

# *Why Parents Must Talk to Teens About Dating: Sex, Healthy Relationships, and Sexual Assault Prevention*

## **WHAT ARE THE IMPORTANT STATISTICS ABOUT TEEN SEXUAL BEHAVIORS?**

According to the most recent CDC statistics, pulled from the 2019 National Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 39% of high school students report they had sexual intercourse. From that group, 9% had four or more partners and 7% were forced into having sex against their will. A significant percentage sexually active teens report not using condoms or other forms of pregnancy prevention, drinking, or using drugs before sex, and not being tested for infection or disease including HIV.

In 2018, the CDC reported 21% of all new HIV diagnoses were among people 13-24 years old, 50% of the new twenty million STDs were among people 15-24 years old, and 180,000 babies were born to girls 15-19 years old.

## **WHY IS IT IMPORTANT FOR PARENTS TO TALK TO TEENS ABOUT DATING?**

Parents cannot deny that sexuality is an inevitable part of the dating scene at some point in their child's life. They have a responsibility to empower their children to advocate for themselves to have healthy relationships. It will help to understand the following points:

- When a young person feels comfortable with sexuality, they have a healthier development.
- When you show that you can accept your child's sexuality, it's beneficial for their development.
- Talking openly to your child about sexuality shows you support their healthy sexual development.
- Fostering open communication with your child about dating allows you to protect them through education and gives them a person to whom they know they can disclose without judgement if they ever end up in a distressing, troubling, or dangerous situation.

## **HOW CAN PARENTS & TEENS TALK ABOUT SEX, RELATIONSHIPS, AND ASSAULT?**

When it comes to sex, it is important to talk with your teen about consent, contraception, sexually transmitted diseases and infections, and all forms of sexual activity. Also, never assume they know all they need to know. For example, many teens think they haven't had sex if they only had oral or anal sex; they need to understand they are open to the same infections.

Understand not only are teens beliefs about sex, relationships, and sexual assault influenced by cultural background, upbringing, and personal experiences, but also, they are receiving a lot of their information from social media. We already know social media is plagued with a combination of real

versus fake news. So, please share your feelings and values about issues related to dating, but also listen to their feelings and values; you may find you are able to dispel many myths for them.

Using the following guidelines will make it easier to talk to your teen:

- Let your teen know you're interested in their perspective
- Be honest if you don't know the answer, and look for the answer with your teen
- Use everyday opportunities to talk about sex, healthy relationships, and safety
- Talk about issues or concerns when your teen raises them, and assure him/her/they there is no need to feel embarrassed

## **WHAT IS A HEALTHY VS. UNHEALTHY OR TOXIC RELATIONSHIP?**

It is good practice to always assess your relationship by examining how your partner treats you and how he/she/they make you feel. You can use the following questions as a checklist for your relationship:

- Do we trust each other?
- Do we respect each other?
- Do we support each other's interests and efforts?
- Are we honest and open with each other?
- Are we each able to maintain our individual identity?
- Is there equality and fairness in our relationship?

If you are in a healthy relationship which includes trust, respect, support, and honesty, your answers to each question will be, "Yes." You know you respect each other if you do the following:

- Listen to each other
- Support and encourage each other
- Forgive each other when a mistake is made
- Build each other up; not tear each other down
- Take an interest in the things your partner likes
- Allow each other to have your own individuality
- Show appreciation and empathy for each other

You know your relationship is unhealthy or toxic if you answer, "No" to any combination of checklist questions. Typical indicators of an unhealthy or toxic relationship include:

- Controlling behaviors that make you feel pressured
- Feeling afraid to share feeling, thoughts, or opinions
- Yelling or physical harm like slapping, punching, or kicking
- Feeling that you must be with that person over your friends or family
- Being criticized for what you do, who you spend time with, how you dress, etc.

## **WHAT IS IMPORTANT TO UNDERSTAND ABOUT SEXUAL ASSAULT?**

Sexual assault does not discriminate; males, whether LGBTQIA+ or heterosexual, are as much at risk of becoming victims as females. Statistically, 90% of women, 21% of men, and 70% of the LGBTQIA+ community experience sexual assault annually. One person is assaulted every 68 seconds.

Additionally, people ages 12-34 are at highest risk, females ages 16-19 are at four times higher risk, and college females ages 18-24 are at three times higher risk.

To dispel some stereotypes and myths, a higher percentage of sexual assaults occur by someone the victim knows versus a stranger; it is a crime of control and violence, not sex. If the assailant takes away his/her/their victim's ability to consent through drugs or alcohol, it is assault.

## **HOW CAN TEENS PROTECT THEMSELVES AGAINST BEING SEXUALLY ASSAULTED?**

Understand one cannot totally protect themselves from being assaulted, however, there are preventative measures you can take to reduce your risk. In general, do not share too many details of your social plans online, or post risqué pictures of yourself. Also, always make sure you are your cellphone with you and that it is fully charged. There are three situations most relevant to you as a teen: walking or travelling alone, attending parties, and going on dates.

When walking or travelling alone, it is essential to do the following:

- Pay attention to your surroundings, sights, and sounds
- Walk along a well-travelled, well-lit pathway, and at a steady pace
- Don't leave your car unlocked and always check the backseat when returning to your car
- If taking a taxi or Uber, always check your driver's ID tag

When going on a date, it is essential to do the following:

- Understand consent and set boundaries
- If you start to feel uncomfortable or are being pressured, make an excuse and leave
- Tell your friends and/or parents where you are going and when you expect to return

When at a party, it is essential to do the following:

- Don't become isolated with a person you do not trust
- Stick together with friends and look out for each other
- It's best to not drink, but, if you do, control how much
- Do not take drinks from unknown people and never lose sight of your drink

## WHAT CAN TEENS DO IF THEY OR SOMEONE THEY KNOW ARE SEXUALLY ASSAULTED, OR FIND THEMSELVES IN AN UNHEALTHY RELATIONSHIP?

If you are a victim of sexual assault or in an unhealthy relationship, the first thing to do is remember **'IT IS NOT YOUR FAULT'** and you don't need to feel ashamed. If you know someone who, it is important to be there, listen, and do not judge them. Several other ways in which you can help yourself or a friend/relative are to:

<b><i>Be patient:</i></b>	Dealing with either situation is a process; it takes time.
<b><i>Be there:</i></b>	Offer to go with them if they decide they want to get medical attention.
<b><i>Empowerment :</i></b>	Do not pressure yourself or them to take steps until they are ready.
<b><i>Encouragement:</i></b>	They can report what happened to law enforcement, and can contact a sexual assault or domestic violence hotline for support.

## HOW CAN YOU SUPPORT YOUR CHILD AS HE/SHE/THEY NAVIGATE DATING?

The best way to support your child is to create a parent-child relationship that consist of open and honest communication: let them know they can ask questions and confide in you. Also, empower yourself by learning about their sexual identity and support them in who they are. Learn their risk factors and find resources to educate yourselves about potential dangers to them in the dating realm.

## HOW CAN YOU SUPPORT YOUR CHILD IF HE/SHE/THEY TELL YOU THEY HAVE BEEN SEXUALLY ASSAULTED, OR ARE IN AN UNHEALTHY RELATIONSHIP?

The best way for you to support you child if they disclose having been sexually or physically abused is to respond appropriately; do not yell at them, judge them, or blame them. Rather, hold what they are telling you sacred and important then respond with care. Beyond this, you can best support your child by doing the following:

- Stay calm
- Believe them
- Be caring and supportive
- Help them create a safety plan
- Face the problem and get help

## **RESOURCES**

Below are some resources on teenage sexuality for parents and teens.

- ✓ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention  
<https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/education-materials/index.htm>
- ✓ Let's Talk Teens, Sexuality & Media  
<https://depts.washington.edu/sexmedia/parents/safesex.php>
- ✓ Teach Consent  
<http://www.teachconsent.org/parents>
- ✓ Talk With Your Kids  
<https://www.talkwithyourkids.org/resources-teens/resources-teens.html>

Below are some resources on healthy vs. unhealthy relationships for parents and teens.

- ✓ Pennsylvania Coalition Against Domestic Violence  
<https://www.pcadv.org/>
- ✓ National Domestic Violence Hotline  
<https://www.thehotline.org/>
- ✓ Youth.gov  
<https://youth.gov/youth-topics/teen-dating-violence/characteristics>

Below are some resources on sexual assault prevention for parents and teens.

- ✓ RAINN  
<https://www.rainn.org/resources>
- ✓ Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape  
<https://pcar.org/>
- ✓ Charlotte Police & Public Safety – Division of Business Affairs  
<https://police.charlotte.edu/safety/sexual-assault-prevention/reduce-risk-becoming-sexual-assault-victim>
- ✓ Kid Power International  
<https://www.kidpower.org/downloads>
- ✓ Project Sanctuary Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Prevention and Support  
<https://www.projectsanctuary.org/prevention/>
- ✓ Grabel & Associates Michigan Criminal Lawyers  
<https://www.grabellaw.com/personal-safety-guides-protect-yourself-against-sex-crimes.html>