

Attachment in Adolescence

The period from puberty to the mid-teens has a unique function in the development of attachment relationships. With the onset of sexual maturity, interest in a peer best friend of the same gender (typical of the school years, i.e., roughly 6 years to puberty) shifts to sexualized interest in a peer, thus imbuing the relationship with sexual feelings. This produces several changes in attachment, while retaining some aspects of school-age best friend attachments. The new features are physical interest in the girl- or boyfriend, complimentary behavioral and functional differences between the partners in the relationship (as compared to the parity of school-age best friends), flirtatious behavior, and romantic feelings of being ‘in love.’ These features are shared by both hetero- and homosexual adolescent couples.

What remains largely unchanged is the self-serving function of the relationship with each partner thinking of how he or she benefits and whether he or she is happy in the relationship, as opposed to considering the needs of the other partner and how he or she might help to meet those needs. Consistent with this, the focus is very immediate, as opposed to considering how the partner might work out over many years, as a life partner and parent of one’s children (Black, Jaeger, McCartney, & Crittenden, 2000). In addition, the romantic feelings often have a sudden onset and equally sudden cessation; the slow development of a deep relationship usually awaits the ‘transition from adolescence to adulthood’. Crucially, parents are still the primary attachment figure when the adolescent feels threatened or needs comfort. Together, these characteristics lead to the relatively brief duration of many adolescent love affairs (Cretzmeyer, 2003).

In spite of the sexual feelings and flirtatious behavior, these early romantic relationships do not usually include sexual intercourse. When, however, adolescents have intense needs for protection and comfort that are not met at home through the care of their parents, they may become precociously sexual, both establishing sexual relationships and also engaging in sexual intercourse at younger ages than children who are not at physical and psychological risk (Belsky, Houts, & Fearon, 2010). This, of course, means that the least mature and psychologically balanced adolescents are the most likely to become parents during adolescence.

The advantages of this interlude between close friendship and adult sexuality are that young adolescents (a) gain experience in several different relationships, thus having the opportunity to discover how their personality and behavior change when paired with different people, (b) learn to use new sexualized (flirtatious) forms of non-verbal communication, and (c) gather experience in the more complex context of complementary roles. These skills will be needed to select an adult life partner with whom to raise one’s children.

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When adolescents live in relatively safe circumstances with understanding and developmentally tolerant parents, this can support identity formation. However, when adolescents live in threatening circumstances, there is a risk that they will simplify the circumstances, take one side or the other, and through a pattern of supporting one perspective and castigating or attacking the other, engage in anti-social activity.

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