



Study Guide for Parents of Bahá'í Youth/Young Adults

Dating, Courting, Character, Chastity, and Consent

Provided as an Educational Service from Marriage Transformation®

Introduction

Parents have many significant responsibilities, and a primary one is setting a positive example for your children. The powerful example of an excellent marriage provides a foundation of love and security for children and contributes in major ways to their well-being. A happy, unified marriage is one of the greatest gifts you give your children.

The Universal House of Justice includes marriage and parenting as an aspect of service: "...[E]very aspect of a person's life is an element of his or her service to Bahá'u'lláh: the love and respect one has for one's parents; the pursuit of one's education; the nurturing of good health; the acquiring of a trade or profession; one's behavior towards others and the upholding of a high moral standard; **one's marriage and the bringing up of one's children**; one's activities in teaching the Faith and the building up the strength of the Bahá'í community, whether this be in such simple matters as attending the Nineteen Day Feast or the observance of Bahá'í Holy Days, or in more demanding tasks required by service in the administration of the Faith; and, not least, to take time each day to read the Writings and say the Obligatory Prayer, which are the source of growing spiritual strength, understanding, and attachment to God." (The Universal House of Justice, December 7, 1992, European Bahá'í Youth Council; www.bahairesearch.com; bolding added)

We are also told that our credibility as Bahá'ís is very much linked to the maintenance of our families: "...[I]f the friends are not able to maintain harmony within their families, on what other basis do they hope to demonstrate to a skeptical world the efficacy of the pre-eminent character of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh? What possible influence could they hope to exert on the development of nations and the establishment of world peace?" (On behalf of the Universal House of Justice: *Lights of Guidance*, p. 222)

Below is a message from the Universal House of Justice about other ways your example contributes to your children as they mature.

Message to Parents in 5-Year Plan – How Can We Do Better at This?

"No less pertinent [than rectitude of conduct] to the success of the Bahá'í enterprise today are the Guardian's forthright comments on the importance of a chaste and holy life, 'with its implications of modesty, purity, temperance, decency, and clean-mindedness'. He was unequivocal in his language, summoning the friends to a life unsullied 'by the indecencies, the vices, the false standards, which an inherently deficient moral code tolerates, perpetuates, and fosters'. ... The forces at work on the hearts and minds of the young, to whom the Guardian directed his appeal most fervently, are pernicious indeed. Exhortations to remain pure and chaste will only succeed to a limited degree in helping them to resist these forces. What needs to be appreciated in this respect is the extent to which young minds are affected by the choices parents make for their own lives, when, no matter how unintentionally, no matter how innocently, such choices condone the passions of the world—its admiration for power, its adoration of status, its love of luxuries, its attachment to frivolous pursuits, its glorification of violence, and its obsession with self-gratification. ... May every one of them [the youth] come to know the bounties of a life adorned with purity and learn to draw on the powers that flow through pure channels." (Universal House of Justice to the Continental Counsellors, December 28, 2010)

Discussion Questions

1. What are some practical examples in a person's life of "modesty, purity, temperance, decency, and clean-mindedness"?
2. What are examples of "indecentcies, the vices, the false standards"?
3. How do your children respond when you exhort them to remain "pure and chaste"?
4. What are examples of choices that "condone the passions of the world"?
5. What parental behaviors are a good example for your children?

Guidance about Dating and Courting:

Published in *Marriage Can Be Forever--Preparation Counts!* Third Edition 2007, Chapters 9 & 10:

"...[T]here is nothing in the Bahá'í Writings which relates specifically to the so-called dating practices prevalent in some parts of the world, where two unmarried people of the opposite sex participate together in a social activity. In general, Bahá'ís who are planning to involve themselves in this form of behavior should become well aware of the Bahá'í Teachings on chastity and, with these in mind, should scrupulously avoid any actions which would arouse passions which might well tempt them to violate these Teachings. In deciding which acts are permissible in the light of these considerations, the youth should use their own judgment, giving due consideration to the advice of their parents, taking account of the prevailing customs of the society in which they live, and prayerfully following the guidance of their conscience. It is the sacred duty of parents to instill in their children the exalted Bahá'í standard of moral conduct, and the importance of adherence to this standard cannot be over-emphasized as a basis for true happiness and for successful marriage." (On behalf of the Universal House of Justice: February 5, 1992, to an individual)

The following is a letter written by the Universal House of Justice in response to an inquiry from a father about his sons:

"As you know, courtship practices differ greatly from one culture to another, and it is not yet known what pattern of courtship will emerge in the future when society has been more influenced by Bahá'í Teachings. However, there is no indication that it will resemble the practices extant in existing cultures.... In this interim period, the friends are encouraged to make great efforts to live in conformity with the Teachings and to gradually forge a new pattern of behavior, more in keeping with the spirit of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation. In this context, we offer the following comments.

"Although a Bahá'í may, if he chooses, seek his parents' advice on the choice of a partner, and although Bahá'í parents may give such advice if asked, it is clear from the Teachings that parents do not have the right to interfere in their children's actual choice of a prospective partner until approached for their consent to marry. Therefore, when discussing the issue of courtship with your sons, it would be best to discuss it on the level of principle without reference to individuals.

"In the context of the society in which your family now lives, a society in which materialism, self-centeredness and failing marriages are all too common, your sons may well feel that it is wise to have a long period of courtship in which the prospective partners spend much time together and become thoroughly acquainted with each other's character, background and family. This practice does not in itself contradict Bahá'í law and, as it is not unacceptable in ... [country name removed], it appears to be a viable option. As you are aware, Bahá'u'lláh ordained that Bahá'í engagement should not exceed 95 days*, and, although this law has not yet been applied universally, it highlights the desirability of marrying quickly once the decision to marry has been firmly taken and parental consent obtained. However, in a relationship in which such a decision has not been taken and in which the law of chastity is strictly observed, there is no objection, in

principle, to a prolonged friendship in which the two individuals entertain the possibility of marrying each other at some time in the future.

“You have mentioned that your sons like to invite their girlfriends to spend a lot of time with the family and that you are not entirely happy with this situation. Each family member has rights which should be respected, and if you wish to have some time in your home without the presence of non-family members, the other members of your family should take this seriously into consideration. However, we hasten to point out to you that the situation which you describe, in which your sons wish their friends to be involved with your family, is much more in line with the Teachings than the common pattern in Western countries in which many youth virtually exclude their parents from interacting with their peers, sometimes distancing themselves from their families in order to have the freedom to engage in frivolous and even unchaste behavior....”

(Universal House of Justice: August 28, 1994, to an individual)

* For information about whether the 95-day engagement law applies to your circumstances, please contact your Spiritual Assembly for up-to-date guidance.

Discussion Questions

1. How do we help our children to be effective at using their own judgment?
2. When is it permissible to offer advice to one’s children? What type of advice is possible?
3. What behaviors would be inappropriate interference in a relationship?
4. What dating behaviors would be a concern for you? How could you communicate about them?
5. How can you strengthen your relationship with your children?
6. How can you strengthen your relationship with your children’s friends or dating partners? With their family members?
7. How can your children and their partners get to know your family?

Quotations about Chastity

1. “A chaste and holy life must be made the controlling principle in the behavior and conduct of all Bahá’ís, both in their social relations with the members of their own community, and in their contact with the world at large. ... It must be upheld, in all its integrity and implications, in every phase of the life of those who fill the ranks of that Faith, whether in their homes, their travels, their clubs, their societies, their entertainments, their schools, and their universities. ... It must be closely and continually identified with the mission of the Bahá’í Youth, both as an element in the life of the Bahá’í community, and as a factor in the future progress and orientation of the youth of their own country.

“Such a chaste and holy life, with its implications of modesty, purity, temperance, decency, and clean-mindedness, involves no less than the exercise of moderation in all that pertains to dress, language, amusements, and all artistic and literary avocations. It demands daily vigilance in the control of one’s carnal desires and corrupt inclinations. It calls for the abandonment of a frivolous conduct, with its excessive attachment to trivial and often misdirected pleasures. It requires total abstinence from all alcoholic drinks, from opium, and from similar habit-forming drugs. It condemns the prostitution of art and of literature, the practices of nudism and of companionate marriage, infidelity in marital relationships, and all manner of promiscuity, of easy familiarity, and of sexual vices. It can tolerate no compromise with the theories, the standards, the habits, and the excesses of a decadent age. Nay rather it seeks to demonstrate, through the dynamic force of its example, the pernicious character of such theories, the falsity of such standards, the hollowness of such claims, the perversity of such habits, and the sacrilegious character of such excesses.” (Shoghi Effendi, *The Advent of Divine Justice*, p. 25)

2. "...[T]he Bahá'í conception of sex is based on the belief that chastity should be strictly practiced by both sexes, not only because it is in itself highly commendable ethically, but also due to its being the only way to a happy and successful marital life. Sex relationships of any form, outside marriage, are not permissible therefore...." (Shoghi Effendi: *Lights of Guidance*, #1157)
3. "...[T]he whole matter of sex and the problems related to it have assumed far too great an importance in the thinking of present-day society." (Universal House of Justice: *Lights of Guidance*, #1220)
4. "...[T]he Cause of God will derive immense benefit when it is observed that the Bahá'ís, and particularly Bahá'í youth, stand out against the laxity and depravity of the permissive society, that the exalted standards of conduct which they strive to uphold are firmly rooted in spiritual principles, giving them confidence, self-respect and true happiness. On the other hand only the greatest harm can be done to the Cause if its followers are simply engulfed by the current tide." (On behalf of the Universal House of Justice, *Lights of Guidance*, #1206)
5. "Abandonment of 'a frivolous conduct' does not imply that a Bahá'í must be sour-faced or perpetually solemn. Humor, happiness, joy are characteristics of a true Bahá'í life. Frivolity palls and eventually leads to boredom and emptiness, but true happiness and joy and humor that are parts of a balanced life that includes serious thought, compassion and humble servitude to God, are characteristics that enrich life and add to its radiance." (On behalf of the Universal House of Justice: *The Compilation of Compilations, Vol. I, "A Chaste and Holy Life"*, p. 54)

Discussion Questions

1. How can you help your children to understand the value of having a full, happy, and spiritual life?
2. How can you encourage chastity as part of a happy life without your children feeling like sex is over-emphasized?
3. What are the practical aspects of your own example that can encourage chastity? (Consider what you read, watch for entertainment, interact with on the Internet... Consider how your children see you respond to someone who is attractive... Do you encourage young children to flirt or tease them about having a boyfriend or girlfriend?)

Quotations about Character and Consent [Note: There are many more quotations about the consent process than are included here. See *Marriage Can Be Forever—Preparation Counts!* for a greater selection.]

1. "...[M]arriage is dependent upon the consent of both parties. Desiring to establish love, unity and harmony amidst Our servants, We have conditioned it, once the couple's wish is known, upon the permission of their parents, lest enmity and rancor should arise amongst them." (Bahá'u'lláh: *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, p. 42)
2. "There is a difference between character and faith; it is often very hard to accept this fact and put up with it, but the fact remains that a person may believe in and love [the Bahá'í Faith]—even to being ready to die for it—and yet not have a good personal character, or possess traits at variance with the teachings. We should try to change, to let the Power of God help recreate us and make us true Bahá'ís in deed as well as in belief. But sometimes the process is slow, sometimes it never happens because the individual does not try hard enough." (On behalf of Shoghi Effendi: *Unfolding Destiny*, p. 440)
3. "Careful preparation for marriage is an essential first step in the preservation of Bahá'í marriage." (Research Department of the Universal House of Justice: Introduction to *Preserving Bahá'í Marriages* compilation, item 3)

4. “Bahá’í law places the responsibility for ascertaining knowledge of the character of those entering into the marriage contract on the two parties involved, and on the parents, who must give consent to the marriage.” (Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly: *Lights of Guidance*, #1231)

Discussion Questions

1. How are you helping your children prepare for marriage?
2. What knowledge and skills do you need to gain to be excellent at participating in the consent process?
3. How can you get to know the character of someone your child is dating or courting? Does your child need to invite you to do this before you begin doing it?

Character Qualities of Particular Importance for Relationships and Marriage

Acceptance	Encouragement	Integrity	Responsibility
Assertiveness	Enthusiasm	Joyfulness	Self-Discipline
Beauty	Equality	Justice	Service
Caring	Excellence	Kindness	Sincerity
Chastity	Faithfulness	Love	Spirituality
Commitment	Flexibility	Loyalty	Tactfulness
Compassion	Forgiveness	Mercy	Thankfulness
Confidence	Fortitude	Moderation	Thoughtfulness
Contentment	Friendliness	Patience	Thriftiness
Cooperation	Generosity	Peacefulness	Trustworthiness
Courage	Gentleness	Perseverance	Truthfulness
Courtesy	Helpfulness	Purity	Unity
Creativity	Honesty	Purposefulness	Wisdom
Detachment	Humility	Resilience	
Discernment	Idealism	Respect	

Excerpted from the books *Creating Excellent Relationships: The Power of Character Choices*; *Marriage Can Be Forever—Preparation Counts!*, and *Pure Gold: Encouraging Character Qualities in Marriage*

Article of Interest for Discussion

Creating a New Bahá'í Marriage Culture by Raelee Peirce

The following article appeared in the September 2006 issue of the Bahá'í Parenting Newsletter and is reprinted here with permission of the author.

Our world and our Bahá'í community are in trouble. Our Bahá'í youth are struggling in a culture that over-emphasizes the sex impulse. We are fooling ourselves as Bahá'í parents if we aren't aware that our youth are having sexual experiences and they are feeling a great sense of shame and guilt and even leaving the Faith due to their feeling of unworthiness after breaking this law. Somehow as parents we are failing our children because we aren't communicating the beauty and joy of sex within the marriage relationship. Perhaps we are waiting until our children turn into pre-youth or even youth before we decide to tell them "don't have sex outside of marriage."

A list of "Do-Nots" is not a great way to inspire or create acceptance of this law. Instead, we should be emphasizing the joy of sex and what a fantastic gift it is within the marriage relationship when our children are young. We need to share with our preschoolers the idea of marriage and we need to discuss the concept of finding a husband or wife when our children are in grade school rather than entertaining the idea of boyfriends and girlfriends. We need to create a family culture that does not include our children or youth engaging in frivolous boy-girl relationships. For example, when a six-year-old talks about "liking" another of the opposite sex, one should not consider it cute and exclaim to others that Jamal has a little girlfriend. As a Bahá'í parent we need to say, "Jamal, it's wonderful that you like Emma; it's great to have lots of friends. One day when you are much older you will find a girl to be your wife and have a beautiful Bahá'í family!"

My three-year-old daughter loves Cinderella and anything to do with princesses. Recently we were staying at a hotel on a mini-vacation and we saw a bride with her wedding party in the lobby. My husband took Isabel over to see the "princess" and to her delight the bride smiled at her and said, "Do you like my princess dress?" We use any opportunity we can to share with her the joy and the excitement around marriage and being married.

When we consistently refer to boy-girl relationships as a marriage relationship through the young years and the expectation of our family standard is that boyfriends and girlfriends aren't relevant, then it isn't a part of our child's context even when it is part of their world at school. Potential husbands and wives are the more acceptable concept. In this context, a young boy or girl is not likely to start seeking a marriage partner!

The middle school years are difficult for our children and some are following the lead of their peers. A life of secrecy and hiding becomes part of the way our young adolescents are living. Many of our youth have boyfriends and girlfriends and end up emotionally hurt over and over again through these immature romances that primarily revolve around game-playing, manipulation, and physical contact. By the time they are in high school, sex is no longer a mystery and is considered an acceptable part of a relationship. Today, oral sex is as common as kissing amongst teens because it is not considered to be sex.

Once our youth are in college disconnecting from the Bahá'í Faith is all too common. Some of our Bahá'í college students are inactive in the Faith because they are engaging in the college scene of sex and parties. Rather than feel like a hypocrite, they leave the Faith. They continue to date primarily non-Bahá'ís so they do not feel judged about their behavior and continue accumulating emotional wounds from the starts and break-ups of falling in out of love/lust/attraction. Once married, sustaining a long-term, committed

relationship is about being fulfilled by another person, rather than serving the Cause of God. Should their spouse not be able to make them happy anymore, infidelity, unhappiness, and even divorce may result.

It is so important that we unconditionally love our children, even when they make mistakes. None of us are perfect Bahá'ís. Just because we love and accept our child who has made a mistake, we are not saying that breaking God's law is okay. Judgment and consequences to the laws of God are left to God. As a community we must envelop our young people with love, not criticism. We all have our burdens to bear because of mistakes we have made. Each of us is developing our own relationship with God and we will answer to God. It isn't necessary for parents to be unsupportive toward their children. This only has detrimental effects. God is the All-Merciful, the All-Forgiving. To go through life feeling guilty and shamed for our mistakes, only encourages making more mistakes or withdrawing more and more from God.

Our only message to our youth continues to be “don't do it” or “be chaste.” This is unacceptable and will not protect or inculcate the love of God in the hearts of our children and youth. Attending Feast, Holy Days and Bahá'í classes may assist some, but even this is not always enough to create a child or youth who desires to serve their Lord, dedicate their lives to Bahá'u'lláh, or become a champion of the Cause. So, what are some ideas? How can we better help instill the love of God?

1. Attend Bahá'í activities and events regularly. Celebrate Baha'í Holy Days, pray, memorize prayers and writings, sing songs (especially when your children are young). Create Bahá'í traditions. This builds a Bahá'í identity.
2. Engage your young children in discussions about life – marriage, the power of prayer and guidance in your own life.
3. Model a joyful, happy Bahá'í marriage!
4. Stay positive about the institutions of the Faith, Fasting, and daily prayer.
5. Stay positive about life in general and share often your own struggles and how God assists you to get through.
6. When appropriate, discuss the wonder and joy of sex when it is between two married persons. Share that the law of chastity is not to punish us or deny us joy, but it is a protection to us so that we have clarity and sound judgment. Tell your children and youth how sex can cloud their vision in a relationship or bring about unplanned pregnancies or disease.
7. Share your high expectations and talk about trusting your child and/or youth.
8. Learn the stories of the Old Testament and tell them regularly to your children and youth. These stories describe how God works and tell of His love, mercy, and judgment. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá encourages us as parents to teach our children through stories!
9. Talk about being a champion for God's Cause, standing up for what is right and just in the world. Create rebels who are willing to stand up against corruption and immorality! We want to be heroes for God not enemies of God's Cause. Be a warrior of what is True and of what is Just!
10. Get support from other Bahá'í parents.

So, we've done all of this. God willing, we have chaste children, chaste pre-youth, and chaste youth. The sexual impulse begins between 11-13 years old and now our 18-year-old is going off to college. They have been chaste for five to seven years already. Now we hope that they will remain chaste through four years of college, and even some parents believe that their child should not think of marriage until after graduate school or professional school. So, now we have an individual in their late 20's or even early 30's who is chaste and finally has found a marriage partner. Is this realistic? Is this even healthy? And no wonder we are met with astonishment from non-Baha'ís when we explain that our 29-year-old or 32-year-old needs parental consent to get married! Did Bahá'u'lláh establish the consent law because he didn't believe that adults could manage this decision? Could it be that the consent law was given to us because it was intended to protect our children from making a poor marriage choice when they are young?

The beloved Guardian wrote, **“Outside of marital life there can be no lawful or healthy use of the sex impulse. The Bahá’í youth, on the one hand, be taught the lesson of self-control, which when exercised, undoubtedly has a salutary effect on the development of character and personality in general, and on the other, should be advised, nay, even encouraged to contract marriage while still young and in full possession of their physical vigor. Economic factors, no doubt, are often a serious hindrance to early marriage, but in most cases are only an excuse, and as such should not be overstressed.”** From *Unrestrained as the Wind*, Shoghi Effendi, page 149. [1]

What about the age of 15 being the age of spiritual maturity? Bahá’u’lláh states that this is an age suitable for marriage. Is that realistic in our culture? Is that just for the future? Certainly most 15-year-olds aren’t ready to get married. However, perhaps as Bahá’í parents we should be encouraging our youth to attend Bahá’í activities, conferences, and Bahá’í schools with an open mind to finding a spouse. It is during their youth that they will meet the most Bahá’ís and have the most opportunity to find a spiritual connection. Attending college together as a young married couple, perhaps living with parents for financial and emotional support, sounds strange, inappropriate, or unacceptable. On the other hand, it could be a way of protecting our young people and creating strong marriages. This approach requires strong parental support. By encouraging our youth to wait for marriage, we are buying into the cultural norm. Our culture accepts pre-marital sex, companionate marriage, and serial monogamy because our culture is becoming more wary of the institution of marriage. As Bahá’ís, we are agreeing with the idea that marriage should be after education and in some cases should be considered when the individual is financially independent and stable. It is unrealistic to expect our youth to wait 20 years before they experience intimacy or a relationship. Our message is confusing and we will see more and more youth possibly leaving religion behind.

Just because we encourage young marriage, doesn’t mean our youth would become indiscriminate. On the contrary, by putting the male/female relationship into a marriage context, our youth may become more responsible, mature, and more “choosy” of their significant other. They may become more focused on their education at a young age, free from the burden of boy-girl games since marriage is not appropriate for a high school student! But between 18-25 years of age, more Bahá’í marriages could be taking place with the financial and emotional support and guidance of parents.

As a Bahá’í community who wants to create dedicated children and youth to the Cause of God for this day and encourage and support strong marriages and family life, we must dialogue about working toward our goals.

[1]: From a letter dated 13 December 1940 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer. Also included in the compilation “A Chaste and Holy Life” ([link](#)).

Raelee Peirce is a PCI Certified Parent Coach and Parent Educator and served on the Triangle Bahá’í Marriage Support Team. She and her husband Glenn are raising their two young children with the loving support of her parents in a home they all built together in North Carolina, U.S.A. Their idea of all living together is, like they say in Hawaii, “Ohana” or the idea of living with your extended family! If you would like parenting support, contact her for information at noblemama@gmail.com.

Sources for Further Study and Action

From Marriage Transformation (www.marriagetransformation.com):

- Parental Consent for Marriage Excerpt from *Marriage Can Be Forever* on Consent and Character
- *Marriage Can Be Forever—Preparation Counts!* (self/couple prep for Bahá'ís and partners)
- *Creating Excellent Relationships: The Power of Character Choices*
- *Becoming Relationship Ready: Preparing for a Future Partner*
- *Becoming Unified Partners: Assessing Harmony Between You and a Partner*
- *All-in-One Marriage Prep: 75 Experts Share Tips and Wisdom to Help You Get Ready Now*
- *Can We Dance?: Learning the Steps for a Fulfilling Relationship*
- *A Perfectly Funny Marriage* (cartoon book about marriage preparation and marriage)
- *Pure Gold: Encouraging Character Qualities in Marriage*
- *Deciding in Unity: A Practical Process for Married Couples to Agree on Practically Everything*

From Other Sources:

- Conscious Courtship, by Raymond Switzer
- Consent for Parents, by John Skeaff

Websites:

www.bahairrelationships.com

www.bahaimarriage.net

www.marriagetransformation.com

www.allinonemarriageprep.com

www.virtuesproject.com

www.smartmarriages.com

www.prepare-enrich.com

Workshops: www.marriagetransformation.com