

Dating Mistakes

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Throughout the years, the Lord has allowed me the privilege of serving families and students in their journey together. Hundreds of teens have graduated from our student ministry, and the vast majority of them are living faithfully for the Lord—all by God’s grace and to His glory. In the day-to-day efforts, my wife and I have been involved as counselors, mentors, and sometimes disciplinarians in literally hundreds of budding and developing “dating relationships.” Not long ago, we sat down together and listed the ten most common mistakes that we see parents make when it comes to their teenager’s romantic attractions.

At the start, I must say, I don’t like the word dating. It carries with it too many varying connotations and secular implications. For the purpose of this article, I’m referring to the 7th–12th grade age groups (and in some cases, early college) when young people tend to become attracted to each other—too fast, too far, too soon. Unfortunately, all too often, when we have helped families through moral failures, we have counseled parents who, albeit unwittingly and unintentionally, indirectly facilitated serious temptation for their kids. In simple terms, they dropped their guard.

Thus, the Lord placed on my heart to put these “mistakes” into print—that parents and student ministry leaders might consider them, teach them, and avoid them. While I’m not pro-dating for high school students, I’m also realistic enough to understand that God-given desires and attractions naturally awaken during the teen years. Kids are going to be attracted to each other, and there’s nothing we can do to change that—nor would we want to.

If we “ban” all communication and contact, they respond by taking their attractions underground—hiding them from authorities and sneaking around rules. If we lower the bar and drop our guard, then dangerous emotions and physical desires will destroy them. So I have long written and taught that we should strike a careful, biblical balance—teaching and nurturing our kids in how to manage these emotions and how to keep their friendships healthy and Christ-honoring until the Lord intersects their paths with the right person at the right time.

With that foundation, let's consider the ways that parents often allow their children's relationships to go too far, too fast, too soon. Just to be clear, these are the "doors of temptation that were left open" in many difficult counseling sessions we've conducted.

1. They let a sibling be the chaperone. I'm assuming you already have a standard that your teenager is never to be alone with the opposite gender. To put it mildly, siblings make horrible chaperones! Younger siblings are easy to deceive, and honest older siblings are not always as vigilant as they should be. If you could sit in my office and see the tears, you would never, never ever allow a sibling to chaperone your teenager's "friendships."

2. They go to bed when a friend is still in the house. Usually this mistake follows closely with the first. Parents get tired and they feel bad about making a friend leave so they can go to bed. So they leave someone else in charge and sign off for the evening—often while the other parents are presuming adult oversight is in place. This is never a good thing. You have two choices—make the friend go home (probably the better choice), or stay up and be vigilant. Whatever you do, don't go to bed.

3. They allow "minimal" physical contact. We tend to reason that "our kids are so much better than we were." We think that holding hands or minimal touching will generally be safe. We couldn't be more wrong. Teens are not equipped to deal with adult physical desires that grow stronger with even "minimal physical contact." By allowing what we feel to be "minimal touching," we reason that we're helping them. We're actually enlarging their temptation a hundred fold! Beware parent. What you allow them to do "in front of you" will be far worse behind your back, and you may be placing them on a fast track to moral failure.

4. They trust other parents. This one is huge. Not everybody in your church has your standards. Not every marriage is strong, and not every Christian parent agrees with the church, the pastor, or the preaching. Simple advice—don't blindly trust parents you don't know very, very well. Don't assume that their standards are Biblical. They may not be. That doesn't mean you should be rude or disrespectful. You can be kind, friendly, and loving—but you don't have to trust someone you know doesn't have Biblical convictions. If you don't have absolute knowledge of the convictions of other parents, then just say "no."

5. They allow perpetually open lines of communication—phone, texting, emailing, etc. This one is huge too. We live in a day of perpetual communication. We can be in constant contact with someone across great distances. This is often a blessing, but for teen dating relationships, it is a big "game changer" from when we were growing up. To say it succinctly, relationships grow through time and attention. The more time and attention you give any one person, the closer the relationship becomes. For teens this means rapid imbalance, idolatry, relational addiction, emotional dependency, and ultimately physical and moral devastation. To allow teens to be in constant communication through being together, then being on the phone, then texting, emailing, social networking, twittering, or even note writing (that long lost art), we allow their

hearts to become consumed with a temporal, early attraction that has little hope of becoming anything but a snare.

Prudent parents put a strong brake on this until a serious dating relationship is appropriate—closer to marriage. In our home, for our boys, there is no phone calling, no texting, and no unsupervised communication with girls. We read every email coming and going, and we allow no more than two per week. And to be honest, the guys appreciate our oversight and accept it with a great spirit.

6. They allow the couple to be in a different room in the house. How often I have dealt with serious problems that began when two teens were in another room of the house while parents sat just a few feet away but out of sight. Why would we do this? If your teenager must be alone and doesn't want the kind of friendship that can be interactive with the rest of the family, there's a problem. Teens don't ever need to be alone with a boyfriend or girlfriend, not even when chaperones are nearby but out of sight. Make friendships a family event.

This past Christmas my son planned to give a young lady a Christmas gift, and she had one for him as well. When the gift exchange was about to take place, unbeknownst to my son, both sets of parents assembled to enjoy the moment. We caught them off guard a little, but what a delight it was to see them laugh and proceed in giving each other their gifts. Matters got even funnier when both dads grabbed the Christmas cards and began to read them. (If you're a parent and thinking right now that I'm out of my mind, keep reading.) Our teens laughed again, and said nothing of it. It was both cute and cool at the same time! How great that two young people could have that kind of open friendship in front of their parents. I believe that pleases the Lord.

7. They take trips and vacations with a "friend." I know, what a kill-joy I am. Vacations can cause us to drop our guard. Often a vacation involves swimming, alone time, and plenty of opportunities to grow emotionally and physically closer than two teens should be. Over-familiarity between teenagers is always a bad thing. Even driving in a car, sitting too close for ten hours, can do a lot of damage. Parent, it's just not worth it. I promise you. Your teen needs time with you on vacation—not more time with a boy or girl friend. Let the boyfriends and girlfriends stay home until engagement is near—and even then, be very vigilant. Let me add, this includes spending the night at a friend's house who is of the opposite gender – big no-no here parents.

8. They push their kids into dating out of a personal childhood fantasy. This is usually a mother, but sometimes a dad too. Admittedly, there's a certain delight and inner satisfaction in the heart of a parent when your son or daughter has "a special someone." For a parent who is happily married, there's even a slight anticipation in us—looking forward to when our grown children will enjoy that wonderful, Christ-centered relationship within the bounds of commitment. But for now—rein it in, cowboy! Don't get caught up in the emotion of it! Hold it back. You are the voice of reason and control. You must remain objective and principle centered. If you don't, your teenager has no hope. You must be an objective, fixed authority, holding a biblical position of balance.

Yes, that will create tension between you and your teen, but tension that keeps your teenager from driving into a ditch relationally is GOOD tension!

9. They don't thoroughly and biblically explain appropriate boundaries. As my story under point six illustrates, kids are capable of appreciating and functioning well under clear boundaries. What they can't deal with is parental ignorance that yells, "Because I SAID SO!" That stopped working when they were about nine. Teenagers long for well-reasoned, well-balanced mentoring. They appreciate knowing what the Bible says and how to apply it. They can grasp principles that flow from loving teaching and nurture. They can even deal with authority that is consistently biblical and compassionate. That's not to say they won't fight temptation—but at least they will fight it, and with your help and coaching, they will have victory over it. Set boundaries, explain them thoroughly, and expect them to be maintained.

10. They leave their kids to themselves in dealing with and developing their relationships. I don't understand why, but most parents don't even talk to their kids about sex, love, romance, and strong emotions. They don't get below the surface in the growth of these friendships. It's like we throw our kids into the deep end of the pool and hope they will survive. They won't—not in today's culture! Please talk to your kids about these emotions, and help them manage them by God's grace. Teach them what a biblical and godly friendship looks like. Explain how they can keep that friendship Christ-centered. Help them understand the stakes and the blessings of doing things the right way—even if you didn't. Don't expect them to "just know," and don't force them to learn the hard way.

11. They think a dating relationship will compensate for other family problems. (I know, I said ten, but this one is a bonus.) Often, in a home where there is trouble or relational divide, one parent will falsely believe that a dating relationship will mend the hurt and heal the heart. It's a deceptive thought flowing from a sincere desire! Who wouldn't want a young lady whose father is absent to have the attention of a good Christian guy? But again, too far, too fast, too soon—this will only compound the problems into future generations.

Only Christ can heal a wounded heart. When we push or assist a young person into an early serious relationship with the hopes that it will "help," we only invite greater eventual hurt. In this case, "another person" is not the answer. God's grace is the answer—and once God's grace has healed the heart, your young person will be able to stand on solid, spiritual ground. A future spouse will be chosen within God's perfect will rather than from the desperate cries of a hurting heart.

PLEASE—don't fall to these mistakes. Stand guard, and graciously guide your teenager through these wonderful but potentially troubling years. God will grant you wisdom and strength if you will trust Him and honor His Word.