

Parenting *ideas*

INSIGHTS

Building parent-school partnerships

WORDS Lakshmi Singh

Boyfriends, girlfriends or just friends?

With the early sexualisation of kids comes the possibility of attraction and an ensuing relationship. But what constitutes a 'relationship' and when is the most appropriate time to embark on one? Lakshmi Singh explores the concept of younger kids having a boyfriend or girlfriend.

Is it a case of taking on too much too soon, or are kids of today ready to handle boyfriend/girlfriend relationships at a younger age?

Anecdotal evidence suggests that the answer to this question depends on the family. In some families, it is 'acceptable' to start a relationship as soon as childhood 'puppy love' kicks in. In others, relationships aren't acceptable until the late teens – or even the thirties!

The research is also mixed. While some research suggests that relationships between younger adolescents involve more costs than benefits, there is also evidence that tween and early-teen relationships can be useful.

The right age

The 'right age' depends on what the young person feels constitutes a romantic relationship and what having a boy/girlfriend actually means for them says Jocelyn Brewer, registered psychologist at www.jocelynbrewer.com.

"In upper-primary school and early-high school this can simply mean a recognition of mutual 'liking' (and I don't mean liking on Facebook!) and a sense of awareness of

having 'feelings' towards someone, who kids then communicate this to and may choose to give each other a title of boy/girlfriend."

In older years, these relationships tend to take on a more 'serious' nature and begin to embrace some of the concepts central to adult relationships, including intimacy, sexual exploration, trust and sharing, she says.

Knowing when it's okay to start a relationship and go on 'real dates' can be tricky, particularly for a young person who is going out with someone older than them, says Wendy Protheroe, General Manager at Kids Helpline.

"If they start going on dates too early, they might find themselves in sticky situations, such as their date wanting to start having sexual contact that they are not ready for," she says.

Parents may be tempted to impose a blanket ban on dating on hearing of such possible consequences. However, when parents understand that developmentally-appropriate relationships can assist in emotion management, improved communication skills and interpersonal skills, they can help accept and support the onset of the dating stage.

In addition, parents can feel a sense of 'safety' by implementing some stepping stones and taking advantage of technology. For instance, instant communication and video calls may be used to supplement interactions – they need to be limited to long-distance relationships.

While these kinds of early relationships might not encompass the full range of experiences a 'real-life' relationship might entail, they can be useful for kids who are shy or introverted, says Brewer.

However, interactions based on technology alone may change the dynamic of these sorts of relationships, making them somewhat like real life. Brewer warns that such relationships can lack depth and that a child's ability to gauge whether they know someone deeply can be flawed.

Regardless of the form of any of these relationships, Protheroe says that there really isn't a 'right' time to start dating.

"The main thing is not to feel pressured to start going out before they are ready."

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Factors determining 'readiness'

Maturity, parental attitudes, culture and self-determination are some major factors in determining whether a child is ready to start a relationship, says Brewer.

"Many children of migrants are restricted from having relationships for various reasons. In some Asian families it might be that there is an expectation of school success and focus. In some Middle-Eastern families it might be around cultural and religious expectations of how men and women relate and interact and the trajectory of relationships (quite quickly to marriage)."

A family's openness and previous experience with youngsters in relationships (e.g. siblings or other family members) can also influence both the parents' and the child's readiness.

"[Other family members'] values can be useful to reflect on and to use when working out what fits with the family's values and expectations," says Brewer.

Sometimes a child's motivation for a relationship may not be driven by their feelings, but be affected by their reaction to family rules (revealing a rebellious streak) or a desire to achieve a particular status amongst peers.

"Sometimes [the relationship is about achieving] a 'trophy' title – kids want to know that they can get someone to declare a union or connection more than actually knowing how to be in a relationship!"

The gender of the child can also sometimes contribute to how ready they feel. Brewer says she has worked with several young women who have a self-imposed 'no relationships' rule.

"They recognise the time and emotional investment which can be required to have a 'romantic other' and have a sense of wanting to prioritise their study over what is sometimes seen as very emotionally turbulent and unknown."

How should parents speak to kids about these relationships?

Kids need to be given the space to work out how their own personal values and feelings fit in with the rest of the world. As such, the framing of conversations about relationships is important, says Brewer.

"If there is a specific 'serious' message that parents want to deliver – and ensure it's received with appropriate listening – then setting a specific time to meet and having a bit more of a formal chat is something I recommend. Parents shouldn't spring these 'big chats' on kids in the hallway or when they're sleeping in on a Saturday morning."

More general conversations can be initiated using examples from real life, the media and in relation to the young person's situation, she says.

Knowing what young kids may be curious about with regards to relationships can also help start conversations.

Protheroe says that kids call Kids Helpline to talk about all sorts of relationship issues: seeking information about relationships; concern for a friend's relationship; advice on when to start dating; wanting to start a relationship; how to tell someone that they like them; and questions about relationship maintenance and closure.

Sometimes, kids don't or can't talk to their parents about these issues and that is where approaching a counselling service can provide extra support.

"Having a private place where young people can talk through their concerns with someone who doesn't know them personally, but is a qualified counsellor, is what Kids Helpline is all about," she says.

With or without the knowledge and support of their parents, a counsellor can reflect a young person's feelings, normalise them as appropriate and validate the challenges of navigating relationships. The advice given by counsellors involves

running through options and possible consequences, exploring the resources and support the young person has, as well as helping them tap into their inherent beliefs and values, she says.

Brewer's tips on what key messages kids should receive from parents:

- Relationships are/should be safe places to share feelings and experience trust.
- Good/solid relationships require communication and agreement, and sometimes a level of compromise to make them long lasting.
- Sometimes, despite best efforts/intentions, relationships don't always work out, and sometimes that's nothing to do with you not being worthy/valuable/lovable/good enough.
- Communicating your needs in a relationship is very important. It is important to establish what your expectations are and what you are seeking – and this conversation might require revisions and ongoing work as a relationship develops and grows.
- Sometimes relationships are an emotional storm for young people and you might need guidance on how to navigate the emotions, expectations and interactions.
- When conflict occurs in adult relationships it's important not to hide it away from kids. Demonstrating how to resolve conflicts can empower kids to do so in their own relationships.

Sources:

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