

# INTIMACY AS BECOMING

By Ellie Roscher

**T**he teenage years are an exciting time not only for building a sense of identity but for developing relationships. Human beings flourish in relationships. We are made for friendship with our creator, our world, and each other. Feeling a need for intimacy with others is part of being human.

At high school age we women start seeking identity and intimacy outside our families. We define ourselves in relation to our peers as well as our parents and siblings. We start to acknowledge and celebrate ourselves as sexual beings, while at the same time others' voices saturate our senses with messages about who we are and who we are supposed to become. To name the voices and decide which voices to listen to are critical choices.

Who do my parents say that I am? How do my friends describe me? What words might God use to explain me? What does the Church say about my sexuality? Who do media voices want me to be? Who do I say that I am? Who am I becoming? What do I look like when my most authentic self is walking through the hallways? Who am I listening to? Most young women have a sense of who God created them to be but feel conflicting desires to meet external, often unattainable expectations. A key in identity work is to name all the voices and make intentional decisions about which messages to accept and which to discard. To empower the voice within, the conscience God put in our hearts, demands time to be still and listen to my sense of self unfolding.

Identity is one life task in the high school years; developing a capacity for intimacy is a second. Who we choose to be close to and how we choose to be close affects who each of us becomes. What is intimacy? When is the right time to date? How can we build life-giving friendships? Who in our lives reminds us how God sees us?

Below are six guidelines for thinking about dating and intimacy. These guides are not rules but suggestions that are meant to be helpful for young women seeking intimacy and starting to date. Among the young women I have worked with, I have witnessed fewer tears and less heartache when they have thought about these guides.

## 1. Sex is not intimacy.

**Y**oung women often define intimacy too narrowly, putting the highest priority on sexual intimacy. Intimacy is not synonymous with sexual intimacy. And sexual intimacy is not synonymous with sex. When a young woman equates intimacy with sex, she hears parents, teachers, or pastors denying her natural desire for intimacy when they urge her to abstinence. However, we can have a life full of intimacy as we honor abstinence. The desire for intimacy is natural and beautiful; we can pursue it because intimacy is more than sexuality, and sexuality is more than sex.

Because of the popular and narrow view of intimacy as sex, many young people in high school experience painfully unbalanced and unhealthy peer relationships. They have sex, thinking it will satisfy a desire for intimacy. Recognizing the many kinds of intimacy—physical, spiritual, mental, emotional, and sexual—helps in working for balance. Dating relationships that engage our whole social selves offer more chance to know and love another person. I encourage young women to strive for the intimacy they deeply desire but think about intimacy holistically. We experience intimacy in friendships and families, not only in isolating relationships with one person who may walk away at any moment. Making mental, emotional, spiritual and physical intimacy part of

relationships enriches teenage life, deepens friendships, and widens circles of friends. What is involved in these various kinds of intimacy?

**Mental Intimacy:** Do I have someone in my life I like to talk to about difficult topics? Does my family talk about intellectual things? Who really knows how my mind works? Which teachers stimulate me mentally and why? Who is that friend I go to and talk about things that make my brain hurt?

**Emotional Intimacy:** Who do I like to be with when I am crying? Who do I laugh the hardest with? Who really knows my heart? Who do I feel comfortable calling at 2 a.m. if I really need someone to listen? Who do I share my vulnerable thoughts and feelings with?

**Spiritual Intimacy:** With whom do I feel comfortable talking about God? Who pushes me to ask the big life questions? Who do I feel comfortable praying with? Who really knows my soul?

**Physical Intimacy:** Who is the best hugger in my life? Do I allow my parents to be affectionate with me? Who are the girlfriends who will hold me when I am sad?

I have a friend and teacher colleague named Kevin with whom I am mentally, emotionally, spiritually, and physically intimate. We love having tough conversations about justice and politics. We talk about God all the time. We have laughed and cried together. We give each other hugs on a daily basis. I am not sexually attracted to him, and he is not sexually attracted to me. We have never kissed or held hands because that is not how we want to express our intimacy with each other, yet I would still classify our friendship as intimate because we can be vul-

nerable together. I am only sexually intimate with my spouse, but I appreciate people like Kevin in my life with whom I can build intimate friendships, so that I do not lean on my spouse for all my social needs.

**“Intimacy is love. And that love does not mean sex. Sex is getting in the way of intimacy. It’s the answer to when we need to be cool, or when we are lonely, or when we are seeking something. Intimacy is loving who you are as a person, and then loving someone else.”**

**Danielle, student**

**A** dating partner to avoid is one who will not let us build mental, emotional, spiritual, and even physical intimacy with other people. I once dated a man who got jealous if I spent quality time with other men. Then he even began to isolate me from girlfriends and siblings. One person cannot fulfill our heart’s desire for intimacy. We save sexual intimacy like holding hands and kissing for that one special person, but my spouse understands and encourages me to build intimacy with friends and family so that my life feels full of different kinds of love. Dating relationships should feel like that, too. Teenage years should involve meeting many new people and building different types of intimate friendship.

Another dating relationship to avoid is one in which a single type of intimacy takes over. I once dated a man who was pressuring me to have sex, yet he refused to hold my hand in public. He wanted our sexual relationship to be more intense than our physical one, and that felt unhealthy. A sexual relationship should be mutual and celebrate and extend the rest of the relationship. I often see dating couples who have trouble talking, connecting emotionally, and praying together, yet they are very close physically. I worry that these couples tie their worth together solely in their bodies, rather than getting to know each other’s heart, mind, and soul. A student observes:

**“People are afraid to really get to know someone because they think they know someone well enough, love someone,**

and are ready to have sex with them. Having sex is the easy way out of a relationship, when actually getting to know someone is the right way to have relationship.”

Nicole, high school woman

Mature romantic relationships need prayer, communication, and affection. A capacity for holistic, full relationships grows out of the small steps we take to build mental, emotional, spiritual, and physical intimacy with our friends and family. When intimacy grows with a special someone, we must decide what is a healthy and appropriate expression of our feelings sexually. We build intimacy in all of our relationships, but we choose one person ultimately with whom to be sexually intimate.

For visual learners, try to chart some of your relationships. Write the different kinds of intimacies, and judge the depth of each kind by making markings at different depths in chart. Then, take a look. Is it balanced? What could you do to build a healthier relationship?

For example, the chart for my friendship with Kevin would look like this:

	Mental	Emotional	Spiritual	Physical	Sexual
Some Depth				X	
Deep	X	X	X		

That is a pretty healthy chart for a friendship. I see tears most often when a high school dating relationship looks more like this:

	Mental	Emotional	Spiritual	Physical	Sexual
Some Depth	X	X			
Deep				X	X

Sexual intimacy drives the relationship. It does not look balanced, and the relationship will suffer long term. This couple needs to build a broader sense of intimacy if the partnership is to become more balanced and healthy.

## 2. Know Your No.

**P**art of a young woman knowing herself is knowing her no. Many young men get the message from somewhere that it is their job, even if they are not ready, to push a partner sexually until she says no. Women need to anticipate this pressure and create a detailed boundary to maintain and be proud of. Two students describe voices they hear:

**“For men, they have the pressure of needing to be able to get a girl laid. You have to be attractive, so girls will drool over you, so you can have sex with them.”**

**Student**

**“Women need to look good, be skinny and we feel pressure sexually because we hear that boys will not like us unless we heighten our sexuality.”**

**Student**

Part of maintaining that boundary is making choices about friends and situations, and avoiding times that force us to say no. Saying no, especially to someone we care about, can be hard. But in case that time arises, it helps to have brainstormed and practiced creative and effective exit plans with friends. Studying the Church’s teaching on sexuality and talking to people we trust like teachers and parents can fortify our boundaries. When a young woman knows

her no, knows why she maintains her sexual boundaries, makes good life choices that mirror her beliefs, and has an exit plan, she can feel clever, empowered, and intentional. She is controlling and deciding her sexual destiny and shaping her identity.

In addition to “Know your no,” women should strive to find partners that have the same no. Young men feel pressure to push sexual boundaries, but plenty of young men

know where their own limits are. When looking for someone to date, it is important to pick a person who has thought about these things. If the person I am dating is not intentional about boundaries or has very different boundaries, I have to decide if I want to be the boundary keeper. It is easier to share that task and talk about it openly.

My no is dynamic. It can change instantly or gradually, in or out of relationships. If I have made decisions sexually that do not feel right, healthy, or balanced, I can change the boundary at which I say no. It is never too late to claim my sexuality and have a no that I feel proud of and respects where I am at. Late in college, I dated a guy who put a lot of sexual pressure on me, and I got tired of being the only one responsible for maintaining my no. I decided to be single and have a very big no. At the age of 22 I took a sabbatical from guys and did not date at all for a year. I did not hold hands or kiss a guy. I gave myself time to figure out who I was apart from dating. After that time, I was ready to start dating again and find a guy who would respect me and be a partner in maintaining our joint no.

### 3. Don't date boys.

**T**here is nothing wrong with boys; they are just not as much fun to date as guys. Young women tend to mature faster than young men. Often women are looking for dating relationships that have mental, emotional, spiritual, and physical intimacy, while well-meaning young men are fairly preoccupied with sexual intimacy. Many women mistake sexual intimacy for intimacy; their partners have no idea who they are as whole persons. From the outside, these relationships look shallow and unbalanced. To honor the need for patience, I have my young heterosexual women memorize this mantra:

Boys are bad,  
Guys are good,  
Men you marry.

This saying pertains only to dating. There is nothing inherently wrong with boys; they just aren't ready to date. The point of this guideline is finding mutuality in relationships. There is also nothing wrong with a girl starting to build an innocent relationship with a boy in middle school. The unbalance comes when a young woman is trying to build intimacy with a boy who is not quite ready for a mature, mutual relationship between equals. Romantically, heterosexual women should wait for boys to become guys before asking them out.

I ask young women to think about the young men who are their peers, and identify a few boys and a few guys. My guideline recommends finding a guy and having fun dating! Guys are ready to take cautious steps toward intimacy. Many guys revert to being boys in early college as they venture out without parental restrictions and support, and dating them may require a wait. A boy in college who does not do his own laundry or spends the whole weekend intoxicated signals he is reverting. My guides recommend being friends with boys but not dating them. When I see a young woman crying because a boy cheated on her or she got dumped on Facebook, I ask her if she was dating a boy or a guy. Those who date guys tend to cry less!

The same is true for marriage. I have had friends who have married guys, and it has not ended well. Guys are young men who have not quite claimed their manhood. They may be ready to date, but are not quite ready for the intimacy and intensity of marriage. Some of my friends who married guys are divorced, others are in counseling, and some are making it work, but they cry more than I do! Some women feel they have waited too long for boys to become men, but marriage is not something to rush into. When I first started dating my spouse, I thought, "Wow, this is a man!" A few years later, I proposed to him. The mantra gives hope and something to hold out for. If I know how to spot a boy, a guy, and a man, there will be fewer tears and emotional baggage if I live by the mantra.

## 4. If you can't talk about it, don't do it.

**A**nother good rule of thumb is, "If you cannot talk about it, you aren't ready to do it." There is a myth that it is not sexy to talk about sex. The truth is that healthy sex is totally about communication and that includes verbal communication. Dating is about practicing communication in a healthy relationship so that, as a healthy married couple, we can be truly ready to have sex by talking openly, honestly, and comfortably before, during, and after the experience.

**"I think communication makes relationships close. It is not just the physical part, but knowing you can count on the other person for anything and feeling comfortable with that person."**

**Student**

My sexuality should not be secret. Think about your first kiss. If my first kiss is with someone I respect at a time that is right, it should be fun to tell my closest friend. This does not mean I go proclaiming it down every hallway, but if I am embarrassed to tell my closest friend, then something makes it not a decision of integrity. If I am not embarrassed or ashamed of my sexual decisions and can verbalize them to my friends, my family, and my God, I am probably making healthy mature choices that do not need to be hidden. Sexuality is a beautiful, powerful gift to be celebrated and expressed with the right person in the right time. If my sexuality ever becomes a secret that I feel shame or discomfort about, it is time to look at these guidelines and see what needs to change.

## 5. Have a self to give.

**S**o often with premarital sex, one person is looking for some sort of validation from the other partner. Sexual expression works better and is more fulfilling and life-giving when each person has a self to share with the partner. Adults, even in committed, monogamous, married relationships, actively work on this differentiation within their relationships. As a young person I am busy sorting out who God creates me to be, who I am, who I am becoming, and what I want

my story to be. I am experimenting with defining myself differently from the person my parents or guardians have been telling me that I am. I am searching for peer groups that will validate how I want others in the world to see me. This quest is exciting and necessary to form an authentic self.

One reason sex belongs in the context of marriage is allowing time to develop a secure sense of self. Before marriage a young woman may give too much power to the sexual partner in telling her who she is. If I perceive my sexuality as my defining characteristic, I may struggle to validate myself and instead look anxiously to others, especially sexual partners, to affirm my worth. In the long run, this becomes problematic if I want a monogamous, full sex life in my future marriage. When so much fun, challenging, rich self-development goes on during high school, why open one's self to the possibility of letting one other person co-opt that process? Instead of looking to sexual partners for validation, we must look inside ourselves, love ourselves first, know that self well, and then have that healthy, whole self to offer to another in relationship when the time is right.

Women who know themselves and find self-validation will date the right people for the right reasons. I will not date someone just because he gives me attention. I will know what qualities I have to offer and who may be a good companion to compliment my strengths. I will recognize times in my life to be single, work on friendships, and end unhealthy relationships without losing myself. Again, I will cry fewer tears along the way. By the time I met my spouse, got married, and started having sex, I knew who I was and what I had to offer the relationship. Sex became a life-giving part of a relationship between two equals.

**“Most eros love seems to be based on whether you are ‘enough’ for someone. My friends and I cried about not being blonde enough, smart enough, thin enough, even dumb enough for the guys we liked. As a result, we covered our real selves. One of us dyed her hair, one studied more, one changed her eating habits, and another wore different clothes. We hid because it was the only thing we thought to do to make a boy like us. I have since changed my mind, and I no longer hide. I may not be as liked by guys, but I hope I am more respected.”**

**Kathleen, high school woman**

## 6. What do I want my story to be?

**A** 10th grade woman named Bobbi walked into a retreat and started talking to the other young women about her plan to lose her virginity that weekend. None of the other women spoke up, so the leader decided to press her.

“So who is this guy? Is he special? Do you love him?”

“No, no one special,” she responded nonchalantly.

“So why him? Why now?” the leader asked.

She did not have an answer.

“Is that what you want your story to be?” the leader asked further.

Eventually, Bobbi’s peers chimed in as well, and she decided not to give in to the real and imagined pressure to have sex just for the sake of having sex. Each of us needs to create a safe space to talk about our desires for intimacy in our quests for self-discovery. Each of us must be able to say I am beautiful and powerful and deserve to be treated with reverence by my peers and myself.

These guides aim to help us create a beautiful story of our lives. There is wisdom in waiting as we create a story we are proud of. There is room for abstinence in society. We seek strength from our family, friends, and Church. We become the woman we want to be, having a self to give in rich and wide friendships and in marriage.

### FOR REFLECTION

- What do I want my story to be?
- What story do I want my future spouse to know about the decisions I made in high school and in young adulthood?
- What does a woman of integrity look like?
- How can I become that woman?