

THERE ARE **NO SIMPLE RULES** FOR DATING MY DAUGHTER!



Surviving the
Pitfalls and Pratfalls
of Teen Relationships

*"An incredibly valuable resource
for any parent with a teenaged
daughter who is navigating the
turbulent waters of dating!"*

– LeVar Burton

Laura J. Buddenberg and Kathleen M. McGee

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Chapter 1	
The History and Biology of Dating	9
Chapter 2	
Don't Say 'Ugh' to Dating	21
Chapter 3	
Age Is More Than a Number	45
Chapter 4	
A Roadmap for Safe Dating, or Fasten Your Belts... It's Date Night	67
Chapter 5	
Addressing Dressing: Modesty Is Always in Style	87
Chapter 6	
Gift Giving and Other Musings on Money Matters	107
Chapter 7	
The Appeal and the Peril of Online Relationships	123
Chapter 8	
Breaking Up Is (not so) Hard to Do	145
Chapter 9	
Dating Is About Choosing, Not Being Chosen	163
Chapter 10	
Conversation Starters	173
Appendix A	
Helpful Resources	205
Appendix B	
Recommended Reading	209
Appendix C	
Recommended Viewing	213

Chapter 1

The History and Biology of Dating

*Don't know much about history
Don't know much biology
Don't know much about science books
Don't know much about the French I took
But I do know that I love you
And I know that if you loved me, too
What a wonderful world this would be...*

– *WONDERFUL WORLD*
BY HERMAN'S HERMITS

Back in 1965, the lyrics to *Wonderful World* captured a “truth” that every love-struck American teen understood: I might not remember when Columbus sailed the ocean blue or know how to pronounce “*je ne sais quoi*,” but I know what’s really important – love. Four decades later, one could set those lyrics to an urban beat and watch heads nod in unison – to the message as well as the sound.

Kids seem to think they know what love is, and many of them believe they've found love in their dating relationships. How else can you explain the daughter who gets positively giddy every time she has a date, but then turns sour when she finds herself single again? Teens can create so much drama around their dating relationships that many parents are left shaking their heads and asking, "Was it really this complicated when I was that age?" Other parents long for some bygone era, believing that it was somehow easier for kids and parents way back in the day. But that may not be true. A brief history lesson and a look at the latest scientific research suggests there have always been challenges, both external and internal.

Cultural Influences

Just as hairstyles and fashion trends evolve (for better or worse) through the ages, so too do the social rituals surrounding male/female romance. Author Beth Bailey describes the evolution of courtship in her book, *From Front Porch to Back Seat*. In the late 19th century, men would "call" on eligible females. And like today's single man looking for love, there were no guarantees against rejection. Bailey writes, "The young man from the neighboring farm who spent the evening sitting on the front porch with the farmer's daughter was paying a call, and so was the 'society' man who could judge his prospects by whether or not the card he presented at the front door found the lady of his choice 'at home.'"¹

The calling system of yesteryear was a highly structured and formalized ritual. According to Bailey, women

had great sway in the process. Mothers would dictate which callers would be received into their homes, a decision influenced by the familial, social, and financial reputations of the gentleman caller. It was the ladies who also decided which day(s) they would accept callers into their homes and which “days they paid or returned calls.”² This rather rigid calling process took place in family parlors and at community events such as dances, where guest lists were always highly selective. All of the rules and structures associated with courtship in the 19th century helped to ensure that respectable young ladies were introduced to similarly respectable young lads.

By the 1920s, however, the relative privacy of courtship was being replaced by a much more public display of “dating.” According to Bailey, “Dating moved courtship into the public world, relocating it from family parlors and community events to restaurants, theaters, and dance halls. At the same time, it removed couples from the implied supervision of the private sphere – from the watchful eyes of family and local community – to the anonymity of the public sphere.”³

While women dictated the who, what, and when of the old calling system, the new age of “dating” saw a pronounced power shift toward men and money. In fact, the word “date” originated from the language of the streets, notably prostitutes who used the term to describe their scheduled encounters. Throughout the 20th century, dating – both its meaning and its rituals – would be redefined. In the 1930s and 1940s, America’s youth practically elevated dating to a competitive sport, a chance to showcase one’s popularity. For men to be successful, they had to have the right posses-

sions – clothing, car, cash – whereas women needed to be “seen with popular men in the ‘right’ places.”⁴ For young people, dating was a means to establish popularity. Finding a lifelong mate was secondary.

By the 1950s, going steady became the new symbol of popularity for youth. Boys and girls sought affection from one rather than many. According to Bailey, the concept was

“I’m dating a woman
now who, evidently, is
unaware of it.”

– GARY SHANDLING
COMEDIAN

disconcerting to adults who worried that young people could not possibly learn anything about the opposite sex if they limited their social interactions to one person. Parents and religious leaders frowned on the idea of going steady for other reasons, too. Many believed it made a couple more likely to engage in premarital sex. For young people, however, finding someone to go steady with was a stress reducer. With a steady, they had a guaranteed date to formals, and they didn’t have to continually compete against their peers for dates to every social event. For them, security trumped competition.⁵

In the following decades, dating relationships would be turned upside down by changes in American society. There was the sexual revolution and women’s liberation in the 1960s and 1970s. There were latchkey kids and deadly sexually transmitted diseases in the 1980s. By the dawn of the new millennium, communication technologies transformed everyday life. Young people from every corner of the globe were suddenly connected in their own virtual communities. Instant messaging and personal cell phones have replaced

the family phone as the primary communications tool. Now, parents are denied complete access to who their children are contacting and vice versa. Many of the built-in mechanisms that existed within families and communities to monitor a child's social interactions are gone, and they aren't coming back. Even the lingo of youth culture makes it difficult for today's parents to know exactly what's going on.

Talkin' about love

The language of modern relationships bears little resemblance to anything used in previous generations. And it's constantly changing. Much of young people's lingo is taken from rap lyrics and teen movies, two forms of media that parents rarely tune in to. Even words or phrases that are native to one corner of the globe can become universally adopted thanks to the Internet. If you heard your daughter use the word "baggin," would you know that she's picking up a guy? Maybe your son refers to a girl as "breezy"; would you know that she was his girlfriend? Or if you heard a group of your daughter's friends talking about "givin' up the gold," would you know they were referring to losing one's virginity? Even if you knew what these slang words meant, by the time you finish reading this book, new words will likely have taken their place, if they haven't already. In modern America, the euphemisms of youth culture change as frequently as teens change their iPod playlists.

So is there anything we can learn from the past to help us understand our children's dating environment? The best lesson may be realizing that there really never was a "golden age" of dating. Wishing for a return to the simple, stress-free good ol' days (that never existed) will leave you ill prepared

for what's happening today. Whether it was the young gentleman struggling to understand the etiquette of making a social call in 1905 America or the 13-year-old hottie taking a booty call via text messaging in modern America, dating has never been easy for most kids or enjoyable for their parents. Every generation has been, and will be, influenced by the culture and realities of its time. That won't change, and neither will the stress it causes parents.

Biological Influences

Here's a newsflash: Girls and boys are different. Just as the world intrudes on relationships, so too does biology. Aside from the obvious physical features that distinguish the genders, the mental makeup of girls and boys is anything but identical. In *Brain Sex: The Real Difference Between Men and Women*, authors Anne Moir and David Jessel tell readers, "The sexes are born with brains wired in different ways. They think in different ways, have different strengths, value things in a different way, and use different strategies to approach life. These brain biases are accentuated and refined throughout life, particularly when spurred on by the hormonal surge of adolescence."⁶

While a man's brain is biased toward objects and activities, the female's brain is biased toward people and relationships. These biases influence behavior. As Moir and Jessel note, "The boy more naturally involves himself in experiences that sharpen spatial skills; the girl involves herself more in experiences that strengthen interpersonal skills. Boys want to explore areas, spaces, and things because their brain bias predisposes them to these aspects of the environ-

ment. Girls like to talk and listen because that is what their brains are better designed to do.”⁷

But what do brain differences have to do with your daughter’s dating relationships? Plenty.

In adolescence, the brain is still a work in progress. For example, the prefrontal cortex is the region of the brain that is thought to play an important role in our ability to make connections between actions and consequences. This part of our brain is charged with helping us solve problems, plan, and make judgments. It also plays a role in our inhibitions, or lack thereof. For teens whose hormones are already raging, there’s one thought they all seem to share:

“If it feels good, do it.” And they do. They’re impulsive. The emotional, sometimes irrational decisions teens make can be partly or totally attributed to the fact that their brains are still developing. Their brains are like a computer with a file manager that isn’t fully loaded. Things misfire and go haywire. Anthropologist

“When you are courting a nice girl an hour seems like a second. When you sit on a red-hot cinder a second seems like an hour. That’s relativity.”

— ALBERT EINSTEIN
RENOWNED PHYSICIST

Helen Fisher, quoted in Barbara Strauch’s book, *The Primal Teen*, says, “The prefrontal cortex develops slowly. They [teens] have strong drives but not the brain power or the experience to go with them.”⁸ Neuroscientist Dr. Jay Giedd puts it this way: “They have the passion and the strength but no brakes and they may not get good brakes until they are twenty-five.”⁹

As parents, we need to understand that even if our teenage daughters look physically mature, they are not grown up. Most still lack the cognitive development necessary to fully comprehend the consequences of their choices. In other words, even teens still need their parents. That's why child psychiatrist Peter Jensen tells moms and dads that it will sometimes be their responsibility to be the "prefrontal cortex" for their teenagers.¹⁰

The 'cuddle hormone'

While this isn't a biology book, we do want to mention that it's not just your daughter's brain that influences her behavior. Her hormones are at work as well. One in particular may play a pivotal role in her relationships. Oxytocin, also referred to as the "cuddle" or "prosocial" hormone, is believed to facilitate social bonding, whether that bond is between a mother and her newborn or two starry-eyed lovers. Oxytocin's effect on female behavior may be as potent as testosterone's effect on males. Although it's found in both sexes, oxytocin in females helps to stimulate milk production, uterine contractions, and maternal behavior. But new research also suggests it may have a powerful influence on intimate relationships. Oxytocin is naturally released in males and females in response to a variety of stimuli, including sexual feelings or activities. Neuroscientist Diane Witt describes the power that this bonding hormone can have on a girl's dating life: "You first meet him and he's passable. The second time you go out with him, he's OK. The third time you go out with him, you have sex. And from that point on you can't imagine what life would be like without him."¹¹

Children of the Corn

My best friend Shawna's new boyfriend asked her to go to a festival in his hometown. Shawna invited me to tag along with them. I didn't know her boyfriend that well, and I had never met his friends, but it sounded fun, so I agreed to go. We were all having a great time at the festival when Shawna's boyfriend said, "Everybody's going out to the pond. Let's go." Shawna didn't know what the "pond" was, nor did I. Her boyfriend drove us a mile out of town to a pasture with a shallow creek, surrounded by cornfields. It was dark when we arrived, and there were maybe 20 or 30 other kids hanging out. There was at least one keg and Bon Jovi was blaring from a boom box. I told Shawna I didn't want to stay. She didn't either, but her date and his friends shouted at us to follow them. We hung back by the car thinking we would leave soon. As we stood there, we watched and laughed at all the girls who wandered into the field to relieve themselves. Little did we know we'd soon be "children of the corn," too.

We weren't there more than 10 minutes when someone shouted, "Cops are coming!" Suddenly, everyone went running. Shawna and I darted into the cornfield. The stalks were taller than we were, and the ground was uneven. Shawna was running ahead of me and tripped. I fell over her and took out a half-dozen corn stalks on my way down. By the time we reached the end of the row, Shawna had lost her shoes, and my arms were scratched from the corn stalks. We looked around for Shawna's date and his friends, but we didn't see them. We did see the lights of the town in the distance, so we headed that way. Of course, we had to climb over a barbed-wire fence to get out of the field. I got caught on the wire as I climbed over, ripped my jeans, fell forward, and planted my face in the dirt. Shawna lost her footing, too. She fell and rolled down into the ditch. We eventually made it back into town and caught a ride home. Shawna dumped her boyfriend the next day, and we never saw him or his friends again.

— DITCHED ON A GROUP DATE

The bonding power of oxytocin may explain why some girls who are sexually intimate with their partners turn into emotional zombies or behave as if a death occurred in the family following a romantic breakup. The depth of their attachment, fueled by oxytocin, may produce profound despair, yet another unexpected and unwanted consequence for the sexually active teen.

What Parents Can Do

So, is parental influence powerless against the tides of history and biology? Has our daughters' fate already been sealed inside their genetic makeup and the prevailing cultural trends? We don't think so.

History simply shows us that it's impossible to reclaim the unclaimable. Dating used to involve tremendous thought, supervision, stringent ritual, and community effort. It was also very controlling. Adults dictated who did what, when, and with whom. The child's voice was virtually silent compared to today's standards. And the process itself could be discriminatory, denying potential relationships on the basis of race, religion, or riches. It wasn't perfect then, nor is it realistic now. The current dating environment also leaves much to be desired. Structure has given way to chaos, as young people engage in a seemingly endless string of hookups and breakups. They don't know what they want out of their relationships, nor do they know how to get it if they do know. At the same time, parents are pushed to the sidelines and their voices – by choice or circumstance – are silenced. Surely we can find a happier and healthier medium between the dictatorship of the past and the aimless drift of today.

In our experience, parents who are forthright and willing to talk to their daughters about dating, including the social skills it requires, have less stress and fewer sleepless nights. And their daughters enjoy more rewarding experiences. But when girls are left to figure things out on their own, in the absence of parental guidance, they often find themselves in dysfunctional relationships. To help your daughter overcome and avoid dating pitfalls, you have to talk to one another, ask questions, and listen. In the next chapter, we show you how to have a running conversation in your family that can help your daughters learn how to date wisely.

-
- ¹ Bailey, Beth L. *From Front Porch to Back Seat: Courtship in Twentieth-Century America*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press (1989) p. 15.
 - ² Ibid.
 - ³ Ibid., p. 13.
 - ⁴ Ibid., p. 26.
 - ⁵ Ibid.
 - ⁶ Moir, Anne and Jessel, David. *Brain Sex: The Real Difference Between Men and Women*. New York: Carol Publishing Group (1991) p. 100.
 - ⁷ Ibid., pp. 58-59.
 - ⁸ Strauch, Barbara. *The Primal Teen: What the New Discoveries About the Teenage Brain Tell Us About Our Kids*. New York: Doubleday (2003) p. 150.
 - ⁹ Ibid., p. 33.
 - ¹⁰ Ibid., p. 34.
 - ¹¹ Diane Witt, quoted in Susan E. Barker, “‘Cuddle Hormone’ Research Links Oxytocin and Socio-Sexual Behaviors,” Oxytocin.org, <http://www.oxytocin.org/cuddle-hormone>.