

6 Truths About Teens and Dating

By [Amy Morin, LCSW](#) | Updated on June 30, 2020

The prospect of your [teen starting to date](#) is naturally unnerving. It's easy to fear your child getting hurt, getting in over their head, being manipulated or [heartbroken](#), and especially, growing up and leaving the nest. But as uncomfortable or scary as it may feel to consider your child with a romantic life, remember that this is a normal, healthy, and necessary part of any young adult's emotional development.

How Teen Dating Has Changed

But what exactly does teen dating even look like these days? The general idea may be the same as it's always been, but the way teens date has changed quite a bit from just a decade or so ago.

Clearly, the explosion of [social media](#) and [ever-present cellphones](#) are two of the biggest influences on the changing world of teen dating—kids don't even need to leave their bedrooms to "hang out."

Truths About Teen Dating

This quickly morphing [social landscape](#) makes it more challenging for parents to keep up, figure out how to talk with their teens about dating, and establish rules that will keep them safe. To help you navigate this unfamiliar territory, there are five essential truths every parent should know about the teen dating scene.

Teen Romance Is Normal

While some teens will start dating earlier than others, romantic interests are normal and healthy during adolescence. Some kids are more overt or vocal about their interest in dating but most are paying attention and intrigued by the prospect of a romantic life, even if they keep it to themselves.

According to the Department of Health and Human Services, dating helps teens [build social skills](#) and grow emotionally. Interestingly, teens "date" less now than they did in the past—perhaps in part due to the influx of cell phones and virtual social interactions.

In 1991, only 14% of high school seniors did not date, while by 2013 that number had jumped to 38%. Of kids aged 13 to 17, around 35% have some experience with romantic relationships and 19% are in a relationship at any one time.

But regardless of when it starts, the truth is that most teens, especially as they make their way [through high school and college](#), are eventually going to be interested in dating. When they start dating, you'll need to be ready by establishing expectations and opening a caring and supportive dialogue about these topics.

Related: [7 Ways Technology Is Changing Teen Romance](#)

Dating Builds Relationship Skills

Just like starting any new phase of life, entering the world of dating is both exciting and scary—for kids and their parents alike. Kids will need to put themselves out there by expressing romantic interest in someone else, [risking rejection](#), figuring out how to be a dating partner, and what exactly that means.

New skills in the realms of communication, caring, thoughtfulness, intimacy, and independence collide with a [developing sexuality](#), limited impulse control, and the urge to push boundaries. Your teen may also have some unrealistic ideas about dating based on what they've seen online, in the movies, or read in books.

Real-life dating doesn't mimic a teen Netflix or Disney movie—or porn. Instead, first dates may be awkward or they may not end in romance. Dates may be in a group setting or even via Snapchat—but the feelings are just as real.

Today's teens spend a lot of time texting and messaging potential love interests on social media. For some, this approach can make dating easier because they can test the waters and get to know one another online first. For those [teens who are shy](#), meeting in person can be more awkward, especially since kids spend so much time tied to their electronics at the expense of face-to-face communication.

Understand that early dating is your teen's chance to work on these life skills. They may make mistakes and/or get hurt but ideally, they will also learn from those experiences.

Your Teen Needs "The Talk"

It's important to talk to your teen about a variety of dating topics, such as personal values, expectations, and peer pressure. Be open with your teen about everything from treating someone else with respect to your—and their—beliefs around [sexual activity](#).

It can be helpful to outline for your kids what early dating may be like for them. Even if your perspective is a bit outdated, sharing it can get the conversation started. Ask them what they have in mind about dating and what questions they may have. Possibly share some of your own experiences.

Go over the topics of consent, feeling safe and comfortable, and honoring their own and the other person's feelings. Most importantly, tell them what you expect in terms of being respectful of their dating partner and vice versa.

Talk about the basics too, like how to behave when meeting a date's parents or [how to be respectful](#) while you're on a date. Make sure your teen knows to show respect by being on time and not texting friends throughout the date. Talk about what to do if a date [behaves disrespectfully](#). Talk to your child about safe sex.

Additionally, don't assume you know (or should choose) the type (or gender) of the person your child will want to date. You might see your child with a sporty, clean-cut kid or a teen from their newspaper club, but they may express interest in someone else entirely.

This is their time to experiment and figure out what and who they are interested in. Plus, we all know that the more you push, the more they'll pull. Your child may be interested in someone that you would never pick for them but aim to be as supportive as you can as long as it's a healthy, respectful relationship.

Be open to the fact that sexuality and gender are a spectrum and many kids won't fall into the traditional boxes—or fit the exact expectations their parents have for them. Love your child no matter what.

Related: [What to Do When You Don't Like Who Your Teen Is Dating](#)

Privacy Is Essential

Your parenting values, your teen's maturity level, and the specific situation will help you determine how much chaperoning your teen needs. Having an eyes-on policy might be necessary and healthy in some circumstances but teens also need a [growing amount of independence](#) and the ability to make their own choices.

Aim to offer your teen at least a little bit of privacy. Don't listen in on phone calls or eavesdrop on private chats, and don't read every social media message. Keep tabs on what you can, especially if you have any concerns about what is going on. You can certainly follow your child's public posts on social media. You'll need to follow your instincts on how closely to supervise what your child is doing.

Inviting your child to bring their friends and dates to your house is another good strategy as you will get a better sense of the dynamic of the group or couple. Plus, if your child thinks you genuinely want to get to know their friends or romantic partners and aren't hostile to them, they are more likely to open up to you—and possibly, less likely to engage in questionable behavior.

Your Teen Needs Guidance

While it's not healthy to get too wrapped up in your teen's dating life, there may be times when you'll have to intervene. If you overhear your teen saying mean comments or using manipulative tactics, speak up. Similarly, if your teen is on the receiving end of [unhealthy behavior](#), it's important to step in and help out.

There's a small window of time between when your teen begins dating and when they're going to be entering the adult world. Aim to provide guidance that can help them succeed in their future relationships. Whether they experience some [serious heartbreak](#), or they're a heart breaker, adolescence is when teens begin to learn about romantic relationships firsthand.

Talk openly with your child about sex, how to know what they're ready for, and safe sex.

Expect that your child may feel uncomfortable talking about this stuff with you (and may even be explicitly resistant) but that doesn't mean that you shouldn't try. Offer advice, a caring ear, and an open shoulder. Make sure they understand that anything put online is forever and that [sending a nude photo can easily backfire](#)—and be shared with unintended recipients.

Don't assume they've learned what they need to know from sex ed, movies, and their friends—tell them everything you think they should know, even the obvious stuff. They probably have questions (but may not ask them), and they've likely picked up misinformation along the way that needs to be corrected.

Related: [Preparing for "The Talk" With Your Teen](#)

Safety Rules Must Be Established

As a parent, your job is to [keep your child safe](#) and to help them learn the skills they need to navigate healthy relationships. As your teen matures, they should require fewer dating rules. But [rules for your teen](#) should be based on their behavior, not necessarily their age.

If they aren't honest about their activities or don't abide by their curfew or other rules, they may lack the maturity to have more freedom (as long as your rules are reasonable). Tweens and younger teens will need more rules as they likely aren't able to handle the responsibilities of a romantic relationship yet.

Here are some general safety rules you might want to establish for your child:

- **Get to know anyone your teen wants to date.** Establish the expectation that you'll be introduced before a date, whatever you want that to look like. You can always start by meeting their date at your home a few times for dinner before allowing your teen to go out on a date alone.
- **Make dating without a chaperone a privilege.** For younger teens, inviting a romantic interest to the house may be the extent of dating. Or you can drive your teen and their date to the movies or a public place. Older teens are likely to want to go out on dates without a chauffeur. Make that [a privilege that can be earned](#) as long as your teen exhibits trustworthy behavior.
- **Create clear guidelines about online romance.** Many teens talk online, which can easily develop into a false sense of intimacy. Consequently, they're more likely to meet people they've chatted with, but never met because they don't view them as strangers. Create clear [rules about online dating](#) and stay up to date on any apps your teen might be tempted to use, like [Tinder](#).
- **Know your teen's itinerary.** Make sure you have a clear itinerary for your teen's date. Insist your teen contact you if the plan changes. If you feel it's needed, you can set up tracking apps on your child's phone so you'll always know where they are.
- **Establish a clear curfew.** Make it clear you need to know the details of who your teen will be with, where they will be going, and who will be there. [Establish a clear curfew](#) as well. Your child may rail against these rules but may also feel comforted by them—not that they will tell you that.
- **Set age limits.** In some states, teens can legally date anyone they want once they [reach 16](#), but in other states, they don't have that choice until they turn 18. But, legal issues aside, there's usually a big difference in maturity level between [a 14-year-old](#) and [an 18-year-old](#). So, set some rules about the acceptable dating age range.
- **Know who is at home at the other person's house.** If your teen is going to a date's home, find out who will be home. Have a conversation with the date's parents to talk about their rules.
- **Discuss technology dangers, like sexting.** Sometimes, teens are [tempted to comply](#) with a date's request to send nude photos. Unfortunately, these photos can become public very quickly and unsuspecting teens can end up hurt, shamed, or embarrassed. [Establish clear cellphone rules](#) that will help your teen make good decisions.

A Word From Verywell

Consider that how you parent your child during this new stage can have big ramifications on their future relationships (romantic and otherwise), the lifestyle choices they make, and the mature adult they become. The more open and supportive you can be with them, the better. After all, if something does go awry, you'll want them to know that you're always in their corner.

Article Sources

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1. U.S. Department of Health & Human Services Office of Population Affairs. [Healthy Dating Relationships in Adolescence](#). Updated March 25, 2019.