

# G A T E W A Y I S S U E 6

G A T E W A Y  
COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SERVICE

P A R E N T I N G I N T O T H E T E E N Y E A R S  
UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS AT URBANA-CHAMPAIGN COLLEGE OF AGRICULTURE



## Teen Friendships Are Important!

### Why Are Teenager's Friendships Important?

Many people view friendships as a luxury—that it really isn't a problem if a child has no friends. We believe that peer relationships are very important! Friends provide teens with a variety of benefits, including:

- Opportunities to learn about how to end a fight so both people stay friends. These skills are valuable throughout life. Adults need to know how to resolve conflicts with co-workers, spouses, family members, and friends.
- Recreation and companionship. Friends provide fun and excitement for teens! Teens report some of their most positive emotions when they are with their friends.

# friends

- Someone with whom teens can talk about their problems. In this role, friends can give advice on many topics—from views about which accessories go with an outfit to help in figuring out how to live with a new stepparent.
- Loyal allies in troubles that may come up at school or in the neighborhood. One trait that teens say is important in friends is loyalty. Although this quality is not as vital for younger children, teens value it highly.
- Stability during transitions or times of stress. This may be true particularly during the transition to a new school or to adolescence in general. Having a friend nearby who is going through the same trials can ease many anxieties about new situations.

## If Friends Provide Kids with All These Things, What Happens to Kids Who Don't Have Friends?

From following kids who have problems with peers over a long time, we know that kids without friends are more lonely and more unhappy. They also tend to have lower levels of academic achievement and lower self-esteem. As these kids get older, they are more likely to drop out of school and get involved in delinquent activities.

It is clear, there are good reasons for you, as a parent, to be concerned with your teen's peer relationships!



# ChAnGeS in Teen Peer Relationships

In the earlier parts of this issue, much of what we said applies to younger children as well as teens. But peer relationships change in several ways for your child in the teen years.

— **More time with peers.** You may notice that your teen spends more time with peers or on the telephone talking with them. This is common for many adolescents—although parents may find nonstop use of the phone irritating!

— **Less supervision needed when with peers.** Your teen is more mobile than younger children. He or she can ride the bus, walk to a friend's house, or ride a bike to meet friends. No longer does he or she count on you to shuttle him or her around. This new mobility means more time is spent with peers without your supervision. You also may find that your teen wants to interact with peers without always being under your direct supervision.

— **More contact with opposite-sex peers.** Another feature of your teen's peer relationships that will become obvious is the increased contact with opposite-sex peers. This may surprise you. Only a few months ago, your child may have been horrified at the thought of going to a party with both boys and girls, and now he or she wants to invite them to a party at your house!

— **Spending time in cliques.** During the early teen years, adolescents form cliques, small groups of friends, all of whom know each other well. Young teens may interact almost exclusively with this group of friends. The group helps shore up teens' confidence in themselves and gives them a sense of identity when they are just starting to sort out who they are.

— **Crowds.** The last feature of adolescent peer relationships that contrasts with those of younger children is the emergence of teen crowds. These groups become important in early and middle adolescence. These are large groups of teens who cluster together because they have characteristics that identify them with a particular crowd. You may recall crowds from your teen years. Many schools in the United States have these crowds: brains (kids who do well in school), populars (kids who are socially skilled and wear the "in" clothing), jocks (kids who take part in school athletics), druggies (kids who are involved with drugs and don't do very well in school), and nerds or nobodies (kids no one likes or wants to associate with).

Your teen uses crowds as a way of figuring out who to associate with. During the transition to middle school or junior high, your teen is faced with a larger number of peers with which to interact. No longer is he or she in a single classroom all day with 30 other students and one teacher. Crowds help your teen sort peers into groups of people he or she would like to spend time with versus those he or she wouldn't.

Both crowds and cliques also serve as a basis of self-definition, especially during early adolescence. Through choices in style of dress, language, or hangouts, your teen shows other people who he or she is (even though he or she may be struggling to figure out who he or she really is).



# Peer Pressure

## I Thought Peer Relationships Were Bad for Teenagers!

If you're like many parents, you may be a little worried about your teen's relationships with other teens. You have heard many stories about good kids getting in with the "wrong" crowd, and you do not want this to happen to your child. In thinking about this concern, we believe many parents have a couple of misperceptions about adolescent peer relationships.

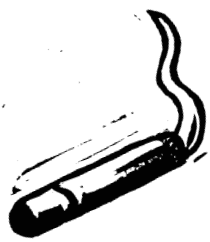
First, many parents (aided by the media) believe that peers are always a bad influence on teens. Research shows that peers can be a negative *or* positive influence. Peers can lead your child to drink alcohol or smoke. But peers also can push your child to finish high school or get a college education. The type of friends your teen chooses determines the type of influence that they may have on him or her.

Second, many parents believe that they always will be at odds with what their teen's friends believe. Again, the media furthers this myth. Many parents believe that the generation gap puts their teens at odds with them on key values and moral issues. Research in this area shows, though, that parents and peers hold many of the same values. Parents' moral values or opinions about long-term plans for the future are especially important to teens, and these same views usually are supported by peers. Where teens (and their friends) differ most often from parents is on matters such as taste in clothes, hairstyle, or music—which have few long-term effects.

## How Do I Help My Teen Deal with Peer Pressure?

According to teen experts Laurence Steinberg and Ann Levine, parents can do several things to help their teens avoid peer pressure.

- Encourage your teen's decision making at home. In an earlier issue of *Gateway*, we talked about ways to nurture your teen's decision-making skills. Teens who practice decision making at home are more likely to use these skills to make good decisions when they interact with peers.
- Encourage your teen to think about situations in which peer pressure may occur and how to respond. Make an effort to talk about times when your teen may face peer pressure. Help your teen think of ways to handle peer pressure to do something that is not acceptable. For example, if your teen's friends promote drinking, help him or her think of ways to maintain the friendship, or save face, but avoid drinking.
- Encourage your teen's relationships with peers who have values you approve of. Research shows that many parents do support these relationships. Parents say they encourage their teens to invite certain peers to special activities, go on family outings, or invite them to the house. Think of how you can promote these positive interactions. Remember, however, don't criticize your teen about choice in friends or forbid seeing a friend that you don't approve of. In many cases, loyalty to that friend can force your teen to defend the friend. (And the friendship may grow stronger!)



# Teen Dating

## What Should I Expect in my Teen's Relationship with the Opposite Sex?

As parents, you will notice that your son or daughter starts to become intrigued at some point with members of the opposite sex. There might be several reasons for this new-found interest, including changes in the young person's physical development, what the peer group expects, and (simply) curiosity.

Regardless of the reasons for this change, knowing some basic facts about opposite-sex interaction among 10- to 13-year-olds might allow you to help your child make this transition a positive one.

## When Do Most Teens Start to Date?

During the past several decades, the age that young people start to "date" in the United States has dropped. Girls are between ages 14 and 15, boys are 15 to 16. Teen dating can take several forms. Opposite-sex interaction can range from group activities, to group dating, to serious relationships among young people. Most early adolescents spend much more time in activities with mixed-sex groups, such as dances and parties, than they do in dating as a couple or in serious relationships.

In early adolescence, young people tend to date for fun and recreation. They also might see dating as a way to upgrade their social standing. For instance, a young girl might think it is cool to be seen with a popular boy. A boy might like to be involved with an attractive girl to impress his friends. Young people at this stage of development are more self-involved when it comes to dating, rather than being interested in building a relationship with another person.

## What Are the Positive Effects of Dating for Teens?

As a parent, it is important to consider the positive and negative effects of dating relationships.

- **Helps teens mature socially.** An understanding of affection and intimacy with others is needed in adulthood. Interacting with opposite-sex peers gives teens a chance to hone these skills.
- **Creates stronger acceptance by the peer group.** If other teens in the peer group are dating, there may be a stronger acceptance by the group for teens who are dating. However, keep in mind that this also could have negative effects for the adolescent who doesn't date or go to parties with the rest of the group. At this age, the peer group exerts much influence over a young person's actions and self-image.



# T e e n

## What Are the Negative Effects of Dating for Teens?

Some research suggests that more serious dating as a couple at an early age (younger than age 15) can have negative effects on a young person's adjustment, especially for girls. Information about boys and early dating is less conclusive, probably because young boys tend to spend time with girls their own age or in mixed-group activities. Because most young adolescent girls start dating older boys, they are particularly susceptible to the negative effects of early dating.

First, young girls might not be as socially mature as the boys they are with. Difficulties can arise in handling the expectations of an older, more mature boy, such as becoming sexually active at an early age. Second, while trying to fit in with an older crowd, an adolescent girl may be rejected by friends her own age. They may feel that she is no longer one of them. Third, because girls who are involved in early dating may focus on being attractive to boys (rather than on academic achievement), they purposely may not do their best at school—to make themselves more attractive to boys. Also, they may become so busy with dating that they don't spend enough time on school work to do well academically. Lastly, girls who are engaged in couples dating too early may be so absorbed in boys that they give up other hobbies and interests.

## How Do I Deal with My Teen's Dating?

As a parent, you may have mixed feelings when your son or daughter starts to date. Some issues may bother you that you may not have consciously considered. For example, adolescent dating can signal your child's first visible move toward sexual behavior. Also, you might be concerned with the physical safety of your teen as he or she begins to car date and venture off to new places. You also might remember the turmoil of teen dating and want to spare your child this heartache.

However, even though you have some valid concerns, it is important to keep in mind that opposite-sex interaction is a meaningful part of growing up. You, as a parent, can help make this activity a positive one.

## How Involved Should I Be in My Teen's Dating?

As a parent, you might find it hard to know how involved to become in your son or daughter's dating practices. An overly involved attitude might surface for a number of reasons. For instance, maybe the parents didn't date much as teens. Or, maybe they still are fixated with the thought of adolescent "romance." Regardless of the reasons, this involvement can place added pressure on already confused adolescents.



# D a t i n g

Some parents, too, are overprotective. Some even can seem fanatical in their views of dating. You will find overprotective parents who set unreasonable curfews for their children and then act like police when their teens return home from a date. These overprotective behaviors might affect the young person in one of two ways. The adolescent might totally shut down the desire for companionship or intimacy, or the teen could become even more intrigued with the opposite sex, which is supposedly off-limits.

Using authoritative parenting can have a very positive effect when it comes to your teen's dating relationships. As an authoritative parent, you encourage your son or daughter to be independent but still place limits on his or her actions. The verbal give-and-take you engage in with your teen is also useful when dating starts. For instance, if you do not agree with your daughter's choice of where to go on a date, you might state your case, listen to your teen's side, and then attempt a compromise that is satisfactory to both of you.

## Setting Guidelines and Showing That You Care

Because you know that relating comfortably with the opposite sex is a gradual process, you may want to help your teen long before he or she starts to date. Consider encouraging your son or daughter to entertain friends at home or to take part in well-supervised group activities with opposite-sex peers.

You also can help your adolescent prepare for dating by being open to discuss any issues or concerns that might arise. Your teen might ask you how to ask for a date or may be concerned about being very nervous on a date. If you show a willingness to discuss these issues, it should make your teen feel comfortable in coming to you as other issues of dating arise.

You also might talk to your teen about some of the courtesies of dating. Behaviors such as being polite and behaving in a gracious manner never go out of style.

Finally, caring parents set reasonable rules and guidelines for their teens. You and your spouse may want to talk over the following questions about your teen's opposite-sex relationships. Thoughtful decisions about these questions can help you protect your teen, while encouraging healthy relationships with the opposite sex.

**When will I allow my teen to go to mixed-sex activities or parties?**

**When will I allow my teen to start dating?**

**Will I allow my teen to date older peers? How much older?**

**Where will I allow my teen to go on those first dates?**

**How late will my teen be permitted to stay out?**

Dating can be confusing for teens. Your child needs all the sensitivity you can offer. This includes an understanding of how involved you should be in his or her new relationships, help with questions your teen has about dating or the opposite sex, and setting reasonable guidelines and supervision for opposite-sex interactions.



## Suggested Reading

*Experiencing adolescents: A sourcebook for parents, teachers, and teens*, by Richard Lerner and Nancy Galambos (eds.) (1984). New York: Garland.



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GATEWAY is a publication of the University of Illinois Cooperative Extension Service. Your comments and suggestions are welcome. Please address your correspondence to Nina Mounts, Department of Human Development and Family Studies, 905 South Goodwin Avenue, Urbana, Illinois 61801.  
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