

Flirt

Who teaches a boy to recognize when a girl is flirting with him? Certainly no one stepped forward to do the job in my mostly male family in the 1950's. My father was probably genetically oblivious to what women signaled to him. Males ran in our Irish family and possibly we had a surfeit of Y chromosomes. We were never tuned into the opposite sex. A college roommate had to explain to me long ago that the girl who would become my wife was interested in me. I don't know how he could tell. I couldn't.

And it was hard for me to believe my mother knew how to flirt. Don't ask me why. I just know Mom wasn't capable of flirting. Maybe it's because I never saw her do it. But I have to admit I have a vague recollection of her getting lovey with my father ... in a proper Catholic way, of course ... just before I would run out the back door screaming, "Someone stop my parents from doing that!"

I never asked how Mom and Dad got together back when they were young, but I always wondered if well meaning friends pulled their clothes off and pushed the two into a closet at a wild New Years Eve party. We Irish are not always subtle.

I remember a sweet girl named Alice in the 9th grade. I was totally obsessed with her one summer after seeing her in a red bathing suit. I had no idea what lie beneath the bathing suit, but twenty billion years of evolution guaranteed I didn't need to know in order to want it. In the spirit of first things first, I longed to know if Alice was interested in me. I could not tell.

On the city bus one afternoon, I heard a young woman say to another, "Oh, you can tell when he's interested. A girl can tell."
"So can a boy," said her seatmate.

That was news to me. I considered myself a fairly good looking fourteen year old guy and someone might agree, but I just didn't know how to read the signals.

I don't know what most teenage boys did when stumped for an answer, but I always turned to our local library. Although you wouldn't think so, in those hallowed halls I discovered how to build an explosive device big enough to blow up my brother's bicycle and even how to properly call in the resulting fire in a concise and professional manner.

Of course, for that research I had been necessarily secretive. For flirting, I figured I'd just be open and above board.

"Can you recommend a book on flirting?" I asked the elderly librarian the next morning.

"You should talk to your mother," said the woman.

"She's busy," I said. "Besides, I don't want to flirt with anyone, I want to do a scholarly study on the subject." This last phrase always goes over well with librarians. They get all gooey and helpful when they hear it.

A half hour later I had piled up a number of books to consult, mostly psychology tomes and journals. Not very far in my quest, I was skimming an article on the socio-sexual aspects of dimorphism among apes and its effect on food gathering. The librarian stopped by my table to ask if I'd had a Eureka moment yet.

"To be honest," I admitted to the nice lady, "all I wanted to know was how to tell if a girl was interested in me."

"Isn't it really quite simple?" she said. "Normally, the girl would catch your eye first."

"I don't look girls in the eye," I said.

"And then she might smile at you," the woman continued.

"But maybe she's smiling because she forgot her lunch money and wants to borrow a dollar," I replied. "I don't want to be taken advantage of, not by a girl Jih-GO-low."

"That's Gigolo," said the librarian. She smiled sweetly, stood up and left.

Back among the shelves I stumbled across an anthropological classic, *Female Courting Signals Among Primates* (or something like that) and finally found the mother lode of flirting tips.

Point by point, the book explained each gesture a girl may use to indicate interest in a boy. Sure, the young lady may not realize what she's doing, but a 14 year old budding anthropologist like myself should be on the watch for these signs. Here they are.

She sticks out her chest at you. This is for the purpose of showing she's ready to nurse ... a baby, I

guess. Boy! I'd never had a girl do that to me, except for the night at the skating rink a buxom lass lost her balance and came flying into me. Her chest was all she had to protect herself, of course. So, does that count?

She looks at you and plays with her hair using her finger or a pencil. This is called preening. Yes, Skeevie Eevie did that across the room to me in 4th grade, but she was itching terribly, her eyes were unfocused and everyone said she had bugs in her hair.

She touches you somewhere safe, the forearm as an example. This is the female testing if you are comfortable with her. By age fourteen, not a single girl had ever reached out and touched my forearm. Older women had taken my arm to cross the street when I was downtown, but I don't think they were trying to pick me up.

She lets her wrist go limp. Bent, it's a sign of submission. Oh! I didn't know that. I thought it was a sign she was a girl.

A real treat awaited me when I opened the next book, *How To Tell What A Woman Really Wants*.

"Women will tend to use a lot of subtle cues to entice you," it announced, "but you have to be absolutely sure you understand what she is saying with her body." Uh, if I were sure, I wouldn't be looking it up in the library. The book, written by a Reverend Hiram Percy, never specifically told me what a woman really wanted. Perhaps the Reverend had to finish the book on a deadline, or maybe there would be a sequel. In any event, it may have been written for the older crowd I saw dancing and kissing at Uncle Harry's last New Year's Eve Party.

You're not going to believe this, but after I boarded the city bus for home, Alice got on at the next stop and sat in the sideways seat up front. She wasn't wearing her red swimsuit, but was instead drowning in her oversized Catholic school uniform. She didn't look my way. I kept glancing up from my shoes, ready to wave to her, waiting for her to catch my eye, smile, flip her hair or stick out her chest. She did none of these, but underneath her extra roomy school uniform all kinds of things might have been going on without my noticing.

I realized she would never send any of these signals without knowing I was just down the aisle from her, so I began to make noticeable arm movements. "How long has it been since you showered, young man?" asked the elderly lady beside me as she leaned

away.

I kept swinging my arms. "It's a mental rehearsal for my hoop shot," I told the woman.

When I glanced toward the front of the bus, Alice was staring at me, incredulous. She got off at the next stop, five blocks before her street. Just to avoid me, I suppose.

I began to wonder if perhaps not all of life's explanations could be found in books. After all, when I set my brother's bike on fire and called the fire department, there was nothing in the demolition book I read that said our phone number would be traced. Dejected, I made my way home, thinking I would have to face the inevitable. I'd have to ask Mom.

My mother stood in the kitchen at the stove, wrapped in her favorite apron, the green one that looked like she was getting ready to feed the entire Third Army. I could not bring myself to believe this woman knew how to flirt, but I was out of options.

"Mom," I began, "how can I tell if girls are interested in me."

"They're not. You're too young," she said.

"Well, I want to be prepared, just in case," I said. "How does a girl flirt?"

Mom left the stove, walked over and stood in front of me as I sat sideways in the chair at the kitchen table. She reached out and grabbed my ears and pulled my face into her aproned bosom and wrapped her arms around me in a headlock, smothering me in a place I'd have loved to be if it belonged to a girl my age. She planted a kiss on my forehead and roughly shoved me back in my chair.

"If a girl does that to you," she said, "you send her to me."

I've been married 47 years and I'm still waiting for a girl my own age to do that to me.

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