

## **When Your Tween or Teen Falls in Love** **Ruth A. Peters, Ph.D.**

Okay—your thirteen-year-old daughter comes home from school and dreamily announces that she’s in love with the hottest guy in the grade. And, what’s even more astounding is that the kid has actually admitted to liking her also. And, Valentine’s Day is just around the corner and she’s babbling on about whether to buy him a shirt or a CD. “Mom, what do you think that Jason would like better? He’s so cute and would look great in that red polo shirt, but, you know, he’s really into music also. Oh, and what if he doesn’t get me anything....I just couldn’t go back to school!”

Great, from zero to practically married in 10 seconds flat and the kid is now vacillating between the highs that come from feeling in love and the lows of fearing rejection. And, somehow you’ve just been placed in the middle of the whole mess!

Teen romance is not a new phenomenon...in fact many of our grandparents were married quite young and began their own families in their latter teenage years. But nowadays it seems like even little kids are having crushes on both peers and celebrities, and tweens and teens are more actively engaged in the “hunt” for a partner. Being “single” at the ripe old age of 15 can be seen as abnormal by many kids, especially those who hang out with peers in the fast lane and aspire to be, act and look like the celebs on MTV.

Although tween and teen romance is normal, it’s not without some pretty heavy ups and downs. Let’s take a gander at a few:

- It’s certainly risky business and a good way to get the first heart-break!
- Some tweens really do fall head over heels in love, and can continue a relationship throughout middle school and even into the high school years.
- Generally, this type of relationship narrows the child’s interests and involvement with others (sports, clubs and even academics). Hours spent on the telephone or chatting on the Internet with a boyfriend or girlfriend may be better spent with a more balanced approach to a relationship.

What’s a parent to do? Well, try to keep a cool head yourself, make sure that the lines of communication with your child remain open, and that you are not judgmental (at least until you see the boyfriend’s rap sheet!). Also, try the following with your child:

- Discuss the benefits of finding a balance in a relationship, especially if your child is getting too involved or obsessed with the relationship. You may have to set some limits on telephone or Internet time, or suggest that activities and time are spent with a variety of friends.
- Caution your child to not spend too much money on gifts for the other person—it’s expensive, and may not be received well.
- If the relationship is relatively new, suggest to your child that he or she shy away from buying a Valentine gift that is to be worn on the body (jewelry, clothing)—

that's very personal and may be viewed by the recipient (or their folks!) as too intimate. Safer choices are CD's, books or cool Valentine cards or candy. And, feelings can be easily hurt if the gift is not received well or reciprocated. Guys should keep it simple—a card, flower or small box of candy is usually a safe bet. Girls—too sentimental may come across as smothering—keep the gift simple, cute or perhaps even humorous.

- For kids in more lengthy relationships, more personal gifts can be given and are often valued as treasured possessions.

### How Should Parents Handle the Tween or Teen Relationship?

- Whatever you do, don't ridicule your kid—no matter how unrealistic the crush or inappropriate the relationship. Your child's feelings are real and should be respected.
- Communication is key. If you make fun of his or her feelings, your kid may become secretive about this one as well as future relationships.
- Try not to be judgmental. Discuss with your child what is important, in your family, about dating, sex and the bottom line when it comes to who your kid can become involved with. At the minimum, I would suggest that the significant other must still be attending school, close to your child's age, not have a history of legal problems, not involved in substance use or abuse, and be reasonably polite when in your presence.
- If the kid at least meets these requirements, let your child lead the way. Unless the relationship becomes obsessive or interferes with other life activities, try to enjoy your kid's involvement and new interests, of course with a watchful eye regarding curfew violations and honesty in terms of the ol' who, what, when, where and why of where they are going and what they are doing.
- Use the "relationship" as a jumping off spot for communication. Get to know your child's interests, friends and how he or she wishes to be perceived by others via the boyfriend or girlfriend. Kids love to talk about their loves and infatuations—have fun with it and respect your child's feelings. If you really like the boyfriend or girlfriend let the kids know it—take them out to dinner or the movies with you, praise the way that they treat each other and are respectful of feelings, and also show that you know when to back off and give the couple some privacy and time to themselves.

### What to Do if the Situation Gets Out of Hand

- If you have reason to believe that the relationship has gone too far (the kids are experimenting sexually, for instance) you must step in. First, talk with your child alone, and discuss the reasons for refraining from sexual activity (emotionally not ready, often ruins the relationship or reputation, the possibility of sexually transmitted diseases or pregnancy). If appropriate, consider discussing these same issues with the boyfriend or girlfriend, as well

as with their parents. Trust me, their mom or dad would want this information as much as you would and it's better to not keep important issues hidden from the other parents.

- Realize the limitations that parents have when it comes to controlling their kids' behaviors. Even if you've given the best talk possible about sex and the reasons to abstain, kids can be very, very sneaky and stay sexually involved behind your back (and even in your house!). Watch the curfew, stay involved with your child, do not allow the kids to be home alone without a responsible adult present, and always check with the other parent when your child sets up a sleep over at his or her friend's house. Many tweens or teens work in cahoots with each other, saying that they are staying at the respective homes while actually spending the night with a boyfriend or girlfriend at an unsupervised location.
- You may have to end the relationship. Initially your child will probably despise you for this—threatening to run away or to continue to see the boyfriend or girlfriend regardless of what you say. If you've been reasonable and still feel that this is a dangerous or very inappropriate relationship then you should stand your ground and monitor your child's actions and whereabouts closely. This too shall pass, but not without your kid making you feel like a real heel. Keep in mind the big picture and how important it is for your child to move out of this relationship and into a different frame of mind.

Hopefully, your child's romance is a successful, fun relationship. But, many tween or teen involvements are not, and end within a month or so of the first kiss. And, with Valentine's Day approaching, your son or daughter may be feeling down in the dumps, especially if they are the "dumped" and not the "dumpee"! I've found that distraction often works best in these situations—send your daughter flowers from Mom and Dad. Even though it may not hold the same significance as a bouquet from the heathen who just broke up with your lovely daughter, it will help to smooth over hurt feelings to some extent. Take your heart-broken son to the movies—a good comedy or exciting action thriller will at least give him a few hours of distraction on Valentine's Day. Within a few weeks your kid will realize that their ex was (a) a jerk, (b) a player, (c) just not worth the drama, or (d) all of the above.

And, by the way, for the young lady facing Valentine's Day without a beau in sight, remember that a flower bouquet, candy, or other gift from Mom and Dad is really appreciated and confirms your unconditional and full love throughout the year!