



Missouri 4-H Youth Development Programs

January 27, 2003

Dear Adult Leader,

A goal during adolescence is to enjoy life! One of the best ways for adolescents to do this is to develop positive relationships with others. The ability to make good decisions and communicate effectively is important in developing these relationships. Respectful, responsible, trustworthy and caring interactions with parents, friends, dating partners, and others help adolescents achieve these goals, as well.

The Dating Mystery and All That Relationship Stuff is a curriculum that was designed to help take away some of the confusion and mystery about relationships that adolescents often experience. In this curriculum, a group of adolescents and an adult leader watch a movie entitled, *Where the Heart Is* and discuss the relationships observed in the video. Then, through guided discussion, the group applies what they see in the movie to their own experiences.

The movie is rated PG-13 due to language and sexual references. Because of this, parents need to be aware of the content, goals, and objectives of the curriculum to decide if their adolescent can participate. Before beginning the activity, please be sure that parents and youth participants read and sign the attached permission slip.

Information about adolescent relationships with parents, peers, and dating partners is provided at the end of the curriculum. It never hurts to brush up on relationship basics before talking with a group of teens! In addition, websites and other resources about relationships are provided.

Your interest in helping young people better understand relationships is greatly appreciated! Whether you are 4-H youth staff, a teacher, volunteer or a concerned citizen, helping young people learn to get along well with others is an important job. Thank you!

Sincerely,

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Introduction

Relationships can be fun! Relationships can be exciting! Relationships can be confusing! Adolescents have different types of relationships with many people – parents/caregivers, sibling, relatives, peers, and other significant adults. Relationships can be very complex and confusing for adolescents because at different stages, they may discover changing and differing relationship needs.

Young adolescents (age 10-14), for example still depend on parents for basic needs – food, shelter, clothing, and transportation. Older adolescents (age 15 and older), though have different needs. These teens are seeking greater independence, which is often enhanced with a job and a driver's license. A shift in attachment from parents to dating and/or stronger relationships with friends will likely occur. As adolescents grow and develop, changes in physical and emotional needs suggest that relationships with others change, as well.

No one can become truly happy without relationships, yet often those closest to us (friends, parents, dating partners) can sometimes cause us the most pain. Developing good relationships requires a lot of thought and effort! Many things contribute to adolescents having positive relationships with peers, family members and dating partners. One is the ability to make good decisions and to communicate in positive ways. Adolescents who are responsible, respectful, trustworthy and caring are more likely to connect with and understand the needs of others.

Sometimes, adolescents have problems in their relationships that may be a result of poor decision-making and/or communication skills. They may also lack understanding and practice of the character traits identified above. By enhancing and strengthening these skills, adolescents can increase their ability to interact more positively and confidently in relationships.

Much ado about relationships? Here's how adolescents benefit from positive relationships with others:

- Sense of self-esteem and self-concept
- Sense of worthwhileness to family and society
- Respect for self and others
- Positive role models and positive character
- Sense of capability and the ability to cope in social situations
- Ability to define one's direction and goals

(Polk, 2002)

It's a good thing! Read on for ways to help adolescents increase positive relationship skills.



The Dating Mystery and All That Relationship Stuff

Purpose

The purpose of this curriculum is to provide an opportunity for adolescents (age 13-18) to talk with an adult leader about relationship issues that can sometimes be confusing. Using *Where the Heart Is*, a popular PG-13 movie, as the discussion tool, adolescents will increase their understanding of how to interact with peers, parents, dating partners and other adults in positive and successful ways.*

Goals

- Explore adolescent relationships with parents/caregivers, peers, dating partners and other significant adults;
- Discuss the importance of respect, responsibility, trustworthiness and caring in relationships;
- Identify and practice decision-making and communication skills that lend toward more positive relationships.

* This curriculum does not address violence, abusive adolescent relationships, or sexual activity among adolescents.

Activity

A group of adolescents and an adult leader watch the movie entitled *Where the Heart Is*. While and/or after viewing the movie, adolescents and adults talk about the relationship issues they observed and implications for their own relationships. The curriculum is designed with flexibility in mind! You may want to use it as a one-time program or view the movie and have discussion in small segments over a period of time. Whatever method you choose, remember that the most important element in this curriculum is not the movie! It's helping adolescents better understand relationship issues through guided discussion.

***Where the Heart Is* - Movie Summary**

The movie follows the fortunes of a pregnant and destitute 17-year-old young woman, Novalee Nation. On the way to California, Novalee is abandoned by her boyfriend in an Oklahoma Wal-Mart. From this unpromising beginning, Novalee builds a new life and creates her long-desired home. Along the way she is helped by, and ultimately helps, a group of eccentric but loving people who take her into their lives. Some of these individuals include blue-haired Sister Thelma Husband, who hands out advice and photocopied books of the Bible ... Moses Whitecotton, the wise, soft-spoken, elderly photographer who teaches Novalee life skills and life lessons ... and Forney Hull, the eccentric town librarian who hides his secrets and his feelings behind his world of books.



When More Than Discussion Is Needed

The activity and curriculum is intended to address basic relationship concerns (i.e., communication, respect, decision-making) not necessarily issues such as abuse, violence, and sexual activity. However, these issues are very real to many youth – even the youth participating in your discussion group. The content of the video and discussion questions may spark these kinds of thoughts and experiences that a teen may want to talk about. For example, a teen may come up to you after a session to talk about a specific abusive situation. Or, he or she might make a comment during discussion about risky sexual behavior of a “friend” and what to do about it.

Depending on the situation and needs of the youth, you may be able to provide guidance just by listening. In other circumstances, assistance from parents or professionals in the community may be needed. The key is to help connect youth with the appropriate people to better assist them. It is important for you to be aware of resource people (social workers, counselors, medical professionals, etc.) in your community that can help meet the needs of youth. You may want to invite resource people to participate in the sessions in case questions or needs arise.

If the setting in which you are using this curriculum is 4-H (camp, club, school program, etc.), contact the local 4-H youth specialist or staff to let them know about the issue and to make the appropriate contacts and referrals.

If a more severe issue, such as child abuse or neglect, is suspected there are procedures in place in Missouri to help. Please see the next two pages for more details about protecting the safety and well being of youth.





Scene I: Before the Movie

Make sure you rent the movie and that the TV/VCR or DVD player is working properly. You may want to prepare or ask youth to bring snacks to share with the group. Be sure to collect signed parent permission forms (see attached form).

Let youths know they will be watching a movie about teenage relationships (dating, parents, friends) that will probably bring up some issues they might be familiar with or have questions about. The group can watch the movie in entirety and then have discussions afterwards or show small segments with discussions throughout the movie.

If you choose the small segment/discussion route, you'll note this curriculum identifies seven places throughout the movie to pause for guided discussion. Specific discussion questions and conclusions are provided. Remember the goal is for youth to observe and discuss the relationships they see in the movie and then talk about what it means to them.

It is not necessary to have a discussion about each of the questions identified in the Pause Points (unless you have lots of time and an eager group!). Feel free to pick and choose discussion questions in each section based on the needs and interests of the group.

Confidentiality

Discussions about relationships can be sensitive. Youths will feel more comfortable sharing their thoughts and experiences if they know it won't be gossiped about or spread all over the community. Sharing will be most effective if group trust is established. If the youth are new friends, help them get to know each other through get-acquainted activities or other games. Caution youth that while sharing is welcome, they may want to be careful about what they share with the group. Once something is said it can't be taken back! There is no guarantee of confidentiality!

Let the group know that what is discussed must be confidential. A good phrase to use when explaining this is "what is said in the group, stays in the group." You may want to ask youth to commit to this ground rule by a show of hands.

Protecting the Safety and Well-Being of Youth

The exception to the confidentiality rule is when the adult leader feels there is an immediate safety problem. Examples of this include youths that talk about having suicidal thoughts or being a victim of abuse/incest. Explain to the group that due to concern for their safety, you and the 4-H Youth Development Program are obligated to follow up on things you hear in the group discussion that are harmful or dangerous to participants. That may include breaking confidentiality in order to get someone the help they need (i.e., social services, law enforcement, etc.).



If such an instance occurs, it is very important for the adult leader to take action:

- Talk with the youth in private after the session to gather more information.
- Reassure the youth that he/she did the right thing in sharing or talking about the situation.
- Explain that their safety and well-being is very important and that you want to assist them in getting the help they need.
- If the setting is a 4-H Youth Development Program, contact the local 4-H youth specialist or staff member to share the situation and get advice about next steps.

For suspected child abuse and neglect (i.e., physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, neglect and other):

- 4-H Youth Development faculty and staff are mandated reporters of suspected child abuse and neglect. This means they are required by law to report instances of suspected abuse and neglect. Even though 4-H and other adult volunteers are not mandated reporters, they can choose to report suspected child abuse and neglect situations in order to protect youth. For more information about how to report child abuse and neglect visit the Missouri Department of Social Services website - <http://www.dss.state.mo.us/can.htm>
- If you voluntarily report an instance of abuse or neglect, your identity will be kept confidential.

To report suspected child abuse and neglect in Missouri dial 1-800-392-3738, or contact county police departments or social services offices as soon as possible

Pre Movie Discussion Questions About Dating and Other Relationships

- How many of you have friends or know people who have trouble getting along with parents, friends, or boyfriends/girlfriends? What are the problems?
- What do you think would help these people solve some of their relationship problems?
- Do you think relationships are easy or difficult? Why or why not?
- What is dating like at your school or with your friends? Do dating partners treat each other in a respectful, responsible, trustworthy, caring way? Explain.
- Do your friends make good decisions in their relationships? Do they choose dates or friends that are positive influences? Why or why not. Do you?
- Does it seem like parents are “there” for adolescents today? Explain.
- What does it take to be a good friend to others? Describe the characteristics of a good friend. Would your friends describe you in this way? Why or why not?





Scene II: During the Movie

1. Pause Point.....At the end of the segment when, after buying shoes Novalee runs to the Wal-Mart parking lot and finds Willie Jack is gone.

Discussion questions:

- Are you surprised Willie Jack left Novalee? Why or why not?
 - Are you concerned about Novalee?
 - What do you think Novalee is thinking right now?
-

2. Pause Point..... At the end of the segment when a person jumps through the window to assist Novalee as she goes into labor at Wal-Mart.

Discussion questions:

- Are you surprised that Willie Jack meets Jolene and ends up going to jail?
- Novalee is in a new community with no money, no home, no family, few friends and she's about to bring a baby into the world. Describe her future.

Conclusions

Novalee doesn't have a strong foundation for positive, trusting relationships. She was abandoned by her mother and apparently lived in several foster homes. Willie Jack was irresponsible and uncaring toward her, too. The rest of the movie examines how Novalee forms relationships and attachments with friends and dating partners.

3. Pause Point.....The end of the segment when Sister Husband shows up at the hospital and takes Novalee and baby Americus home to live with her.

Discussion Questions:

- What does Lexi Coop, the nurse, provide Novalee?
- What did you think about Mama Nell's relationship with Novalee? How about Sister Husband?
- Compare Mama Nell and Sister Husband and their relationships with Novalee.
- Think about your relationship with your parent(s). How should parents relate to their teenagers? How do you communicate with your parents and how do they communicate with you? What are some things you could do to have a stronger relationship with your parents?



- Were you surprised that it was Forney who jumped through the window to help Novalee?
- People seem to abandon Novalee (i.e., Mama Nell, Willie Jack). How might this affect other relationship decisions Novalee makes?

Conclusions

After giving birth to the “Wal-Mart baby” Novalee had a brief moment of fame and money. Some people, like her mother, took advantage of Novalee during this time. Others, like Lexi, Sister Husband and Forney show her kindness and support. Positive, supportive relationships are based on trust, caring, respectfulness, and responsible behavior during good and bad times.

4. Pause Point..... The end of the segment when the police and Novalee find Americus in the nativity scene unharmed.

Discussion Questions:

- Novalee regrets the relationship she had with the mechanic. What do we learn from our regrets? How do they help us make better decisions in the future?
- Novalee and Forney are spending more time together. Describe their relationship.
- Think about your relationships with friends and dating partners. Are these relationships positive? Are they enjoyable and do they make you feel good about yourself? Explain. If they don’t, what can you do?
- What do you think of Lexi’s statement to Novalee, “Let’s face it, girls like us don’t get the pick of the litter.”
- In regard to Americus being kidnapped, Novalee asks Forney “am I being punished?” Forney replies “Do you really think this is what you deserve?” What do you think is the answer to both questions? Why?
- Have you ever felt “punished”, either by your parents or friends, because of friends you’ve chosen or people you’ve dated? If so, how did this make you feel? Did pressure from friends or family make you change your mind? Did you think your friends and family members were concerned about you or where they “meddling”? Explain.

Conclusions

This segment seems to relate to life decisions and subsequent consequences – Novalee’s relationship with the mechanic, Forney’s decision to quit school to take care of his sister, Lexi and Novalee talking about “not getting the pick of the litter” and being punished due to past behavior. Some say that all people have the ability to grow and make positive decisions at any point in their life if they choose to do so. As you know, some people don’t make the choice, some eventually learn through trial and error and others seem to have an on-going ability (usually through the influence of stable and secure family and community networks) to make positive decisions.



Sometimes, we're so close to a relationship or situation that we cannot see what other people see. It is probably a good idea to step outside oneself to see things in a more impartial way. The rest of the movie looks further at decision-making and communication.

5. Pause Point..... At the end of the segment when Novalee learns she inherited money from Sister Husband.

Discussion Questions:

- As Lexi and Novalee walk through the rubble of the tornado-destroyed house and talk about Forney, Lexi accuses Novalee of thinking she's not good enough for Forney. What do you think about this? Should only certain people have dating relationships together?
- Have you ever had a relationship either with a friend or dating partner that others criticized – thought you were “too good” or not good enough for the other person? How do you decide with whom to have friendships or dates? Are they people that are caring, trustworthy, responsible and respectful to you? If not, what kind of friend or partner will they be? Are you the kind of friend or partner that is caring, trustworthy, responsible and respectful? Explain.
- In addition to a home and inheritance, what did Sister Husband provide Novalee?

Conclusions

Individuals that can show respectful, responsible, trustworthy and caring behavior toward others usually have stronger and positive relationships. This is true regardless of income, educational level and family background.

6. Pause Point..... At the end of the segment when Novalee and Lexi are on the porch after Lexi and her children move in with Novalee.

Discussion Questions:

- Lexi has a big heart, but a past record of choosing men that are harmful. What can you learn from Lexi about relationships?
- What are words that describe Lexi Coop and her friendship with Novalee?
- How is Forney different from Willie Jack?
- What do you think about the following statement made by Novalee? “Our lives can change with every breath we take. Men like Roger Briscoe never win. Hold on to everything you've got. We've all got meanness but we've all got goodness, too. And that's the only thing worth living for.”
- Novalee says that it is the good things in life, like positive relations with others that matter. Discuss the people in the movie that were a positive influence on



Novalee. What would her life be like now if she didn't have Sister Husband, Lexi Coop, Moses Whitecotton and Forney Hull?

- Who are the people in your life that are positive influences? How do they affect your life?

Conclusions

Novalee's life is looking better. She builds her dream house and wins a photography award. Much of this is due to the support and encouragement of friends. Being open to positive influences can greatly enhance your life. Novalee seems able to take the lemons in her life and turn them into lemon aid. In other words, she has an ability to thrive in difficult situations. She has qualities (kindness, respectfulness, open to positive influences) that allow her to have positive experiences with others.

7. Pause Point..... The end of the segment when Novalee visits Willie Jack at the hospital.

Discussion Questions:

- What do you think about Willie Jack now?
- What did you think about Willie Jack's statement, "Remember when you asked if I could feel the baby's heart? I lied. I'd do anything to change it, set it straight."
- What did you think when Novalee told Forney she didn't love him? Was she being honest?
- In your experience what happens when dating partners aren't honest? What are ways to communicate with others about what you're really thinking and feeling?
- Have you ever done or said something you regret and wished you could change it? Is it possible to right a wrong in a relationship? Explain.
- Lexi married Ernie the Exterminator. Are you surprised? Why is he the "winner" she describes?
- Does Novalee assert (stand up for herself) herself or does she let people walk over her? Does her level of assertiveness change from the beginning of the movie to the end? Explain.
- Do you stand up for yourself with friends or dates? How difficult is this?
- Think of a time when you felt like friends or dates "walked all over you." What was it like? What could you do to better assert yourself in the future?

Conclusions

This segment seems to focus on honesty and communication – or lack thereof. Willie Jack admits he lied to Novalee. Novalee wasn't honest with Forney about her feelings for him. The result of this communication was abandonment and hurt feelings. A way to avoid these negative results is for individuals to communicate in an honest and direct way.



The last segment of the movies shows
Forney and Novalee reunited.....and they
live happily ever after!





Scene III: After the Movie

- What happens when people aren't honest in their relationships?
- Did Novalee make good decisions in her relationships? Why or why not?
- What is it about Novalee that allows her to thrive in difficult situations? Even though she had a challenging past, Novalee was able to make a secure and positive life. Describe her qualities and what it is that allows her to eventually have positive relationships with others.
- What words describe Forney Hull and the relationship he has with Novalee?
- How do the characters in the movie deal with conflict? Do the different ways of dealing with conflict help resolve issues in a positive way?
- How do you resolve conflict or fights in your relationship with parents, friends, or dates? What are some things you learned about dealing with conflict that you will use in your own relationships?
- The buckeye tree, which symbolizes good luck, is referenced throughout the movie. Are positive relations with others the result of luck or effort? Why?
- What did you learn from the movie?
- How will you use what you learned in this movie in your relationships with parents, friends, and dates?

Just a friendly reminder! Through discussions, it may become apparent that some youth in the group may need additional guidance or assistance from parents or trained professionals such as counselors, social workers, etc. It is important for you to be aware of resource people in your community to help meet the needs of youth.

If the setting in which you are using this curriculum is 4-H (camp, club, school program) contact the local 4-H youth specialist or staff to let them know about the issue and to make the appropriate contacts and referrals.

Remind youths of the ground rule regarding confidentiality – “what is said in the group, stays in the group.”

Please see the next page for an after movie activity!



Where the Heart Is Cast of Characters

Your Vote Counts – What Do You Think?

On a scale of 1-7 rate each character on their ability to demonstrate respectful, responsible, caring, trustworthy behaviors and positive decision-making and communication skills. (*Photocopy and distribute to youth*).

1 = weak and 7 = strong

	Respectful	Responsible	Caring	Trustworthy	Decision-making	Communication
Novalee						
Sister Husband						
Mama Nell						
Lexi Coop						
Moses Whitecotton						
Ernie the Exterminator						
Willie Jack						

Which characters would you prefer to know and spend time with? Why?

How does good communication and decision-making skills enhance the relationships you have with friends, dates and parents?

What are things you can do to show dating partners, friends and family members the positive traits that many of the characters above displayed?



RESOURCE INFORMATION FOR ADULT LEADERS



The Vote Is In... Parents Matter

Parents are important in the lives of adolescents but there is disagreement about the specific role of parents and family in the development of adolescent relationships. Some researchers see friends, or the peer group, as more important than the family, and others see the family as continuing to be important throughout adolescence and into adulthood (Noller, 1994). Probably the truth lies somewhere in the middle: both peers and parents have important places in adolescents' lives, and a goal is for adolescents to move comfortably between the two groups, depending on the need and situation.

Adolescents seem to want high levels of support from their parents, but they also want the family to be flexible and continually changing in response to their needs. Common thought is that adolescents and their parents/caregivers have much "storm and stress" or conflict. Most conflicts between parents and their adolescents tend to be about minor matters such as style of dress, personal hygiene, homework, social activities and friendships, chores around the house, and conflicts with siblings. Montemayor (1983) points out that some things seem to never change: arguments between parents and adolescents in the 1970s and 1980s are basically about the same topics that parents and adolescents argued about in the 1920s.

However, heavier subjects, such as sex, drugs, religion and politics are not a frequent topic of discussion between adolescents and parents. Therefore, there tends to be less expressed conflict or arguing regarding these issues. Differences of views regarding these issues may exist; they're just not talked or argued about as much.

The way parents and caregivers interact with adolescents makes a big difference in the parent/adolescent relationship. Authoritarian, or strict and rigid, parenting is more likely to lead to rebellion and a breakdown of the parent-adolescent relationship. Parents need to be flexible with adolescents and prepared to change expectations and rules when they are no longer appropriate (i.e., changing a curfew to accommodate a special event, such as a prom or sports event). On the other hand, permissive parenting provides little structure and guidance for adolescents, which can result in high-risk taking and other negative behaviors.

Adolescents who are able to talk with their parents about their needs and rely on them for emotional support are less likely to rely on friends for these things. Adolescents whose main focus is on the peer group are more likely to be pressured into behaviors such as drinking, drugs, and high-risk sexual behavior (Noller, 1994).

Most adolescents want and need a close, warm relationship with their parents. Constructive, helpful parenting helps to provide such a relationship. Adolescents who feel comfortable about their relationships with their parents are more likely to reflect their parents' values, and communicate and cooperate with them.



The Power of Peers

The transition from childhood to adolescence brings about many changes in peer relationships. In addition to parents and family, the adolescent circle of influence grows to include friends who play a very important and different role in adolescent life and provide them with a sense of connection and acceptance. School plays a big role in the development of peer relationships. Usually, adolescents go to new, larger schools (middle school, junior high and high school) and come in contact with greater numbers of peers because they move from class to class instead of self-contained classrooms in smaller elementary school.

One way this overwhelming “largeness” is lessened is through the peer groups. Groups refer to groups of adolescents identified by interests, attitudes, and personal characteristics they have in common. Adolescents tend to become part of these groups based on personal preference, interaction style, family history and other things. Common groups include: populars, jocks, brains, aggies, loners, druggies, preppies, skaters, etc. (Youniss, McLellan, & Strouse, 1994)

Groups have two major functions: they 1) encourage adolescent development of identify or self-concept (who they are) and 2) help establish how adolescents interact with and get along with others (Brown, Mory & Kinney, 1994).

Groups and friendships can have a range of positive and negative effects on adolescents. Groups that promote positive social, emotional, intellectual and physical development clearly have a positive effect on adolescents. Of course, groups that promote negative development (i.e., violence, drinking, drugs, etc.) affect adolescents adversely.

Groups influence the way adolescents interact with others. The relationship style (i.e., communication, decision making skills) learned in a particular group is often expressed in other settings, too. This explains why it is difficult for some adolescents to change their image or become a part of other groups. For example, simply removing an adolescent from a problematic peer group doesn't automatically mean they are accepted in other groups. Often, these young people need help from teachers, friends, youth organizations and/or volunteers to change their relationship style from that of a difficult or troublemaking adolescent to one that can identify with and relate to problem-free peers (Brown, Mory & Kinney, 1994).

The sense of acceptance and connection that friends provide adolescents is a very important part of their development. The key is to help adolescents identify with and choose positive peer groups and friends with which to associate.



The Dating Dance

Furman and Wehner (1997) said, “if we were to look back at our romantic experiences, most of us would be struck by the changes that have occurred in our relationships. Early experiences could usually be characterized as superficial or awkward, yet quite important to us at the time. Over the course of adolescence and adulthood, we gained further experience and learned ways of interacting. Typically relationships became more “serious” and lasted longer.”

Often, adolescents find dating a confusing, mysterious experience. How do I act with a dating partner? What do I say? How do I know if he likes me? Why does she talk all the time? Why does he spend more time with his friends than me? Should I let him go all the way? The girl I like parties a lot, maybe I should party, too. My boyfriend stands me up all the time – what should I do? And on, and on, and on.....

Many things influence adolescent dating experiences. Researchers, for example, argue that there is a connection between a child’s experience with parents and later ability in adolescence and adulthood to make affectionate or romantic bonds (Shaver & Hazan, 1988). They believe that how an adolescent behaves in dating and romantic relationships is based on their past attachment history. This means that if adolescents have a secure attachment to their parents/caregivers as infants and children (i.e., cared for, responded to) they are more likely to experience positive and secure dating and romantic relationships, as well.

On the other hand, adolescents who did not have secure relationships with parents/caregivers as infants and children may not have the experiences and skills necessary to connect in positive ways with others in romantic relationships. Or, they may be likely to minimize the importance of needing others and avoid dating and romantic relationships.

With few exceptions, negative early experiences, such as poor attachment to parents/caregivers, do not stop adolescent romantic relationships from happening, but it can direct them along a more negative path (i.e., poor decision-making and communication skills, irresponsible, disrespectful, untrustworthy, uncaring, and harmful behavior). For the majority of children, regardless of past relationship history, the entrance into adolescence will lead to the search for romantic partners. Past experiences with parents/caregivers, romantic partners, and other individuals are likely to have an impact on the quality of romantic relationships that emerge (Furman & Wehner, 1994).



You Might Want to Know How The Dating Process Works

Several researchers outlined a four-step sequence for dating (Feinstein & Ardon, 1973; Montemayor, Adams, and Gullotta, 1994). Here is how they say it works:

With the beginning of adolescence there is a new interest in sexuality and intimacy brought on by puberty. However, adolescents have not yet had an opportunity to develop basic skills for interacting with peers in a dating or intimate relationship. They must first develop a sense of comfort **interacting** with them, which often occurs within the context of the crowd, or group events. Here, adolescents develop comfort and skill in their interactions before they move on to **casual dating**. Affectionate behavior and sexual experimentation may occur in a number of short-term relationships.

Secure and attached romantic partners do not emerge until an adolescent begins to develop **stable relationships**, which are exclusive, longer-term relationships. Long-term, **committed relationships**, which often occur in late adolescence or early adulthood, usually result in marriage or other arrangements.

This four-step process is helpful in understanding adolescent dating. Not all youth progress through this sequence in the same way or at the same time. It is important to understand the differences in these four steps in order to understand the development of romantic relationships. For example, differences in each partner's level of security in dating relationships could occur because of differences in past relationship histories. But, they could also occur because one adolescent is casually dating and the other has or wants to have a stable relationship. As you know, situations such as these can lead to relationship conflicts!

Do romantic views and experiences typically become more secure, remain consistent, or become less secure over time? The answer is yes and no! Dating experiences are affected by past experiences and in turn affect dating future experiences - for better or for worse. But, there are opportunities to teach young people positive interaction and relationship skills that will help them increase their ability to select positive dating partners and understand how to interact in positive ways in these relationships.

What Is the Best Age to Begin Dating?

Parents often wonder about when their children should begin dating. Ten-to 12-year olds may use the word "dating" to refer to simply liking someone. In some areas "going with" a boy or girl may mean that a friend has told someone that the other person likes him or her. Or it may even mean that they like doing things together, such as playing games at recess. Usually, these are innocent relationships and should not cause concern (Molgaard, 1995).

In this publication "dating" refers to a boy and girl spending time together unsupervised, outside of school, church, or group activities. David Elkind (1981), a child development expert, says that youth younger than age 14 do not have the social and interpersonal skills that are required in dating situations. He identifies several problems that early dating often leads to:



- premature sexual involvement
- underdeveloped personal identity
- less time spent with same-sex friends (Molgaard, 1995)

Gender Differences in Relationships

By the time they reach adolescence, many boys have been raised to approach relationships in an independent and dominant way. Girls, in general, tend to approach relationships in a nurturing and supportive way. These different skills and experiences may clash later when males and females begin romantic relationships (Leaper and Anderson, 1997).

Tolerance for male dominance and aggression can create problems in adolescent and later romantic relationships, too. Some researchers have found a greater amount of dating violence among adolescent boys and girls who were more accepting of male dominance and aggression (White and Koss, 1993). Youth that have these behaviors often learn them from watching their own parent/s behavior. Boys who have domineering and aggressive fathers often follow in these footsteps and girls with passive mothers do the same.

So, based on gender differences in our society, how do males and females create positive relationships? There are many answers to that question but two good ones are equality and communication! Usually, dating partners are happier when they respect each other; share thoughts and feelings, and make shared decisions (Leaper and Anderson, 1997).

By providing opportunities for youth to think and talk about male/female interactions they have a better chance of understanding each other and acting in ways that help them have better relationships. Communication can help unravel the mystery of dating relationships!



Relationship Resources

Advocates for Youth - Dating Violence Among Teens

<http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/publications/factsheet/fsdating.htm>

American Psychological Association – Answers to Questions About Sexual Orientation and Homosexuality - <http://www.apa.org/pubinfo/answers.html>

Bridge for Adolescent Pregnancy, Parenting and Sexuality “BAPPS”

<http://www.nnh.org/bapps/bapps1.htm>

Children Youth and Families Education and Resource Network -

<http://www.cyfernet.org/>

National Network for Health - <http://www.nnh.org/newlinks/links.htm>

Nebraska Cooperative Extension – Adolescence and Peer Pressure

<http://www.ianr.unl.edu/pubs/family/nf211.htm>

Parent Soup (2003) – www.parentsoup.com

University of Missouri Outreach and Extension/4-H Youth Development Programs –

Parentlink - <http://outreach.missouri.edu/parentlink/>

University of Missouri Outreach and Extension – Center on Adolescent Sexuality, Pregnancy and Parenting - <http://outreach.missouri.edu/hdfs/caspp.htm>

University of Missouri Outreach and Extension – Information about families and adolescents

<http://www.missourifamilies.org/>

Resources for Adolescents

Free Teens – Leader Training

<http://www.freeteens.org/stories/curric-1.htm>

The Teenager’s Guide to the Real World – Dating Ideas for Teenagers!

<http://www.bygpublish.com/books/tg2rw/dating-ideas.htm>



The Dating Mystery and All That Relationship Stuff Parent Permission Form

Purpose

The purpose of this curriculum is to provide an opportunity for adolescents (age 13-18) to talk about relationship issues that can sometimes be confusing with an adult leader. Using *Where the Heart Is*, a popular PG-13 movie as the discussion tool, adolescents will increase their understanding of how to interact with peers, dating partners, parents and adults in positive and successful ways.

Goals

- Explore adolescent relationships with parents/caregivers, peers, dating partners and other significant adults;
- Discuss the importance of respect, responsibility, trustworthiness and caring in relationships;
- Identify and practice decision-making and communication skills that lend toward more positive relationships.

Activity

A group of adolescents and an adult leader watch the movie entitled *Where the Heart Is*. While and/or after viewing the movie, adolescents and adults talk about the relationship issues they observed and implications for their own relationships.

Where the Heart Is - Video Summary

The movie follows the fortunes of a pregnant and destitute 17-year-old young woman, Novalee Nation. On the way to California, Novalee is abandoned by her boyfriend in an Oklahoma Wal-Mart. From this unpromising beginning, Novalee builds a new life and creates her long-desired home. Along the way she is helped by, and ultimately helps, a group of eccentric but loving people who take her into their lives. Some of these individuals include blue-haired Sister Thelma Husband, who hands out advice and photocopied books of the Bible ... Moses Whitecotton, the wise, elderly photographer who teaches Novalee life skills and life lessons ... and Forney Hull, the eccentric town librarian who hides his secrets and his feelings behind his world of books.

To view the discussion questions prior to giving permission, please contact the adult leader in charge of the program or visit - <http://www.mo4h.missouri.edu/go/health/>

I agree to participate in this session

Signature of youth participant

Date

I agree to allow my teenager to participate in this session

Signature of parent

Date



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