



Discussion Guide

For Adults Working with Teens

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Is it OK for a Teen to Date Someone in His or Her Twenties?

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Is it OK for a teen to date someone in his or her twenties? No.

I once had a friend—let’s call her Anna—who dated a guy about 10 years older than she was. They started the relationship because they both loved the American Pie movies and heavy metal. And above all, they shared a similar sense of humor. At first, I was a little hesitant about her new relationship, but as long as he treated her well and she was happy, I was comfortable with it.

They broke up about a month ago because Anna said they wanted different things. While Anna’s life was just starting up in college, her boyfriend’s life was beginning to settle. She was beginning to discover things about herself, and he was ready to get married. They were just in different stages in their lives. A big age difference can be one of those factors that make a relationship very difficult.

The difference in age can be a legal issue, too. The legal age of consent, though it varies from state to state, is usually 16. If a teenage minor has sexual relations with a man or woman older than a certain age—usually 18—it is regarded as “statutory rape.” Even if the sex is consensual, the law states that you can’t really consent if you’re under a certain age. These laws exist for a reason. They are trying to protect minors who may not have the emotional maturity that is required for sex, especially younger teens who are 13 to 15 years old. The younger you are the more likely you are to be in a situation where an adult says do something and you just do it, even if you don’t want to. There’s always a chance that you can be taken advantage of in a relationship, but that risk increases when the person you’re dating is much more mature and experienced than you. There have to be laws to protect minors who could get exploited in a relationship where there’s a big age difference.



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As much as we hate to admit it—I know I do—we’re still very young. Even if we think we’re old enough to make all our own decisions and we know what’s best for us, we may not. The teenage years are formative ONES, and the law helps to protect us. Though it may seem like it, these laws are not enforced to make our lives harder!

A strong relationship is based on being with somebody who understands you well. And who can best relate to what you’re going through than somebody who’s close to your age and going through the exact same things? Can you imagine how awkward a dinner-date conversation would be with somebody much older than you? I would have such a hard time sharing details about my day without it seeming silly and childish. I would be concerned about a major biology test while he would be talking about a big presentation at work. Let’s be honest, a relationship can only go so far on simply sharing similar taste in books or movies. The real similarities come from your personalities and how comfortable you are with each other. Isn’t it true that you find yourself more comfortable in a group of kids your age than a group of twenty-somethings? I think so.

I have friends who won’t go out with anybody a year younger than them because they consider them “annoying.” We may not see it, but the maturity levels are much different for those who are transitioning out of adolescence and those who are in their twenties.

It’s definitely not wrong to date somebody much older when we’re older, like in our twenties. But during the teenage years, it seems only natural to date somebody who’s having the same experiences as us. We’re just getting comfortable with who we are and who we are becoming. We’re different than people who already know what they want and who they are. I don’t even know if we’re on the same planet, so how can we be a part of an intimate relationship? It just makes more sense for teenagers to date teenagers—the people that best understand them.



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Is it OK for a teen to date someone in his or her twenties? Yes.

For the most part, it is OK for a teenager who's 16 or older to date someone in his or her twenties.

Let's suppose you're 17 and in a relationship with a cute girl who is 21. She is beautiful, charming, sensitive to your needs and loves you very much. Basically, the two of you are the portrait of a perfect relationship. Then she gets arrested because she is 21 and you are 17. This may strike you as unfair, but it can be done because of current statutory rape laws in my state (Tennessee) and several others.

Alright, wait. That is really not OK. While there are situations when statutory rape laws should be called upon, the above is not one of them.

Statutory rape laws should be used to protect guys and girls age fifteen and below. I know the number seems arbitrary. But I can't think of a better solution to protect younger teens who could get into bad situations with adults. I want to say "let the parents decide who their teen can or can't date," but I know how resourceful teenagers can be when it comes to getting around parents' rules. Note, though, that resourceful does not necessarily mean responsible...though I wish it did. Of course, this is where the problem lies. Many younger teens just aren't responsible enough to use protection and birth control or emotionally mature enough to handle having a relationship with an adult partner. And you have to admit that an older person who's interested in a very young teen isn't looking for a relationship. They want someone they can coerce, bully, intimidate, pressure, trick, force, lie to or threaten. All that stuff I just listed is bad and has no place in a relationship.

If a teenager who is 16 or older is mature, however, it's OK for him or her to have a partner in their twenties. Maturity level can contribute a lot to the stability of a relationship. The more mature you are, the more likely you are to be calm, reflective, reasonable and responsible about protecting yourself from sexually transmitted diseases and using birth control. It's perfectly within the realm of possibility for a 16-, 17-, 18-, or 19-year-old to be as or more mature than a really immature person in his or her twenties.



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If older teens do what parents have always told them to do—be responsible—then there’s no reason why they can’t be in a relationship with someone in his or her twenties.

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