

# The Three Questions Your Teens Should Ask Before Dating

By Elsbeth Martindale, PsyD

There is so much for teens to think about and to learn as they approach romance, dating and relationship. The breadth of information needed for happy, healthy relationships is great, and with teens, the emotional landscape through which those lessons must be learned can be pretty rocky. There are three very important questions, however, that can and should be asked, questions that will help get a core of valuable information across that landscape. The concerns contained in these questions are as important, when raising a teen, as your guidance to look both ways before crossing the street was for your toddler. Your kids will need to hear you talk about these issues over and over, in different settings and from different angles, in order for this wisdom to become familiar and integrated. Just as you helped your child build survival skills and learn to keep themselves safe in the world, this kind of information and discussion will help them create a solid foundation for building positive relationships throughout their lives.

1) Do you like how this person is walking through the world and where they are headed?

This is a question that encourages teens to look, listen, and scrutinize the people they wish to date. The question gives permission to be both picky and reflective. It is much more important for your teen to be asking if they like someone than asking if someone likes them. This may seem selfish but it is an act of self-respect, not selfishness. When teens focus on whether they are liked by another, rather than their own preferences and desires, they set themselves up to be dependent and needy of the other person's validation and direction.

This question also encourages teens to accept others as they are. Invite your teen to be real about the person they are interested in, seeing them accurately, faults and all. By asking this question your teen may avoid taking on a relationship as a "project", or partnering with someone's potential rather than who they are right now. When your teen asks this question you are inviting them to look out at the future (not always an easy task for an adolescent) to see where the person they are interested in is going in their life. Implied in this is a call to see if this direction is in harmony with your teens own goals and aspirations.

2) Can you trust this person?

This is probably the most important question to have answered in order to determine the viability of a future relationship. Healthy and sustainable relationships are built on trust. Without it the relationship is doomed to be either short lived or continually conflictual.

Teach your children to know how to assess if someone is trustworthy. Talk about the importance of honesty and truth-telling in a partner, since deceit erodes trust more quickly than anything. Trust allows for comfort and ease in a relationship, and it is in this

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kind of environment that relationships and the individuals in that relationship can grow and blossom.

### 3) Does this person bring you joy?

Here is another question that puts the focus inward, asking your teen to listen to themselves. Being reflective and self-examining helps teens steer their lives with conscious intention. It encourages them to be self-directed and responsible. Teach your teenagers how to listen to their own heart and make this the focus of their dating experience, rather than on being pleasing or meeting the needs of others. Unfortunately, many young people can become so obsessed with being liked by others that they forget to cultivate their own awareness of personal preferences and desires. Help your teens to listen to themselves, especially to what brings them joy.

There are many nuanced questions that can be broken out of these three main concerns. And there are many more questions that teens can ask themselves and their potential partners. But these core questions are a perfect place to start. If possible, begin teaching your teens to think about these kinds of questions before they get involved in a relationship. Encourage them to follow their attractions but to do so from the kind of rational framework that these questions are meant to provide. By keeping the above questions in mind as they begin dating, your teenagers will be able to look within themselves, to know how to choose partners wisely and thoughtfully, and be better able to enjoy the delight of exploring romance while perhaps keeping their heart protected.

### **About Dr. Martindale**

Elsbeth Martindale, PsyD has written a complete set of 76 relationship assessment questions, in the form of a card deck, to ask before deepening relationship commitment. The deck and accompanying book are called [Things to Know Before You Say "Go"](#). This deck came directly out of her work with adolescent clients in psychotherapy. It offers a playful and engaging way to look at all the issues worthy of consideration in relationships. This engaging tool is also available in the form of an iPhone app, called [The Questions](#). These two resources are designed to help teens and adults alike look within themselves to see if they are choosing healthy, viable, and enriching partnerships.