

A Parent's Guide to

TEEN DATING

axis

*I read an article on the internet
Told me that that's how you know you're falling in love
Don't really trust what's on the internet
But maybe just this once*

— Lizzy McAlpine, "Hate to Be Lame"

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This guide will help you discuss the following questions:

- ❓ When do I start a conversation about dating and sex with my kid?
- ❓ What topics do I need to cover with my child about dating?
- ❓ Should I let my kid date?
- ❓ How do I know if my child is ready to date?
- ❓ What are the current teenage dating trends?
- ❓ How do I coach my kid to date in a digital age?

Don't Outsource the Conversation

If you were to ask most millennials or Gen Xers if their parents sat them down to talk to them about dating and sex, their answer would be no. Even if their response is yes, the conversation may have gone something like, “Don’t get a girl pregnant,” or “If you lay down with dogs, you’ll wake up with fleas.” These are true stories from many of our friends. In fact, a friend of Axis shared that the only instruction her parents gave her about dating was that she couldn’t date until she was sixteen. She turned sixteen, got her license to drive and date. There was no conversation about character, attraction, boundaries, or appropriate and inappropriate touch. “There were more conversations on how to drive than how to date,” she said.

Many parents of these generations outsourced the conversation about dating and sex, entrusting it to sex education teachers, youth group leaders, and television shows like *Family Matters*, *Step by Step*, and *90210*. Though this trend has significantly diminished, as current parents have experienced the ill effects of their parents not having “the sex talk” with them, The [New York Post](#) reports that over twenty percent of parents still do not plan to talk to their kids about sex. Here are the top three reasons why:

- 1 They believe their child is too young for the conversation.
- 2 They have entrusted their child’s sex education to their child’s school (35%).
- 3 They plan to outsource the conversation about sex to the other parent (61%).

These last two reasons are of great concern for us at Axis. We believe all available parents and caregivers are the most influential voices in shaping their children. The research agrees. In their book, [Handing Down the Faith: How Parents Pass Their Religion on to the Next Generation](#), sociologists [Christian Smith](#) and [Amy Adamczyk](#), speak of the crucial role of parents in their child’s spiritual formation, stating:

All research in the United States today shows clearly that parents are by far the most important factor influencing their children’s religion, not only as youth but also after they leave home. Not clergy, religious schools, youth ministers, neighborhoods, Sunday school, mission trips, service projects, summer camp, peers, or the media. Parents. That is who matters here and now.

While their research focuses solely on the religious influence parents have on their children, it’s not presumptuous to conclude that this influence spills over into all aspects of life. At its core,

Christianity is a worldview centered around the person of Jesus Christ and is intended to impact every aspect of the lives of its adherents, including how a person takes up the task of dating, engages in romantic relationships, and views sex. That said, even if your child doesn't share your faith, you are still the most influential person in how they view and will engage in dating, sex, and marriage. Don't outsource the conversation. Your voice in your child's life matters.

Reflection Questions: Did your parents talk to you about sex and dating? If so, how did that conversation go? What might you want to keep, add, or omit as you talk to your child about sex and dating? If not, how did this impact you regarding sex and dating? How do you hope to change the narrative for your child?

The New Talk

There's a common conception about "the talk." A parent goes into their child's room to have an awkward conversation about sex. The parent stumbles over their words, avoids eye contact, and leaves little time for their child to respond. The objective is to tell them to wait and maybe also to be safe if they can't. After the parent has said their piece, they leave the conversation feeling proud for checking that part of their parenting responsibilities off the list.

However, "the talk" with your child about sex, dating, and romantic relationships needs to be less of a task on your parental to-do list and more of a mile marker in your child's development that creates space for more conversation for the miles of life ahead. Because as you know, depositing a worldview or a set of values and norms into the bedrock of your child's heart and mind takes time and repetition. We understand that instilling other virtues like kindness, honesty, respect, and responsibility takes repeated emphasis over a period of years. This conversation about sex, dating, and romantic relationships (which includes the values of kindness, honesty, respect, and responsibility) will require the same kind of investment of time and repetition. The "new sex talk" needs to be a series of talks that start at an appropriate age and expand to greater depths of conversation throughout your child's development.

The “new” talk needs to also be about more than sex. You may have noticed that most of the statistics mentioned in the previous section were about sex. Unfortunately, there is very little data available on whether or not parents are having conversations with their children about dating. If researchers aren’t asking questions about parents’ talks with their children about dating, it could be because researchers are counting or lumping the conversation about dating in with a talk about sex, or because having substantive exchanges with children about dating doesn’t seem as important. Whatever the reasoning, here are five pitfalls for talking about sex with your child apart from dating:

- ⦿ It communicates that sex is the most important aspect of dating or romantic relationships.
- ⦿ It can indirectly communicate that physical attraction is more important than character and compatibility.
- ⦿ It doesn’t teach them non-sexual ways of expressing affection for another person.
- ⦿ It doesn’t teach them how to cultivate other forms of intimacy with a person that are built on communication, authenticity, trust, and having fun together.
- ⦿ It makes the conversation restrictive, focusing solely on the behaviors you don’t want them to do instead of on good, appropriate, and healthy ways of engaging with someone they like at their age.

You will find more in this guide about how to avoid these pitfalls, but for now, here’s one more reason why “the talk” needs to change: gender and sexual fluidity. While this guide will not go into too much detail about how to talk to your child about sexuality and gender, when having “the new talk,” you must also discuss these topics. Don’t assume that you know what your child thinks or feels about their sexuality or gender apart from having a conversation. You can start the conversation by asking them broad questions to understand their general views of trends around gender and sexuality. Just listen. Don’t be quick to critique or correct. The goal is to get a sense of what they are thinking and to create a safe space that lets your child know that if they are experiencing gender dysphoria or same-sex attraction, they can talk to you. You can learn more about how to talk to your child about gender and sexuality using our [How to Talk with Gen Z About Gender and Sexuality Course](#), and our [Parent’s Guide to Gender Identity](#).

Reflection Questions: What other pitfalls exist in having a conversation with your child about sex apart from dating? What other aspects or topics would you add to “the new sex talk?”

Know and Grow Your Kid

Though research on Gen Z and Gen Alpha can provide insight into the values and worldview of your child's generation, not every trend presented in the data will be the best representative of your child. Your child might be an outlier. Where the data reveals that Gen Z struggles to communicate well with others, your child might have a knack for communicating. Though the research says that Gen Z is less interested in getting married and is more focused on building their careers, your child might have a great desire to walk down the aisle instead of work their way up the corporate ladder. Your kid is more dynamic and nuanced than the generalizations and trends presented in the data or media. So as we review and dissect dating trends amongst teenagers, consider whether or not these generalizations fit your child and their environment. You know your kid. And if you feel that you don't, we encourage you to do the hard work of getting to know them and understanding what they value and think. This work is foundational for any and every conversation you will have with your kid. As it relates to dating, it will assist you in assessing their readiness, potential pitfalls, and areas in need of growth to date well.

This work is also foundational because it helps you understand and shape their values. Every parent or caregiver hopes to grow the child in their care into a kind, thoughtful, and wise human being. This hope is also at the center of your work as a parent. As you talk to your child about dating, consider what values and ways of being you want your child to embody as an adult in every sphere of life. Don't just focus on what kind of spouse or dating partner you want your child to be. Focus on what type of person you want them to be holistically. This holistic approach will be long-standing and inevitably influence how they date and treat those they are dating.

Reflection Questions: What values or ways of being do you want your child to embody as an adult? What can you do now to help make that future a reality?

Should I Let My Child Date?

Maybe.

In her book, [*iGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy—and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood*](#), psychologist [Dr. Jean M. Twenge](#) writes,

Contrary to the prevalent idea that children are growing up faster than previous generations did, [Gen Z] is growing up more slowly: 18-year-olds now act like 15-year-olds used to, and 13-year-olds like 10-year-olds. Teens...are more mentally [and emotionally] vulnerable.

Given this new reality, we recommend parents steer away from an “age approach” where they allow their child to date once they reach a certain age to a “readiness approach.” The “readiness approach” will require you to know and be attuned to your child’s emotional and mental maturity, asking questions like:

- 1 Does my child have the emotional maturity to experience rejection or a break-up?
- 2 Does my child possess the ability to communicate well enough to be in a relationship with others?
- 3 What are my child’s friendships like? How does this help me discern their readiness for dating?
- 4 What areas do they need to grow in, in order to handle the various kinds of experiences they could have in dating?
- 5 Is my child a good judge of character?

It’s possible that after considering these questions, the answer is a resounding “Nope! My kid’s not ready!” This might very well be true, but be sure to check and make sure that’s not your fear talking. For example, when assessing your child’s emotional maturity to experience rejection or a break-up, be careful not to allow your desire to protect your child from emotional harm to keep you from objectively evaluating their maturity. They will get hurt. Even in the scenario where they meet their childhood sweetheart and eventually get married and live happily-ish ever after, there will still be emotional highs and lows. They will need you to help comfort and coach them through these highs and lows, not to over-protect in an attempt to shield them from potential harm.

In assessing your child’s readiness to date, it will also be helpful to have conversations about attraction, expectations, and boundaries. Are they attracted to the right things? Do they only talk

about being physically attracted to someone? Or do they talk about other reasons for being attracted to someone? Are their expectations around dating too optimistic or too pessimistic? Do they understand appropriate levels of emotional sharing and physical touch?

These are a lot of things to consider. If you are feeling overwhelmed, we want to remind you the goal is to have several conversations over an extended period of time. Think about pace. You will not talk through attraction, expectations, and boundaries all at once. You're growing a person. You will plant seeds, water, take breaks, plant more seeds, and water. Take your time.

One more quick word on pace: consider how you might ease your child into the dating process. You want to start with chaperoned group dates, where you're there for support, not to snoop, before allowing your child to go on one-on-one unsupervised dates. Additionally, depending on their age and maturity, help your child think through what levels of physical touch they are ready for and what is inappropriate for them. Give them opportunities to practice and "grow up" in this area.

Reflection Questions: What are some pros of letting your child date? What are some cons? In what ways is your child ready to date? In what ways are they not?

Trends You Need To Know

While we encourage you to know and grow your kid, here's a quick snapshot of some teenage dating trends that we believe will help you coach and care for your child when they start to date.

- 1 Everything is fluid.** Gen Z and Gen Alpha highly value individualism and refuse to live in boxes. This creates a lot of fluidity in how they understand and express their sexuality and gender. It also impacts the way they engage in relationships. Many teens are more comfortable with non-committal "situationships" than labeled relationships. Situationships are also reflective of the challenges teens have communicating with others. If your child exhibits these kinds of patterns in dating, jumping from one person to another or keeping everything "casual," you will need to lean in and coach them on how communicating with clarity is a kindness they should extend and expect from others.

- 2 **Ghosting.** Another unfortunate outcome of Gen Z and Gen Alpha's struggles with communication is ghosting. If they start to lack interest in a person, their attraction for them doesn't grow, or conflict occurs, they tend to withdraw without communicating and go radio-silent instead of ending the relationship. This trend is also the by-product of children and young adults being overly socialized through social media and social anxiety. If your child exhibits this behavior, you will need to pull from the values of kindness and thoughtfulness you've been building over time to help them not ghost. If your child is a Christian, you can also remind them that people are human beings created God's image, deserving of dignity and clear communication. If your child finds themselves on the receiving end of ghosting, they will need your care and support as they navigate hurt feelings and not understanding why that person has left them without an explanation for why their relationship has come to an end.
- 3 **Dating happens online.** While teens are hungry for face-to-face interaction, many still prefer communicating their attraction via social media apps like Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat. Social media apps will also likely be their primary way of communicating with someone they are interested in or dating. This shift requires monitoring and coaching around screen time, appropriate communications, and talks about catfishing and sexting.
- 4 **Dating violence among teens.** According to the [National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey](#), over [71% of women and over 55% of men](#) first experienced intimate partner violence (sexual or physical violence, and/or stalking) under the age of 25. This unfortunate reality will require you to talk to your child about emotional and physical boundaries and what to do when they feel uncomfortable with someone they are dating. You will also need to look out for warning signs like enmeshment and codependency that can fly under the radar as puppy love and pay attention to any considerable shifts in your child's personality or activities. Are they all of a sudden withdrawn? Are they no longer participating in activities you know they love? Are their relationships with their friends changing? Do they get inordinately defensive when you express concern or ask about the person they are dating? These are all things to keep a close eye on to keep your child safe. For a deeper dive into tackling this content, check out our [Parent's Guide to Sexual Assault](#).

Reflection Question: Which of these trends are your kids already exhibiting or have experienced? What can you do to prepare them for potentially experiencing these trends in dating?

Addressing Your Fears and Hopes

We've talked about what you can do for your teens, but now, about you. We know you love your kid. You want to keep them safe. You want them to have positive dating experiences. We do, too.

But we also want you to take care of yourself in the midst of what can be an overwhelming and even scary time. You can do this by prayerfully bringing your fears and hopes to God in prayer. Consider praying through [Psalm 139:13-16](#), reminding yourself that before they were yours, they were His. Allow the truth of knowing that every day of your child's life was written down in God's book before the beginning of time to give you peace despite your fears.

Also allow these truths to inform your hopes. Most parents tend to pray for their child to meet someone godly, fall in love, and get married. This is a good prayer. However, this might not be the path your child chooses or the story God has written out for them. With each passing generation, the average age adults marry continues to trend older. Your child may not get married until their thirties, if they get married at all. The latter becomes more of a possibility if your child is a believer who experiences same-sex attraction. Singleness may be the most God-glorifying option for them. That said, don't just talk about dating. Talk about singleness, and how whether it's temporary or permanent, God is glorified through single people as much as anyone else.

In 1 Corinthians 7:7, Paul teaches that singleness is a gift. The same Greek word, *charisma*, that he uses in this verse to talk about singleness is the same word he uses when speaking of our salvation in Ephesians 2:8. Singleness is not a lesser life that needs escaping. Singleness is a good life worth exploring. Talking about being single in a healthy and joyful way with your child also has tremendous benefits:

- 1 It takes the societal and familial pressure off getting married, creating space for your child to make wise decisions in dating.
- 2 It helps ensure they don't get married before they're ready.
- 3 It keeps them from settling out of fear of being alone.
- 4 It allows them to cultivate a healthy sense of self. Instead of spending most of their energy on dating and meeting their person, they spend that energy on getting to know themselves more fully.

- 5 It keeps them from idolizing marriage in a way that leads to sin or feelings of anxiety, despair, or resentment.

Reflection Questions: What are your fears about your child dating? What are your hopes? How does the idea of talking to your child about the joys and challenges of singleness alongside the joys and challenges of dating strike you?

Stay Engaged, Don't Grow Weary

Parenting can be tiring. While this may be the hardest thing you do in your life, it also has the potential to be the most rewarding, yielding a fruitful harvest. And even if it doesn't, you will want to know that you did everything possible to steward the gift of loving and growing your kid well. Stay the course. As the Apostle Paul put it in Galatians 6:9, "Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up."

We're rooting for you!

Reflection Questions: In what moments of parenting are you the most tempted to give up? How can you invite God to meet you in your weariness? What truths of Scriptures can you commit to memory to help you persevere in hope?

Invitation to Generosity

If you like what you learned in this Parent Guide and want to help us continue to make great resources to serve parents like you, consider making a gift at axis.org/give. Thank you!

Sources

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