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What to do When Your Kids Start Dating

This is episode #106 of Stay Happily Married, "What to do When Your Kids Start Dating."

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Today's episode of Stay Happily Married is brought to you by the Rosen Law Firm. For more information, visit us at Rosen.com.

Lee Rosen: I'm Lee Rosen. I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. I'm here by telephone with Annie Fox. She joins us from California. Annie has a master's degree in education and she's been writing books for teens and for educators for almost 40 years.

Back in 1996 she created The InSite, where she wrote the popular "Hey, Terra" column, answering tough questions from teenagers.

Today she's going to talk to us about how to cope with your kids when they start dating, which was the topic of her 2000 book *Can You Relate?* Which she just recently made available for free. I'm all about free. It's called on the website *The Teen Survival Guide to Dating and Relating*. You can visit her website at AnnieFox.com and download that.

Annie lives in California with her husband David and she's dealt with a lot of issues that we're going to discuss today with her own kids. Annie, I am so excited that you're here because I've got two teenagers. How are you doing?

Annie Fox: I'm fine, Lee. How are things with you?

Lee Rosen: Oh, I am -- well, I've got two teenagers, so I guess I'm okay.

Annie Fox: I'm sorry.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. I'm really fascinated by this topic and trying to figure out what to do with it. I want to ask -- I always want to use these interviews not just to help everybody that's listening but I always want to get a little help for myself. So we'll dig into that in a minute.

But before I do that, let's kind of introduce the topic. Give us a little history on this book.

Annie Fox: Okay. Well, *The Teen Survival Guide to Dating and Relating* really is a compilation of e-mails that tweens and teens have written to me from all over the world. I've been receiving this kind of e-mail for the last 13 years and let me tell you, it's very intriguing. And I have found that they are clueless -- surprise, surprise -- but that doesn't keep them from making all kinds of really bad decisions in the boyfriend/girlfriend zone.

And so the book really came out of my answers to these questions, which I felt were universal in a lot of ways. It didn't matter what culture the kids were writing from; they were all very confused about how to get someone to like them, how to proceed and create and maintain a healthy relationship, how to get out of a relationship that no longer feels like it's good for you, all these kinds of issues.

And I'm very good at giving advice and so the book really is a peek into the trenches that is 21st century teen social life. It's written for the kids but parents can really learn a lot from it.

Lee Rosen: Wow. So it was e-mails back and forth between you and the kids, right -- the teenagers?

Annie Fox: Yes. Yes, that's correct.

Lee Rosen: Okay. So about how old is a kid before dating really becomes a hot topic with them?

Annie Fox: Oh, my goodness. Well, they aspire to be way older than they are always. And I often get e-mails from 11 and 12 year olds who think their parents are Neanderthals because they're parents won't let them date. Or the kids themselves think there's something wrong with him or her because everybody they know already is coupled up and they have never had a boyfriend or a girlfriend. "So what's wrong with me? I'm 11 years old and I'm single."

Lee Rosen: Right. I haven't met my match yet. Yeah, kid. Okay. Good thoughts on that. Let me ask you this. Are they likely -- are these kids likely to turn to their parents? I'm not getting a lot of questions about --

are we -- I'm guessing we're the last person they would turn to as a parent. Am I right or wrong?

Annie Fox: Unfortunately, that is more often the case than not. So don't feel like you're singled out, there's something wrong with your relationship with your kids. Come on. Think back, Lee. Were you likely to have talked to your parents about something you --

Lee Rosen: No, nothing. Especially a girl. There's no way I would have talked to my parents about a girl.

Annie Fox: Exactly. Exactly. So this is the way it's supposed to be. I think that most kids get information from their equally clueless peers, which is what most of the problem arises from is that they really are in an echo chamber of ignorance. And what seems normal and right within their peer group is really an aberration and not healthy for the rest of us who are sentient beings, yes.

Lee Rosen: Right. Are things changing for teenagers? Like, you've been at this now for a while. Have there been shifts over the last, say, 10 years, or are kids pretty much the same now as they were 10 or 15 years ago?

Annie Fox: It's a really excellent question. What is not different is the fact that the urge to be popular and to get your self-esteem boost from having someone of the opposite sex like you, that's always been. But what's different now in the last four or five years that I'm noticing is that social media has made the whole social drama of what goes on in school in the kid's head and at their fingertips 24/7. There is never a break from it. And so the intensity of the pressure to be dating has really gone way off the charts.

And I think that puts younger and younger kids at risk for succumbing to that pressure where they find themselves in situations where they have no business to be because mentally they're not equipped to make these kinds of decisions and they cannot deal with the emotional and physical fallout of -- let's be honest -- sex.

Lee Rosen: Right. Wow. That is really interesting because I'm just thinking about what goes on in my house and, you're right, it is. It's like 24/7. And the thing that is always going on, that's always under the radar, is the texting. They're back and forth. I mean, my 16-year-old barely -- there's a message coming in every minute from one of his friends.

Annie Fox: Yeah. And you say it's under the radar. It's under the dining room table too. It's probably under the covers too, when they're supposed to be asleep on a school night. They're addicted to it. I mean, we have to be really honest.

They have what I call peer approval addiction, which is something I made up. But really what it means is that you need to be in the know with your peer group, otherwise it's like missing an episode of "Lost." You're totally out of it if you follow your parents' rule and say no texting after 10:30 or 11:00 on a school night. It's like, you don't get it; I need to be plugged into this lifeline of social drama or I will be out of it when I get to school the next morning.

Lee Rosen: Right. And you really will be out of it. I mean, you'll have been --

Annie Fox: You totally will be out of it. "Oh, those people aren't going together anymore. They broke up and now each of them has a different boyfriend or girlfriend. Where were you?" And there is that embarrassment factor that you were out of the loop.

So they compulsive about staying tuned in, which doesn't make the environment between parents and teens conducive for having conversations because mostly what you're seeing is the top of their heads as they're bent down texting.

Lee Rosen: Right. Very accurate. That is definitely -- I'm definitely seeing the top of heads very regularly. Are there common problems or conflicts between the kid and the parent that you've sort of seen that are sort of in a lot of families -- in most families?

Annie Fox: Yeah. It's all about communication. It doesn't matter if we're fighting about whether or not I'm old enough to date or whether or not I can stay out past what you say is my curfew, whether or not I'm going to give you the password to my MySpace account so you can check up on me. Really, it's about trust and communication, which is really, really difficult when the kids and parents aren't sitting down making eye contact and actually having conversations with each other anymore.

So it's like we're both operating in these two different realms. Yeah, we're under the same roof but it's like we're in cubicles and we don't really look over the other side of the cubicle to see who our officemate is, or in this case who our family member is. It's very troubling for parents.

But I find for teens -- this may be surprising to your adult listeners -
- I find for teens that their biggest complaint about their parents is

that their parents don't listen. Isn't that intriguing? Parents say the same thing about their teens. So nobody's communicating and I really nobody's really happy about it.

So I think part of the solution may be to set up a moratorium during certain hours of the day where you just turn off all the social/digital media, and that includes the e-mails that parents are trying to get going for business or for whatever, and actually have a down time where the family is together and there is no technology. We'll do real low-tech communication here; we'll talk.

Lee Rosen: Right. Yeah. I can't even remember how to do that. Okay. So since you've got the inside track let me ask you about one thing I have observed at my house, and that is that -- when I was a kid, a teenager, dating meant I asked a girl out and we went to a movie or whatever. Have things -- is it just my house or have things changed to where dating today always seems to mean a group of kids going together to the mall, that they don't seem to date like I did?

Annie Fox: Or even the whole term "going out" with someone has -- they don't really often go anywhere. It's like, "We're going out -- we met online and we're going out online. We've never actually met in the real world but we're going out." Or for middle school kids what's typical is going out happens just at school and it's really just an acknowledgement within the peer group that we like each other. That's what it means to "go out."

So depending on the community it may mean very different things. But it is a status symbol and it is -- as often as not, a girl will ask a guy out. Really more often than not, I'd say. Girls are getting really, really aggressive out there and 6th, 7th, and 8th grade boys don't stand a chance because hormonally they want what the girls think but the girls really aren't offering that at all.

What the girls want is a "boyfriend," which means something different in her status-sphere. And the guy is just trying to get some because he's a guy. And the girls are often putting out because they think that's what it takes to keep the boyfriend, when what they really want is a relationship and the boys are nowhere ready for that at all.

So this is where parents can really, really help because there's an awful lot of heartache that goes on with this miscommunication and misunderstanding between the teens themselves. They're not talking about sex; they're more likely to do it than talk about it. It's crazy. It's crazy.

Lee Rosen: Well, yeah. And it is so complicated because the kids are just so prickly sometimes and you just can't -- it's challenging. What is your advice -- what do you suggest to parents? What things should we be doing that work?

Annie Fox: Well, it is a challenge and I don't mean to minimize it. I was laughing at you at the beginning saying, "Oh, gee, I'm sorry you have two teenagers." I wouldn't go back there for anything. Our kids are now 30 and 25 and we survived. And I think it's much harder today because of the texting, which was not part of our kids' growing up lives. It's changed so radically in the last 10 years, even, that it makes a parent's job much more difficult.

I would suggest that parents do whatever they can to try to learn about the world their kids live in. And if that means asking your kid for a tour of what is Facebook, what -- not a prying kind of thing. But we need to be in the know because the social milieu they live in, it shapes who they are, it shapes the way they communicate, it shapes the kind of relationships they have and the way they manage those relationships.

And if we just throw up our hands and say, "Oh, my goodness, he knows much more about this technology stuff than I do," and just say, "Oh, well, I guess I missed the boat," you're really missing a lot of -- a really great opportunity to build something with your teen.

And again, it's not about prying, it's not about trying to get information so that you could use it against your teenage son or daughter; it's really about finding an entrée into their world of technology because it's very, very different.

But when it comes right down to it, most of the guidelines they need from us are not technology issues; they are parenting issues. And we need to step up and let them know what we expect of them when it comes to behavior on and offline. They don't get that from their parents very much.

They stumble along and when you ask them, as I often do, "How do your parents feel about this?" they say either, "My parents don't know," or "I don't know how they feel about my being 14 and having sex with my boyfriend." And I'm like, hello. You don't know where your parents stand on the issue of sex for 14 year olds? That seems like a real missed opportunity for some parenting here.

Lee Rosen: Right. Yeah. What I'm hearing from you is that the kids -- they need all the help they can get.

Are there things we're doing -- are you hearing from the kids that there are things that the parents are doing that are really misguided? That don't make things better, that maybe they even make things worse?

Annie Fox: What a great question. Yes, I hear it all the time. A lot of my e-mail is laced with complaints about parents. They can write that to me because [inaudible] their parent, so it makes it safe.

I'd say first off the bat, most of the kids who write to me have very good judgment and they want to be trusted by their parents. The parents are so fearful about teens in general -- they make a lot of assumptions about teens and lump their own kids into that label. They keep the kids on a very short leash.

Now, any self-respecting teenager is going to push back against restrictions. And they feel incensed when restrictions come without any grounding to them. It's like kids will say, "I'm a straight-A student. I have really good friends. I don't smoke or do drugs and I'm not sexually active. And yet, my parents won't even let me go out with a group of friends."

And when you are keeping your kid on a short leash because of your own fears -- and maybe you were a teen who didn't have good judgment or you've just been watching the wrong kind of news shows too often and get really scared and paranoid -- then what's going to end up happening is that your kids are going to be doing stuff behind your back.

Lee Rosen: Right. Yeah. That makes a lot of sense. They're going to do what they're going to do, I guess. They're going to figure out a way around you one way or another.

Annie Fox: So the biggest mistake parents make, to answer your question, is that they don't give their kids specific guidelines that fit the kid. And they also don't give kids increasing opportunities to show that the kid has good judgment. And where's the good judgment come from? It comes from good parenting.

So when kids say, "How can I get my parents to give me more independence?" I say, "Make your best case for why what you want to do is a good idea. Tell your parents that they've done a great job and that you do have good judgment and you want increasing opportunities to show them that you can make good choices when they're not around."

Lee Rosen: Right. All terrific advice. You know, we hear a lot on this show from our guests about how marital satisfaction levels drop to their lowest level ever in a marriage during that time period when the kids are teenagers. And it is so tricky and there can be so much conflict and parents get divided over these issues and all that. It just is a very challenging time.

And I think the ideas that you're suggesting, not only will they work but they also help the parents to have a philosophy where they can be working together on dealing with the teenagers rather than being divided about things.

Annie Fox: I'm really glad you mentioned that because I do a lot of parent education. And at these events I will ask parents, "What are your five top parenting objectives?" Meaning, at the end of the 18 years that you have with this kid in this first long phase of childhood, at the end of the 18 years what do you want to send them into the next chapter of their lives with in terms of life skills, character traits, etc.? Because you are your kid's foremost teacher.

I'm a teacher, so whenever I have a group of students or parents together, I've got some educational objectives in my head. I've got a curriculum. I know what I want them to take out the door at the end of the session. So I think it's the same with parenting.

As a parent you need to know what are your educational objectives? What's the exit exam going to look like? So that you will know that when you're launching your kid into the next chapter of his or her life they will in fact have met some of your objectives.

And parents will often say, "Well, I want my kid to be self-reliant. I want them to have good judgment. I want them to be a person of good character," and all these really lofty things, which are great. They're totally great.

But then I say, "Okay. Well, what are you doing every single day to reinforce these objectives you've got? How are you working towards it with your 'student?' And what might you be doing --" this is the hard one. "What might you be doing to undermine those said objectives without even knowing? You say you want your kid to be self-reliant. Are you still, when your kid is 15, waking them up in the morning on a school morning, making their breakfast, laying out their clothes for them, checking their backpack for their homework, handing them lunch, driving them to school? I mean, does that not in fact undermine your idea of self-reliance?"

Lee Rosen: Right. It is. It's so difficult to think of the big picture when you're caught up in the day-to-day. But you're exactly right. Perfect.

Annie Fox: You've got to. You've got to think of the big picture. You don't need the big picture when your kids are little, but if you don't have those big picture objectives stamped somewhere in clear sight to remind yourself, by the time your kids get to be teenagers you're going to hit a wall.

And that's why the kids say, "I don't know where my parents stand on that," because the parents have kind of faded out. And it's not just the kid's fault that the kids are texting too much; it's often that the parents say, "Well, I guess my job's over."

Lee Rosen: Right. Game over and they are what they are. No, you give very valid advice and it does -- it is just contrary to kind of the trap that I think so many of us fall into.

I've already downloaded *The Teen Survival Guide* but I'm going to download a copy for my wife. I want you to tell folks what else is at AnnieFox.com. What other resources are available? What's going on at the website?

Annie Fox: Well, I think probably the most enlightening thing you'll find there are letters from teens. There's e-mail there. So you go to the teen section and you click on Q&A and what you'll find there is letters in folders, problems with parents, the boyfriend/girlfriend zone, friendship issues, bullying, all that stuff. And so it's Q&A. It's e-mails that kids have sent to me, obviously with all the identifiers stripped out so we don't know who the writer is. But those questions and my answers to them. I think parents will find those very enlightening.

There are also Q&A from other parents. I have a parenting blog.

And I would love for people to know that I do my own podcast and it's called "Family Confidential: Secrets of Successful Parenting," where I interview top parenting authors and have in-depth dialogues with them. Because the books for parents are fabulous, but who has time to read parenting books? I guess I do because I'm not parenting at close range anymore. So I read the books and then I interview these fabulous parent educators. And these podcasts are on iTunes and they're free downloads and they're a great way to become more effective as a parent.

Lee Rosen: Fantastic. Well, you know, our listeners love podcasts so I'm sure they will be hopping over to your site at AnnieFox.com and tuning in.

Annie, thank you so much for being with us today. I really appreciate it. And it sort of energizes me to go home and deal with my kids. You've given me some things to think about and some things that I think I can act on and gives me just a feeling for, hey, I better make sure my head is in the game because there's a lot at stake here. Thank you so much.

Annie Fox: My pleasure. Thanks for having me, Lee.

Lee Rosen: You can learn a whole lot more about Annie at the website. That's AnnieFox.com. Lots of information. Not only *The Teen Survival Guide* but also info on her other books, her blog, the podcast you've heard about; great stuff for teens, parents, and educators.

Thank you so much for joining us today. I hope that you will come back and join us again next week. In the meantime, we are getting such great feedback and so many comments; keep them coming. Your input helps us to make this show better all the time. You can reach our comment line at (919) 256-3083 and leave us a message, or you can e-mail us at comments@stayhappilymarried.com.

I'm Lee Rosen. Until next time, stay happily married.

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