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It's a scary thought for most parents (especially fathers!) that one day your little girl and boy will be out there dating other girls and boys. For some parents it's the moment we've been dreading for years; having to meet your daughter's first boyfriend. Perhaps what scares us is that this is the sign that your little child is no longer a little child, but a young woman and man now.

Also, we worry about whether they will find a good life partner, someone who will give them love, respect, support and companionship. We see so many unhappy marriages and relationships, so much pain, anger, unfaithfulness and bitterness and we just hope and pray that our children will be able to develop healthy and happy relationships when the time comes.

The good news is that there is much we can do as parents to prepare them for this important stage in their lives:

1. Build their self esteem

Many unhealthy relationships stem from poor self esteem. When someone looks down on themselves they are more likely to desperately seek a boyfriend or girlfriend to boost their self worth, even when their partners are incompatible, unsupportive and sometimes downright abusive.

For example research in psychology indicates that young people with low self esteem are more likely to stay in an unhealthy relationship even when their partners are taking advantage of them, or causing them much grief.

Young people with low self esteem also are more likely to feel pressured into dating and starting romantic relationships even when they are unprepared to commit. Conversely young people with a healthy self esteem are more likely to be thoughtful and less hasty when deciding whether to enter into a relationship, because they feel fulfilled and confident in who they are and are unlikely to "settle" for someone who may not be a good fit for them.

So as parents we should start from young: affirm your child. Remind them regularly of what makes them special and unique. Don't compare them to others and discourage them from wishing they were someone else. Encourage them to take a balanced perspective of themselves recognizing that no one is perfect and that while we should all strive to develop and better ourselves we should never look down on ourselves because we are different from others.

2. Remind them that marriage is a choice

If we do not want our children to rush into romantic relationships, we should be careful what message we send them about love and marriage. In my experience working with teenagers, I observe that many of them grow up with the perception that the only way to be truly happy is to be married or in a relationship. The message they are getting from fairy tales, movies, TV seems to be that to be single is to be miserable and to be complete you need a boyfriend or girlfriend. This of course is not true.

Sometimes as parents we make things worse, when we make comments about other young adults we know in the presence of our children. When we say things like "Poor thing, she's still not married," or "Now that he's got a steady job he better start looking for a good wife quickly and settle down", our children get the message that it's unnatural to be single and that prime goal in life is to find a partner.

This may explain why as teenagers, so many of them seek happiness through finding a romantic partner even when they are not ready for such a commitment.

As parents we should emphasize from the time they are young that marriage and singlehood are choices in life. One is not necessarily better than the other. As such, they should feel free to make the choice that will make them the happiest. We should also make it clear that we will be supportive of whatever choice they make as long as it leads to their own fulfillment.

3. Show them what true love is

So much about love and romance is misunderstood. The world seems to be so focused on love as a feeling, an emotion that overwhelms you. Really what they are talking about is attraction and infatuation which, as we all know, doesn't last in the long term. Teens are particularly susceptible to confusing "falling in love" with actually "loving" someone.

If we want our children to have happy and fulfilling relationships in the future, we should provide them with a healthy and accurate understanding of love.

From young we should teach and show them through our own marriage that love is about meeting the needs of interest of others. Love is hard because it often involves sacrifice. Love is about learning to give and take, to be strong enough to help and at the same time to be humble enough to receive

help. Love is about being open, vulnerable and honest with your partner. It is about being patient and kind, not cruel or manipulative. Love is about celebrating the success and happiness of others, not being resentful or jealous.

When our children have good values, and have a clear understanding of what love really means, they will be so much more ready to be a loving boyfriend or girlfriend when the time comes. They will also be in good position to discern between a healthy and an unhealthy relationship, and will be willing to speak up and stand up when they are not being loved by their partners.

4. Encourage them to have a clear life goals and dreams

One of the keys to selecting a compatible life partner is to understand your own goals in life. In other words, our children need to develop a clear sense of what they really want in life.

To use an illustration: marriage is like two travelers on a journey who come together and decide that they will be companions on their life journey. But in order to determine whether they want to travel together, they need some sense of where they want to go.

Many relationships fail because the individuals don't know what direction they're heading in, and they may discover much later that their directions are not really compatible.

As parents we can encourage our children, from the time they're young to the time they are teenagers, to always think about what they want in life. Of course this will change and will evolve as they grow older. But by encouraging a child to be mindful and aware of their life direction, we help them also make better choices about their life partners.

Research has shown that teenagers with long term life goals and ambitions, were a lot less likely to rush into romantic relationships. They were also a lot more thoughtful when selecting a boyfriend and girlfriend, often considering whether the dreams and goals of their prospective partners were compatible with their own.

Conclusion

At the end of the day, we realize that our children's romantic lives will be in their hands, not ours. Our role is not to manage and run their lives forever. They need to choose their own paths. The best we can do is to equip them with the values, understanding and knowledge that will help them make good decisions on their journey.

This article on education and parenting ideas have been published in the Parenthood magazine between 2008 - 2010