

Field Guide to Dating  
First Edition  
Circa April 2014

Introduction: Adolescence is a confusing and complex time that is driven by core needs and experiences. Ultimately students who are navigating this time are looking to figure out the following things.

1. Who am I? (Students are putting pieces together and trying to form a cohesive understanding of who they are as a person and how they are equipped to face adulthood.)
2. Am I loved? (This is a core question of the human condition, does someone love me because I am created to love and be loved)
3. Do I have value? (Our world has an economic lens, I am as good as what I can do)
4. Am I safe? (students at the end of the day are gravitating away from situations and people who feel unsafe to them and towards people who provide some sense of safety)

Before we can adequately address dating we must first realize that these are the lenses that students look through as they navigating social relationships (including dating relationship). By acknowledging that these core questions are being asked constantly helps us frame conversations that are helpful in promoting healthy relationships in adolescence.

A word to the Parents before we go to far. As we engage our child on this topic here are a couple of values and questions that we need to ask and consider.

1. Value # 1: Conversation! This is a confusing time for students and dating can be both an exciting and scary experience. Not to mention the embarrassment that can come from this topic. In my opinion, it is very important that parents look to find ways to have open, safe and honest conversation. This may mean (depending on the disposition and gender of the students) parents will have to adopt a more conversational approach rather than a directive one. This is not to say there won't be times for parents to set firm boundaries but its equally important to create a rhythm that invites open conversation that is seasoned with grace.

2. Define the terms: The definition and application of dating shifts from generation to generation and develops as a students matures and gets older. By enlarge dating is seen as a loose associate between two people without many strings attached. It tends to be more social in nature (especially in middle school and early highschool) and often takes place in group settings. This is not to say that there are variances to this trend or that it doesn't lead to serious physical consequences....there are, but that the underlying current is to avoid seriousness and be more social in nature. But this is also a great conversation piece and a way for dialog to take place as the definition of dating shifts over time. Its important though to define the terms and develop a shared language between parent and child.

3. How does my son or daughter view themselves and are they ready for the complexity of dating? Teens are asking these crazy important questions like who

am I and do I have value and that can be a dangerous cocktail when it comes to dating. Without consciously knowing it, students can very easily project their desire to be loved and be known in their relationships. In some situations a student may enter a relationship because they are longing for some level of affection from a parent (variances depending on gender). It is important for parents to evaluate (between themselves) the mental and emotional readiness for dating relationship. I am not necessarily an advocate for age restrictions to dating but I would encourage parents to consider development and where their child is on the path toward adulthood when it comes to dating.

4. Be present early! I strongly encourage parents to engage in the conversation of dating and to be much more active in setting down guidelines early on rather than jumping into the conversation when they are in high school. No one rides their bike perfectly the first time they get on, that's what training wheels are for. Parents need to see themselves as training wheels when it comes to dating. If the relationship is strained and if those conversations feel combative bring in other trusted adults who can walk along side these young people.

5. HWJD (How would Jesus Date) We wish sometimes Jesus had a lesson or a story for everything, including dating. Sadly, the Bible doesn't lay out clear ground rules for dating but here are some things to consider

a. Dating Non-Christians: There are plenty of views on this subject. While I think its perfectly appropriate to encourage dating between believers there isn't anything inherently evil about dating someone who believes something different. Yes Paul talked about being yoked and yes I think that does have some implications here I think the focus of that text has more significant implications for marriage. The truth of the matter is this, the longer two people "Date" and the more involved they become in their relationship (physically and emotionally) the more important it is to "Spiritually" on the same page. Most relationships especially in middle school and even through high school are opportunities to discover compatibility and themselves. As relationships become more serious, than I think its important to have conversations about the spiritual ramifications.

b. Dating puts our Christian values to the test. We are created for relationships and no other relationship puts our commitments to Christ on display as our close dating/marriage relationship. It is important to encourage and at times remind our young daters that are called to view and treat each other as Christ views and treats us. Yes....big and impossible task. But these relationships are a great chance to serve and put other's need before our own. I think Christ works in and through that.

c. Be praying! As Parents we can't pray enough but we should also be inviting our young teens to be praying as well..

1. For wisdom
2. For discernment
3. For protection
4. For opportunities to give God glory

Brian's steps to successful dating (for students)

1. Don't date because it feels like everyone else is dating?
2. If you think to yourself "If only I can find a boy/girlfriend I will finally be complete, feel better about myself, get into a group of friend, finally feel like I have arrived.....then avoid dating like the black plague."
3. Develop open communication early. Talk about what you think and feel.
4. Take it slow and keep it light
5. Spend more time with friends than alone together
6. Talk about boundaries and whatever you do don't let this be silent. What are the limits of this relationship. Yes this will be weird but it will save you a ton of anxiety down the road.
7. Keep realistic expectation....you probably won't marry this person.
8. Keep asking yourself the question, how can I respect this person?
9. Keep your parents in the loop and develop trust with them
10. Don't use friends to fix or maintain a relationship, do it in person and keep the middle people out.
11. Pray about the relationship and for the other person (hold off on with that person until the relationship has demonstrated some longer term possibilities)
12. Be open about your faith, don't hide it...its part of who you are.

Brian's Steps for successful parenting as it pertains to dating.

1. Keep the conversation going, even if it means not saying something that sound parental!
2. Wait for the opportunities to speak wisdom and truth into their lives (especially when they ask for it)
3. Talk early and often about guidelines and expectations.
  - a. What do you expect in terms of guidelines for time at each other homes, time alone vs time with friends.
  - b. What expectations does the student have about the parents and their involvement in the process. How can a student earn trust with their parents?
4. Pray early and often!
5. Be honest, talk candidly (especially) early about boundaries and sex. Set expectation while also expressing grace and love. Students will make mistakes and its important that they know that you still love them!
6. Bring trusted adults into the picture that can be go to people of your son or daughter can't come to you directly! Build the village!
7. Get to know the significant other when possible...make public places in your home safe and comfortable.
8. Develop a common word that gently and lovingly reminds your son or daughter to live as a light of Christ. For my son its "Be a light"!
9. Don't be afraid to step in and encourage recalibration....Your student is a child in a developing body....they still think like a child even if their body says something else.
10. Extend Grace when possible!