***My daughter is immature but I hope she can date someday. How can I prepare her for dating?***

Just because she is immature now, does not mean she will be forever. People with limited experiences can be immature. Hopefully with life experiences, including opportunities to date- she will mature. Life experience is a great teacher. In the meantime:

*Share information*- There are usually plenty of opportunities to present information about dating well before your daughter is old enough to actually date. Look for teachable moments to share basic information about dating. For example, if an older sib has a partner, you can explain how they met, how they plan dates, and reasons why people date. To explain the purpose of dating you could say “your brother and \_\_\_\_\_ spend time dating to see if they are a good match for each other”. If there is a break up, “not all dating relationships work out the first time. It takes time to find the right person.” Or, “this relationship didn’t work out because your sister was going away to college and she knew that keeping a relationship going with \_\_\_\_ at a distance would be too hard”. Educating your daughter while she is able to observe others go through the process can help her understand the process more concretely.

*Identify your values around dating*- You will need to be specific and realistic about your own rules for dating. Some questions to consider: What are my biggest hopes regarding dating? What are my biggest fears? What skills and information does my child need that would support success in the dating world? Are my standards for my daughter with a disability similar or different than her other siblings? Same aged peers? Why? Why not? Being clear about your values can help you shape your own unique parental messages.

***My son really would like to date but can’t seem to find anyone who interests him. I would love for him to experience this rite of passage. What can I do?***

The first step in the dating process is finding someone who interests you and this is often the most challenging and complex task for the people I work with. Your job as a parent is not to find someone for your son but instead:

* Ensure your son has an *active social life*. It’s hard to find someone if you are not out there meeting and connecting with others. Your son should have friends in both worlds- the world of typical people, and the world of people with disabilities. He will, however, have a better chance at finding a dating partner if he is regularly interacting with other people with disabilities.

* *Identify skill or social deficits* that might be preventing your son from connecting with others. Do some quiet observing at social functions. Is he off to the side too nervous or anxious to start up a conversation? Does he struggle with initiating, conversing or ending a conversation? Or does he demand all of the attention and have a hard time sharing the limelight with another person? Figuring out what skills can be developed is a good first step.
* *Pay attention* to relationships that are working. When he clicks with another person, facilitate additional opportunities for him to be with the person. Build on common interests to keep the relationships going if it’s working!

***My son, a young adult, is only interested in dating people who do NOT have a disability (his typical peers). How do I handle that?***

This is a common scenario, particularly among a generation of young adults who have grown up fully integrated in school and in the community. The difficulty here is that in order for a dating relationship to develop, there must be mutuality of feelings between two people. My experience is that when one person has a disability and the other does not, sexual feelings are often one-sided rather than reciprocal. Successful partnering is more likely to happen when people have similar interests, abilities, and skills.

The bigger question becomes why your son feels or perceives that people with disabilities are not potential dating partners? Is he uncomfortable around other people with disabilities? Why is that? Is he aware he has a disability? Adults with intellectual disabilities who insist on dating people without disabilities may need counseling to deal with a range of potential issues. An important foundation for healthy sexuality and healthy relationships is feeling good about who you are. Helping him feel good about who he is will help greatly as he enters the world of dating.

***I am so worried about my daughter being hurt or exploited. How do I prevent that from happening in dating relationships?***

Chaperoning is an excellent way for inexperienced newbies to practice the ritual of dating in the context of supervision. I advise chaperoning if a person has had minimal experience with dating, has little information about the dating partner, has few skills, or will likely need some assistance with handling money, communication, etc. Chaperoning should be viewed as an opportunity to identify skills that are needed and then teach and allow them to practice those skills while they are being supported. As your daughter gains skills and becomes more confident and competent, her need for chaperoning (and your need to be there) should fade over time.

***Is it normal for someone to have no interest whatsoever in dating?***

It is normal for there to be a range of interests in dating. For some people an interest in dating spikes in adolescence. For others, a desire to date comes much later. Some individuals may not think about dating until they meet a compatible partner whose mutual interest is obvious. And others may not be interested in dating or finding a partner but instead prefer an active social life with friends. All of these are normal.

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