

The Romantics of High School Romance:
Are Late-Adolescent Dating Relationships to be Encouraged or Avoided?

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Outline

Thesis: Experience with high school romantic relationships, whether avoided or encouraged, certainly has a great effect on one's friendships, cultural identity, and physical wellbeing; most importantly, though, high school dating affects one's interpersonal confidence. The two variables are positively correlated: the greater one's experience with healthy romantic relationships in high school, the greater his or her confidence both during and following late adolescence. Therefore, healthy high school dating relationships should not be avoided.

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“I asked a girl out once. She said yes. Then she left the school a few weeks later. She obviously really liked me.” “My high school relationships? No one ever asked me out. The end.” “How many girls did I date? Nine. Maybe ten. I don’t really remember. Crap. Eleven. Anyways, I try to treat my girlfriends the best I possibly can, and my bank account usually shows it.” When asked for a brief statement about the extent of their high school romantic relationships, students at Dordt College (selected solely on willingness to share; selected independent of age, gender, major, ethnicity, etc.) indicated a wide array of experience.

This brief, anonymous, far-from-scholarly survey offers an accurate representation of the variance in American dating. Unlike stages of normal childhood development, which are universally acknowledged, stages of romantic development are dependent upon a number of factors unique to the individual. It is impossible to develop a model that systematizes steps to romantic maturity. Nonetheless, experience with high school romantic relationships, whether avoided or encouraged, certainly has a great effect on one’s friendships, cultural identity, and physical wellbeing; most importantly, though, high school dating affects one’s interpersonal confidence. The two variables are positively correlated: the greater one’s experience with healthy romantic relationships in high school, the greater his or her confidence both during and following late adolescence. Therefore, healthy high school dating relationships should not be avoided.

First, the phrase “healthy high school dating relationship” must be defined. The true purpose dating is to find a spouse, to seek out someone with whom the remainder of will be spent. However, high school romantic relationships do not usually culminate in marriage. According to the Huffington Post, “only two percent of new marriages in North America are compromised of ‘high school sweethearts’” (Manning). Further, as a survey at Albion College indicated, only 5% of all high school relationships survive the first semester of college (Hyman). If it is unrealistic to believe that the purpose of dating will reach fruition in high school, why should high-school relationships be encouraged? So many high school dating horror stories circulate through communities. A difficult break-up made both parties leery of relationships in the future. More time was spent planning dates than planning for exams, taking its toll on GPA, scholarships awarded, college acceptance, etc. What could have been an innocent relationship was blown out of proportion because of stereotypical high school gossip, resulting in heartache for all involved. Emotional scarring resulted when one party fell in love with another, but the love was not reciprocated. Much of one’s soul was barred, much of one’s purity given away, taking away from the sacredness of future marriage. Many stories that follow these plotlines are told (and lived!) daily. In light of these instances, is it worth it to take the risk and date in high school? Are today’s teens trying to grow up too quickly? Shouldn’t one wait until he or she is older and more mature to begin the dating process for fear of heartbreak?

Perhaps the solution does not lie in avoiding high school romance altogether, but in shifting its focus. Perhaps high school dating should have a purpose of its own, separate from that of marriage-seeking relationships. Dating offers its own set of benefits separate from marriage, most notably interpersonal confidence development; these benefits are applicable to younger as well as older individuals. When these late-adolescent dating relationships are entered with different expectations and different desired outcomes than marriage-oriented ones, they can

be classified as “healthy.” High-school relationships, when viewed as the light-hearted, temporary, personal-growth-based interactions that they truly are, can become primary opportunities for growth. There is certainly a way to do high school dating right. This type of high school dating, focused on appreciating another person and understanding of one’s self as opposed to overblown infatuation, yields benefits. *Healthy* high school dating, not high school dating in general, should be encouraged.

But when and how should these encouraged relationships take root? It is impossible to compile a specific model for normal romantic development, though psychologists have observed a number of key factors that inform the romantic variance observed among American high school students and reflected in Dordt students’ accounts.

In a 2000 study, Jennifer Connolly “explored how the emergence and quality of heterosexual romantic relationships might be facilitated by adolescents’ peer networks” (Connolly 1395). This study was conducted by means of a Peer-Relationships Questionnaire completed by the same set high school students annually from freshman to junior year. These students simply compiled a list of up to thirty people with whom they spent social time regularly. Once the list was compiled, students would answer three questions about each friend: “(1) Do you know this person well? (2) Do you consider him/her a really close friend? (3) Do you and this person sometimes/often do things together on weekends and after school?” (1397). Then, students were asked to identify one to three best friends, and one boyfriend/girlfriend. For this more intimate circle, students completed a Network of Relationships Inventory, which surveys perception of “social support” and “negative interaction”: “The perception of social support factor entails instrumental aid, intimacy, nurturance, affection, reliable alliance, and admiration. The perception of negative interaction factor entails conflict and punishment” (1397). Thus, the

Peer-Relationships Questionnaire measured the *quantity* of any given student's peer group and the Network of Relationships Inventory measured the *quality* of these relationships.

Researchers then compiled statistics about how many of the surveyed relationships were same-sex and how many were mixed, how many were genuinely close friendships and how many were surface-level, etc. Ultimately, researchers concluded, "Adolescents with large networks and many other-sex friends were more likely to have a romantic relationship than other adolescents" (1396). Engaging in romantic relationships is a natural result of engaging with multi-gendered peer groups, which primarily emerges in late middle school and early high school. Because adolescent dating is a byproduct of developing more diverse friendships, romantic relationships are a natural outflow of a positive cause: increased numbers of friendships, which is indicative of increased personal growth. Dating proves means of developing one's own skill in interaction, both platonically in peer groups and romantically with certain individuals from those peer groups. Dating also proves a means of understanding one's own identity, as one's exact manner of interaction indicates much about his or her personal character.

Dating relationships are not only spurred by heterosexual peers, but also by cultural/ethnic influences. In a 2009 study, developmental psychologist Constance Milbrath interviewed southern-California high school students, seeking their objective thoughts on high school romance. First, students' "high school dating histories," including topics such as "number of dates, longest relationship, currently in a relationship, length of current relationship, age and race/ethnicity of current partner, and being sexually active" were surveyed (Milbrath 319). Then, the 819 students with the most relationship experience were interviewed, using six primary questions to eliminate stories specific to the interviewee and obtain general answers about dating: "(1) What are some reasons to be in a relationship? (2) What are the rules of a relationship? (3) What things do partners need to talk about in a relationship? (4) What things screw up a

relationship? (5) What are some issues people have about sex in a relationship? and (6) What are the most important things someone can do to make a relationship work?” (323). All of this interview data was compiled and analyzed by a research team; each member of this team held higher degrees in anthropology, psychology, and education.

After all compiling all interview data, Milbrath concluded that a number of “cultural models,” or “interrelated set of concepts representing an object or event that is shared by members of a social group” (314) influence dating relationships. Examples of primary “cultural models” include: “appreciation for parental role” (parents are primary source of relationship advice), “contextualized male behavior” (accepted criteria for male behavior depending on setting, i.e. with girlfriend, with male peers, etc.), “game” (viewing dating as means of fun, not of lifelong substance), “morality of sex” (ethical implications of sex with emphasis on female virginity), “prestige” (need to maintain high reputation among peers), “relationship baggage” (problems and/or feelings from previous relationships mingling with those of the current relationship), “romanticized relationship” (seeking an ideal partner), “serial flings” (relationship based on fun), “serious relationship” (relationship based on trust), “talking to” (maintaining low-key relationships with multiple people of the opposite gender; getting to know many individuals before becoming serious with one), and “work” (maintaining sex-only relationships on the side of a trust-based relationship) (326). Each “cultural model” was referenced in each interview; every student, no matter ethnicity, gender, level of romantic experience, etc., had preconceptions that fit into these categories.

However, the precise nature of these preconceptions differed from ethnic group to ethnic group. The contrast in “cultural models” employed in dating relationships was most evident between those of African and Hispanic descent. The two groups had similar dating history reports: both groups’ average number of dates fell between 2.5 and 3; both groups’ average age

of partner was 17; both groups' percentage of individuals dating someone of the same race fell between 85 and 90. Additionally, both groups attended school together in identical environments (322). Regardless of these similarities, preconceptions on "cultural models" differed greatly between the two groups. For example, African-American students indicated longer-lasting relationships than those of Latino students, and African-American students also indicated a higher percentage of sexual activity than Hispanic students. Because the two ethnic groups had similar dating history reports and attended school together in similar environments, the effects must be based solely in ethnic variability (336). Dating proves means of celebrating one's heritage through embracing and employing inherited ethnic views on romantic relationships.

High school dating is affected by both developing multi-gendered peer groups and by one's ethnic/cultural background. These two factors are major contributors to the timing of and manner of adolescent dating, but they are also positive effects in and of themselves. Through engaging with the diverse peer groups in which romantic relationships are cultivated, adolescents learn more about how to interact with others and about what those means of interaction indicate about their own personalities. Through experiencing dating while still living at home, where parent's cultural/ethnic influence is still primary, dating becomes a means of connecting to one's heritage. The causes themselves become positive effects.

Other positive effects exist separate from causes, though. For example, Scott R. Braithwaite conducted a survey in 2010 to demonstrate a correlation between a student's relationships status and physical wellbeing. After sending out voluntary surveys to 4,485 college students and statistically compiling all received responses, researchers concluded, "individuals in committed relationships experienced fewer mental health problems and were less likely to be overweight/obese... [Also,] college students in committed dating relationships engaged in less risky behavior (e.g., binge drinking, driving while intoxicated) than their single counterparts" (7).

This study specifically looked at college students, though the same conclusions can be applied to high school students; additionally, students that experience healthy dating in high school are more likely to experience the same in college, making these conclusions long-lasting. Those in dating relationships have an outlet for their emotions/musings, and means of avoiding solitary time, lending to decreased mental health and weight problems. Further, those in dating relationships have means of entertaining themselves apart from drugs and alcohol, lending to decreased risky behavior. Thus, dating relationships result in physical wellbeing.

Romantic relationships result in not only physical/mental health, but also social health. In 2011, Amber L. Paulk conducted a survey among 1432 high school students (some daters, some non-daters) enrolled in a Family and Consumer Sciences class in an anonymous high school. Students were asked to rate on a scale from 1 to 5 how strongly they agreed or disagreed with various statements. For example, the questions “I am nervous when romantic partners get too close to me” and “I often wish that my partner’s feelings for me were as significant as my feelings for him/her” were used (Paulk 1034). These questions sought to give empirical data to the assumption that those engaged in dating relationships are more socially competent than those that remain single.

After compiling all the data, researchers did indeed prove their point: “Daters were less anxious, less avoidant, and more competent than non-daters. A moderate negative association was found between avoidance and interpersonal competence” (1027). In other words, the more one avoids relationships, the lower his or her interpersonal confidence. Interpersonal confidence consists of five primary categories: “initiation” (actively seeking friendships and social activities), “negative assertion” (confronting friends who do not treat others well), “disclosure” (making oneself vulnerable with close friends), “conflict management” (ability to resolve fights with close friends), and “emotional support” (making oneself available when a friend is

experiencing adversity) (1034). Competence in each of these areas is certainly a positive trait; one must be capable of handling diverse social situations. If healthy high school romantic relationships increase competence in this regard, then they should certainly be encouraged.

Ultimately, as Paulk's study concluded:

Although adolescents' relationships are considered superficial by some... they are pivotal experiences in adolescents' lives and demand more empirical attention [because]... being involved in an active dating relationship affects the relation between one's sense of security (assessed in terms of anxiety about and avoidance of close, romantic relationships) and the sense of interpersonal competence in relationships, both peer and romantic. (Paulk 1028-1029)

If healthy high school romantic relationships equip students in their interpersonal confidence, then this healthy dating should be encouraged on this premise alone. However, high school dating is also a means of connecting with one's ethnic heritage, maintaining physical wellbeing, and developing one's own identity through both platonic friendships (from which dating relationships stem) and romantic friendships. As long as high school romance is limited to the healthy realm, where the relationship is viewed as the temporary friendship it truly is, it certainly proves more beneficial than detrimental. Thus, healthy high school relationships should not be avoided, but should be encouraged.

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