



THE GROWING BRAIN

EPISODE 21: Managing Healthy Relationships

Guest: Dena Kohleriter, LCSW

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From friendships to dating, what should we be thinking about when it comes to healthy relationships? Learn the warning signs of unhealthy relationships and tips for conversations with kids with guest Dena Kohleriter.

Welcome to The Growing Brain, a social emotional health podcast. I am Maureen Fernandez with Momentous Institute, a nonprofit in Dallas, Texas, dedicated to all things, social emotional health. Welcome to Season Two, where we're diving deeper into some of the most challenging aspects of parenting - dating, sleep, ADHD, anxiety, and so much more on this season of The Growing Brain. Thank you for joining us.

Maureen *Welcome back to The Growing Brain podcast. Our guest today is Dena Kohleriter. Dena is a licensed clinical social worker on our therapeutic services team at Momentous. And in her role, she works a lot with teens, especially around issues related to bullying, dating violence, and working with parent child relationships. Dena also was a guest on the technology and kids episode of this podcast in season one. So if you missed that one, I definitely recommend you go back and listen to it. And most importantly, Dena is also a mom to an eight-year-old daughter. And we're so excited to have Dena here today. We're going to talk a lot about healthy relationships for our kids and dating relationships. So thanks for being here.*

Dena *It's a pleasure to be here.*

Maureen *So as you know, Dena, I have really young kids. So I think if I were listening, I would think, okay, dating relationships, that sounds like something I'm not even gonna think about for a long time. That's like a big kid teenager problem. Um, but based on our conversations I've had with you in the past, I have a feeling you disagree with that.*

Dena *Absolutely disagree because now's the important time to start talking. And maybe what we need to do is, is get rid of the label of dating relationship. Let's talk about relationships. Because, because it's all in the relationships that we have as a young child, you know, we're still talking about relationships with others and there are healthy friendships and unhealthy friendships.*

And if you start having conversations like that, when they're, when they're your kid's age, it makes it so much easier when you're talking about it, when it gets to some of the really scary stuff.

Maureen *Yeah. Yeah. That's really good. So let's talk a little bit about some of those early conversations. Like when do you start talking about this and, and, and what does it look like?*

Dena You know, it's, it's kind of an interesting thing for me because, uh, before I became a parent, I had a good, you know, 10, 15 years in the field where I was working with kids, um, on issues related to dating violence and bullying. And then when I became a parent, it's kind of like, you know, the sociologist where you're observing things in your own child's life.

And I was just kind of fascinated as she was entering, um, her social realm. And when she was in preschool and starting to form those friendships, And I remember, um, when she was in the three-year-old class and watching it, like a couple of the kids getting into a fight and what comes out of their mouth was like, you're not my friend.

Maureen *Yep. I've heard that.*

Dena And you start, you start thinking about, wow, that's, that's really interesting that, um, way of hurting each other, when you get mad at someone, when you're that little as to take that away from them, let's take the relationship away from them. And thinking about the relationships and how they form and what does it mean to be a good friend?

And if you start talking with kids, when they're in preschool about, you know, when someone's different, what is it that you like about them? You know, what does, it sounds like you have such a good time with them. What is it that you like about them and how does it make you feel when they do things like that?

And when kids do things that hurt their feelings, that when they come to you and they say, they're not my friend anymore, talking to them about what happened, because what we want to do is we want to talk to kids about friendships and that sometimes, you know, in healthy friendships, just like in healthy relationships, we have arguments and we have disagreements, but how do we work through them?

But then also we have to decipher when there are relationships, friendships that are worth keeping. And sometimes those, those early friendships kind of help you to kind of decide how do I want to be treated and what's okay. And, and talking about those things.

Maureen *Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. So as, as kids get older and you've kind of set a foundation for, you know, talking about friendship is really normal in this family. And then as they sort of start to get into more of those complex relationships, including dating, but also just... relationships get more complex as kids get older. How do you kind of handle some of the complexity there?*

Dena You run away screaming.

Maureen *That's my parenting strategy.*

Dena You know, it's funny. Um, because I think so much of people want to know about ages and stages. And when do you introduce this topic? And I think so much of it depends on your child. Um, you know, I hear a lot, you know, it's, it's normal kids model from their... what they say the model from their parents and, and you know, when they're little kids and they start playing family. Right. And the, and then when they're, when they're young and they talk about, well, that's my boyfriend. You know, and a lot of parents, you know, get freaked out by that. Like, no, no, no, no, no. They're not your boyfriend. We don't date. Um, you know, don't get so caught up in the labels with things like that, but this is, this is the time to start having conversations too. Um, I'm not sure I asked your question, answered your question... I think I kind of went off, I think I went off on a tangent there.

Maureen *No, that's good. I was asking sort of, how do you layer in some of the more complex things like labels, like boyfriend and girlfriend? I mean, I've, I've even heard those things in my house with my really young kids. So-and-so has a girlfriend...*

Dena You know, I think we get, we get caught up in this tangle of when do we listen to our kids and when do we teach our kids? And I think so much of the lessons in teaching our kids come from being a good listener and, and learning to elicit questions from them. And not getting caught up in, you know, particularly when we're talking about relationships, not getting caught up in the, in the lecturing them, and this is what we do, and this is what we don't do.

We need to ask them more questions about things like, you know, I noticed you're talking about that person, you know, tell me about them and usually, you know, like, um, I've noticed with my own daughter and I don't know that she'd want me talking about it, but she'll come and she'll, she'll tell me, you know, I think, I think so-and-so has a crush on me.

You know, and I'll ask her about, you know, so what makes you think that? And she's like, well, you know, he threw a note in my locker. Okay. So, you know, we talk about that or, um, you know, earlier, you know, she said something about, well, I think so-and-so because he pushes her and he, he does that to her a lot. So, you know, someone says that, that he likes her and we've gotta be really careful that we're not excusing bad behavior while he likes you. Well, that's not a sign of someone liking you and we've got to give messages to kids about when you like someone, you don't do things like that.

Maureen *That's really good.*

Dena And it's going, you know, our big worry, you know, as kids get older and they start dating. Um, who are they going to get involved with? You know? And I, I worked in the domestic violence field for about 10 years. And so my big fear is

always going to be about, you know, I don't want my daughter to get into an abusive relationship. But we know that one out of three high school students is experiencing some sort of abuse in their dating relationship. And if we start having conversations at a young age that when kids like you, when someone likes you, they shouldn't be hurting you. So, you know, what is it that you like about him?

You know, and well, you know, he's really nice to me. And like, when I dropped my pencils, you know, he stopped and he helped me pick them up or, you know, he complimented me, well, those are good things. Aren't those things that you want to carry on in relationships when you get older, right? You want someone that's going to be there to support you. You know, if you know, you drop something or if you're hurt or if, if you just need support that, that person's going to be there to support you with it. Or if you do well, if you, if you, um, get a promotion at work, someone that's going to be there to compliment you on it and celebrate those are all good things. And those are signs of healthy relationships. So from an early age, if we're, if we're... Oh yeah. That's, that's so nice. When, when people do that, that's a sign of a good friend when they do something like that.

Maureen *Yeah. So you're just calling it out sort of explicitly.*

Dena Yeah. And labeling it.

Maureen *Yeah. So. You said, what was that stat? You just said one in three...*

Dena One in three high school students... And the thing that we know is that 3% of those kids are going to tell an authority figure 6% total, a family member, but 67% of those kids are confiding in their peers. And so, you know, that's kind of something that's always been important to me is that we have to educate, you know, the peers and the teenagers on how to help their friends that are in unhealthy and abusive relationships because that's, that's where they're getting their information from. It's not really coming from the adults. And it's, it's staggering um, to me, I've for a long time, I've done groups with kids that have been in abusive relationships or haven't been in abusive relationships, but want to know more about it. And I always ask them, when was the first time that you had an adult sit down and talk to you about what a healthy relationship is supposed to look like? The vast majority have never had an adult that sat down with them and actually talk to them about what a healthy relationship supposed to look like. They learn from what they see, whether it's from TV and movies or their parents. And those aren't always the most reliable sources of what a relationship actually is supposed to look like.

Maureen *Right. Yeah. So I want to come back to that, what you said about the teens who are confiding in their peers. So I'm going to come back to that, but let's talk a little bit about what, what a healthy relationship looks like and what an unhealthy relationship looks like. Just so we can kind of have a frame of reference of what we're talking about. I think we all know, obviously like*

physically violent relationship is unhealthy, but there's more nuance to it than those.

Dena Sure. You know, you usually kind of split into three categories of healthy versus unhealthy versus abusive relationships.

Um, now a healthy relationship is going to be based... the heart of healthy relationship is going to be equality. Um, it's, it's a relationship where two people, uh, develop a connection that's based on mutual respect, trust, and honesty and support. That is the basis of a, of a healthy relationship. Um, and I read something recently. I wrote it down that that a healthy relationship should bring more happiness than stress into your life.

Maureen *Oh, I love that. I mean, I think we can all think of relationships that feel healthy to us, not just romantic, but friendship, relationships. They're those that, that do exactly that they bring us more happiness than stress.*

Dena Okay. And, and I don't want to, I don't want people to be naive and think that a healthy relationship is never going to have times of stress, right. That, and kids need to know that too, that there are times where, you know, there's, you're going to get into arguments and there's times where it's going to be stressful, but as more of your relationship, stressful than it is happy?

Maureen *Yeah. Yeah.*

Dena And the other thing to know is that oftentimes unhealthy relationships, they started out as healthy. They've kind of just run their course and a lot of times those are relationships where it's almost like they become more of a habit than anything else. It's not necessarily that you want to be there with that person. It's just kind of like, well, you know what we always do.

Maureen *Let's talk a little more about the unhealthy relationships then.*

Dena Okay. So, um, So there's, there's in a healthy relationship, there's going to be lots more ups than downs. You know, the unhealthy relationship there's going to be more downs than there are ups.

Um, one person, you know, and, and this is, this is the part that's interesting too, is that one person in the relationship is not enjoying it as much. There may be one person in it that's, you know, yeah, this is great. I love this. The other person is maybe kind of bored and losing interest. Um, they can, they can disagree and solve problems fairly, but, but there's a lot of disagreements and problems in an unhealthy relationship.

And it could be that they've just grown apart. And so, you know, you get to that point where it's just, it's not good... One person is more the center of the relationship than the other person. So there's a lot more time spent focusing

on one person's feelings and one person's emotions and it's, you know, are they going to get upset?

And there's a lot of stress that's coming from thinking about how that other person is going to react and you don't want to offset the balance. And that's usually a pretty good indicator when things have become unhealthy.

Maureen *And then you mentioned sort of a third category of abusive. I think we have an idea in our heads of what that is, but what can you say about...*

Dena Well, uh, an abusive relationship is generally there's alarm bells going off, you know, someone is getting hurt in that relationship, whether it's, um, emotionally or physically, verbally, sexually, you know, that, that it is not safe to be in that relationship anymore.

Um, and that's kind of a whole different category. If we're talking about abusive relationships, um, generally, you know, you need to have some help planning on how to get out of that relationship. Um, you know, whereas an unhealthy relationship, you may be sad that it's over, but you may also be pretty relieved and you're ready, you know, that you can end that relationship and it might be hard, but you're not gonna be physically harmed from doing that.

Maureen *Hard but safe. Yeah. Yeah. Um, so you talked a lot about how kids confide in their peers. And we just know developmentally about teenagers at this age, that they're sort of leaning away from their parents and they're leaning into those peer relationships anyway. And just anecdotally, every teenager we know, like if the parent sits them down and says, I want to have a conversation about this thing. I mean, they're just that it's difficult to have those conversations with teens who kind of just want to do the opposite of what their parents think. So how do parents kind of approach... say, say you think your child might be in an unhealthy relationship? How do parents kind of approach that?*

Dena Um, and that's, that is a tricky one, but this is, this is going to be kind of across the board. What I, what I tell peers also is you have to watch that you're not telling them what to do, right? Because if you are telling them, it's kind of like someone who's abusive. If you're telling them what to do, you're taking their power and control away. And you're also increasing the likelihood that they're going to just go behind your back. And they're also teaching them that you don't, you don't get it. Right. So generally like, uh, uh, a first step is just, you know, how are... asking, how are things going? Tell me what you like about this person. Kind of like when they were little and I was talking about, what do you like about that? Tell me about it.

Yeah. Um, you know, I think, you know, some relationships are hard, you know, I wonder sometimes I know that it's kind of hard to go and talk to your parents about things. Do you have someone that you feel like you can talk to. Um,

yeah. You know, one thing who knows, because parenting is such a, it's such a roller coaster ride as it is, you know, one of the things that I try to be cognizant about is the adults that are in my child's life, because I know, you know, right now, fortunately, you know, like I feel like she, she confides in me, but I also know we're going to hit that stage where she doesn't want mom and to know anything. Um, but I also know that there are several adults in her life that aren't her mom and that my hope is that at some point that, you know, she needs to, that she can feel like she can talk to them about that.

Um, but if you do, if you, do, you have concerns you to start with the conversation, start with, tell me about it. Um, uh, a common mistake that I see people make when they're, when they're talking to someone, for example, that's in an abusive relationship, you know, the questions, the why questions, you know, why are you still with them? You know, you know, why don't you just leave? If you're asking questions like that, you're asking the other person to justify them. And basically, then they're going to defend that person and think of all the reasons why they should stay.

So if you can change the why to what, so, you know, what, what keeps you in this relationship? What is it that you love about him? Yeah. And, um, are there things, so the, that, you know, you ever want to talk about, you know, are there things that maybe you get confused about sometimes? Um, the other thing I think about is media is pretty great and there are lots of things out there, you know. Take the opportunity to, to watch certain TV shows or watch a movie with them. And if you can talk about what's going on in the relationships that you see there, um, then I'll a lot of times that takes out the, the, the personalization that comes from it. It's safer to talk about what's going on, on screen than to talk about their own relationships.

Um, you know what I find is that's easier sometimes like when I'm talking to teenagers, I can, you know, it's the, you know, the old, *I've got a friend who...* But it's like, I know someone once who really struggled with this. Have you ever, have you ever had struggles like that before? And commenting, that's really hard. And sometimes too validating their, their confused feelings.

Cause the thing is a lot of times when we see someone that's in an unhealthy or abusive relationship, we have a tendency to villainize that person's partner, right? Um, and that totally discounts all the reasons why they're in that relationship. It's like, think about when you start dating someone, when you started dating your husband. And if he had acted like a jerk, the first time you went out with him, you wouldn't have given him a second chance. Right. The reason the people start dating someone is because they really like him. You know, they think they're cute. They make them laugh. They have fun. They feel good about themselves when they're with this person. And so they have all of the stuff that goes into the relationship, all this wonderful stuff. And then there are the other parts that come into it. But if you get rid of those bad parts, you're also getting rid of all the good parts and that's what makes it really complicated.

Maureen *That's so good to remember, because as an outsider to the relationship it's easier to just see the bad things and you don't have access usually to the good things.*

Dena Right? Right. Um, I, you know, I remember I had a good friend who, um, had dated someone that I had known it when I was in high school and I was good friends with this guy in high school. But then in college I saw stuff and he was downright abusive. But then I went out with them as a couple and he was the friend that I had in high school and I saw him and it's like, yeah, that's why she's in love with him because he's fun. And he's funny. And you know, he can be really sweet and he has those parts to him too. And if you think about it, like thinking about the person that you love and trust and count on more than anyone in the world, and if that person was mean to you or they hurt you one time, would you cut them loose? It's not so easy. And so we have to really make an effort to understand that side of it too. And if we can see the good in that person, and kind of, and kind of acknowledge that, then that has a tendency to let the other person kind of open up and relax and talk about it because they know that you actually see and recognize the complexity of the situation.

Maureen *And yeah. And this gets harder if you don't like the other person.*

Dena Yes, it does.

Maureen *So if your child brings home a partner who you just, just can't stand it's way harder to be able to sort of see what they see.*

Dena Right. Right. In, in the thing that we have to keep in mind is that we want, we want our child, our children to know that they can come and talk to us.

Right. And if we're, if we're not making an effort to understand and if we're labeling the person that they care about as bad, then that's going to push them away from being able to talk to them.

Maureen *Yeah. I've heard you say before in conversations that it's, uh, it's never a good idea to, if they come to you and they say so-and-so is, you know, being mean to me and we're having a hard time, it's never a good idea to be like, yeah, I hate that guy.*

Dena Right. You want to make sure you never put down the person, but you can, you can put down abuse, you can say things like you don't deserve to be treated that way. Nobody deserves to be treated that way. You know, I'm... I'm sorry that, that, that happened.

Maureen *Yeah. And putting him down is what I've heard you say before is that then it just shuts that conversation down. And if later that person goes back with him or, you know, there are good sides to him that it, it kind of, it closes the door.*

Dena It closes the door. They're not going to come back to you. Yeah. Um, the, the other thing that can be really helpful too, instead of telling them what to do is giving them options or asking them what have, what have they been thinking about doing, what is it that you, what have you tried to do? What have you thought about doing, what do you think would happen if you did that? And if you can keep it more asking questions and getting them to think it through and come up with their own answers, it's, it's less of, well, mom's telling me and mom's lecturing me. It's... it's helping them to come to the conclusions that you hope that they'll come to.

Maureen *Yeah. You're sort of answering a question that I had thought about asking, which was, um, you know, I think the journey of childhood really is, uh, you know, when they're really little, you, you kind of control a lot of their decision-making for them. Cause they're not really able to do it on their own. And as they get older and start to prepare to leave the house, you hope that they'll be able to make some of the decisions so that then they can go into adulthood. Um, and where is the line, I guess, between letting them make those decisions and maybe mess up, or maybe feel what it feels like to have your heart broken, or kind of go through some of those hard things with relationships, um, for, and kind of sitting back and letting them be in that messy place versus sort of setting those boundaries or being the parent. And I know that's hard with all decisions with teenagers, but here, especially as it pertains to relationships, it feels like that gets really messy.*

Dena Oh my God. I mean, what's worse than seeing your child in pain. That's, that's the worst thought in the world and, and we all want to wrap them in bubble wrap. Right. We want to protect them from, from that pain. Um, you know, I think the thing that, that we have to step back is, you know, this is life. And there are certain things that they have to experience. Now is their life at risk? Are they physically being harmed? I mean, this there, what, what is it that's going on? Um, and then at that point, I think it also, it always comes back to communication with them. If you're wanting to build trust, you're not going to go do things behind their back, but it's talking to them about, I'm really scared. This is kind of what I'm observing and it has me really worried. Um, what are you thinking? And getting their feedback and a lot of times, like, yeah, I'm scared too. Or sometimes it's like, I got it. I got it. But also giving the message. Listen, you know, I trust you and I want to give you the space to make your own decisions. But if I see some things going on, then I may have to step down. If you notice that they're at risk or if you're noticing bruises or things like that. And I'm kind of going to an extreme, we're talking about the abusive and really, I want to, you know, we probably should focus on the healthy versus unhealthy cause that's normal, but you know, you can, the hard part is you see it, coming, you see, you know, you, you know, what's coming and you want to protect them from pain.

But those are also our learning opportunities. Right? Right. And sometimes we have to have those painful heartbreaks to learn what it is that a healthy and an

unhealthy relationship is. We learn what we want for future relationships. What's okay with us. I mean, I'm sure everyone that's listening can think about a painful heartbreak, right?

Maureen *Yep.*

Dena And. You know, would you want to take away that experience? Maybe some of them..

Maureen *I'm kind of like maybe.. no, you're right. I mean, that's, that's exactly in the space where we grow and we learn. Um, and especially in relationships, those early relationships teach you what you like and don't like in relationship.*

I mean, I learned a lot from the first relationships that I was in like, oh yeah, I'm not cool with that actually. Or this is not the kind of person that I want to, you know, you learn a lot from...

Dena Well, and, and so if you can think of yourself, okay. I can't be the bubble wrap that protects them from everything, but what I can be is the pillow they land on.

And so you know that you want them to have those experiences. You, you, you hope that it's not going to be too, you painful for them, but you want them to know, listen, you know, I trust you. I trust your judgment. And if there's ever anything where you want to talk to me about I'm here from you, I'm here for you and I'm going to be there and I'm going to support you no matter what, right?

Maureen *Let's take a quick break.*

Commercial

Thank you for listening to our podcast. I'm so excited to announce that we have launched an online store where we're selling some of our favorite tools for helping kids develop social emotional health. These are things I use with my kids and they're amazing products. We have posters. We have books. We have a little book that teaches kids about the parts of the brain. Then we have a book for older kids that's a comic book that talks them through how the brain shows up during a typical day in the middle school classroom. We have curriculum, journals, posters, storybooks, all kinds of things in our online shop. So if you are interested, I would love for you to check it out. You can find more at momentousinstitute.org/shop.

Maureen *Okay. We are back. I want to talk very briefly on this subject, but I want to talk just a little bit about sex. And the reason I say briefly is that, of course, every family has their own values about sex and what's appropriate and not appropriate, and at what age, and you know, that's very personal and I'm not, I don't want to suggest that we're going to give people advice on sort of how*

they approach that conversation with their kids. Those are sort of the values that families will decide. But I do want to talk a little bit about sort of having the conversation and sort of what, uh, some... any guidelines you have about just sort of how to talk about it.

Dena Okay. Um, this is kind of funny, cause I think this was the conversation that, um, that most parents fear the most. It's, it's kind of funny cause I have a group of moms that will go out to dinner once, once a month. And uh, we're talking about this, you know, when do you have the talk? And they're like, well, we're just going to send them to you.

Maureen *Is that a service you provide because I could do that too!*

Dena Well, what's what's so funny and about it is that all the, all these fears that we have about talking to our kids about sex, we're thinking from an adult perspective, right. And we're going way ahead and kind of the answer that I'm going to give to any parent and talking about any issue is when your kid comes to you to talk to you about something, you just meet them at their level. Um, you know, I think it's kind of natural, you know, when, you know, they start getting 9, 10, you know, the, that their bodies are going through some changes. And so you have to have conversations with them, you know, the normal puberty talks. And some kids, when they're younger, they're going to come to you with questions about sex. And so you have, you know, the, the birds and the bees, that basic talk. But now if we're talking about sex with relationships, that's, that's a whole other topic.

And so, you know, what I encourage parents is to be realistic and that, yes, these are our values. And this is what I hope for you. I think those terms, this is what I hope for you. This is, this is kind of the values that our family has, but I also know that sometimes teenagers make different choices. And I want you to feel that even if you make a choice, that isn't what we've taught you, and isn't a match with the values of our family, I'm going to be there for you. And you know, I'm going to help you, you know, through this. But if you have a kid that's coming to you to talk to you about sex, that's, that's actually a good thing, that means that you're doing a good job, making them feel comfortable. Um, yeah, I think there's kids at a certain point where they're not going to be coming to you to talk about it. They're going to be going to other sources.

Maureen *They're going to be going to you because I'm gonna send my kids to you...*

Dena (Laughs.) But, but the idea is that that when, when talking with kids, if we are, if we're getting all flustered and you know, like, oh gosh, okay. I don't want to talk to you about this! And having all of that, we're giving the kids a message that this is a bad thing to talk about.

Maureen *Right. Just layering in the shame and all those feelings.*

Dena Right. And so, um, you meet them where they are and you answer the questions as at, at their level. So you're not going to go into, you know, explaining the Kama Sutra to them. You know, you're not going to do something like that when a kid comes to you and they're, and they're talking to you about, you know, I'm thinking about having sex with my boyfriend. They're thinking about the emotions of it, you know, like I really like... and they may be thinking about the peer pressure. So this is also goes back to healthy relationships. Is this something that you want to do or do you, or do you feel pressured to do it? Is this something that you guys are agreeing on, um, together?

You know, are you worried about safety? What do you think, how do you think this will impact your relationship if you do that? What do you worry about with it? What are your fears? And so taking it back to the, the turning the questions to them. And what is it that you want to know about it?

Maureen *Nice. I love what the advice you always give is so many questions thrown back at them. And I just love that... it's just non-therapists don't have that skill. So not all of us naturally do that. So I just really appreciate the way that you do that where you, you kind of take what they're saying and you kind of throw these questions, cause it really does help them. Now they're answering the question and they're processing through their thoughts out loud. And that's a therapist skill that I don't know if you know that not all of us naturally lean to.*

Dena I think I said this is the last podcast. There's a quote that I love that, and I say this to parents all the time. Is it says that God gave us two ears and one mouth and we need to use it in that per, um, perspective. We have to listen twice as much as we're talking.

And so, you know, asking the questions and getting them, you know, nine, nine out of 10 times, they're going to come to a similar, a similar, um, um, decision. Right. Because you have to think about, let's say your child is 16 and they're talking to you about this. You have 16 years of values that you have poured into them. Right? All those things from the time that they're a little child, all the little messages, um, about, you know, what makes a good friend and what makes... how do you feel about that? All of those things get poured into you all the times that you've spent with your religious affiliation, whether it's, you know, a church or temple, mosque. All of these things are live inside of them. You're helping them sort through all of those things themselves. It's all there.

Maureen *Yeah. I love that. That's great. Um, we've touched on this a few times, this idea that the kids are confiding in their peers and, uh, and you mentioned peer pressure just now. What, how can kids be an ally for any of their friends who may be in relationships. I know, even as we were preparing for this, I was thinking about when I was in high school, I was really not interested in dating. I wasn't not really in relationships, but I had a lot of friends starting to go into that world. And, and even just thinking back to that time, like I could see some of*

them were not in the healthiest of relationships, but I didn't know how, I didn't know what to do with that. Um, so I assume there are some things kids can be doing to sort of support their peers in this space.

Dena Well, I think, you know, kids are naturally talking to each other. So if you have a friend that's coming to you kind of like what we're telling the parents, don't be afraid to ask questions. And, and the biggest message that I give is, um, ask questions and don't tell them what to do. You know, in, in, you know, going back to statistics from abusive relationships, um, in an abusive relationship, the victim is going to leave the relationship. It's, they're going to break up an average of seven times before they leave. So they're going to break up and they're going to get back together and they're going to break up and they're going to get back together. And if you're telling them to break up at a time when they're not ready to, oftentimes that can just kind of increase the danger.

So, so the idea is that person has to be ready to make that decision. So what you can do is just offer that support, listen to them. Ask them questions, let them know that you're there for them no matter what. And if you, if you see something that really worries you, tell them, I'm, I'm really worried about you. I'm just worried about you.

Maureen *Yeah. Then they know, you know, if they, if they do want to talk or if later they decide they want to talk to me now that you're a safe person, they can talk to you.*

Dena Yeah. I think a lot of times, um, when we're in a relationship and things start getting bad, it's, it's, it's kinda like getting into, um, a pot of water that's on the stove. If you're in it and then they turn the heat up, you know, it's that slow boil and you don't notice it, but if someone were to put you in a pot of boiling water, you notice it right away. Um, and so sometimes friends don't notice things. They can kind of push off things that are worrisome, but, uh, one of their friends who they've confided in says, you know, that's, that's not right. I'm worried about you. He shouldn't have done that to you. Remember though, it's putting down the action, not the person. That's another thing to keep in mind.

Maureen *Yeah, that's good. So for anyone who's listening and thinks, this is... all this sounds really familiar. This is, I really need a lot more information on this topic. What sort of resources do you recommend for people who, who are looking for more information?*

Dena Um, there is actually a really great resource that's it is loveisrespect.org.

Maureen *Love is respect.*

Dena [Loveisrespect.org](http://loveisrespect.org). Um, the national teen dating violence hotline. They actually have a website where they have people online all the time answering questions, but they also have like a whole bunch of resources and quizzes and

handouts. And so you can get tons of information there. Um, you know, a lot of times, and once again, we're not saying that this is abusive relationships, but healthy versus unhealthy, a lot of times, uh, domestic violence agencies can give you resource resources to those things too. Um, the Texas Council on Family Violence also has resources available too.

Maureen *Right. Um, so we're closing out here and I just wanted to ask you, what is sort of your biggest piece of advice of everything that you've shared or not shared so far? What, what do you think is the best, sort of biggest thing people should know about helping kids form and maintain safe and healthy relationships?*

Dena Oh, there's a lot.

Maureen *Not to put you on the spot.*

Dena Um, you know, I'm gonna, I'm gonna go with the, first off the listening and asking questions. The other thing is it's never too early to start talking about healthy relationships.

Maureen *I know that one's for me. You're giving me that advice.*

Dena But I think it's so important, and um, I mentioned watching my daughter and in those three-year-old classes and now watching her in eighth grade, um, eighth grade... uh in third grade, she's eight years old, and watching how, how friendships are starting to change and, you know, and you form deeper relationships, you know, and, and overhearing certain conversations and the way that they communicate with each other. Commenting on, on things that you're noticing, when you notice some of that's been a really good friend say, hey, I know that they did that. That's, that's a sign of a really good friend. Um, you know, and pointing out those things, you know, you keep those conversations going all the time and parents, you know, don't be afraid to talk about what a healthy relationship looks like. And even if you're not sure, do the research to find out and have conversations together. Some of my most powerful, um, family therapy sessions have been when I've had a mother and a teenage daughter in session together, and we do a list of, of, uh, qualities of a healthy relationship. And a mom will say, you know, I never really thought about that when I was younger. I wish I had known and we'll start talking about stuff that maybe they experienced in their teens, in their teenage years. And then that teenagers like, oh, well maybe she does get me a little bit more than I thought.

Maureen *Yeah. Nice.*

Dena So we have to have those conversations, just don't be afraid to talk. We get in our head, it's adult worries, right? Yeah. Right. Yeah. Stay on your, on your child's low level. Remember what it's like to be their age.

Maureen *Yeah. That's great advice. And, um, I am going to go home tonight and talk all about my kids and be like, why are you so obsessed as friendships today? I go home and try talking about all of it all at once. Um, no, you've given me a lot to think about definitely. Um, so many things to think about. So I really appreciate it. And thank you so much for this great conversation.*

Dena Thank you for having me.

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