

Literature Review:
At What Age Should I Allow My Teenager to Start Dating?
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Abstract

This literature review will give parents some resources to help them decide when to allow their child to begin dating. The first part of this report will focus on the dating issue itself and other issues are that involved in this problem. The second part will deal with different resource tools are out there and how they can help the parents in the process of making the best decision.

At what age should I allow my teenager to start dating? This is a question that has plagued man for decades. Only decades? The concept of dating and even the modern view of adolescence are still relatively new. While adolescence in and of itself is most definitely not new, the modern concept of it is very different than previous centuries have seen. As such the modern concept of dating was relatively unknown prior to the 20th century.

That brings us back to our topic at hand. When should dating begin? In looking to answer this question there must first come an understanding that in reality there is no set age. Almost all resources, including the Christian resources, seem to say that this age differs from person to person. It is dependent upon a number of different factors of which I am bringing up only a few. One of the first things to look at is the maturity of the individual. Different people mature at different rates than others. There some are ready for dating earlier than others. The second factor to look at is the parent's mentality. What do the parents view as an appropriate time for their "child" to begin dating? The third factor is the purpose of dating. What does the young person see as the reasons for dating? Do they have the right mindset and mentality? Then fourthly is the factors of the types and frequency of dates. Is it a one-time group date to the chaperoned Jr. High prom, or is it a singles date to a movie on a Friday night?

When looking at the aspect of maturity there are a number of possible aspects to be introduced. First is the aspect of responsibility. Has the young person shown that they know how to be responsible? Can they be relied upon to be responsible in their use of money? Do they have a job? Do they get their work done? Will they be home by curfew? If a young person can not be responsible in the little things than it might not be

the best idea to give them the bigger responsibilities of making dating decisions. If the young person is responsibly mature, then giving them more freedom should be a natural process.

This brings up the second issue I want to focus on. That is the aspect of character. When dealing with the issues of relationships and dating it is very important to understand that the character of the individual will play a very important role in the dating process. Those who are immature in character tend to drift to others who are also immature in character. And when two immature people get together, there can be some very major problems. People tend to get used and abused. There come major regrets and hurts. However if the individuals are both very mature in character, then the dating process can be a vast learning and growing experience.

Within this context of responsibility and character is the aspect of peer pressure. There can be a great deal of peer pressure on a young person concerning whether they date or not, as well as how they should act while on the date. It is important to understand that these pressures are not just directly external. Peer pressure can be self inflicted as well as imagined. If a young person is not mature enough to handle the pressures whether real or imagined, external or internal that are constantly barraging them it can cause them to do things and act in ways that could not only hurt themselves, but others around them as well. Thus there needs to be a maturity in the young person to make the right choices.

There are many other things to consider in looking at the topic of maturity as well. For example: What about the use of the car? Are they responsible enough to handle using the vehicle? What about younger siblings? Your teens dating attitudes will

definitely have an effect on their younger siblings. These are just a few examples of many important maturity factors. One last factor to look at is that just because your teen is healthy doesn't necessarily mean their date is.

It is very important to consider the parent's view of the dating concept in making this decision. Ultimately it is the parents who have the responsibility and final say in when their child should begin dating. How parents view the dating relationship can be as different as how the teen themselves view it. Some parents view their child's dating decision as just that, their own decision. If their child wants to begin dating at twelve years of age then that's their decision. They are responsible to make their own decision. They have to learn sometime, why not the present. This seems to be a growing mentality in today's society and is very dangerous.

Another parental mentality is that dating is a learning process and a time of self-discovery. As such young people when they are mature enough to begin to handle it can date as they like. However freedom is not unlimited. There tends to be at least some rules to help the teens to keep themselves from getting into too much trouble. Each family will have different rules, but they are there. This is a view that is prevalent in both Christian, religious, and secular homes.

The third prevalent parental mentality is one of dating relationships being for the sole purpose of preparation for marriage. In this view the teenager is not allowed to begin dating until they are old enough to get married. Which means that they would not begin dating until they are at least 18 years old. This idea seems to have only taken hold in Christian and other religions homes.

There are other important factors to consider when looking at the dating mentality

through parents eyes. One issue that must be taken into consideration is the parent's moral view. If the parents have high moral standards, then that will affect when and how they allow their children to begin dating. Another issue that can have prevalence is the aspect of family involvement in dating relationship. If there is high family involvement in the couple's relationship, then that relationship will tend to have different values.

There are a number of different views that the young person can take to the dating relationship. Sometimes their relationship can follow their parent's views. More often it seems they are taking their own views while at least partially discarding their parents. Here are the common views that young people have on the relationship process. First of all teens tend to see relationships as a route to social status. If you have a good-looking, cool boyfriend, then you are more popular. If your girlfriend is hot, you tend to get more respect. In a community where social status is the most important thing, having the right girl or boyfriend can be everything.

Another modern mentality of dating is that of recreation. Now day's more and more young people are going out because it's fun. The concept of long-term commitment is not even a consideration. Dating is fun and that's all there is to it.

Like some parents, many teens see dating as a way of identity development. By dating they find out who they are and what they are looking for in a mate. Thus the only thing of real importance is getting what they can out of the relationship. Following in the wake of identity development is the mentality of sexual experimentation and discovery. Dating is a good chance for them to have sex with a good-looking girl or guy. It's a good way to lose that social stigma that seems to come from being a virgin.

Seeking companionship and running away from loneliness seems to be two of the

biggest reasons that young people begin dating. They think that if they are in a relationship or get married they won't be lonely any more. They believe that the other person will fill that giant hole that they have in their heart. They're seeking for another human being to do what only God can.

The last common reason for dating is the issue dealt with earlier of spouse selection. The young person wants to get married, have a family, and live happily ever after. It doesn't always work that way, but it is one of the best reasons for dating.

One of the key factors in the process of beginning to date is the type and frequency of dating. There are three basic types of dating; 1) Group dating, 2) Double/triple dating, and 3) Single dating. Group dating includes a large number of people in a very public setting. Usually the group date occurs at a special event like a concert or a school dance. This is generally the first type of dating that occurs, and only occurs occasionally. This gives the young people a chance to know each other and have fun in a less intimate setting. Double or triple dating is generally the second step in the dating process and happens more often than the group dating. This entails two or three couples that are friends going out together to dinner or a movie. This usually occurs later than group dating, and is more of an intimate thing. The last step in the dating process is single dating. This happens more often and on more of a regular basis than the two earlier types. It entails just one guy and one girl spending time together, going out, and staying in to watch television, etc. As the last stage this generally tends to begin later in the dating process and brings the couple into marriage.

What are some of the negative aspects of beginning dating too early? Early dating tends to limit social development. The exclusive relationships formed tend to

prevent those in the relationships from learning to build friendships with people of the opposite sex, and tends to suck up the time that the individuals would have spent with other people. Early dating leads to a mentality of intimacy without commitment. Going from dating relationship, to dating relationship, to dating relationship creates among other things, a mentality that intimacy with one person alone is not that important. This in turn can cause a great many problems in any future marriage relationship. As mentioned before, when young people begin dating too early, too many decisions are left to the immature young people with very little outside help. One of the most problematic issues resulting from early dating is that it builds the mentality of romantic love instead of true love. True love puts the other person above the self. Romantic love looks for what the relationship can do for me. When that happens, it sets the young people up for failure when they do get married. To get a better understanding of these negative aspects and how they work, check out the Dating for Mating (pp. 235-242) section in *An introduction to biblical ethics* by Robertson McQuilkin.

So what can parents do? There are a few things that a parent can do to prepare their children for the dating process. First and foremost, start early! Begin to talk to your kids about sex and dating before they hit puberty, because if you haven't by then, most likely they will have already begun to find out from other sources that are not quite so healthy. Set down rules and guidelines ahead of time. Make it clear what is allowed, when, and why. Make the decisions together. Don't just say "these are the rules...you will live by them whether you like it or not." Get them involved in the process.

Then once they have started dating be flexible. If the rules don't work or your teenager feels that they are responsible enough to handle things being different, then be

flexible to that change. Secondly, make sure you keep communication open. That is so much easier said than done, but just because it seems difficult doesn't mean that it's impossible. Thirdly, make it a family thing. Invite the boy or girlfriend over for dinner. Make them an important part of your lives. They may be hesitant about that at first. Once they get used to it though, that can be such a tool to helping them keep on the right track.

Some last things to remember. In order for a person to have a healthy relationship, they must first be a healthy person. If a person's walk with the Lord is not mature, then they won't be. Your child's walk with the Lord needs to be the first thing in their life. Is it?

If you don't talk to your child about dating and sex then who will? There are plenty of people and companies out there who want to "educate" your children in their way. Which means that they teach them whatever it takes to bring in the money, and as has been proven time and time again, sex sells.

Your children will learn more from what you do than what you say, so teach them well. True ladies are very difficult to find nowadays. Husbands if you aren't treating your wife and daughters like ladies, then you won't raise them up to be that way. The same goes for the boys. If you expect them to act like a gentleman and treat girls right, and exemplify that yourselves, then most likely they will.

Resources - There are a great many up to date resources out there that speak on the issue of parenting and adolescence, however there seems to be a lack of published book material on the issue of the appropriate age for dating. Most parenting books talk about the issues that teens are going through, how to help them through life's challenges,

and how to discipline and instill values into them. However there is very little on helping them and their parents to make the right choices about when and how to begin the dating process. Here are a few that may be of some help to you.

Adolescence (9th), by John W. Santrack, is a very extensive overview of the adolescent stage of development in today's time. This book goes gives at least a basic overview of all areas of adolescence and an adolescent's life. It deals with everything from a historical understanding of adolescence, to adolescent perspectives in different societies, to what pressures adolescents are dealing with, to the dating and romantic relationships. Over all it excels in explaining the in's and out's of adolescence.

However there are a couple of complaints concerning this book. The first complaint deals with the nature of the book. *Adolescence* is a scholastic book written more for graduate students, psychologists, therapists, doctors, and other professionals than for normal casual readers. As a result it is an excellent study tool with a lot of facts, theories, and useful information, however it can be very dry and slightly difficult reading. Something else to consider when reading this book is that it comes from a secular viewpoint. As a result, while it has a great deal to offer, the reader must recognize that it's underlying beliefs don't necessarily fit with Biblical morals and standards.

However, do not let those complaints stop you from taking advantage of *Adolescence*. It has much to offer in helping to better understand today's adolescents. In chapter 7 they deal with the concepts and issues of peers, and within that chapter they deal with dating and romantic relationships (pp. 235-241). The section starts out with an introduction then immediately goes into the functions of dating. This is followed by sections on the age of onset and frequency of dating, going steady, male and female

dating patterns and scripts, what attracts adolescents to each other, romantic love, and the developmental construction of romantic relationships.

The sections on functions of dating and age and onset of dating were the most helpful. Functions of Dating looks at eight reasons for and functions of dating. While this does have a secular spin to it, it does help to understand the mentality that today's adolescents have on the dating process. Age of onset and frequency of dating gives some basic statistics as to the ages at which dating begins as well as how often.

There is also a chapter on sexuality that could be helpful in researching this topic, however as a warning, this chapter really shows the secular view mindset of the book. All in all this is an excellent book in portraying a complete picture of adolescence.

The book *Parents & teenagers* by Jay Kesler with Ronald A. Beers is a book of articles dealing with many life issues concerning parenting and teens. There are many excellent articles throughout the book that can be very helpful in dealing with the issue of teens and dating.

There are positive and negatives in using this book to research this question. On the positive side this book has a Christian orientation and focus. It's copyrighted to Youth for Christ®, and the authors look at the concepts of dating from a Godly perspective. There is a focus on spiritual growth as well as the dating process. Another advantage that this book has is that it is simple to read. The articles are short, simple, and easy to copy and read on the run. They are not academic and yet they are still very concise.

There are a couple of negative aspects. First of all, because the articles are short and quick, there comes an issue of lack of depth. If you find something that you read

really interesting, and you want to get into it, you will have to go elsewhere. The other negative aspect of this book is its age. It was published in 1984 making it a little old. So while the information in the book is very useful, it is not necessarily up to date on all the cultural issues. That's not to say that the information is outdated. The information is as relevant today as it was the day that it was written. However, in order to find this book you will have to either get it used, or find it in the library.

There are a number of very helpful articles in this book and most articles have smaller mini-articles formatted within the spaces of the larger articles. Some of the articles to look at in this book are "At What Age Should Teens Date?" by David Veerman (pp. 616-618), "Limiting a Teen's Social Activities; Is It Necessary?" by Glandion Carney (pp. 564-565), "Helping Your Teen through the Dating Game" by Josh McDowell (pp. 609-612), and "Preparing Your Teen for Marriage", by Howard G. Hendricks (pp. 623-625). However, do not limit your interest solely to these articles. There are many more that may help you even more than these.

I was very surprised in looking over Dr. Dobson's materials that he had relatively little material on this issue. He had a number of books on parenting, adolescents, and dealing with teens dating, but there was not very much directly relating to when to allow dating.

I did find some things in a book by him called, *Dr. Dobson answers your questions*. This book is like *Parents & teenagers* in that it is a book of articles answering questions. Unfortunately the *Complete marriage and family home reference guide*, which is the successor to *Dr. Dobson answers your questions* does not have anything on this topic.

In *Dr. Dobson answers your questions* Dobson answers 423 commonly asked questions concerning issues of marriage, parenting, and the Christian faith. However in researching this book, I only found two articles that helped to deal with this subject. The first “I have a fourteen-year-old daughter, Margretta, who wants to date a seventeen-year-old boy. I don’t feel good about letting her go, but I’m not sure just how to respond. What should I say to her?” In this article, Dobson lays out a basic plan for introducing the dating process including steps taken to go from group dating to single dating.

In the second article Dr. Dobson deals with a little bit of a different topic. The question and title of the article is “What do you do when you child, at age eighteen or twenty, makes choices quite different from what you had hoped?” In this article he talks about letting the child go to make their own choices once they reach a certain age. It is important to recognize this in the process because eventually the teenager will have to make their own choices concerning when, how, where, and who they should date. That’s not to say that all parents should be letting their children be completely free about all aspects of dating. It’s just a reminder that soon enough they must be let go of in order for them to make their own decisions in life.

The final book that focused on in this paper is *An introduction to biblical ethics* by Robertson McQuilkin. This is an ethics book with some excellent insight into the issues of teens and dating. It helps to bring in some insight that was much needed, but that none of the other books even mentioned.

The section on Dating for Mating (pp. 235-242) deals with many important issues that should be considered in the dating process. First of all it deals with the differences between dating in the western world and arranged marriages in the eastern world with the

pros and cons of each. McQuilkin then discusses the issue of the effects of dating too soon. This is an important topic which should be more often discussed, but that is too often ignored. He brings up the issues of intimacy without commitment, how early dating leaves key decisions to someone who is not ready for them, the fact that it can lead to limiting social development, as well as many others. After this he brings up the issues of distractions in the dating relationship, which prevent true discovering and relating. The distractions mentioned being physical attraction and the concept of “falling” in love. Next he deals with the obvious issue of sexual relations before marriage. Finally he comes to the final issue of the engagement.

Over all this book has the best insight into what things must be considered before deciding when and how a teenager is to begin dating. If you only read one of the recommended books on this issue, make it this one. It brings to light what the others will only hint at.

There are a number of other Internet related resources on this subject. However take caution in using Internet sources. Some so-called teen advisors will give completely inappropriate and inaccurate facts and information. For example one place that I looked at said that 99.9% of young people begin dating at the age of 12, and recommended that to all teens.

However there are a number of very good Internet resources. Here are a few. Iowa State University hosts a website called *Deciding about early dating*. This is an excellent resource talking to parents about the issues of allowing their children to begin dating, and what some of the problems are that occur when dating begins too early. The web-address is; <http://www.extension.iastate.edu/Publications/PM15471.pdf>.

Another really good Internet source is an advice column by a Christian organization called Crosswalk.com. This is an advice column focused towards teen girls. In this article the author brings up the question of why the teenager wants to date, and deals with the issues brought up in that. The best advice given is at the beginning where Christy Shipe states that the parent's rules take precedence. If the parents say, "no dating," then that's what needs to be done. The web address for this site is http://teens.crosswalk.com/partner/Article_Display_Page/0,,PTID74457|CHID198784|CID941662,00.html.

This third website is put out by University of Minnesota and gives a very basic overview of some things dealing with the dating scene. Some of its underlying views don't necessarily fit with the Biblical model, however they bring up the issue of abusive relationships and some of the signs that someone may be in an abusive relationship. The web address is; <http://www.extension.umn.edu/familydevelopment/components/DE7309i.html>.

There are many other excellent websites out there pertaining to this subject. Just remember in looking at them all, that while many have a lot of excellent things to say, most don't have a Biblical perspective. So as you read them, make sure that take out the nuggets of wisdom while discarding the information that stands against Biblical truth. And remember just because it is published on the Internet or by a reputable business does not necessarily mean that their information is accurate or helpful.

Resources

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