

Equipping Youth to Build Healthy Relationships

How can we help the children and youth in our families, churches, and communities learn to feel at ease in social settings, enjoy interactions with a variety of interesting persons, and connect with a supportive group of close friends? How can we encourage their search for a life partner with whom to enjoy a fulfilling relationship while raising a family and/or pursuing other goals? How can we assist those who do not marry, “by choice or by chance,” to cultivate a life of rich interdependence, friendship, and belonging within communities of their choosing?

Because relationship education begins naturally in the home, effective marriage preparation, education, and enrichment for couples helps prepare their children for healthy relationships as well. However, due to the current high incidence of family breakdown, divorce, and single parenting, many grow up without models of healthy relationships and need direct instruction in and opportunities to practice effective relationship skills. Many would also benefit from processing their family-of-origin experiences, considering both how they contribute to and how they might choose to influence family dynamics. Persons who realize how they have been shaped by their family-of-origin experiences can more readily make conscious efforts to unlearn and change unproductive patterns of behavior. Even at an early age, children can learn to “use words” to name their emotions, to figure out the needs underlying their feelings, and to make requests in a way that increases the likelihood of getting their needs met. They can also be taught to listen and respond appropriately to the feelings and needs of others. With skillful and consistent coaching in real-life and role-play situations, children can gain skills for resolving conflicts and finding win-win solutions to disagreements. **Relationship education training for parents, teachers, and youth leaders, then, can directly impact the lives of children and youth.**

Children and youth also need clear information and direction in regard to sexuality. This God-given gift can enrich life and deepen intimacy, but if we do not regulate it, sex – like any other appetite - can rule instead of enhancing our lives. In the face of crude humor and countless media images depicting casual and exploitive sexual activity, we must speak up, lest silence be interpreted as endorsement of such demeaning attitudes and practices. Children can learn early to understand and appreciate their bodies, to speak respectfully of body parts and functions, and to assert their rights to refuse unwanted touch. Youth need forewarning about the power of infatuation and sexual attraction to blind them to the risks of pregnancy, transmitted disease, and emotional bonding with someone they do not really know or would not choose were they thinking clearly. Even in a potentially healthy relationship, engaging in sexual touching too soon can prevent the development of communication, mutual understanding, and genuine intimacy. Couples need to practice talking, sharing deeply, and managing conflict, rather than using sex to avoid or bridge their differences. Practicing intentionality and self-discipline is essential, because even after marriage, people are likely to feel sexually attracted to others and need to avoid situations in which temptation might overwhelm them. While setting clear boundaries in regard to curfews, adult supervision, drinking, drugs, and media usage, adults can encourage youth to establish their own personal boundaries in order to avoid situations and behaviors that may damage their reputations or lead to unintended sexual activity. Pornography and “soft porn” movies, music, and videos, in particular, can normalize unhealthy behaviors, encourage unreal expectations, lead to dependence upon such materials for sexual stimulation, and interfere with genuine human relationships.

Effective sex education fosters an appreciation of marriage as a worthy goal. **Without disparaging singleness, we can help youth see that an enduring, life-long commitment brings many benefits.** Since sexual encounters are not always “movie” perfect, healthy

sexuality blooms best within a long-term relationship of mutual trust and commitment, where the emphasis is on emotional connection, not performance. Not only do married people live longer, stay healthier, accrue more wealth, and enjoy happier sex lives (*The Case For Marriage: Why Married People are Happier, Healthier, and Better Off Financially*, by Linda J. Waite and Maggie Gallagher (New York: Doubleday, 2000), but they can also help each other grow spiritually and emotionally as they negotiate the various challenges of life. **Marriage, however, will not solve all of an individual's problems or automatically produce a state of bliss.** What comes naturally before marriage, fueled by "new love" hormones and brain chemicals, requires intentionality after a few years, when the production of those chemicals inevitably subsides and conflicts inevitably arise. We want our youth to understand the difference between being "in love" and active loving, as well as the importance of paying attention to and continually nurturing a relationship.

Encourage youth who are dating to seek partners they genuinely like, who share their primary values, and who demonstrate strength of character. Harville Hendrix, in *Getting the Love You Want* (NY: Harper & Row, 1988), describes the "Imago," an image we develop of the person we want to marry, often someone with traits of our parents or other significant adults - or with traits we have suppressed in ourselves. Someone who "feels right" because of this match with our subconscious yearnings, may not, in fact, be someone we would really want to marry. John Van Epp, in *How to Avoid Falling in Love with a Jerk* (NY: McGraw-Hill, 2007), recommends carefully pacing a relationship to avoid being swept away by infatuation and sexual attraction. Restricting sexual touch to the level of knowledge, trust, reliability, and commitment in a relationship helps persons observe more clearly a potential marriage partner's character and watch out for controlling, manipulative, or abusive behavior. Encourage youth be their real selves, in order to find a partner who really likes them as they are, and to notice how the other person behaves in a variety of situations over time. Assure them that breakups, although painful at the time, are not the end of the world, but important steps toward discovering what they really want in a relationship.

Finally, although cohabitation seems commonly accepted in our culture today, **we want youth to know that living together beforehand does not guarantee a successful marriage.** Statistics reveal a higher divorce rate for those who cohabited before marriage than for those who did not. Couples who cohabit during their engagement, however, who have already made a full commitment to each other, do not divorce as frequently as those who practice serial cohabitation or who cohabit in order to test their compatibility. Couples who cohabit with no intention to marry, of course, are the most vulnerable and likely to separate, with devastating effects on any children they may have. Marriage preparation specifically geared toward cohabiting couples can help them transition more smoothly into marriage.

Churches or clusters of churches can offer a variety of programs and resources in their congregations and communities to provide children and youth with the knowledge and skills to form healthy, growing relationships, whether they choose to marry or to remain single. Although programs and books provide important information and skill-training, youth will be most influenced by the relationships they experience with and observe among the adults in their lives. **There are no greater gifts we can give children and youth than good role models, sound information, personal insight, and practical relationship skills. These gifts, furthermore, will keep on giving as our youth form families and raise children of their own and/or mentor the children of others.**

Some Recommended Resources for Equipping Youth to Build Healthy Relationships

Created by God: About Human Sexuality for Older Boys and Girls, by James Ritchie (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009). This updated resource emphasizes a healthy biblical and Christian perspective on human sexuality, relationships, and values for “tweens.” A Leader’s Guide CD-ROM and a DVD provide guidance for planning, promotion, and leading of the program. The Student Book and Parent Guide provide information for individual study, for parent-child discussion, and for classroom use. See also the parent resource. [Order through Cokesbury (800-672-1789).]

Talking With Your Child About Feelings, by Kathryn E. Parker (Berea, OH: Pilgrim Press, 1990). One of a series of booklets designed for discussion with children age twelve and under. Parents and caregivers will find this helpful in nurturing the faith and understanding of their children.

Talking With Your Child: Conversations for Life, edited by Rebecca Laird (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999). This six-session study for parents addresses the following topics: communication, emotions, respect, success and failure, grief and loss, and sexuality.

Talking to Your Kids About Sex: Turning “the talk” into a conversation for life, by Laura Berman (Great Britain: Dorling Kindersley Limited, 2009) The author encourages parents to determine the values they want to pass on to their children. She then provides guidance for initiating appropriate conversations at every age. By taking advantage of “teachable moments” from infancy through adulthood, parents can establish themselves as a credible source for information. If children will know their parents will provide honest and helpful information, they are less likely to be misled by peers and popular media.

Talking With Your Teen: Conversations for Life, edited by Lynn Hutton (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1999). Same format and focus as Talking With Your Child, above, but appropriate for parents of children ages thirteen and up.

Teen Sexuality Resources: Let’s Be Real: Honest Discussions about Faith and Sexuality, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998). This leader’s resource addresses issues related to youth sexuality and offers several models for learning experiences with youth grades 6 through 12. The student resource, ***Let’s Decide: Faith and My Sexuality*** (Nashville: Abingdon, 2010) discusses beliefs, values, and sexuality, providing guidance for healthy decision-making. A PDF electronic download for parents, ***Let’s Listen: Communicating With Your Youth About Faith and Sexuality*** (Nashville: Abingdon, 2010) provides practical help and simple techniques for inviting conversation about faith and sexuality. [Purchase through Cokesbury, 800-672-1789 or www.cokesbury.com]

The Dibble Institute for Marriage Education, P.O. Box 7881, Berkeley, CA, 94707-0881, 800-695-7975, Relationshipskills@DibbleInstitute.org, www.DibbleInstitute.org. Here you can order research- and activity-based curriculum resources for workers with youth, sample lessons, free e-newsletters, and brochures (“Ten Things Teens Should Know About Marriage,” “What You Should Know About Living Together,” “50 Things Everyone Should Know About Dating Violence,” “9 Signs of a Healthy Relationship,” “Relationship Redux: Tips and Scripts for

Talking to Your Kids About Relationships”). Some materials are available in religious language versions; all are completely compatible with Christian teaching.

The Connections Series, by Charlene R. Kamper (revised 2010) consists of two complete ready-to-teach programs: **Dating and Emotions** (revised 2010) helps thirteen- seventeen-year-olds learn how relationships develop, how to communicate effectively, how to spot destructive patterns, how to deal with emotions, and other interpersonal skills. **Relationships and Marriage** (1996), for young adults aged sixteen through twenty, teaches practical tools for understanding, managing, and making wise decisions about relationships.

The LoveU2 Series: by Marline F. Pearson (2004) includes activity-based courses that may be used separately or in sequence or by combining key lessons from each. **LoveU2: Baby Smarts: Through the Eyes of a Child** - Ten lessons for teens help them consider What birth to young, unprepared, and unwed parents means to a child and that child’s future. **Love U2: Becoming Sex Smart** - Eleven lessons address the physical, emotional, and social consequences of sexual activity; help teens learn to define and maintain personal boundaries; and offer compelling reasons and skills for postponing sexual involvement. **Love U2: Communication Smarts for All Relationships** – provides seven sessions focused on communication, conflict management, and recognition of damaging relationship patterns. **Love U2: Dating Smarts: A Bit More Than Friends for Younger Teens** - Six one-hour sessions for youth in grades 5 through 8. **Love U2: Relationship Smarts Plus** (2010) - Thirteen sessions for youth grades 9 through 12 offer practical guidance for building healthy relationships. Also includes dating violence prevention and assertiveness skills, communication and conflict skills, and a unique approach to pregnancy prevention.

Things to Know Before You Say “Go”: **Powerful Questions to Ask Before You Give Your Heart Away**, Elizabeth Martindale, Psy.D. (2009, www.couragetobloom.com). Attractive cards and booklet provide seventy-six question cards for individuals to ask themselves to evaluate a potential or actual dating partner. “How does this person deal with disappointment and loss?” “Do I like how this person responds when I am hurting or upset?” “Does this person follow through on commitments and obligations?”

What’s Reel? Myths and Facts About Marriage, (2010). Seven ready-to-teach and fun lessons use movies to help teens compare ideas about marriage with actual research, examine their own expectations, evaluate media, and identify helpful and problematic behaviors.

The National Campaign To Prevent Teen And Unplanned Pregnancy, www.stayteen.org, information about relationships and sex in an attractive and fun format, including interactive quizzes and games.

How to Avoid Falling in Love With a Jerk: The Foolproof Way to Follow Your Heart Without Losing Your Mind, by Dr. John Van Epp, Ph.D. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2007) www.lovethinks.com . See also the PICK a Partner program at the same website. Both the book and the program offer a plan for pacing relationships and predicting what a potential partner will be like in marriage.

What Children Learn from Their Parents’ Marriage, by Judith P. Siegel, Ph.D., C.S.W. (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2000). This book, an excellent resource for a nine-week study for parents or a helpful gift for couples, helps parents discover how they have been impacted by

the relationship of their parents and what they, in turn, are communicating to their children. Each chapter discusses, gives clear examples of, and provides discussion questions for an aspect of healthy intimacy: giving priority to the marriage, practicing interdependence and mutual respect, managing conflict constructively, etc.

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