

# Talking with Your Teen about Dating Safety

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**EDITOR'S NOTE:** This week's article is taken from our growing archive of articles and training bulletins for parents. More articles, like this one, are available through our new *Protecting God's Children® for Parents* program. The new Parents program will officially become available to dioceses on April 22, along with *Touching Safety™—Instructions for Educators, Catechists, Youth Ministers, and Other Caring Adults (Touching Safety)*. The *Parents* program is designed to make parents aware of the unique issues they face in helping to protect their children from sex abuse. *Touching Safety*, meanwhile, is our new sex abuse prevention curriculum for schools and religious education programs. Both programs are founded on the Church's teachings regarding the appropriate roles of parents and others in providing important relationship-related information to young people. *Touching Safety* is designed to help others support parents in the parents' role as the primary educators of their children. For more information on the *Parents* program, [click here](#). For more information on the *Touching Safety* program, [click here](#).

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Have you discussed sex, sexuality, and your personal values with your teen—including your values related to both sex-related and non-sex-related issues? Have you determined when your teen will be old enough or mature enough to begin dating? How can you make sure your teen will return safely when he or she leaves to go on a date? Besides worrying, what should you do next?

You can greatly assist your teen in the development of a healthy decision-making process by having ongoing discussions with your teen in a short “sound-bite” style of dialog. This is an effective way to provide your child with important safety information and to help him or her “think” about dating and other behavioral decisions within the larger context of values and morals.

Here are some questions for you to answer for yourself before you initiate a conversation with your teen:

- What are your values?
- What are your feelings and hopes for your child?
- What behaviors do you find *acceptable* and *unacceptable*?
- What would you like for your child to do if he or she becomes uncomfortable during a date?
- How will you respond if your teen does something that you consider unacceptable?
- What is a good choice, and how do you make a good choice?
- What is a bad choice, and how can you avoid making a bad choice?
- What are the consequences of bad choices?
- What kinds of positive and negative dating issues did you experience when you were your child's age?



- Who are the people your teen can trust, regardless of the circumstances?
- Who will always *be there* for your child, no matter what?

Even though these questions may appear to be straightforward, direct, and very simple, these topics are often unspoken and left as *assumptions* between parents and teens. Parents know how they think their teens *should* respond—and teens often don't think about these issues in advance. Once you are clear about your responses, the issues raised by these questions provide a great way for you to initiate a conversation with your teen about the larger topic of dating safety.

In my 12 years' experience leading seminars for couples engaged to be married, I have found through informally polling of participants that roughly 96 percent never had a discussion about sex or sexuality with their parents. In my experience, it also appears that the percentage is roughly the same among parents I train and teach. For whatever reasons, we agree that it is absolutely essential for parents to educate their children about sexuality and values, but very few of us do it.

Many parents rely on school programs to fully educate their children about sex and sexuality, but often these programs do not include the particular values and religious beliefs that each family holds true and dear. For your teen to be properly equipped to make good decisions—not only about relationships and sexual situations, but also about appropriate behavior in all human relationships—it is crucial that values and morality be applied to any sex education a child receives.

When talking about dating safety, you need to place the facts within the context of your family's values and moral responsibility. Knowing what to do and what not to do is one thing; knowing why is yet another. Discuss with your teen the things to consider when making a responsible choice.



Additionally, teaching them to understand and respect the distinctions between different individuals, cultures, ideas, and norms, can empower teens to see their *own individual worth* within a relationship and the need to have *their own beliefs* respected. This allows them to be open-minded, yet faithful, in knowing who they are, what their family values are, and how to manage their growing edge.

What is their *growing edge*? Everyone has a growing edge—the places in our life where we need to grow and understand more about ourselves and the world around us. Communication and education are the keys to keeping this growing edge as rich and rewarding as possible. It is so important for parents to have regular, frequent, and consistent conversations with their children and teens about the changing world in which we live—including a discussion of how these changes interface with the values and moral beliefs we hold to be true.

Parents are often faced with the challenge of redefining their own language and understanding the new terms and definitions that teens use as a part of their dating lingo. Parents need to ask their teens the definitions for different terms so everyone in the family can operate from a common understanding. Perhaps “dating” or “going out” does not mean the same thing today that it did when *you* were a teenager. Reviewing dating lingo with your teens can be a humorous way to segue into a serious conversation about dating safety.

Safety is an important part of anyone's dating life. Knowing what to do when the “unexpected” happens can save your teens from difficult or hurtful experiences. Here are some topics to help you initiate a discussion with your teen:

- How the teen can reach a parent or guardian when the teen is on a date.

- The family's rules regarding curfews.
- Meeting the teen's date and having the date's home telephone number.
- Knowing exactly where your teen is going along with the telephone numbers of those locations.
- Knowing whether there will be other adults present at parties and other activities.
- Giving your teen a cell phone for emergencies, and making sure he or she carries enough money to be able to call someone in an emergency or to arrange for alternative transportation if he or she chooses to abandon a date. A cell phone is a powerful tool in an emergency. Your teen can summon immediate help by calling 9-1-1 or a family member.
- Make sure you teach your teen the meaning of the word "no." Tell your child that he or she should bring to their date's attention anything that makes them uncomfortable. Make sure your teen understands that he or she has the right to say "no" and to be respected for exercising that right. Remember, when it comes to sex, "no" ALWAYS MEANS "no."
- The possible lifetime negative impact of today's choices and actions. Teach your children of all ages to walk away from anyone who suggests that it is okay to break the law—even for the purpose of a juvenile prank. This, for example, applies to underage drinking, smoking pot, taking any type of illegal or recreational drug, skipping out on a restaurant check, stealing anything of any value, damaging property in any manner, and hurting anyone. These things need to be discussed, repeated, and repeated some more. Your constant and consistent support—not nagging—on these points will help to reinforce your teen's personal investment in making good choices.
- Possessiveness in a relationship has nothing to do with love or respect.
- Verbal, emotional and physical abuse should never be tolerated.
- Teens should learn to trust their instincts and to stay away from peer pressure as often as possible.
- Teach your teen to be a "leader," not a "follower," by taking the lead in saying "no" to anything that he or she knows is dangerous.
- Emergencies are not always life and death issues. Teach your teen to call home whenever he or she feels uncomfortable or threatened. It may save your teen a great deal of trauma and, in some cases, it can save your child's life.
- Always have a "plan" to act on in any emergency situation.
- Tell your teen to always call you for help—regardless of the type of trouble he or she encounters. Your teen needs to know that you will help, even when he or she breaks the rules.
- If in danger, teens should "make a scene" to draw attention to themselves and to summon help.



By discussing these topics with your teen, you may prevent a terrible situation from happening. Plus, the conversation gives you an opportunity to share your values with your teen.

### Bottom Line:

Most importantly, perhaps, parents should always focus on the joy and fun of dating—and the positive and enjoyable experiences that result—when you engage in good, clean, wholesome fun! Dating adds a new element of excitement to a teen’s life. By having frank, open, and respectful conversations with your teen, you can encourage them to share their experiences with you without fear or guilt. This foundation of effective communication will extend far beyond the teenage years and the dating environment and will support a lifetime of happiness and joy with your young adult.