



Foundational Concepts of Adolescent Romantic Relationships

A critical developmental task in adolescence is gaining relationship skills. The social, emotional, physical, and neurodevelopmental transitions occurring during adolescence prepare young people for the skills needed to maintain functional, healthy relationships in adulthood.¹ As young people become more interested and involved in romantic relationships, adults—including parents, caregivers and other trusted adults—play an important role in promoting teens’ ability to develop positive relationships and experiences.

This brief provides an overview of science-based, foundational concepts of adolescent romantic relationships to support the development and dissemination of a scaffolding tool for parents and trusted adults.

Relationship experiences are important opportunities for achieving many of the tasks and skills associated with adolescent development.*

Consensus among researchers and practitioners suggests that there are key developmental tasks that teenagers need to undertake to prepare them for adult roles and responsibilities. The sequence and pace of these tasks are highly dependent on the individual, shaped by their experiences, relationships and environments. Adolescents are not just passive recipients of their development but are actively responding to and interpreting new experiences through their personal lens and prior experiences.

Evidence suggests that adolescent romantic relationships play a significant role in young people’s long-term developmental and relationship outcomes.^{2,3} While adults tend to focus on potentially harmful risks (such as early sexual behavior, unintended pregnancy, STIs and negative social and emotional consequences), romantic relationships can support young people’s development by providing a context to practice interpersonal skills, explore new identities and values, and cultivate empathy and autonomy.

Relationship characteristics are shaped by development, context and experience. Researchers have identified a number of characteristics typically present in adolescent romantic relationships. However, there is no universally agreed upon definition of what constitutes a “healthy” adolescent romantic relationship. This is due to the varying contexts and experiences in which relationships are created and navigated.

Developmentally, as young people gain experience with romantic relationships, their views and perceptions are likely to change concerning who they select as partners, how they deal with communication and conflict, and which relationship characteristics they prioritize. For example, younger adolescents may choose a partner based on status within a friend group or shared interests, whereas older adolescents may select partners who provide a sense of mutual understanding and trust.⁴

Young people’s romantic relationships are shaped by multiple influences, including their families, peers, and

the media. Cultural norms may affect the timing of dating and sexual experiences, expectations of partners, and beliefs and values around relationships.

Experience is also a critical influencing factor in how relationships form, evolve, and end. The timing and intensity of previous traumatic experiences may negatively impact a young person's development of social and emotional skills, affecting their relationships with peers, adults and romantic partners.⁵

Most adolescent romantic relationships end and most young people will have multiple romantic relationships.^{3,6}

We have identified three stages of adolescent romantic relationships:

- 1) Beginning and establishing a new relationship, including experiencing romantic feelings towards someone and initiating a romantic interest;
- 2) Navigating and/or maintaining a relationship, including conflict resolution as well as decision-making about intimate and sexual behaviors and the role of social media in the relationship; and
- 3) Ending and moving on from a relationship, including deciding when to break off a relationship, ending a relationship, and coping with breaking up.

At each stage, there are opportunities for growth and learning supported by parents, caregivers and/or other trusted adults.

Most adolescent sexual activity takes place in the context of relationships but not all relationships include sexual intercourse.

Developing sexually is a necessary, expected and normal part of growing into adulthood.⁷ Adolescents learn how to identify and navigate emerging sexual feelings and evolving intimate relationships that may or may not include sexual intercourse. Research suggests that most heterosexual adolescents will explore a range of intimate behaviors, starting with touching behaviors (e.g., kissing,

holding hands, touching body parts over clothing), progressing to other pre-intercourse behaviors (e.g., touching each other's genitals), and proceeding, ultimately, to vaginal intercourse.^{8,9}

Sexual behavior and expression of these behaviors differ among youth and depend on developmental age, personal readiness, family standards, prior exposure to abuse/violence, social norms, peer pressure, religious values, moral guidelines, and opportunity.¹⁰ Many youth choose to delay sexual intercourse.¹¹ When young people do engage in sexual activity, most engage in first-time sexual behaviors within the context of a romantic relationship.¹²

Young people need continued support from their parents and caregivers.

As a part of cultivating a new identity and a sense of autonomy, young people will often generate conflict as they sort out how they relate to and differ from their parents, caregivers and other family members.¹³ As they are still learning how to identify and express their emotions, this process may come across unskillfully (e.g., abrasive, aggressive, avoidant, silent, emotional). Despite this, young people still benefit from and want consistent and continued support from their parents/caregivers and trusted adults.¹³

Research indicates that young people want improved communication with adults on the topic of romantic relationships.¹⁴ Research also indicates that young people feel judged by adults, who are perceived as not taking the relationships seriously, or seeing them as trivial experimentation or rebellion.⁶ Throughout adolescence, parents and trusted adults can promote healthy development by remaining available to nurture, supervise, guide and advocate on their young person's behalf while providing a safe environment and secure boundaries that allow for autonomy and skill development.

*The following table outlines ways in which romantic relationships can support developmental tasks:

Developmental Task	Opportunities for Development in Romantic Relationships
<p>1. Learn about sexually maturing bodies and feelings</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Adjust to body growth and development of sexual characteristics + Learn to manage biological changes and sexual feelings + Develop a sexual identity + Explore romantic relationships + Learn to engage in healthy sexual behaviors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Explore and develop an understanding of what it means to be a sexual being, such as gender identity, sexual orientation and feelings of attraction or pleasure + Experience emotional and physical intimacy (not just intercourse!) + Explore what feels physically and emotionally good and what doesn't, which might change over time
<p>2. Develop and apply abstract thinking skills</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Develop ability to understand and coordinate abstract ideas, imagine possibilities, test out hypotheses, and construct philosophies + Engage in introspection (to think about thinking) and reflection (possibly through journaling or blogging) + Develop a deepened understanding of issues like friendship, justice, identity and religion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Practice communicating new ideas, thoughts and feelings + Experience reflecting on conversations with others + Learn about others' identities, characteristics, values and behaviors and how they differ from own + Have a greater awareness and understanding of fairness and justice + Develop deeper friendships and relationships and greater respect for others
<p>3. Develop and apply a more complex level of perspective taking</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Develop ability to understand human relationships + Experience "putting themselves in another person's shoes" + Account for own perspective and another's perspective at the same time 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Gain better understanding and empathy for friends or a partner and their points of view + Practice exploring others' perspectives when resolving problems + Learn to cope with strong emotions during and after a break up
<p>4. Develop and apply new coping skills in decision-making, problem solving, and conflict resolution</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Think about and plan for the future + Engage in more sophisticated decision-making, problem solving and conflict resolution + Develop ability to set more realistic goals + Moderate risk-taking to serve goals rather than jeopardize them 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Practice setting boundaries and respecting others' boundaries + Learn to request support from partner to achieve future goals, such as preventing unplanned pregnancy + Practice communication skills and strategies for resolving conflict + Try out and reflect on different communication strategies and behaviors + Identify when, how and why a relationship should end

Developmental Task	Opportunities for Development in Romantic Relationships
<p>5. Identify meaningful moral standards, values and beliefs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Develop a more complex understanding of moral behavior and underlying principles of justice + Develop an understanding of right and wrong no longer based on set of concrete rules + Adopt more personally meaningful values, religious views and belief systems to guide decisions and behavior, including questioning beliefs from childhood 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Learn about different belief systems, values and principles + Explore and communicate personal values, views and beliefs + Identify whether a relationship or partner choice matches with personal values, views and beliefs + Establish a sense of independence from family as well as friends or a partner
<p>6. Understand and express more complex emotional experiences</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Develop ability to identify and communicate more complex emotions, including intentions behind behaviors or hidden emotions + Develop ability to understand the emotions of others in more sophisticated ways + Develop ability to think about emotions in abstract ways + Learn to manage intense emotions, self-consciousness, and mood swings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Practice communicating complex feelings and emotions + Support partner when they are feeling strong emotions + Identify unhealthy warning behaviors that may lead to emotional or physical violence + Practice managing emotions and reflect on how emotions influence partners
<p>7. Form friendships that are mutually close and supportive</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Generate powerful peer relationships that are more intimate, stable, and provide significant support and connection + Develop relationships that take on new importance and meaning (a shift from friendships based on interests to friendships based on ideas, feelings and mutual trust and understanding) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Learn how to maintain important friendships with peers (and family) while exploring and building romantic relationships + Explore romantic relationships based on mutual trust and understanding (as opposed to status and interest) + Practice supporting another person + Practice receiving support from multiple people, including a romantic partner + Learn skills for future relationships
<p>8. Establish key aspects of identity</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Develop an identity that reflects a sense of individuality as well as connection to valued people and groups + Develop a positive identity around gender, sexuality, vocation or class, and ethnicity + Cultivate a sensitivity to the diversity of identities + Try out “temporary” identities with alternative styles of dress, jewelry, music, hair, manner 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Explore similarities and differences in identity, perspectives, and values with romantic partner + Learn about new identities through partner and their friends or family + Explore different identities within and across different contexts + Having a partner who is supportive of identity, especially when family/friends are not + Engage in positive risk-taking in supportive environment

Developmental Task	Opportunities for Development in Romantic Relationships
<p>9. Meet the demands of increasingly mature roles and responsibilities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Take on the roles that will be expected of them in adulthood + Learn to acquire the skills and manage the multiple demands of education or work while meeting expectations of family, community, and citizenship 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Practice ability to balance relationships, school, family and work + Practice ability to prioritize responsibilities and expectations + Establish a sense of independence by making decisions related to personal set of responsibilities and expectations
<p>10. Renegotiate relationships with adults in parenting roles</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Negotiate a change in relationships between adolescents and caregivers that balances autonomy and ongoing connection + Create more breadth and depth of discussion, new options for intellectual and emotional connection, opportunities for richer and more sophisticated range of activities in family life 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Use communication and conflict resolution skills learned in romantic relationships in family relationships (and vice versa) + Receive support from and connect with parents and caregivers after experiencing relationship conflicts or break-ups + Reflect on own family relationships after learning about other family relationships

Column 1 is adapted from: Simpson, A. R. (2001). *Raising teens: A synthesis of research and a foundation for action*. Boston: Harvard University, School of Public Health. *Center for Health Communication*.

Column 2 is based on what we know from the application of adolescent developmental science and available science related to adolescent romantic relationships.

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