

Families Are Talking

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Friendship, Dating, and Love:

Young People Experience Many Types of Relationships

Developing healthy relationships is an important part of growing up. Young people have many relationships including those with their parents and caregivers, siblings, classmates, teachers, coaches, friends, crushes, and boyfriends/girlfriends. Some relationships are temporary and others continue to grow over time. As parents and caregivers, you can play a crucial role in helping your children understand the complexities of these interactions.

Parents and Caregivers Have an Important Role in Defining Healthy Relationships

By sharing values about friendship, dating, and love through teachable moments—daily opportunities that occur when you are with your children—parents and caregivers can help their children recognize the difference between those relationships that make them feel good, valued, and respected and those that make them feel bad, pressured, or insecure. While parents and caregivers can share these messages verbally, young people also receive powerful nonverbal messages as they observe the way that adults in their lives interact with friends and loved ones. All of these messages can influence the platonic or romantic relationships that young people form in life.

Discussing Dating with Young People

Most parents and caregivers have their own ideas about when they think it's appropriate for their children to start dating, and every child has his/her own time line. When young people begin to show an interest in dating, many parents and caregivers worry that the next step is sexual exploration. But dating doesn't have to be synonymous with sexual activity. The truth of the matter is that dating is a great way for young people to develop new social skills.

Parents and caregivers have different parenting styles. Some approach dating by setting very strict rules. Others take a hands-off approach, letting children make their own decisions without adult interference. However, many experts recommend that parents and caregivers address dating with a more middle-of-the-road approach. This includes sharing family values about friendship, dating, and love; helping young people to develop communication, decision-making, and assertiveness skills; establishing ground rules while also providing young people with options from which they can choose; and being available and open to ongoing conversations.

Two Types of Love

To parents and caregivers of young people, it may seem that their children are always declaring themselves to be in love. While many parents and caregivers may be quick to call it 'puppy love,' it's possible that they are experiencing the real thing. As Sol Gordon, Ph.D., a professor and sexuality expert says, "If you feel yourself to be in love, you are." He acknowledges that there are hundreds of ways to experience love. However, he defines love in two basic ways: immature love, which he describes as exhausting; and mature love, which he describes as energizing.

Generally speaking, those experiencing immature love tend to be wrapped up in their thoughts and unable to function in a productive way, and need constant reassurance (like asking "Do you love me?"). And, while they often feel they can't live without the person, they don't seem to enjoy time spent with the person. These relationships are often based on the desire to be taken care of.

On the other hand, people experiencing mature love tend to have time and energy to do things they enjoy. They also have a relationship built on intimacy and other important healthy characteristics such as trust, honesty, respect, support, loyalty, and shared interests. Mature love is an evolving process, growing over time.

Talking with young people about the different types of love can help them decipher what they are feeling.

If you want ideas about how to talk with your children about love, read Dr. Sol Gordon's books *Raising A Child Responsibly in a Sexually Permissive World* and *How Can You Tell If You're Really in Love?*

TIPS

to Help Parents and Caregivers Talk with Their Children

- Do not wait until your children ask questions.
- Know and practice the messages that you want to share.
- Seek “teachable moments”—daily opportunities that occur when you are with your children—that make it easy to share your messages and values.
- Let your children know that you are open to talking with them about these important issues.
- Listen.
- Try to understand your children’s point of view.
- Provide pamphlets, books, and other age-appropriate, medically accurate materials.
- If you don’t know how to answer your children’s questions, offer to find the answers or look them up together.
- Find out what your children’s schools are teaching about these topics.
- Stay actively involved in your children’s lives.
- Help your children plan for their future.

Sharing Messages with Your

Friendship, dating, and love are important topics to talk about with your children, these conversations can help them lay the foundation to develop healthy relationships throughout their childhood, the pre-teen and adolescent years, and adulthood.

Before talking with your children, it’s helpful to consider the messages you want to share. Perhaps you want to share the following using clear, age-appropriate language.

5-8 Messages for Young People Age Five through Eight:

About Friendship

- People can have many friends.
- Friends spend time together and get to know each other well.
- Friendship depends on honesty.
- Friends sometimes hurt each other’s feelings.
- Friends forgive each other.
- Friends share feelings with each other.
- Friends can help each other.

About Dating

- When two teenagers or unmarried adults spend their leisure time with one another, it is often called dating.
- When children become teenagers, they spend more time with their friends and may begin to date.
- Sometimes single parents date.

About Love

- Love means having deep and warm feelings about oneself and others.
- People can experience different types of love.
- People express love differently to their parents, families, and friends.
- People experience loving relationships throughout their lives.

9-12 Messages for Young People Age Nine through 12:

About Friendship

- Friendships help people feel good about themselves.
- Many skills are needed to begin, continue, and end friendships.

- Friends respect and appreciate each other.
- Choosing friends well is important.

About Dating

- Many teenagers and adults have romantic relationships.
- Before people commit themselves to a relationship, they want to be friends, spend time together, and get to know each other well.

About Love

- A person can show love for another person in many ways.
- People are capable of giving and receiving love.

12-15 Messages for Young People Age 12 through 15:

About Friendship

- Young people benefit from interacting with many friends of both genders.
- Friends can influence each other both positively and negatively.

About Dating

- Dating includes sharing recreational activities, learning new things, and practicing social skills.
- Parents usually decide the age when children can begin dating.
- Different families and cultures may have varied values about dating.
- When couples spend a lot of time together alone, they are more likely to become sexually involved.
- People date in different forms such as couple dates, double dating, and group dates.
- People date for different reasons such as companionship, to share an experience with someone, friendship, and love.
- Not all teenagers or adults date.

Children During "Teachable Moments"

- Readiness and interest in dating vary among individuals.
- When dating involves expenses, either partner or both can pay.
- Paying for a date or giving gifts does not entitle one to any type of sexual activity.
- Gay and lesbian youth, like heterosexual youth, may or may not date.
- People of different races, ethnic backgrounds, and religions sometimes date each other.

About Love

- Love is not the same as sexual involvement or attraction.
- The feelings of "falling in love" are different from those in a continuing relationship.
- In a love relationship, people encourage each other to develop as individuals.
- "First love" is often one of life's most intense experiences.
- Knowing for sure if you're in love can be difficult.
- People may confuse love with other intense emotions such as jealousy and control.

15-18 Messages for Young People Age 15 through 18:

About Friendship

- Friendships sometimes evolve into romantic relationships.
- Men and women can be friends without being romantically involved.

About Dating

- Dating can be a way to learn about other people, about romantic and sexual feelings and expression, and about what it is like to be in a love relationship.
- Dating relationships are enhanced by honesty and openness.
- A dating partner cannot meet all the needs of another person.
- Responsibility for the quality of the relationship is shared by both dating partners.

Resources

to Help Your Pre-Teens and Teens Learn More about Dating and Love

Dating: "What is a Healthy Relationship?"

Kate Havelin

This book for young people in grades five through 12 is from the series *Perspectives on Relationships* and is designed for use in the home as well as the classroom. Chapters include: "What is Dating All About?"; "Tips for Starting to Date"; "Is It a Crush, or Is It Love?"; "Tips for Successful Dating"; "Deciding About Sex"; "What You Need to Know About Sex"; and "Breaking Up."

2000; \$18.95/each; ISBN: 0736802924; Capstone Press; 800/747-4992; Web site: www.capstonepress.com

Dating With Confidence: A Teen's Survival Guide

Jacqueline Jarosz

This book for teens addresses many of the practical issues associated with a first date. Chapters include "Are You Ready?"; "I've Got a Crush on You"; "How Are You Gonna Get There"; "The 411 on the Pre-Date"; "First Date Do's and Don'ts"; "Dating on a Budget"; "Who is This Person?"; "Should I or Shouldn't I?"; and "The Dark Side of Dating."

2000; \$9.95; ISBN: 1580622933; Adams Media Corporation; 800/872-5627; Web site: www.adamsmedia.com

Teen Love Series: A Journal on Relationships

Kimberly Kirberger with Colin Mortensen

This journal provides questions for teens to answer as they express themselves and discover how to deal with love and relationships during adolescence. Chapters include "Love Yourself First"; "Falling in Love"; "All These New Feelings"; "Do You Like Me"; "When Friends Become More"; "Now That We're Together"; "Breaking Up Is Hard To Do"; and "Starting Over".

1999; \$12.95; ISBN: 1558747664; Health Communications, Inc.; 800/441-5569; Web site: www.hci-online.com

About Love

- Love requires understanding oneself as well as one's partner.
- Love often changes and grows during a long-term relationship.
- Loving another person can be one of life's greatest joys.

For messages about other sexuality-related topics, download the *Guidelines for Comprehensive Sexuality Education: Kindergarten—12th Grade* at www.siecus.org/pubs/guidelines/guidelines.pdf

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Activities for Parents and Caregivers to Communicate with Young People*

Young people form many relationships throughout childhood and adolescence. The following activities for various age groups will help young people identify qualities of healthy and unhealthy relationships, giving them guidelines that they can apply to their relationships now and in the future.

For Young People Age 5 through 11:

Begin by asking your children to rate whether it's Good (G) or Bad (B) to be friends with someone who has the following qualities. Once each quality is marked with a "G" or "B," have your children rate the importance of each healthy quality using the following key: 4= Very Important; 3= Important; 2= Less Important; and 1= Not Important

Then, discuss the following questions:

- What other good qualities of a friend are important to you?
- What other bad qualities would you not want a friend to have?
- Which friendships of yours have qualities that you consider to be good? Bad? What are those qualities?
- When a friendship has bad qualities, what can you do about it?
- What qualities do you have that make you a good friend? A bad one? Why?

Qualities of a Friend

Good/ Bad	Importance	Someone who...
—	—	is honest
—	—	shares their feelings
—	—	always has to have his/her way
—	—	accepts you for who you are
—	—	listens to what you have to say
—	—	you like to spend time with

For Young People Age 12 through 18

Begin by asking your children to rate whether the following qualities in someone to date are Healthy (H) or Unhealthy (U). Once each quality is marked with a "H" or "U," have your children rate the importance of each healthy quality using the following key: 4= Very Important; 3= Important; 2= Less Important; and 1= Not Important.

Then, discuss the following questions:

- What other healthy qualities do you look for in someone to date? How important are these qualities to you?
- What other unhealthy qualities would you not want a person that you date to possess?
- Why do you think dating might be important? And, what do you think people do on a date?
- If you aren't already dating, when, if ever, do you think you might want to start dating? Why?
- If you have started to date, does he/she possess the healthy qualities that are important to you?

Qualities of Someone You Want to Date

Healthy/ Unhealthy	Importance	Someone who...
—	—	is popular with a certain crowd
—	—	respects you
—	—	you feel closer to as time goes on
—	—	tells you what to do
—	—	you can talk with about your feelings
—	—	doesn't pressure you into getting sexually involved

Now, follow the same process for qualities in a boyfriend/girlfriend and discuss the following questions:

- What other healthy qualities do you want a boyfriend/girlfriend to possess? How important are these qualities to you?
- What other unhealthy qualities would you not want a boyfriend/girlfriend to possess?
- What are the differences in the qualities between someone to date and a boyfriend/girlfriend? How do you know when a dating relationship is becoming a more serious relationship?
- Why do you think people might stay in relationships that are unhealthy? What would you do if you were in this situation?

Qualities of a Boyfriend/Girlfriend

Healthy/ Unhealthy	Importance	Someone who...
—	—	is smart, has a mind of their own, and doesn't just follow the crowd
—	—	you constantly fight with, even though you may make-up
—	—	gets jealous when you spend time with your friends
—	—	is respectful, honest, and trustworthy
—	—	interferes with your studies or work
—	—	Someone who is willing to talk about and use birth control and condoms if and when you are sexually active

*These activities were adapted from *Streetwise to Sex-Wise: Sexuality Education for High-Risk Youth*, Second Edition, by Steve Brown and Bill Taverner. For ordering information, please call 973/539-9580, extension 120.

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