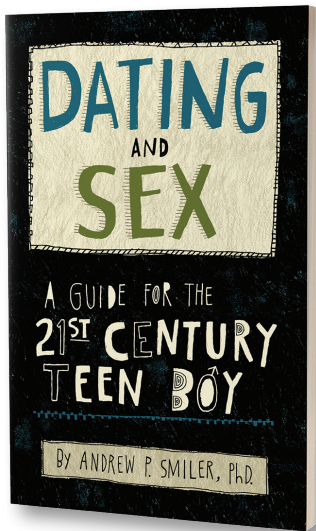




Magination Press Quick Tip: Talk with Your Teen About Dating



Talking with your teen or pre-teen about dating and relationships is best done as an ongoing conversation, not a once-and-done chat. These ongoing conversations can cover a range of topics including how the media portrays dating, expectations about dating, healthy relationships, defining terms, and even how to ask someone out or decline an invitation.

Dr. Andrew Smiler, author of Magination Press book, *Dating and Sex: A Guide for the 21st Century Teen Boy*, offers the following tips for talking with your child about dating.

Teen Dating Experiences

Most children start becoming aware of the worlds of dating and sex during early adolescence. This awareness is driven by puberty (which starts as early as age 10) and the start of some “boyfriend-girlfriend” activity in schools (although this rarely involves kissing or holding hands). Tween and teen-oriented television programs often include this content in ways that are mostly absent from programming for younger children.

Approximately 80% of adolescents tell researchers that they started “dating” at age 14 (or younger), although it’s not always clear what that means. For 13- and 14-year olds, dating is often centered on group activities, and may — or may not — include activities such as kissing and holding hands. At age 16, dating includes time for the couple alone (outside of school) and also with groups of friends. Kissing and holding hands are expected, and many teens engage in more intimate activities. According to one long-running [federal research project](#), approximately [20% of 9th graders](#) report that they’ve had sex, and the number climbs to almost [60% of 12th graders](#).

The topics and questions below are designed to help you start discussing this part of life with your child. The conversation may be uncomfortable, for you or your child, so you may need to minimize eye contact, allow long pauses, or talk while completing another activity that provides some momentary distractions. Until you’re sure of your child’s gender and sexual preferences, phrase your questions in a more open fashion (e.g., “who” instead of “which boy/girl”). I recommend starting to discuss the media content at age 10 (the first bullet point) and other topics at age 12 or 13.

Suggestions for Discussing Dating and Sex with Your Pre-Teen or Teen

- Use TV shows and movies that you're both familiar with as the basis for some discussion, especially first conversations. If you're both fans of *Friends*, *Black-ish*, or some other show, ask which character they'd like to date, and why that character but not another character? Also ask how respectful, honest, trusting, caring, etc., the on-screen relationships are and if they'd want to be in that kind of relationship. These conversations can start at age 10.
- Teach your child how to ask someone out, including how to handle the disappointment of hearing "no." Also, teach your child how to respond if they get asked out, including ways to stall (because they weren't expecting the question) and ways to politely say no. In an era of gender equality, all children need to be prepared to both ask and respond.
- Ask them, and offer your own perspective, about what it means to be someone's "boyfriend" or "girlfriend" and how that meaning might change two or three months into the relationship. In the hookup era, ask what your child expects to happen before they start using those terms.
- Ask them, and offer your own perspective, on what terms like "dating," "hooking up," and "having sex" mean. Note where your definitions differ and try to be mindful of these differences in order to maintain clarity in other conversations.
- Ask them, and provide your own perspective, on what parts of relationships are just for the couple to know and what parts should not be kept secret. It's fine if your child doesn't share their partner's deepest hopes and fears with you, but it's not acceptable if they keep secrets about being pressured, threatened, or assaulted by their partner.

I encourage you to think about your child's dating and sexual development the same way you approach topics like manners, respect, self-understanding, and time management – one conversation at a time over a span of years. These are all complicated topics that require a combination of adolescent experience, parental input, and self-reflection.

These tips were provided by Andrew Smiler, PhD, author of Magination Press book, *Dating and Sex: A Guide for the 21st Century Teen Boy*.

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