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Kiss and Tell

Dating and your tween.

by Alana Trocchia

According to statistics gathered by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy (NCPTP), the U.S. has the highest rates of teen pregnancy and births in the western industrialized world. Approximately one in five teens has had sex before age 15, and approximately half of teens ages 12-14 have been on a date or in a romantic relationship in the past 18 months.

While these statistics are cause for concern, NCPTP research also shows that, while parents cannot determine their teens' decisions about sex, the quality of parent/teen relationships can make a huge difference in forming these decisions. A 2004 NCPTP survey relating to younger teens revealed that parents underestimate their influence with younger teens when it comes to decisions about sex.

It's key for parents to talk to their children as early as possible. Teach them to respect others' space and bodies when they're as young as 4 or 5, says Mike Domitrz, a Milwaukee, WI-based speaker and author of *May I Kiss You? A Candid Look at Dating, Communication, Respect, & Sexual Assault Awareness*. He recommends that parents speak to their children early, because by age 13 or 14 kids will have all of their friends' (mis)information.

Instead of emphasizing differences (e.g. dating was so different during your youth), look for a way to connect with your child. Find similarities, like getting nervous before a date, and discuss them in a way that children can relate to. This makes parents more approachable, Domitrz says, and kids are surprised, because they assume their parents know it all. Ask children about their thoughts— for instance, find out what your middle-schooler thinks about kids going out and what is appropriate for that age group.

There are steps parents can take to ensure the safety of their children when it comes to dating. "Know who your children's friends are, where they are and where they're going," says Allen A. Du Mont, a licensed and board certified psychotherapist at A Child & Family Therapy Center of Bayside. "Approve of where [your children] go and who's there. Is there adult supervision? What kind of activities will be going on?"

Reinforcing values is also an important step. "The best way parents can help kids is to raise a confident kid who believes in him or herself; that child will stand up and do the right thing," says Domitrz. "Every chance you get, tell them you love them, that you believe in them and that they're special." Parents shower young children with praise and encouragement, Domitrz notes, but tend to check up on tweens, monitoring their grades and performance. He recommends that parents continue to be supportive and reassuring of their budding teenagers.

"Set realistic limits, not based on fear, and stick with them," says Kathleen Dwyer, director of Nassau Guidance and Counseling Center in Nassau County, NY. "It's good to be cautious but fear-based decisions can be unreal, rigid and backfire." Overly lenient rules can also fail. "Adolescence is a scary time, and kids need support. They

deserve to have input and negotiations, but the buck stops with the parent, the final decision maker.”

Domitrz agrees. “Parents must be consistent with standards— even if kids don’t like it. Years ago, parents used to lay down the law with a firm ‘because I said so,’ but those kids were much less likely to open up to their parents. Nowadays, kids ask why and they want an explanation. Parents can say, I want you to have fun, but there are too many risks and I’m going to put my foot down.”

It can take time to get kids to open up to parents, especially about dating. If you don’t currently have a close, open relationship with your child, show him that you care; ask for his opinions, Domitrz says. When kids feel comfortable, they’ll open up.

The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy (www.teenpregnancy.org) offers free downloadable tips for parents on their Web site (www.teenpregnancy.org/resources/reading/tips/tips.asp), including the following:

- Be clear about your own sexual values and attitudes. Consider your own beliefs about relationships and dating, and communicate them with your children.
- Talk with your children early and often about sex, and be specific. Use TV or movies as springboards for discussion of your opinions. Emphasize conversation rather than lectures, asking for their opinions and concerns.

- Discourage early, frequent and steady dating. Group activities among young people are fine and often fun, but allowing teens to begin steady, one-on-one dating much before age 16 can lead to trouble. Let your child know your strong feelings about this throughout childhood; otherwise, s/he will think you just don’t like the particular person or invitation.

- Take a strong stand against your daughter dating a boy significantly older than she is.

And don’t allow your son to develop an intense relationship with a girl much younger than he is. Try setting a limit of no more than a two- (or at most three-) year age difference. The power differences between younger girls and older boys or men can lead girls into risky situations.

- Help your teenagers to have options for the future that are more attractive than early pregnancy and parenthood. Assist them in making plans to fulfill their goals.

- Let your kids know that you value education highly. Encourage your children to take school seriously and set high expectations about their school performance.

Limit the number of hours your teenager gives to part-time jobs (20 hours per week should be the maximum) so that there is enough time and energy left to focus on school.

- Know what your kids are watching, reading and listening to.

Ask your kids what they think about the programs they watch and the music they listen to. You will probably not be able to fully control what your children see and hear, but you can make your views known and control your own home environment.

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