

Dad, Did You Kiss Her?

by Andrew Stenhouse

“Dad, did you kiss her?”

“Of course not, we’ve only gone out a few times.”

“Then what did you do when the date was over?”

“I walked her to the door, gave Karen a quick hug goodnight, put my hands in my pocket and walked back to the car. I was nervous!”

They laughed. “Dad you’re such a geek! You’re supposed to kiss her and stuff to see if you really like her.”

“No,” I argued. “I do that later because I like her. Affection is not an experiment; it is an expression.”

A few weeks later, I recalled the conversation and complained about today’s culture with a friend of mine. “Think about it,” he said. “Parents talk to their kids about dating until they’re blue in the face, but you have a chance to actually show them. Few children ever get to see their parents date. What an opportunity!”

He’s right. Single parents are the best role models for teaching their children about dating. We can preach to them about boundaries, respect and

purity, but when they watch us living out these commitments, they are truly influenced.

A few months after I married Karen, my two teenage daughters and I talked about dating. I asked them, “Girls, what did I do right when I was dating Karen?” They told me what I did right from their perspective, and also what I did wrong. We had a marvelous conversation, and in the process we discovered some good guidelines for single-parent dating.

1. Phone Home

Keep your kids informed, and share your feelings with your children. If there are information gaps, they will fill them in with their imaginations. And quite often their imaginations can be pretty bleak, especially if they are influenced by the horror stories of some of their friends or — even worse — the media.

Don’t feel that you have to tell them the personal details, but let them know your fears, hopes and dreams. On the other hand, don’t involve them so much that their hearts break more than yours if things don’t work out.

Maintain privacy, not secrets. My girls said they appreciated the fact that they could ask me about my dates and I would tell them, from beginning to end, what we did and where we went. There were no secrets.

But when I was asked to reveal some of the things Karen and I talked about, I told them only general topics. I explained that some conversations were private, and I was sure they understood why I kept them between Karen and myself. They understood.

2. Bring Home

Keep your children in mind when you are out. Bring them something from the date, like a dessert you know they would enjoy. Treat a night out like a mini-vacation: Never come back empty-handed. Bringing a little something for your kids makes them feel as if they were part of your outing and you were thinking of them.

It also demonstrates to your date how important your children are to you. If he or she doesn't understand that your kids are your priority right off the bat, there may be trouble later. The sooner your date realizes your heart is completely committed to your young ones at home, the sooner he or she will be able to settle into a relationship based on that truth.

3. Stay Home

Have a pizza and movie night once things are going well enough to let your kids become vulnerable. Let them see you hang out on a sofa and

watch television. Sweats, stocking feet, throw pillows, blankets and popcorn while you watch a movie are ingredients of typical family life. While it is important not to rush, everyday experiences can be good for everyone. This is when things begin to seem real and normal. You are casual, and the kids are part of the growing relationship in their own environment.

This is a safe way to bond as a potential blended family. If this stage is not rushed, it can also be a great opportunity for you to have prayer with each other's kids and be part of their bedtime rituals. Once trust is established, kids enjoy falling asleep with grown-ups talking in the living room. They feel safe. (Of course, they need to hear you *only talking*.) It is also important to tell them you will be leaving soon after they fall asleep. Even so, they will stay awake for the first few times — until they hear the front door close after you leave. They want desperately to believe you. So let them.

4. Go Home

Keep a curfew, and let your kids know when you are going to be home. Maintain the same rules you would expect them to maintain when they date. Call if you are going to be late and give them the reason.

No grown-up overnights. Period. Kids can sleep over. You can't.

As my relationship with Karen progressed, her daughter and my two girls spent more time together and had sleepovers on the weekends. They found it absolutely hilarious that while they got to spend the night, I had to go home. Many weekends, I would return to Karen's on Sunday morning to take the whole crew to church. After the Saturday night sleepover, they would be eating pancakes and bacon, enjoying the next morning together when I came into the house. It was wonderful. They were able to bond in ways that I could not, and they moved in together long before I did.

Dating as a single parent can be a traumatic time for everyone. It can also be a time of great fun and family development. Take it slow and enjoy the building process. Remember, your children need to develop trust as much as you do. Include them as much as possible.

Single-parent dating is the ultimate group experience. Even though you and your date may spend time alone, dating is never just about the two of you: It is a family affair.

Andrew Stenhouse eventually kissed Karen. They are now married and living in Costa Mesa, Calif.