

Kiss and Tell

What Teens Say about  
Love, Trust, and Other  
Relationship Stuff



The National Campaign  
to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy

It's a relationship world.  
Seven in ten teens say that  
most of their friends are in  
romantic relationships.

TEENS TEND TO GET ADVICE ON ALL KINDS OF ISSUES from parents, teachers, and other adults but rarely are young people *themselves* asked to describe their own thoughts and beliefs. We hope to balance the equation just a bit with *Kiss and Tell*, a snapshot of what teens are thinking about love and relationships.

We think these findings should be of interest to adults who work with teens, particularly those concerned about teen relationships, early sex, pregnancy, and parenthood. It is also our sincere hope that teens will find what is presented here of interest as well.

The survey results presented in this document are, unless otherwise noted, drawn from a nationally-representative survey of young people aged 12-17 conducted in September 2007 by International Communications Research (ICR) on behalf of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy. Telephone interviews were conducted by ICR with 520 individuals—261 boys and 259 girls. The exact wording of the survey questions and answers, as well as other information on relationships, can be found on National Campaign websites—[StayTeen.org](http://StayTeen.org) and [theNationalCampaign.org](http://theNationalCampaign.org).

Also presented are some key themes and quotes that emerged from an unscientific, web-based survey conducted on the National Campaign website and from focus group research conducted in Washington DC, Miami, Seattle, Los Angeles, San Antonio, and Denver with a diverse group of boys and girls ages 13-19.

# RELATIONSHIPS

**Healthy relationships.** Everybody knows what it takes to have a healthy body. But having a “healthy” relationship? That can mean a lot of different things to different people. Generally, most teens<sup>1</sup> agree that a healthy relationship is one that includes love, trust, mutual respect, and honesty.

The good news? Most teens (68%) say that their friends are in “healthy” romantic relationships. In fact, nearly identical proportions of teen boys (68%) and teen girls (69%) agree that *most* of their friends are in healthy relationships.

The not-so good news? About one in five (19%) teens aged 15-17 say that most of their friends are in *unhealthy* relationships—those without love, trust, mutual respect, and honesty.

**Trust and Honesty Rule.** When it comes to relationships, teens say it’s all about *trust*—40% of guys and 48% of girls say that trust is the most important part of a healthy relationship. Teens say that *honesty* is the second most important factor in a healthy relationship. Surprisingly, ten percent of teen guys say *compatibility* is the most important part of a healthy relationship; yet only 3% of *teen girls agree*. Less than 3% of teens say *looks or popularity matters most*.

**“A serious relationship is one that matters to you: one that’s not only attraction, but trust and dependability as well.”**  
– *Web Survey Response*

**Teen Tip:** Have you ever shared something with someone who later betrayed your trust? It’s a terrible feeling but it happens all too frequently. When you get into a new relationship, try not to rush the trust factor—take your time and get to know your new partner before confiding your deepest thoughts and feelings. Keep in mind that trust is usually built *through* sharing—you have to give a little to get a lot.

*Fast fact: Previous surveys have shown that almost all teens (85%) believe that sex should only happen in a long-term committed relationship.*

**Teen Tip:** Remember, just because you may think that “everyone is doing it,” doesn’t mean they are. Some are, some aren’t, and some are just lying.

1) For the purposes of this pamphlet, “teens” means boys and girls ages 12-17 unless otherwise noted.



# RELATIONSHIP INFLUENCE

Teens—both guys and girls—say that *parents* most influence their decisions about dating and relationships. There is, however, a gender divide on the topic of parental influence: teen girls (40%) are much more likely than teen guys (30%) to say that parents most influence their dating relationships.

Our survey of teens indicates that friends are the second biggest influence in terms of dating and relationships. In focus groups, teens said they often look to their peers when they feel uncomfortable talking to adults or if they do not have close adult figures in their lives.

**“Some teens don’t trust adults, but they do trust other teens.”**  
– *Male, San Antonio focus group*

## Who influences you most when it comes to your dating relationships?

Parents = 35%      Religious leader/Faith community = 3%  
Friends = 28%      Boyfriend or girlfriend = 2%  
The media = 4%      Other family member = 2%  
Siblings = 4%

# PARENT-TEEN CONVERSATIONS

Is the glass half full or half empty? About six out of ten teens (67% of girls and 62% of guys) find it easy to talk to their parents about relationships. Still, about one in four teens (27% of guys and 24% of girls) say it’s difficult to talk to their parents about relationship issues.

Teens have lots of reasons why they don’t talk with their parents about love, sex, and relationships, including fear of their parent’s reaction, worry that their parents will think they are having sex, embarrassment, not knowing how to bring the subject up, and the belief that parents won’t understand. Parents want to talk to their children about these topics but freely admit they often don’t know what to say or when to start the conversation.

*Fast Fact: We know from previous surveys that there is a conversation disconnect between parents and teens. Teens say that parents are having helpful conversations with them about sex and related issues but there is disagreement about just how often. For example—89% of adults said that they’ve had a helpful conversation about sex, love, and relationships with their teens but only 71% of teens agree, according to a previous survey.*

**Parent Tip:** Remember to talk to your kids honestly about love, sex, and relationships. Just because they seem young doesn’t mean that they can’t fall in love or wonder about sex.

**Teen Tip:** Help your parents out—be patient when they broach tough topics such as dating and relationships, and especially sex. It can be awkward for them too!

**“To me a serious relationship doesn’t have to involve sex. It is just deeply caring about the person you are with no matter what they want. Being in love has a huge part in that because if you love someone you wouldn’t push them into anything they didn’t want to do.”**

– *Web Survey Response*

## WHEN SHOULD THE CONVERSATIONS START?

The majority of teens (51% of guys and 53% of girls) believe that parents should start talking with their kids about sex, love, and relationships when their kids are 13 or 14. But almost one-third (27% of guys and 30% of girls) say the conversation should start even earlier—at age 12 or younger. In fact, almost one in seven teens have sex before age 15, so having a strong history of communicating about appropriate relationships, love, and sex is important. And, in fact, most teens say it would be easier for them to delay sex and avoid pregnancy if they were able to have more open, honest conversations about these topics with their parents.

**Parent Tip:** Recognize that your teens hate the “talk” as much as you do. Instead of just sitting them down for *one* awkward talk about sex, love, and relationships—try starting early and keeping the conversation going as they get older. Help teens be comfortable coming to you with questions on all topics, not just the easy ones. Let them ask questions without judging them based on what they ask you. And make sure you listen to the answers.

Almost one in five (17%) teens say they don't know anyone who serves as an example of a healthy relationship.

## ROLE MODELS

Teen guys and girls are divided on who serves as their relationship role models. Teen girls (35%) are more likely to say that their parents serve as an example of a healthy relationship than other family members, friends, faith leaders, or other adults. Guys, however, are most likely to say that their friends are role models of good relationships.

**“I look at my parents. Mine are still together and I'm living proof of that. You always have to be able to work it out.”**

– Male, Miami focus group

Teens in focus groups also indicated that they can learn a lot about what to avoid from seeing unhealthy relationships:

**“What you do now will affect the future. Now I compare my relationship to the relationship of my parents.”**

– Female, Washington DC focus group

*Fast Fact:* Most teens aged 15-17 say they enjoy spending time with their mother (79%) and father (76%).

**Teen Tip:** Do you think highly of your parents? Do you enjoy spending time with them? You're not alone. Research shows that most teens describe the relationship they have with their mothers and fathers as positive—they admire their parents, enjoy spending time with them, and want to be like them. If you feel this way about your parents, consider letting them know.

**Parent Tip:** Remember that your actions speak as loud as your words. What you *do* has just as much impact on your teens' behavior as the rules you set down for them. If you show them what a healthy, responsible relationship looks like they are more likely to emulate your example.

## PRESSURE

More good news: Most teens (84% of guys and 85% of girls) say they have never felt pressure to be in a romantic relationship before they were ready.

Teens often recognize when their friends and loved ones are in unhealthy relationships. Sometimes it takes outside perspective for people to realize what they are going through. When asked what advice teens would give a friend in an unhealthy relationship they respond with direct guidance:

**“Think about yourself. Don't be scared. Do something about it now... You can do better, and it doesn't hurt to find someone else.”**

– Female, San Antonio focus group

**“People in unhealthy relationships should know that they can get out of them, and it isn't their fault that the relationship didn't work.”**

– Web Survey Response

**Teen Tip:** You're in charge of your own life. Don't let anyone pressure you into being in a relationship until you are absolutely sure that you're ready. And remember, the same rules apply even if you are already in a relationship. Just because you've said “yes” before doesn't mean you can't say “no” now. You are the decider. Remember too that romantic relationships with someone older—even just three years older—can be risky.

*Fast Fact:* Teens who are in relationships with someone who is three years older are far more likely to say that sex was unwanted.





**About the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy:** The National Campaign's goal is to improve the lives and future prospects of children and families and, in particular, to help ensure that children are born into stable, two-parent families who are committed to and ready for the demanding task of raising the next generation. Our specific strategy is to prevent teen pregnancy and unplanned pregnancy among single, young adults. We support a combination of responsible values and behavior by both men and women and responsible policies in both the public and private sectors.

If we are successful, child and family well-being will improve. There will be less poverty, more opportunities for young men and women to complete their education or achieve other life goals, fewer abortions, and a stronger nation.

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