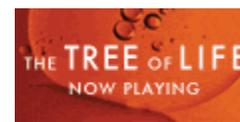


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# Teaching Kids How to Break Up Nicely

By BENOIT DENIZET-LEWIS

Late last month, 200 teenagers from Boston-area schools gathered to discuss the minutia of [Facebook](#) breakup etiquette. Should you delete pictures of your ex after splitting up? Is it O.K. to unfriend your last girlfriend if you can't stop looking at her profile? And is it ever ethically defensible to change your relationship status to single without first notifying the person whose heart you're crushing?

These pressing adolescent questions were part of a one-day conference on "healthy breakups" sponsored by the [Boston Public Health Commission](#). "No one talks to young people about this aspect of relationships," Nicole Daley, one of the conference organizers, told me between breakout sessions as teenagers swarmed a nearby cotton-candy stand. "We're here to change that."

Minutes later, 15 high-school students on a sugar high convened for a session on "creating online boundaries." The girls outnumbered the boys, and they didn't hesitate to gang up on a charming — and, until then, immensely well liked — 17-year-old named Roberto, who proclaimed with a bit too much gusto that "racing to update your relationship status after a breakup" is a healthy behavior. That was just one of a handful of scenarios the teenagers debated and placed into "healthy" or "unhealthy" categories: others included "posting mean/embarrassing statuses about your ex" (unhealthy) and "rushing into a new 'Facebook official' relationship" (understandable, but still not healthy).

"Roberto, you're really going to run all the way to your house after school to change your status?" a 16-year-old named Lazangie asked, shaking her head. She knows a thing or two about Facebook-related breakups: her last relationship ended, she said, because her ex-boyfriend couldn't handle her male friends posting niceties on her wall.

"When I'm done with a relationship, I'm not going to wait a day, an hour or even 10 minutes to update my status," Roberto told the group. "When it's over, it's over. I'm done with you."

"The key word here is 'racing,'" another girl replied with all the condescension she could muster. "Is that really healthy? Breaking up shouldn't be a competition!"

The group's adult facilitator — who wore a blue "Face It, Don't Facebook It" pin, in a reference to the apparently troubling trend of young people breaking up with one another via social media —

nodded in agreement and suggested that Roberto consider taking a “technology timeout” the next time he felt compelled to race home and publicly declare his singlehood. Roberto reluctantly agreed to consider it.

Throughout the one-day meeting, organizers did their best to make the teenagers forget they were about to learn something. They were encouraged to freely use their cellphones (“We’re not” — the kind of adults — “who tell you not to use them!” an organizer boasted during the day’s opening session), and breakup-themed songs, like Kelly Clarkson’s “[Since U Been Gone](#),” blasted from the main conference room’s speakers. The pandering worked: I saw only one teen roll her eyes all day.

To help the youngsters envision what a healthy split might look like, pictures and videos of several celebrity couples who managed amicable breakups were projected onto a big screen. Justin Timberlake and Cameron Diaz, for example, were heralded as healthy because “they’re still friends and were able to co-star in a movie together.” Their parting was juxtaposed with those of Kanye West and Amber Rose (West wrote a mean song about her) and Sammi and Ronnie from “Jersey Shore” (Sammi supposedly defriended Ronnie’s friends on her Facebook page), who each exhibited the kind of “unhealthy” breakup behavior that the Boston Health Commission hopes Massachusetts young people will rise above.

In that pursuit, organizers encouraged the crowd to eschew parting ways over text message or Facebook, the most common teen breakup methods. (A bisexual 15-year-old confessed in a morning session that she learned that her girlfriend of two years had dumped her only when she changed her relationship status to single.) Attendees were advised — with mixed results — to bravely confront the awkwardness of face-to-face breakups. When the facilitator in a session titled “Breakups 101” suggested that teenagers meet with “and come to an agreement or mutual understanding” with a soon-to-be ex, a skeptical 19-year-old nearly leapt out of her chair in protest. “So, you’re telling me that you’re crying at night, you’re not sleeping, you’re eating all this food to make you feel better, and you’re supposed to just *come to an agreement?*”

That sounded like wishful thinking to at least one teenager, who insisted that dating in high school is for suckers. “Who needs the drama?” she said, adding that many peers choose friendships or casual sexual relationships over formal romantic ones. “I’ve got enough problems without some stupid boy breaking up with me on Facebook.”