

# Communities That Care | ‘Straight Talk’ will share tips on talking to your teen about healthy relationships

By Amelia McGinnis

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In my office the other day, I was discussing the 2004 movie, “13 Going on 30.” In this movie, the main character wishes that she was “30, flirty and thriving,” and overnight she becomes a 13 year old in a 30-year-old body.

The naivety that is portrayed throughout the movie as this 13-year-old from the late 1980’s tackles issues of dating and romance in the early 2000’s is endearing and comical. The discussion in my office, however, was the unfortunate realization that most 13-year-olds are no longer that naive when it comes to dating.

It seems as though 13 is the new 16. Television shows introduce tweens to themes of dating at an early age. Social media and texting give children more freedom and less parental guidance as they navigate their own social identity.

Many parents don’t know how to have conversations about healthy relationships with their children. The risk of not having these conversations may be that our children’s only information comes from television or other peers. As a parent, how does one know when a child should be allowed to date? Moreover, how do we help guide our kids to make healthy decisions regarding relationships and share our own values in ways that they can hear us?

There are a variety of things that can be helpful to parents when they are trying to navigate this issue. Practical information is one of them. Understanding developmental milestones and the differences between preadolescence and adolescence can be helpful in deciding what is age- or developmentally appropriate for your child. Often this kind of information can give parents the confidence they need to make rules and decisions that balance freedom, trust and safety.

It is my belief, however, that information from a book or expert is not the only or most important part of the equation. One of the toughest questions I pose to parents is this: “What are your values around dating and relationships?” Often parents can tell me what they don’t want their child to do. Many parents talk about rules. But talking about values and beliefs can be challenging. Then I ask the ultimate parent-stumping question, “Why do you believe that?”

In my experience, the answer to the question isn’t what is most important. What is important is that you have an answer to the question — an answer that fits for you and your family, one that you can get behind and have meaningful discussions about. I believe once that is figured out, the

rest comes more easily. Learning how to talk about these things can happen once you know what you want to say.

Learn how to broach topics with your child at the next Straight Talk for Parents Series presentation, “Tips for Talking To Your Teens About Healthy Relationships” on Nov. 19.

Amelia McGinnis is an outpatient and neurofeedback therapist with Individual and Family CHOICES Program. This weekly column is a collaboration of Centre County Communities that Care serving Bald Eagle, Bellefonte, Penns Valley and Philipsburg-Osceola area school districts, and Care Partnership: Centre Region Communities that Care serving the State College Area School District.

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