



WHAT IS THE RIGHT AGE TO START DATING AND WHAT KIND OF RULES SHOULD PARENTS HAVE?

Many parents let the external environment and peer group norms dictate dating ages; others set specific family rules regarding this teenage rite of passage. Both approaches, however, are flawed because each child is different. Base this important decision on your teen's maturity level and ability to make responsible decisions.

Typically, kids start pairing off between the ages of 12 and 14 as they spend time in mixed gendered groups. In fact, this is a popular age to mingle with the opposite sex by attending parties and making purposeful trips to the mall. Through these types of activities, relationships develop and young adolescents learn to navigate the social mine field of the turbulent teen years.

More serious relationships are typically reserved for the later high school grades, but these days it can be difficult to tell if your son or daughter is even in a relationship. Phones don't ring and plans can't be overheard as tech savvy teens text meeting times and places. Furthermore, kids are hooking up on line with MySpace, FaceBook, and SKPYE. Kids rarely call each other unless it is from the driveway.

Most parents find dating discussions to be both difficult and nerve-racking. Embrace that anxiety and look for natural opportunities to talk about the "big issues." Watch a TV show with your child and ask how they might have handled a recently viewed complex social situation. Share an appropriate story at an appropriate time about your teen experiences. Discuss your views on relationship issues and ask open ended questions that promote conversation.

How you monitor your teen's dating behaviors varies with age. For the younger adolescents it is important to regulate the amount of time your child spends with opposite sex friends. Too much exclusivity may decrease social skill development and increase the chance of early sexual activity. It is okay for these kids to date, but help arrange the time, place, and activity.

For older adolescents, set appropriate curfews and be available to talk after the date. Meet your teen's friends and know their schedules. Work questions into regular conversation showing interest in their lives versus prying into their personal affairs. In other words, don't interrogate your child in front of her friends; rather, casually converse about social opportunities on a frequent basis.

Lastly, for all ages, know what your kids are doing when the school day ends. The after school hours are the "danger zone" of teen behavior. In fact, teens are more likely to engage in inappropriate activity during this time than on a Saturday night because parents work and adult supervision is minimal. To diminish risky behavior opportunities, make sure to frequently "drop in" or have a friend "stop by" to check on your teen. This invasion of their privacy will help you stay more focused at work and sleep better at night.

Dating can be an excellent way for adolescents to learn about cooperation, behavior, manners, empathy, and sensitivity. Talk with your teens about the complicated emotional feelings that result from romantic relationships. When teens feel parentally supported, they tend to feel more secure about their relational decisions and make better peer choices.