

Introduction

A Different Kind of Dating Book

In 1971 my sister went on her first date. Because she was the oldest, our entire family was invested in this watershed moment and waited eagerly for her date to arrive. Even though I was only six, I remember it well. Her date pulled up in a VW bus. In typical '70s bus fashion, the windows were all becurtained. As the redheaded boy stepped out of the VW, I thought he looked just like Bernie from the TV show *Room 222*. (You may want to Google image him. Trust me, you don't want to miss the hair.) With a bouncing, white-man 'fro he sauntered to the door, then whisked my sister away. They climbed into the van for the greatest night of my sister's life. "Bernie" turned the key, but the van wouldn't start. He turned it again, and again, all with the same result.

In order for my sister to go on her first date, my father, brother, and I would have to push start the van. So with the mighty effort of two small boys and a paunchy, middle-aged man, we set the vehicle in motion. Soon we were at a run, pushing with all our might. With a pop of the VW's clutch, the bus sputtered and lurched to life. As the bus sped away, its window curtains swayed from side to side,

revealing momentary glimpses inside the back—and of a bed, ready to go. I can only imagine what terrors were in my father’s mind at that moment. After that van pulled away, and once my father’s shock wore off, I wonder if he said to himself, “I hope she is ready for this.”

A lot has changed since 1971, but one thing hasn’t: it is never too early to start preparing your daughter for the world of dating.

WHY THIS BOOK

I have a question to ask you: Where did you learn about dating? If you are like many parents, your information came from a variety of sources. It may have come from your parents. You certainly learned a great deal from your own dating experiences. Perhaps as an adult you have taken a marriage class or read a book about relationships. Regardless of your sources, I can assure you of one fact: you know way more than your daughter.

Where does your daughter learn about dating? Her resources are scant. Many girls learn about dating by talking to their friends, which is like two first-time parachutists looking to each other for advice as they are leaving the plane. It is a little late to ask the important questions as you plunge toward the ground. Lots of girls get their ideas about dating by watching TV and movies. But mostly young women learn about dating through trial and error. While trial and error may be fine when painting your living room, it’s a terrible way to learn about dating, because your future happiness is at stake.

I’ve been in high schools for over two decades and have observed thousands of teenage dating relationships from the outside looking

in. I want to tell you it is not a pretty sight. I've been witness to pregnancies, emotional and physical abuse, unsafe sex, cheating, rebound relationships, and enough teen pain and drama to fill five books. I have talked to girls about their cheating boyfriends. I've talked to boys about their indifferent girlfriends. I've watched from my desk as girls ran out of class in tears. I've eavesdropped on boys' conversations and marveled about how little they know about girls. I have seen more hickeys on necks than I can count on my fingers and toes. I've watched couples argue in the hallways, and I've seen those same couples kissing in the hallways the next day. Over time I've become convinced that dating, as practiced by many teenagers, just isn't any good for them.

About a decade ago I decided I'd had enough and began to teach my students about dating myths that most of them seemed to embrace without question. Initially I shared a few random thoughts that, over time, evolved into a researched body of ideas. One thing has been constant over the years: teens are intrigued by these ideas. They crave information about dating and relationships and don't have good sources of wisdom on the topic. It is from this research, and sharing with thousands of students about dating, that this book began to emerge. Because I have a close relationship with my students, they can think through these ideas and we can discuss them. However, a book written for teenage girls lacks the immediacy of a classroom setting, where students can question and discuss a tough topic.

So, I wrote this book for you, the parent, so that you might engage your daughter in discussions around dating and her future happiness. Your daughter has a set of beliefs and assumptions

about dating and relationships. Regardless of what those are, they will impact how she approaches dating and determine whether she will be dating smart or dating dumb. I wrote this book to help you understand what myths she may hold regarding dating and to offer you guidance concerning how you can help her date smart, avoid disaster, and protect her future happiness.

BORN FROM FAILURE

When my oldest daughter, Jacquelyn, was of dating age, I thought I was prepared to guide her into the dating world. After all, hadn't I been teaching teens about dating for a number of years? Hadn't I seen firsthand the mistakes teenagers make? Who better to prepare a daughter for dating than I? As it turns out, almost anyone could have done a better job than I. Though my actions came from a good place in my heart, I bungled the job thoroughly. Because of this, I asked my daughter to coauthor this book with me in order to give you insight into how teenage girls think.

Jacquelyn:

Hello, parents! I'm in my midtwenties and am currently teaching at a high school only a few blocks away from my childhood home. When my dad says that this book was born of failure, he is talking about some of the mistakes he made with me. I certainly don't claim to speak for all teenage girls everywhere, but I can tell you about my experiences and that of my friends. I went to a Christian high school, attended church on Sundays, went to youth group

on Wednesdays, dated Christian boys, and followed Christ myself, yet I still made some big mistakes that I regret. In the upcoming pages, I will offer you some ideas about what might be happening inside your daughter's head along with some suggestions for how to engage with her more effectively regarding these important issues.

Because I did not want my daughter to experience the all-too-often toxic world of teenage dating, my approach was to keep Jacquelyn from dating at all until she turned eighteen. Boy, was that a bad idea! I thought I was protecting her and ensuring that she would get through her teenage years unscathed. And in my defense, it wasn't like I was sending her to a convent. (Though the idea did cross my mind!) My goal was to help her avoid an intimate, exclusive relationship as a teen and all the pitfalls that come with it. So, I discouraged solo dates in favor of group outings. I spent time preaching the dangers of exclusive dating and enforced that idea by saying no to anything that might lead to a serious dating relationship. To Jacquelyn, my dating advice sounded like, "Do we really have to talk about this?" or, "You can date as much as you like when you turn eighteen," or, "Please let the boys in your life know I have a shotgun and am not afraid to use it."

For years I had built my classroom philosophy on changing hearts and minds, not just controlling behavior. I was good at it. But with my own daughter I ignored everything I knew to be true. I was trying to cultivate compliance, when I should have been sowing understanding. I was trying to control behavior, when I should have been shaping Jacquelyn's heart and mind. All my approach did was

encourage her to go underground with her dating life; consequently, Jacquelyn had dating relationships that she kept hidden from her mother and me. I forced our daughter to go it alone without the benefit of a parent helping her to navigate the difficult world of teenage dating.

Jacquelyn:

As a teenager, it felt like whenever an adult was talking, the word I heard the loudest was always *no*. In response to my dad's *no* on dating, I ignored his wishes and wandered alone in the dark world of dating from that point on. I had a few boyfriends in high school right under my parents' noses, and I made many of the mistakes outlined in this book. That decision left me with some pain and some regret. I beseech every parent reading this book to avoid the urge to lay down mandates for your daughter in this area and to instead become an agent of education. If my dad had explained and talked through some of the things in this book with me instead of forbidding me to have a boyfriend, I may have been able to avoid much of the pain that I have taken with me from my teenage years.

Because you are reading this I assume that you want your daughter to handle the world of teenage dating with courage, grace, and class. I know I made a number of mistakes as a young man that I want my children to avoid. I'm sure every parent in the world feels the same way. In fact, this is the great challenge of parenting. *How do we raise our kids so that they are better than we are? How do we help*

them grow up to be independent, moral people who live admirable lives?

In the realm of dating, it should be the goal of every parent that his or her daughter will date in such a way that she is happy both today and well into the future.

I believe that if you teach your daughter about the ten myths of dating, you will have done your part in making this possible. Far too many young women believe these myths to be true. They are progressive in nature, with each one often leading to the next. Most young women will not buy into all ten myths, but many will believe at least some of them. Because there is so much faulty thinking around dating, it is important that you have all the information you can get to help your daughter.

THE BIBLE IS NOT ENOUGH

I want to clarify one thing from the outset: I'm a Christian. There. I said it. And I teach in one of the most liberal high schools on the West Coast—in one of the most liberal cities in America. (Believe me, everything you have seen in the *Portlandia* TV show is spot on.) I swim in a very secular pond, and I see how the non-Christian world looks at the Christian world: with anything from ambivalence to downright hostility. This attitude is often understandable. In many cases the actions of Christians have given biblical teachings a bad name. Through the centuries Christians have often been focused on some issues while ignoring other teachings, such as loving your enemies, social justice, and turning the other cheek. But I believe that both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament have a voice to be heard when it comes to twenty-first-century dating.

While this book leans most heavily on science and research, it does allow the voice of the ancients to speak. There may even be a scripture or two. But strictly speaking, this is not a Christian book or even a book for Christians. It is a book for all parents who want to help their daughters through one of the most difficult phases of their lives—the dating years.

In 1997 the Josh Harris book *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* was released. I was a youth pastor at the time and read the book along with hundreds of thousands of other Christians. Within four years this book had sold over 700,000 copies. But for all that it brought to the discussion of dating, it was limited in its scope to a scriptural look at dating. I think the Christian community often believes that the word *no*, some extra prayer, a few sermons, and the spiritual bromide of Scripture are all that every person needs for a better life.

Don't get me wrong. In a perfect world the teachings of the Bible would be all we need. But we are imperfect people with free will who often choose what we shouldn't despite all that we know and have been told. It is important to add as well that not every Christian shares the evangelical emphasis on scriptural authority. Christianity is a big tent. I believe all parents need something more to help their daughters through the dating years.

I think this something more is what is largely missing from Christian writing on sex and dating—namely, scientific information and practical tools to help your daughter. Not research and thinking to supplant ancient wisdom, but rather new ideas that will engage your daughter's mind and help her clarify her thinking on dating relationships so that it may come in line with timeless wisdom. It's about sowing understanding, not just cultivating compliance.

Regardless of whether you are a Christian, I believe we can all agree that we live in troubling times. Attitudes and behaviors regarding dating and relationships are as dysfunctional and dangerous as they have been at any time in human history. As parents we can't exclude any information that will help us raise our daughters to date smart, avoid disaster, and protect their future happiness.

WARNING: BE PREPARED TO FEEL UNCOMFORTABLE

In order to teach our daughters about dating, we sometimes have to let go of our own assumptions about dating and relationships. This process of letting go of what you think you know about dating promises to be incredibly interesting but just a little bit painful. Let me explain why.

Many years ago, my eleventh-grade economics class and I were having a discussion that somehow became centered on prostitution. One student named Brian was quite insistent that prostitutes choose their fates. The discussion then focused on how much choice a prostitute actually has. What the class agreed on is that *choice* is a difficult word to apply to prostitutes because such a high percentage of them are habitual drug users. Apparently Brian had seen *Pretty Woman* a few too many times, as he then began to argue that prostitutes make a free choice and that in fact most of them are not drug users. It was one thing for Brian to make a philosophic argument about the nature of choice, but quite another to argue that a majority of prostitutes are not habitual drug users. Research suggests that the prevalence of habitual drug use among prostitutes is many, many

times that of nonprostitutes.¹ So, in this case, Brian was dead wrong, and I told him so. I said, “Brian, you are dead wrong.” Those were my exact words. What happened next I will never forget.

Brian’s jaw quite literally dropped for a few moments as he thought of what to say. He was flabbergasted. I wish there were a dramatic flourish to cap this story, but like so many class discussions, the topic veered in another direction and the moment was lost. But it was Brian’s gobsmacked expression that remains in my mind’s eye.

Just like Brian, you may be taken off guard by some of what you read in this book, because it may challenge your own dating experiences. It may even challenge you in your current relationship. Adults are not immune to unwise relationship patterns and choices. This book relies heavily on research and data that sometimes run counter to what many people believe when it comes to dating and marriage. It is entirely possible that as you read you will find that you have believed some of the dating myths. One of the hardest things to do in life is to accept our own faulty thinking. You may need to do this a few times as you read this book.

The other reason this book may make you uncomfortable is that it may require a 180-degree turn in what you are currently teaching your daughter about dating. As you read the research, learn about the teenage brain, and gain insight from Jacquelyn and other young women about what your daughter may be thinking and what she needs to hear from you, you may realize you need to make some changes in how you are parenting. As you read this book, your jaw may drop from time to time, but I believe you will also gain valuable insight into your dating daughter that will make change inevitable—for both you and her.

OUR CHALLENGE

I will never forget when I first heard the words “Mr. Anderson, what do you think I should do?” I was in my second year teaching in a small town in central Oregon. A girl had come into my class at lunchtime and asked to talk to me. She then proceeded to tell me she was five months pregnant and no one knew except her boyfriend, her best friend, and now me. She had managed to hide her pregnancy from everyone. (It’s amazing what a baggy sweater and leather coat can conceal.) After explaining her situation, she said, “Mr. Anderson, what do you think I should do?” That was a big question.

We talked for a very long time that day. We talked about the baby, visiting a doctor, her grades, her boyfriend, and how her family was going to react to the news. Ultimately, she had to answer the question for herself, and it proved to be a difficult forty-eight hours for her. Thankfully, she decided to tell her parents about her pregnancy, and later she gave birth to a healthy baby. She eventually moved with her baby and graduated from high school in another state. Over time I lost track of that student, but what I most remember from that encounter was her question: “What do you think I should do?” This girl’s dating behavior had led her down the path to pregnancy. Every parent’s nightmare.

Like this student, too many girls date so they are happy in the here and now, but pay a terrible price for that happiness. How can we teach our daughters to date smart today so they can be happy tomorrow? To be happy in both times is equally important. This is the challenge and the focus of this book. It is what I want for my own daughters, and I hope it is what you want for yours.

THE 10 MYTHS OF TEEN DATING

I believe the most important factors in your daughter's future marital happiness are the ideas, habits, and behaviors about dating that she will put into practice as a teen. It is vital that you have the resources and knowledge to guide her in these formative years. I don't want to equip you for preaching at her, but for communicating with her. Because of this, I want to teach you some crucial things I've learned about teenagers and dating in the past two decades.

Let's dive in!