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## The Prom: A Survival Guide for Parents

Getting your son a date, preparing for the after party and other tips for parents to get through prom season



ILLUSTRATION: RAMI NIEMI

By Rob LaZebnik

May 12, 2017 8:58 a.m. ET

**Congratulations.** You've successfully steered your child's emotional journey through high school. She's graduating and will soon head to her fourth-choice college, which you artfully convinced her is the "right fit" (go Mud Hawks!). But before you relax, you need to steel yourself for the final high-school land mine: It lies ahead at the Hilton Sycamore Ballroom III and is called senior prom. Having guided three of my children so far through this tumultuous event, I have some advice to stave off heartbreak, embarrassment and decades of painful memories—for you, and for your kid.

Prom has evolved since I went to mine in the 1980s, the theme of which was, truly, "Memories. Times you'll never forget...Still." Why "Still?" Because it was our song of the night, by the Commodores. If my date had been in charge, it would have been "Don't Stand So Close to Me."

Which brings us to your kid finding someone to ask to the prom. Strangely, this effort still falls entirely on the quaking shoulders of boys. If your son doesn't have a significant other, asking someone to the dance is just as hellish as ever.

Your son doesn't want to be reminded by you that he is nowhere near having a date. Your task here is so obvious that I probably don't need to say it: You need to create a spreadsheet to track his Instagram likes from girls in order to identify a likely candidate. Then if you have a daughter, have her quietly reach out on Snapchat to the girlfriends of the potential askee to ensure a golden ticket: the precooked yes.

If this fails, you're going to have to collude with other parents. This is fraught with danger. If your son gets wind of your soliciting for him, he'll be so angry he might run out and pierce things you didn't know could be pierced.

Once you've sussed out information about other lonely-hearts, set your trap: "Brandon, I heard lots of kids don't have prom plans yet, like Luke, James, Amanda..." There she is—Amanda! A little treasure chest for him at the bottom of the aquarium tank. Now, quick, change the subject: "Anyway, can you believe the Eagles were able to draft Donnel Pumphrey in the fourth round? Incredible no one else had taken him yet." You dog—you didn't really change the subject at all.

You linked Amanda to Donnel Pumphrey. Late drafts—steals! If he doesn't ask her right away, Amanda is going to get grabbed by Brandon, the Dallas Cowboys of the prom!

Now that he's taken the bait, be careful that he doesn't rush out a promposal. There's nothing more scarring than the elaborately-staged public promposal that lands a "sure," followed by the dreaded, eyes-darting talk in the parking lot where she politely rescinds her yes. The subtext is: "You put me on the spot in front of 20 sort-of friends who actually looked up from their phones for the whole thing, and I was too nice to humiliate you then. So I'm doing it now, and please don't touch my Honda Fit."

The upshot: Make sure your kid gets a private yes first. Otherwise, for the rest of his life, whenever he sees any kind of Honda he'll replay that conversation, drowning out crucial talks you've had with him such as: "Sometimes the only part of the shirt you need to iron is the collar."

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Now that your kid has his date, it's time for an epiphany: You're in the wrong business. You should quit your job and rent out formal wear or limos, because you're about to shell out more for those items than it would have cost to book the Commodores for

your prom.

Also, don't forget to preorder the boutonniere or corsage. God forbid your son's date doesn't have a \$40 orchid strapped to her wrist that will be flung into the punch bowl during the first chorus of "Party in the U.S.A."

Finally, meet the two scariest words in modern parenting: after party. Typically they are arranged by entrepreneurial kids who will eventually go into concert promotion or minimum-security prison. The events are often held at an event space that prohibits underage drinking, and where there will be nothing but underage drinking. Every soon-to-be-killed brain cell in your teen's head will be focused on how to sneak alcohol into the party. Obviously you'll want to load her up with lots of cautionary tales about kids passing out and waking up missing a kidney, or worse, their favorite earbuds. And encourage your kid to make smart choices. For instance: Should she throw up on the street or in the Uber? Push the street, because there's a \$200 cleaning fee for the Uber.

With your help and some luck, your child will emerge from the prom emotionally unscathed, and learn the important lesson that memories are times that are nice to forget. Still. Just like when we were young.

—*Mr. LaZebnik is a writer for "The Simpsons."*

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