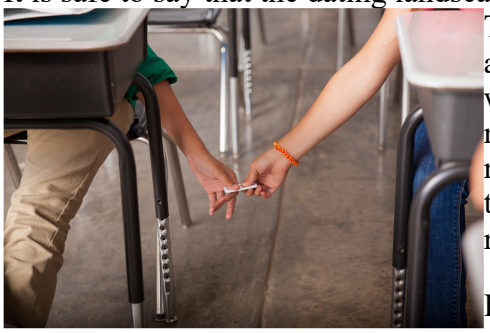
Equipping your kids to navigate their dating years

It is safe to say that the dating landscape has changed significantly since the time you were a teenager.



Today's kids are growing up online, with active social media lives and access to an incredible amount of information and images, many of which are sexual in nature. Teens may feel pressured to explore romantic relationships at a very early age, before they are emotionally ready or adequately prepared. This can be problematic because what they learn during these crucial years will set the stage for future adult relationships.

How can parents help prepare their tweens and teens for romantic relationships? The answer: information, information, information…and dialogue.

- **Have the sex talk early.** Most parents talk to their children about sex at 11 or 12 years old; yet by this point, most of today's kids know what sex is. A better way is to give age-appropriate information throughout childhood and later tie it into relationships.
- **Set expectations.** Discuss your ideas, values and expectations regarding issues such as sex, drinking, drugs or relationships from an early age.
- **Help them understand the power of peer pressure.** Ask your teen to think about what he or she would do if they were left alone. Ask questions such as, 'If nobody was drinking a beer, would you?' or 'If nobody your age was having sex, would you?' Let your child know that if he or she does not feel emotionally ready for a serious relationship, then it is okay to be the only one in his or her group who is not paired off.
- **Make them responsible.** Discuss birth control and safe sex. This can be a tough one for parents – and it is important to understand that your teens are not necessarily going to become sexually active immediately. However, when they do, they need to do so safely and responsibly, and understand the repercussions.
- **Use the media.** When a celebrity is involved in an abusive relationship or situation, use the corresponding news reports to start discussions with your teens about what constitutes healthy – and unhealthy – relationships. Talk about music videos, TV shows, movies and advertising that objectify women or promote violence as a means to control or solve problems.
- Make sure they are not neglecting friends. While your son or daughter may want to spend every waking minute with their new love, remind them not to abandon their other friends, since friends are, and will continue to be, an important part of their lives.
- **Explain the warning signs of unacceptable behaviour.** Teenagers largely have not yet developed the emotional maturity to handle adult relationships. This can sometimes lead to controlling, obsessive and even abusive behaviour by both genders. It is essential that your teens learn the warning signs of such unacceptable behaviour, and have the confidence to end the relationship immediately – regardless of their partners' promises to change.
- **Lead by example.** Experts agree that the way you and your spouse treat each other will strongly influence your child's future partner choices, how they will treat others and how they will expect to be treated. Try to be positive role models for your kids.
- **What happens online stays online.** Dating has gone digital. Thanks to social media, dating sites and smartphones, young people are meeting and communicating in cyberspace. While it may seem like innocent fun to send naughty texts ("sexting") or sexy "selfies" to your love's cell phone, if inappropriate images or messages find their way online, whether intentionally or accidentally, they can unleash vicious cyberbullying by people known and unknown. It is important to remind your kids that words and pictures remain online, somewhere, forever.

Teens often have trouble with what is or is not appropriate in the digital realm. A good guideline is to have them ask themselves if they would send this picture to you, their grandparents or even their teachers. If the answer is no, then they should not send it to their friends. A good rule of thumb: if in doubt, do not send it. Remind them repeatedly that what is posted online *stays* online, and discuss what your family's values and expectations are regarding the use of technology.

The most important thing we can do for our children is to instil in them the confidence and values they need to succeed in life. A child with good self-esteem and unshakeable personal ethics is less likely to be influenced by peer pressure or manipulative behaviour – either online or offline.