**Dating in Middle School: Is It Worth the Risk?**

*Dating is part of growing up, but middle school dating can be risky. Here’s what you need to know to help your kids make the right decisions.*

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As many parents know, adolescents between the ages of 12 and 15 can be the most perplexing and frustrating humans on the planet. One minute they are happy with life; the next, they hate everything. It is a peak time of physical growth for boys and girls. /they eat and sleep a lot. Their appearance begins to be important to them so they brush their teeth and shower more. They may be developing cruses on classmates. These changes often drive behavior, especially when it comes to their burgeoning sexuality-so figuring out when and how to respond is like a high wire act for parents.

One reason that adolescence is such a complicated time is because the brain is still changing. As well, teens weigh risk vs. reward differently and more highly than adults. They respond more strongly to social rewards like a friends’ approval or disapproval. And most teens overwhelmingly prefer the company of their friends over their parents. So coupling an adolescent’s risk-taking with his love for reward plus the innate need to establish his own sexual identity can mean that previously innocuous behavior can lead, if unchecked, to high-risk activities. In fact, changes in an adolescent’s brain around puberty may contribute to an adolescent’s seeking out romantic relationships and expanding them into sexual relationships.

**What Does “Dating” Even Mean?**

So what is dating in middle school like? While most people think of dating as getting in the car, picking someone up, and taking them to the movies or dinner, that’s an adult’s definition. Adolescents don’t see dating that way. There is a whole ecology of teen relationships. The spectrum of informal to formal relationship is wide. Young people don’t have a lot of experience with relationships. There might be something unhealthy or abusive going on in the relationship and they think that it is normal or even romantic. They just don’t have a lot to compare it to. So within this murky relationship ecology you might hear your teen say, “I’m going out with . . . “ or “Jared and Ashley are hooking up.” Of course, the language varies depending on who you talk to, but in most cases, their relationships coupled with changes in adolescent development can impact not only kids’ ability to cope with these changes, but also how they perform in school and in other a activities. So keeping watch for these changes can be really critical for parents.

**What Does The Research Say?**

Studies show that students who reported dating since middle school demonstrated the poor study skills and were four times more likely to drop out of high school. Early daters were twice as likely to have consumed alcohol smoked cigarettes, and used marijuana. Students who never or hardly ever dated consistently had the best study skills and demonstrated the least risky behavior. Finally students who dated since middle school also experience greater risk for depression because of the impact of romantic breakups. Being in middle school, you sit with the same person from 8:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. very day. Many of these relationships are short then finished and the kid is doing someone else. In that sense, it can get depressing.

**What Can Parents Do To Help Their Kids Navigate Dating During Middle School?**

**Have a conversation about dating –**Have then early and often. The first time that you talk to your child about relationship shouldn’t be when there is a big problem.

**Guide, don’t control –** Guide your children in appropriate ways to interact with other kids. Work to compromise on limits to social interactions which might include curfew, adult supervision, acceptable locations, and what is meant by “dating,” the follow through.

**Monitor digital activity –** There’s no doubt that electronic influence on dating is pervasive. Let your child know that digital devices and social networking access are privileges and that they need to be respected. Be clear about your expectations for behavior on the Internet and with texting. Monitor your kid’s activities and their activity on the Internet. Parents should find out who they are spending their time with, check their Facebook page and monitor their activity on their Instagram account.

**Peer groups: the first responders** Peer groups play an enormous role in preventing violence and promoting healthy teen relationships. They are in a=essence, the first responder-the people who our children will look to before coming to us as parents. Help your child create a cluster of young people that are committed to engaging in healthy relationships.

**Practice makes perfect –**Have guided conversations with your kids about dating. Ask them questions like “What do you expect in a relationship?” “How do you want to be treated?” “How do you plan to treat others in a relations?” These conversations are like pre-thinking- we need to give them the skills and let them practice before there is a big problem.

**Spend time with your kids-** A parent who regularly spends time with their teen can pick up on change in mood or dress that might not pick up on when you are just passing each other in the morning.

*Adapted from Rebecca A Hill schoolfamily.com*