

## Teens and Dating: Tips for Parents and Professionals<sup>1</sup>

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*This publication is one in a series of discussions on understanding teen sexuality.*

### Romantic Feelings of Teens: A Natural Process

Teens face strong pressures to date, as well as get involved in a romantic relationship<sup>1</sup>. A romantic relationship is one that involves feelings of attraction—physical and friendship. In fact, over half of teens in the United States report dating regularly (casual dates with one or more partners at different times) whereas a third claim to have a steady dating (exclusive) partner<sup>2</sup>. Young teens usually hang out with peers who are the same gender as they are. As they reach the mid-teen years (age 14-15 years), they start having relationships with peers of the opposite sex<sup>3</sup>. Such relationships are likely to be friendships and/or physical attractions. Although most romantic relationships among 12- to 14-year-olds last less than 5 months, by age 16 relationships last an average of 2 years<sup>4</sup>. In the early teen years dating is more superficial—for fun and recreation, status among peers, and exploring attractiveness/sexuality. In the older teen years youth are looking for intimacy, companionship, affection, and social support.

Desiring a romantic partner is a natural, expected part of adolescence. However, involvement in a serious or exclusive romantic relationship in the preteen/early teen years can create problems. True romantic relationships are about intimacy, or communicating detailed, personal information verbally, and physical contact and closeness. Some believe a teen first needs to form an identity and know who she or he is before developing a healthy intimate relationship. Other experts feel that romantic relationships are a way for teens to learn more about themselves. Many young teens are still defining themselves and romantic relationships may be based on a false sense of intimacy—in other words, teens don't know themselves well enough to share who they are with someone else.

Having a crush in the late elementary school and early middle school years is perfectly natural and part of the biological changes of puberty. Before we can see puberty's physical changes, preteens (aged 8-10) experience an increase in hormones. Greater levels of sex hormones may influence a preteens first romantic feelings. Having a crush is not a problem, but acting on early romantic feelings and biology when a teen is not emotionally or socially ready can lead to problems for early daters.

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## What Parents and Adults Need to Know About Teen Dating

Even when teens start dating, they are still not as close with romantic partners as they are with their same-sex friends. Still, the security teens feel in their friendships spills over into their feelings of security in their romantic relationships<sup>4</sup>. To add, parents influence those feelings of security. When teens feel secure and supported in their relationships with their parents, they have warm and secure feelings about friendship. As long as dating doesn't start too early in the adolescent years, dating can be a way to learn<sup>4,5</sup>:

- cooperation skills and sharing of activities,
- socially appropriate behavior and manners,
- interdependence and companionship,
- compromise,
- empathy and sensitivity, and
- how to develop an intimate, meaningful relationship.

Although most adolescent romantic relationships do not last, first romances are practice for more mature bonds in adulthood. In fact, warm and caring romantic relationships in the teen years tend to lead to satisfying, committed relationships in early adulthood<sup>4</sup>.

The dark side of dating in the teen years is that it can put youth at risk. Frequent dating—or spending time with romantic partner(s) several times a week—in early adolescence is connected with adolescent risk behaviors such as school failure (poor school performance and limited educational goals), drug use, and delinquency<sup>6,7</sup>. Other problems for preteens or early adolescents who date frequently and/or exclusively include<sup>7,8,9,10</sup>:

- having poor social skills that last through the later teenage years,
- depression, or
- sexual activity.

Research shows that the proportion of young U.S. teens dating steadily is higher than some would expect. When asked, “In the last 18 months have you had a special romantic relationship with anyone?”, teens reported that<sup>2</sup>:

- 25% of 12-year-old and 37% of 13-year-old males had been in a romantic relationship.
- 27% of 12-year-old and 34% of 13-year-old females had been in a romantic relationship.
- 45% of 14-year-old and 49% of 15-year-old males had been in a romantic relationship.
- 34% of 14-year-old and 56% of 15-year-old females had been in a romantic relationship.

A teens chance of involvement in dating violence increases if he or she has experienced abusive family relationships, as well as frequent, early dating and/or sexual involvement. A portion of teens face the dangers of dating violence. For example, in a representative poll of over 1,000 teens (13-18 years old)<sup>1</sup>:

- Of the almost half (49%) of 16- to 18-year-olds who have been “seriously involved” in a relationship, 24% felt pressure to date and 14% said they would do almost anything to keep a boyfriend or girlfriend.
- 61% of teens who had been in a relationship stated they had a boyfriend/girlfriend who made them “feel bad or embarrassed” about themselves.
- 15% of teens who had been in a relationship have been “hit, slapped, or pushed” by a boyfriend or girlfriend and 25% of those in a “serious” relationship were “hit, slapped, or pushed.”
- One-third (33%) of 16- to 18-year-olds said sex is “expected” of people their age who are in a relationship—about the same portion (31%) of teens who have been in a “serious” relationship agreed with this statement.

The expectation for sex in teen relationships may be partly explained by the media which socializes teens on dating and sexual behaviors<sup>11</sup>.

## Who Influences Teen Dating?

Peers may influence a teen's dating life, but parents and families should have the final say. Families can provide support for their teens or add stress to their lives. Early teen girls who date and have parents who continually fight are likely to have low self-esteem. Girls who date early and have strict and emotionally distant parents are likely to be depressed. On the other hand, families can be a great support to their teens. For example, teen girls with warm, strong relationships with their mothers and who were *not* involved in steady dating had higher grades than their romantically involved peers<sup>12</sup>.

## Ways to Discuss Dating with Teens

Parents and youth educators can use their knowledge of both the promises and pitfalls of dating in the teen years to discuss dating with youth. Some suggestions on how to communicate with teens about dating:

- First and foremost, make sure you are building a caring, supportive relationship with your teen. That relationship serves as a model for the relationships she or he will have with friends and future romantic partners.
- When your teen feels loved and supported, this will open the lines of communication and trust.
- Provide educational opportunities for your teen to learn about the biological, social, and emotional changes taking place during adolescence. Youth are interested in knowing about maturity (growth spurts and male/female biological differences) and enjoy applying this information to real life.
- Take time to find out about your teen's friends and schedule of daily events through conversation. This is a great way to learn about his or her peer network as well as what is important to your teen and his/her friends.
- Ask your teen tentative, open-ended questions about potential romantic interests. Use active listening (see EDIS publication HE316/FCS 2151 on Active Listening). Avoid forcing the issue, though. Don't embarrass your teen by publicly expressing information he or she shares in confidence.
- Be open to discussing your own relationship experiences with your teen. Share how you define a healthy versus an unhealthy relationship. If you are currently in a significant relationship, serve as a role model for healthy relationship behavior to your teen.
- Talking about romantic relationships with preteens or early adolescents will not make them more likely to date. Instead inform your early adolescent or preteen of relationship myths they may have been exposed to by peers and media.
- Ask your teen to think carefully about dating: whether he or she feels pressured to date; whether he/she knows of a teen couple who are having problems and why that may be the case; or what he/she thinks dating should be like. If possible, share what you know about the research in a caring and casual way.
- Join your teen in watching his or her favorite television programs, particularly those that involve teens having romantic relationships. Refrain from commenting during the show and take time for discussion after the show is over. (For example ask your teen, "How might that situation really end up?", "What is healthy/unhealthy about this relationship?", or "What overall message do you get from this episode about teen relationships?").
- Share with your teen the positives of dating later in adolescence. Let him/her know your views/values on dating with an optimistic attitude, using positive examples as needed. Avoid dwelling on the "dos" of dating.
- Be willing to support your older teen's efforts to date, unless there appears to be a threat of psychological or physical harm.
- Understand that your teen's identity as well as sexuality are still being formed and may be fragile. Avoid letting your values dictate your teen's sexual identity. Sexual minority (gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered) youth usually face much confusion and difficulty

during this time and need their parents support. (See EDIS publication FY749/FCS9237 on Understanding Sexual Minority Adolescents)

- Inform your teen about the rules (and consequences) you've set on dating and why—the appropriate age, age of partner, curfews, who they'll be with, and contact information. Make sure to follow through with expectations and consequences.
- Pay attention to the “double standard.” Do you set different dating rules for your son and your daughter? For example, even though your early maturing 14-year-old son appears more confident and ready to date exclusively than his slightly older teenage sister, he still faces the risks of early dating (risk behaviors & poor academic performance).
- Have positive ways to handle family conflict. Be flexible and willing to listen to your teens viewpoint and negotiate, without giving up your parental authority. Being too strict may lead teens to rebel by making poor dating choices or engaging in other risky behaviors.
- Encourage your young adolescent (13-15 years old) to go on group dates without your direct supervision (however, trustworthy adults should be present) such as a movie matinee, cultural/educational events, shopping at the mall, a theme park visit, an outdoor activity, or a field trip.

Overall, its important to: 1) Provide a safe and secure base for your teen to communicate with you openly about his or her relationships; 2) Guide your teen with open-ended questions to think about his/her own expectations and values in relationships; and 3) Share your own wisdom about relationships with your teen.

### **Support for Families through Cooperative Extension Programs**

1. Dating in the teenage years is one of many ways to promote healthy development among teens. Programs serving youth and their families can promote a positive emphasis or resilience perspective on teen dating. However, the

problems of dating in adolescence should not be overlooked in curricula/programming that serves teens. And, there are other ways to promote positive youth development, especially in the younger teen years.

2. Programs for parents of teens benefit from including teens in the program—in other words, promoting healthy parent-teen interaction. For example, a revised Florida-based curriculum, “Teening-Up with your Adolescent”: Parenting Children Ages 9-16, is useful for both parent-only and parent-teen audiences.
3. Inform teens of educational opportunities and responsibilities that prepare them for adulthood. When youth are focused on their vocational and academic growth, they are less likely to turn to romantic relationships and risky behaviors to feel “grown up.”
4. Ideally, parent-teen programs should focus on building parent-teen bonds, fostering communication, and bolstering parental monitoring and support of teens. Developing these parent-teen relationship assets helps teens to build healthy relationships outside the family unit<sup>13</sup>.
5. The relationship between parents or a parent and a romantic partner also sets an example for teens. Family programming should focus on strengthening relationships between parents and between parents and teens. Moreover, parents can be encouraged and motivated to set an example of healthy adult relationships with their teens.

### **Conclusion**

Dating during adolescence poses both promise and problems. Understanding the impacts of dating on early, middle, and late teen years can help parents in their communication with teens. Strengthening family communication benefits families in many ways, including promoting healthy, happy teens.

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