

The Parent's Corner

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TEEN/PRE-TEEN UNHEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS

March 2022 | By Katie McDonough, MSW, LCSW

So, your child has moved on from the "We're dating, but we don't actually talk" stage of elementary school, to the pre-teen/teen years of dating... this can be scary, right? A teen's first love experience is typically passionate, exuberating, and exciting. However, it can also be emotional, painful and sometimes toxic. This is usually the age when kids create more boundaries from parents -- more privacy and less communication about what's going on in their relationships. Increased social media usage creates an additional barrier between parents and their kids' communication; teens now have many conversations online with their boyfriend or girlfriend of which parents are unaware. As we know, science shows that cognitive functioning does not fully develop until mid-twenties. This means emotions, especially with teens experiencing what feels like their first love, are strong. Knowing the signs of an unhealthy relationship may help parents support their children through this time. Here are some unhealthy/dependent red flags to look for in your child's relationship:

1. They speak about them/treat them badly in front of family or friends

While this may seem like something that will be noticeable, sometimes it is more subtle behavior than parents may think. Look for how your child acts or responds to communication with their significant other. Pay attention to any moments of yelling, being belittled, or being brushed aside or ignored by their boyfriend or girlfriend. Look for any teasing that sends your child to the point of tears. In today's age, much of this communication may take place over text or social media. Be observant of your child's reaction and behavior to communication received from their significant other, especially over a device. If your child seems distraught, exceptionally withdrawn or irritable while on their device around family or friends, the cause may be attributed to this.

2. Extreme jealousy around family or friends

A boyfriend or girlfriend isolating your child from their social support is usually a gradual experience. Your child's significant other may start small with remarks about their friends or family that lead your child to believe they don't have their best interest at heart. This may escalate over time, leading to full-blown panic and jealousy when your child is with others without them, despite them being family members or just friends. A teenager's pre-frontal cortex is not yet developed, meaning they lead with emotion much of the time. For many teens, the thought of a first love being with others who pose a threat may be enough for them to act irrationally, be controlling, and potentially emotionally or physically abusive.

3. Emotional threats

A key indicator of control issues in your child's relationship is threats. When we think of threats, we often think of physical threats first. Emotional threats hold just as much weight. Emotional threats may consist of threats of self harm or suicide if your child breaks up with them, threats of a break up, or threats to ruin your child's reputation or release personal information. If your child is experiencing this, remind them these threats are based on wanting to control the relationship, insecurity, and fear by their significant other. The best thing they can do for someone they believe may actually carry out harmful behaviors is to elicit the help of professionals or supportive adults, rather than handle the situation alone.

4. Constant cheating accusations

Along with feelings of jealousy, your child's boyfriend or girlfriend may fall into a pattern of constant cheating accusations. If your child is continuously, and inaccurately, being blamed for being unfaithful, your child may feel the need to isolate further from their significant other to avoid future conflicts. It also may lead to self-esteem and confidence struggles in your teen and may be a sign for your child to walk away from the relationship.

5. Tracking and monitoring devices

Apps like Find My Friends, Snapchat and Life360 open new doors to teens tracking each other via mobile device. If your child's significant other is constantly tracking their location, sending frantic texts when they don't respond within 5 minutes, or searching their social media for signs of betrayal, they are likely in a toxic relationship. Remind your child that healthy relationships involve a level of space from each other. Since your child may be new to relationships, they may have a hard time gauging what is appropriate and what is not. Your child's significant other has no reason to have your child's social media passwords or access to their personal devices to check in on their behavior.

6. Your teen gives up their hobbies/goals

It is often typical for teens to outgrow things they once enjoyed. They may not feel connected to their childhood dance team or Boy Scout group anymore. Some of this change is normal. However, keep an eye on if your teen is showing signs of not having any hobbies or personal interests outside of their significant other at all, or if their partner belittles their future goals. A toxic partner, who tries to take away your child's extracurricular activities or ability to potentially end the relationship, may give the boyfriend or girlfriend a false sense of security in their own doubts and worries, but is a cause for concern for your child.

Parents may feel helpless when handling an unhealthy relationship with their child. Some try to lay down strict rules and, in turn, drive their children to their boyfriend or girlfriend. Others avoid conflict and trust their child will figure it out on their own, which may be equally as dangerous. If you suspect your child is going through a potentially unhealthy relationship, the first key to acknowledging this is open communication with your child. Ask questions in a non-judgemental way about what they like about this partner, what they gain from the relationship, and what they see for their future. Teens who feel their partner is judged will likely withdraw information from their parent and put barriers up immediately, as they will feel misunderstood. Consider having your teen's love interest over to your house more often to gauge their relationship and get to know the partner better. Set social media or phone limits when necessary. Most importantly, discuss with your child what constitutes a healthy versus unhealthy relationship and model this for them yourself. Children who have grown up with unhealthy relationships (fighting, infidelity, divorce, etc.) or those who have low confidence or self-esteem may need more conversation surrounding what constitutes healthy behaviors. Acknowledge your own mistakes and discuss warning signs and ways your child can navigate and move on from unhealthy relationships. Lastly, if you suspect a relationship is emotionally or physically abusive, seek professional help to support your child. A teen may open up to an unbiased professional more than they will a parent or someone they know.

As always, your School Partnership Program (SPP) Therapist is in your corner if you need extra support!