

Telling It Like It Is: Teen Perspectives on Romantic Relationships

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Overview. Teen romantic relationships have become a pervasive part of popular culture, from TV shows, movies, and books to blogs and social networking sites. But the attention paid to these relationships extends beyond the parameters of popular culture. Romance, teen style, has become of increasing interest to anyone concerned with healthy adolescent development—with good reason. The initiation of romantic relationships represents a key developmental task of adolescence. Research suggests that several critical dimensions of adolescent romantic and sexual relationships—such as how teens define the different types of relationships, how serious they consider these relationships, and how they communicate within them—may influence when teens first have sex and whether they use contraception. In turn, these considerations have a bearing on teens' risks of having or fathering a child or of acquiring a sexually transmitted infection (STI).^{6,9,13,16} Moreover, relationship habits and patterns developed during adolescence can affect later adult relationships,^{2,8} a finding that highlights the importance of developing healthy relationship behaviors during the teen years.

The majority of teens in high school have been involved in a romantic relationship,² and almost one-half of high school-aged teens report that they have had at least one sexual experience.⁴ Learning more about how teens view these relationships can provide insights that help policy makers, program providers, parents, and others promote healthy youth development in general and address the problems of teen pregnancy and STIs in particular. Toward this end, Child Trends recently conducted focus groups to hear what teens themselves have to say about these relationships. Because of relatively high levels of early sexual activity, teenage childbearing, and STIs among racial and ethnic minority groups,^{1,3,11} the teens that we selected for this project were African American and Latino. We conducted seven focus groups with a total of 52 teen boys and girls living in Washington, DC.

This Research Brief summarizes findings from the focus groups. What we learned was both encouraging and sobering. In general, the teens showed that they knew what a healthy teen relationship should look like; that is, it should be marked by respect, honesty, fidelity, good communication, and the absence of violence. Yet, at the same time, many of the teens expressed pessimism about their chances of experiencing that type of relationship themselves. Nor did they know many adults whose romantic relationships were worthy of emulation.

OVERARCHING THEMES

Four major themes about teens' views on romantic relationships emerged from the focus groups: 1) teens have developed novel ways to describe their relationships; 2) teens have a clear understanding of what makes a romantic relationship a healthy one; 3) despite this understanding, teens have low expectations for experiencing these qualities in their own relationships; and 4) teens see many similarities between the ways that they think about romantic relationships and the ways that adults define their own relationships.

We provide more detail on these themes in the following sections of this brief. To capture some of the flavor of the language teens used in discussing romantic relationships, we have included some actual quotes from the focus groups in a number of places.

THEME ONE: Teens have developed novel ways to describe romantic relationships.

Teens were asked to describe romantic relationships among their peers, as well as the terms that they use to describe and talk about the different types and stages of relationships.

Similarities in descriptions. We found that teens from all of the focus groups used a rich and wide-ranging vernacular to illustrate relationships and their various stages. There appeared to be more agreement across the age and gender groups and among the participants in terms used to describe serious or semi-serious relationships than in the terms used to describe less serious or more casual relationships. However, the language used to describe less serious relationships was more rich and complex, with teens noting that these relationships were the most common among their peers. Generally, these less serious relationships appeared to represent two types of processes: 1) physical intimacy without commitment, and 2) getting to know the other person before becoming “too serious.”

Language that reflects variation in relationship behaviors. The terms that teens use to describe romantic relationships reflect variation in the intensity and expectations of the relationship and in the behaviors occurring within the relationship. Teen participants were asked to create relationship spectrums during the focus group discussions. The results revealed that teens have a wide spectrum of romantic relationships, with distinct stages and clear end points (see Figure 1). Teens ordered relationships from least serious to most serious. For example, 15- to 17-year-old teen boys put “friends with benefits” on the left end of the spectrum (least serious), noting that this type of relationship involved no commitment. Thus, each person in the relationship had the freedom to pursue other partners. To give another example: At the right, or most serious, end of the spectrum, 15- to 17-year-old teen girls included “hubby/wifey,” a

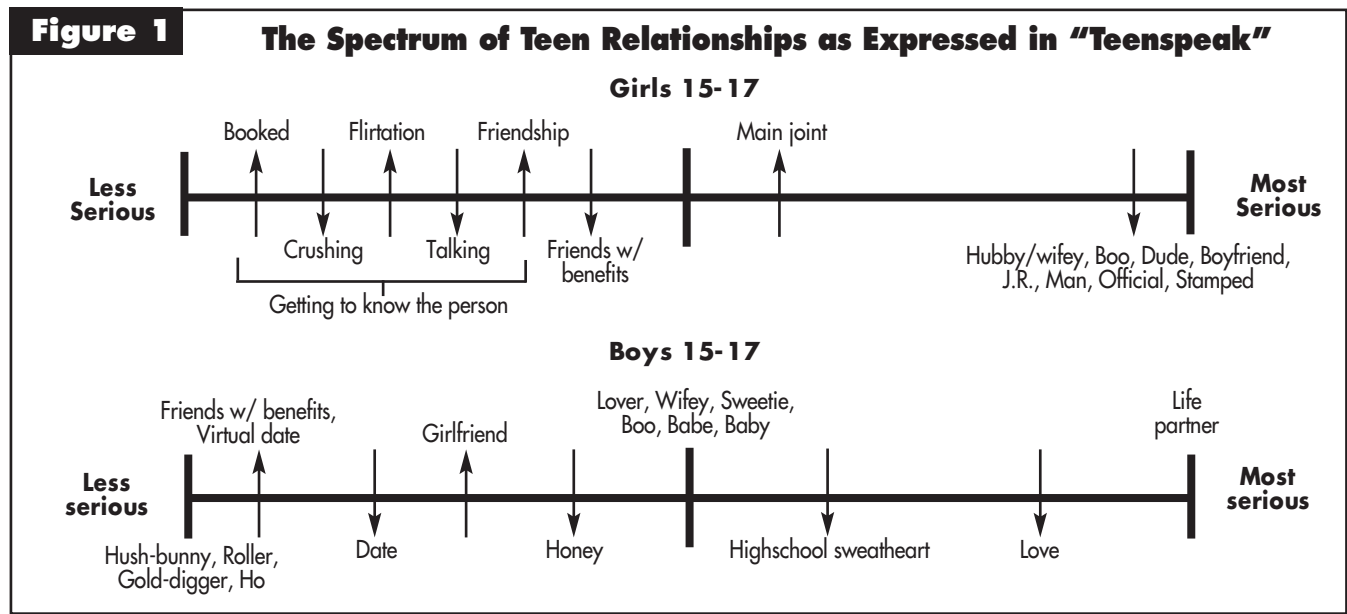
relationship in which there was an expectation of commitment and monogamy.

Although the language may differ, there were considerable similarities of views across age and gender groups, indicating a widely understood and accepted concept of romantic relationships among teens. Younger teens were more likely to lump all serious relationships together, whereas older teens had a slightly more nuanced differentiation of these relationships. When naming and defining relationships, younger teens were more likely to refer to song lyrics, television commercials, and other aspects of pop culture, whereas older teens seemed to rely more on their own experiences or that of their peers. In addition, teen boys had an extensive vocabulary for Internet dating relationships that was not mentioned by any of the teen girls.

THEME TWO: Teens have a clear understanding and expectation of what defines a healthy romantic relationship.

Respect. Today’s teens might or might not be familiar with the classic Aretha Franklin song “Respect,” but in each of the focus group discussions, it was evident that teens place a very high value on this quality. Indeed, they viewed respect as essential to a successful and healthy relationship. One participant in the 15- to 17-year-old teen boy group put it this way:

“Ya’ll gotta have respect for each other in order for the relationship to work.”



Teen girls noted that one way to show respect was by being faithful and not cheating. They also described respect as speaking respectfully to them, not calling them names or putting them down. For teen girls, such as this participant in the 12- to 14-year-old group, respect was also defined as being valued for more than their bodies or physical appearance:

“Um, I don’t know how to say it, but like, respect you for who you are is like, just because I have a butt doesn’t mean you have to touch it and stuff. Just because I have a chest doesn’t mean you go tell your friends oh this and that and the other. But you can respect me.”

Teen boys incorporated the concept of “self-respect” into discussions about respect, feeling that teens needed to respect themselves in order to demand respect from others. For example, a participant in the group made up of 15- to 17-year-old teen boys noted that:

“[Some girls] get treated bad and get called names and stuff, and they still go back to the same guy. Is that respect?...you’ve gotta respect you own self in order to be with somebody that you actually love.”

Trust. The idea of trust was also mentioned by teens in all of the focus groups as a component of healthy romantic relationships. Other than this small consensus, focus groups differed in their views on the qualities necessary for a good or healthy romantic relationship. We found that even the concept of respect encompassed a variety of issues for teens, varying among teen boys and teen girls.

Love. As for “what’s love got to do with it,” to quote Tina Turner, how focus group participants viewed the importance of love in the context of teens’ romantic relationships tended to differ by gender. Participants in both groups of teen boys listed love as an important characteristic of a good romantic relationship, whereas teen girls rarely brought up this idea. However, the teen boys were quick to qualify their definition of love, noting that love was often disingenuous. “You say you love them, but you don’t really mean it,” observed one

teen boy in the group made up of 15- to 17-year-olds. For teen boys, love was also defined by or equated with physical intimacy. For example, a participant from the 15- to 17-year-old group of teen boys explained:

“Some...teenagers, they think they’re grown enough, and they think they can handle love...They think that love is like being with a girl, having sex with a girl, and then leaving her...They think that that’s love, when it’s not.”

The teen girls seemed to take a more practical approach when it came to love and relationships. They felt that if respect, loyalty, and trust were present, then that would amount to love.

Image. All teen groups mentioned the importance of the public face of their relationships, even though this element differed slightly from others on the lists of qualities needed in a good or healthy relationship. By “public image,” we are referring to how their relationships were projected to and viewed by the public and their peers. This issue came up in the focus groups for both teen boys and teen girls, although participants emphasized different sides of the issue depending on their gender. Teen girls were concerned with how their peers viewed their relationship and how their partners behaved towards them in public. Teen boys were more likely to report a concern about their own image rather than about the image of the relationship; and, to some extent, teen boys saw their relationships as shaping their public image. As one participant in the 15- to 17-year-old boy group expressed it:

“You just wanna look cool in front of your friends...All your friends, all they talk about is... who got that last night.”

Additional qualities. Other qualities of healthy romantic relationships that teens cited differed not only in definition but also in importance across the groups. Focus groups of teen girls brought up honesty, communication, caring, attentiveness, and responsibility, whereas focus groups of teen boys listed sex as one of the top elements of a healthy romantic relationship. Sex was not mentioned in the teen girl groups. Throughout the discussions on healthy romantic relationships, teens in all groups spoke more in terms of what a relationship should not be than what it should be. The qualities needed

for a good relationship became a list of negative characteristics that should not be present (for example, “not cheating or lying,” “no abuse,” and “not bossy”).

THEME THREE: Teens’ relationships typically fall short of their own standards of healthy romantic relationships.

High standards/low expectations. Focus group participants were asked how commonly the qualities that they listed as defining healthy relationships were found in typical romantic relationships among teens their age. These discussions revealed that, even though teens had high standards for relationships (as illustrated in their comments about the factors that make up a healthy relationship), teens do not necessarily expect to find these qualities in a partner or relationship. For example, one participant in a 15- to 17-year-old teen girl group noted:

“...one boy can be...honest, respectful, and you have a connection. But then, he’ll be violent or something.”

Both teen boys and teen girls seem to have high hopes for relationships while also expressing pessimism about their expectations of ever having a healthy relationship, at least during their teen years. The overwhelming consensus was that healthy qualities were atypical and not characteristic of the average teen relationship.

Cheating. Infidelity was mentioned by all groups as something that is common among teens, in contrast to the “absence of cheating” that they listed as a good or healthy quality. All of the teen girl focus groups cited cheating almost immediately as a typical dimension of teen relationships and noted that this experience contributed to their low expectations for finding a healthy relationship. A participant in a 12- to 14-year-old girl group expressed skepticism that a man would ever be faithful:

“After you start callin’ someone your boyfriend...he will cheat anyway...[Even] when the person becomes your hubby, I doubt they’re not gonna cheat no more.”

Likewise, a teen girl from the 15-to 17-year-old group described the difference between teen girls’ and teen boys’ views of fidelity:

“Now,...a girl might say, ‘Oh that’s my boo.’ That’s her own person. But if you think like a dude, he’s gonna be like, ‘That’s my boo,’ but then he’s got other ‘boo’s’ around.”

Older teen girls talked about infidelity among teen boys as stemming from the importance that teen boys placed on sex and maintaining a public image in front of their peers. Yet cheating also seems to have its own role in shaping teens’ public image, especially among teen boys who reported that it did place a large emphasis on their own image. As a participant in a 15- to 17-year-old teen girl group explained:

“They’ll be like ‘I’ve got this reputation, I’m a pimp, I’m a playa, I’m not gonna let no female dispose or just ruin my reputation like that.’”

Relationship violence. Physical abuse was cited by all groups as something that is common in teen relationships, although teens were quick to distinguish between “play-fighting” and violence. Play-fighting was listed as something that was commonplace, with both teen boys and teen girls reporting that the girls were just as likely to initiate this sort of fighting. Outright abuse was discussed as significantly less prevalent. Teens also brought up the problem of verbal abuse, primarily directed at teen girls, in the form of name-calling. Teen girls were more likely to take a harsh stance against cheating and verbal/physical abuse, whereas teen boys were more likely to acknowledge the prevalence of these behaviors more nonchalantly.

No or few role models. Teens felt that having few role models contributed to their low expectations for healthy romantic relationships. Some teen girls specifically referred to the absence of fathers as a primary example of the lack of positive role models.

In response to why teen relationships lack many of the healthy aspects that they identified, a participant in a 15- to 17-year-old teen girl group responded:

“Most girls, if they don’t have a father figure in their life, they don’t have these [healthy] qualities, or if they do have a father figure, they have little evidence [of them].”

“...Or [girls] could just be loose because they don’t have a father figure and they just want attention from a male. Like you could see a girl who keep[s] giving this dude compliments...And I was like, ‘Girl, go somewhere! He don’t want you!’ But she wasn’t getting it, so I’m guessing she needed some male attention.”

THEME FOUR: The ways that teens, adults, and the research literature define healthy romantic relationships have much in common.

Teen ... to adult. Teens were able to link nearly all of the qualities that they listed as comprising a good or healthy romantic relationship to the qualities that researchers have agreed on as important for adult romantic relationships. Basic characteristics identified as defining healthy adult relationships include commitment, satisfaction, lack of domestic violence, conflict resolution, intimacy and emotional support, communication, fidelity, and interaction and time together.^{7,14}

Differences in emphasis. When presented with the list of characteristics of adult healthy relationships, teens linked respect and a lack of cheating to adult concepts of fidelity and commitment, and mapped honesty and listening onto communication and trust on the adult list. However, in each focus group, the teens indicated that they did not find direct parallels between some of the qualities that adults considered critical to healthy relationships and the qualities that teens included on their own lists. Within the focus groups of teen girls, participants debated whether all the characteristics that were important for healthy adult relationships

were also critical for teen relationships. The teen girls noted that certain qualities—such as satisfaction, time together, commitment, and conflict resolution—would be needed for more serious adult relationships, but were not as important for teen relationships. As one participant in the 15- to-17-year-old teen girl group said:

“I guess the adults [need to] have that [time together] because they are working hard, so you forget to leave time for each other. But we don’t have a lot on our time.”

In contrast, the teen boy groups were more likely to deem qualities not originally on their list (such as time together, and intimacy and emotional support) as important for teen relationships as well.

SUMMARY

This *Research Brief* has highlighted major themes that emerged from discussions with teens about romantic relationship patterns and ideals, which have potential implications for reproductive health outcomes and well-being in adolescence and young adulthood. Results from these focus groups have both positive and negative implications for teens’ present and future chances of developing healthy romantic relationships. On the one hand, our findings suggest that:

- Teens know what they should be looking for in a partner and relationship. They understand what makes a relationship healthy and view relationships possessing these qualities as highly desirable. Teens cited qualities such as respect, trust, honesty, and good communication as important for a healthy relationship. They also recognized what a healthy relationship should not be, as they often listed negative characteristics that should not occur (such as not cheating, or not being bossy) in a relationship for it to be healthy.
- Teens are aware that their relationships should not be adult-like in every way. For example, they expressed the idea that teen relationships should not involve very serious long-term commitments because teens should be more focused on their education.

On the other hand, our findings bring up several areas for concern:

- Despite having high standards for healthy relationships, teens have low expectations of ever being in such a relationship. Teens indicated that they are well aware that adult relationship problems, such as infidelity and violence, are present in many teen relationships. In fact, teens discussed infidelity as being so commonplace that it was to be expected in their relationships, even among the youngest teens. These findings echo those reported recently by Kathryn Edin and Maria Kefalas, who, in their qualitative research on adult populations, found that the prevalence of cheating, multiple partners, and short-lived relationships harbored low expectations of healthy relationships among women.⁵
- Teen girls, especially, appear to be pessimistic about their chances of finding a supportive, faithful, and caring partner. For example, many teen girls voiced frustration about teen boys' cheating and the abundance of teen boys who were "players," an accusation that many boys did not deny. Teen boys readily agreed that they cheated, in part, because doing so enhanced their reputations within their peer group.
- The scarcity of models of healthy adult relationships seriously hinders the ability of both teen girls and teen boys to forge such relationships themselves. For many teens, for example, the absence of fathers in their households or communities has become an accepted fact of life, with troubling consequences for their positive development in many areas, including male-female relationships.

Taken together, findings from our focus group study speak to the possible role that mentors can play in promoting healthy relationships and youth development.^{10,12} Given our findings, mentors may be able to serve as role models. Also, mentoring programs may want to incorporate discussions and activities that focus on how to build healthy relationship patterns, including how to show respect and be respected; the value and importance of fidelity and trust; and how to avoid or handle situations that become physically violent. Teens may especially benefit from efforts that are aimed at how to attain healthy relationships rather than why this is important—our results suggest that they already know what matters. Given the dearth of examples of couples with healthy relationships and the lack of father-figures noted by teens in the groups, mentoring programs may want to expand

their recruitment efforts to include mentors in strong, healthy relationships as well as positive male role models for both teen girls and teen boys.

Our findings also suggest that existing programs and efforts related to teen dating, teen sexual behavior, and preventing teen pregnancy and STIs may benefit from incorporating strategies aimed at building healthy romantic relationships. The teens in our study clearly voiced a strong desire for strong, healthy relationships but either don't know how to or don't expect to attain them. Programs targeted at promoting healthy relationships and not simply at preventing negative behaviors may hold particular appeal to teens.¹⁷ Likewise, these findings speak to the potential benefit that may result from recent government programs designed to promote healthy relationships among youth. For parents and program providers, our findings also highlight the need to be aware of and prepared to discuss the full range of teen relationships.

More specifically, our findings highlight the need to promote healthy intimate relationships starting from an early age. The younger teens in our study, although not as active as the older teens, were already "dating" and reported much of what was voiced by older teens. For example, in discussions of typical relationships, we found that even among the younger groups, teens' high expectations for relationships were matched with low hopes for finding and developing an ideal relationship. Thus, the pre- and early-teen years (between the ages of 12 and 14) may represent a key learning window for establishing and promoting healthy relationship patterns and ideals. Programs aimed at promoting healthy teen romantic relationships may want to make sure that they include youth in this age range in their outreach efforts. Programs and policy makers could also advocate for better role models for young healthy relationships in the media.

The issue of violence in teen relationships further underscores the need for programs promoting healthy relationships to begin early. Focus group participants agreed that outright physical violence was relatively rare in teen relationships, but that "play-fighting" was not, and that teen girls were as likely (if not more likely) to be the instigators. Moreover, even though play-fighting was often seen as harmless, some of the teens acknowledged that it could turn into "real" fighting. Thus, programs aimed at promoting healthy teen romantic relationship should address the issue of violence and such efforts should be aimed at both sexes. Again, adolescence may be a key window of time to help foster positive behaviors

ABOUT THE DATA SOURCE AND METHOD USED FOR THIS BRIEF

The data for this study came from a series of focus groups conducted by Child Trends researchers in the Spring and Summer of 2008 with adolescents living in Washington, D.C. Focus groups are discussions with a small group of people (e.g., six to eight) selected because they share characteristics and backgrounds that are thought to be critical to understanding the issue at hand. To facilitate communication and exploration of concerns that may be unique to age and gender groups, we conducted separate groups by gender and age (12-14-year-olds and 15-17-year-olds). The focus groups were comprised exclusively of African American and Hispanic teens. The study's protocol and procedures underwent review by an Institutional Review Board.

We recruited participants for the focus groups from after-school programs in Washington, D.C. Seven focus groups were conducted—five involving teen girls and two involving teen boys—with a total of 52 teens (36 females and 16 males). Because of the relatively small number of groups and participants, findings from the groups should be considered exploratory. In all, 79 percent of participants were African American and 21 percent were Latino. Roughly one-third of participants were between the ages of 15 and 17 (37 percent), and two-thirds (69 percent) lived in a family that was not headed by two biological or adoptive parents. The focus groups were moderated by experienced minority moderators of the same gender as the teens.

In focus group discussions, participants were asked to:

- describe the types of romantic relationships among teens their age;
- discuss the terms and language used to describe these relationships;
- list and describe the factors that make up a “good and healthy teen romantic relationship;”
- describe what is typical in teen romantic relationships, and
- compare the elements of a healthy teen romantic relationship with those of a healthy adult relationship.

At the start of each focus group, we explained to participants that by “romantic relationship,” we meant a relationship between a teenage boy and girl that was more than just friendship. Thus, the term “romantic relationship” in this *Research Brief* does not refer to the seriousness of the relationship, but rather to the status of that relationship as being one beyond friendship.

We held debriefings during the field period to identify initial themes and patterns. We then reviewed and analyzed the detailed notes that were taken during the groups, as well as transcriptions of the focus group discussions, to form the basis of this brief.

and curtail the cycle of intimate couple violence whose seeds are often planted early.¹⁵

CONCLUSION

The focus group study on which this brief is based has some limitations worth noting. First, the study included a relatively small sample and was largely comprised of African Americans (compared with other racial/ethnic groups) and teen girls (compared with boys). Thus, our findings may not reflect those taken from a nationally representative sample of adolescents. Second, because we recruited participants for the focus groups from after-school programs in the District of Columbia, these teens may have had more resources available to them than did other teens living in similar neighborhoods in the city.

However, we believe that focus groups were the most appropriate approach to explore how teens think and speak about teen romantic relationships. Focus groups can be used to identify important topics, hone in on issues and problems, generate solutions, share ideas, identify innovative approaches, and increase understanding about the nuances of the subject being investigated in a very personal way. In addition, focus groups allow researchers not only to find out how people think about and understand an issue, but also to gain unique perspectives based on group interactions. These interactions provide insights into the importance of issues and the extent to which consensus exists on a topic or opinion. In the case of our study, for example, many of the themes that emerged from the first focus group also came up in all other groups.

This study contributes to previous research on adolescent relationships by providing teen insights into healthy versus typical relationships. These insights are particularly important for program developers, parents, and policy makers, because relationship habits, expectations and behaviors formed in adolescence have implications for adult relationships, and may influence reproductive health outcomes in adolescence and young adulthood – including the risk of unintended childbearing and STIs.

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