

When your child's love interest seems a bad choice

By VIRGINIA JUSTICE

I started writing this article with considerable experience with the subject and can attest that it is not a comfortable topic to discuss. But it is necessary.

When our first daughter was born a relative remarked, "When you have a boy you have to worry about your little boy. When you have a girl you have to worry about everyone else's little boys." At the time I did not give the statement much thought. However, as my daughters reached their teens I completely understood what they meant, although I think there's more to it. So many issues regarding young relationships can cause angst within a family, especially if parents do not approve of the significant other their child is dating.

In the case of our two daughters (nearly three years apart in age), one always had to have a boyfriend, the other could not have cared less about boys. As the sister of three brothers, I never went through the boy crazy stage, perhaps because I was around my brothers all the time and they were, to put it nicely, pests. I think this made it more difficult to understand my elder daughter's need to have a boyfriend.

There were a couple of boyfriends throughout middle and high school that her father and I were not keen on, my husband more so than me. Having worked as a classroom teacher, I try to understand children rather than judge them, however, it was clear to me that

some of her choices were questionable.

My dad, a psychiatric nurse, advised that we should not vocalize our dislike of the boyfriend because



that would likely result in her sticking with him like a "burr on a dog." I tried to heed his warning but hiding feelings is not easy for me or my husband ... and the truth came out. Not surprisingly, my dad was right. Speaking privately to our daughter, we expressed our concern over a remark from her boyfriend that had made her cry. We felt it was emotionally abusive, but that observation had the opposite effect of what we'd hoped and she became even more enamored with him.

Our daughter seemed to be most attracted to a certain type, a guy with little or no family support, seemingly lost and without much direction. There were exceptions of course, but much to our dismay it seemed she was on a quest to save these guys from what she per-

ceived as their troubles in life. Our daughter is a loyal, forgiving and loving person, traits we admire. But these traits seemed to work against healthy romantic choices.

We attempted to counsel her on not trying to save or change others, especially if they do not appear to want to change. We even became desperate enough to arrange professional counseling for her with a therapist. I was invited to sit in on one session in which the counselor was trying to get her to see that it was not her responsibility to protect or save these boyfriends and that perhaps she needed to revise her choices when it came to relationships.

The counseling seemed to have had little effect on the boyfriends she continued to select. Looking back, I can see that many of her friends were individuals she felt were "underdogs." It was her nature to want to protect them. It was no fun seeing her hurt by harsh words or a broken heart, but I'm confident that I would never want to change her.

So, what are parents to do in this situation? First, refrain from being too judgmental. You are an outsider looking in and obviously, your child sees something in the person that you do not. Unless you suspect some sort of abuse, try to play it cool. Be open to talking without judging; the more you can discuss openly with your children the more they will talk to you. This doesn't mean you shouldn't caution them to use common sense or trust their gut.



Parenting Tip

This includes talking about sex; I believe parents play a huge role in sex education. Don't invalidate their feelings for the boyfriend/girlfriend, those feelings are very real to them. But don't be afraid to open the door to discussions on what love is and that sex and love may not be the same thing.

Establish boundaries, but remember you cannot monitor what they are doing 24/7, and who knows what goes on at school, another person's house, at the mall. Understand that making mistakes is a part of learning and maturing. I love this simple acronym: FAIL = First Attempt In Learning. We have to make mistakes, we have to be unafraid to fail on this journey we call life.

Be a parent, not a friend. Parents have to set boundaries, say no and discipline; friends don't. Parenting is really a balancing act between not holding on so tight your child wants to rebel and being so cool that your child lacks a model for good judgement.

Parenting is difficult. I often say my children did not come with an instructional manual but they did come with a no refund clause. It is about balance and respect.

I have strong opinions, but I truly want my children to feel that they have a right to their opinion, even if it differs from my own.

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