](http://HeartlightMinistries.org). You can also call Heartlight directly at (903) 668-2173.

Mark is also the host of the radio program Parenting Today’s Teen; heard on over 1,600 radio outlets nationwide. Visit [ParentingTodaysTeens.org](http://ParentingTodaysTeens.org) where you’ll find more parenting resources and find a station near you that carries the daily 60-second features or the 30-minute weekend program. Download the

Parenting Today's Teens App for Apple or Android, it's a great way to listen on your schedule.