

Teenagers, Dating and Sex, Oh My!

by Sharon Risch, PhD

Research on adolescent romantic relationships is a burgeoning field. It has only been in the past twenty years that researchers have started to investigate normative development in these early, often fleeting, relationships. Teens are often excited to experiment with romantic love and dating. Parents, on the other hand, often find themselves anxious about what to expect, worried about how to manage their teen's increasing sense of independence without being overprotective and uncertain about how to manage their teen's increasing distance from the family as he or she spends more time focused on dating relationships.

How do these relationships develop?

Research has demonstrated a relatively clear pathway for the development of dating relationships. In childhood, children's energy is focused around developing friendships with same-sex peers; however, around adolescence, this begins to change. Pre-adolescents begin learning how to relate to opposite-sex peers. Very early "dating" relationships begin to form in middle school, but these are not dating relationships as adults typically define them. Instead, pre-teens usually define dating at this stage as two people who "like each other." These relationships typically involve a great deal of time talking on the phone, text messaging or communicating via computer.

Around early adolescence, teenagers begin to form co-ed peer social groups. With the buffer and support

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of these groups, adolescents learn more about how to relate to the opposite sex. Exclusive dating relationships, in which two teens form their own bond, may emerge from these co-ed groups. This is one pathway to dating, but not the only trajectory. Some teens do not start dating until late adolescence. Ultimately, adolescent dating relationships are heavily dependent on the teen's personality, social competence and emotional development.

Do these dating relationships matter?

Teen dating relationships, while they may seem trivial to some parents or adults, are not at all trivial to teens. In one study (Richards, Crowe, Larson and Swarr, 1998), researchers examined how often 5th to 12th graders thought about the opposite sex by asking the students to carry a pager with them and to record their thoughts when they were paged at random times during the day. The results were quite compelling. The oldest girls in the study spent about eight hours each week thinking about a boy, while the oldest boys spent about five to six hours each week thinking about a girl. In contrast, the 5th and 6th graders in the study spent much less time thinking about members of the opposite sex (less than two hours a day for girls and one hour for boys).

What should parents expect?

When teens begin dating, parents usually are concerned about two primary issues: 1) the amount of time their teen devotes to the dating partner (which usually means the teen is less interested in spending time with the family) and 2) sexual activity.

To address the first concern, it is helpful to keep in mind that one of the main developmental tasks in adolescence is separation and individuation. This means that teens are forming their own identity while separating from the family (so they can eventually become fully independent adults with families of their own). Teens begin to spend

a great deal of time with their friends and dating partners, and this social activity promotes psychological health and emotional growth. Naturally, parents must set limits to ensure that this separation does not become complete disconnection from the family. Curfews are essential, limits around computer use and text messaging are necessary, and it is important to ensure that teens spend time with the family, including on important days such as holidays or family events.

The second concern facing parents, sexual activity, is slightly more complicated because parents often have a great deal of anxiety about how to ensure that their teen is safe from sexually-transmitted diseases and teen pregnancy. Some parents are so afraid of their teen's burgeoning sexuality that they make one of two mistakes: either not talking about sex at all with their teen or monitoring the teen very strictly in hopes of controlling his or her behavior.

We know from nationwide studies of American adolescents that the average age of first intercourse is sixteen, that sex most often occurs within the context of a dating relationship and that the majority of adolescents have had sex for the first time by the time they graduate from high school. Teen sexuality has historically been viewed as pathological, with a sole focus on its risks (such as pregnancy and STDs). However, researchers are now beginning to view teen sexuality from a developmental perspective. For instance, researchers at the University of Tennessee (Welsh, Haugen, Widman, Darling and Grello, 2005) who have studied adolescent dating couples between the ages of fourteen to twenty-one have found that for older adolescents, a higher frequency of sexual intercourse was related to increased relationship commitment. However, for younger adolescents, higher frequency of sexual intercourse was related to decreased relationship quality. Thus, the researchers proposed a developmental model whereby sexual intercourse

for older adolescents may represent a manifestation of positive relational quality that is not the same for younger adolescents.

What can parents do?

As parents, it is important to communicate values about sexuality to children and teenagers. It is also essential to communicate with teens about sex and contraception. Parents should try to foster open communication so that teens feel free to raise questions and concerns about this new area of their life.

It is equally important to know that parents' lives may be greatly impacted by their son's or daughter's transition to dating. One study of 200 families (Steinberg and Steinberg, 1994) found that mothers' feelings of self-doubt, regret over past decisions and reported desire to change their life circumstances significantly increased when their son or daughter began to date. Similarly, fathers' marital satisfaction decreased when their adolescents began dating, and fathers whose sons were dating reported a mixture of anxiety and depression, but, also, surprisingly enough, high self-esteem.

Dating has a significant impact not only on teenagers, but on their parents as well. Observing teens as they venture into dating relationships may trigger a mixture of feelings for parents – anxiety about their burgeoning sexuality, envy over their freedom, regret over romantic choices that were not pursued and longing for one's youth. Given this information, it is important for parents to examine their own feelings as they emerge so that their feelings do not interfere with the teen's ability to experience these important, new relationships.

References

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