

A P A R E N T ' S  
T O  
G U I D E

# Teen Singleness

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# Congrats! You've got the gift of singleness! Aren't you excited?

Lovesick teenagers are nothing new. Countless films have been made about them (or at least have made fun of them), and our culture's focus on love stories only increases younger generations' obsession with romance, finding "the one," and living happily ever *after* after they find true love (thanks, *Bachelor* and *Bachelorette*). In fact, being single has become something to fear, to fight against and resist as hard as possible—to the point of causing many to miss out on life as it happens and to make life-altering decisions out of fear.

At this point in their lives, our teens might not be worried that they won't ever get married, but their views on singleness and relationships are still being formed. They might be worried they'll never have a boy/girlfriend or be "really old" (like, 25 *\*gasp!\**) when they finally get one. Or they may just be worried that something's wrong with them if they've never been in love or no one wants to pursue them. And whether they realize it or not, most of them have come to believe that being single means being alone, unfulfilled, and unhappy. Rather than considering singleness as a worthy life path, they (like many of us) want to avoid it like the plague.

But is that how we want them to live their young lives: constantly worried about their futures and closed off to what God asks of them? Being single is a real possibility, one we should prepare them to handle well, rather than fear. In general, people are waiting longer and longer to marry—there are [more adult singles](#) now than ever before. A [2014 report from Pew Research](#) says that about a quarter of today's young adults will never marry by the time they're 50 years old. So they might not feel like they need a relationship now, but what about when they feel pressured to find a spouse while they're in college? When they imagine the future, do they assume they'll get married by the time they're 25, 30, or 40? What happens if they don't? God never promises any of us that we'll get married, nor that we'll get married by a certain age. Is God cheating them of a good life then, if marriage is not part of it?

Regardless of if your teens already feel like they're called to singleness or if they do hope to marry one day, we believe this Guide is important for both you and them to consider now. How you shape your kids' vision of marriage and singleness in their younger years is critical to helping them live their best life right now and in the future.

## How does American culture shape our view of singleness?

Our culture presents romantic love as the most incredible, beautiful, and pleasurable type of love a person could ever experience. Most movies, even if they aren't romances, have a romantic relationship as part of the storyline, as though a movie without a romantic relationship won't hold people's attention. The 2008 film [Prince Caspian](#), for example, portrays an attraction between Caspian and Susan that wasn't in C.S. Lewis' original book.

Disney princess movies and shows like *The Bachelor* perpetuate the idea that relationships are crucial to a fulfilled life. And of course, social media can inadvertently lead us to feel as though our lives aren't as fulfilling as those of our friends. One

woman says that there are days when she scrolls through Instagram, and it seems as though every single picture she sees is of someone who got engaged, married, or had a baby. This is a constant reminder to her that she doesn't have a family.

## How do Christians tend to view singleness?

Many young adults dread the thought that God has given them the “gift of singleness” (see [1 Cor. 7:6-7](#)). In other words, they're afraid God has doomed them to remain single for the rest of their lives. In fact, even the words we use to talk about it are telling. Words like “doomed” or “cursed” or even “my cross to bear” are phrases we often use when talking about singleness, even though Paul says it's “good” to remain single if possible. Jesus Himself lived His entire life as a single man, yet it's hard for us to even *pretend* that a life of singleness is anywhere near fulfilling. One woman we talked to told us that she used to ask God to come back and wipe away all evil soon, just *not* before she got married. Another woman was never bothered by not being in a relationship...until she passed her late twenties with no guy even remotely in sight. Then some anxiety, fear, and panic set in: “What if I'm single forever?!”

Here are a few (erroneous) ways Christians see singleness:

- Singleness is something to fix. If you're single, you must be hoping that you can change that ASAP.
- The only good thing about being single is that you're free to find someone to date.
- Singleness is ok for now, but not for the rest of your life. If someone is older than, say, 35, reasonably attractive, and not dating or married, then something must be wrong with that person.
- You have to find a spouse in college or else you never will. We have a friend whose college roommate said, “I don't know what I would do if I wasn't engaged by graduation.”
- Someone who is single hasn't fully “matured.”

And so on. Even if they don't have an extremely negative view of singleness, most young people don't dream about being single indefinitely when they imagine their futures. They see themselves getting married and having families, usually by their late twenties.

## How do these perspectives affect teenagers?

We talked to an unmarried woman in her late thirties who unsuccessfully tried to start a singles group for women at her church. She believes that part of the reason the group didn't take off was that many of the women who were invited felt discouraged at the thought of having yet another reminder that they were single. As one of them said: “Great. I've made the club!” One single man in his late twenties is frustrated by the flippant responses and lack of empathy he routinely encounters from people who are married or in relationships. Teenagers are always observing and do notice these reactions, which can reinforce their fear of being single.

It's easy for churches to unintentionally overlook single people. We know one church that recently offered a class where the older women would mentor the younger women.

One woman was very excited at the idea of being mentored by older women until she found out that the class was only for married women and that she couldn't attend it because she is single. The church offered no alternative class for young single women to be mentored, let alone for teens to be mentored in more than just how to become good husbands or wives.

On the other hand, sometimes those in ministry have an unhealthy focus on getting people into relationships. A woman we talked to was in a Christian college group, and at one point a leader approached her, asking if he could add her to his binder. He was organizing all the single people in the binder so he could match them up and help them find someone to date. It's not wrong for churches and youth groups to encourage healthy romantic relationships, but it is wrong to emphasize finding a relationship more than pursuing Christ.

This woman (who's in her early twenties) says that when people find out she's not dating, they immediately try to comfort her and tell her it's ok that she's not dating. She finds this reaction frustrating because people assume she must be sad that she's single. But she's really fine with it! She wishes that when people hear that she's single, they'd be excited for her and ask how God is working in her life right now.

How we view relationships also makes platonic friendships between people of the opposite sex difficult. When a guy meets a girl who is attractive and single, he can feel pressure to explore a relationship with her right away, instead of developing a friendship. Depending on the culture around them or their own perspectives, for an eligible guy and girl to be friends is to be pursuing a relationship. On the other hand, guys and girls can be so focused on finding someone to date that they only evaluate people of the opposite sex based on their eligibility. When we do this, we're actually objectifying each other because we are treating others as a means to an end instead of valuing them for who they are.

## — Any other unhelpful reactions that single Christians hear?

As [Lisa Anderson of Boundless](#) says, one of the dangers of being single and admitting that you want to get married is you'll get a lot of terrible responses from well-meaning people. Here's some of the unhelpful advice we've heard at various times:

- Just delight yourself in the Lord, and He'll give you the desires of your heart!
- Seek God's kingdom first, and "all these things" will be added to you.
- You're young—you've got plenty of time.
- Stop thinking about yourself so much and focus on serving other people.
- You're not trying hard enough. Put yourself out there more.
- Oh, you'll get married. I'm sure you will.
- Once you stop looking, you'll find someone.
- Don't worry—we got married late. (This was from a couple who married in their late twenties and somehow thought saying this would be comforting to people still single in their thirties.)
- \*To women\* Guys aren't asking you out? You should let them know you're interested.

- \*To guys\* Still haven't found someone? Are you...gay?
- \*To women\* Your standards are too high/you're being too picky. If you just change X, you'll find someone.
- There are plenty of fish in the sea.
- Singleness is the best time of your life. Live it up while you can!
- Well, at least you're not in a bad marriage.
- Wow, I'm impressed you stayed single for so long.
- I wish I were still single.

Keep these in mind with your teens. Even if they don't realize it yet, these responses will impact how they view singleness.

## Why are they unhelpful? Should I avoid them?

A lot of the “unhelpful” advice we mentioned above *could* be good advice, **depending on how and when it is given**. It could very well be that someone is single because he or she has a character flaw or is not spending time around marriageable people. It could be that a single person is not seeking and loving God first, but is too focused on getting married. It could be that someone lacks faith that God could provide him a spouse, no matter how impossible that seems.

***The problem comes when people offer advice that does not apply to the single person they're talking to or they offer the advice as a simple, easy solution to a complicated and often painful problem.*** This situation is similar to the pitfalls involved with comforting someone who is grieving the loss of a loved one. A grieving person mainly needs empathy, not flippant advice, however true it might be. Likewise, many single people have probably heard it all before. They mainly need others to listen to and empathize with them.

In addition, because advice like that is often given to teens and 20-somethings, many of them have (consciously or subconsciously) bought into the idea that they need romance and marriage in order to be happy. They think that if they never find someone, they will live lesser, unfulfilling lives. **This is a powerful lie** that has many distracted from wholeheartedly seeking Christ (who, again, was single for His entire earthly life). Romance, sex, and marriage are indeed beautiful gifts that God created and gave to the human race. But now matter how good it is, marriage is should never be idolized, worshipped, or pursued above Christ. Pastor [Tim Keller says](#) it beautifully:

*Sin isn't only doing bad things, it is more fundamentally making good things into ultimate things. Sin is building your life and meaning on anything, even a very good thing, more than on God. Whatever we build our life on will drive us and enslave us. Sin is primarily idolatry.*

We're not saying it's easy to see singleness as good. Many people will find doing so pretty difficult. **But God is not teasing us or holding out on us.** If He says that both singleness and marriage are good, then they are **both** good. ***If we or our teens don't see singleness as one option for a flourishing life, we need to recognize that our understanding is broken and pursue God's vision for our lives.***

## — What are bad ways teens deal with being single?

There's real pain and loneliness that can accompany being single, and there are various unhealthy ways teens might be tempted to deal with that pain. Some live in denial and won't admit it to themselves or to others that they want to get married. If they don't admit it, they don't have to deal with the disappointment of not marrying. One single friend of ours lived this way until her early twenties when God showed her that she needed to be honest about this desire.

Others, seeing a bleak dating landscape, give up on pursuing a relationship. Some become bitter, resenting God and/or the opposite sex. Some people come from extremely broken homes and decide to reject marriage in order to protect themselves from repeating that brokenness. Others, not finding the person they were hoping for, give up on their values (say, by dating someone who is not a Christian or by making sexual compromises). It's easy to think, "Well, God's ideal isn't realistic, so I'll just take what I can get since it's all I'll ever have."

And it's surprising how many teens actually reach this conclusion during their high school years! If many of their friends are and have been coupled up, they can easily begin to feel like it's already hopeless for them. It's not that hard to remember back to our own teen years when everything we were going through felt like the most important things ever and it was hard to envision anything after high school and college mattering. So, the thinking goes, if they can't find someone now, they never will!

Another way of coping with singleness that's very common amongst teens is to pursue another relationship right after a breakup. Even though everyone knows you shouldn't rebound, many teens either don't want to face the reality of the breakup so they distract themselves OR they don't know how to be on their own so they become "serial monogamists."

And finally, many teens, operating on an incomplete understanding of the purpose of relationships and romance, decide that relationships are too much work altogether, especially when they can have their physical desires met through hookups. So instead, they get on apps like Tinder and say that relationships aren't for them.

## — How can I help my kids pursue God above all else and be content right now?

### **1. Give them a realistic view of the Christian life.**

[As this writer observes](#), "All of God's saints, if allowed to live long enough, are led into the lonely, disorienting, weary wilderness." [Everyone struggles or will struggle with something](#), whether a difficult marriage, a debilitating injury, disillusionment in their careers, the death of a child. . . .The point is, it's not as though God has cursed a particular group of His children with pain, while the rest of them get to live in married bliss.

Your kids might have days when they find being single to be really hard. That's ok—

they shouldn't expect to be happy about their singleness all the time. Make sure they know they have the freedom not to like it. Remind them that God has grace for them when they feel this way, so they should have grace for themselves. But encourage them not to park in a state of self-pity. We must teach our kids to be like Paul and [be content in any and every situation](#)—including and especially when we don't get what we want.

## **2. Give them a realistic view of marriage.**

It's easy for singles to focus on what they don't have and forget how hard marriage is. They might long for the glamour of being pursued and responded to, being in love, being able to have sex, and having a lifelong companion. These benefits are valid, but we deceive ourselves if we ignore the fact that even people in strong marriages deal with frustration, suffering, and disillusionment. Obeying God and pursuing godly marriage is not a guarantee that we will avoid loneliness, divorce, or a spouse being unfaithful.

Several single friends of ours say that getting a glimpse into the lives of married people has helped them not to idealize marriage as much as they used to. With that in mind, be honest with your kids about your own marriage struggles. They will already be aware of some of them, especially if they are older. And there are clearly aspects of your marriage that would be inappropriate for you to discuss with your kids. But don't try to pretend that you have it all together when you really don't. Allow your kids to see that marriage is messy and takes work and talk to them about how you work through your issues with God's help. It's also good for your kids to spend time around other married people. If they go to college, encourage them to plug into a church and befriend a family or married couple there. You could also have your married friends share positive stories with your kids about when they were single.

A bad marriage really is worse than remaining single. This is not that comforting to people who are thinking, "True, but I'd love to experience a good marriage!" Where it is helpful, however, is in reminding singles to guard themselves from rushing into a marriage simply because they're tired of being single. We know people who were so desperate to be married that they made decisions they later deeply regretted.

## **3. Show them that Christ is our best life now and always.**

***Singleness is not simply a waiting room for marriage.*** The purpose of life, whether we are married or single, is to pursue, love, and obey Christ. Scripture tells us that He's our shield and reward, the source of our deepest satisfaction, and the One who gives abundant life and joy. Do your teens believe that if God allows them to remain single forever, He can still provide them a good, **desirable**, and flourishing life?

It might be hard to accept this, but if we think we need to be married to have a complete life, then we reveal what is *actually* lord of our lives. We're saying, "I will follow Christ as long as He gives me what I want [marriage]. If I can't, it's not worth it." We need to take Jesus seriously when He tells us to count the cost of following Him ([Luke 14:25-33](#)). Then we should ask ourselves if we agree with [Paul in Philippians 3](#) when he says, "Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For His sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ." And yes, "all things" includes marriage, romance, and sex.

## **4. Teach them to submit their sexual desires to God.**

For your teens to give up their desire to have sex takes a lot of sacrifice in our

sexualized culture. Again, we all need to count the cost: Is Christ worth it?

While marriage is the place where God allows us to satisfy our sexual desires, it's helpful to remember that married people still need to practice sexual self-control. They will need self-control not to have sex with people they aren't married to and patience when their spouse doesn't feel like having sex. It's tempting for Christian singles to think of marriage as a kind of sexual nirvana, but there are still [sexual challenges to navigate within marriage](#) (...everyone who is or has been married shouts *Amen!*).

Recognizing this reality won't make a single person's desires magically disappear. But it can help him or her have a more realistic perspective on those desires. As singles wrestle with their sexual longings, they should bring them before the Lord, following Paul's instructions in [Romans 12:1](#): "I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship." God has a purpose for our sexuality, even if we're not married.

### **5. Teach them to persevere in bringing their struggles to the Lord.**

It's easy to say, "Here's the right way to look at marriage and singleness," but it can be *very* hard to live out of that.

One single friend of ours has really struggled in this area. Even though she knows in her mind that marriage won't make her ultimately happy, she still finds herself going through life as though it will. What this looks like for her is focusing on the guys around her in coffee shops or at the grocery store, deciding if they're attractive, and looking to see if they're wearing wedding rings. Because there's nothing wrong with simply noticing someone is attractive, it's taken her a while to recognize that what she's really doing is living out of idolatry and discontentment. Yet she can't simply *will* herself to break out of this pattern. It's like what Paul describes in [Romans 7](#):

*For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?*

So recently, she tried something new. When she catches herself living out of a lie, she calls it what it is (a lie), then identifies it, which can take a while. The most common lies she believes are: 1. She needs a relationship to be happy; and 2. God cannot or will not ever give her a relationship. When she figures out which lie she's believing, simply naming it goes a long way toward helping her break free of it. She then tells herself the truth, often out loud: "A relationship cannot make you happy—only God can do that," and, "God is able to bring you a relationship if He wants to, but He doesn't owe you that." She also memorizes and reminds herself of Scripture. Sometimes she has to really work at repeating these truths to herself before she believes them. The cool thing is that when she doesn't give up on fighting the lies, she has seen her freedom, contentment, and joy increase and has started to overcome her negative behaviors.

If your teens struggle with believing lies about singleness, it's often true that they have no idea they're lies. They just have seen and heard how others and culture talks about relationships, and they accept it as truth. So working through how what they believe is a lie could be a huge eye-opener for them. Teaching them to identify the source of their discontentment and speak truth to themselves, no matter how long they have to work at it, can also really do wonders for their hearts and minds. Remind them of God's faithfulness, both in Scripture and in their lives. Encourage them to actively give thanks

for what God has already given them and to rejoice in other people's happiness. It will also be a huge benefit if they can find friends who love them, will speak truth to them, and help keep them accountable.

#### **6. DON'T pressure them to get married and have a family.**

One woman is only 20, but her parents are already pressuring her to find someone, get married, and have kids before her biological clock runs out. Please don't do this to your kids! Particularly if they're girls, they're probably already feeling anxious about finding a husband. Instead, your kids need your empathy and encouragement, but more than anything, **they need their parents to encourage them to follow God wherever He leads whenever He leads...even if it's now how you or they envisioned it.** The best thing you can do for them is pray, first that God would help them follow Him wholeheartedly, and second that He would bring them a husband or wife if it's His will. After all, He is the one with ultimate control over whether or not your kids find a spouse.

#### **7. Make space for them to be single in the future.**

To help your kids see singleness as a good thing, you need to see singleness as a good thing. When you talk to them about their futures, do you make statements like, "When you get married..." and make it seem obvious that they're going to get married? You should absolutely cast a vision for what to look for in a spouse and teach them how to date well. But do you only talk about dating and marriage and never about how awesome their lives could be if they remain single and fully devoted to God? You can help your kids immensely by shaping their expectations to include the good possibilities of singleness or marriage, depending on how God leads.

#### **8. Teach them how to use their singleness for personal growth.**

It's true, single people have more freedom than married people do, which is something to be thankful for and not merely tolerate. Singleness is a chance for people to grow in their relationship with Christ, in who they are, and in their life skills. One woman who recently got married says that one thing she wishes she had done more when she was single was work on standing up for herself. It's not as though she can't grow as a person now that she's married, but it would've been helpful if she'd been stronger in that area before marrying.

Singleness is also a good time to deal with emotional baggage. It's impossible to not bring personal brokenness into a marriage, but it's definitely helpful if one can make progress in dealing with their baggage *before* diving into marriage because marriage only bring those issues to the surface.

#### **9. Teach them that a single life does NOT have to be a lonely life.**

How you raise kids to build their relationships and communities now will impact how they do so in adulthood. These habits will in turn affect how they live as married or single people. It's essential for your teens to recognize that **marriage is not a cure for loneliness.** Many married people experience deep loneliness. At the same time, **being single does not have to mean being alone.** We know many single people who, even though they desire to be married, are living full and flourishing lives by building friendships, serving others, and being involved in their churches and communities. These relationships don't magically appear, however; they put time and energy into maintaining them, and your teens will need to do that as well. Teach them how to do that now.

## 10. Get them around awesome older single people.

It's not enough to simply hear that singleness is good. *We need to see single people who are thriving.* Get your kids around adults who are single and rocking it. There's an older, single woman who has hosted our speaking teams several times while they've been on the road. She has never been married, but has wholeheartedly devoted herself to serving the Lord and others. Her home is a welcoming and restful place for the people who stay there. She offers not only hospitality, but also her attention, wisdom, and joy. She has been a great example to us of someone who is single-mindedly following God and thriving as a single person.

## — How do I know if my kid is “called to singleness”?

Some people have never had a strong desire to marry and have kids. Many who are not married have always wanted to be and still want to be, but God has not provided marriage for them for one reason or another. We certainly wouldn't want to discourage people from exploring through prayer, counsel, and reflection whether or not God has called them to singleness. **However**, rather than making it a goal to figure out whether God has called them to singleness for the rest of their lives, we think it's a much better strategy to do as [Jesus says](#): “Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.” If they're single today, then help them be single well and with purpose today. See what tomorrow holds tomorrow.

It's fair for your kids to wrestle with the fact that God might call them to lifelong singleness. But looking ahead to the future is only useful to a point. It's not really helpful for us to dwell on what we think the rest of our lives will be like and then carry that burden around every day. For one, it's possible that none of us will live past tomorrow. And even if your kids are single for a while, they could get married at some point. They don't know when that might happen. If they let themselves get depressed because they're projecting about the future, they're borrowing pain and anxiety that do not exist and might never exist.

## — Should my kids pursue romantic relationships?

It takes a lot of humility to 1. admit you want to get married and be open to pursuing marriage while 2. constantly surrendering that desire to God and accepting He might not allow you to marry. While God needs to be the center of our lives, He gives us freedom to marry and freedom to remain single. So when your kids start dating, how much time and energy should they devote to it? What if they pursue dating for a long time without finding anyone to marry? Should they give it up for a season and focus on serving God?

There isn't a black and white answer to these questions. If your teens want to get married, it makes sense for them to spend time with marriageable people. If wanting to marry has become an idol, then they should probably stop dating to reorient their priorities. What they decide to do at a particular time requires [wisdom and the leading of the Holy Spirit](#):

*You discover it in actually walking with Christ and telling him all you feel, asking him for all his help and all his wisdom and asking him about when to rest and when to act and how to be restful in him even while acting. So I think the last thing I could say is: God is going to show you.*

If your kids are unsure about how much energy to spend on dating, encourage them to seek wise counsel and God's leading. He isn't trying to trick them. He wants them to thrive and will show them the way to go ([Ps. 32:8](#)).

## Discussion Questions

- How do you feel about being single? Do you see it as a good situation or one you need to get out of?
- Do you feel the freedom to admit you want a relationship (if you do)?
- When you see older, single people, do you feel bad for them? Why do you think that is?
- Do you think it's possible that God might allow you to remain single for most or all of your life? Would you be ok with Him doing that?
- If you're not ok with that, what do you think you should do about it?
- Do you feel pressure to date? Where do you think that comes from?
- Is there anything we've done to put pressure on you to be in a relationship? How can we encourage you to embrace whatever God has for you?
- Is there anything you want so badly, you'd do anything for it? If so, why do you think it want it so badly?
- What does it mean to idolize something? What does it look like in someone's life when they've idolized something? Do you think you've ever done that before?
- When you meet new people of the opposite sex, do you evaluate them right away as potential dating material or try to value them for who they are as people?
- How can you have the freedom to be attracted to and interested in people of the opposite sex without objectifying them?
- Do you have a positive view of marriage? How can having a high view of marriage help you to be single well?

## Conclusion

Jesus lived His entire life as a single man. And Jesus is still, patiently and with longing, waiting for His bride. [He is able to perfectly empathize](#) with what single people are going through. Scripture legitimizes both the high calling of singleness and the yearning we experience for our wedding day.

Help your kids see singleness as good. If they want to be married, validate that desire. But whatever their desires and whatever life holds for them, always, always point them toward Christ above all. He understands our struggles, whether we are married or single. And He capable of acting on our behalf, bringing good out of whatever comes our way, even and especially when it doesn't look like we envisioned it.

## Related Axis Resources

To read before talking to your kids (all available at [axis.org/guides](https://axis.org/guides)):

- Parent's Guide to Teen Dating
- Parent's Guide to Pornography
- Parent's Guide to Teen FOMO

To watch with your teenagers:

- [Dating Conversation Kit](#)

## Additional Resources

- [Thrive: The Single Life as God Intended](#), Lina AbuJamra
- [The Dating Manifesto: A Drama-Free Plan for Pursuing Marriage with Purpose](#), Lisa Anderson
- ["Called to Singleness,"](#) Boundless
- ["Talking Singleness,"](#) Boundless
- ["Singleness: My Only Companion,"](#) Christianity Today
- ["Singleness: A Personal Testimony,"](#) The Gospel Coalition
- ["Faith and the Single Life"](#) Series, New Life Downtown Church, Lisa Anderson

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