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Why Puppy Love Matters for Parents

By SUE SHELLNBARGER

Among all my endeavors as a parent of teenagers, understanding their affairs of the heart has been the most baffling. Mostly, my approach has been, "Hands off."

New research suggests I might do better by meddling a bit.



Tim Bower

Long dismissed by researchers as trivial and fleeting, teen romance is emerging as a powerful factor in kids' development—one in which parents have a major role to play, new studies show. The romantic ties kids form between middle school and college are important markers of progress toward adulthood; their choice of partners as early as middle school actually shapes their development to a surprising degree.

And while parents' dating advice may seem about

as welcomed by teens as the swine flu, the research suggests the opposite—that young people not only value parental input, but tend to have healthier relationships when they receive parental advice.

The studies serve as bedrock for parents in an era of dizzying changes in youthful romance. Many adults see little that is familiar in today's teen dating relationships, which may seem to live and die entirely on Facebook, or through texting, sexting or—to parents' dismay—casual "hookups," or brief sexual liaisons.

"It is an area where parents aren't quite sure what to do," says Stephanie Madsen, an associate professor of psychology at McDaniel College, Westminster, Md. Now, emerging research "can offer some solid information on what is helpful, and what's not."

Young people whose parents make themselves available to talk with them or give advice about dating tend to have warmer, closer, more positive romantic relationships, with less fighting and tension, reveals a study by Dr. Madsen and others of 225 young adults ages 22 to 29. If parents don't offer help, however, and keep out of offsprings' love lives altogether, that is linked in their offspring to poorer-quality relationships, including less affection and support and more conflict.

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Young people like it best when parents take a consulting or coaching role, listening—and offering advice only when asked, Dr. Madsen says.

When Jim Garrett's son, a college student, came to him last summer to say he was considering breaking up with his girlfriend, "I mostly just listened and asked a few questions so I would understand," says Mr. Garrett, San Diego. "But I agreed with his decision to break up."

Soon, in what Mr. Garrett regarded as a sign of maturity, his son ended the relationship, and took up with another girl—one whom Mr. Garrett knew and already liked and respected.

Even when parents think a relationship is unhealthy, it is best to avoid handing down judgments or giving orders; young people may regard that as encroaching on their independence. Rather than saying, "you have to break up with this person," try reflecting on "what you're seeing that seems unhealthy, or that worries you," Dr. Madsen says.

In talking with her three children about romantic matters, Paula Thomas, Murfreesboro, Tenn., has found that "how well the message is heard greatly depends on how I deliver it. If I speak 'off the cuff' or in anger, my children aren't apt to listen. I see that wall of defensiveness go up," she says. But if she uses restraint, speaking up only about serious issues, then simply expresses concern, saying, "Here's what I see," her children tend to heed her advice.

Watching her son's longtime teenage romance begin to break down, "I struggled greatly with how much advice to provide," Ms. Thomas says. "But I became increasingly vocal as the situation deteriorated." Although her son was trying to hang onto the relationship to avoid the pain of a breakup, Ms. Thomas was able, during a relaxed, low-key conversation in a restaurant, "to help him see that he was already in pain" and would be hurting either way, she says. He soon made the tough decision to break up and "gained some maturity along the way," she says.

Connecting with a teen in this way can take a lot of relaxed down-time together, so you're available when he or she is in the mood to talk. When Mark Nagelsmith noticed that his 16-year-old son seemed to communicate with girls exclusively on Facebook or via text message, he pondered how to help him "work up the courage to actually to go up to a real girl and start talking" face-to-face.

Mr. Nagelsmith makes a point of spending lots of time practicing baseball with his son; "he really opens up to talk when we're just out fooling around, tossing the ball," says the Glens Falls, N.Y., father. During one of these sessions he raised the question, "Do you ever actually talk to these girls?" Although his son said he did, Mr. Nagelsmith has since seen him inviting girls to their house and really "making an effort to keep the conversation going," he says.

"He would never admit to me that he's listening, because as you know, dads don't know anything," Mr. Nagelsmith says. But his son's behavior makes Mr. Nagelsmith think "maybe he is."

Starting healthy new dating relationships also serves as a signal of kids' overall readiness to launch from the parental nest. Young people whose romantic relationships are nurturing and close also tend to have reached more milestones of adult development, including a stronger sense of personal identity and an ability to care for other family members, says a study of 710 people ages 18 to 26 led by Carolyn M. Barry, an associate professor of psychology at Loyola University Maryland.

That is how Kathy Raborn read the tea leaves when her teenage son launched into a new dating relationship last year. The romance coincided with applying to college and getting his driver's license, signalling "he was moving on to a new phase of his life," says the New Jersey mother.

Finally, in a finding termed "striking" by researchers, romantic relationships as early as middle school seem to have a formative influence on teens' social and emotional health. In a study

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of 78 middle-school students published last year in *Child Development*, researchers rated teens and their boyfriends or girlfriends on depressive symptoms, and on peer reports of popularity, aggression, fighting and victimization via bullying or teasing; 11 months later, they rated the teens and their partners again.

Teens who had more problems at the first rating, but who picked healthier boyfriends or girlfriends, became mentally and socially healthier themselves by the second rating. However, low-functioning teens who picked partners who also had a lot of problems tended to stay stuck. The findings, says the study by Valerie Simon, an assistant professor of clinical psychology at Wayne State University, Detroit, and others, suggest "romantic partners are unique and significant" influences in kids' lives.

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