

# RESEARCH



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## Adolescent Romantic Relationships

by Sarah Sorensen

Young people spend a great deal of time thinking about, talking about, and being in romantic relationships (Furman, 2002), yet adults typically dismiss adolescent dating relationships as superficial. Young people do not agree: half of all teens report having been in a dating relationship and nearly one-third of all teens said they have been in a serious relationship (Teenage Research Unlimited, 2006). Although most adolescent relationships last for only a few weeks or months, these early relationships play a pivotal role in the lives of adolescents and are important to developing the capacity for long-term, committed relationships in adulthood.

The quality of adolescent romantic relationships can have long lasting effects on self-esteem and shape personal values regarding romance, intimate relationships, and sexuality (Barber & Eccles, 2003). This article discusses the importance of romantic relationships to youth and youth development, including the benefits of healthy relationships, the risks romantic relationships may pose to adolescents, and the need for adults to support young people in developing healthy relationships.



### Increasing Significance

Romantic relationships become increasingly significant in the lives of young people as they move from early to late adolescence. Although dating has not yet begun, in early adolescence (ages 10-14) most youth are very preoccupied with romantic issues. Youth at this age spend significant amounts of time in mixed-gender groups that intensify their romantic interest and may eventually lead to romantic relationships (Connolly, Craig, Goldberg, & Pepler, 2004). Romantic relationships are central to social life during middle to late adolescence (ages 15-19). Three-fourths of teens age 16-18 report having had a relationship, dated, or “hooked up” with someone and half of these youth have had a serious boyfriend or girlfriend (Teenage Research Unlimited, 2006). Many youth in middle to late adolescence report spending more time with their romantic partner than with friends and family (Furman & Schaffer, 2003).

### Healthy Romantic Relationships

Healthy adolescent romantic relationships are characterized by open communication, high levels of trust, and partners who are relatively close in age. Healthy relationships help

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youth refine their sense of identity and develop interpersonal skills, and also provide emotional support.

*Identity.* One of the key developmental tasks of adolescence is forming a sense of identity. Young people are in the process of refining their personal values and determining future goals. Just like relationships with family and friends, romantic relationships can facilitate the process of youth gaining a greater understanding of who they are and what they value.

*Interpersonal Skills.* Adolescent romantic relationships can also provide a training ground for youth to develop interpersonal skills. Through their dating relationships, adolescents often refine their communication and negotiation skills, develop empathy, and learn how to maintain intimate relationships. The emotional ups and downs associated with getting together and breaking up may also help youth develop important skills. While breakups may put some young people at risk for depression, they may also help youth develop emotional resiliency and coping skills needed to handle difficulties later in life (Barber & Eccles, 2003).

*Emotional Support.* As adolescents become more autonomous from their parents, their romantic relationships increasingly become a source of emotional support. One study found that, among tenth graders, only close friends provide more support than romantic partners (Furman, 2002). The role of romantic relationships as a source of support and identity formation may be especially important for sexual minority youth who are often compelled by social norms to keep their sexual orientation secret from family and friends. For sexual minority youth, their romantic partners may be the only people with whom they feel comfortable (and safe) sharing their thoughts and feelings about their sexual identity (Barber & Eccles, 2003).

### **Risks of Adolescent Romantic Relationships**

While healthy romantic relationships have many potential benefits for youth, unhealthy relationships pose risks that may have long-lasting impact. Youth are particularly vulnerable to becoming involved in relationships that include dating violence and risky sexual activity. In fact, teens report dating abuse more often than any other age

group (National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, 2006).

*Abuse.* Adolescents in dating relationships are at great risk for experiencing verbal, emotional, and physical abuse from their partners. A majority of teens (61 percent) who have been in relationships report that a partner has made them feel bad or embarrassed about themselves. More than one-fourth (27 percent) of dating teens said that they have a partner call them names or put them down. Nearly one-third (30 percent) of teens who have been in relationships said that they have worried about being physically hurt by a partner and 15 percent said they have been hit, slapped, or pushed by a partner (Teenage Research Unlimited, 2006). Dating violence is not limited to heterosexual youth. One study found that sexual minority youth are more likely to have experienced dating violence than other students (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2003). Involvement in abusive relationships can have lasting consequences for youth. Teens who have experienced physical dating abuse are more likely to be involved in intimate partner violence as adults (National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, 2006).

*STDs and Premature Pregnancy.* Dating relationships also put teens at risk of sexually transmitted infections and pregnancy (Furman, 2002). The strongest predictor for having sexual intercourse in 7th through 12th grades is recent involvement in a romantic relationship (Bouchey & Furman, 2003). A significant minority of teens in romantic relationships report feeling pressure to engage in sexual activity. One out of four teens report that having sex is expected if you are in a relationship and almost one-third of teen girls who had been in a relationship said that they have been pressured to have sex or engage in sexual acts when they did not want to. Additionally, nearly one-fourth of teen girls reported that they have gone further sexually in a relationship than they wanted to (Teenage Research Unlimited, 2006). Sexual activity can, of course, have long-term consequences. Almost one-third of sexually active girls report having been pregnant (Suellentrop & Flanigan, 2006) and one out of two sexually active young people can expect to become infected with an STD by age 25 (Center for Health and Healthcare in Schools, 2004).

*Acceptance of Unhealthy Relationships.* Research suggests that some teens are accepting of unhealthy relationships. Over one out of four youth say that it is okay for a significant other to be “really jealous” at times (Teenage Research Unlimited, 2006). One study found significant tolerance for sexual coercion among young teens (ages 12-14) with 34% of boys reporting that it was okay to pressure a girl to have sex if they had previously had sex (Albert, Brown, & Flanigan, 2003).

### **Promoting Healthy Relationships**

The risks associated with adolescent romantic relationships can be minimized by helping young people develop skills that support healthy relationships. Sexually active youth in healthy relationships are more likely to engage in behaviors that minimize their risk of pregnancy and STDs, including more consistent contraceptive use, greater disclosure of sexual histories, and more sexual exclusivity (Manning, Giordano, Longmore, & Flanigan, 2006). Additionally, school and community-based programs that help youth recognize gender-based stereotypes, improve conflict-management and communication skills, and decrease acceptance of partner violence have been shown to be effective in reducing dating violence in adolescent relationships (Foshee, Bauman, Arriaga, Helms, Koch, & Linder, 1998).



Young people do not automatically know what constitutes right and wrong behavior in dating relationships. Without a clear understanding of what makes a healthy relationship, youth are likely to tolerate relationships that put them at risk. For

example, it may be easy for a teen to interpret jealousy or constant text messaging as a sign of love rather than seeing the behavior as a warning sign of abuse. Youth must be taught the characteristics of healthy relationships, how to differentiate a healthy relationship from an unhealthy one, and how to seek help if they find themselves in unhealthy relationships.

### **Effective Skill-Building Programs**

Community and school-based programs can succeed in helping youth develop skills for healthy relationships. Young people are very receptive to information about healthy relationships; in fact, research indicates that youth want to receive more information on relationships (Wood, Senn, Desmarais, Park, & Verberg, 2002).

Effective programs typically work to:

- Change attitudes toward dating violence
- Explore the negative consequences of gender stereotypes
- Help youth build conflict management, negotiation, problem solving, and anger-control skills

Program designers should also:

- Recognize the importance of peers in shaping adolescent attitudes; incorporate peer education (Wood et al., 2002; Wolfe & Feiring, 2000)
- Be sensitive to the individual experiences of youth, considering factors such as developmental level, culture, sexual orientation, and prior dating experience (Barber & Eccles, 2003; Centers For Disease Control, n.d.)

We cannot afford to overlook the importance of adolescence as a crucial time to teach skills for developing healthy relationships. Romantic relationships are at the center of teens’ lives, providing formative experiences that can positively and negatively shape their long-term development. By teaching youth to recognize the characteristics of healthy relationships and helping them develop the communication and interpersonal skills needed to create healthy relationships, we can help ensure that they will have meaningful and fulfilling romantic relationships both in adolescence and into adulthood.

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