



PARENTING AND PUPPY LOVE:

How to Talk to Your Teen About Dating

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Should Teens Date?

Dating and romantic relationships are a normal part of adolescence.



Healthy adolescent relationships can:

- Foster a Sense of Identity
- Build Skills for Healthy Adult Relationships
- Promote Teens' Autonomy

Many teens don't date. That's okay too!

If your teen chooses to date, a healthy and supportive romantic relationship can be an important, positive experience for them.

Should My Teen Date?

Unlike driving and voting, there's no "right" age for teens to start dating.

INSTEAD, ASK YOURSELF:

- Does my teen have strong **conflict resolution** skills?
- How does my teen **cope with stress**?
- How much **social support** does my teen have?
- Is my teen educated about the **risks of sexual activity** and ways to **prevent those risks**?
- Is my teen aware of warning signs for **dating violence and abuse**?
- Does my teen know **where to seek help** if they need it?
- How will my **expectations** for dating change **as my teen gets older**?

Keeping the Lines Open

Starting to date is a major milestone for teens. Here are some ways to ensure transparent, ongoing communication as they navigate this new stage:



Movies and media can start conversations about real-world relationships.

1. BE OPEN AND CURIOUS.

Share your opinions about healthy relationships with your teen, but balance that with asking for their views on the subject. Discuss your family's view of dating and relationships, but also the views expressed in media, by friends/classmates, etc.

Ask open-ended questions, such as: "What would you do in that situation?", "What boundaries would you want in a relationship?", or "Who would you talk to if you were having problems with your partner?"

2. SUPERVISE, BUT DON'T IMPOSE.

Teens are learning to make decisions on their own. Lecturing or telling them what to do may make them feel threatened and discouraged. Instead, express any concerns gently and ask questions to guide your teen to their own conclusions.

Instead of:

"That person is taking up all of your time. You don't care about school or family anymore."
"I'm taking your phone away every night."

Try:

"I notice you're often up late on the phone and you seem tired the next day. Have you noticed that?"
"I'm worried this might affect your grades and I want us to spend time together, too. What could we do about this?"

Teens appreciate when their parents involve them in the decision-making process, rather than demanding or giving ultimatums.

Set age-appropriate rules but always give a clear explanation for why those rules exist. Research suggests that the most helpful rules are *supervision* rules that require the teen to share information with their parents (like where they are going and who they are dating). Rules that tell a teen that they are not allowed to engage in certain activities, without a justification, may feel overly intrusive and unfair.

Here are some examples of effective rules that parents might set:

"If you date, your grades need to stay at a certain level so you can get into college/university."

"If your plans change, let me know right away so that I know you will get home safely."

"Family time is important, so I would still like you to be home for dinner 2 nights per week."

"I would be more comfortable if I could meet your partner. Maybe they can come over this week."

3. BE A SAFE CONFIDANT.

Your teen will be more willing to communicate if they view you as a trustworthy, non-judgmental support person.

It might be difficult for your teen to tell you about their dating life – they might be nervous or ashamed to bring up certain topics. Try to respond to them in a non-judgmental, compassionate way (even if you might not agree with their decisions!) and thank them for trusting you. This sets the stage for solving problems **collaboratively**.

Give your teen a reasonable amount of privacy when it comes to phone calls, social media, and time with friends/dating partners. Be clear and upfront about how much "access" you expect while also showing you trust them.

You might be excited when your teen enters a new relationship or tells you about the person they are dating, but don't embarrass them by sharing information without their permission unless their safety is a concern.



Beyond "The Talk" Teens who receive accurate sexual health information before being sexually active for the first time are more likely to delay sexual activity and use protection because they have the knowledge to make appropriate decisions.

Normalize talking with your teen about sex. That means not just having "the talk," but *many* talks at an age-appropriate level. Acknowledge your (and your teen's) potential discomfort, but remind them that it is normal and necessary to discuss sex directly.

WHAT SHOULD WE TALK ABOUT?

In addition to discussing your family's beliefs or expectations about sex and sexuality, it is important to:

- Educate your teen about safer sex.** That includes condom use, birth control, STIs and testing, pregnancy, and personal readiness for sex.
- Explain the importance of sexual consent.** Teens should know how to assertively communicate boundaries, *verbally* ask for consent, and respect the wishes of their partner.
- Talk about digital safety.** 14.8% of teens have sent sexually suggestive messages, and 27.4% have received them. Therefore, it's crucial talk to your teen about the possible consequences of sending sexually explicit photos, videos, or text messages, particularly when there is identifying information.

Need more info?

Many parents want to learn more about sexual health before discussing it with their kids. Check out online resources like the SHORE Centre for factual, inclusive, and trustworthy information.

Dating Violence and Abuse

1 in 3 teens who date experience at least one form of dating abuse...

...but only half of parents talk to their teens about abusive relationships.

ABUSE CAN BE PHYSICAL, SEXUAL, VERBAL, OR EMOTIONAL.

These behaviours may indicate abuse:

- Unexplained bruises or injuries
- New/worse depression or anxiety
- Decreased interest in usual activities
- Major appearance/behaviour changes
- Constant emails, texts, or calls from your child's partner
- Jealousy or possessiveness from your child's partner (including social media monitoring)
- Isolation from friends or family
- Increased self-criticism

Your teen may not immediately want to leave an abusive partner because of strong feelings toward their partner or self-blame. Though it is scary to know your teen is in an abusive situation, a careful approach is needed. Validate their feelings. Do not force them to break up, as they may resist. Avoid guilt or punishment. Develop a safety plan together.

IN A HEALTHY RELATIONSHIP, BOTH PARTNERS ARE RESPECTED, HEARD, AND VALUED FOR THEIR INDIVIDUAL SELVES.

Dating and Sexual Orientation

The general principles on this poster can be a great starting point for talking about relationships with a teen who is lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB) or questioning their sexual orientation.



LGB teens also have specific needs such as:

- Knowing that their loved ones accept them for who they are
- Protection from homophobia in schools or other settings
- Sexual health education that is relevant to same-sex relationships

Providing your teen with reassurance and support can improve their well-being, overall health, and potentially their sense of safety.

Resources



SHORE CENTRE (KITCHENER-WATERLOO)

www.shorecentre.ca

Accurate, inclusive sexual health information and support for accessing sexual and reproductive health services.



LOVE IS RESPECT (USA)

www.loveisrespect.org

Tips regarding healthy relationships, dating abuse, and how to support someone in an unhealthy relationship



OK2BME (KITCHENER-WATERLOO)

www.ok2bme.ca

Education and support for LGBTQ+ individuals and their loved ones.