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Learning About Love

How schools can better prepare students for romantic relationships

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Freud argued that two things mattered most in a life: work and love. This country devotes staggering amounts of attention to education and other forms of career preparation. But what do we do to prepare young people for love?

Widespread failure in romantic love—divorce (which ends nearly half of all first marriages), constant marital conflict, and quieter marital misery or the inability to even form a relationship—has clear, high human costs. The consequences of troubled relationships, including alcoholism, workaholism, and domestic abuse, as well as the legions of therapies, mediation, and legal settlements designed to handle relationship failures, take an exorbitant financial and emotional toll.

Conversely, successful romantic relationships—supportive, securely attached partnerships that promote stability and trust—are correlated with higher wages, fewer health problems, and gratification in many domains of life. Yet public and private schools in this country, including higher education, do frighteningly little to provide young people the most rudimentary forms of guidance on how to develop healthy, mature romantic relationships. As a high school student told *New York Times* reporter Laurie Abraham, “As a society, we always tell kids, ‘Work hard, just focus on school, don’t think about girls or guys—you can worry about that stuff later, that stuff will work itself out,’ but the thing is, it doesn’t.”

We can hear the objections. Why should already-strapped schools be saddled with this responsibility? Isn’t this a family responsibility? Yet most families simply aren’t going to do it alone. Parents who have failed in love have frequently also failed to model mature, healthy romantic relationships. Many parents, regardless of their relationship status, are struggling with how to pass on wisdom about romantic relationships to their kids or don’t see this guidance as their role. Many children, of course, don’t want to hear advice from their parents about love, let alone sex.

That lack of modeling and conversation creates a dangerous vacuum. Research indicates that young people are learning a great deal about romantic relationships from their peers and from the media—the Internet, songs, films, television. While much has been rightly made about children’s frequent exposure to misogynistic songs, pornography, and other debased images of sex in the media and on the Internet, the media also often propagates all sorts of harmful myths and reinforces longstanding, deep cultural misconceptions about romantic love—for example, that love is an intoxication, an obsessive attraction, that love is about fulfilling one’s needs, that deep, durable love is unmistakable and suddenly happens to you. In reality, however, successful, healthy relationships are a matter of mutual, deep appreciation that often develops fitfully and with great care over many years.

Beyond “Disaster Prevention”

Over the past two years we have begun surveying and talking to a wide variety of high school and college students, including Harvard freshmen, about how they view romantic relationships and what influences these views. We have found both that young people rarely learn anything of value about romantic love in courses in school and that media notions of romantic love often permeate their views. We have also found, along with other researchers, that both male and female students are interested in far more than sex: They are commonly confused and anxious about failing to find durable love,

and they want more talk with older adults about their questions and fears.

And we have found that older adults, including school adults, are often neglecting to deal with threats to romantic relationships that are right under their noses. The evidence indicates that misogyny and sexual harassment among high school and college students are pervasive, and walking in the halls of most middle or high schools and many college campuses in this country one can hear conversation laced with phrases like “bitches” and “ho’s.” The words many boys and young men in different communities use for sex these days—“I hit that,” “I nailed that,” “I slayed that”—are almost entirely violent, and some girls are parroting these phrases. For educators or other adults to stand idly by with this degradation in their midst or as children are bombarded with these various media messages about love and sex—to fail to counteract these messages in any meaningful sense—is a dumbfounding, epic abdication of responsibility. It is similarly indefensible for older adults to fail to engage young people who are seeking more guidance on this vital and tender domain of their lives.

The reality is that we can do much better on these fronts, starting with teaching the fundamentals of healthy, respectful relationships in elementary school and including a greater focus on mature, ethical romantic relationships both in sex education classes and across disciplines in middle and high school. Importantly, these efforts will also inexpensively serve several key education goals. And unlike brutally polarizing debates about sex in this country, we’re likely to find substantial common ground talking about respect, integrity, and other ethical dimensions of romantic relationships.

We can start by learning from several other countries. In Norway, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand, for example, some form of relationship education is compulsory for students beginning in primary school. In Norway, starting in the fourth grade, students discuss “how language may violate other people,” while high school students reflect on ethical issues connected to romantic relationships, sexual orientation, and media images of the body and discuss the “relationship between love and sexuality in light of cultural norms”—topics that may be taken up in social studies, history, and biology/science classes. In South Korea, high school students find out ways to realize gender equality by “case studying sexual assaults, discrimination and commercialization.” In Australia, high school students discuss how different dimensions of relationships “vary between people and over time” and explore “community attitudes and stereotypes about young people and sexuality.” In New Zealand, beginning in primary school, students develop “the skills needed to examine people’s . . . values and beliefs and their rights and responsibilities.” In the Netherlands, schools have a great deal of flexibility in whether and how they teach relationship education, yet many primary schools teach relationship education within the “personal and world orientation” part of the national curriculum, which includes “how people relate to each other, how they solve problems and how they give meaning to their existence.”

Middle and high schools in the United States are quite a different story. Rarely does a sex or health education class, let alone a social studies or history class, explore in any depth how to have an ethical, lasting romantic relationship or provide vibrant images to young people of these relationships. (One can imagine students watching and discussing, for instance, the compelling, mature marriage of the main couple on the TV show *Friday Night Lights*.) Nor are the particular challenges of romantic relationships for LGBTQ youth addressed. Instead, in the vast majority of states these courses are either “abstinence only” or “comprehensive sex education,” which teaches both abstinence and safe sex. Sex education is typically reduced to what’s called “disaster prevention”: how to avoid pregnancy or STDs. Making matters worse, sex or health education is typically taught by adults who have little or no training or support and are sometimes roped into it.

To be sure, some teens and young adults are receiving some form of romantic relationship education, although research into the programs’ efficacy has been sparse. Comprehensive sex education courses sometimes thoughtfully teach communication skills, for example, and various religious institutions are providing relationship education to teens and young adults. Prompted in part by the Bush administration’s concern about high numbers of unwed mothers in low-income communities, the Federal Deficit Reduction Act of 2005 (Senate Bill 1932) authorized grants for relationship education programs for teens in various community settings and schools scattered around the country.

Recent research has suggested promising outcomes for a few of these Bush-era programs (only a few programs have been tested in relatively small quasi-experimental studies). One study by Auburn University researchers of 340 diverse Alabama teenagers in public school using the *Love U2: Increasing Your Relationship Smarts* curriculum, a program focused on promoting healthy relationship choices through discussions of topics such as mature love, “dating smart,” and conflict management, found that students showed lower verbal aggression, greater ability to detect unhealthy relationships, and more realistic relationship beliefs as compared to a control group without the curriculum. Another program, *The Art of Loving Well*, developed at Boston University as part of a five-year teen pregnancy prevention grant

from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, includes short stories and interactive activities designed to encourage reflection about romance, marriage, and commitment and to generate conversation between teens and their parents about cross-generational experiences through the use of three topic areas: “Early Loves and Losses,” “Romance,” and “Commitment and Marriage.” This program, research suggests, delayed the onset of sexual activity for eighth graders. Yet these various approaches combined are failing to reach the great majority of U.S. students, and their long-term impact is unknown.

A Topic for All Ages

At the very least, we could pilot various approaches in different contexts, move toward making teaching romantic and sexual relationship education what it should be—a prized, complex, exciting activity—and provide meaningful training and support to relationship and sex educators.

But why relegate the teaching of love—perhaps, as Freud suggests, the most important thing we do in our lives—to one course in middle school, high school, or college? The ability to form a mature romantic relationship, as several other countries recognize, derives from capacities that begin to evolve at birth, and learning how to have healthy relationships could usefully be part of schooling at every level.

There are all sorts of other low-burden ways to educate young people about romantic relationships. History, literature, and social studies courses, as some other countries recognize, are ripe with opportunities to talk about love. Students can explore, for instance, the many types of romantic love—“There are as many loves as there are hearts,” Tolstoy says—and they can examine why different cultures in different eras have defined and valued love so differently. Why, for instance, did the ancient Greeks and Romans chiefly fear that young people would fall in love, while Americans these days mainly fear that young people will have sex? (One answer is that love for other humans was considered a threat to love for the gods.) Afterschool providers, with training, can take up issues involving romantic relationships. Programs aimed at developing character via sports are proliferating, yet coaches in particular need guidance on talking about romance and sex, given how commonly they’re viewed as mentors by the more than 40 million children who play organized sports and also given how frequently they hear low-minded talk among boys about girls and expressions of homophobia on buses and in locker rooms.

Done well, these relationship courses can help wipe away the myths about love, respond to students’ underlying anxieties, improve students’ abilities to not only have respectful romantic relationships but a wide range of healthy relationships, and develop academic skills while riveting students—no small feat, given the number of disengaged middle and high school students nationally. Further, reflecting on romantic and sexual relationships may be the most powerful way to teach teens ethics—far more effective than the typical forms of character education in high schools—because ethical issues in romantic relationships meet teens exactly where they are. We have found that high school and college students are endlessly interested in ethical questions related to these relationships and that reflection on these questions can develop capacity for complex thinking, problem-solving and ethical awareness and reasoning: What do I do if I know my friend is cheating on his girlfriend who is also my friend? Is infidelity justified under any circumstances? I told my friend that I would go with her to the prom because she did not have a date, and then a guy asks me to go who I really like. What should I do? Is it exploitation when a senior hooks up with a freshman?

Reflection on these questions can enable students to sort out their ethical obligations to others, think through multiple perspectives, learn how to ethically reason when faced with conflicting loyalties, and take up questions about human rights and dignity. At the core of moral functioning is also learning to cope with destructive feelings, and students can talk about how to manage feelings such as envy, shame, and aggression that can suddenly flood them as they begin romantic and sexual relationships. When we guide children in how to love, we are also teaching them a great deal about how they ought to live.

It’s important, of course, not to understate the complexity of this challenge. One of us did a role-playing exercise with students in his course, many of whom were former teachers and most of whom are women, about what they would do if they overheard a few high school boys in the cafeteria bragging about their recent sexual conquests, using phrases like “I hit that.” The women students especially—very mature, smart adults—almost uniformly expressed how uncomfortable and challenging it is to engage boys and young men about this kind of sexism in ways boys won’t write off. In addition, many schools now consumed by high-stakes testing will have difficulty implementing romantic relationship education in a thoughtful, careful way.

Yet given the high cost of inaction and the tremendous potential upside, and given that we could inexpensively serve

multiple educational, health, and ethical goals, why wouldn't we try to do better on this front? Few things are more to our individual and collective lives.

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