

Teens and Dating: Tips for Parents¹

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I'll never forget the initial shock I felt when my second grader came home from school one day to tell me that one of her friends was "going out" with one of the little boys in her class. "Going out?!" I asked. "What does that mean?" She couldn't really answer, much to my relief. Many parents might likewise find themselves unprepared when they first learn their elementary and middle schoolers have developed perfectly normal crushes on their classmates.

Perhaps more important is being prepared when your teens start dating. According to research, the relationships teens have with their parents—especially the degree of support and security they feel in their relationships—influence their having warm and secure feelings about friendship. Having a secure view of friendship is also positively related to teens' security in their romantic relationships. Experts report that as long as dating doesn't start too early in adolescent years, dating is a way to learn cooperative skills and sharing activities. It also teaches socially appropriate behavior and manners, interdependence and companionship, empathy and sensitivity, as well as how to compromise.

Although most adolescent romantic relationships do not last long, first romances are practice for more mature bonds in adulthood. In fact, warm and caring romantic relationships in the teen years tend to lead to satisfying, committed relationships in early adulthood.

Parents need not panic as their teens begin to date. Rather, it's important to provide a safe and secure base for your teen to communicate with you openly about his or her relationship.

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