

Communication helps teens make better relationship choices  
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The holiday decorations have barely been put away (or have *not* been put away in some cases) and already we've moved into the Valentine's season. The stores have exploded in red and pink and florists are stocking up on flowers to be sent to loved ones.

While Valentine's Day has become a day to celebrate relationships, it can also be a source of stress, not only for adults but also for teens.

As children get older, the pressure to be involved in a romantic relationship increases. According to Kate Fogarty from the University of Florida, 25% of 12-year-old males and 27% of 12-year-old females reported having been in a romantic relationship. That number increased for 15-year-olds, to 49% and 56% respectively. So as you can see, not "everyone is doing it" but the majority are, especially as young people get older.

Dating is a very normal, and important, part of a teenager's development. Healthy dating experiences can help teens learn more about themselves; help them develop socially appropriate manners and behavior; and how to compromise, show empathy, and develop meaningful relationships.

As with everything though, there are potential pitfalls. Spending too much time with a romantic partner has been linked to poor school performance, delinquency, depression, and poor social skills.

Parents, however, can have a tremendous influence over their children's dating experience. Having an open, continuous dialog is the first step. Ted Futris and Bobbee Seldin with The University of Georgia, Family and Consumer Sciences Extension, offer the following tips on how to communicate with your children about dating:

**Be open and sensitive when talking with your teen.** Discuss your views and values and listen to what they have to say. Also, share your own dating experiences and your definition of a healthy versus non-healthy relationship.

**Keep up with your teen's schedule and activities and learn about their friends.** This shows your interest in their social life. In conversations with your teen, be a good listener and allow your teen to talk openly about their friends, dating partners, or any other aspect of their day they want to share. What you talk about is not as important as how you talk.

**Work together to form clear expectations and rules on dating.** Be flexible and willing to respond to your child's reasonable requests. Being too strict may cause your teen to act out and make poor decisions. Establishing clear rules with fair consequences will increase the likelihood that your children will make better choices.

*For more information about the 4-H program or other youth development issues, contact the Oconee County Cooperative Extension Office at (706) 769-3946 or stop by our office located behind the Oconee County Courthouse.*