

# Development of Romantic Relationships in Adolescence and Emerging Adulthood: Implications for Community Mental Health

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## ABSTRACT

Romantic relationships emerge in the early adolescent years and mature over the course of adolescence from initial cross-gender affiliations to dyadic partnerships. Adolescents' romantic relationships are important because they contribute to relational development and foretell the quality of intimate relationships in adulthood. This paper summarizes current research findings on the development of romantic relationships, focusing first on the normative stages of mainstream youth and subsequently on atypical patterns of troubled youth. Peer and family influences on romantic development are considered as well as ethnocultural variation. The paper concludes with several policy implications for community mental health.

**Keywords:** romantic relationships, childhood development, adolescent development, community mental health, atypical development

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## RÉSUMÉ

Les relations amoureuses apparaissent tôt chez les jeunes et mûrissent tout au long de l'adolescence, passant d'affiliations avec l'autre sexe à des unions dyadiques. Les relations amoureuses chez les adolescents et adolescentes contribuent de façon importante au développement relationnel et prédisent la qualité des relations intimes à l'âge adulte. Le présent article résume les connaissances actuelles sur le développement des relations amoureuses, examinant en premier lieu les stades normatifs observés chez les jeunes en général, suivi des patrons atypiques notés chez les jeunes en difficulté. La variation ethnoculturelle et l'influence des parents et des pairs sur le développement amoureux sont considérés. L'article se termine par la présentation de quelques conséquences pour les politiques dans le domaine de la santé mentale communautaire.

**Mots clés :** relations amoureuses, développement des enfants, développement en adolescence, santé mentale communautaire, développement atypique

One need only to spend a few minutes in the company of adolescents and young adults to be reminded that romantic relationships are a defining feature of these years. As adult observers of these activities, one might be inclined to dismiss youthful romantic relationships as trivial examples of “puppy love.” However, research of the past 15 years has revealed otherwise (Collins, 2003). Although the vast majority of youthful dating does not transform into stable adult relationships, these experiences are crucial first steps in the journey towards establishing loving romantic partnership in adulthood. In this paper we synthesize current research on adolescent and young adult romantic relationships from the field of developmental psychology. We organize this information into two sections. First, we focus on mainstream youth in order to glean information on typical romantic development. Then we turn our attention to high-risk and vulnerable youth in the community. Finally we conclude with policy commendations for community mental health.

## OVERVIEW OF ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS

### Prevalence and Frequency

Romantic relationships are common in adolescence and young adulthood. In response to the question, “have you had a special romantic relationship with anyone in the last 18 months?”, 25% of 12-year-olds, 50% of 15-year-olds, and 70% of 18-year-olds respond “yes” (Carver, Joyner, & Udry, 2003). Most often these relationships are relatively brief. Youths under the age of 14 years typically report relationships of a few weeks. Sixteen-year-olds typically report their relationships last for 6 months, and 18-year-olds report that their relationships endure for a year or more (Carver et al., 2003). Most teens report more than one relationship during their adolescent years with four being the typical number (Connolly & McIsaac, 2009). In view of this it should be no surprise to learn that romantic breakups are also common, with one third of young adolescents and nearly all older adolescents reporting such an experience.

### Gender Differences

Boys and girls do not differ much in romantic engagement (Carver et al., 2003). The most discernable difference is that girls are more likely to describe their relationships as enduring and stable, whereas

boys are more likely to describe short-term encounters and unstable pairings (Shulman, Walsh, Weisman, & Schleyer, 2009).

### **STAGES OF ROMANTIC DEVELOPMENT**

What changes do we see in young people's romantic experiences as they move across the adolescent years and into young adulthood? Research has shown that romantic experiences unfold in a predictable sequence of stages across early, middle, and late adolescence, reaching their mature form in the emerging adult years.

#### **Stage 1: Early Adolescence (ages 12 to 14)**

Romantic development in the junior high school years is triggered by puberty. During the years of 11 to 14, adolescents become intensely interested in matters of romance and this topic dominates internal fantasies (Tuval-Mashiach, Walsh, Harel, & Shulman, 2008) and conversations with friends (Eder, 1993). Teens begin to move away from socializing only with members of their own sex to form friendship groups with members of the other sex. The resultant mixed-gender friendship groups bring boys and girls together in joint social activities outside of school, giving them an opportunity to explore their emerging romantic feelings and stretch their social skills to these new interactions. More than 80% of high school students, and especially those who are popular with their same-sex peers (Carlson & Rose, 2007), report activities that are definitive of this first stage of romantic development, such as going to movies, sports activities, dances, and parties with groups of boys and girls (Connolly, Craig, Goldberg, & Pepler, 2004).

#### **Stage 2: Middle Adolescence (ages 15 to 17)**

During the high school years, "dating-in-groups" becomes a very prominent form of romantic experience (Connolly, Furman, & Konarski, 2000). Essentially, the mixed-gender friendship groups that were formed in junior high become increasingly populated by youths who are also part of a "couple." For the most part, couple relationships in high school are casual and short-term; they are less about providing a source of emotional intimacy and more about providing a "special" source of companionship within the peer group in that their feelings of fun and camaraderie are also tinged with sexuality and passion.

#### **Stage 3: Late Adolescence (ages 18 to 20)**

In the late adolescent years the focus of romantic development is to form a strong emotional bond with a compatible other. The romantic bonds of late adolescence often last for a year or more and youth describe them as serious, exclusive, and highly rewarding (Seiffge-Krenke, 2003). That being said, increasing involvement with a romantic partner can also pose challenges to a young person's need to maintain a separate sense of self and, at this age, youth begin to struggle with questions of identity and balance. For this reason it is important at this stage not to conceal or downplay existing differences but to examine them authentically—a factor which accounts for the increase in negotiating conflict with a romantic partner at this age (Tuval-Mashiach & Shulman, 2006). Being able to resolve conflicts in ways that balance the needs of self and other is essential for solidifying a satisfying relationship.

**Stage 4: Emerging Adulthood (age 21 to 25)**

By the young adult years, the majority of individuals have acquired the requisite skills to engage in committed and long-term romantic relationships. Yet emerging research shows there is still a lot of instability in the romantic lives of emerging adults (Arnett, 2004). Increasingly young people postpone commitment in their romantic relationships, a pattern which likely reflects the mobility of young adults' lives as they move in and out of school and work. Some young adults choose not to have serious relationships and concentrate instead on developing vocational competence. As well, exploratory relationships with different partners where youth experiment with relationship styles and partners in short-term relationships, or even "hookups," have become increasingly common (Dhariwal, Connolly, Paciello, & Caprara, 2009; Paul, Wenzel, & Harvey, 2008).

**Gender Differences in Stages of Romantic Development**

Boys and girls do not differ much in their progression through romantic stages (Connolly et al., 2004). Small differences exist in that girls more often initiate the social contacts that lead to the formation of larger mixed-gender friendship groups whereas boys take the lead in initiating dates (Jackson, Jacob, Landman-Peeters, & Lanting, 2001).

**SOCIAL INFLUENCES ON ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS**

Adolescents' romantic relationships do not develop in a social vacuum. Rather, they emerge within a web of relationships. Most influential are the attachments youth have with their parents and with their peers.

**Early Adolescence: Highlighting Peer Influences**

As previously noted, the early adolescent years are characterized by entry into the first stage of romantic development, namely mixed-gender affiliations. Peers are the main conduit for romantic initiation and their influence is supported by the dramatic shift in the composition of early adolescent friendship circles that rapidly change their membership from same-sex to mixed-sex peers (Connolly et al, 2000). Most influential in sparking this shift are the popular youths. High-status members of same-sex peer groups oversee the opening of group borders to other-sex members, presumably because they have the social skills and connections to initiate this new form of social contact (Franzoi, Davis, & Vasquez-Suson, 1994). Speaking further to the influence of social standing on early romantic development, the most common "objects" of romantic attraction at this age are the popular youths themselves (Brown, 1999). Crushes on high-status individuals are often "shared" by the at-large members of the group and participating with these focal early adolescents in mixed-gender social activities is a way for at-large members to improve or maintain their social position (Brown, 1999).

In contrast to the direct influence of peers, parents influence their early adolescents' romantic development by guiding and channelling their social activities in age-appropriate ways. Parenting styles which strike a balance between supervision of activities and encouragement of adolescents' growing desire to explore contacts outside the family are most predictive of positive romantic experiences in the teen years (Kan, McHale, & Crouter, 2008).

### **Middle Adolescence: Combining Peer and Family Influences**

Peers continue to be an important influence on romantic development in the middle years of adolescence. However, their influence expands from providing a forum for mixed-gender connections to shaping the quality of emerging dating relationships. As previously noted, middle adolescents begin to form special romantic connections with other group members to whom they are attracted. Research has shown that the quality of the relationships adolescents have with their friends predicts the quality of relationships that adolescents have with their romantic partners. Both the closeness and self-sufficiency dimensions of friendships carry forward: The level of trust and openness that adolescents have with their friends is mirrored by comparable qualities in their romantic relationships (Connolly & Johnson, 1996; Laursen, Furman, & Mooney, 2006), as is their ability to express differing viewpoints (Taradash, Connolly, Pepler, Craig, & Costa, 2001). Finally, the conflict resolution styles that adolescents have honed with their friends set the base for how they resolve conflicts with a romantic partner (Laursen, Finkelstein, & Betts, 2001).

Coincident with the expanding influence of peers on romantic quality, the influence of parents also begins to increase. In addition to their role as monitors of safe romantic exchanges, the quality of the emotional bond between adolescents and their parents is generally predictive of the closeness adolescents have with romantic partners (Seiffge-Krenke, Shulman, & Klessinger, 2001). Thus in middle adolescence, parents and peers create overlapping social influences within which romantic development occurs. Most often these influences work together to amplify the outcome. That is, adolescents who experience support from their parents and their friends go on to report the highest feelings of competence in handling the ups and downs of their romantic lives (Laursen et al., 2006).

### **Late Adolescence and Emerging Adulthood: Highlighting Family Influences**

By late adolescence and young adulthood, most youths have acquired considerable romantic confidence because of their prior romantic experiences within the supportive context of the peer group. This self-confidence allows them to distance themselves somewhat from the all-pervasive impact of peers, giving them the freedom to choose romantic partners on the basis of personal compatibility instead of social standing and peer approval (Brown, 1999). At the same time, their romantic relationships are increasingly sustained outside the peer group: The time that romantic partners spend together is more one-on-one and less part of the activities of the social group. This increase in dyadic activity creates an opening for experiences in parent-child relationships to become more influential (Collins & Sroufe, 1999). More precisely, the quality of youths' relationships with their parents is a strong predictor of the quality of their romantic relationships in late adolescence and young adulthood (Roisman, Madsen, Hennighausen, Sroufe, & Collins, 2001). On the other hand, peers continue to provide supporting structures for their friends' romantic relationships. This support occurs through shared social networks, normative beliefs about the value of relationships, and serving as an empathetic audience when relationship troubles occur (Etcheverry, Le, & Charania, 2008).

### **Gender Differences in Parent and Peer Influences on Romantic Relationships**

Recent lines of evidence suggest that girls are especially influenced by their parents. For example, in early adolescence, girls' dating activities are more intensely supervised by their parents than are boys' and

this restricts the experiences that they have (Kan et al., 2008). Adolescent girls are also highly influenced by their mothers in terms of relationship quality (Scharf & Mayseless, 2008). Emotionally positive mother-daughter bonds in early adolescence predict positive romantic experience at that age. In the late teen years, fathers gain influence; as greater intimacy with a romantic partner is sought, fathers may serve as prototypes for their daughters in these more mature relationships.

### **Community Influences: Highlighting Ethno-Cultural Values**

In addition to family and peer contexts, the values of the cultural community within which a youth grows up shapes the nature of his or her romantic experiences. There are two broad categories of cultural beliefs, namely individualism and collectivism (Dion & Dion, 1996). Individualistic cultures emphasize the overriding importance of individual freedoms in all matters, including selecting a partner. Collectivistic cultures emphasize the importance of family and the role of kin in shaping romantic relationships. These different cultural values contribute to variation in the timing of romantic trajectories. For example, young Canadian adolescents of Asian descent report romantic experiences at a later age than their peers of European or Caribbean descent (Connolly et al., 2004). This delayed timetable for initiating relationships has also been demonstrated among Chinese adolescents living in mainland China and South Asian youths living in India (Dhariwal & Connolly, 2013). Despite the later initiation of romantic relationships Asian youths are comparable in their desire for romance. We may conclude that while cultural values may delay or accelerate romantic timetables for appropriate entry into relationships, once relationships have been initiated the joint influences of family and peers are universal.

## **ATYPICAL PATTERNS OF ROMANTIC DEVELOPMENT**

Thus far we have considered romantic relationships from the perspective of positive youth development. Yet it is evident that not all adolescents and young people fit this model, either because of mental health and delinquency issues, or negative circumstances within the family. In this section we review what is known about such atypical pathways.

### **Depressed Youth**

Romantic relationships which run a typical course during adolescence are reported to be worthwhile for developing emotional intelligence, and for warding off feelings of loneliness and isolation. Atypically, depression may be elevated among some youth in romantic relationships. Researchers have focused on girls because of more frequent occurrences of reported depression (Davila, 2008), and they have found that the link between romance and depression is two-sided. Girls who suffer from depression approach romantic relationships differently from typical youths, and conversely romantic relationships may lead to feelings of depression. Girls who report depression seek out romantic relationships with more frequency than other girls, likely as an attempt to alleviate their depression (Davila et al., 2009). Moreover, they do so at an earlier age than other youths, often participating in couple-dating during early adolescence, at a stage when it is normative to participate in mixed-gender affiliations (Natsuaki, Biehl, & Ge, 2009). Characteristically, these early-onset relationships involve more intense sexual activity (Monahan & Lee, 2008), and are marked

by unequal power dynamics, sexual exploitation, and feelings of anger, jealousy, and suspicion (Davila, Steinberg, Kachadourian, Cobb, & Fincham, 2004). Breakups are common, which in turn can ignite the feelings of worthlessness and abandonment that underlie depressive disorders (Monroe, Rohde, Seeley, & Lewinsohn, 1999).

### **Delinquent Youth**

Adolescents and young adults who engage in delinquent behaviours, such as rule-breaking, bullying, school truancy, or substance use, show atypical romantic patterns. As with girls who suffer from depression, these youths frequently have intense romantic relationships in early adolescence, at a time when their peers are involved in casual affiliations (Davies & Windle, 2000). These relationships often endure for long periods of time although delinquent youths can also show a pattern of rapid turnover in relationships and multiple dating partners (Davies & Windle, 2000). Regardless of their duration, these relationships are emotionally intense and conflict-laden. Aggressive behaviours, both physical and verbal, often occur among delinquent partners as their relationships are often characterized by an unequal balance of power (Connolly, Pepler, Craig, & Taradash, 2000). While girls are often the victim of romantic aggression, emerging evidence suggests they may also perpetrate aggression towards their partners (Ellis, Crooks, & Wolfe, 2009), and these romantic relationships are oftentimes mutually aggressive (O'Leary, Slep, Avery-Leaf, & Cascardi, 2008). This is especially true when substance use problems prevail in the relationship (Florsheim & Moore, 2008).

The romantic relationships of delinquency-prone youth tend to create a vicious cycle by propagating increases in deviancy (Eklund, Kerr, & Stattin, 2010). This likely has to do with the partners they date. Aggressive boys tend to date deviance-prone girls (Miller et al., 2009), while girls are more likely to engage in minor delinquent behaviour when involved with a deviant partner. This deviancy-facilitating effect of romantic relationships on problem-prone youth also occurs because of negative peer group influence. Even though friends can provide a great deal of support when working through the ups and downs of dating, they can also encourage acts of delinquency and health-risk behaviours when their group members are similar to each other in negative behaviour (Simon, Atkins, & Prinstein, 2009). This effect is particularly strong when dating occurs in the group (Lonardo, Giordano, Longmore, & Manning, 2009).

### **Family Divorce**

Family dissolutions cast a shadow on adolescents' romantic development. Teens from divorced families hold less favourable views about commitment in romantic relationships than do youth whose families are intact, and they also report reduced intimacy in their romantic partnerships (Giuliani, Lafrate, & Rosnati, 1998). The more family transitions that teens go through, the more upheavals they report in their own romantic relationships (Cavanagh, Crissey, & Raley, 2008). Youth from divorced families also tend to become involved in romantic relationships at younger ages than do youth whose parents are still together (Cavanagh et al., 2008). In young adulthood, parental divorce is associated with a lower level of relationship quality as these young people are more likely to have a negative attitude towards marriage which is in turn linked to a lack of commitment to their own current relationships (Cui & Fincham, 2010).

Girls appear to be especially disrupted by hostility between their parents. Relative to other girls, those who were exposed to parental hostility were more likely to be insecure about their romantic feelings, preoccupied

with relationships, and at increased risk for unsafe sexual activities (Steinberg, Davila, & Fincham, 2006). Family instability is also an important contributor to early romantic onset among girls (Doyle, Brendgen, Markiewicz, & Kamkar, 2003). This sensitivity to parental conflict and divorce continues in emerging adulthood. Young adult couples in which the female was the one who experienced parental divorce report lower levels of intimacy (Mullett & Stolberg, 2002).

### **Family Violence and Abuse**

Families that are characterized by hostility or aggression create particularly aversive environments for youths' development of romantic relationships. Family violence can be of two types: hostility between the parents and abuse directed towards the child. It is now known that hostile and aggressive patterns in the interparental relationship are predictive of adolescents' use of hostility towards a romantic partner (Simon & Furman, 2010). Several studies show that adolescents are inclined to use the same strategies to solve problems with their romantic partner as happens with their parents, be it compromise or coercion (Reese-Weber & Kahn, 2005). These patterns continue after adolescence as young adults who witnessed interparental aggression report lower levels of romantic relationship quality (Cui & Fincham 2010) as well as higher levels of aggression (Gover, Kaukinen, & Fox, 2008).

Of great concern to society are young people who grow up in families that are emotionally, physically, or sexually abusive. Often these victims of familial maltreatment are removed from their homes and taken into the care of protective services. The consequences of these abusive experiences in their families of origin have negative implications for their romantic relationships. Such youth are twice as likely to report aggression with their partner, either as a victim or as a perpetrator (Wekerle et al., 2009). Both young men and young women with histories of abuse report anxiety in sexual relationships along with aggressive reactions to conflict (Feiring, Simon, & Cleland, 2009). Girls who have been in protective services also report risky relationships and high rates of unwanted pregnancy (Connolly, Heifetz, & Bohr, 2012).

Many factors lead youths who have difficult or abusive family backgrounds to become involved in aversive romantic relationships themselves. These factors include mental health problems, poor models of interpersonal relationships, and ongoing symptoms of trauma. Researchers have shown that one significant factor is how youths interpret the behaviours of their romantic partner. Often, distressed youths with poor emotional control become hypervigilant, perceiving rejection in the behaviours of their boyfriend or girlfriend, and continuously expect rejection even when it is not there (Ayduk, Downey, & Kim, 2001). Other times, these youths, especially girls, suppress their thoughts and opinions out of fear that self-expression could lead to the loss of the romantic relationship (Harper & Welsh, 2007). Finally, sensitivity to rejection may result in feelings of jealousy, particularly among young men (Downey & Feldman, 1996). The combination of rejection sensitivity and chronic relationship distress has been shown to lead to hostility in relationships especially when negotiating a conflict with a romantic partner (Purdie & Downey, 2000). When conflicts end poorly, physical aggression towards the boyfriend or girlfriend may ensue (Downey, Feldman, & Ayduk, 2000). Over the course of maturing, young people need to learn to cope with intense emotions in ways that lead to positive outcomes for themselves and others. Yet some youths have difficulty doing so because of a low tolerance for experiencing distressing negative emotions such as rejection, hostility, or anger. In the

context of romantic relationships, such youths experience heightened distress in response to the trivial disagreements and frustrations that arise in the course of daily interactions with a romantic partner (Donnellan, Larsen-Rife, & Conger, 2005).

### POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

As this review makes clear, romantic relationships are an integral feature of development in adolescents and young adults. Moreover, the ways in which they unfold foretell future intimate relationships in adulthood. Since romantic relationships are emergent in adolescence and young adulthood, they are open to positive influences. Building on the empirical evidence covered in this review, we suggest communities adopt the following policies.

1. **Healthy romantic development should be acknowledged as a critical feature of adolescence and young adulthood.** Romantic relationships are part of youths' emerging developmental assets. When romantic experiences are paced with the competencies of the young person and embedded in a supportive social context that provides for appropriate involvement, romantic relationships are healthy and beneficial.
2. **Evidence-based knowledge about healthy romantic development should be mobilized within the community.** Research on the romantic relationships of adolescents and young adults is robust and substantial. Yet mobilization of this information to key adults in the community is lagging behind. Adolescents flourish when their parents, teachers, and counsellors are knowledgeable about their developmental challenges and are equipped with resources to assist them. These key adult figures should be the targeted recipients of evidence-based knowledge about youths' romantic development. Teacher education and parenting courses should include information about romantic development as well as sexuality. Teachers should be knowledgeable about normative expectations for youth, how to spot troubled relationships, and where to direct youth for assistance.
3. **Troubled youth should be a priority.** Vulnerable youths experience particular stressors in their romantic relationships. Clinicians and front-line workers would greatly benefit from learning about adolescents' romantic development. Interventions intended to improve youths' romantic relationships, especially preventing conflict and unsafe sex, should be available in settings that provide services to such youths.
4. **Research on youths' romantic development should be focused on emerging themes.** We note two such issues: culture and technology. Adolescents live in a global world and Canada receives newcomers from diverse countries. Research needs to examine romantic relationships in this transcultural perspective. Contributing to trans-acculturation is youths' use of the media. An understanding of how the digital world facilitates social dynamics is a central question for future research.
5. **Emerging adulthood should be viewed as a distinct stage of development and serviced within the auspices of one government agency.** The emerging adult years are a critical transition point in development, including romantic relationships. Yet often these young people are neglected

because they do not fall clearly within the mandate of one government agency. From a developmental perspective, the needs of emerging adults would be best met within a government agency targeting youth development overall.

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