

How can we Support Healthy Intimate Relationships for Adolescents?

Pelham Together Hosts Dr. Richard Weissbourd

Wednesday, February 2, 2022 @7:30 PM

Dr. Weissbourd is a senior lecturer on education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, and at the Kennedy School of Government. He directs the Making Caring Common Project. Making Caring Common's report *The Talk: How Adults Can Promote Young People's Healthy Relationships and Prevent Misogyny and Sexual Harassment* helps us navigate how to form/maintain healthy romantic relationships, deal with misogyny/harassment, and offers insights into how adults can begin to have meaningful and constructive conversations with the young people in their lives.

Why is Pelham Together doing this? There is a lot of discussion of the effects of the pandemic on our children. As parents, we search for ways to stay hopeful. Our relationships are crucial to this. We hope to provide info and expert advice to navigate these issues.

Dr. Weissbourd started by posing this rhetorical question:

- Say a young person says they are in a relationship, but they are not sure if they are in love, how do they know if they are in love? How do we answer that question? What if that person asks how to differentiate infatuation and love?

We do so much to prepare our children for their career, but not as much goes into teaching them how to love and be loved. Sex ed in this country is more disaster prevention (preventing disease/pregnancy). As parents, we may feel we have not succeeded ourselves, and hence may feel we don't have wisdom to share. Dr. Weissbourd wants us to talk to our kids about what it means to be in a loving relationship.

Love changes developmentally. Popular culture can be sometimes damaging in the image it creates; it can be misguided. Friday night lights: his example of a TV show with a good example of a good relationship.

So many kids feel they are defective because they are not "hooking up". As adults, we have to fix this narrative. There are basics discussions we should be having about reciprocity, safety, care, tenderness, and pleasure. Kids won't want to have conversations, especially about pleasure, with you, but we should still start an open line of communication.

QUESTIONS:

Non-Binary / Gay Relationships

1. My son identifies as gay, I am going with the assumption that the messaging is the same gay or straight, but I would love to know if there is anything in particular that I need to be aware of when having these conversations.

Dr. Weissbourd: There are online resources. Encourages us to seek help from a trusted adult. For two boys: Dr. Weissbourd recommends watching an episode of “Glee”, the conversation Kurt has with his son. He says in male/male relationships, men have a challenge about how to combine sex with vulnerability. You can have two men having trouble being vulnerable. Two women: help them navigate intense feelings/drama.

Question from audience: what to do when our schools won’t allow our sexed curriculum to include this topic? Dr. W: he finds this troubling. He thinks we should be advocating for this in our schools. Reality is, a lot of schools won’t do this. There are support groups they can access.

2. Can you address the issues of teens transitioning to same sex relationships and how that affects the rules for sleepovers, etc? It’s difficult to know exactly when to set boundaries around sleeping arrangements and when not to. Not all same sex relationships will be romantic, and I know how important it is to be connecting with friends right now. Any suggestions?

Dr. W: Know your child; know whether you can trust your child; know what kind of relationship they are in. Gauge if the child is having a romantic relationship and/or feelings. Where is your child developmentally? Have trust in your child. Consider talking to other kid’s parent. Also may consider perception of others in community.

The next several questions are about Opening Lines of Communication when Facing a Particular Challenge:

The first...Communicating with a teenager of the opposite sex as a single parent:

3. As a single mom, how do you suggest I talk with my 16 year old son about things like being safe, respecting himself and respecting his partners?

Dr. W: You can talk about the experience of being a woman, what it means to be respectful/caring, relay your experiences. Be aware of your transference (of your experiences onto your child). He worries that some of the language we use to talk about love with boys, boys can see as “feminizing” (even talking about empathy). Sometimes there is a different kind of language that can be helpful with boys. Teach them to love somebody well; teach them about behaviors that are misogynistic (like rating women).

The next question regarding communication while facing a particular challenge is with respect to talking to younger children to lay the groundwork for these relationships:

4. How do you recommend laying the foundation of open communication on this topic with younger children (ages 6-10yrs old)? I'm especially interested in ways to talk with boys about how to be respectful, open, and emotionally available.

Dr. W: It's important to talk to boys about expressing your feelings, identifying/articulating your feelings; in his experience this age may not be able to do this. Conversation about boundaries, reciprocity (how you would like to be treated/golden rule), "platinum rule": people may want to be treated differently than the way you want to be treated. Let them know that it is important to you as a parent that the child treats everyone well.

The next communication challenge is with respect to how to MAINTAIN A BALANCE in your conversations on this topic:

I've combined two questions here, allowing for you to answer this one in stages....as one scenario sort of builds to the next....

5. How do you balance having an open discussion about intimacy with your teen's sense of privacy and awkwardness? Taking it a step further.... what if your teen son closes the door entirely and refuses to engage in the conversation? Do I write him a note?

Dr. W: there are things you should say to your child when they are adolescents: be safe when having sex, have a conversation of what respect looks like and means (no cat calling, no rating of girls/boys); caring is important; protection is important. Acknowledge they may not want to talk to you about this topic, but encourage them to find someone they feel comfortable having conversation with. Men need to have conversations about female pleasure. Teach them to avoid terms like "I crushed that" "I hit that". Have conversations about porn.

6. How do you advise suggesting to a teenager that they wait for marriage to have sex in a way that let's them know they can STILL come to you EVEN if they decide not to wait?

Dr. W: the messaging around this is that we want to share with our kids 1. This is what I believe, tell kids why you feel it is important; 2. What's just as important to me is that we have open communication; if you do something you think will disappoint me, please still talk with me, I will appreciate your honesty; don't let your kids "go underground"; reinforce that we all make mistakes, please talk to us about mistakes, listen non-judgmentally.

The next communication challenge is with regards to SOCIAL MEDIA:

7. How do you suggest parents manage what our teens are learning on social media about intimacy, love, sex, and romantic relationships?

Dr. W: if we don't have conversations, kids will fill the void (especially with things they see on social media). Let kids know a lot of what they see/hear is wrong (he even used the term "fake news"). Social media has curated images,

has images of love that make people feel defective. Many images are inaccurate/performative.

The next one.... the challenge of communicating with them after you've discovered information that they didn't share with you:

8. What do you suggest doing when you find that your teen hasn't shared with you that they are in fact sexually active? How do you support and educate them indirectly without violating their privacy?

Dr. W: he wonders how did parent find out? Makes a difference if child told parent they were sexually active-tell child "I appreciate you telling me; here are my concerns". Make sure you listen to your child's experience; was it gratifying, or scary, did it make them less confident/more unsure; inquiry/open conversation important. If you heard from someone else, that is very tricky. If you are worried, ask your child if it is true, and express your concerns. If you aren't worried, leave it up to your child to bring it up.

Some final comments from Dr. Weissbourd: if watching a TV show or hear a misogynistic song lyric, have a conversation (these are reactive conversations). Have proactive conversations about harassment, coercion, consent, how to respond if you feel like you are being harassed/coerced. Have conversations about our own experiences with love/relationships. Make yourself available for conversations, listen nonjudgmentally.

For full event recording, [listen here](#).