



Mom, Can I Borrow the Car and a Condom?

How to Talk to Your Teen About Dating and Sex

by LUCY RIMALOWER, M.A., MFT

There are two common requests I hear from parents on the issue of teen dating and sex: First, "Can you please tell me at what age [preferably close to 30] my child should be allowed to date?" Second, "How should I talk to my child about sex?" First things first: There is no prescribed age at which a child is ready for dating and sexuality. Children mature into sexual and dating curiosity at a variety of ages; girls typically between ages 9-14, boys a little bit later.

As to the second question, talking to teens about sex and dating ideally starts when they are children. From the time they are born, children are entitled to know about their bodies, including proper names for genitals, and that they have the right to physical and emotional boundaries

to protect them from harm. They also benefit from having healthy relationship role models, such as parents or caregivers. These experiences become examples for what they should expect in their own relationships.

If your child approaches you with questions or thoughts, take a deep breath and listen so your child doesn't feel shut down.

As children approach adolescence, their curiosity leads them to more explicit questions. You, as the parent, are the best guide. While dating and sex may be two very separate things, talking about them together helps define sex as a broader experience that encompasses both physical and emotional intimacy and building trust.

Here are some guidelines for a dialogue with your children. Warning: these may elicit an "Ew-mom!" or "Dad!!!!" response from your child (and likely from you, too). That's ok. Proceed with care and respect.

Give your child a context for these conversations. Explain that although it may be uncomfortable to discuss sex and dating, it's your job as parent to make sure your child is prepared with this information. Your child may not be ready to talk, but you are asking him/her to listen.

Be willing to listen and speak non-judgmentally.

If your child approaches you with questions or thoughts, take a deep breath and listen without judgment or criticism so your child doesn't feel shut down. This is particularly important with matters of sexual orientation. Research shows that children rejected by their families for their sexual orientation are more likely to struggle with depression, drug abuse and suicide.

Using descriptive language and "I-statements" is a more effective way to be heard. For example, your child is more likely to listen if you say "I'm concerned your choices might make you unsafe. Let's talk about ways to make sure you're protected" as opposed to "What in the world were you thinking? You're grounded and we're no discussing this further!"

Talk about safety.

Asking kids what they know about safer sex and dating practices is a good conversation starter. Find out what they're learning in school. Build on their knowledge.

Educate yourself and learn their language.

While you don't have to have all the answers, and you probably won't, having some trusted sources will help your children get the information they need. See resources below. Ask them how their peers talk about dating. Hooking up? Hanging out? Kick back? Hit it and Qui it? This can be a light-hearted way into conversation anyway for you to keep your ears perked to your child's vernacular.

Media Myths and Misleads.

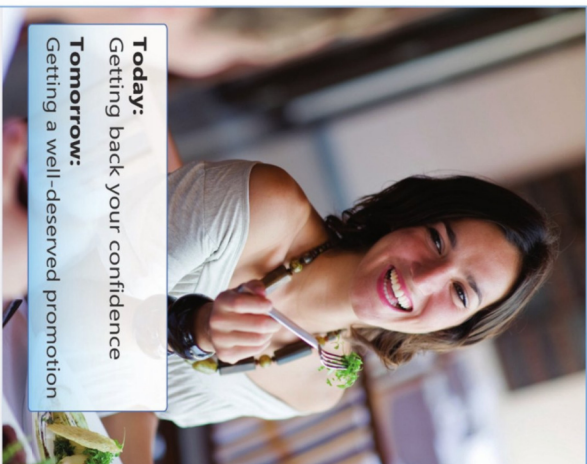
Use movies, TV shows and music as cues to your children's ideas about sex and dating. Ask questions about the relationships depicted on TV. Debunk myths and correct misinformation that you notice in storylines.

Resources:

Advocates for Youth www.advocatesforyouth.org
 Amplify, a resource website for GLBT youth www.amplifyyourvoice.org/youthresource
 MTV's Your Sexual Life Guide www.mtv.com/ontariv/proteclife/guide
 Planned Parenthood Teen Talk www.plannedparenthood.org/teen-talk
 Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States www.siecus.org

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