

Evidence Summary :

Adolescent Romantic Relationships –
Why are they important? And should
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Adolescent romantic relationships – are they just puppy love?

Whether you are a parent or someone working with adolescents it can be difficult to appreciate the impact that a romantic relationship can have on their lives. They may describe quite fleeting or ‘stormy’ romances, lasting only a number of weeks or sometimes even days (1). Given that they are often so short-lived and seemingly unstable, adolescents’ romantic relationships are often dismissed as ‘puppy love’. It is assumed that they are too trivial to be of any major significance or to have a lasting impact on their lives (1, 2). Parents may dismiss their children’s romances as unimportant or fail to take them seriously. Likewise, those working with adolescents often overlook their romantic relationship history and/or current involvement in romantic relationships as a potentially important area to explore. Like researchers’, their attention often instead focuses on adolescents’ family and peer relationships (1, 2). It is only in the last decade that researchers have begun to investigate the nature or the development of romantic relationships in adolescence (1-3). As research has begun to emerge, it has become increasingly clear that adolescent romantic relationships warrant much more attention than they have traditionally been given. They play an important role in adolescents’ day-to-day lives, and have a significant impact on their current mental health, their ongoing development and future romantic relationships (2, 4-6). This resource summarises the existing research in this area – *research specific to same-sex attracted youth is not included* as it warrants more attention than could be included in this brief summary (for more information on this topic please visit www.headspace.org.au). This resource appears in a two-part series, you may also be interested in reading ‘Evidence Summary: Working With Adolescents – Keeping romantic relationships in mind’ (www.headspace.org.au/what-works/resources).

Why is it important to consider the impact of romantic relationships on the lives of adolescents?

Romantic relationships are a common topic of conversation, a significant source of preoccupation and rumination, and a major cause of strong emotions in adolescence. Some researchers have argued that they should be recognized as the single greatest source of strong emotions in adolescents’ lives (7). Adolescents say that romantic relationships and experiences – whether real, potential or fantasised – account for many of their strong emotions both positive (e.g., excitement, happiness), and negative (e.g. jealousy, anger, distress; see (7)). The negative emotions associated with romantic relationships can’t be avoided simply by not getting involved in one. Adolescents (particularly girls) spend a lot of time thinking and talking about romantic relationships, whether the focus is on past relationships, or potential future relationships, even when they are single (e.g., (8)). And adolescents who are not in a romantic relationship often say that not having a boyfriend/girlfriend is very stressful, particularly in early adolescence (9). In addition to having a major impact on adolescents’ day-to-day lives, romantic relationships impact significantly on their ongoing emotional and social development (10). They also lay the foundations for romantic relationships in adulthood (6, 11, 12). While it is true that adolescent romantic relationships tend to be shorter in duration than adult relationships, and typically involve less intimacy, attachment and commitment, they play a very important role in adolescents’ lives.

So when do romantic relationships first develop and how do they change across adolescence?

The specific age at which people develop their first romantic relationship varies widely by culture, gender and person, but for most it will happen at some point during adolescence. Romantic relationships become more common and last longer as teenagers move from early to late adolescence (e.g., (13)) reflecting important changes in relationship quality over this time (14). Younger adolescents typically experience more costs and fewer benefits from being involved in a romantic relationship. They describe them as more stressful and less supportive than older adolescents who tend to experience them as more rewarding both emotionally (e.g., greater levels of intimacy, affection and companionship) and sexually (e.g., (9, 12, 13, 15)). With increasing age, as well as becoming more rewarding, romantic relationships last longer and romantic partners come to play an increasingly important role in adolescents’ lives (16). Between early adolescence and adulthood there is a shift from parent to partner as a primary attachment figure (17). By mid- to late-adolescence, adolescents often spend more time with their partner than with friends or family and by early adulthood, romantic partners typically overtake mothers and close friends to become the primary source of support to a young person (see (12)).

What role do romantic relationships play in healthy adolescent development?

Involvement in romantic relationships is developmentally appropriate and healthy in adolescence. They provide a valuable opportunity for adolescents to work toward achieving many important developmental tasks (see (11) for review) including:

- Developing ‘*emotional autonomy*’ or independence (initially from the family unit and later from peers; (12, 18)) – this is one of the most important tasks of adolescence (19).
- *Identity formation* – they contribute to adolescents’ growing sense of who they are and what they believe in, contributing to their self-esteem, self-worth, confidence and level of acceptance/popularity among peers (e.g. (20)). Adolescent romantic experiences and relationships also form the foundations of adolescents’ ‘*romantic self-concept*’ (i.e. how they see themselves within romantic relationships (11) and play an important role in the development and *exploration of sexual identity* (11, 16, 21)).

The challenges of developing and maintaining romantic relationships also allow adolescents to build many important skills that they will rely on as adults including:

- *The ability to regulate (or manage) strong emotions* (7) – facilitated through experiencing a wide range of intense emotions within one relationship and the experience of coping with break-ups
- *Communication and interpersonal skills, in particular, conflict negotiation skills* (e.g. knowing how and when to compromise) – romantic relationships provide an important opportunity to practice and refine these skills as they typically involve more intense emotions and conflict than adolescents’ friendships (15, 22)
- *Intimacy* – adolescents can learn how to develop and nurture an intimate relationship. This ability is very important to healthy adult adjustment(1).

Are romantic relationships particularly challenging in adolescence?

Along with opportunities, romantic relationships also bring many new challenges to adolescents' lives (16). In addition to the challenges that come with building, nurturing and ending romantic relationships at any age, adolescents face additional hurdles due to:

(1) Inexperience

Adolescents typically have *little or no prior experience* of developing romantic relationships. The first step toward developing one can be daunting and it is one that many adolescents feel pressured to take (9). There is some evidence that forming a first romantic relationship is stressful, regardless of the age at which this happens (23). Inexperience can bring fear of the unknown, uncertainty around what's expected and associated risks (e.g. engaging in risky or impulsive sexual behaviour; failure to recognize or misinterpreting abusive behaviour or 'warning signs'; (24, 25)). Inexperience also means the young person cannot rely on the benefit of past experience when trying to problem-solve relationship difficulties or gain perspective on them. This can be particularly problematic when it comes to coping with break-ups.

(2) Their age & stage of development

Adolescents may also find romantic relationships particularly challenging simply due to their *age and stage of development* (26). For example, they may be more vulnerable to experiencing negative self-concept following a negative romantic experience or a break-up as their sense of identity is still developing. Similarly, they may find it harder to process their thoughts clearly, to think through the consequences of their actions and to control their emotions, as their brains are still developing (e.g., (27)).

(3) The impact romantic relationships can have on support networks

The introduction of a romantic partner into a pre-existing network of friends inevitably causes friendships to change and new stresses can arise as a result (28). For example, adolescents often neglect or exclude their close friends to spend time with their partner (29). This can be a source of considerable guilt for adolescents who are dating, and a source of anger, hurt and jealousy to friends who feel neglected by their behaviour (29). Such tensions can lead to the deterioration of the quality of friendships and may even end them. Similar effects have been shown regarding family relationships. Adolescents who are involved in a romantic relationship typically spend less time with their families – this alone can be a significant cause of conflict or tension (7). Parents may struggle with conflicting emotions around their child becoming increasingly attached to a romantic partner while adolescents may find it difficult to balance following their parents' wishes and satisfying their own desire to form romantic relationships (9). In adolescence, there is greater reliance on both family and peers than in adulthood so any conflict or deterioration within friendships and family relationships can be particularly problematic (e.g., (23)). There is some evidence that girls may be particularly sensitive to such changes (23, 29).

So should involvement in romantic relationships be encouraged or avoided during adolescence?

Romantic relationships cannot be generalized as being either 'good' or 'bad' for adolescent development. The many benefits and risks of adolescent romantic involvement often co-exist (see (2, 5, 16, 30)). Positive outcomes can include enhanced self-esteem, popularity and social status, social competence, autonomy/independence, increased feelings of self-worth and protection against feelings of

social anxiety (e.g., (20, 22, 31)). While negative outcomes can include substance use, academic difficulties, stress and involvement in delinquent behavior (particularly in relation to early sexual and romantic experiences; e.g., (32)), sexual health risks and unplanned pregnancy (33), risk of experiencing 'dating' or 'partner violence' (24) and increased vulnerability to experiencing depressive symptoms (particularly for girls, and particularly following break-ups e.g., (23, 26, 34)).

It is important to note that all of the research on risks points to an *association* between involvement in dating and romantic relationships, risk behaviours and mental health difficulties. There is very little evidence to suggest that involvement in a romantic relationship during adolescence *causes* mental health and/or behavioural problems. Other factors may be partly responsible for the relationship between early romantic involvement and dysfunctional behaviours and it is unclear which comes first (i.e. the dysfunctional behaviour or the involvement in romantic activities or relationships; (2)). In addition, there is also some evidence to suggest that young people who become involved in romantic relationships later than their peers are also at-risk of experiencing negative outcomes (e.g., (35)). Taken together, research suggests that while some concern is warranted when adolescents enter into a romantic relationship, discouraging adolescent involvement in these relationships is not advocated.

So what does this all mean?

Adolescents' romantic experiences and relationships warrant attention. Even when they are short-lived, they can have a major impact on adolescents' day-to-day lives, and influence their emotional and social development, their future functioning and their experience and expectations of intimate relationships in adulthood. Some researchers have suggested that it may be helpful to think of adolescents beginning to develop romantic relationships as being similar to learning how to drive a car (see (16)). It can be fun and rewarding, allowing adolescents to learn new skills and increase their independence. However, just as there is some level of risk involved every time you drive a car, there are risks involved in developing romantic relationships and these risks are highest when we are young and inexperienced. Similarly to the way in which the degree of risk involved in driving depends on a number of factors, the risks associated with involvement in romantic relationships depend heavily on the types of relationships and experiences adolescents have. The quality of the relationship (e.g. supportive or not), the seriousness of it (e.g. casual dating vs. a committed relationship), the timing (e.g. 'early', 'typical' or 'late' onset), experiences of break-ups (e.g. a particularly humiliating or painful break-up), partner characteristics and the other supports a young person has available (e.g. parents, friends) all influence the degree of risk a young person experiences relative to being involved in a romantic relationship (22, 16).

As a parent or someone working with young people, it is important to discuss the difference between healthy and unhealthy relationships, warning-signs to look out for if things are going wrong in a romantic relationship and how to act respectfully toward romantic partners and interests, especially following a perceived rejection or a break-up. A useful place to start is to become familiar with some good, reliable, youth-friendly resources yourself (see page 3). These resources, particularly content generated directly by young people (e.g. stories), may be helpful in providing you with additional insight into some of the challenges that young people are facing around developing romantic relationships today that were not around a generation ago (e.g. issues related to social networking, media, cyber-bullying). You can also suggest a young person refer to them in their own time.

Helpful Resources

www.lovegoodbadugly.com – information for young people on romantic relationship.

Other helpful websites include: www.headspace.org.au, www.reachout.com.au and www.somazone.com.au.

‘the line’ – 24/7 helpline for people experiencing relationship difficulties (Ph: 1800 200 526 or visit www.theline.gov.au)

The Domestic Violence Resources Centre of Australia, visit www.dvrcv.org.au

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