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Remember the first time you fell in love? It was all you could think about and you thought it would last forever. Combine that with what you know about all the physical and emotional changes your teen is going through, and it's easy to see why teen relationships can become so intense.

Teens physically mature long before they have a complete understanding of the emotions involved in an intimate relationship. This is why parents need to be prepared to help teens set guidelines on when they are ready to date and help them understand when a relationship is getting too intense or unhealthy. Teens should be encouraged to keep their early dating simple.

When are teens ready to date?

When a teen is ready to date is a question each family must answer based on their own values.

Interest in dating usually develops in stages. Teens typically move from same sex groups, to mixed sex groups, to one-on-one relationships.

One recent Parent Soup web poll asked 538 parents, "What's the best age to begin dating?" About 61% said 16 or 17 was the right age for youth to start dating while 30% said 14 to 15 years of age was best. Only 6% thought youth should be 18 years of age or older and lastly 3% said 12 to 13-year-olds were old enough to date.

Most of these parents made a distinction between one-on-one dates and group dating. Several parents stated that kids who were younger than 16 should be allowed to go out in groups. Many parents said they'd allow young teens – even as young as 13 years old to date if there was a parent chaperone.

Although these first dating relationships typically do not last, do not dismiss them as unimportant. Teens need the freedom to move in and out of relationships, learning more about themselves and others. These



relationships can be intense and can cause emotional upset when a break up occurs. Your child may need reassurance if this happens.

These relationships are the most important thing in the world to your teen.

What about dating rules?

Teen dating is not only a new experience for teens but for parents as well. Here are some guidelines to help parents set rules about dating:

- Know who your teen is dating.
- Know where your teen is going on a date and what they plan to do.
- Have guidelines for where, when, and how often your teen dates.
- Don't jump to conclusions on what dating means for your teen.
- Keep in mind, there is a fine line between interest and intrusion. Many teens talk with their parents about their feelings, but a parent should not press or demand that a teen tell every detail of every date. That is intrusion.

Setting teen curfews

Whose job is it to decide what time a teen should be home from a date: the city's, the parent's, or the teen's?

According to a survey of 13 to 17-year-olds, 71% live in a household with curfews. The big surprise in this poll of 1,000 teens was that three-quarters of the teens agreed with their family rules.

When it comes to curfews keep these points in mind:

- Teens do want limits. Boundaries are reassuring because it says you care.
- Curfews need to be determined after considering multiple things: How much sleep does your teen need? What other responsibilities does your teen have? What are the average curfews for his or her friends? Are these reasonable in your view?
- Let your teen know that abiding by a curfew shows responsibility and maturity. The more of this you see the more lenient you become in the future.
- Finally, do not be sexist. Give girls fair curfews, too. Sometimes we allow boys more leeway. This sends a message to girls that they are less competent and trustworthy.

Is dating good or bad?

Dating can affect a teen in both positive and negative ways. And teens can learn from both. Dating can help build self-esteem, help a teen discover who he or she is, and help build social and relationship skills. Learning how to be part of a healthy relationship is an important skill to develop. Parents should try to help teens understand that healthy relationships are based on trust and caring.

But dating can also hurt one's self esteem, reinforce stereotypical gender roles, or cause a teen to have unrealistic expectations about relationships.

Dating that becomes hurtful

Watch for warning signs of an abusive relationship. Far too many teens are hurt in abusive and exploitive relationships, sometimes with life-long consequences.

Adapted with permission from Positive Parenting of Teens, "Teens and Dating" (University of Minnesota Extension Service, 1999, no longer in print).

Signs of an abusive relationship include:

- The abusive partner is very controlling about what their partner does and who they do it with. Abusive partners usually show a lot of jealousy or possessiveness. Parents may notice that their teen no longer hangs out with his or her friends.
- Abusive partners have short tempers.
- Abusive partners will often belittle or put down their partner.
- Abusive relationships don't start with a black eye on the first date. Abuse is much more subtle. There is a lot of emotional abuse that occurs before the first slap, push, or grab.

Teens are often confused and scared when abuse or sexual assault occurs in a relationship. They aren't sure how to tell a parent. Parents may have to ask teens directly if they have been hurt.

If teens disclose abuse, believe them. Make sure teens know that abuse or sexual assault is not their fault. Contact a local sexual assault or domestic abuse program for help.

Where you can go for more information:

Families with Teens – University of Minnesota Extension
www.extension.umn.edu/familieswithteens/

Love Doesn't Have to Hurt Teens
www.apa.org/pi/families/resources/love-teens.pdf

The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy
www.nationalcampaign.org

National Survey of Teens: Teens Talk About Dating, Intimacy, and Their Sexual Experiences – Kaiser Family Foundation
www.kff.org/youth/hivstds/1373-datingrep.cfm

You may also want to look at:

Giannetti, C. C., & Sagarese, M. (1997). *The roller-coaster years*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury.

Steinberg, L. (2011). *You and your adolescent: The essential guide for ages 10-25*. New York: Simon and Schuster.