

Know! To Talk Teen Relationships and Dating

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February is Teen Dating Violence Awareness Month so what better time than now to bring up the subject with your teen? Whether your teen has shown interest in dating, it has more than likely crossed his or her mind. It is vitally important for our daughters and our sons to hear from us on this subject. They need to know what a healthy relationship entails; they need to be clear on the family rules regarding teen romance and dating; and they need to be keenly aware that **no means no**, and “love” does not equal sex.

Uncomfortable with the topic? Understandable, but their understanding of a healthy relationship is a must, and it's up to parents to discuss and share this important topic. If you don't answer your teen's questions, they'll look elsewhere for the information, including their friends and the internet. This is a critical subject that needs to be discussed regularly with our children throughout adolescence.

Here are some specific topics to address:

Healthy Teen Relationships: Role modeling is the most effective tool in teaching your child what a healthy relationship looks like. But in addition to seeing it in action, young people need to be taught that a healthy relationship includes mutual respect, understanding, trust, honesty, communication and support. It also involves setting healthy boundaries that are respected by both partners (including NO means NO), as well as the freedom to maintain outside interests and friendships.

Unhealthy and Abusive Teen Relationships: Unhealthy relationships consist of any type of imbalance of power and control, which can develop into an abusive relationship as well. **One in three adolescents in the U.S. is a victim of physical, sexual, emotional or verbal abuse from a dating partner.** Abusive relationships in adolescence additionally place youth at a greater likelihood for making other hazardous life choices, which oftentimes lead to substance misuse, eating disorders and risky sexual behaviors. [Click here](#) to be taken to **LevelsRespect.org** for a comprehensive list of the various types of dating abuse and their warning signs.

Differences between Infatuation, Lust and Love: During adolescence infatuation and lust are oftentimes mistaken for “love,” as they can all elicit those feel-good butterflies and goosebumps. But there is a difference, a big difference. Typically based on physical attraction, infatuation can happen instantly, and even with someone you don't know. It is short-lived and once those momentary feelings wear off, so does the desire to be with that person. The same goes with lust - which is the intense desire for someone or something. Unlike infatuation and lust, love builds and develops over time. Where infatuation and lust can cause people to act selfishly, for their own pleasure, love is unselfish, kind, respectful and honest, and desires only positive outcomes for the other person. The key here is that **love does NOT equal sex**. And if a partner truly loves you, he or she will not pressure you to do anything you are not ready to do.

Sex: At this point, your teens are likely familiar with the birds and bees, but give them a chance to get clarity and ask questions. It's fine to acknowledge that the subject is a little uncomfortable, but it is important to be direct and share with them the risks of sexual activity objectively, including the emotional pain, sexually transmitted infections, and unplanned pregnancy. They also need to hear that oral sex, which is popular among teens, isn't a risk-free alternative to intercourse. This is also a good opportunity to talk about your personal family values and religious beliefs.

Setting Your Expectations and Boundaries: We're talking about things like curfews, restrictions on who you allow your child to date, who will pay for the date, and, of course, your expectations regarding sexual activity. Be aware that your influence on this topic matters! Research shows that sexual activity is delayed when parents communicate their disapproval of teen sex.

Offer Your Support: Your teen needs to know they can count on you for support. It's about showing compassion when needed, lending an attentive ear, and reminding them they can always come to you with questions or concerns about their relationship and/or sex. When, and if, they do come to you for support, be sure to give them words of affirmation and praise for their good decision.

As you talk to your teen, you may want to consider using gender- inclusive language regarding sexual preference. If a young person is questioning their sexual orientation, this may provide the open door they're looking for to share their feelings with you. It may also help your teen feel more comfortable with his or her identity.

And finally, the most important thing you can do when talking with your teen about relationships and dating is to show them respect; respect for their opinions and beliefs, and respect for their individuality. This will help to set the foundation for a lifetime of trust and open dialogue between you and your child, on a variety of important topics.