

## Dating and Your Teenager

When your child takes an interest in dating, it is important to question whether they are ready to accept the responsibilities.

Parents should not be afraid to talk to their children about any issues and concerns. Set fair limits and rules, and get to know their love interest better.

### How old is old enough?

It is the age-old question. However, there is no best age for teens to start dating. Every person will be ready for a dating relationship at a different time.

Different families may have their own rules about dating. When a teen decides to start a dating relationship, it should be because they care about someone and not because other people are dating.

A dating relationship is a special chance to get to know someone, and it should happen only when the teen is ready and parents or guardians are agreeable to the situation.

Child development experts recommend coming to a compromise that is fair and suitable to both parent and child.

When deciding on a mutually acceptable age, it is important to use common sense and trust parental instincts.

- Get to know the child's friends.
- Meet and stay in contact with boyfriend's or girlfriend's parents.
- Gauge the overall safety of the neighborhood and the areas where your teen will probably be spending time with their love interest.
- Be willing and available to drop the child off and pick up from dates.

Be aware that the more tough and forbidding parents are about dating rules, the more likely the chance that a child may test parental boundaries. Try to be supportive, flexible and understanding of their love interest and allow for an equal exchange of ideas.

### Setting Ground Rules

Before granting permission to date, it is important to set fair and consistent rules. Consider the following:

- **Stress that dating is a privilege, not a right.** While forming new friendships and exploring dating relationships is an important part of growing up, it is not necessarily the most important. Indicate that school and family responsibilities come first.

- **Express parental expectations.** Talk about what is expected in terms of behavior and actions while dating. Tell your son or daughter what you do not approve of. Indicate that you will not allow him or her to date someone who is abusive, manipulative, sexually coercive, uses drugs or alcohol or breaks the law.
- **Have an honest conversation about sex.** Let your child know your feelings about expressing intimacy and affection. Discuss important issues such as practicing safe sex, using condoms and other forms of birth control.
- **Set age limits.** Stress the acceptable age of what their date should be (experts suggest not letting your teenager date anyone two years older or younger). Talk with boys about the potential legal consequences of sexual relations with a minor even if they are "consensual."
- **If you disagree with your child dating more than one person** at a time, discuss the issue.
- **Discuss feelings about "love."** Caution your teen that what may feel like head-over-heels love can really be an exaggerated emotion. See whether their date shows the same degree of thoughtful gestures and appropriate signs of affection. Talk about the importance of sorting through feelings, and how it can be easier to distinguish real love after more experience dating other people.
- **Encourage your child to invite his or her date over when the family is home.** Get to know the person. Observe how they interact. Try to make them feel comfortable spending time together at home—when you are home—instead of going out.
- **Arrange for a "check-in" system.** Require that your child indicate clearly before leaving for a date, where they are going and set a return time. Also, consider requiring at least one phone call at a predetermined time.
- **Set a curfew and stick to it.** Find out the local legal curfew and consider making home curfew 30 minutes earlier.
- **Decide on consequences** for breaking rules ahead of time.

## Resources

- Office on Women's Health, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services: [www.girlshealth.gov](http://www.girlshealth.gov)
- Substance Abuse & Mental Health Services Administration: [www.samhsa.gov](http://www.samhsa.gov)
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control (NCIPC): [www.cdc.gov/ViolencePrevention/DatingMatters/index.html](http://www.cdc.gov/ViolencePrevention/DatingMatters/index.html)

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