

## Chapter 6

### Building Healthy Boy-Girl Friendships

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It is an understatement to say that something “strange” happens to girls and boys as they enter puberty. The boy she’s known since kindergarten all of sudden makes her self-conscious and tongue-tied. Girls handle this hormonally-driven dilemma in different ways. Boy/girl “drama” may occupy a major portion of a girl’s waking hours. Girls go to great lengths to attract male attention—evidenced by constant worry about physical appearance and constant focus on wondering, “Does he love me?” or “Love me not?” While worry about romantic attraction is normal, the continuum quickly moves to unhealthy when girls use sexually revealing clothing and excessive make-up in an attempt to make themselves attractive to boys. Conversely, some girls decide they will deal with their developmental discomfort by competing with the boys in their lives, continually trying to “one-up” them in sports or academics and criticizing them, but never learning to build mutual friendships.

Pre-teens and teens imagine romance as some kind of unseen, irresistible spell that magically holds them captive. They “have” to have a boyfriend, and they “have” to give in to their newly discovered attractions. The normal attractions of teens that arise during puberty and the tendency of teens to have irrational beliefs about what they “can’t live without” because “everybody is doing it” is heavily exploited by the media culture. The media culture seeks to erode boundaries, morals, and inhibitions so that teens will act impulsively. Teens who are impulsive and irrational will buy products without restraint. So, those who target the teen market seek to cultivate an out-of-control, “if it feels good, do it” mentality; they relentlessly glamorize sexually driven relationships and camouflage real consequences.

Parents and professionals need to provide strong leadership in the area of boy-girl relationships to challenge these trends. Dr. Miriam Grossman, a nationally recognized psychiatrist, reminds parents that while sexual educators may advise them to give adolescents condoms and pills and encourage them to make “smart” decisions, the fact remains that teens are impulsive by nature, because the part of the brain that supports impulse-control does not develop until early adulthood. “It’s not ignorance causing all those pregnancies and infections; it’s the unfinished wiring between brain cells” (Grossman, 2009, p. 7). Professionals need to recognize that their reticence to pass “value judgments” and discourage clients from sexual experimentation ignores the prevailing risks to long-term mental and physical health. Parents need professionals who will support, rather than undermine their leadership role: “Children who are raised by moderately strict parents who voice clear expectations about delaying sexual activity are the kids least likely to engage in harmful behaviors” (Grossman, 2009, p. 12). If you are a parent who experimented

with sex as a teen, do not be deterred by your own past; use the tools in this chapter to help your daughter make wiser choices and benefit from your experience.

Parents, mentors, and counselors must place constant emphasis on healthy *friendships* between girls and boys, rather than steady dating relationships. This must occur in the face of intense peer pressure to have a boyfriend as a *rite of passage*. Longing for attention and approval from boys is natural, but many girls believe that their *self-worth* depends on whether they have a boyfriend. Getting and keeping a boyfriend can become a compulsion that affects sleep, eating habits, and school performance. A 6<sup>th</sup> grade girl in one of my workshops stated that she was not eating that day because she had just had a “bad breakup” with her boyfriend. Another girl had to visit the doctor because of insomnia and weight loss when her boyfriend started dating another girl. Still another girl became ostracized from her family because her steady boyfriend told her they were too “controlling.” Simultaneously, he sexually exploited her, which caused her to become further alienated from her parents and clergy.

Another pitfall of early steady dating and idealized romance is that girls and boys learn to see each other as stereotypes, rather than real people. Girls look at their “Prince Charming” and think, “Oh, he is so cool” or “He is so popular.” “Cool” and “popular” are defined by unspoken, but commonly understood “rules” about behavior and appearance. They are superficial rules that rarely have anything to do with values, character, skills, or potential for success. Sadly, both boys and girls are being socialized to look for a steady dating partner that can improve their social status and fulfill sexual drives, rather than a true friend with common interests. The Cinder Edna *Bibliotherapy Activity* (Activity 21) is a humorous learning activity that teaches girls how stereotypes interfere with real friendships between girls and boys.

Codependency is a word that is commonly understood by people who have worked in addiction or attended Twelve-Step Groups, but it may not be well understood by those who have not had these experiences. Simply put, codependency is chronic people pleasing, compromising personal values and true feelings to please someone else. Girls who have been taught to always be “nice” to others and who feel overly “guilty” if someone is offended seem to be most at risk for codependent relationships. The themes of songs, television programs, and movies continually promote codependent relationships: “I’m lost without you”; “I can’t live without you”; and “I’ll do anything if you’ll be mine.” Romeo and Juliet had a classic case of codependency! Codependent relationships are common, unhealthy, and can put girls at risk for sexual exploitation, psychological manipulation, and physical abuse. Although other relationships can be codependent as well, the *Codependency Versus Healthy Relationships Activity* (Activity 20) specifically discusses codependent boy-girl relationships. *I Can’t Live Without Him and Other Lies You Hear in Country Songs* (Handout 28) helps girls to differentiate between healthy and unhealthy boy-girl relationships.

Unknowingly, parents who want their kids to be popular and who are excited when their daughter has a boyfriend are feeding the problem, rather than the solution. JeaNette G. Smith, LMFT, a private practice marriage and family counselor, counters the notion that steady dating is just inevitable, harmless fun. In her book, *Unsteady: What Every Parent Absolutely Must Know About Teenage Romance* (2008), she explains that when a couple gets emotionally entangled in steady dating, they limit growth experiences critical to development of self, limit choices in opposite-sex friends, narrow their focus away from future goals, isolate themselves from other same-sex friends, and isolate themselves from their parents. As pointed out in *Unsteady*, the inevitable fate of a teen romance is to either end in heartbreak or continue to become more intensely committed and sexually involved—at the exclusion of other goals and growth experiences.

Research supports a need for concern about sexual experimentation, not just because of teen pregnancy or STDs—which in 2008 infected one out of four girls (Grossman, 2009, p.4)—but also because of sexual experimentation’s effect on mental health and long-term relationship building. A 2006 study of 19,000 teens conducted by the National Institute of Mental Health (NIH) found that girls who experimented sexually were four times more likely to develop depression than girls who were abstinent. In a study of 2035 married individuals, Busby, Carroll, and Willoughby (2010) found that early sex in relationships inhibits the overall growth of the relationship, particularly communication skills. Participants in their study who engaged in premarital sex reported less sexual satisfaction and stability in their marriages. Despite a media-fueled cultural belief that couples need to test sexual compatibility, a review of research by VanderZanden, Crandell, and Crandell (2007) concurred that couples who cohabitated prior to marriage are less likely to experience long-term marriages.

*Healthy Transitions for Girls* helps parents, mentors, and counselors provide the guardrails that will keep kids from jumping off the cliff of teen romance and sexual experimentation like a bunch of media-brainwashed lemmings. *Heart Healthy Relationships* (Activity 22) and the *Relationship Timeline Activity* (Activity 23) work together to help girls recognize that 1) sexual boundaries are necessary and possible; and 2) they have more important things to do at this time in their lives than develop drama-filled, emotionally-entangling, romantic relationships. Overwhelmingly, research confirms that if girls want the hope of a nurturing, committed, life-long, marital relationship, the best thing they can do is to learn friendship and communication skills *now* and abstain from sex until marriage.

## List of Activities, Handouts, & Figures

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### Chapter 6: Building Healthy Boy-Girl Friendships

#### List of Activities.

Activity 20. Codependency Versus Healthy Relationships Activity

Activity 21. *Cinder Edna* Bibliotherapy Activity

Activity 22. Heart Healthy Relationships Activity

Activity 23. Relationship Timeline Activity

#### List of Handouts.

Handout 28. I Can't Live Without Him ... and Other Lies You Hear in Country Songs

Handout 29. Heart Healthy Relationships

Handout 30. My Timeline

Handout 31. My Timeline Events

#### List of Figures.

None.

**Activity 20**  
**Codependency Versus Healthy Friendships<sup>1</sup>**

(Time = 45 minutes)

Objectives for Each Girl.

1. I can become aware of the codependent messages that are pervasive in music, television, and movies.
2. I can recognize the warning signs of unhealthy relationships.
3. I can recognize the negative emotions created by unhealthy relationships.
4. I can get help when I am in a negative relationship.
5. I can end relationships that are unhealthy.
6. I can identify the qualities of healthy relationships.
7. I can build healthy friendships rather than serious dating relationships with boys.

Explanation.

The objective of this activity is 1) to raise awareness of codependent relationships; and 2) to help prevent codependent relationships with boys by teaching girls the early warning signs.

Materials Needed.

1. Handout 28, *I Can't Live Without Him ... and Other Lies You Hear in Country Songs*.

Activity Steps.

1. Begin the discussion by asking the girls how they feel about having a boyfriend. Are having boyfriends a condition of being popular? Do they feel weird if they don't have a boyfriend? Are they someone who always needs to have a boyfriend to feel good?
2. Ask the girls to think of some popular songs that talk about boy-girl relationships and breaking up. Allow them to share these lyrics with the group. Discuss whether or not these lyrics describe relationships that are codependent. Ask the girls to challenge the messages in music and other forms of entertainment: "Is it

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<sup>1</sup> The Cinder Edna *Bibliotherapy Activity* (Activity 21) is a good follow-up activity to demonstrate what a healthy relationship looks like. The *Heart Healthy Relationships Activity* (Activity 22) and *Relationship Timeline Activity* (Activity 23) teach girls how to set boundaries on physical affection and put boy-girl relationships in perspective.

really healthy to stop being happy or to want to die because a guy stops liking you?”

3. Have the girls read the signs of Healthy Friendship vs. Codependency, shown in Handout 28. Ask them to describe movies where they have seen the signs of codependency. (If a movie depicts people being miserable in a relationship, or a lot of relationship drama, it is a good sign the relationship is codependent.) Have they seen signs of codependency in people they know? What would they do if they knew someone who was in an unhealthy relationship?
4. Explain that a serious warning sign of codependency is when a girl believes she can't say no to sex without losing her boyfriend. Girls can be pressured into sex and then feel so shameful about it that they continue in a bad relationship. One of the reasons it is important not to steady date is that girls do not have the skills to handle sexual pressures until they are older.
5. Another serious warning sign of codependency is if a girl is slapped, has her arms squeezed, or is ridiculed by a guy but continues to see him. Anytime a guy puts a girl down to make her feel she has to stay in the relationship, she is being psychologically manipulated. Girls will also lie for guys who are doing drugs, alcohol, stealing, or cheating, even when they know these things are wrong. They don't tell anyone because they believe telling would be disloyal or not loving.
6. Make sure girls know that they need to tell an adult if they believe a friend is in a harmful boy-girl relationship. Staying in an unhealthy relationship will only cause more heartache. The longer a girl stays in a codependent relationship, the more she loses her ability to know that she is being harmed. **Role-play** the following scenarios:

Scenario 1: End an unhealthy relationship with a boy.

Scenario 2: Confront a friend who is at risk in an unhealthy relationship with a boy.

Scenario 3: Get help from an adult because a friend is in an abusive relationship.

7. Emphasize again the value of building healthy friendships with guys, rather than steady dating.

## Handout 28

### I Can't Live Without Him ... and Other Lies You Hear in Country Songs

## “I can't live without him”

### ... and other lies you hear in country songs



Are you someone who has to have a boyfriend to feel good about yourself?

Much of what the media portrays about “love” is really unhealthy **codependency**.

Know the signs. Avoid the drama.

### Healthy Friendship

vs.

### Codependency

- I stay in touch with my feelings.
- I set clear boundaries about physical affection, and they are respected.
- We can talk comfortably; I am not afraid to say what I really feel.
- I hold him responsible for his choices and behaviors.
- I feel accepted just as I am; I don't have to change my looks to please him.
- We enjoy spending time together, but I have many other interests and friends.

- I try to figure out what he thinks, but I'm unsure of my own feelings.
- I give physical affection to make him like me.
- We are physically attracted, but we don't talk much; I hold in my real thoughts.
- I make excuses when he hurts me; I lie about things he does so others will like him.
- I change my preferences and my appearance to please him.
- I give up my friends and interests to be with him.

**I can choose to have healthy friendships.**