

Ten Minute T(ea) with Ms. Jennifer Taylor

*Interview conducted by Kaela Dunne
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Q) How do you think boarding school life impacts student relationships?

A) I think that boarding school can really make relationships challenging because you're with the people all the time. If you're talking about romantic relationships, I think it's really hard to date at a boarding school because your relationship is incredibly public. Everybody sees every aspect of your relationship if you're trying to date, and at the same time when you break up or if there are difficulties in your relationship, everybody also seems to know about that. So it's really hard to have a private relationship or a healthy private relationship because it feels like you're living in a fishbowl. I think it's also really hard just for friendships sometimes because, when you're living together with everybody, friendships can get really intense. But at the same time I think it's really nice because you know that you've always got someone there for you all the time. So I think boarding school can really help to develop healthy friendships. I think boarding schools can allow for healthy dating relationships, but I think dating relationships in a boarding school can be really really challenging.

Q) Are boarding school students more or less likely to have relationships? Why do you think so?

A) For St. Mark's, I think we're more likely not to have like dating relationships because I think that boarding schools make it really clear within the rulebook that you're not supposed to be engaging in certain types of relationships, so I think that students get really nervous about wanting to explore a dating because "what are teachers going to say?" "are people going to look at me funny?" Again, because it's so public, everybody sees that you're dating somebody, so I think that students probably want to have relationships in high school. I think most students feel like part of their high school experience is dating, so they want to explore the dating aspect, but in the boarding school world it becomes more challenging. So I think they think twice before "do I want to get into a relationship with somebody because it could get really messy and if we break up and everybody knows about it." But also the school has rules, and I think that's where it becomes really challenging. Here at St. Mark's, and probably at other boarding schools too, we've seen situations where kids try to have a relationship and want to spend time together just privately, not in a sexual way, just like "I want to hang out with this person" and they look around their campus and think "well where can I go? Where can I sit with this person to get to know them and determine if I want to date them?" and I think that's where you see a lot of the boarding school cultures have "well let me hook up with them first, then I'll decide if I want to have a relationship with this person." So I think that our students are very cautious about the dating relationship world. I think they are less cautious when it comes to "well let me hook up with somebody." That seems to be easier, even though I think it's probably not emotionally easier to hook up with someone first, but I think boarding school students are more nervous

about having a dating relationship because it can be really public, and I don't know if they want to take that risk.

Q) What do you think about how the administration and student handbook set guidelines for student relationships?

A) So, now you're talking to a counselor, and I need to put it out there that you're talking to a counselor because this is really hard. This is one of the things that I am challenged with because I do think that you are at an age as high schoolers that you need to explore the dating world, you need to explore healthy relationships, and you need to explore what a sexual component in that healthy relationship is. That's where it gets all messy because of what the law says, the handbook says, the administration says, but at the same time, all of the people in the administration were all teenagers once, and we all dated at some point. So it's kind of this hard piece where I understand the administration wants kids to be safe, and I know that the administration wants kids to make healthy choices. As a counselor, I want kids to make healthy choices, and I want kids to be safe, but it's just really hard because I feel for students who want to have a relationship but feel like they can't, then they have to sneak around. And sneaking around is not part of a healthy relationship. You can't date here. You can't go on a date. If you went to a public school where the school day ends at 3:30pm, you can tell someone "hey let's go meet somewhere and hang out" but here everything has to have permissions. You need to have permission to go off campus, and you need to have permission to go into a dorm room. So, I just think that I understand why administrations and schools put parameters around relationships, both because of the law and because we're responsible for your safety and well-being, but for me it's a really hard challenge. It's not that I want the institutions and schools to be less strict; I think that schools have to look at relationships on a case by case basis, and it's really challenging. I know for me, as a counselor, I struggle with promoting students to have a healthy relationship while maintaining the rules and the expectations of the school. So because I, as an adult, have trouble figuring that out, I can't imagine how students figure it out because they don't want to get themselves in trouble but they want to be in a relationship. I understand why administrations put parameters on relationships but as a counselor, I think it's hard to balance that. I want kids to have healthy relationships, I want kids to be able to experience healthy relationships in a boarding school. Sneaking around is not part of a healthy relationship, I mean sneaking out your parents house is an aspect of it, but that's not what we're talking about here. I mean you can't even have a normal teenage relationship because you have to ask permission, and you have to be supervised. I don't really know if boarding schools allow for relationships to be what they could be because it just feels different.

Q) In such a small school like St. Mark's, how do you think the relationships impact class dynamics?

A) That's a hard question for me to answer, but I would imagine if you're in a relationship or if you're dating, then I think it could have positives and negatives. We are a community where

everything is done collaboratively and working in small groups on projects together. I think that if you're dating somebody and if you're in a class together, that could be a really positive dynamic. I think, however, if that relationship breaks up, then it's going to be a very awkward dynamic and I don't know if our students are saying to their English teacher, "hey I just broke up with my boyfriend. Can you not put me on a group project with him?" So I think the dating relationship can have positive aspects. And the reality is, here at St. Mark's, we've seen that. You and I can sit here, and we know who the couples are. We know the senior couples, we know who's really good, we know who's a public couple and I think those people have worked really hard on their relationship to have a solid relationship in front of our school community. So we have really good role models, and I think that's really positive for our younger students to see that, yes, you can have a healthy relationship here in a boarding school, whether you're both boarders or a boarder and a day student. I think in the academic world, if it's a healthy relationship, it's going to be really good whether it's a team or for a classroom. If it's not a healthy relationship or it's a bad breakup, it's going to be that same dynamic where it will cause difficulties. I think the challenge is faculty don't always know what that dating world looks like. The adults don't realize that somebody is a couple until they are really firmly established as a couple, so I think teachers may not know who dated who, who broke up with who, and who didn't have a good relationship. They are not going to know not to pair kids up in an academic setting, but I think if we have really good role models and healthy relationships, they'll be fine in an academic setting.

Ms. Jennifer Taylor joined St. Mark's as Director of Counseling Services in 2012. Jennifer has a range of great experience, having worked in public and independent schools, university settings, as well as high schools and middle schools. Most recently, she is coming to us from a similar role at Fay School.