

# Dating & Love

## Helping tweens define a healthy relationship.

by Amy Levine, MA

Developing healthy relationships is an important part of growing up. Young people have many relationships including those with their parents and caregivers, siblings, classmates, teachers, coaches, friends, crushes and boyfriends/girlfriends. Some relationships are temporary and others continue to grow over time. As parents and caregivers, you can play a crucial role in helping your tweens understand the complexities of these interactions.

Most parents have their own ideas about when they think it's appropriate for their children to start dating, and every child has his/her own timeline. When young people begin to show an interest in dating, many parents and caregivers worry that the next step is sexual exploration. But dating doesn't have to be synonymous with sexual activity. The truth of the matter is that dating is a great way for young people to develop new social skills.

Parents have different parenting styles. Some approach dating by setting very strict rules. Others take a hands-off approach, letting children make their own decisions without adult interference. However, many experts recommend that parents and caregivers address dating with a more middle-of-the-road approach. This includes sharing family values about friendship, dating and love; helping young people to develop communication, decision-making and assertiveness skills; establishing ground rules while also providing young people with options from which they can choose; and being available and open to ongoing conversations.



### Two Types of Love

To parents and caregivers of young people, it may seem that their children are always declaring themselves to be in love. While many parents and caregivers may be quick to call it 'puppy love,' it's possible that they are experiencing the real thing. As Sol Gordon, Ph.D., a professor and sexuality expert says, "If you feel yourself to be in love, you are." He acknowledges that there are hundreds of ways to experience love, which he describes as exhausting; and mature love, which he describes as energizing. Generally speaking, those experiencing immature love tend to be wrapped up in their thoughts and unable to function in a productive way, and need constant reassurance (like asking "Do you love me?"). And, while they often feel they can't live without the person, they don't seem to enjoy time spent with the person. These relationships are often based on the desire to be taken care of.

On the other hand, people experiencing mature love tend to have time and energy to do things they enjoy. They also have a relationship built on intimacy and other important healthy characteristics such as trust, honesty, respect, support, loyalty and shared interests. Mature love is an evolving process, growing over time. Talking with young children about the different types of love can help them decipher what they are feeling.

Before talking with your children, it's helpful to consider the messages you want to share.

### Messages for young people ages 9 through 12:

#### About Friendships

- Friendships help people feel good about themselves.
- Many skills are needed to begin, continue and end friendships.
- Friends respect and appreciate each other.
- Choosing friends well is important.

#### About Dating

- Many teenagers and adults have romantic relationships.
- Before people commit themselves to a relationship, they want to be friends, spend time together and get to know each other well.

#### About Love

- A person can show love for another person in many ways.
- People are capable of giving and receiving love.

### Qualities of Someone You Want to Date

Ask your tween to rate whether the following qualities in someone to date are healthy or unhealthy. Then, have your children rate the importance of each healthy quality using the following key: 4= very important; 3= important; 2= less important; and 1= not important

Someone who...

- is popular with a certain crowd
- respects you
- you feel closer to as time goes on
- tells you what to do
- you can talk with about your feelings
- doesn't pressure you into getting sexually involved.

Then, discuss the following questions:

- What other healthy qualities do you look for in someone to date? How important are these qualities? What qualities would you not want a boyfriend/girlfriend to possess? Why do you think dating might be important? And, what do you think people do on a date? If you aren't already dating, when, if ever, do you think you might want to start dating? Why?
- If you have started to date, does he/she possess the healthy qualities that are important to you?

Amy Levine, MA, is the Family Project coordinator at SIECUS, the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States. This article was adapted from SIECUS' Families Are Talking newsletters. For more information, visit [www.familiesaretalking.org](http://www.familiesaretalking.org).