

Here's my New Year's resolution. Celebrate everything. Take nothing for granted. Have as much fun as you can. Things happen; acknowledge them and move on. Don't drag them through life with you. I want my children to believe that miracles can happen. I want to believe that miracles can happen. Maybe this year, they will.

By Kim Dinardo

Risa: Older Teens

Dating in the teen world today is nothing like dating in my generation. Teen dating in the 70s and 80s was characterized by the boy picking up the girl at her home, car or no car. Dinner and a movie were standard, with pizza as the preferred cuisine. There were picnics to Central Park, and dates to concerts, sporting events, and fondue restaurants. The boy would approach the girl with a specific proposal which usually began with "would you like to go to..." and the plan was set.

My teens lump those traditions together with the drive-up, roller skating burger joints of the 50s, as passé.

Today's teens do not go out on dates. Shocking as it may be to parents of young children today, no boy is going to come to your house and ask if they can date your sweet little girl. They "hang out." The only way I can even discern if my teens are dating is to inquire who they are "hanging out with." Funny, we "hung out" too sometimes, but we did not count that as dating. Dating was going on dates and "hanging out" was relaxing in someone's house in a group.

Yet, there are still teens who pair up to form actual exclusive relationships. These teens present themselves as "going out," but don't really go out anywhere. When one of my teens was in middle school, I was told that the teen was "going out" with someone. I asked "where are you going exactly? I have never seen your date and you never left home to go on a date!" Apparently, "going out" in middle school means that your friends know you like each other, but your parents have no clue! The teens do not go any place special outside of school, but talk a lot and spend time together at parties.

Teens today also request "coed sleepovers." To those of my generation, coed sleepovers were tantamount to Plato's Retreat. To teens today, most often, coed sleepovers are hanging out together late with friends-platonically. When we arrived in Dublin to pick up our son at the end of a summer program, he was sleeping late, as usual. His somewhat old-fashioned parents were a bit disturbed when he walked out of a girl's room, sleepy-eyed. He told me that all the kids slept in each other's rooms and that they were all "just friends." Similarly, my daughter asked for a coed sleepover for the night of the junior prom. After I gave her my initial quite negative reaction, I realized that both host parents were home, I knew the family well, the boys and girls were sleeping on opposite sides of the house and none of the couples in the group were romantically involved. So, I agreed.

Kids are often overwhelmed with studies and extra-curricular activities, so they spend time with whoever they are "going out with" in school clubs or sit together at lunch, if they even have the same lunch period. If there is a lull in schoolwork, SAT study and college application preparation, they might visit the mall in a group. Of course, they talk incessantly by text, IM, BBM and vid chat. I was shocked the day I walked into my daughter's room and saw a boy's face on the screen of her computer! I got the standard "we are just friends" line, which was indeed the case this time, but the boy was ostensibly in her bedroom! Moreover, most enigmatic is the knee-jerk reaction from many teens, to deny that their relationships are anything but platonic. Perhaps they prefer to avoid parental scrutiny? I understand that, but, back in the old days, we all endured the inevitable family dinner evaluations of our dates, and survived. Of course, then dating, relationships and falling in love were not an anomaly.

It is true that there is a different mindset today. Today's teen girls do not day-dream about being wooed with flowers and poetry, hoping to fall in love, just like in a 1970s Kodak commercial. Today's teen girls are focused on college and career and have no time to wonder when their John Travolta will come along. Almost all the students attending proms at our local high schools attend with a friend, and not with a real date. Times have really changed.

It is ironic that teens' socialization, in the form of dating relationships, has regressed so markedly, as their online virtual relationships have proliferated enormously. My high school informant tells me that perhaps two couples in her entire school can be seen holding hands in the hallway. Doubtless a small handful of members of the millennial generation will buy a gift for a girlfriend or boyfriend for Valentine's Day. But, to an old-fashioned Mom, it seems like the romance is mostly gone. Sorry FTD, or should I say "1-800 Flowers.com?"

By Risa C. Doherty

John: The Dad's Point of View

Now that my son is a senior he has begun his college search. It's an interesting time for us filled with much chaos and confusion and thinking. There are so many choices and even more costs. We all have our own opinions, of course. My son has to go somewhere where he will be happy that will also prepare him for the future. Of course, my wife and I also need to be happy since we're fitting the bill. The goal is to pay for our son's undergraduate work entirely with cash. We don't want him to have loans and we don't want us to have loans. Our son seems to have three basic choices: the local community college for two years, the local four year college Hobart and William Smith, or a State School.

As a stay at home father, a person who has basically gotten quite used to having the kid around for the last 17 years; I am leaning heavily towards the first two choices. Of course, they each come with their own set of pros and cons. As for the community college, my son is a really good student and his guidance counselors look at me funny (even funnier than usual) when I suggest that he might go that route. It appears that community colleges still have a stigma around them that they are the types of schools that only students like those on the TV show Community attend. In other words if you are a top student you don't go to a community college. To this I say, "Poppycock!" Why pay thousands and thousands and thousands of dollars taking 100 and 200 level courses when you can take the same courses for far less money? Sure intro to biology may be more challenging at an Ivy League school than at a community college, but is the challenge really worth the cost? For some, it may be. For others, it probably isn't. The thing is, when you can save many thousands of dollars (which is a measurable gain) going to a two year school, I believe this is a great option for many students, especially students who aren't sure what they want to do.

As for the four year college in our town, Hobart, it is a fine liberal arts college where the faculty seems to really care about the students. Many of their alumni have gone on to great things. It is also a great launching pad for both graduate school and medical school. These are all good things. Of course the downside here is price. It is very steep. Quite frankly, we've told our son we will give you X amount of cash to go to college with. His job is to get the scholarships to bring the cost of any college he wishes to go down to X. If he does that then fine, he can consider that college. If not then he needs to find another choice. Our son is actually cool with this. He has no interest in either us or him acquiring vast amounts of debt over a four year span. (Like I said, he's smart.) So he either gets a good deal to Hobart or he doesn't go. I would love Hobart. I think it would be ideal to have him away from home but still very close. Of course, some people see this as a problem with Hobart. It doesn't allow our son to experience the world. He'll be in the area for four more years. To this I once again say, "Poppycock!" (That's my word of the day.) There is no reason why in this day and age we need to send our kids away when they are 18-21. Many of the other countries in the world have their undergrad students attend nearby schools and live at home. There are no set human rules that say the child must leave the nest at 18. People are living longer and longer and some would argue that adolescence is lasting longer and longer. I would suggest that for many of today's students, graduate school has become what undergraduate was for past generations, a chance to break out and explore the world and to decide what you really want to do with the next portion of your life. I am cool with my son really expanding his world in graduate school.

As for the state college system, I went there, so no complaints. Sure he won't be able to pop home for dinner, but I can deal with this. Many of these Colleges are within a two hour drive and they all give a fine undergraduate education at a reasonable price. They offer a wide array of choices. And while I would love for my son to stay within 10 minutes of home, I do realize that this really is his choice (within the financial parameters.) If he chooses one of the state schools, I will be happy for him just as long as he is happy there.

Of course that still doesn't stop me from rooting for Hobart!

Addition: Just today, just as I finished writing this, I learned my son wishes to apply to Cornell University, where my wife, his mother, is a professor. Cornell would be great. It is a world class institution just an hour away. Problem to me is it's a huge school so he will go from a high school with 100 students to a University where he has hundreds of students in a class. I think he'd be better suited for a smaller school at first and then transfer to Cornell. Still if he can pull off Cornell from the start more power to him.

By John Zakour

