



Last month, my ninth grade son ask me to help him pick out a Valentines present for his girlfriend. He seems so young to have a girlfriend. What age is normal for kids to start having dates?

First, it is great that your son still wants his mother's input. When kids enter high school, they often start relying on their friends more than their parents. I hope you were able to help your son and that he had a positive experience around this very difficult time.

There are no hard and fast rules about what age dating should start, but I have outlined stages of "dating" development that will provide insight into your question and help you child negotiate their first romantic encounters.

Stage One: Since I love you, I am going to call you names.

Believe it or not, most of us become attracted to the opposite sex at about the age of 10 or 11; we just don't know what to do. First crushes form but many try to keep their "dream boats" a secret to avoid embarrassment. Sometimes, we are even mean to the objects of our desire to hide our true feelings. Kids are usually too young to understand romance and, as a result, crushes are often not returned. This is a confusing time.

Stage Two: I like you, but do you like me?

Things get a little better around 12 or 13. We are still too young to truly understand romance, but members of the opposite sex begin to really intrigue us. Group dating where large groups get together become popular events. Kids spend lots of time talking on the phone and instant messaging each other. There is safety in numbers, and, at this age, relationships probably don't develop but true friendships begin to form.

Stage Three: Are we just friends, or do you like me this week?

About the age of 14 or 15, many really begin to identify with a particular crowd and the ability to have opposite sex friendships occurs. These friendships often lead to something more. Group dating gives way to "double dates" and quite often the "first date". We don't need or even want our friends around. Some even experience their first "love" at this age, but that "love" often only lasts a few weeks.

Stage Four: Time to meet the parents.

Moving into the later years of high school and the first years of college are when most experience their first "real" or "adult" dating experience. Relationships last longer and we begin to understand what it means to "care" about someone other than ourselves. We invite our significant others to family events as infatuation is often replaced by true emotions.

Unfortunately, not every person goes through every stage at the same time which may cause some adolescent angst and stress. Some may skip, miss, or repeat a phase all together. However, going to school and spending time with friends gives everyone the opportunity and the skills to develop deep, meaningful relationships. While romance can occur instantaneously, relationships take a lot work and are different for everyone. Stay involved in your teens life and be there for support when they need it.