



**By Matthew O. Richardson**

Served as second counselor in the Sunday School general presidency from 2009 to 2014



My wife and I wanted to give our children the skills to successfully navigate growing relationships.

While serving as bishop in a young single adult ward, I couldn't help but notice how young people handled their emerging relationships. I was increasingly worried about those who approached dating with very little purpose, understanding, or direction. Some were apathetic, while others were much too zealous. Often they didn't know how to treat each other properly.

My biggest concern was their future. I desperately wanted them to experience the joys and fulfillment of a happy marriage and family

life. The statement by President Spencer W. Kimball (1895–1985) that “clearly, right marriage begins with right dating”<sup>1</sup> seemed to occupy my thoughts during this time.

I remember driving home with my wife from a ward social activity feeling particularly frustrated at what I'd seen. “This shouldn't be happening,” I blurted out. “After all, they know better!”



# TIPS FOR PARENTS: CREATING YOUR OWN DATING ACADEMY

Know & teach proper standards early.  
Be a good example & use good manners.

TEACH  
MODESTY BY  
EXAMPLE.



Talk with your  
children - A LOT!

Talk about  
appropriate affection.  
See *FTSOY* booklet.

Jot down new  
lesson ideas &  
discuss them  
together.



After a few moments my wife said, “Maybe they *don’t* know better.”

We began talking in earnest about whether the process of developing good relationships was inherent in people or learned. In the end, my wife and I concluded that the skill of developing worthwhile relationships is something a person indeed learns, whether from peers, family, a course or book, culture, traditions, or religious beliefs and practices. We immediately thought of our own children and wondered if we were

adequately preparing them for their future relationships.

We began exploring ideas on how we could best teach our children to develop appropriate relationships. We wanted to take an intentional approach. We wanted to convey the importance and purpose of relationships. We also wanted to teach realistic, proper, and practical behaviors that would empower self-confidence, engender confidence in others, and lay a foundation for healthy relationships.

In all of this we felt that we needed to start early—long before

our children began dating—and we wanted our experience to be filled with learning and teaching that were natural and hopefully fun. We fully understood, too, that we would be competing with the way the media portray relationships.

Our efforts resulted in the “Richardson Dating Academy,” which you can read about in more detail in this month’s issue of the *New Era*. What follows here is a list of tips and ideas we learned along the way that all parents can use to help teach their children about forming positive relationships.

Limit distractions. Turn off your phones!

At restaurants, point out and observe "good behavior" in others. Observe & discuss with children how couples interact.

Teach children to look people in the eye when talking to them.



Teach children to focus on the OTHER PERSON. Forget yourself!

Share experiences that illustrate treating others with courtesy & kindness.

Teach children how to calculate a tip & how to pay the bill.



## Preparing to Teach

The more my wife and I counseled together, the more we realized this wasn't just a good idea; it was our parental responsibility. President Boyd K. Packer, President of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, taught that parents "have not only the right but the sacred obligation, and they are under counsel from the leaders of the Church, to concern themselves with [their children's] dating habits."<sup>2</sup> While we were emboldened, we were still unsure of exactly how we could fulfill our goals.

We felt that no matter how we

prepared our children, we needed to ensure that what we taught would be founded on solid gospel principles and standards and not just our own experience or bias. We began searching for pertinent gospel doctrines, Church guidelines, materials (such as *For the Strength of Youth*), and teachings of prophets, seers, and revelators.

We then counseled together about how we could best teach our children about the purposes and practices of dating and developing appropriate relationships. We specifically wanted our children to learn through discovery,

observation, counseling together, and especially practicing relationship skills.

## Launching the Academy

Our "curriculum" was based on our outline of gospel doctrines, Church standards and guidelines, skills, activities, and objectives that we wanted our children to know and practice before they started dating. We then informed our children that they needed to graduate from this academy before their first date. You can imagine the funny looks we received at this announcement!



*Involve family  
in talking, role-  
playing, offering  
suggestions.*

*Teaching moments  
can happen anytime.*

*Teach children to plan their dates  
and always have a backup plan!*

The Richardson Dating Academy—or RDA, as our children called it—officially started for each of our children when he or she turned 13 years old. Using our curriculum outline as a guide, we intentionally made time to talk with our children about the purpose and timing of dating, courting, engagement, and even marriage. We often read together and discussed Church standards on how to develop relationships.

We found that it was a good idea to mix up the settings for our various discussions. We used family home evenings, the dinner table, father's

interviews, and even driving in the car. The more natural the setting, the better.

Conversation topics included whom to date, what to do or not to do on a date, common courtesies, ideas for good activities, and how to act in mixed company. We also covered practical considerations: how to appropriately plan a date or what to do if plans go awry (such as when someone gets sick or if an emergency arises). Your own curriculum can develop naturally as you study, ponder, and pray concerning what to teach your children.

### **Practicing the Concepts**

We found that showing and practicing were typically far more effective than just talking or telling. For example, we discovered that going out to dinner was the best way to expose our children to a variety of foods, help them practice good old-fashioned table manners in a public setting, and teach them how to order, use utensils, and appropriately tip a server.

When going over how to invite a person on a date, we first gave the child some practical instruction and then had him or her practice by calling older siblings or family members of the

Let your children plan some family activities.

Practice being "with" family. Pay attention to them. LISTEN!

Expose children to a variety of activities, foods, & experiences.

Let them plan, pay, & participate.



opposite sex (all were prepped beforehand) to invite them to an activity.

A favorite family home evening memory is the time we watched an older sister give her nearly 16-year-old brother advice and warnings about what to do at the end of a date—at the doorstep. We laughed (and marveled at her wisdom) as she shared her own experiences and they role-played possible scenarios for success. As you can imagine, family members loved role-playing during this part of the dating academy!

Repeating these types of activities for each child over the course of three years helped deepen understanding and build confidence through practice more than a single conversation about relationships ever could.

### Observing and Learning

We also discovered that it was incredibly helpful to provide as many opportunities as possible for our children to observe real-life relationships. For example, we would take them to a variety of social events and ask them to observe other couples. After inviting our child to watch a particular couple or group, we might ask, “What did you notice about this couple?”

Our children’s responses to such questions were not always what we expected. Sometimes they would say something like, “He likes her but she doesn’t like him.” We always asked additional questions like, “How can you tell?” These experiences led to wonderful discussions about real-life relationships.

On a different occasion, while watching a couple at a restaurant, one

son observed, “She had her phone under the table and was texting almost the entire dinner.”

“How do you feel about that?” we asked.

He said, “I think if you are going to be with a person, then you should actually *be with that person!*” This was a perfect opportunity to talk about the importance of paying attention to others. Elder Dallin H. Oaks of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles taught, “Dating involves commitments, if only for a few hours.”<sup>3</sup>

### Involving Friends

We wondered how our children’s friends would react when hearing about the dating academy. We were pleasantly surprised when some of their friends asked to learn more and to be included in some of the

Make your practice lessons fun. Always look for opportunities to learn.

Include your children's friends.



Be positive.

Build confidence.

Raise expectations.

Teach children to be committed.

activities. Others said they expected to be treated in positive ways when they were with one of our children because they knew they were with a “graduate” of the dating academy.

Graduation from the RDA came at the end of three years of learning, observing, counseling together, and practicing, followed by successful completion of the “final exam.” This happened as the boys in our family demonstrated what they learned by asking and taking their mother on their very first date, a date they had planned and prepared themselves. The girls had to implement the lessons they learned by accepting and going on their first date with me—their father.

At the conclusion of their first date, we presented our “graduates” with a diploma.

### Learning Continually

Contrary to what some might assume, we have continued working with our children on the principles and practices of successful relationships long after their graduation from the academy. We talk with them, make observations, and offer gentle reminders. Teaching our children is a lifelong process for all of us.

My wife and I present our children with a framed “graduate degree” from the dating academy for “Outstanding Application of Academy Principles” when they marry. Over the years, we have been blessed to witness the lessons learned that impacted our children’s experiences with dating, courting, engagement, and especially their marriages.

Originally, the intended outcome of the dating academy was that

our children would “know better” as they developed and navigated their relationships. In hindsight, we can see it produced so much more. For example, one daughter reflected on how the RDA instilled self-confidence during a very self-conscious stage of life. Another son said he learned to respect and value others. My wife and I believe that perhaps the best outcome of the dating academy was the endearing relationships forged with our children as we taught them and all of us learned together during those meaningful experiences. ■

*The author lives in Utah, USA.*

#### NOTES

1. Spencer W. Kimball, *The Miracle of Forgiveness* (1969), 241.
2. Boyd K. Packer, in Conference Report, Apr. 1965, 70.
3. Dallin H. Oaks, “Dating versus Hanging Out,” *Ensign*, June 2006, 12.