Relationship smarts: A curriculum on dating and marriage

by Amy Frykholm in the September 9, 2008 issue

I'm in a high school classroom talking to Lisa. (I've changed her name and the names of all the students mentioned in this article.) Lisa's hair is dyed black and purple, and she has numerous piercings, including one in her lower lip that bounces as she talks to me.

"I broke up with my boyfriend because of this class," she says.

The class is Introduction to Psychology, and the school is Redlands High School in Redlands, California. Lisa's teacher is Char Kamper, who uses a curriculum called Connections that she developed to teach students about dating, relationships and marriage.

"When did you break up with him?" I ask.

"Three days ago," Lisa says, and then she looks me straight in the eye. "I realized he only called me when he wanted one thing."

Students tell me that one of their favorite pages in Connections is "The Breakup Page." I turned to it expecting to find principles, rules or guidelines for breaking off a relationship, maybe "Ten Steps to Breaking Up." Instead I found a list of questions with space for students to write answers:

> When it isn't working out . . .
>
> If you are the one choosing to end a relationship, what are some common feelings that you might struggle with *before* doing it?
>
> If you are the one with whom someone has broken up, what feelings are associated with the experience?

Were your expectations about the other person or the relationship realistic?

Does the length of time you have gone out with a person make breaking up more difficult?

How could breaking up be handled in a way that showed genuine concern for the feelings of both partners? Tell how you would want someone to treat you in this situation.

Getting a plan . . .

Why is it often so difficult to make a decision to end the relationship?

Once the decision is made, why is it important to carry it out as soon as possible?

What are the advantages of choosing a time and place to end the relationship rather than letting things "just happen"?

Why is it important for the end of the relationship to be truly final?

These questions convey the power of Kamper's curriculum and her classroom dynamic. She does not preach. She asks, inviting dialogue with teenagers by raising questions that suggest fundamental principles such as "listening is important," "all people have feelings and deserve to be treated with dignity and respect," and "significant decisions require planning." Kamper provides on-the-ground, tangible activities for students to engage in, and she leaves space for them to reflect and come to their own conclusions. Kamper, who is a lifelong member of the Reformed Church and a graduate of Calvin College, calls her curriculum "values-based." Privately she admits that she believes that her teaching is a mission field. "I see so many kids hurting. They have absolutely no moral compass, no way of finding their way through."

The political and social context has gradually grown more complex over the 17 years that Kamper has been teaching at Redlands. While the divorce rate in the U.S. is at its lowest level since 1970, fewer people are choosing to get married, and the word *marriage* has become politically charged. A rallying cry for "traditional marriage" galvanized conservative voters in the 2004 election, even as a recent court decision

in California legalized marriage for gay couples.

Public schools and school boards across the country continue to argue about sex education. The Bush administration insists on funding abstinence-only education even though studies question its effectiveness. Some educators insist that teaching students about the biology of sex is insufficient; we must also address the context of teens' social relationships. Then there are the bare facts: one in five teen girls enters adulthood with a sexually transmitted disease, and one in five teenagers experiences violence in a relationship.

Oklahoma, the state with the highest divorce rate in the nation, responded to the crisis by implementing relationship training for its public high school students. The Oklahoma Marriage Initiative supplies copies of Kamper's Connections to all of the state's public high schools. Other states use Connections or Love U2, a popular curriculum that focuses on preventing teen pregnancy while teaching about all aspects of human relationships. Some states recommend relationship and marriage education (RME), some mandate it and still others provide money to make it happen. Does RME make a difference? Can it help young people make better choices?

Sarah Halpern-Meekin, a graduate student at Harvard University, became interested in RME when she was studying welfare reform in the 1990s. When the federal government implemented the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, it began to provide money to states to promote healthy marriages. This included RME classes in public high schools. With the help of a relationship questionnaire that helps gauge a person's capacity for healthy, mature relationships, Halpern-Meekin is studying the impact of RME curricula in Oklahoma and Florida.

Initial results indicate that relationship and marriage curricula provide positive outcomes for students. Halpern-Meekin looks for gains such as improved communication skills, a better understanding of commitment and more maturity in relationship timing. All are difficult to quantify, of course, but students in both rural and urban areas showed improvement in these areas. A study by Scott Gardner of South Dakota State University also seems to confirm RME's effectiveness. Researchers followed students for four years after their classroom experience and found that students who studied Connections were better at conflict resolution and more likely to say they would seek out premarital or marriage counseling than those who did not.

Gardner’s work also suggests that although Connections only rarely mentions sex, students with a better overall understanding of human relationships were less likely to engage in risky sexual behavior. The most positive gains in relationship maturity were in students raised in two-parent homes. This means, says Halpern-Meekin, that children who already have the strongest relationship skills, according to previous research, benefit from RME the most, while those from single-parent and divorced parents struggle more and respond less to interventions like Connections.

In Kamper’s classroom, even those from homes with divorced or single parents were reflecting on the issues raised by the curriculum. Amber, a tall, willowy sophomore with long hair and glasses, says her favorite pages of Kamper’s curriculum are titled “Problem People.” Here Kamper lays out types of behavior that cause problems: a tendency to wide mood swings, impulsiveness, lying and manipulating, inability to trust, highly controlling behavior and so on. “I think I might be a problem person,” Amber says, laughing.

Jessica, a quiet, mature senior, says that she will save page 35, “What Is Love?” forever, and give it to her little brother and anyone else she thinks will listen. At the top of the page, Kamper identifies three elements of “imitation love”: “over-controlling,” “conditional” and “based solely on physical attraction.” Further down on the page, “genuine love” is described as “nurturing,” “unconditional” and “generous.” Jessica says that she sees “imitation love” everywhere, and it helps to believe that the genuine kind exists and that she can find it.

Other students are using Connections to think carefully about their futures. James sits at the back of the room diligently filling out his workbook. He tells me that he’s going to college and will major in criminal justice—and that he’s never had a girlfriend but has seen his friends get into trouble with the girls they’ve dated. He hopes to avoid the same mistakes, and he says now he has the words to tell his friends why they get into trouble and maybe even how to get out of it.

Micah, a sophomore who has just moved to California from Texas, is using Kamper’s curriculum to help him think about a long-distance relationship. He read Kamper’s “Rate Your Relationship” checklist to his girlfriend over the phone.

“No way am I reading that list to my girlfriend,” a student named Josh fires back. When I ask him why, he says that Mrs. Kamper told the students that when people do these exercises together they often break up. He doesn’t want to break up yet.

Here are some of the questions:

> Does your partner share similar interests with you?
> Is the relationship growing stronger and moving forward?
>
> Does your partner trust your decisions and behavior when you are apart?
>
> Does your partner treat his/her family members well?
>
> When you talk to friends or someone new, does your partner feel threatened?
>
> Does your partner show respect for your feelings and ideas?
>
> Can your partner handle disappointment or frustration without demonstrating physical aggression or violence?

One chapter of the curriculum directs students to find partners and get “married” for a few days. They can marry anyone—inside the class or out, of a different gender or the same. The couple has to plan a wedding together, work out a budget, have children and get jobs.

Once married, the students “design babies.” Kamper has adapted this exercise from her days as a science teacher. The students have a handout with several pages of physical characteristics from eyebrow shape to skin color. Each “parent” flips a coin and uses the results to determine the appearance of the child, on the basis of dominant and recessive genes and a complex chart that Kamper gives them. The students then try to draw the baby they have designed. Implicit in this exercise is an understanding that you cannot predict what your baby will look like or act like and that two people participate in creating a child. Perhaps this seems like common sense, but in teenagers, common sense can be rare.

This is also a moment for Kamper to do the kind of teaching she has clearly mastered. She gets the students involved in an activity and then drops one-liners.

“Remember, when you have children, you don’t get to decide ahead of time who they are going to be.”

“Remember, a baby is not a little you. A baby is its own person.”

Most of the students in the sections I am observing tell me that they have partners in another class or even out of state or in another country. A few have partners in the class.

Peter and Joanna, for example, quickly work out a way to accomplish the assignment as they lightly joke with each other and enjoy each other's company. But in front of them Christina and Ryan are flirting outrageously and arguing constantly. "Mrs. Kamper," Christina complains loudly, "I want a divorce!"

"Tough luck," Kamper says dryly. "You picked him. Work it out."

Another youth in this class seems removed from all that is going on. He doesn't have a partner, he tells me, looking away. He doesn't even bother to flip the coin but randomly fills in blanks to assign hair color and chin shape to his imaginary, designed child. Clearly something about this assignment does not speak to him. Perhaps, for any number of reasons, it is difficult for him to see marriage and family as applying to his life.

This may be a pitfall of the marriage curriculum: not every student will get married, and no doubt some feel alienated by the very word *marriage*. But Kamper insists that "everyone needs relationship skills. Everyone needs to learn to listen to and work with others." Furthermore, she says, 86 percent of these students will get married at some point in their lives, and most will do so with only a vague idea of what lies ahead of them.

Ironically, although Kamper repeatedly and explicitly tells her students that living together before marriage does not increase the chances of staying together after marriage (she cites a 75 percent divorce rate for live-in couples who later marry), this is the one message that students do not accept. According to Gardner's study, they believe that living together improves the chances of a successful marriage even after they've participated in a relationships program.

While Kamper is thrilled to see evidence that her relationships curriculum reduces risky behavior, she insists that the curriculum is not a teen pregnancy reduction program, and she gets nervous when people start to test the curriculum for results. "It is helping kids with what they experience in their everyday lives. I'd hate for a school board somewhere to say, 'Well, it doesn't accomplish this or that objective,' and stop using it. People who teach this program know it is helping kids."

Kamper's curriculum is designed for a secular classroom with students of diverse backgrounds, and although Kamper believes she is teaching students about God when she teaches them about love and values, she never crosses the boundary of her secular context. When her fellow Christians ask why she doesn't teach in a context where she can be more explicit about her beliefs, she says: "I do this in a public school because here I can do the most good for the people who need it most." Her curriculum provides a way to talk about values in a diverse, public landscape that must be sensitive to and respect religious differences.

Despite her conservatism, Kamper disagrees with some evangelicals as to how teens should learn about relationships. For example, instead of suggesting that teenagers should not date as many popular evangelical curricula do, she argues in favor of dating. "Dating is good practice," she says, "and marriage is a very hard place to learn what you might have learned from dating." She believes that parents and churches that rule out dating for their young people are afraid of sexuality and especially afraid that their own children won't make it through the American sexual wilderness. Instead, she says, "You give kids arrows on the sidewalk. You tell them, 'If you follow these, you'll get there.'"

Now, with the help of a Lilly Endowment grant, Kamper and her daughter Shana have written a Christian curriculum called One, Two . . . I Do that identifies Christian principles that are key to healthy relationships.

Bromleigh McCleneghan, a Methodist pastor in Riverside, Illinois, is glad for the new product. Having studied relationship education for youth groups, she says that on one side of the spectrum there are abstinence curricula that demand adherence to an absolute set of practices. On the other side are carefully researched materials like Our Whole Lives, a joint effort by the Unitarian Universalist Association and the United Church of Christ that teaches an understanding of justice in relationships. What's been lacking, however, is a curriculum that works in mainline youth groups where conservative, moderate and liberal voices need a common vocabulary to talk about human relationships. The Kampers' One, Two . . . I Do meets this need.

As might be expected, One, Two is far preachier than its secular counterpart. Student lessons rely more on commentary than on the activities that make Connections come alive. Instead of the inviting blank spaces that draw students into responding and then discussing, One, Two has lengthy sections that tell rather than show the principles the curriculum is trying to teach. Char and Shana Kamper say

that in creating One, Two they did not want to simply take the principles of Connections, “add God and stir.” They wanted to create a curriculum that is biblically based and rooted in Christian tradition. Yet “add God and stir” would have been more effective if it meant lecturing less and leaving more room for students to think and respond.

For mainline churches, the question is how and when to teach young people about relationships. A session of premarital counseling may be comprehensive and honest, but pastors know that their sessions with couples come too late to have much effect on a relationship; couples are usually only rubber stamping a decision they’ve already made.

At the same time, youth group leaders struggle to find an opportunity and a vocabulary to talk to young people about relationships. The real issue may be not political arguments about what marriage is but how in church, with children, youth and adults alike, we can teach people to forge strong, rewarding relationships.

Back in Char Kamper’s classroom, Lisa rolls her eyes and tells me she is finished with high school relationships anyway. “I don’t think I am ready to be that serious with someone,” she continues. “I think I need to wait.” Mrs. Kamper will be glad to hear it.