



Dr. Jenn

—*Dr. Jenn Berman*

Love Lessons For Children

Children learn how to love and be loved by the messages and examples set forth by their “primary love objects,” Mom and Dad. Sometimes these lessons are subtle, such as seeing a loving interaction or an expression of affection between family members. Other times they are more overt, like a frank, sit-down discussion between a parent and a child about dating or sex. While most parents recognize that this is valuable for their children to learn, it is important to understand that the real impact of these early, unconscious lessons will last your children a lifetime. From infancy through adulthood, there are many important things your children need to learn about relationships. I have chosen to highlight a few I think will prove especially valuable.

Be a good example to your children. This is the greatest gift you can give your kids. Your example of a loving relationship is the template upon which your children’s future relationships will be built. This does not mean you have to have a “perfect” relationship to show your child how to do it. It is far more valuable to show your child how couples deal with disappointment, hurt feelings, anger, misunderstandings and conflict in a loving relationship.

Trust your instincts. Teaching your children to trust their gut feelings is also an invaluable lesson that will benefit your kids in all areas of their lives. Most people are born with good instincts but are taught to ignore them in order to be polite or to fit in. Instincts are some of the greatest guides that people have when it comes to picking a partner or steering clear of a dangerous situation.

Speak up for yourself. I once did some work for The Los Angeles Commission on Assaults Against Women as a rape and battering hotline counselor. During one of our training sessions, this group of intelligent and outspoken women participated in an exercise to help understand the dynamics of date rape. After a long discussion, it became apparent that, in several of the

scenarios brought up, although they made all of the women uncomfortable, many would not have said anything out of fear of hurting the guy’s feelings or turning him off. The problem with this kind of thinking is that it only leads to more behavior that is uncomfortable



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and can quickly spiral out of control. The truth is a really great guy would want to know when he makes a woman uncomfortable. Teach your daughters to speak up for themselves and your sons to know how to listen. While date rape is an extreme example, often when people repress their desires or needs in a relationship, the person they are with never has the opportunity to meet those needs or even to truly get to know the person they are with.

Look at how someone treats you. Talk is cheap. Teach your children to be conscious of not only what people say, but also what they do. It’s easy to say nice things and make promises. Actions speak louder than words.

A “failed” relationship is not a failure. It is a normal part of dating to have relationships not work out. Many of the adolescents as well as adults I see in my practice feel like failures when their dates don’t work out. Having romantic experiences with people is how we learn to have relationships. Every experience teaches you about what you really want in a relationship. It is a normal part of life to try people on for size and put them back on the rack if they don’t fit. Getting “dumped” does not mean that a person is unlovable, just that they are not compatible with that particular person.

One of the greatest gifts you can give your children is imparting to them the ability to speak to you openly about relationship fears and concerns as well as about the joys. In this day and age of premature sexuality in kids, this can pose a great challenge to parents. But now, more than ever, children need guidance from their parents as experienced adults to help them to navigate the murky waters of relationships, trust and love.

Dr. Jenn Berman is a psychotherapist and sports psychology consultant. She regularly appears on television and radio as an expert on psychological issues. She has been on 48 Hours, NBC News, The Other Half, and many more. For questions, comments, or advice to be used in one of her columns, she can be reached through her website at www.DoctorJenn.com.