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Preparing for the Day Your Teen Starts Dating

(Featured July 12, 2004)

Dating ... the dream of every young boy and girl and a nightmare for every parent. At what age do you allow your child to start dating? What should you tell your adolescent about dating? Should your child watch for any warning signs? What should you say to help break the ice with your child on these sensitive topics? Interested? Then, keep reading ...

What age is it appropriate for a child to start dating?

There doesn't seem to be a simple answer to this. Girls mature faster than boys. At 14, they are interested in boys and dating, and appear ready to begin dating. By comparison, however, boys are often still immature at 14 and don't always show signs of being interested in girls at that age.

Often, we wonder why girls would want to date a boy of 14. Sexual urges and puberty take over, however, and soon your *family* is flooded with powerful emotions and heated debates. As you head down this path with your own teenager, here are some simple questions to think about:

- What are your family traditions regarding dating?
- What are the social norms in the area where you live?
- Should your teen begin by dating in small groups?

Regardless of the age that's right for your teenager and your family, make sure that you have conversations with your adolescent that include discussions about his or her feelings about dating and relationships. Set the rules, enforce them, and be open to discussion. And remember, your family's moral and theological underpinnings will begin to show up in all of these conversations and in the way that you and your teen relate to each other during those conversations.

What should you tell your adolescent about dating? Honesty, accuracy, and candor will make these conversations much more effective. It's okay to share with your teen that some topics are new to you, or that some are harder than others to explain. Respect your teen's questions and, by taking your child seriously, he or she will respond in-kind—although he or she may not reveal their appreciation at the time. Here are some great topics and conversation starters:

- **Sex:** Discuss safety (e.g., preventing your child from getting date raped), your values, and the importance of respect (e.g., "no" ALWAYS MEANS "NO!").
- **Respect:** Inform your child about the importance of honoring other people and their individuality. Never force anyone to do anything against his or her will or never allow anyone to force

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you to do anything against your will. Discuss why the word “No” always means “No” in relationships, and why it is crucial to respect other people.

- **Self-worth:** Each person has value. Nobody should ever be demeaned, insulted, or harassed.
- **Kindness:** Each person needs to treat the other as they themselves would want to be treated.
- **Personality:** Every person has his or her own likes, dislikes, and opinions. Respectful conversation is always the key to a good date.
- **Responsibility:** The safety of each person is always a top priority. Discuss your values about safety issues, and what to do when something unexpected happens.
- **Fun:** Make sure you impress upon your child that group dating and one-on-one dating are all about fun—and getting to know yourself and other people better.

Make sure your teen is actually ready to date

Make sure that your adolescent is actually ready to date even though he or she has reached the age that you have decided is appropriate. Maturity is different for each person. Some are “late bloomers,” so it is wise not to force the issue or to provide unrealistic expectations. Talk openly with your child about all of this, and most especially about the differences in each person’s personality and the unfair and inappropriate influences that society has forced on this issue.

What not to say to your teen ...

- Your friend’s parents have their rules, and I have mine.
- You’ll do as I say.
- I don’t want to discuss it.
- I don’t care what you think or want.
- These are the rules and that is the end of that.
- You’ve got to be tough with girls. If you are soft with them, they won’t like you.
- Maybe you’ll get lucky!

What should you say to your teen?

- This is how to behave ...
- Never be violent or forceful.
- Never be unkind.
- Never be mean.
- Don’t force anyone to do what he or she doesn’t want to do.
- Always respect a person’s right to say “no,” especially your own right to say no.
- Show respect at all times—even when it’s not convenient.
- Always be a gentleman or lady.
- Let’s talk about it...

Be certain that you look closely at each of the above sentences and try to re-phrase or reframe them in positive ways. Always include your adolescent in the process by showing and telling them the reasons why you make the decisions that you make. Your teen is maturing into an adult, and your respect for your teen will help garner his or her respect for you. Try to have conversations with your teen instead of telling them the rules and arguing about “who’s right.”

Most importantly, know that this is a beautiful yet anxiety ridden time in your child’s life. It should be a fun and exciting time, yet a time when education and discussion come *before* a crisis occurs.

A good way to start a conversation about dating with your adolescent is to say, “I remember the worst date I ever had...” or “I remember the best date that I ever had...” Be proud of your child’s accomplishments and affirm his or her good behaviors so that your child knows you trust him or her to be the best that they can be. Good luck!

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How to Say it to Boys. Richard Heyman, Ed.D., Prentice Hall Press; New York, New York, 2003. pp. 291-295.

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