

Parenting - Teen Dating

Want to develop healthy dating habits in your teens?

Assumptions about dating develop in young children as they watch parents relate to each other and to adult peers, and as they glean messages about romance from visual media/books. Here are some parenting do's and don'ts that may impact future dating choices:

First, teach/model for your kids how to say "No" to unwanted verbal or physical affection and teach respect of others' boundaries (this starts in the family). Discuss body parts, privacy, and sexual information in age-appropriate language throughout your parenting. Avoid sexualizing young children's friendships by joking about little girls or boys "liking" one another, who they think is "cute" or who might later marry the other. Be sure the media your children watch is limited and age-appropriate, avoiding romantic themes until teen years (e.g., movies such as "Spiderman 3", although marketed to young children, have romantic content that is inappropriate for kids under 13). Talk about how successful marriages are preceded by years of friendship and dating (contrast this with media characters who "fall in love" quickly).

Good supervision in the home at all ages is a main key to deterring inappropriate behavior between children. Facilitate friendships with both genders throughout your child's life (don't reinforce the "ooooh icky, girls/boys!" stage of middle childhood), so that your child is comfortable talking to and being friends with both genders as they grow. Show them you believe that boys and girls can relate without romantic/sexual interaction and have good self control. This prepares the child to get to know potential dating partners during group gatherings/outings before spending time alone with them (I strongly discourage one-on-one dates until late adolescence and I believe that allowing adolescents to stay out all night or rent hotel rooms for occasions such as school dances amounts to encouraging casual sex). Instead of leaving kids to decide where to hang out, have a fun home and family life, such that your child will want to invite both genders over (this way you will be able to provide the needed supervision). Do not allow potential dating partners in the home when you are absent (do surprise checks) and see that bedroom doors are always left open when potential dating partners visit (70% of kids who give away their virginity before age 17 do so in their own home). Enforce age-appropriate curfews. Teach your adolescents how to ask for or turn down a date, as well as how to exit a relationship with respect and grace.

One of the greatest gifts you can give teens is to tell them about your own mistakes in dating relationships (even the sexual ones) and discuss your regrets, or the specific

benefits you received by saving sex for a life-time partnership. Avoid telling your child who to date, but share your fears if you see your teen making poor choices. Finally, be frank about the risks of date rape (and how to report it), sexually transmitted diseases, and pregnancy (do not assume they got the information at school- it is the parents' job to provide adequate education in these areas).