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VOICES from the VILLAGE: Teen dating

By Alexandra Muller Arboleda | November 2015

Dating is a leap from childhood to young adulthood that creates plenty of anxiety for parents. How do we give teens the freedom to explore new relationships—while keeping them safe?



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Lisa Donsker, MC, LPC, of Phoenix, has worked as a counselor for 15 years, focusing on adolescent and family issues. She and her husband, Seth, have two children: Owen (10) and Elsie (5). Photos by Rick D'Elia.

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Respecting boundaries

We hold our kids' hands when they cross the street, tell them how far they can ride their bikes and watch them swim in the pool. We won't go on dates with them when that time comes, but they will still need our advice and guidance.

Healthy dating is all about boundaries. Trust with supervision is the name of the game. Establishing acceptable curfews, transportation choices, destinations and activities gives a framework for safe dating. Parents may want to begin by allowing activity-based, group outings instead of private, isolated situations.

When children respect basic boundaries, it is easier to assume they will make other good

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become necessary.

One in three teens reports being a victim of dating violence or being violent toward a date, according to the American Psychological Association. Discussions of situational awareness [knowing what's going on around you], abuse prevention and setting boundaries for romantic and physical relationships are key. Rehearsing how to say—and respect—the word “no” is important. Teaching teens to recognize jealousy, possessiveness and control helps them avoid dating dangers.

With GPS and other tools already at their fingertips, parents have many ways to monitor their kids on dates. (Parent-controlled drones are probably not too far off!) But teaching teens to set the pace and tone of their own relationships gives them skills for safe and successful dating experiences and seems to be the better choice. – [Lisa Donsker, MC, LPC](#)

Keep doors open to communication

We have five girls. Four are teenagers. We have worried about and discussed teen dating since they were toddlers.

We have now crossed that bridge. Two of our daughters have begun dating. It hasn't been a big issue because we have prepared them. From the time they were very small, we used books and PBS shows to initiate discussions about relationships and how children are brought into the world.



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their beliefs and what they think is best for their family. The goal is the same for every responsible parent: to raise children safely and to help them minimize—and learn from—mistakes they will make through high school and beyond.

All children are different, and I am sure we will be thrown some curve balls with ours. But we have raised strong, confident young ladies. They are responsible and self-assured. We know kids will do what they want once they leave home, but we believe it is best to be realistic and keep the doors open to communication. – *Hector Escarcega*

The “dance” of dating

Since preschool, our girls were told one simple rule: You may date after you are married.

When my youngest was in third grade, she asked, “Mom, how is that going to work? How will I get to know my husband if I can’t date him?” I handed the phone to my daughter and told her to call her father, who replied, “Not to worry, we will choose wisely.”

Clearly, dating was something we didn’t want to deal with. I believe having girls

Hector Escarcega, of Scottsdale, is director of engineering at Talari Networks, based in San Jose, Calif. He and his wife, Joy, have five daughters: Lauren (16), Lexi (14), Lainey (18), Ellie (8) and Elise (13).



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A friend once told us, “Every night I go home and worry about my boy; every night you will go home and worry about all the boys!”

director for Atonement Lutheran School in Glendale. She and her husband, Don, have two daughters: Abby (15) and Molly (17).

Both of our girls are now teenagers and high school is a new social world. Reality has set in and we have had to reassess our simple rule.

Freshman and sophomore years were easy with the “How can you date if you don’t drive?” rationale. But now that our older daughter is a senior, we realize the importance of the “dance” of dating.

It starts with slow steps: going out in mixed groups. It moves to one-on-one dating that prepares teenagers for life after they leave home. They can safely step on some toes, switch partners and negotiate the crowded floor while they remain protected under their parents’ roof.

If we are lucky, we have prepared our children to make the right choices and ask for help or advice as they stumble through the teenage years. As much as we might want to find dance companions for them, we must allow them to search on their own. – *Jane Sutton*

Tags: Arizona, Atonement Lutheran School, family counselor Phoenix, Glendale, kids, Lisa Donsker, parenting, parents, teen dating, teens, voices from the village

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Alexandra Muller Arboleda is a freelance writer and the mother of Isabel (14) and Nicolas (11). She has worked as a water lawyer and a law and logic teacher. She is also certified to teach yoga.

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