

Your Teen's Social World: How Parent Connection Can Make a Difference



Topics for today

1. Where your teen is right now

- Brain development, the world they date in, and why these relationships are practice

2. Attachment and the models' teens carry into peer relationships

- Internalized working models, emotion regulation, and the power of peers

3. Healthy, unhealthy, and unsafe: What each one looks like

- The spectrum, boundaries, red flags, and what you might notice at home

4. What you can say and do

- The 3 C's, emotion coaching, and practice with real scenarios

Before we get Started

- **Take a break whenever you need one:** You are welcome to step out of the room at any point to stretch, get water, or take a moment for yourself.
- **Ask for help:** If you feel overwhelmed or need clarification, please let us know.
- **This is a judgment-free space:** We are here to support one another. We respect each parent's unique journey and meet each other with empathy and respect.
- **Our time together is limited:** While we may not be able to address every question or cover every detail today, this is the beginning of an ongoing conversation.
- **Participation is encouraged:** Your insights, questions, and experiences are valuable. Please feel free to share and engage as you feel comfortable.

Think back to your own high school years.....

What do you remember about healthy relationships back then?

What did you wish someone had told you?

What did you worry about back then?

Was there something you **really wanted to tell your parents but didn't?**



The World Has Changed. The Needs Haven't.

THEN

- Dating happened primarily face-to-face
- Communication ended when you went home
- Conflict wasn't visible to everyone
- A breakup didn't become public
- Parents had limited visibility into relationships
- A "bad day" stayed at school

NOW

- Relationships can be nearly continuous via phone
- Social media adds a public audience to everything
- Location sharing & digital monitoring blur boundaries
- Private conversations can be screenshotted or shared
- Conflict follows teens home 24/7
- Breakups play out in front of peers in real time

The Developmental Gap & Modern Dating

- **The Communication Gap:** Texting and Snapchat allow teens to pause, edit, or avoid difficult moments. That can mean fewer opportunities to practice:
 - Reading social cues in real time
 - Navigating awkwardness or conflict
 - Tolerating uncertainty
 - Repairing misunderstandings face-to-face
- **The New Dating Roadmap:** Teen relationships often develop through an undefined digital progression:
- **Talking → Texting/Snapping → Dating → Exclusive**
 - The “**talking stage**” can be especially stressful because expectations are high—but the rules and commitment are often unclear.
 - **Texting Has Its Own Language**
Small digital behaviors can carry a surprising amount of meaning:
 - “**hey**” → may feel distant or *dry*
 - “**heyyyy**” → may communicate warmth or interest
 - **Left on read or delivered / response time** → can become a measure of interest

The Developmental Gap & Modern Dating

- **Relationships Can Feel Gamified:** Snapchat streaks, Snap scores, likes, views, and response times can become informal “relationship metrics.” They create frequent contact without necessarily creating deeper connection or vulnerability.
- **Always Connected = Always Interpreting**
 - Constant access can also mean constant monitoring:
 - *Why haven't they answered?*
They were online—why didn't they respond?
Why did they open my Snap but not reply?
- The result can be **hypervigilance, blurred boundaries, reassurance-seeking, and anxiety about digital approval.**

Why Teen Relationships Matter

Adolescent Connections Shape Identity, Well-Being, and Future Bonds.



**Identity
Development**



**Communication
& Negotiation**



**Handling
Rejection**



**Vulnerability
& Intimacy**



**Conflict
Resolution**



**Setting
Boundaries**



**Independence
Building**



**Understanding
Compatibility**

Scenario Discussion: What Would You Do?



SCENARIO

Your daughter tells you the person she's dating gets upset when she Snaps or talks to other boys. He checks her Snap Map, notices when she's active but hasn't responded, and questions new guys who follow her or like her posts. If she leaves him on "delivered" for too long, he gets mad or starts sending multiple messages.

When you express concern, she says:

"He's not controlling. He just overthinks because he really likes me. He only gets jealous because he cares."

How would you handle this situation?

Setting the Stage: Attachment as the Blueprint

Sound familiar?

"I'm not doing that."

"But that's not the way it's supposed to be."

"You don't understand."

"I'm not finished yet. I don't want to move on."

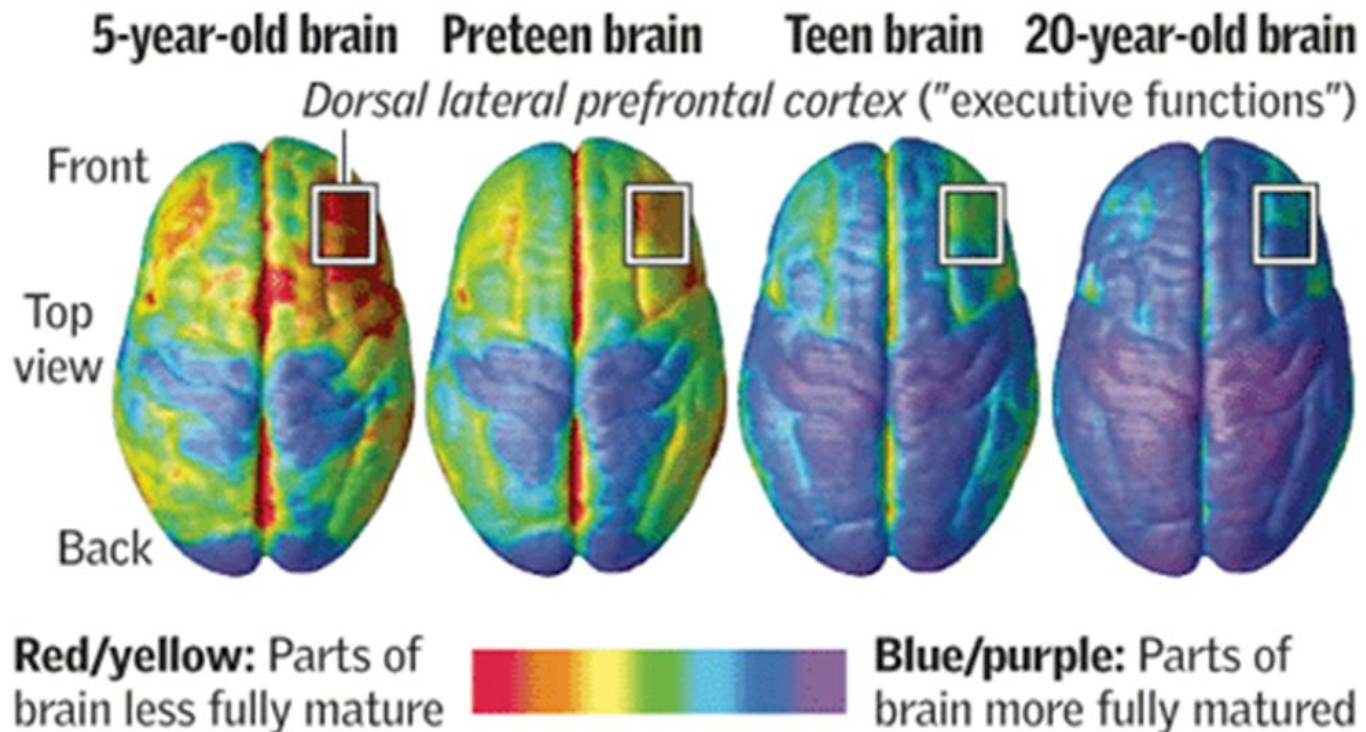
"No."

(Walking past you and bedroom door shuts)

“What is going on with you?”

Judgment last to develop

The area of the brain that controls “executive functions” — including weighing long-term consequences and controlling impulses — is among the last to fully mature. Brain development from childhood to adulthood:



Attachment theory

Children need to develop a relationship with at least one primary caregiver for normal social and emotional development.

Individuals develop cognitive schemas about their self and others based on the **psychological security** in these relationships.

Take-away: “internalized working models”



Attachment theory

- Secure attachment is:
 - Dependable, warm, nurturing, consistent
 - Provides resilience and assists with emotion regulation
- Children who lack healthy developmental relational exchanges (“mirroring”) grow up with **limited ability to emotionally regulate**
- This may contribute to problematic and dysfunctional outcomes (**relationally**, academically, emotionally) later in life



Love Sense: From Infant to Adult

The Importance (and power!) of Peers

- “How well you do with peers as an early teen tells us a whole lot about how you manage in a lot of different ways as an adult.”
- “These [early relationships] are precursors for how they will function in life socially for the rest of their lives. **[Relationships] are critical to physical and mental health.**”



What Matters: Quality not Quantity

Teens who prioritized close friendships had lower social anxiety, an increased sense of self-worth, and fewer symptoms of depression by the time they reached age 25 than their peers.

Conversely, teens who were broadly sought after in school--that is, those who were popular among their peers -- had higher levels of social anxiety as young adults.



“Our study affirms that forming strong close friendships is likely one of the most critical pieces of the teenage social experience.”

What Matters: Quality not Quantity

Paradox: Technology helps build a social network of superficial friends

Parent tip: Focus time and attention on cultivating close connections with a few



“Our study affirms that forming strong close friendships is likely one of the most critical pieces of the teenage social experience.”

Choose Well

- Teens may select deviant friends because of:
 - their own lack of social skill
 - may perceive coercive dynamics as “**normal**” and demonstrate **higher tolerance** for manipulative tactics
- What is the “active ingredient” of deviant friendship?
- **Parent tip:** Look for problematic **interactional patterns** your teen has with friends. This may be more obvious (less hidden) than looking for actual deviant behavior.



**What healthy, unhealthy, and unsafe
actually look like**

Recognizing Relationship Patterns

Teen friendships/relationships can be complicated, and **as a parent, it can be hard to know what is typical, what is concerning, and what may be unsafe.**

Relationships don't always fit neatly into one category. Understanding the spectrum can help you:

- **Recognize patterns early** and notice when a relationship may be shifting.
- **Separate normal conflict from concerning behavior.**
- **Identify signs of control, coercion, or harm.**
- **Understand what healthy relationships should look and feel like.**

The first step is simply **knowing what you're looking for.**



Recognizing the Spectrum



HEALTHY

- Mutual respect & trust
- Comfortable Spending time apart
- Honest communication
- Disagreements can be resolved
- "No" is accepted
- Social media is not a test
- Responding immediately is not expected
- Maintains friendship and interests outside relationship
- Emotional safety



UNHEALTHY

- Excessive jealousy
- Frequent criticism
- Controlling behavior
- Constant monitoring
- Emotional pressure
- Manipulation tactics
- Gradual isolation
- Frequently asks to see phone
- Guilt-tripping/walking on eggshells
- Change in behaviors
- Cyclical break-ups



UNSAFE

- Threats or intimidation
- Physical aggression
- Coercion
- Stalking behaviors
- Significant isolation
- Fear of the partner or friend
- Threats of self-harm to control
- Retaliation for setting boundaries

The Nuance of Teen Relationships

The line between a healthy and unhealthy relationship, whether it's a close friendship or a romance, isn't always clear-cut. Rather than focusing on a single argument or mistake, look for **patterns over time**.

When helping your teen evaluate their friendships and romantic relationships, consider these key areas:

- **Frequency:** Is a hurtful behavior an occasional mistake, or is it happening repeatedly?
Example: A friend forgetting to reply to a text occasionally is a normal mistake. A friend consistently ignoring your teen for days at a time whenever they are upset is a pattern.
- **Intensity:** How extreme is the behavior or the reaction? Does the reaction match the situation, or does it feel disproportionate?
Example: If your teen is 10 minutes late, a healthy reaction is, "Hey, I was worried, glad you're here." An intense, disproportionate reaction is sending dozens of angry texts accusing them of not caring.
- **Impact:** Is your teen changing who they are, dropping other friends, or quitting activities they love to please this friend or partner?
Example: Your teen suddenly stops talking to childhood friends because their partner or a dominant friend group demands all their time.

When Does a Pattern Become Concerning?

Conflict, jealousy, hurt feelings, and changing friendships can all be part of adolescence. **The concern increases when behaviors become a pattern of:**

Pattern	What It Means	What It Might Look Like
CONTROL	Trying to determine what another person can do or who they can interact with	• Constant checking or messaging • Expecting immediate responses • Monitoring location, social media, or follows.
MANIPULATION	Using guilt, the relationship, or emotions to influence someone's choices	• "If you really cared about me..." • Making affection or friendship conditional • Threatening consequences if the relationship ends
INTIMIDATION	Creating fear about what will happen if someone disagrees or says "no"	• Insults • Humiliation • Threats • Angry or unpredictable reactions
ISOLATION	Gradually pulling someone away from relationships and other sources of support	• Jealousy about other friendships • Pressure to stop seeing certain people • Framing restrictions as "caring" or "protecting"
RETALIATION	Punishing someone for setting a boundary or making a choice the other person dislikes	• Silent treatment • Exclusion • Rumors

Sometimes the clearest warning sign isn't the other person's behavior. It's **a change in your teen**. A key question becomes: **Does my teen still feel free to make choices, maintain relationships, set boundaries, and be themselves without fear of the other person's reaction?**

Relational Aggression: Harm Through Relationships

- **Relational aggression** is behavior intended to hurt someone through their relationships, social standing, or sense of belonging.

It can happen in **friendships, peer groups, group chats, and dating relationships.**

- **Reactive:** *“I felt hurt, so I hurt your back.”*
A teen feels rejected or angry and responds by excluding someone, spreading a rumor, posting something, or giving the silent treatment.
- **Instrumental:** *“Do what I want, or there will be a consequence.”*
A teen uses the relationship to gain control: *“If you hang out with them, I’m not talking to you,”* or *“If you were really my friend, you would...”*

Friendship changes are normal. Using friendship as a weapon is not.

Changing friend groups, growing apart, making new friends, and experiencing conflict are expected parts of adolescence. **Repeated exclusion, humiliation, threats, manipulation, or retaliation deserve closer attention.**

It Can Happen in Any Family

It is easy to think: “**I would know.**” or “**My child would tell me.**” or “**That wouldn’t happen in our family.**”

Friendships	Dating Relationships
1 in 5 high school students report being bullied at school.	1 in 10 high school students who date report experiencing physical dating violence.
1 in 6 report being electronically bullied.	Harm can include emotional, digital, verbal, and physical behaviors.
Harm can happen through exclusion, rumors, humiliation, group chats, social media, or threats.	Only 9% of teen dating abuse victims reported seeking help from parent or teacher.

Harmful dynamics can happen in **friendships, friend groups, online interactions, and dating relationships**, including to teens who are confident, successful, well-supported, and have involved families.

Awareness is not about expecting something to go wrong. It is about recognizing it if it does.

Awareness at Home: You Know Your Teen

You don't need to monitor every interaction or assume every change is a red flag. **You know your teen and what is typical for them.**

Pay attention when you notice a **shift from their usual baseline**, particularly when several changes begin happening together.

You might find yourself thinking:

- *"They just don't seem like themselves lately."*
- *"They seem on edge whenever their phone goes off."*
- *"They're suddenly worried about making someone mad."*
- *"They've stopped doing things they used to enjoy."*
- *"I'm seeing less of certain friends."*
- *"Something feels different, but I can't quite put my finger on it."*

Look for change. Look for patterns. Stay curious.

After our break: We'll move from **what to notice** → **what to do**.

BREAK TIME 😊

WELCOME BACK! Activity Time!

Activity: Green Flag · Yellow Flag · Red Flag

As each scenario is read aloud, decide: Green, Yellow, or Red — then discuss with the group.

GREEN FLAG

"They sometimes argue but can apologize and move forward."

RED FLAG

"One partner says: 'If you really loved me, you'd do this.'"

RED FLAG

"One partner gets upset when the other spends any time with friends."

YELLOW FLAG

"They text each other constantly and want to know where the other person is at all times."

YELLOW FLAG

"They share passwords because they say it shows they trust each other."

RED FLAG

"One partner is afraid to say no because of how the other person might react."

Suggestions & Strategies for Parents

The 3 Cs of Effective Conversation

Shift from Control → Lecture → Consequences to Connection → Conversation → Coaching



CURIOSITY

Ask before assuming.

Helps you understand what your teen is experiencing, not just what you see from the outside.



CONNECTION

Lead with empathy before correction.

Feeling understood lowers defensiveness and makes it more likely your teen will keep talking, even when you disagree.



COACHING

Help them think rather than solve for them.

Builds their ability to recognize patterns, consider choices, and make decisions when you aren't there.

Putting the 3C's Into Practice

INSTEAD OF:

"You need to break up with them."



TRY:

"What do you think this relationship is bringing into your life?" (Coaching)

INSTEAD OF:

"That's ridiculous."



TRY:

"Help me understand what you like about this relationship." (Curiosity)

INSTEAD OF:

"You should never let someone treat you that way."



TRY:

"How do you feel when you're around this person?" (Curiosity)

INSTEAD OF:

"Why didn't you tell me sooner?"



TRY:

"I'm really glad you told me now." (Connection)

Help Your Child Find Their Voice

DEARMAN

*What does DEARMAN (or
DEAR MAN) stand for?*

Describe
Express
Assert
Reinforce

Mindful
Assertive
Negotiate

You've learned how to keep the conversation open with your teen. Now, how do you help your teen have difficult conversations in their own relationships?

Teens may know something bothers them but struggle to say it, especially when they worry about conflict, rejection, or hurting someone's feelings.

Instead of telling your teen exactly what to say: “What do you want this person to understand, and how could you say it clearly?”

Then you can help them build the DEAR MAN from there.

Scenario Discussion: What Would You Do?



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"He's not controlling. He just overthinks because he really likes me. He only gets jealous because he cares."

1. What concerns you?

What patterns do you see on the spectrum?

2. What would you say?

Using the 3 C's — how do you start the conversation?

3. What would you NOT say?

What response might cause her to shut down or become defensive?

4. How can you help your child?

How could they use DEARMAN to communicate effectively?

The Learning Doesn't Stop Here

Understanding your teen's relationships starts with understanding relationships, including your own.

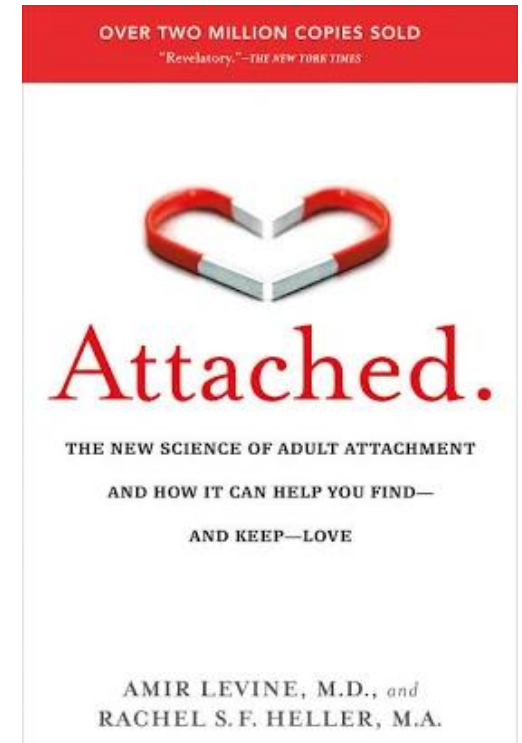
Explore Your Attachment Style

How do you respond to...

- Connection
- Conflict
- Boundaries
- Rejection
- Independence

Your own relationship patterns can shape how you respond to your teen's.

Stay curious. Stay connected. Keep the door open.



Any questions?

Thank you!