

Teenagers in love

Susan Moore considers the research and what it means for effective parenting

The singer of a plaintive hit song from the 1950s croons 'Each night I ask the stars up above, Why must I be a teenager in love?', as he bemoans the ups and downs of his romance, one minute on top of the world, next minute in the deepest slough of despondency. Such angst!

Has anything changed? In modern pop songs, young people still sing about their crushes, unrequited loves and romantic break-ups; about feeling awkward, unsure, in despair, overwhelmed, joyous and inspired, although these days the sexual imagery is much more obvious. And it can appear that the tender feelings of first love are at odds with today's world of 'out there' sexuality. Adolescents are heavy consumers of online pornography, they are sexting, and using 'apps' to meet partners for casual sex hook-ups. They may post on Facebook about their sexual and romantic successes and failures. Research has not yet caught up with the long-term implications of these new ways of courting, but it does seem that falling in love and romantic relationships are still part of the developmental timetable for many adolescents.

Let's look at what is

known. The US-based National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health), involving a representative sample of thousands of school children in Grades 7 to 12, found that over 80 per cent of those aged 14 years and older were or had been in a romantic relationship, including a small number (2–3 per cent) in same-sex relationships (Carver et al., 2003; Grieger et al., 2014). Many of these relationships were short term, especially among younger adolescents, but a significant number were a year or more in duration. Evidence that these relationships were socially normative was shown by the finding that in most cases, parents had met their child's romantic partner and the couples had told others of their romantic status. There is limited data on romantic relationships in other developed

countries, but existing research suggests similar percentages to the US data, although with somewhat older age groups (e.g. Moore et al., 2012).

The normative nature of adolescent romantic relationships means that those young people without a girlfriend or boyfriend can feel stressed or 'different' (Scanlan et al., 2012).



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Given that adolescence is a time when there is a great deal of pressure to conform to peer norms, young people who are not linking up romantically can feel lonely and out of step with their peers. For example, on the internet site girlsaskguys.com, an anonymous young woman asks:

I've never had a boyfriend or girlfriend. Would you assume that there is something bad or wrong with that person that makes people not want to go out with them? I think it's because I am ugly. I am not fat however. What is wrong with me?

On a different advice site (quora.com), this young man similarly questions why he is different:

I am 21 and never had a girlfriend. Most of my friends are in a relationship. I feel kind of depressed and that I would never have a girlfriend. What should I do? I've asked a couple of girls whom I like to go out with me in the past and they declined.

Of course, not every young person is interested in romantic relationships. Some feel they are not ready, some want to concentrate on their studies or sport, others are more tempted by the casual sex culture of temporary 'hook-ups'. Nevertheless, most adolescents begin their sexual lives within the context of a romantic relationship and generally, involvement in romantic relationships in adolescence is developmentally appropriate and healthy (Collins et al., 2009).

What happens when teenagers fall in love?

Falling in love is an emotional upheaval at any age, but for adolescents the feelings are likely to be even more difficult to manage. Teenage bodies and brains are maturing at a rate not experienced since infancy. There is a growth spurt, development of secondary sex

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characteristics and young people change in appearance from child to adult. Physical awkwardness often results from growth asynchronies; young people can feel embarrassed and self-conscious about the sexualisation of their bodies or their perceived inadequacies in terms of often-unrealistic body ideals. As well, the adolescent brain has been described as 'a work in progress', with certain areas maturing more quickly than others, leading to potential mismatches between physical, emotional and cognitive development. For example, there can be incongruities between adult bodily appearance, increasing sex drive and the brain development required for mature decision-making and self-regulation of behaviour and emotions. The 'executive functioning' area of the brain – the prefrontal cortex – is among the last areas of the brain to fully mature, usually sometime in the twenties (Petanjek et al., 2011). Adolescence therefore becomes a time of diminished prefrontal cortical control, with the heightened possibility of risk-taking and poor judgement decisions, especially in environments described as 'reward-sensitive', where the temptations of immediate feel-good experiences are high, such as in romantic and sexual situations (Braams et al., 2015; Suleiman & Harden, 2016).

Hormonal changes, triggered by brain and body developments, are strongly implicated in the intense feelings of sexual attraction and falling in love. Testosterone and oestrogen – male and female sex hormones – are associated with heightened sexual urges, while the hormones oxytocin and vasopressin are implicated in attachment and bonding. During puberty, the volume of these circulating sex hormones in the body rises dramatically. In girls, the ovaries increase their production of oestrogen sixfold and in boys, the testes produce 20 times the amount of testosterone. Both sexes have male and female hormones circulating in the bloodstream, but during adolescence a boy's testosterone level becomes 20 to 60 per

cent higher than that of a girl, while her oestrogen level becomes 20 to 30 per cent higher than his. These hormones have strong effects on mood and libido. Young people are hormonally 'primed' toward being sexually attracted to others but, especially in early adolescence, they are not used to the feelings associated with the rapid increases and fluctuations in their hormone levels. High concentrations of certain hormones for one's age, or rapid fluctuations of hormone levels may trigger more negative moods and greater mood variability (Buchanan et al., 1992). Emotions associated with being 'in love' or 'in lust' are likely to be confused and confusing, even overwhelming for some (Temple-Smith et al., 2016).

It's not only the sex hormones that are involved in falling in love. Ortigue and his colleagues (2010) used brain imaging to show that when a person falls in love, 12 areas of the brain work in tandem to release euphoria-inducing chemicals such as dopamine, adrenaline and serotonin.

Adrenaline is a stress hormone, causing sweating, heart palpitations and dry mouth – just catching a glimpse of the new love can trigger these bodily sensations. Dopamine stimulates desire and pleasurable feelings, and has been described as a 'feel good' hormone with similar effects to the drug cocaine. Fisher et al. (2006) found heightened levels of dopamine in the brains of couples newly in love. Further, Marazziti and Canale (2004) examined levels of serotonin in the bloodstreams of couples in love and people with obsessive-compulsive disorders. Their finding that levels were similarly heightened in the two groups

Meet the author

'It's a long time since my own adolescence, but like so many people I will never forget the heady emotions of first love, the embarrassing things I did and the mistakes I made. The world has changed greatly since "my time", but from over 40 years of research into the adolescent experience (as well as being a mother, step-mother and grandmother to adolescents) I can see that much remains the same. There is more freedom and tolerance of youthful romantic and sexual experimentation, but the risks of poor decision-making persist. Some of these are new, like being the victim of a sexual predator or experiencing "revenge porn" on the internet. Some are as old as history, like regretted sex or unplanned pregnancy. Parents, teachers and counsellors of young people can offer more effective support if they become familiar with the latest research on adolescent romance, including the role of brain development, social attitudes, and online culture. In a recent book, *Sexuality in Adolescence: The Digital Generation* (2016, Taylor & Francis) my co-authors and I examine these issues in detail.'



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led these researchers to conclude that serotonin level is associated with those constant thoughts about the loved one that are part of being 'love struck'.

In another illustration of how some of these effects are manifest, a study by Brand and colleagues (2007) compared newly 'in love' adolescents with a control group who were unpartnered. The 'in love' group scored higher than the controls on hypomania, a mood state (with accompanying thoughts and behaviours) in which emotions are more labile: euphoric one minute, in despair the next. The diary entries of the adolescent love birds showed they had

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more positive morning and evening moods than the controls, shorter sleep times but better quality sleep, lowered daytime sleepiness and better concentration during the day.

Falling in love takes some getting used to, all those different emotions, mood swings, needs and desires. Nevertheless, through their romantic relationships, adolescents have the potential for psychological growth as they learn about themselves and other people, gain experience in how to manage these feelings and develop the skills of intimacy. They also face new risks and challenges. These positive and negative aspects of adolescent romantic relationships are discussed below.

Psychosocial development

Lifespan developmental theorist Erik Erikson (1968) viewed crushes and youthful romances as important contributors to adolescent self-understanding and identity formation. He described teenage ‘falling in love’ as a form of self-development rather than true intimacy. Adolescents, becoming more self-aware as their cognitive powers develop, can try out their ‘grown-up’ identities with romantic partners and through feedback from the partners’ responses and behaviours, gradually clarify self-image. The endless talking (and now texting) that often accompanies teen romances is a way of experimenting with different forms of ‘self’ and testing their effect on the other person.

As well as aiding identity development, adolescent romantic relationships – both short term and longer term – can provide positive learning experiences about the self, for example through influencing self-esteem and beliefs about attractiveness and self-worth, and raising status in the peer group (Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2001; 2004). They can assist young people in renegotiating and developing more mature and less emotionally dependent relationships with their parents, as a

precursor for independent living. When there is good will and warmth between the partners, romantic relationships offer a safe environment for learning about and experimenting with sexuality and sexual orientation (Collins et al., 2009). Teenage romantic relationships are, in a sense, a training ground for adult intimacy, providing an opportunity for learning to manage strong emotions, to negotiate conflict, to communicate needs and to respond to a partner’s needs (Scanlan et al., 2012).

Challenges and problems

On the downside, romantic relationships can sometimes lead to unhealthy outcomes. Young people can become too exclusive when they pair up, cutting themselves off from friendship and support networks in ways that do not advance optimal development. Identity formation may be compromised if a teenager closes off developmental options through a partnership in which unhealthy living choices are made, or through early, unplanned parenthood.

Adolescents can be exposed to abusive and violent interactions or unwanted or coerced sexual activity within their romantic relationships (Mulford & Giordano, 2008). Aggression between romantic partners is common, with boys as likely to report abuse behaviour as girls. Collins et al.’s (2009) review indicates that, depending on the sample surveyed, 10 to 48 per cent of adolescents experience physical aggression and 25 to 50 per cent report psychological aggression from their romantic partner, including being sworn at, insulted and threatened. These days, aggression and bullying also occur online, for example, vengeful ex-partners have been known to share private photos or information on social media, causing embarrassment, humiliation or worse to the victim. Some teens appear to be more accepting of

these situations than is healthy, for example interpreting jealousy and overly possessive behaviours as reflections of love.

Sexual coercion within romantic relationships is relatively common. A national survey of over 2000 Australian secondary students in Years 10, 11 and 12 found that among those who were sexually active, one-quarter had experienced unwanted sex (Mitchell et al., 2014). Reasons given for having sex when they did not want to included being too drunk to say no (49 per cent), frightened (28 per cent) or pressured by their partner (53 per cent). A US study of over 750 female students found almost 50 per cent had had at least one experience of unwanted sex, 70 per cent as part of a casual ‘hook-up’, and 57 per cent in a committed romantic relationship (Garcia et al., 2012). Regretted sex is also not an uncommon phenomenon among teenagers (e.g. Skinner et al., 2008).

Other challenges facing young people seeking or participating in romantic relationships include unrequited love and breaking up. In the case of unrequited love, fantasies about the other can be intense and obsessional, sometimes leading to misinterpretations that the feelings are reciprocated. In extreme cases this may result in maladjusted acting-out behaviours, such as aggression and stalking (Leitz & Theriot, 2005), but more commonly the distress is turned inwards, contributing to depression and low self-esteem, sometimes with the risk of self-harm.

Break-ups are a very common feature of adolescent romantic relationships, some of which last only a few weeks. Among a large sample of young people in their early twenties in Australia and Hong Kong, 80 per cent had experienced a break-up (Moore et al., 2012). The impact of splitting up may not be particularly severe or long-lasting, especially in the case of short-term liaisons. Nevertheless, some teenagers are more vulnerable than others. Several studies have shown

“With experience, if all goes well, love becomes a little less blind”

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romantic break-ups associated with depression, particularly among those who have already experienced mood disorders (Davila, 2008; Welsh et al., 2003). In our 2012 study, 40 per cent of participants felt very hurt following their relationship break-up, even though the majority of these dissolutions were self- or mutually initiated. Break-ups were more distressing if they were partner-initiated, and among adolescents with more 'clingy' relationship styles and greater tendencies toward negative mood.

Usually, time heals and experience teaches. Connolly and McIsaac (2009) researched break-ups among Canadian adolescents and found that the most common reasons given for ending a relationship related to unmet affiliation, intimacy, sexual or interdependence needs. In other words, young people were 'moving on' when their relationships were not fulfilling, and in the process, hopefully, were learning more about themselves and others. Over time, and through talking with others, including parents, peers and partners, adolescents can develop cognitive frameworks for better understanding the nature of intimate relationships and learn to cope with their ups and downs. One example comes from a study by Montgomery (2005) of nearly 500 young people aged 12 to 24 years, in which it was shown that older adolescents were less prone to romantic idealisation than younger ones. They were more realistic in their expectations of a romantic partner, so less liable to be disappointed. With experience, if all goes well, love becomes a little less blind.

Protective factors

With age and maturity come more realistic expectations and, hopefully, stronger capacities to make discerning partner choices, communicate and negotiate with partners and recover from



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relationship set backs and break ups. 'Hopefully' is the operative word here, because we know that people of any age can be undone by their heartbreaks and poor romantic choices. Nevertheless there are some protective factors likely to assist young people to negotiate first romantic relationships and survive break-ups.

Early sex education is important, ideally emanating from the home and supported by the school curriculum. It's a bit late for 'the talk' on the eve of a young person's first date. Education that goes beyond the mechanics of sex and emphasises mutual respect, decision-making and the meaning of consent should help young people to resist relationship bullying and sexual coercion. School and community-based programmes that focus on teaching the characteristics of healthy romantic relationships, recognising gender-based stereotypes, improving conflict-management and communication skills, and decreasing acceptance of partner violence can effectively reduce dating violence in adolescent relationships (Foshee et al., 1998). In addition, parental modelling of respectful interrelationships sets a pattern for young people to aim for in their own interactions.

Family and peer discussions that

normalise teenage romantic relations – and breaking up – also help young people to frame their expectations and experiences in context. Some teenagers may need extra encouragement to maintain links with their friends and peer group, and to keep up their sports and hobbies when they are in the throes of an intense romance. But it is important that they do maintain these support links in order to help them resist the kinds of relationships that are too interdependent and have an obsessional quality. When this kind of relationship breaks up, there

is a greater risk of distress and depression. Maintaining links with friends provides a distraction from troubles and a sounding board for adolescents to discuss their romantic successes, failures and hopes.

In today's world, cyber safety is a key issue for all of us, but especially young people. Education about topics such as the potential dangers of sexting, online sexual predators and the distortion of romantic relationships depicted on pornography sites is essential for adolescents. Parental monitoring of online activity, especially among children and younger teenagers, may be advisable, and this requires that parents too become educated in new media – savvy about Facebook, Instagram, Tinder and the like. While adolescents need their privacy, it is important for parents to be watchful for warning signs of obsessive and secretive internet use. The heady emotions of falling in love can lead teenagers into unwise activity; the problem with the internet is that sexts and social media posts can come back to haunt them well after a relationship is over.

In summary, adolescent romantic relationships – with all their ups and downs – have the capacity to be growth-promoting, confidence-boosting and healthy experiences that teach young people about the give and take of intimacy. They also provide traps for young players. And while we cannot (and should not) shield the adolescents in our care from all the hurts and disappointments that life throws up, there are protective factors that limit the likelihood of serious harm from toxic partnerships or distressing break-ups. Watchful, kindly and respectful parenting, strong friendship networks and relationship-oriented sex education can all play their part in helping adolescents enjoy their romantic adventures and learn from them.

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