

Adolescent Romantic Relationships

Research Facts and Findings

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Introduction

Young people spend a great deal of time thinking about, talking about, and being in romantic relationships, yet adults typically dismiss adolescent dating relationships as superficial. Youth may not agree with this assessment: 35% of all teens are or have been in a romantic relationship of some kind and 14% are currently in relationships they consider to be serious (Lenhart et al., 2015). 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 (Boisvert et al., 2023).

The quality of adolescent romantic relationships can have long-lasting effects on self-esteem and mental health. Youthful relationships shape personal values toward romance, intimate relationships, and sexuality (Boisvert et al., 2023; Kansky & Allen, 2018). This article discusses the importance of romantic relationships to youth and youth development, including the benefits of healthy relationships, the risks 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 (roughly ages 10-14) youth are often preoccupied with crushes, romantic fantasies, and curiosity about sex (Connolly et al., 2023). Socializing in early adolescence is often in mixed-sex groups, while dating typically begins in mid to late teens (Connolly et al., 2023). As they progress toward early adulthood, many adolescents spend increasing amounts of time with their romantic partners (Gómez-López et al., 2019b). These relationships can bring unlooked-for consequences as youth learn to navigate unfamiliar social, emotional, and sexual currents. But these relationships can—and often do—contribute to a young person’s happiness and healthy development.

Healthy Romantic Relationships

What makes a romantic relationship “healthy”? Healthy adolescent romantic relationships are characterized by sharing positive experiences, commitment, intimacy, and a sense of satisfaction in the relationship. Researcher Emily Hielscher and colleagues propose that a healthy romantic relationship is “characterised by strong communication and negotiation skills, caregiving behaviors, self-expression, respect, trust, honesty, and fairness” (Hielscher et al., 2021).

Relationships provide a compelling opportunity for development. As youth become more experienced with open communication, conflict resolution, and empathy, relationships can become positive contributors to each partner’s development and well-being (Gómez-López et al., 2019b). Healthy relationships help youth refine their sense of identity and develop interpersonal skills. In an era of stress and challenges to mental health, caring romantic partners are also a source of emotional support.

- **Identity.** One of the key developmental tasks of adolescence is [forming a sense of identity](#), a process that is facilitated by our relationships. Young people are engaged in refining personal values and determining future goals, and healthy relationships can support this aspect of development. Romantic involvement influences self-image, self-esteem, and expectations of success (Gómez-López et al., 2019a; Salerno et al., 2015).
- **Interpersonal skills.** Adolescent romantic relationships can also provide a training ground for youth to develop [interpersonal skills](#). Through their dating relationships, adolescents can refine their communication and negotiation skills, develop empathy, and learn how to maintain intimate relationships. Youth may learn to express compassion and to manage conflict by balancing individual needs with the needs of their partner (Gómez-López et al., 2019b; Salerno et al., 2015). While breakups put some young people at risk for depression, they may also help youth develop emotional resiliency and coping skills needed to handle later relationships (Connolly et al., 2023).
- **Emotional support.** As adolescents become more autonomous from their parents, their romantic relationships may become a main source of emotional support. The emergence of strong emotional romantic relationships slowly makes friendship less important (Salerno et al., 2015). 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, romantic partners may be the only people with whom they feel comfortable (and safe) sharing their thoughts and feelings about their sexual identity (Connolly, 2023).

Healthy romantic relationships can provide young people with companionship, emotional security, intimacy, and a sense of love, contributing to well-being and happiness in the teen years and beyond (Gómez-López et al., 2019b; van de Bongardt et al., 2015).

Risks of Adolescent Romantic Relationships

While healthy romantic relationships have many benefits for youth, relationships can also pose risks that may have long-lasting impacts. Youth are particularly vulnerable to becoming involved in relationships that include dating violence and risky sexual activity (Hegde et al., 2022).

- **Abuse.** Adolescents in dating relationships are at risk for experiencing verbal, emotional, physical, and sexual abuse from their partners. Young adolescents, who are just beginning to learn relationship skills and are less likely to recognize signs of abuse, are more vulnerable to dating violence than older adolescents (Moschella-Smith et al., 2024). Sexual minority youth are also at increased risk of dating violence (CDC, 2024a). For victims, dating violence is associated with depression, anxiety, substance use, suicidal ideation, and engaging in anti-social behaviors such as bullying (CDC, 2024a). Similarly, for perpetrators, dating violence is correlated with mental disorders, substance use, dating violence victimization, and poor conflict management skills (Piolanti et al., 2023).
 - **Prevalence:** An analysis of teen dating violence literature found prevalence rates of 20% for physical violence and 9% for sexual violence among youth age 13-17 (Wincentak et al., 2017). According to a survey of high school students, about 1 in 12 teens who dated experienced physical violence in the previous year; similar numbers of youth experienced sexual violence (CDC, 2024a). Psychological abuse may occur at even higher rates (Piolanti et al., 2023).
 - **Long-term consequences:** Teens who have perpetrated or been victimized by dating violence are more likely to be involved in intimate partner violence in adulthood, and may struggle with mental and physical health issues, including substance use (Piolanti et al., 2023).
- **STIs.** Dating relationships that involve sex also put teens at risk of sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Half of new reported cases of STIs each year are among adolescents and young adults (Shannon & Klausner, 2018). Only about half of sexually active high school students report having used a condom the last time they had sexual intercourse, putting them at greater risk of STIs (CDC, 2024b).
- **Unintended pregnancy.** While adolescent pregnancy has declined dramatically, many teens become pregnant each year and about 71% of these pregnancies are unintended (Rossen et al., 2023).

Promoting Healthy Relationships

Most youth are not hearing from the adults in their lives about how to develop a loving and fulfilling romantic relationship (Weissbourd et al., 2017). 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 that behavior as a warning sign of abuse. To support positive relationships, we can teach youth the characteristics of healthy relationships,

how to manage their feelings and communicate in a healthy way, how to differentiate a healthy relationship from an unhealthy one, and how to seek help if they find themselves in unhealthy relationships.

Healthy Relationship Programming

Community and school-based programs can succeed in helping improve young people's knowledge about healthy relationships; some programs have also been effective in improving communication skills (Hielscher et al., 2021). Young people are very receptive to information about healthy relationships; in fact, youth want to receive more information on relationships (Weissbourd et al., 2017).

Programs typically work to help youth:

- Change attitudes toward dating violence (Hielscher et al., 2021; Janssens et al., 2020)
- Recognize healthy and unhealthy relationship patterns (Hielscher et al., 2021; Janssens et al., 2020)
- Engage in self-reflection (Burton et al., 2023; Janssens et al., 2020)
- Build communication and consent skills (Burton et al., 2023; Hielscher et al., 2021; Janssens et al., 2020; Pound et al., 2017)
- Help youth build conflict management, negotiation, problem-solving, and anger-control skills (Hielscher et al., 2021; Janssens et al., 2020; Pound et al., 2017)
- Understand the impact of media and digital technologies on relationships (Hielscher et al., 2021; Janssens et al., 2020; Pound et al., 2017)

Program designers should also:

- Involve young people in program design and evaluation to ensure that programs meet young people's needs and priorities (Benham-Clarke et al., 2022; Burton et al., 2023; Pound et al., 2017)
- Ensure an inclusive approach that takes into account youth identities, experience, and social context; eliminate heterosexual and cisgender bias from activities; challenge stereotypes (Janssens et al., 2020; Pound et al., 2017)
- Situate relationships in their full social context. Include activities that help youth question social norms, and explore and analyze the negative consequences of gender stereotypes, misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, racism, and ableism (Burton et al., 2023; Pound et al., 2017)
- In addition to communication and negotiation, consider addressing other features of healthy relationships such as caregiving, self-expression, respect, trust, honesty, and fairness (Hielscher et al., 2021)
- Be sensitive to the community values, family, and cultural context of the specific groups of youth served (Janssens et al., 2020; Pound et al., 2017)
- Address safety and confidentiality (Pound et al., 2017)

- Incorporate a variety of interactive educational strategies such as discussion, debate, group problem-solving, role plays, special events, and outside experts (Burton, et al., 2023; Janssens et al., 2020; Pound et al., 2017)
- Recognize the importance of peers in shaping adolescent attitudes; incorporate peer education (Janssens et al., 2020)
- Consider ways to involve parents (Janssens et al., 2020; Pound et al., 2017)
- Be sensitive to the individual experiences of youth, considering factors such as developmental level, culture, sexual orientation, and prior dating experience (Janssens et al., 2020)
- Take an age-appropriate, sex-positive approach that affirms sexual pleasure while also teaching consent, respect, and relationship skills (Burton et al., 2023; Pound et al., 2017)

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 many teens' lives, providing formative experiences that can positively and negatively shape their long-term development. By teaching youth to recognize healthy and unhealthy behaviors, and helping youth develop the interpersonal skills needed to create positive relationships, we can help ensure that they will have meaningful and fulfilling romantic relationships both in adolescence and into adulthood.

Resources

[SEL Toolkit: Relationship Skills](#)

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) enhances the ability to communicate and connect with a range of people in healthy ways. In this section of the SEL Toolkit, ACT for Youth links to strategies and resources that will help youth development professionals teach relationship skills.

[Helping Youth Build Relationship Skills](#)

In this section of the Prep for Adulthood Toolkit, ACT for Youth curates curricula and resources for youth that focus on building relationship skills.

[Youth Statistics: Sexual Health](#)

Here, ACT for Youth provides selected statistics regarding U.S. youth and sexual health.

[What Is Sexual Health?](#)

Often when we speak of adolescents, sex, and sexuality, we focus on what adults don't want young people to do. Here, ACT for Youth describes the characteristics of sexual health in adolescence.

[Romantic Relationships in Adolescence](#)

In this alternate take on the topic, ACT for Youth considers developmental benefits of romantic relationships as well as the impact of family and peers on young people's romantic experiences.

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