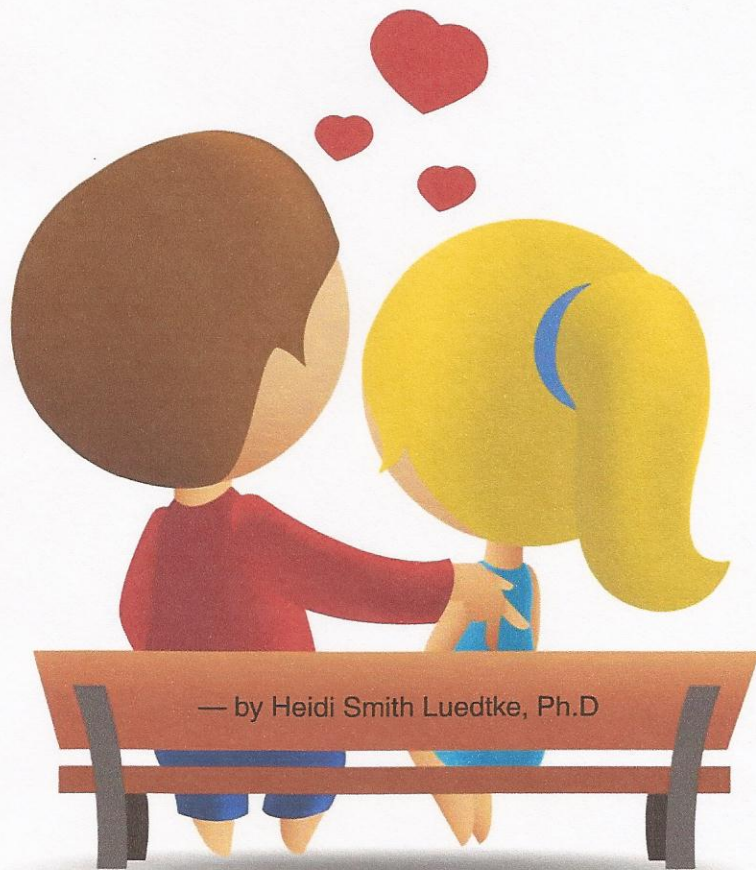


— Romance is a double-edged sword. Early relationships teach tweens and teens a great deal about themselves and others, but they also expose kids to risk and rejection. As a parent, it can be hard to know how to help.

A Parent's Guide To *Young Romance*



Your daughter's latest crush has a shock of thick black hair and a brown belt in Aikido. Enamored of his vegetarian lifestyle and Eastern interests, she's talking tofu and downloading anime movies by the gigabyte. You? Not so impressed.

LEARNING FROM LOVE

"Although many parents would like pre-teens to participate in supervised group activities, school dances, and trips to the mall or the movies, kids are starting to date earlier than most parents

would like," says relationship education advocate Lindsay Kriger, creator of the young women's romance advice blog "If Only I Knew." Some adolescent relationships are short-lived, but many last longer than parents expect.

Tweens are often preoccupied with romance. They may be infatuated with classmates or obsessed with peers' partnerships. Spending time with mixed-sex peer groups exposes kids to potential love interests and offers opportunities for flirtation. By ages 16 to 18, 75% of teens report they've had a relation-

ship, dated or "hooked up" with someone.

Dating is an opportunity for adolescents to test out different identities, says Stephanie Madsen, Ph.D., associate professor of psychology at McDaniel College in Westminster, Maryland. One month your teen may be sporting an athletic persona; the next, he may be asking to turn your garage into a recording studio. His clothing choices and personal style may shift to please the latest would-be girlfriend. For parents, watching kids try on identities may be like watching bad comedy. Although the characters are awkward and unbelievable, you just can't look away.

Relationships are like a mirror — kids see themselves as others see them, and find out how their words and actions draw others closer or push them away. Tweens and teens also learn about their values and goals, explore their feelings, and practice communication and commitment in dating relationships, says Los Angeles-based teen life coach Melissa Kahn. "In some ways, teenage love is the purest, sweetest love of all — the kind that is about attraction and fun," says Kahn. But that doesn't mean young love is easy.

"Romance is a double-edged sword," says Madsen. Being admired and desired is exhilarating; getting disregarded or dumped can be crushing. First relationships also create a template teens use to understand future relationships. "Failed relationships can make teens feel inadequate, and those feelings of unworthiness may be carried around for a long time," says Kriger. Parents can help kids learn what is appropriate in a healthy, loving partnership by taking a consulting role in early romance.

PARENTING POINTERS

Meeting your daughter's date at the door with a loaded shotgun or a list of killer questions would likely do more harm than good. Support healthy relationship skills development by following these do's and don'ts.

DO LISTEN AND SHARE

"Romance can be a fun topic for parents and kids to bond over," says Kahn. "Parents can take a listening role to hear what is on their child's mind. They can also share their personal experiences with love, which a lot of kids are curious about." Ask your child what qualities she looks for in potential boyfriend and what she likes to do on a date. "A teen who has talked through what she wants in a relationship is better prepared when important choices — like when to end a relationship — present themselves," says Kahn. Initiate an ongoing conversation.

DO SET CLEAR EXPECTATIONS

"Fewer than half of teens in high school have had intercourse," says Kahn, "yet many parents — fearing the worst — assume their teen is engaged in sexually risky behavior and discourage dating altogether." Be careful to distinguish between romance and sex, they aren't the same thing. "Many young girls are more interested in infatuation and the logistics of being asked out on a date than in sex," says Kahn. If you immediately bring up sex when your tween or teen mentions a boyfriend, you'll shut down the dialog.

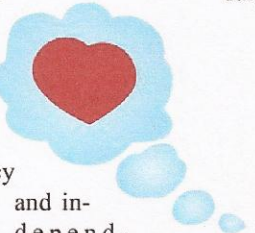
DON'T OVEREMPHASIZE SEX

Madsen's research shows 64% of parents have rules about kids' romantic relationships. The best rules give parents a chance to step in if their child needs support, says Madsen; they don't restrict kids' behavior. For instance, you might make a rule that you must meet a date before your child goes out and that you

need to know where they're going and when they'll return. "Restrictive rules that tell kids who they can (and can't) date, and what they can (and can't) do on a date are perceived as overbearing," says Madsen, and they can backfire. Kids may look for loopholes or keep relationships secret to avoid punishment.

DON'T INTRUDE

Dating is one way kids separate from parents and that may evoke some anxiety, says Madsen. Holding on isn't healthy. "Teens crave privacy



and independence," says Kahn, and they'll pull you away if you're over involved. Forego any spy missions you might be contemplating. Just be available to act as a sounding board when your child wants to talk. When he chooses to share his dating troubles and triumphs, keep them in strictest confidence. It's not cool to post your kid's romance-related news to Facebook.

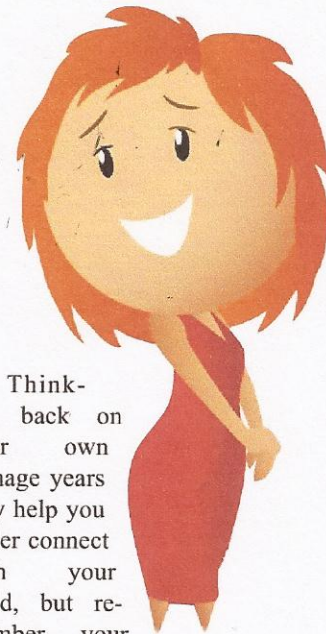
DO SUPERVISE APPROPRIATELY

Adolescents are learning what behavior is normal during dating. Explain what is and is not acceptable. Studies show many tweens and teens experience



verbal harassment in dating relationships and nearly one third say they worry they might be physically hurt by a romantic partner. Kids need to know they don't have to tolerate disrespect or abuse. Establish a code your child can use to escape a bad situation. If she calls or texts you the code, come to the rescue. Tell her you need her to return home immediately due to a "family emergency" and pick her up if necessary.

DON'T PROJECT



Thinking back on your own teenage years may help you better connect with your child, but remember, your child is not you. "Parents may fear teens are repeating the very same mistakes we made, which — in retrospect — seem horrifying," says Kahn. Be careful not to assume kids are making the same choices you made or that the same results are inevitable. You can't prevent your child from making mistakes — or talk her out of her latest crush. You can be there to pick up the pieces of her broken heart.

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