

WHAT NOW?



**How to Respond
When Your Teenager Gets Dumped**
By Laura Anderson, LMFT

The dreaded day comes when your teenager announces that they have started “going out” with someone. After you weather the mild panic attacks, converse about dating rules, and even will yourself to accept this as a normal part of your teen’s growing up, life goes back to a new normal. You may even learn to enjoy your teen’s significant other! And just when you feel like you are in the groove of knowing how to parent a teen who is in a romantic relationship, the worst happens. They break up.

Breakups are incredibly difficult. The teenager may claim that they will never love again and that their world has ended. And the parent must now learn to navigate parenting a brokenhearted teenager.

Remember When...

When I was 19, I met a boy and fell in love. I had never known such a love, such happiness. The world was more colorful; nothing could go wrong. And then we broke up. It devastated me. My heart was broken; my world was shattered; and I remember thinking, “If this is the pain that being in love can create, I will never love again.” (Yes, I really did write those words in my journal.)

Some of the most valuable and character-defining lessons that I have learned in my life have come through the establishment of, maintenance of, and breaking off of dating relationships. But as parents, we often forget that so much of who we are has been fostered through these relationships. So instead of reflecting on our past experiences and lessons learned, we launch into “fix it” mode and try to make the situation better for our brokenhearted teen.

It's natural to feel pain when our child feels pain. It's natural to hurt when our child hurts. And it's natural to want to try out our super powers as parents and come to the rescue. But that isn't always what's best.

Journey back through your own life for a moment. Remember being a teenager. Remember the first time your heart skipped a beat when you saw him/her walking down the hall. As exciting as that moment was, shift your focus now to that painful moment that you experienced when your heart was breaking. Maybe it was your first boyfriend/girlfriend. What was it like?



Now as you try to identify with your teen's heartbreak, consider these questions:

- When you experienced heartache, what were some things that parents and others did that were helpful to you?
- When you experienced heartache, what were some things that parents and others did that were not helpful to you?
- What do you wish your parents and others had done differently--or not at all--when you were experiencing heartache?

Empathy: (noun) the ability to understand and share the feelings of others.

When we deal with our own teenagers, it is important to adopt an attitude of empathy. Sure, as parents, we know that life will go on and that the world is not ending just yet. They will love again, and those past relationships will become funny stories and times of their lives that they look back on and chuckle about, just as we do with our own relational history. We know this, though, because life has taught us that this is so. But when you think about yourself as a teenager, you realize that you didn't know the answers to life's great questions back then. And it is important to recognize that your teen doesn't know the answers now, either.



What NOT to Do/Say When Your Teen Experiences Heartbreak:

- "There are other fish in the sea."
- "I never really liked him/her anyway."
- "There's no reason to cry over it."
- "Someone better will come along."
- "Now you have more time to focus on school/sports/music/other friends!"
- "When I was your age..."
- "You deserve better."

What To Do/Say When Your Teen Experiences Heartbreak:

- "Gosh, that really sucks/stinks."
- "What can I do for you?"
- "If you want to talk, I'm always here."
(And leave it at that! Don't require them to answer back.)
- "It's ok that you feel _____."

Consider not saying anything at all. Just simply sitting with or being in the presence of your teen and not forcing them to talk can be incredibly helpful. Bring them ice cream, their favorite candy, or a pizza. Acknowledge that they are going through a hard time and join them in the tasty indulgence.

Let Them Feel

It's no wonder our teens feel so intensely about breakups. If they are 15 years old and have spent a year in a committed relationship with a boyfriend/girlfriend, that accounts for a very significant portion of their young lives! And when they have spent large percentages of their "able-to-date" years being in a committed relationship, being single (or not in a relationship) has become a foreign concept.

Given this, it seems safe to conclude that the dramatic comments, intense emotions, and endless phone calls to friends in trying to "figure out what happened" seem like appropriate responses. So what is the parent's role in the midst of all this?

When I asked you at the beginning of this piece to remember your first experience of being in love or going through your own heartbreak, my goal was to help you gain a sense of empathy. When we can remember what we were feeling at that time and what we needed from others (especially our parents) in order to help our situation, we are more likely to receive a positive response from our teenager. It is important to note that a positive response, as much as we wish it would, might not sound something like "Gee, thanks, Mom. I can see that you really understand how I feel." (Wishful thinking, right?)

A positive response might just be a nod of the head, a tiny smile, or your teen simply remaining in your presence.

When our teenager experiences heartache--whether it's the first time or the tenth time--, they are dealing with an entirely new set of emotions that are very real, very intense, and very confusing for them. So what if we as parents put on our "empathy hat" and let our teens simply express and experience the emotions they are so intensely feeling, rather than telling them to get over it so quickly? How would that make the teenager feel? How would that make the teenager feel *about us*?



All of us experience anger, loneliness, sadness, hurt, and fear at different times in our lives. Many times we think that these feelings are wrong and that we should change them as quickly as possible to more “positive” emotions. However, it is my experience, both personally and professionally, that when we really deal with our emotions...sit in them a moment...experience them...acknowledge them and honor them..., we are able to become fuller as people, gain a greater sense of self, and relate to others in much healthier ways. It is my belief that our emotions are the reflections of something much deeper within us. They are essentially the “cries of our hearts,” that--when we try to get over them, stuff them down, or not deal with them--can become twisted impairments of our emotions, often leading to self-pity, apathy, depression, rage, anxiety, and isolation.

If we are willing to help our teens deal with their emotions--to patiently let them experience emotion rather than trying to give them a quick fix/10-step-program-to-change or a half-hearted piece of advice--our teens can experience the gifts of emotions and potentially grow into fuller and healthier individuals.

What are these gifts of emotions?



Through willingness to experience, express, and process through anger, we receive **Passion**.



Through admission of hurt and the need for help, we receive **Healing**.



When we are willing to experience and express sadness, we develop **Acceptance**.



Through admitting we are lonely, we are able to experience the gift of **Intimacy**.



When we are willing to admit, express, and experience fear, we receive **Wisdom**.

Whoa! Different take on emotions, huh? Try it, though. As you wear your “empathy hat” and encourage your teen to acknowledge, experience, and express emotion, you may just find that they are able to come out of it in a much healthier way, and [Hold your breath.] they might actually understand that you are on their side!



Puppy Love is Real to a Puppy

Our job as parents, when our teen is experiencing a broken heart, is to validate, not to trivialize. No matter if it's puppy love, a committed relationship, or something in between (or entirely different), it is very real to the person experiencing it. Whether or not we as parents liked or even agreed with the relationship, our teen needs us to be on their side.

One of my favorite TV shows is NBC's "Parenthood." If you haven't already started watching it, I highly recommend you start. The show does a beautiful job of depicting regular, non-glamorous, family life, including the fun, interesting, awkward, painful, and confusing moments of parenting a teen. In a particular scene, Sarah (the brave single mother) is trying to console her son Drew, age 15, after he is rejected by a girl. She is offering all sorts of advice, jokes, and encouraging statements, to which Drew becomes more and more upset until he finally says, "Mom, you keep giving me advice, and I DON'T WANT ADVICE!" I have to believe that many of our teens might feel the same.

Just for fun, think about the worst piece of "advice" (masked as encouragement, of course) you have received when you were experiencing heartbreak. I remember after losing my first love, countless people tried to comfort me by saying, "Well, if it wasn't him, can you imagine how great the guy you end up with will be?" Not helpful. I didn't want some other guy. In my world, no other guys existed. I only wanted *him*!

What was the worst piece of advice given to you? Consider how you felt upon hearing it, and that will help you identify with your own teen.

In a later season of "Parenthood," viewers are faced with another of Drew's breakups. This time he has been broken up with by a girl whom he had dated for quite some time, confessed his love to, and had even considered a future with. Super-Mom Sarah again seeks to come to the rescue by offering more advice, cracking jokes, prying for information, and trying to fix the situation. She quickly realizes that Drew is blowing her off and is getting more than annoyed with her. Instead of getting frustrated with him for not talking, as she had in the past, she allowed him his space and left him alone, like he asked. She later returned with a pint of ice cream and a couple of spoons and simply sat on the bed next to her son, not demanding that he speak but rather loving him simply with her presence. It was only at this point that her son let his guard down and acknowledged his feelings about the breakup.



Risk of Heartache vs. Unsafe Relationships

It seems odd that I would include a section in this piece about teen dating violence when we have spent the rest of the time talking about practical ways to help our teens navigate through heartbreak. Unfortunately, teen dating violence is on the rise, and we as parents need to know what to look for and how to deal with it. As our children grow up and adolescence hits, it's only natural to give them increased responsibility and freedom to make choices. It's normal for parents to want to trust their children and allow them opportunities to make mistakes; however, it is also our job as parents to continue looking out for our children and pulling the "parent card" when we need to.

At times it may be necessary to risk your teen's broken heart in order to save them from an unsafe relationship.

These things are not about love or respect; these are signs of an unhealthy relationship. Dating abuse is a pattern of violent behavior--physical, emotional, verbal, or sexual--by one partner in a dating relationship toward the other partner.

The following diagram I call the **"Power and Control Wheel of Dating Violence."** Violence doesn't always have to be physical or sexual abuse. It's not even defined as emotional, verbal, or mental abuse. Take a look at the characteristics of dating violence and listen to your teen as they talk about their relationship.

Pay attention to how they act around their boyfriend or girlfriend.

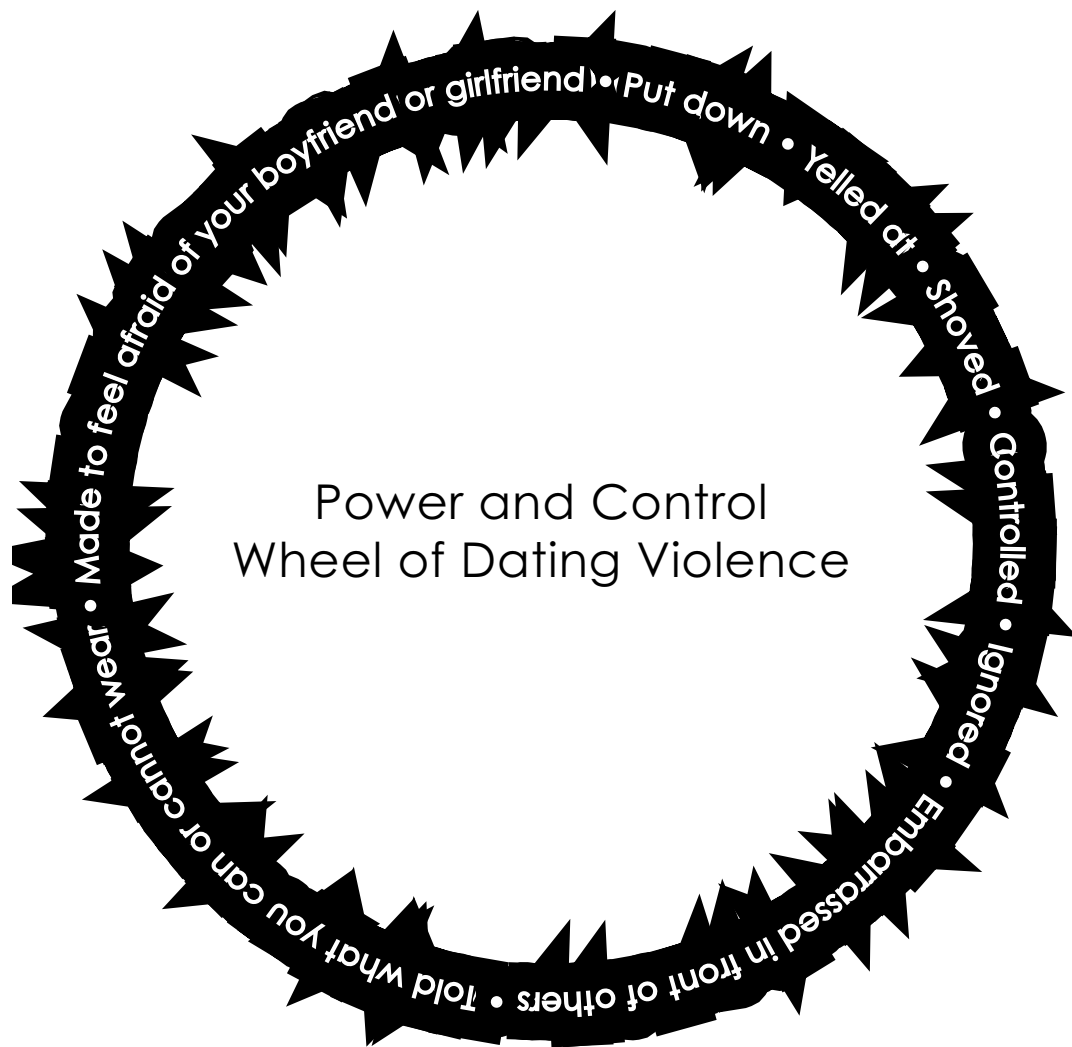
Notice what their friends or peers say about the relationship and notice what areas of their life change when they introduce a boyfriend or girlfriend into the picture.

Do they neglect other activities and relationships that they were previously involved in?

Are they more emotional than before?

Do they seem threatened, scared, or defensive when you ask about their relationship?





If you start to notice these descriptions as the characteristics of your teen's relationship, it is important that you step in as a parent, even if it means the teen's heart may be broken as they lose this relationship.



A teen in this type of relationship is not able to think clearly for themselves, as the other person in the relationship has begun to “train” them not to trust or listen to their own voice, feelings, or opinions or to the advice of others. As a parent, this can be an incredibly scary place to be, so here are a few tips for how to handle this type of situation:

1. Affirm, validate, and protect. Now is not the time to place blame, question, or accuse. While your own frustration and fear may be hard to contain in this situation, your teen needs to know that you love them, are there for them, and will protect them. They need to know that even though they have made mistakes or participated in an unhealthy relationship, it in no way affects your love and care for them.

2. Calmly explain your concerns about the situation by using “I” statements (non-accusatory statements). Let them know your concern for them as your child. Be vulnerable in your emotions.

3. Utilize outside resources. Whether this is pulling in help from teachers, administrators, coaches, other parents, or even the police, do whatever it takes to keep your teen safe at school and in the community.

4. Be firm. While you must affirm, validate, and protect, you must also be firm in your decision to have your child end the relationship. They may be mad. They may scream. They may curse. They may tell you that they hate you. It will be easy for you to take this personally or to give in to their antics. But trust your gut. Remember that your intentions are out of safety, care, and concern.

5. Watch for signs of depression and solicit the help of trained professionals. Contrary to traditional thought, a parent is not weak for seeking the help of a therapist for their child or for themselves. Situations like these are overwhelming on many levels, and it can be beneficial to have an outside, unbiased form of support to help you navigate through this process.



I've referenced "Parenthood's" Sarah Braverman a couple of times throughout this book, and at the risk of sounding like I am glorifying the show (Well, it is a pretty good show!), I want to share with you one more scene. In this scene, Sarah is talking with her older brother Adam. Both of them are parents of teenagers. Adam has just found out that his daughter is having sex with her boyfriend, and Sarah has found out that her daughter is in an incredibly dangerous relationship with an older boy. As they are talking about their children and how they as parents need to respond, the ever-confident Adam responds by saying, "There's nothing I can do about it."

And while Adam is usually the one to save the day with the right word of advice or encouragement, it is now Sarah's statement that hits home and begs us as parents to take a stand for our children. In her response to Adam, she says, "I know it doesn't help now, but I realize I made a mistake. I let Amber tell me when she was ready to grow up, and I should have fought her more. You don't give them space. Just when they tell you they don't need you anymore is when they need you the most. You have to fight it. You have to show up. It's when they are pushing you away, when they are telling you they know better...That's when you have to show up. Now, I'm afraid it's too late."

Don't let it be too late.

Fight for your teen.

Show up.

When they tell you they don't need you is when they need you the most.

