

PARENTING young teens

Early Dating



Parents often wonder when it is okay for youth to begin dating. Is it all right for fifth or sixth graders? What about seventh and eighth graders? First, it is important to define the meaning of “dating.”

Eleven and 12-year-olds may use the word “dating” to mean that they like someone. In some schools, “going with” a boy or girl may mean that a friend has told a friend that another person likes him or her. It may even mean that a boy and girl like doing things together, such as playing games at recess or working on school projects. These relationships should not cause parents to be concerned. In this publication, dating means that youth spend time together unsupervised.

Concerns about dating before age 14 or 15

Typical concerns parents have about early dating include teens’:

- ability to handle the responsibility of dating
- safety on a date
- ability to delay sexual activity

What research says

Kids younger than age 14 years do not have the social skills needed for dating.

Early dating often leads to problems. Often kids learn about dating relationships from TV and movies that don’t show appropriate dating relationships. Young people will likely act in ways they see portrayed, rather than develop a healthy relationship with the other person.

Youth spend less time with same-sex friends. Same-sex friendships help kids learn many skills about getting along with others that they may not develop in a dating relationship.

Personal identity is not formed. Most youth do not know themselves well, what they like and dislike, and their own values. Such self-understanding is required in order to relate in a healthy dating relationship. Youth who do not know what they want or should expect in a relationship may be too easily talked into behaviors for which they are not yet ready. Young dating partners may become too close too quickly, which may keep them from maturing emotionally.



When your child begins to date

Rules can help your child get along better in a dating situation. Invite your child's date to take part in family activities so you can get to know him or her. Let dates take place at home with games and snacks instead of going out. Set reasonable curfews so that there is not much time after organized activities like ball games or other events. Set reasonable consequences if your child does not come home on time. Know that you, the parent, are still the most important influence in your child's life. By helping your child delay dating, you are helping him or her choose appropriate activities that will build skills needed as an adult. You also reduce his or her chances of engaging in sexual activity. Your firm and loving involvement can help your child avoid pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, or emotional consequences that last a lifetime.

Early sexual activity

Research shows that youth who start dating early are more likely to become sexually involved earlier than those who date later. One factor in early sexual activity is peer pressure — a dating partner pressures the other person to be sexually active. Young teens are much more affected by peer pressure than older teens and more likely to give in to sexual activity. Studies also show that individuals who become sexually involved are more likely to have problems in later relationships than are those who delay sexual involvement.

Some parents believe that today's youth are maturing earlier, which naturally leads to earlier dating. Actually, youth are not maturing physically any faster than they did 20 years ago. High rates of teen pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases show that teens are not responsible or mature in their relationships.

What can parents do?

Understand that youth vary greatly in their wishes to be in dating relationships. There is nothing wrong with youth who have no interest in dating.

Encourage group activities. By sixth or seventh grade, it is appropriate for youth to sit with their friends of both sexes at ball games or other events.

Discuss the reasons for not allowing your child to date. Choose a time when both of you are calm and can listen and discuss wishes, values, and rules.

Be firm if your child continues to pressure you. You can say, "I love you and the answer is no."

Encourage your child to be active in school and community activities and to identify a hobby that interests him or her.

Stay involved. Know where your child is and what he or she is doing. Unsupervised time can lead to trouble.

Dating already? Janet and Bob are worried about their daughter, Jill, who is 12 and in seventh grade. She has matured physically faster than many of her friends and has been interested in boys for more than a year. Jill has pressured her parents to let her go out with a ninth grade boy. Janet and Bob know the boy from church and think he is a nice person, but they think Jill is too young to date.

References

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PM15471 June 2010

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