

A LOT OF TEENS  
DATE, BUT DO  
THEY KNOW  
HOW TO BEHAVE  
RESPONSIBLY IN A  
RELATIONSHIP?

DATING

101





There's a lot  
to think about  
when you're in a  
relationship.

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any of you reading this story have had a boyfriend or a girlfriend. If you haven't, you likely know a teenager who has been in that type of relationship. Dating is common among teens.

But dating is a broadly defined term. For some of you, it could mean hanging out with different types of crushes for fun. For others, it might mean picking one person and developing a more-intimate connection. If this sounds confusing, the truth is dating often can be hard to figure out.

Fortunately, *Choices* is here to help sort things out. We talked to Annie Fox, author of *The Teen Survival Guide to Dating and Relating*, about what it takes for teens to behave responsibly when it comes to romance. Together we've come up with ideas on how to navigate dating—the healthy way.

•**Be a friend.** Fox says that it's important to remember the word friend is part of the words "boyfriend" and "girlfriend" for a reason. Why? Well, your significant other may be cute and, perhaps, even really handsome or beautiful, but hopefully you've chosen to date each other because you enjoy spending time together, have similar interests, and value each other's company. In other words, looks are certainly important, but having a solid friendship is the key to making a relationship last.

•**Communicate.** How do you know that you've connected with someone? One sign is if you feel comfortable talking to him or her about stuff that matters to you whether it's your taste in music, your political views, or your needs in a relationship. "The whole point is to get to know and understand the other person while giving him or her lots of opportunities to get to know and understand you," Fox says.



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# personal responsibility

Remember that communication works two ways—*listening* as well as talking. “You can’t get to know someone if you don’t talk with them and listen to what they have to say,” Fox says.

Granted, communicating your thoughts and feelings may seem awkward and even scary at first, especially if you’re not used to doing so with a romantic interest. Fox advises teens to go about doing so gradually, but to keep the dialogue going. “The more you do it, the more you and your boyfriend or girlfriend will learn to trust each other based on your ability to talk honestly and listen with respect,” she says.

Establishing good communication also helps when arguments occur. Just because you really like someone doesn’t mean you won’t ever disagree with him or her. But learning how to talk to each other effectively will enhance the ability of both of you to resolve any differences amicably.



•**Take your time.** Being in a relationship can be exciting, but don’t let that excitement overwhelm you. The quickest way to scare someone you’re interested in dating is to come on too strongly. Instead, get to know your potential partner and see if his or her interests coincide with yours. “Set high standards for yourself when it comes to deciding if this person you’re crushing on is actually good girlfriend/boyfriend material for you,” Fox says.

Keep in mind that it’s OK to decide not to date someone exclusively. Maybe you’re not ready to make that commitment or are more comfortable being around the person in group settings. That’s fine; just make sure that you communicate your stance to the person in order to avoid any misunderstandings.

•**Let your parents know what’s going on.** You’re not a

little kid anymore and you want more freedom from Mom and Dad. That’s understandable but keep in mind that dating isn’t just a big change for you, it’s an adjustment for your parents too. They may be reluctant to let you date. Whatever their stance is, it’s crucial to keep them informed about what you’re doing. You might be surprised at the support they give you—if you’re honest with them.

•**Keep your friends.** There’s no rule that says starting a romance means you have to dump your friends. In fact, it’s healthy to maintain those friendships because your pals will help you maintain a balance in your life by relieving some of the pressure from your new romance. “Real friends have been there for you for a long time,” Fox says. “That’s



**It’s normal to have disagreements with your significant other, but couples who constantly argue shouldn’t be together.**

why you know you can count on them and they can count on you.”

Following our advice should help you navigate the world of dating. But remember that your views and feelings about romance will likely change as you grow older. Why? Because your body is going through a lot of physical changes, which affect your emotions. “You’re still a work in progress—still growing into a mature, adult version of yourself,” Fox says.

So our final tip is to keep in mind your own needs when it comes to dating. That doesn’t mean you should act selfishly toward your boyfriend or girlfriend. Obviously, there are two people in a relationship and you need to be aware of your partner’s feelings. But it’s important to understand what you want and need from a relationship too. “Hopefully, as you date, you will continue learning about yourself, your needs, and what you have to offer in a relationship,” Fox says. “You’ll also learn about how relationships work and what levels of honesty and respect are absolutely essential.”

—Alexis Burling

## A WORD ABOUT...

Many teens in a relationship feel pressure to have sex. You should know that succumbing to that temptation could result in pregnancy or a sexually transmitted disease. The only sure way to avoid these pitfalls is to be abstinent. If you’re in a relationship and your partner is pressuring you to have sex, you should reconsider the relationship.

## time TO BREAK UP?

Read the statements below. Then write “never,” “sometimes,” or “always” in the spaces provided.

**1** When you’re together, it’s hard to find things to talk about, and you’ve been avoiding text messages, e-mails, and phone calls.

**2** Your relationship makes you unhappy more often than it makes you happy.

**3** You feel pressured to do things that violate your moral values.

**4** When you’re together, you don’t feel that you’re worthwhile.

**5** You feel isolated from your friends, family, or activities that you enjoy.

**6** Your boyfriend/girlfriend abuses alcohol or drugs.

**7** You’re only dating this person because of his or her looks.

**Scoring:** Give yourself 1 point for every “never” answer, 2 points for every “sometimes” answer, and 3 points for every “always” answer. An explanation of the scoring system is in the Teacher’s Edition.

## GETTING DUMPED

Romance among teens often fizzles. If your significant other breaks up with you, here’s how to handle it.

**1 FEEL THE PAIN.** Allow yourself to cry, listen to sad music, or watch weepy DVDs. The sooner you deal honestly with your emotions, the sooner you’ll get over the breakup.

**2 TAKE CARE OF YOUR BODY.** The sadness that comes with being dumped is often accompanied by a loss of appetite or an urge to numb the pain by indulging in alcohol or drugs. But punishing your body will just make things worse.

**3 TALK IT OUT.** Find a sympathetic ear to hear your woes. It could be a friend, sibling, or parent.

**4 KEEP THE PEACE.** You may be tempted to publicly vent about your ex. But fueling ill feelings will just keep those emotions around and delay your recovery from the breakup.

**5 REFLECT.** Think about what went wrong with the relationship. By learning from past mistakes, you’ll be better prepared to deal with romance in the future.