

How to cope when your teenager starts dating

A quick guide on how to handle things when your teenager starts dating and brings home a new boyfriend or girlfriend

By Dawn Stannard

As responsible parents we all want the best for our children. We try to protect them from all that can go wrong and hope that wherever they go and whatever they do, they are safe and happy. As they grow older they will be faced with making more and more choices and this includes with whom they wish to share time and affection.

As your teenage daughter starts to take an interest in boys, you will be faced with some quite mixed emotions when being introduced to them for the first time. Of course, you'll realise that you must take a step back and remain slightly on the sidelines as your daughter starts dating. Whatever you feel inside, you'll be desperately trying not to

take over in the quest for a young man who you feel is worthy of her. This article has been written specially for dadcando by Dawn Stannard, a single mother with a 16 year old daughter. However, swap the genders around and the advice is just as sound for dealing with your teenage son's new girlfriend.

Don't judge a book by the cover

Try not to make any rash judgments or determine the new boyfriend's suitability just by the way he looks or dresses, even if he has more piercings than you and hair the colour of newly mown grass. Fashion moves on, and in any case, appearance is something that teenagers like to experiment with. Find out what his real qualities are, get to know him as a person, and make sure you get his name right.

Be yourself

When meeting your daughter's new boyfriend you will want him to like you and you will be trying to create the right impression. As a dad you might feel the urge to be competitive, as a mum, you'll probably want to impress him with your lovely home or your talented family members. Don't forget that he also wants to create a good impression himself and is probably nervous at the prospect of meeting you. So just relax and be yourself, you don't need to prove anything to him, remember you're the parent, so no showing off (dads) and no flirting (mums), however nice he is.

Include him in plans that involve the family or your daughter

Ask them both out on the occasional family outing, and every so often include him in plans involving the rest of the family. Make an effort to help him feel included when he's around. Get him to help you prepare a special meal for example, or take charge of the barbeque. Find out the sort of things he likes and what he doesn't, but steer clear of interrogating him, especially if you are left to spend any time chatting with him alone.

Give them space

This is perhaps one of the most difficult issues in which to achieve the right balance. Your daughter will want to spend lots of time alone with her new boyfriend. This can be a daunting prospect for any parent as the pair climb the stairs to her bedroom to listen to music or watch a DVD. Notwithstanding the rules that you have in your house, it is unlikely that you will be able to chaperone your daughter at all times, and so you will probably have to just trust that they will behave appropriately. If your daughter is at home with him, then you know she is safe and where she is. Overcome the temptation to hassle her

when she is spending time alone with her boyfriend, because if you do, they only will spend more time together somewhere else.

Make your expectations and your house rules clear beforehand

Prior to meeting your daughter's boyfriend for the first time, you should discuss with your daughter what your expectations are of them, so that you are both clear on what you agree is acceptable behaviour, and what is not. This also gives you the opportunity to discuss any logistics of the visit (or stay, if he is staying overnight) that she may not wish to discuss in front of him. If you feel it appropriate, however, you may want to continue part of the conversation to include him in some aspects of it once he has arrived; i.e. the time by which you expect your daughter to be home, the fact that you don't allow smoking in the house, or the sleeping arrangements, for example. If you discuss your expectations in an adult way with both of them, explaining your reasons, it then becomes their responsibility to make sure that they behave as expected.

Never discipline, belittle or argue with your daughter in front of her boyfriend

It is a grave mistake to argue or enforce discipline aimed solely at your daughter in front of the new boyfriend. Apart from making him feel extremely uncomfortable, your daughter is likely react badly or act out by showing off in order not to lose face in front of him. Deal with any issues at a later time when you can sit and talk calmly about the problem, rather than conducting an emotionally charged showdown in his presence.

Also, despite the fact that it may seem like a great idea to have a bit of fun at your daughter's expense by showing the new boyfriend pictures of her as a naked toddler, or that bit old video of her as a gap toothed eight year old in the school choir, do not be tempted to do so, unless you have her express permission beforehand.

Do not compare him to her previous boyfriends

Whatever you thought of the previous boyfriend (perfect or dreadful), keep it to yourself. You are in a no-win situation, in two weeks you might be welcoming the old boyfriend back into your home, or the new boyfriend could go on to be your son-in-law. Either way, your comparison is unlikely to be beneficial. Accept that your daughter has her own relationships to make and

break. Offer advice, only if asked for, and even then with caution and integrity (unless you believe that there is the real possibility of danger in the new relationship).

Do not compare her relationships to any of yours

As adults and parents we have the benefit of an outside perspective on our children's relationships. We also have the experience of a number of casual and serious relationships in the past, some of which will have been successful and productive, while others have been dysfunctional or plainly disastrous.

You may feel therefore, that you are perfectly placed to spot all the potential pitfalls waiting around the corner of your daughter's new relationship, and that she would benefit from your advice on how to handle things. Do not compare your past relationships with hers. No two relationships are ever the same, and it is by the process of trial and error that teenagers learn what they really want from their relationships and what makes them happy. It is hard to learn by your mistakes but these are lessons that are not forgotten. If your daughter wants your opinion or the benefit of your experience, there is no doubt she will ask you for it.

Never ask her to choose between you and him

As your daughter grows up and becomes more independent of you and the security of her home, she will want to spend more time with other people. This can be a difficult time for you as you may feel neglected or even jealous that her affection is being taken away from you by her new boyfriend.

As a new experience and as part of growing up, it is natural that your daughter may prefer to spend time with him rather than you and the rest of the family. Despite the fact that you may feel hurt, do not put your daughter in the situation where she is forced to make a choice between him and you. She loves you unconditionally as her father (or mother) and is just discovering a whole new set of emotions and other types of love, which she really needs to experience to have a happy and fulfilling life as an adult.

Single parents (but especially single dads) have a real head start here, because over long years of visiting and staying access, they have learned that affection is shared and how to be generous hearted with their affection when it's needed. So at this crucial stage in her life, be

supportive to your daughter, and not possessive of her time or affection.

Be supportive if things fall apart

Relationships can end as suddenly and unexpectedly as they begin. At some point your daughter may find herself in the unfortunate and upsetting position of 'being dumped' and she may well feel like her world has fallen apart.

If you have been approachable and supportive through her relationships then she'll know that you'll also be there for her in her hour of need and you'll be an invaluable help to her at this point. However, it's usually completely unproductive to voice your anger and indignation with regard to the (now) ex-boyfriend's behaviour, and calling him names will be the last thing your daughter really wants to hear however angry she seems.

If she is upset, then bear in mind that this is because she still has feelings for him and that any hurtful comments you make about him are likely to be painful to her. Do much more listening than talking, help to restore her confidence and gently provide a glimpse of the wider picture, but give constructive advice only when asked for. Bear in mind, that tomorrow she may patch things up with the ex-boyfriend and you will be left trying to undo any derogatory remarks you made about him in the heat of the moment, when she brings him home for tea the very next day.

So when you are next confronted with the prospect of meeting your daughter's latest boyfriend, be happy for her enthusiasm and elation. Let her learn how to judge for herself, the type of person she is compatible with, and with whom she can build a solid, loving relationship. Take a step back, (and sometimes a deep breath) and trust her to do the right thing. But if she should fall, be ready with the parental safety net ready to pick her up, dust her off and stand her on her feet again, ready for her next affair.