

CHAPTER 1

Planet Romance — what to pack

by Danni

If you're reading this book, there's a fair chance you want to develop a strong, healthy relationship. In this chapter I'll give you the basics — some pointers on how to get things started in the dating world.

Because I think you already have so much to offer, my job in this chapter is eassssy. All I need to do is offer you some pointers about communication skills to help you feel reassured that you've got this covered (I bet you will be nodding along furiously in agreement at these), convince you of your worth (again, eassssy with multiple s's — you are priceless) and then stand back and let you go!

Along the way I want to debunk some of the more unhelpful things you may hear about dating, just to make sure you don't get led down any dead-end

streets on your journey to Planet Romance. Who needs misguided and misinformed advice at a time like this?!

The romance police

Most of us begin our trip to Planet Romance with crushes. Did you know that the intense emotions of a crush actually have their origins in a physical reality? Because the frontal lobes of your brain are still developing throughout your teens, you are all tuned up for emotions, fighting, running away and romance. Sound about right?

I really empathise with how very real and raw crush emotions are. In fact, I think I should win the Mother of the Year Award because I managed to get my daughter, Teyah, onto Channel 9's *Today* show set when her ultimate boy-band crushes were being interviewed. They walked right past us in the corridor, and Teyah was so overwhelmed that all she could do was sob. I helpfully yelled out, 'Welcome to Australia, guys — my daughter loves you!'

Sometimes our crushes are far more personal and we don't want the world to know about them. And when your crush happens to be a real-life-accessible human being (as opposed to a flying-around-the-world rock god) it can be confusing to know what to do, can't it? I mean, you aren't going to want your mum to step in at the canteen line at school and say, 'Hey! Welcome to the playground! My daughter loves you!'

Magazines are filled with advice on how to turn a crush into a relationship. Seriously, you'd think we

should all be experts by the time we start dating. The titles often scream at us to curb our natural responses: ‘10 things he never wants to hear you say’, ‘How to play it cool with your crush’, ‘20 things you shouldn’t say to him’. It’s interesting, isn’t it, that so many magazines that claim to be written just for us seem to be mostly about him? I wonder how much better off we’d all be if we grew up on a diet of articles on how to make ourselves happy rather than a steady diet of articles about how to please boys (and about dieting — but that’s a whole other story).

The magazine articles that claim to be able to show us how to connect with a crush often share a common message: if you really want to get The Man, you need to change your behaviour, stop following your instincts and follow certain rules.

The basic premise is that men like to hunt, so you need to play hard to get with a guy — for example, by not returning his call for at least two days after he first asks you out — in order to make him feel that you are in high demand and worth being hunted.

Crazily, girls are sometimes also told that they should play down their smarts, or act helpless so that guys get to feel good by coming to the rescue. I will admit some of the advice in these books and magazines can seem seductively sensible and helpful. But what good can really come from pretending you’re *less* so that he can feel he’s *more*? Ultimately, any advice that encourages us to follow particular commandments in

order to win over a partner just doesn't sit well with me. Nor does any advice that asks girls to ignore their instincts in order to appear cool or unobtainable (see Chapter 6 to find out why this worries me so much).

And from a feminist perspective, telling girls to manipulate a situation just so boys will feel in charge is some major BS. What is it that the romance police are really saying? 'You're wonderful the way you are. But we will teach you how to be wonderful our way — which is a better kind of wonderful that boys will approve of more.'

Players, studs and stereotypes

Meanwhile, what are the boys reading? Magazines for young men — such as *FHM* and *ZOO Weekly* — seem preoccupied with showing breasts, discussing breasts, and even, in the case of *ZOO*, offering the chance to win your girlfriend new breasts. Yes, that's right, one year the magazine ran a competition in which one lucky reader won his girlfriend a boob job. Think sexual objectification with little or no emphasis on developing and nurturing relationships.

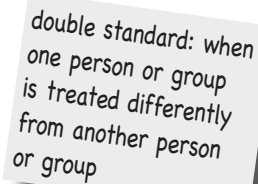
Boys receive the message that their masculinity is measured by whether they can score. And often they are told that in this particular game it's the guy who gets the hottest girl who wins.

It's a message that was

sexual objectification:
treating a person as
if they are only useful
as a source of sexual
pleasure for others

popularised by Hugh Hefner, the *Playboy* founder known for surrounding himself with a bevy of young, surgically enhanced, scantily clad women. It's the same message advertisers peddle to guys: use a certain product and young, surgically enhanced, scantily clad women will be irresistibly drawn to you. This message has left a lot of boys feeling insecure, and a lot of girls angry about cultural double standards.

The pressure on guys to hook up means that dating advice aimed at them is quite different to that for girls. A good example is the incredibly successful book *The Game: Penetrating the Secret Society of Pickup Artists*, which essentially teaches guys that it's OK to manipulate women and that learning new pick-up skills is no different to learning job interview skills. It gives tips on how a guy can speed up intimacy with a girl (sorry, I mean 'target') and how he can 'neg' her — that is, undermine her self-confidence with low-grade insults so she's more vulnerable to his advances. While we are dutifully following rules, they are being taught how to be players.



double standard: when one person or group is treated differently from another person or group

Assume, and you will make an 'ass' out of 'u' and 'me'

Let's take a moment to unpack what's happening on both sides of the fence in Relationship Advice World. It

is assumed that girls are desperate for a relationship and must work hard to establish one, even if the guy may seem unwilling. And it is assumed that boys are only interested in one thing — sex — and that they need to work hard to get it, even if girls may seem unwilling.

Can you see how misleading, and potentially damaging, both views are, for girls and guys?

These assumptions encourage girls to have a defensive view of sexuality — that is, that they must be forever on the alert to stop boys' advances. It doesn't recognise that some girls are just as interested in exploring their sexuality, without being in a committed relationship, as some boys are.

Here is a powerful alternative viewpoint that might have you rethinking the popular assumptions about guys, too: research revealed that 75 per cent of guys would rather meet a girl they liked enough to date than just casually hook up.¹ It also highlighted just how similar boys' goals are to many girls'. Boys' reasons for dating included:

- **Companionship and connection.** Boys genuinely like the girls they date and want to spend more time with them.
- **Emotional support and intimacy.** Boys like having someone to talk to and feel supported by.
- **Physical intimacy.** This was offered as a secondary reason to date. Most boys see

sexual intimacy as a result of dating, not the reason to date.

- **Peer groups.** Some boys date so they don't feel left out by their friends who are paired up.

Boys saw one of the big downsides to dating as being the risk of rejection — of having a broken heart.

It seems, too, that despite what popular culture tells us about teen guys only chasing the 'hotties', most young men actually look for a partner who is 'funny, nice, outgoing, understanding of others, able to make decisions and reasonably self-confident'.

Ground-breaking news, girls: guys are just as likely to want a meaningful relationship as we are, and are looking for similar qualities in a partner to those that we value. Why, then, do any of us need silly games? And why should girls leave taking the initiative and establishing the relationship guidelines up to boys?

Research shows that boys tend to be at least two years behind girls in terms of emotional maturity during the teen years, so they are often less able than girls to articulate their feelings or know how to develop relationships with girls. If a girl is more relationship savvy and more emotionally intelligent than her boy crush, she may well be better placed to take the lead.

Many teenagers and young adults still expect guys to 'wear the pants' in the relationship and be in

charge. Yet girls are generally considered to be the relationship experts, which means the non-expert is in charge. That doesn't sound like a good plan to me.

Andrew P. Smiler²

Rules schmooles

So if the dating advice we get from books, magazines, movies and TV shows is at best not particularly helpful, and at worst makes things more difficult between boys and girls, how did it get so popular?

People tend to prefer information or research that supports the beliefs they already have. (Psychologists call this 'confirmation bias'.) Let's say you read a guide to boys that tells you they don't like girls who appear too keen and that you really must wait at least two days before returning a guy's messages. This may sound really accurate to you as you recall all the times when a guy you liked (or a friend liked) seemed keen, then when the enthusiasm was returned immediately, he withdrew.

But let's get real. Nearly all the really great couples I know say that when they first met, it was obvious there was an attraction and that both parties couldn't get enough of each other from the word go. There are many successful couples in which the girl made it known almost immediately that she was very into him, and he loved that.

I went up to him and I said, 'Hey, I think you're cute. Can I have your number?' He said yes and we ended up dating for about ten months. It was a good ten months, because we had been honest from the start, [so] neither of us had to pretend and [we] felt comfortable from the start! I say who cares about the rules, do what you feel is right.

Yaminah, 17

I met my boyfriend, who I have been with now for a year, at school. As soon as I saw him I just walked over and said hello and asked for his number, and then I called him after school and said, 'Hey, it's the crazy girl from school and I really like you - do you like me?' He said yes and then I said, 'So what are we going to do about it?' and he asked me out.

Mikayla, 14

Well, we were friends for a month before things became 'official' and we were both really affectionate, so I knew I had nothing to be scared of. I sat down with him one night and told him that I really, really felt for him. He said he was glad I did this because he was nervous about how I was going to react if he told me first!

Bryanna, 15

I want to be clear here. I am not advocating that you need to now become the ‘huntress’. Then we’d just be back to square one, only this time you’d be the one convinced you need to do the chasing and look for suitable prey. It’s *not* a jungle out there!

Rather, what I am saying is that you are probably already well equipped to be all the things guys say they like in a partner: ‘funny, nice, outgoing, understanding of others, able to make decisions and reasonably self-confident’.

The real communication dos and don’ts

My version of flirting is looking at someone I find attractive multiple times and hoping they are braver than I am.

Internet meme

This meme makes me giggle, for I think it sums up how intimidating talking to your crush can seem. You’ll be reassured to know it needn’t feel so overwhelming.

In this section I want to offer you some basic communication guidelines that will help improve your interactions with someone you’re interested in. But here’s the really cool thing: these guidelines are universal and will help improve your interactions with everyone you meet — new friends of either sex, teachers, your parents. The ability to communicate effectively is one

of the most valued employability skills you will ever develop, too. I love the idea that these guidelines will not only make you feel more equipped for your heart's work but also prepare you for your head's work, your career.

1. Figure out whom you want to be in a relationship with and why.

You're thinking this part is easy, right? That one — the cute one!

But there really is more to it than that. To form a relationship with someone, you need to first learn more about you rather than more about them — how refreshing! You need to know what your values are and what you want from a relationship. This activity should help:

- Get a big blank piece of paper and write across the top: 'What values are important to me in a relationship?'
- Start making a list. There are no right or wrong answers, simply values that matter to you in a relationship — such as freedom, trust and honesty. It's not about what matters to your best friend, parents or teachers. This is *your* list.
- When you hit a pause, ask yourself, 'What else is important to me in a relationship?' and keep going.

- Once you feel that you've come up with everything you can think of, read your list and edit it. There might be some things that, upon reflection, you decide aren't that important to you, or some that are similar and can be combined.
- Now it's time to rank them. Give each value a number, starting at number one for the most important. If you find it difficult to rank them, ask yourself, 'If I could have *only one* of these qualities in my relationship, which one would it be?' Then keep working through the list until each one has a number.
- Look at your top five values. You will be genuinely happy if your top five are present in your relationship most (if not all) of the time. The other ones on the list are important, too, but are not as essential to your happiness.

If you're in a relationship and feel that it's not quite working for you, doing this exercise can be a good way to clarify if your most important needs are being met — and if they're not, then you can find ways to do something about that. Your values will change as you get older. For example, now you might feel that it's really important to have freedom in a relationship, so you can explore and develop your tastes in what you like, but later, security might become more important

to you. Check in with yourself every so often to see whether your values have changed, so you can continue to get the most out of your relationships. You can adapt this activity to trying to decide what qualities you value in a friend or what type of job you might enjoy the most.³

2. Get involved in a range of activities.

Many girls tell me their biggest problem is not being able to meet a partner they like. My advice is: get involved, *sista!* Join a drama club, Venturers, a local youth group or a mixed sporting team. By doing something you enjoy, you are far more likely to meet someone who has similar interests to you, too, aren't you?

3. Introduce yourself and remember names.

The basics matter. Just walk on over and say hi and give your name, with a big friendly smile. This is really an essential skill for life. I know that whenever a young person bothers to make eye contact with me and introduce herself, I remember her. Your crush is no different! Don't just be 'the chick from maths', be *you*.

4. Work on your conversation skills so you get better at listening and talking.

I think it's important that not all your communication is done via text or Facebook, particularly in the early getting-to-know-each-other phase. I can tell you from first-hand experience that even if you have great

chemistry with a guy via email or messaging, in real life things may not flow quite so easily. If you develop a closeness online and it doesn't translate into real life, you'll both feel really uncomfortable and also, perhaps, a little sad that you shared so much of yourself with someone that you know you'll never really connect with long term. And girls crushing on gamers who are most at home behind their computer screens may need to encourage them to talk for reals, not just via messaging.

Great conversationalists tend to do the following:

- Ask questions. When someone asks questions, it shows they are interested in the other person and his or her opinion. Open questions — ones that require more than a mere yes or no — really help get the conversation flowing. For example, try 'Why did you pick basketball as a sport?' rather than 'So, do you like basketball?'
- Offer observations or examples to show they understand or empathise with what the other person is saying. An example is 'Yep, I felt like that, too, when I started at this school. It can be so lonely being the newbie. How did you cope?' (See how I also threw in an open-ended question there? Genius.)
- Show they are listening by referring back to what the other person has said, in a meaningful way and making connections

where possible. An example is ‘Wow, *The Catcher in the Rye* is my favourite book, too! What part do you love the most?’ (PS That is my favourite book; I could chat about it all day! If we ever meet, you should totally ask me about it.)

And in any real-world interaction, it’s not just about what people say to each other, but also about what their bodies are saying. The following body-language cues indicate a person is interested in you and what you’re saying. They act as your ‘green light’ to continue, safe in the knowledge that someone is engaged with what you’re saying.

- **Posture.** They look comfortable, and they are perhaps leaning in close to you or, occasionally, touching you. Their arms aren’t crossed. They seem relaxed.
- **Eye contact.** Looking into the other person’s eyes, particularly when they are speaking, indicates interest in that person. I love to look into people’s eyes when they are speaking to me, as I get a real insight into how they are truly feeling. They say the eyes are the window to the soul, and I so agree.
- **Nodding in agreement.** When someone nods in response to key things you’re saying, they’re showing interest and understanding.

- **Smiling or laughing.** A smile or laughter is a very strong indication that the person is enjoying what you're saying. They are body-language 'gold stars'.

Keep these body-language basics in mind when you are listening, too. If you like what you're hearing, show it.

Now for the negatives ...

Negative body language isn't necessarily a red light indicating the person you are speaking to has completely lost interest. The signals listed below may also indicate that a person is tired, preoccupied with other thoughts or nervous. However, it is important to be aware of these signs, as they will help you gauge whether the other person is right there with you:

- **Appearing tense or nervous.** Signs that indicate someone might not be interested include frowning, crossing arms, fidgeting and looking around you as if for someone else to talk to.
- **Yawning.** They've either had a late night, or you're losing them. (Note to self: if someone is talking to you and you can't stop yawning, but you really are enjoying what they're saying, it's a good idea to apologise and explain that you are interested, you are just tired.)

Some girls are very social and love talking to new people, but for others, social occasions can be trying.

Michaela, one of Enlighten Education's Facebook friends, stands in front of groups of strangers and talks every day for her job, but she was 'cripplingly shy' when she was a girl. Her advice is to start small:

You can eat an elephant if you take small enough bites, right? So think about one thing you'd like to work on that challenges you in social settings, and give yourself one small goal. For example, maybe think about saying hello to just one person you've not met before. If you manage it, that's great! Just one hello. Then build from there ... The more you do it, the easier it gets.

Wise advice. Start small and practise. Every smile that is returned or conversation that lasts more than five minutes will help build your confidence.

5. Be sensitive to other people.

Your crush may be feeling nervous, too. Look for body-language clues to help you gauge that, and offer lots of supporting comments — like 'That's great!' or 'Wow, that's interesting, tell me more' — or at the very least flash some smiles for encouragement.

6. Take compliments and give them sincerely.

I am always disappointed when I see people reject compliments. And I see girls do this a lot. You've probably noticed this kind of thing, too: a girl posts a

gorgeous photo of herself on Facebook and when one of her friends takes the time to write a lovely comment such as ‘You’re so beautiful!’ she writes back something like ‘As if. You are.’

I think of compliments as being like little word-gifts someone has boxed up, tied with a ribbon and presented to another person. If someone handed you a sparkly present to unwrap, would you throw it back at them, or refuse to thank them for it?

I don’t think girls reject or ignore compliments because they intend to be rude, but rather because they are so terrified that others will think they are ‘up themselves’.

For a whole bunch of messed-up reasons, the ultimate sins we like to attack girls for are being fat, being a slut and thinking she’s ‘all that’. True? I recall once, when I was fighting with my bestie in Year 9, that she said to me, ‘You are such a fat slut and you think you’re so much better than everyone else.’ Wow. The girl-hating trifecta!

But just as cruel words can scar us, kind words and compliments can have a profoundly positive, healing effect on us. I love the anecdotes some of my teen friends shared with me:

At a debating competition one time I was wearing different earrings, one a sparkly one, the other a green flower, and one of the guys on the other team came up to me at the end and said, ‘I’ve been staring at you all night, your earrings are so quirky,’ then

smiled and walked away. I was so happy for the rest of the night and I didn't even know the guy!

Erin, 14

I was at a friend's party, and the guy I was talking to found out that I was a Star Wars geek and he said, 'I think you may be the Obi Wan for me!' We laughed for ages and now we're really good friends.

Brinley, 15

I was talking to a friend about how I really enjoyed ancient history. He said he loved the ancient Greeks and started going into great detail about all the gods and goddesses, attempting to teach me all of them. After about twenty minutes he got to the 'last one', Aphrodite, and he said, 'Do you know who she is?' And I said, 'Yes, she's the goddess of beauty,' and he said, 'Yep, that's right, and you're the living embodiment of her.' Couldn't stop smiling after that.

Steph, 15

7. Be willing to risk rejection, because it is possible that someone you approach may not be interested.

I know. This is shocking news, isn't it? What's. Not. To. Love. About. You? Adopt the approach I take in business towards rejection: a no is not a no forever, it is just a no for that day. It's possible that the person who rejects you now may well be interested in you later on.

Or it's possible that the other person is great but just doesn't believe you are compatible, for whatever reason. That's OK. Not everyone likes Caramello Koalas, either, and that also makes little sense to me.

Or it's possible that this person is a jerk who shouldn't even be in your life.

Don't overthink it.

Quiz

Circle the answer that comes closest to describing your situation.

1. There's someone in your maths class you like. You:

- A. Do nothing about it as you're worried they will reject you.
- B. Start flirting up a storm with their best mate. They need to know you're hot property.
- C. Smile at them, ask how their weekend was and volunteer to help them out when they look confused about how to follow the rules of trigonometry (you totally rock at trig, BTW). Nothing may come from initiating a friendship, but at least you'll get to know them.

2. Someone you've had a crush on for ages asks you to the movies on Friday night. You:

- A. Say no. You're too shy around them and wouldn't know what to say.

- B. Tell them you've got other plans (even though you haven't) but might be free on Saturday (it's best to keep them eager).
- C. Tell them you'd love to. If you feel nervous, you suggest going with a group of friends, which will take the pressure off you both.

3. Someone from school you are crushing on sends you a cute-and-flirty text message. You:

- A. Ignore it. You're not sure what to say back and you're worried they're just joking.
- B. Start sending them loads of flirty messages, too.
- C. Send them a cute-and-flirty message back, then at school smile and tell them their text was sweet. You don't want to get caught up in an only-online flirt fest. If you're going to have a real relationship, you'd like to know sooner rather than later and be in a position where you can read their body language, too.

4. Someone you like sends you a Facebook message that you really don't understand. You:

- A. Assume it means they don't like you or are making fun of you.
- B. Analyse it to death, ask all your friends what it means and stare at it for hours hoping to break the code.
- C. Tell them you didn't get it and ask them to explain.

5. You have heard that your crush likes you but is too shy to say hello. You:

- A. Assume that they mustn't like you at all. If they did, they'd make the first move.
- B. Smile and hope that they will build up the courage to speak to you eventually.
- C. Break the ice by asking them about a singer you know they're really interested in. You feel shy, too, but you know that this is the only way to really find out if there is any chemistry between you both.

6. Someone you like asks you out but then needs to cancel at the last minute, which really disappoints you. You:

- A. Refuse to even listen to their reasons why they had to change the plans. They are obviously just not that into you.
- B. Pretend that you don't mind and tell them you will make sure you are free when it next suits them.
- C. Tell them you are disappointed but give them the opportunity to explain why they had to cancel. If their explanation sounds reasonable, you agree to catch up at another time that suits you both.

7. How often do you read articles in magazines that offer you 'dating rules' and 'flirting tips'?

- A. Constantly. You have no idea what you are doing!
- B. Constantly. You want to be the best at this dating game!

- C. Sometimes. It can be helpful to get a variety of opinions on relationships, but ultimately you need to do what feels right for you.

Now add up how many A's, B's and C's you circled, and check below.

Mostly A's

Sweetheart, before you think too much more about loving *someone else*, you might need to spend a little more time learning how to love *you*. Sometimes we think we will feel better about ourselves if we find another who can heal us; this rarely works long term.

Mostly B's

Your beliefs around romance may have been influenced by popular culture and the media — and while there's nothing wrong with that, you might want to think about trusting your own inner voice more and letting others fall in love with the real you, not a version of you that you think they will like best.

Mostly C's

You've got a really sensible attitude towards dating and relationships. This doesn't mean you won't find elements of dating scary or bewildering — all new experiences can be. But with your solid sense of self and honest approach, you're bound to attract like-minded partners eventually.

Affirmations

I have a lot to offer in any relationship.

I value all of me and attract others who value all of me,
too.