

## Talking to Your Teens About Healthy Relationships

**Teenagers are most influenced by their parents. Parents can be confident that what they say and do will matter to their teen, whether or not their teen shows it.**

Eighty-two percent of 18 to 30 year olds expect to be married for life. Researchers have found that the building blocks of healthy adult marriages are formed during the teenage years. Parents may be nervous about talking to their teens about relationships or marriage, but they are a critical influence in their teen's life. When asked "Who influences you most when it comes to your dating relationships?" teens named their parents first (35 percent). Parents' values seem to be related to teen values and, subsequently, teen behaviors. Parents can be confident that what they say matters to their teen, whether or not their teen shows it. Research shows that parents can maximize their positive influence by:

- ✓ Showing warmth and support.
- ✓ Developing a close connection with their teen.
- ✓ Having frequent and positive parent-teen communication.
- ✓ Engaging their teen in discussions rather than "preaching."

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Show your teen you care, listen respectfully to his or her opinions and feelings, and do things together that strengthen your relationship. The following tips will help parents talk to teens about healthy relationships and healthy marriages.



### **Start the conversation.**

Marriage seems like a distant concept to teens. Even so, marriage is a significant life decision. Just as teens plan and prepare for other significant life decisions such as a career, they should plan and prepare for a successful marriage. Ask your teens what they think about marriage. Do they want to get married, or think they will get married? What kind of marriage do they want?

## What are your teen's values?

As teens develop their values and identity, they will more easily determine what they want in a current relationship and future marriage. Discuss the following questions:

- ✓ What is important to you in a relationship now?
- ✓ What do you find attractive?
- ✓ What qualities are important in a spouse?
- ✓ Are some qualities essential?
- ✓ Are there some qualities that are not essential but desirable?

Consider the values of commitment, trust, respect, honesty, patience, forgiveness, selflessness, fidelity, empathy, compassion, cleanliness, money management, self-care and self-development. Encourage your teen to develop the qualities they want in a future partner/spouse. Compare these qualities with what you think it takes to have a successful relationship and marriage.

## What does love mean to your teen?

Older teens and young adults say the number one reason to marry is for love. Talk about definitions of love, and discuss good and bad examples of love from life and society.

Additional questions to guide your discussion are:

- ✓ How is love formed, sustained and nurtured over time?
- ✓ What role does love play now in your last crush or relationship?
- ✓ Is love enough to make a relationship successful?
- ✓ What else does it take to form a healthy relationship? Why?

Research shows that a couple's chances of a happy marriage are improved if they meet the following milestones in this order: get an education, get married, and then have children. Help your teen create a vision or roadmap. Make the connection between present-day decisions and consequences and reaching this goal.

### Talk about the latest research on marriage.

Talk to your teens about the research on why marriage matters and the benefits of marriage. Teens often will be more receptive to information from third parties. Tell them what the literature says: happily married people are likely to be wealthier, happier, live longer, and have a better sex life. Children benefit significantly from a healthy marriage as well (see Resources below).

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Teens increasingly believe that living together before marriage is a good way to test the relationship. The research is clear, though, that the risk of divorce is 46 percent higher for those who cohabit (live together) than for those who marry without cohabiting first. (This negative finding is associated most strongly with people who live together before engagement or marriage, without a mutual commitment to a future together). Discuss this and additional research on living together to replace any false beliefs with accurate information.

### **Decide together for your teen to participate in a healthy relationship education program.**

Teens can prepare for healthy relationships now and a good marriage in the future by learning and applying healthy relationship skills and knowledge. Encourage your teen to enroll in relationship education classes or seminars designed for youth. Learn the material yourself so that you can discuss it with your teen. Encourage your teen to practice the principles of a healthy relationship now with their close friends, family, classmates, boyfriends/girlfriends and co-workers.

Many relationship education programs include homework assignments and activities that involve parents, which can provide a good opportunity for you to reinforce course concepts outside the class and allow you to share life experiences (see next section). In addition, working through a program together can strengthen the parent-teen connection.

### **Share your life experiences.**

You may be married, divorced, dating or single. Regardless of your current romantic situation, you have rich life experiences from which your teen can learn. Even if you did not have the best experience in marriage, you want what is best for your children and want them to achieve their relational and marital goals. Your teens likely have seen your

life experience firsthand but may not have made the connection between the experience and the lessons that could be learned. Sharing the lessons from what you have experienced gives them an opportunity to discuss their own reservations, hopes, fears and struggles. Regardless of your situation, if you value a strong, healthy marriage, then your teen will likely adopt that value.

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Parents and practitioners can connect with teens by asking them questions about their values regarding relationships and what they desire in a partner. Parents can encourage teens to participate in a healthy

relationship class and actively work with them on the lessons. Practitioners can facilitate this communication by including homework that should be completed by the family. Share the research with your teens and offer what you have learned in past or current relationships. By applying these tips at home and in the classroom, parents and practitioners can help teens articulate, prepare for and realize their goals of current healthy relationships and a future healthy marriage.

***The National Healthy Marriage Resource Center (NHMRC) would like to thank Emily Luschin, M.Ed, for her contributions to this Tip Sheet. Ms. Luschin is a program specialist and research analyst within the healthy relationship field.***

***This is a product of the National Healthy Marriage Resource Center, led by co-directors Mary Myrick, APR and Jeanette Hercik, Ph.D., and project manager, Patrick Patterson, MSW, MPH.***