

# How to Teach Your Child About Healthy Marriage

**Learning to have a Healthy Marriage starts when children are observing their parent's relationship.**

## Introduction

Researchers have learned many things about the positive effects of marriage on adults. For example, they live longer, healthier and wealthier lives. Kids in homes with their married biological parents generally have a higher standard of living, do better in school, have fewer behavioral problems, and are less likely to be abused when compared to kids living in a different family structure. This doesn't mean kids from single-parent homes won't have good lives, or that kids from married homes won't have problems, but it is less likely to happen to kids living with parents who are in a healthy marriage. Learning to have a healthy marriage starts when children are observing their parent's (or other relative's) relationship.

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Parents talk to their kids about all kinds of difficult topics. There are commercials about our kids' brains on drugs, the importance of reading to our kids, and even about staying in school. But we rarely see or hear anything about one of the most important building blocks in our society: healthy marriage. Marriage is something many of us take for granted, but don't really understand. We can give our children the tools to enjoy healthy and happy relationships.



## Tips for Parents

**Start talking to your kids when they are young** about the importance of strong marriages and good relationships. Do not wait until your kids are older. Just keep adding more information to the discussions – about sex, for example – when it is right for their age. This way the topic isn't sudden or unexpected. One way to do this is to watch your own wedding video or look at your

wedding pictures with your kids every year and talk about how being married is important to the family. You do not have to be married to have these discussions with your children. Divorced or single parents can use children's movies or books to talk about healthy relationships. For example, you could say, "See how Shrek and Fiona did not talk to each other very well? One way they could have talked about the problem better is by waiting until the other person finished talking."

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**Lead by example.** Make sure that you are modeling healthy relationship behavior. All couples experience problems during their lives but it is the way you handle those problems that makes the difference between a successful and unsuccessful marriage or relationship. Learning to communicate well and solve problems together sets a great example for your own kids about marriage. It is very important to explain *why*

what you are doing is good for the relationship. When you and your partner disagree, make sure you tell your children what you did to resolve the situation. Help them understand that marriage doesn't mean "happily ever after". It means working together to work through life's ups and downs. Another way to do this is by using other peoples' marriages as examples. Talk to your kids about Aunt Betty's and Uncle Frank's marriage and what makes it healthy. When people in your lives get divorced, talk about your sadness for the couple and their children. Do not say, "We knew they would never make it."

Talking to kids about marriage and relationships should also include information about the importance of making good decisions. This is especially true when talking with older kids who may be in a dating relationship. For example, you can help kids understand:

- ✓ Appropriate touch versus inappropriate touch.
- ✓ That marriage is for grown ups who are able to make a commitment to one another.
- ✓ That living together isn't the same as marriage.
- ✓ It is better to have a baby after you are married.
- ✓ That hitting or saying mean things to each other is never OK in a relationship.

**Be realistic.** Do not try to paint a perfect picture of "happily ever after". Relationships take work and it is never too early for a child to understand this. Tell your child that love is not something that people fall in and out of but is a commitment that two people make to one another.

**Consider Marriage/Relationship Education.** Marriage education workshops are available in many locations (often hosted by churches or community organizations) for adults. Couples can participate in workshops to learn skills, which can often be taught/demonstrated to your children. Relationship education is also available

[www.TwoOfUs.org](http://www.TwoOfUs.org)

for youth (typically middle- and high-school aged youth). When both mom/dad and the kids are learning relationship skills it can be easier to explain and discuss marriage.

## Conclusion

It is important to teach children at an early age to value and understand what healthy relationships look like.

The best thing one can do for his/her children is to model healthy relationship

behavior. But you don't have to have a "perfect relationship" to do this. In fact, there is no such thing as a perfect marriage. You can define for yourself what a healthy marriage looks like in your family. What is important is that you talk appropriately about relationships and your expectations for your child. Books, movies and peoples' relationships in your lives can all be used as examples.

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## Additional Resources

[http://earlychildhood.suite101.com/article.cfm/teaching\\_children\\_appropriate\\_touch](http://earlychildhood.suite101.com/article.cfm/teaching_children_appropriate_touch)

<http://www.marriageproject.org/fs0014.html>

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***This is a product of the National Healthy Marriage Resource Center, led by co-directors Mary Myrick, APR, and Jeanette Hercik, Ph.D., and project manager Patrick Patterson, MSW, MPH.***