

# Unsure how to talk to your teens about dating? There's a book for that

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For many parents, having the 'sex talk' is child's play compared to navigating teenage love and heartbreak. Author Lisa A. Phillips breaks it down in her new book, *First Love: Guiding Teens through Relationships and Heartbreak*

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Parents of teens know the drill: Inquire about their day, they'll ask why you're grilling them. Play it cool, they'll figure you're just not interested. [Lisa A. Phillips](#)

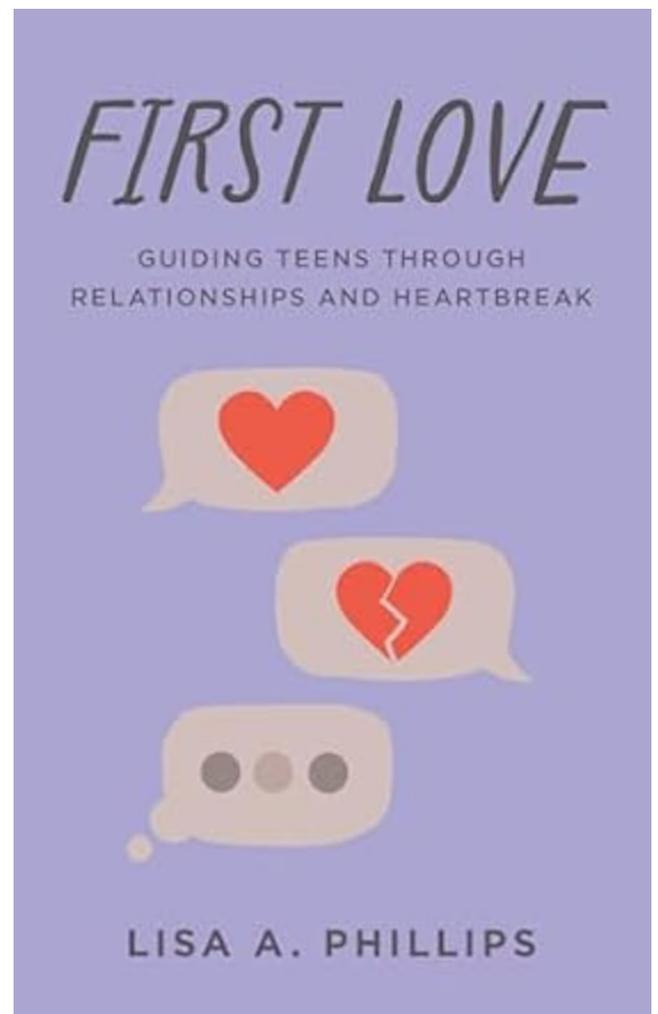
helps parents strike a balance, at least when it comes to dating. Her new book, *First Love: Guiding Teens through Relationships and Heartbreak*, serves as a how-to manual on teen romance, from tackling mental-health issues to obtaining consent in a #MeToo era.

Phillips herself is a mom and associate professor of journalism at State University of New York at New Paltz, where she teaches an interdisciplinary seminar called Love and Heartbreak. For *First Love* – her third book – she puts her reporting skills to use by interviewing more than 100 young people and parents about their experiences with first relationships; the book is filled with colourful anecdotes, as well as thought-provoking findings and practical advice from a range of developmental psychologists and researchers. Parents will walk away better armed to support their children through the emotionally fraught teenage years on all matters love and heartbreak.

The Globe and Mail caught up with Phillips to discuss how modern teen relationships are different from previous generations (hello, social media), handling first heartbreak and showing up for your child when it matters most.

### **How important is first love in laying the foundation for future relationships?**

Entering the world of romantic experience begins that process of trial-and-error learning, where young people are figuring out what it takes to get close to somebody, and all the bumps that may entail. What the research shows is that romantic relationships in teens foster big-picture



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thinking and generosity of spirit, as well as confidence in what it means to care for someone and be cared for. Research also shows that there's nothing wrong with not having a romantic relationship within the teen years; in fact, close friendship matters more to future adult relationship satisfaction. Long friendships have ups and downs, waxing and waning, and so the level of commitment is really a better model for romantic relationships that affect you later in life.

**You include some eye-opening stats throughout your book. One that stuck is that 70 per cent of 18- to-25-year-olds wished they had more information from their parents about the emotional aspects of dating. What's the best way for parents to broach this topic?**

Richard Weissbourd, who founded an organization called Making Caring Common, has some great suggestions. Let's say you're not sure if your child is with the right person. The question I love the most is, when you're with this person, do you feel like more of yourself or less of yourself? This could be asked at any stage, including a crush. It really helps young people start to see their romantic experiences as data they can affect. Even if they say, I'm going to be with this person no matter what, I love him or I love her, they might start to think, wait a second, I'm a mess inside when I'm with this person: I don't talk about my life, I don't feel brave, I don't feel good. They might not actually say these things out loud to you but asking that question can help young people recognize when things aren't going well.

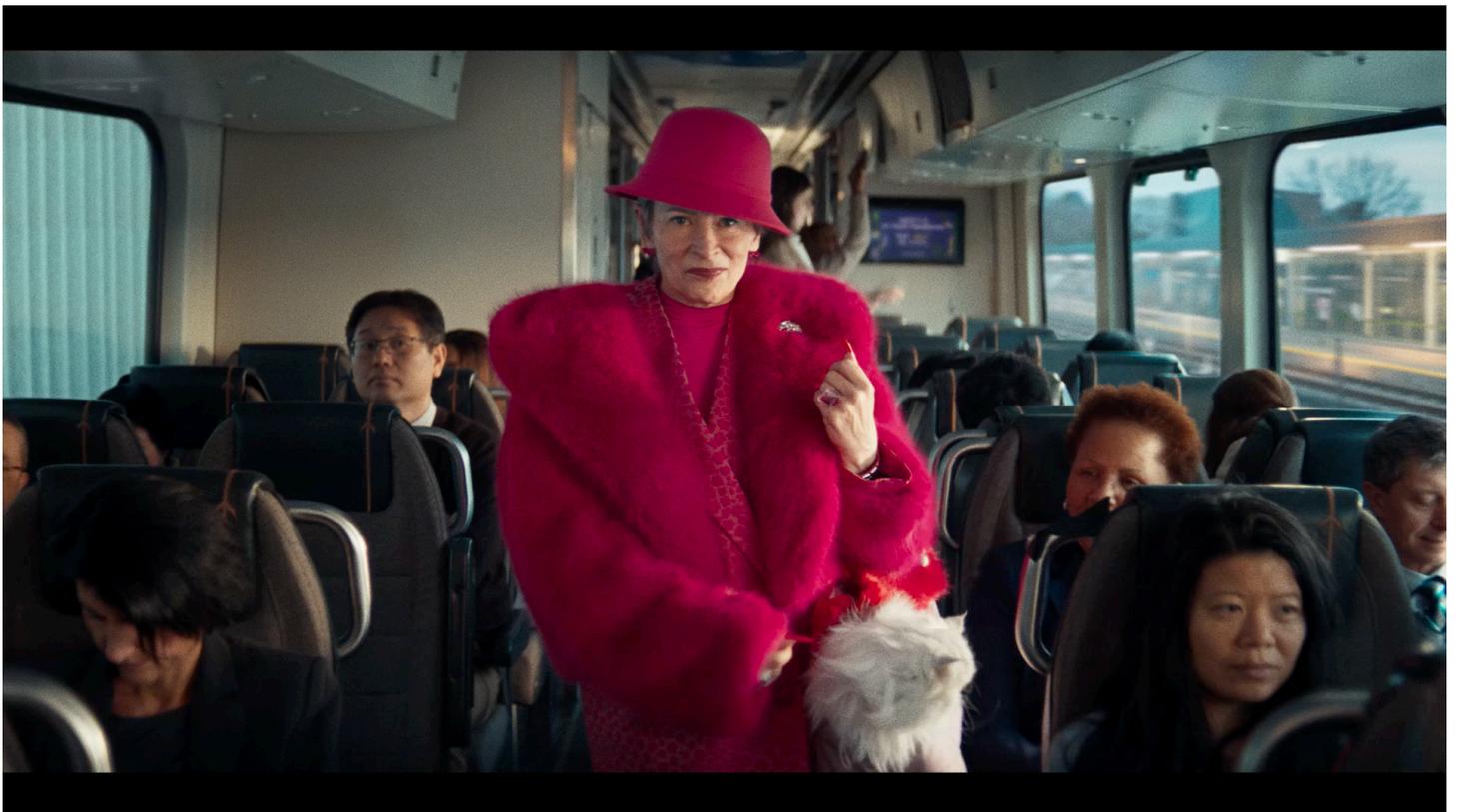
**When it comes to raising teens, it's as if some parents are reliving their own firsts (first crush, first heartbreak and so on). How can parents avoid imposing their own experiences on their children?**

We're all going through this reckoning between past and present. And if we go through it unaware, it's not always in our children's best interest. When my daughter was 13, one of her friends was sexually assaulted by another friend – the boy had grabbed this girl's breasts and genitals and she told him she didn't want

that. The girl ultimately told her mother, and they went to the police. When I found out about this, I realized that even though my daughter told me exactly what had happened, there was nothing in my brain that thought, at the time, this girl was sexually assaulted. I just figured it was a misunderstanding ... I'm somebody who has done reporting on sexual violence and won awards for it ... and yet I didn't initially reckon with the fundamental truth. There was something in me that wanted to justify it and make it okay because that was what had been done to women of my generation when they were teen girls. I realized I still had the voices of my father and other parents of my generation, which is "boys will be boys." We may need to clear the fog of our past to see the present clearly.

**Speaking of past attitudes, you write that today's teens are "the queerest generation in history." What does this mean for parents helping their child navigate the world of dating?**

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We need to re-examine old narratives. Parents today mostly grew up with the

heterosexual default without even knowing it. Give your child the grace of seeing their own journey as it is and talking with them about it. You could say something like, this is how I grew up but what you're going through is incredibly important and I don't want to lay that narrative on you.

### **How does social media shape modern teen relationships?**

We want to be very tuned in to the endlessness of social media, that when you go home, you do not leave your crushes and your breakups and your boyfriends and girlfriends behind. You carry them in your pocket all the time. And that is really a hard way to grow up. It puts a lot of pressure on young people. A big theme is, I don't know if I want to be texting quite so much with someone. Another big theme is the inability to figure out what to do in real-life challenges. How do you translate a really close experience of messaging, texting or Snapchatting with the fact that when you get to school, the person doesn't talk to you, and you don't even acknowledge that you're having this communication. I think about the boy who told me very guiltily how he'd broken up with his girlfriend over text. He said, I just didn't know how to do it. And I thought, this is showing how hungry young people are to figure out the ethical challenges and skills required to do things in a responsible and caring way, even if it's hard.

### **Can you expand on your idea that every teen relationship story is also a mental health story?**

I interviewed more than 100 young people and parents about first relationship experiences. I kept hearing about these instances where one partner was dealing with drug addiction, being hospitalized or put into the psychiatric ward. Or where one partner – sometimes even both partners – sunk into a depression or had to deal with various other aspects of mental health. And I kept thinking, do I have a skewed sample here? What I realized is a lot of teens are falling apart, and this was even before the pandemic. We know now that young people are in a mental-health crisis.

When we first open our hearts to others romantically, it's in the same timeframe that most of us are first experiencing darker feelings. It's not that relationships make young people depressed, it's that the two things are colliding in that mental-health phase. Even in a relationship where nobody's falling apart, relationships touch young people; suddenly, their day is not necessarily determined solely by how they feel but also by how someone else feels. If their partner isn't texting them back, they're going to feel anxious. If their partner doesn't seem happy, they're worried. This interdependence is a source of joy but also stress.

**Every house has what you call a “relationship policy” – the rules and expectations families set for dating, like if a closed bedroom door is okay. What's the best approach to take when it comes to setting up a reasonable policy?**

You figure out your policy and you practice transparency so that you can explain why the policy [is in place]. It's really important because when teens are given rules and they don't know why, they're going to be thinking, this doesn't make sense to me so I'm going find a way around it. For example, if you're just not comfortable having a couple sleep over in your house you can say, in my house, I value my own sense of comfort and privacy and I am not comfortable with two young people who aren't married sleeping in the same room; I would prefer that after 11 p.m., it's separate rooms.

**Parents need to talk to their teens about safety. What are some important discussions to have when it comes to consent and boundaries?**

Affirmative consent – the idea that each step of a sexual encounter should be a knowing, voluntary and mutual decision – is increasingly the standard for this generation. Teens, especially girls, are often teaching their parents more about affirmative consent than parents are teaching their kids. But it's still important to talk about this, especially to boys, who sometimes aren't as immersed in this idea and may be working under a different set of norms and pressures that emphasize scoring and prioritizing their own pleasure over their partner's. I also think that it's

important to talk about the grey areas: The difference between consent and genuine desire, the ways that sexual experiences can be confusing – that you can want something and not want something at the same time, that you can regret doing something that you thought you wanted.

**Let's talk breakups. We tend to get protective of our children. As you put it: Their pain pains us. How can parents support their teens through a breakup?**

The first step is to validate the pain. The feelings can be all-consuming, and it can be very difficult for parents to witness their children's pain. We're often tempted to minimize it by reminding teens of their youth and future and all the opportunities, romantic and otherwise, ahead of them. We do this because we don't want our children to hurt so much, but they will anyway. For many young people, breakups are their first experience of real loss. What teens remember are concrete ways their parents show up for them. The mom who dropped everything to drive several states away to pick her daughter up after a difficult college breakup. The dad who helped his son figure out how to get his stuff back from his boyfriend's house. Parents just opening their arms to hold their grieving children, using that original superpower of touch and soothing. Research shows that people recover from breakups best when they can see them as learning experiences: What went wrong? What do I value in a relationship? How will this change me moving forward? If teens are open to these kinds of conversations, that's another way parents can help.

**What's the one thing you hope parents take away from reading your book?**

Communication is everything. Talk about love and heartbreak. It's a fascinating subject for reflection. If you're able to get the conversation started early, before adolescence, even better, because that makes it easier – you've already established that rapport.

*This interview has been edited and condensed.*

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