Preparing Children for a Healthy Marriage

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Research suggests that those who are married (when compared with non-married or cohabitating couples) live longer, have lower rates of physical and mental illness, are better off financially, experience higher sexual and relationship satisfaction, and have better parenting outcomes (Dush & Amato, 2005; Teachman, 2003; Waite & Gallagher, 2000). Because parents generally want what is best for their children, it is no wonder that this often includes dreams of their children one day having a healthy and lasting marriage.

Vital statistics and the media often paint a bleak picture of marriage, and parents may start to wonder how to help children to overcome the odds and protect their children from destructive relationships. This fact sheet will share research to help parents know how to help children prepare now for healthy relationships in the future.

Family Environment

One of the best things that parents can do to set children up for success in their lives is to provide a healthy environment while growing up. For example, research suggests providing young children with proper nutrition, adequate love and attention, boundaries, etc., will support healthy development (Cohn, 2011). Consequently, how these needs are met will then impact their relationships with others.

Children are also greatly influenced by their family environment, and they tend to model the behaviors they learned in their relationships in the future. Although not always possible, research suggests that the best parenting outcomes come from children born to married couples

(Waite & Gallagher, 2000), rather than cohabitating couples (Schmeer, 2011), or any other family formation. While not all marriages are healthy and children from high-conflict marriages could be potentially relieved by divorce, most children benefit from being in the stable and safe environment that marriage provides (Van Epp, 2007). Research indicates that children born and raised by married couples have higher educational levels, lower juvenile detention rates, fewer out-of-wedlock pregnancies, and fewer mental health issues when compared to children in other family circumstances (Waite & Gallagher, 2000).

Regardless of family circumstances, children learn and model many things from their family such as how to handle their emotions, how to express and receive love, family roles within the household, and how to handle and share power (Van Epp, 2007). Additionally, while it is possible to make changes with time and effort, children generally model their relationships with the opposite sex based on the relationships they view within their family. For example, how a mother and father treat each other will create a baseline for a child of what is normal and acceptable in relationships. Families also have a great impact on the development of an individual's values, such as family, spiritual and material values, that will likely impact decisions and can impact relationship satisfaction later in life (Van Epp, 2007).

Because of the great impact of the family environment, parents can play a large role in a child's future relationships by providing healthy examples of family relationships and roles. Parents can also help to instill values, such as smart money management, by providing

opportunities for youth to be involved in financial decisions for themselves and occasional family financial decisions (such as how to stretch the family food or vacation budget).

Healthy Communication and Conflict Resolution Skills

An important aspect of all relationships is communication and effective problem solving. All relationships experience conflict at some point (Markman, Stanley, Blumber, Jenkins & Whiteley, 2004). While it may be best to address heated adult conflicts away from children, it can be beneficial for children to witness how adults resolve small conflicts as long as they are addressed and resolved in a healthy way. Besides learning through viewing effective skills, children can also be coached to practice healthy communication and conflict resolution skills even while they are young (Cline & Fay, 2006). Teen dating violence prevention programs and interventions can also be effective resources in helping youth to develop these skills (Noonan & Charles, 2009).

Community Environment

The neighborhood in which a family lives can be a major influence in the lives of young people. Neighborhoods can serve as either risk or protective factors in a child's experience of life (Allison, et al., 2003). While families can help to insulate against some environmental factors, youth will experience the best outcomes by being in positive community environments, including positive peer influences. Although some families may struggle financially and cannot afford to live in what they would consider to be a nicer neighborhood, they may be able to find ways to improve the one in which they currently live. In addition, utilizing extended family, church groups, and mentoring or youth development programs such as 4-H can also support youth in disadvantaged neighborhoods. Creating a healthy community environment will help youth to be surrounded by positive influences and friends that will greatly impact their choices in relationships now and in the future.

Encouraging Youth to "Wait to Date"

As children enter adolescence their relationships naturally start to gravitate more toward friends and members of the opposite sex. Despite these changes, parents can continue to help their youth toward long-term healthy relationships by encouraging them to wait to date until they are emotionally mature enough to handle romantic relationships. Research indicates that

those that are very young and get involved in serious romantic relationships tend to experience negative outcomes such as being depressed or feeling pressured to be involved sexually before they feel ready (Forgas, 1995; Graber, Lewinsohn, Seeley, & Brooks-Gunn, 1997; Simmons & Blyth, 1987). They also may not have the courage to break off the unhealthy relationship. Experiencing these early negative outcomes in dating may impact later dating experiences and subsequent choice of a partner.

Get Involved—Preventing Dating Abuse

As youth begin to date, peers and teachers at school can have a profound influence and can help to protect youth from teen dating violence (Adelman & Kil, 2007; Banyard & Cross, 2008). While no parent wants for their child to experience dating violence, according to Wekerle et al. (2009) 10 percent of young people are victims of serious physical teen dating violence. This abuse may include physical violence, sexual coercion, rape, social exclusion, spreading rumors, stalking, name calling, and emotional abuse and isolation from friends (Adelman & Kil, 2007). This behavior is of particular concern because these behaviors tend to be repeated and can often intensify over time and carry into adult relationships (Noonan & Charles, 2009).

Because young people are often unwilling to seek the advice, support, and help of adults when they experience teen dating violence, it is important to educate youth of the dangers of abuse and how to prevent or cope with abuse (Adelman & Kil, 2007). Teachers and friends may recognize warning signs of dating violence and can often help youth learn how to avoid or cope with this abuse if it occurs. Being connected with teachers and friends of their youth can help parents to recognize potential warning signs of abuse and help them get help if needed.

Media and Youth

Most teens are exposed to a very large amount of media on a daily basis. Research indicates that the media has a powerful influence on teen dating and attitudes toward intimate partners; teens generally treat their partners similar to the media they view (Manganello, 2008). For example, many teens recognize that viewing pornography influences their behavior in a negative way (Manganello, 2008). Additionally, media may not only influence a young person's attitudes, knowledge, and behavior but can also influence parents, peers, and social norms. While parents may not be able to control all media that youth are exposed to, monitoring media content within the home and encouraging youth toward

positive media can help to maintain healthy examples of relationships.

Physical Intimacy—Encouraging Abstinence before Marriage

Helping youth to understand the physical, emotional and relationship risks associated with sexual activity (in addition to preventing teen pregnancy and avoiding sexually transmitted diseases) as well as benefits of abstaining from sexual activity before marriage may help them to form healthier relationships and potentially save them much heartache now and in the future. For example, research indicates that there is a connection between the number of sexual partners before marriage and the likelihood of getting divorced or being unfaithful to a spouse (Teachman, 2003; White, Cleland & Carael, 2000). In fact, this research indicates that even having sexual involvement with one additional partner, other that the one he or she marries, significantly increases the odds of divorce (Teachman, 2003).

Being sexually active also impacts partner selection, with those that are sexually active tending to choose a partner for traits that are sexually appealing and exciting, rather than looking for traits that may lead to healthy long-term relationships (Simpson & Gangestad, 1992). Furthermore, sexual involvement produces chemicals in the brain such as oxytocin, vasopressin (in men) and dopamine, which create feelings of bonding and euphoria (Van Epp, 2007). While these chemicals can be enriching in marriage, they can often create feelings of false intimacy and hinder individuals from leaving unhealthy relationships.

On the other hand, research indicates that those who chose to abstain from sexual intimacy until they were married had greater relationship happiness, sexual satisfaction and romantic feelings in their marriage (Cunningham & Antill, 1981).

Conclusion

Research indicates that the principles for preparing youth for future healthy marriage relationships include many of the basic principles of good parenting such as a healthy home environment, modeling healthy relationships, being involved in a child's life, and encouraging healthy choices. Ultimately, as children progress into adulthood they will make their own choices about relationships; however, by providing healthy role models, encouragement, and support, youth will have the framework necessary to develop a healthy and lasting marriage.

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