

An Expert in Psychology Tells:

What I'm Teaching My Children About Marriage



Youngsters should learn about the joys and pitfalls of marriage from the people who love them most—their parents

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as told to Lester and Irene David

ARE YOU GIVING your children vital lessons in marriage?

Well, you should be. After 23 years as a consulting psychologist and marriage counselor, I can say this: there would be far fewer divorces if parents devoted as much time and attention to marital instruction for their children as they do to piano and dancing lessons.

In our house, my wife and I have given marital training a high priority in the raising of our three children. We regard it as crucial to the development of a young person as cultural or career guidance. After all, a good marriage makes the difference between a happy, fruitful life and a barren, perhaps even a miserable, one.

In the storybooks, the prince and princess marry and live happily ever after. In real life, however, one cannot take that "happily-ever-after" part for granted. I have explained to my children that:

"In the first place, you must find the right prince or princess, or the applecart is upset right there.

"And secondly, happy marriages don't just happen. They must be worked at all the time."

Those two statements are the heart of my "home-marriage course." They are so significant that I hope you will go back and read them once more. Now, before I go into the all-important specifics, I should make a few general things clear.

Marriage instruction, of course, cannot—and certainly should not—be as formal as violin lessons or speech therapy. We don't *really* hold classes at our house! We simply talk casually at odd hours about the basic elements in boy-girl and man-woman relationships, about emotions, self-understanding, life goals, and the very practical, sensible things that make up a successful marriage.

The dinner table is an ideal place for these discussions and so is the living room when the family gathers in the evening. If you do this in your home, I can predict that the questions will fly so fast that the youngsters will forget all about tv.

At what age should parents begin to train their children for marriage? It's never too early to start; some of the principles can be instilled at any age. But talks about dating and choosing a mate should wait until the young people are old enough to be interested in them.

What, exactly, am I teaching my children about marriage? Here are the main points my wife and I stress in our informal conversations with our daughter Betty, 15, and our two sons, Steven, 13, and William, 17:

Shop carefully for a wife or husband

The most important ingredient of a successful marriage is picking the right mate.

I put it to Betty this way: "You wouldn't dream of buying the first dress you saw on a rack that appealed to you. You would look over the selection carefully to see if there was something even better. If nothing turned up, you would have no hesitation trying elsewhere. Is it wise to be less particular when choosing a life partner?"

And yet countless girls and boys settle for the first person they are attracted to. If they are lucky, the partner will turn out well. More often, however, that "first item on the rack" isn't any special bargain at all.

"To select a mate wisely," I tell Betty and the