The Significance of Adolescent Dating Experiences for Competence in Adult Romantic Relationships

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Background

- There is considerable debate regarding the developmental significance of adolescent dating relationship experiences for later competence in adult romantic relationships:
- Some consider adolescent dating experiences an important context for the development of interpersonal skills, expectations, and beliefs that influence adult romantic relationship competence (e.g., Furman, 2002; Madsen & Collins, 2011).
- Others view it as an emerging developmental task that has limited significance for later romantic relationships (Roisman, Masten, Coatsworth, & Tellegen, 2004).
- Adolescents' dating experiences (16 years) predicted higher quality interactions with romantic partners during early adulthood (20-21 years; Madsen & Collins, 2011).
- It is unclear whether adolescent dating experiences predict romantic relationship competence beyond emerging adulthood.

Purpose

- Investigate whether the predictive significance of adolescent dating experiences for romantic relationship competence extends into adulthood.

Methods

Participants
- N = 179 (48% female)
- First-born children of low-income mothers
- Followed from birth through 32 years

Predictor Measures
- Childhood Relationship Experiences
  - Early Supportive Caregiving (12 - 42 months)
    - Composite of observational measures:
      - Attachment security (12 & 18 months; Strange Situation)
      - Maternal Supportive Presence (24 & 42 months; laboratory tasks)
      - Parental Sensitivity Measured by the Sensitivity to Child Scale from HOME (36 months)
    - Peer Social Competence (7-9 years)
      - Composite of 1st, 2nd, & 3rd grade teacher rankings
      - Overall peer competence in school (e.g., popularity, peer acceptance, social skills)
    - Parent-Adolescent Relationship Quality (13 years)
      - Videotaped family interactions
        - Composite of 7-pg. observer coded scales (see Roisman et al., 2001):
          - Sibling I (conflict to express ideas)
          - Balance III (ability to work together to accomplish goals of the task)
        - Emotional Affect
      - Adolescent Dating Experiences
        - Quality of adolescents' dating relationships (16 years)
          - Composite of coder rated 5-pt. scales based on interviews:
            - Conflict Resolution, Disclosure, Enjoyment, Intimacy, Security
          - Average number of dating partners reported

Results

- Peer social competence significantly predicted romantic relationship competence at age 23 and age 32.
- Adolescent dating quality and involvement marginally predicted 23 year romantic relationship competence.
- Dating involvement in adolescence significantly predicted 32 year romantic relationship competence, even after accounting for romantic relationship competence at age 23.
- Higher numbers of dating partners in adolescence significantly predicted less competent romantic relationships at 32 years.
- Relationship competence at 23 years predicted relationship competence at 32 years.

Table 1. Correlations among study variables.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Female</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Early Care (12-42 mo.)</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Peer Social Comp. (7-9 yrs)</td>
<td>0.20**</td>
<td>0.18*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Parent-adol. Rel. Qty (13 yrs)</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>0.34*</td>
<td>0.24**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Dating Quality (16 yrs)</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Dating Invol. (16-17.5 yrs)</td>
<td>-0.18*</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>-0.15*</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.10</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Romantic Rel. Comp. (23 yrs)</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.16*</td>
<td>0.23**</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.20**</td>
<td>-0.17*</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. Romantic Rel. Comp. (32 yrs)</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>0.18*</td>
<td>0.29**</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.19**</td>
<td>-0.23**</td>
<td>0.42**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: tpc.10. *tp<.05. **tp<.01.

Table 2. Linear regressions predicting to Romantic Relationship Competence at both 23 years and 32 years

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor</th>
<th>Romantic Relationship Competence 23 years</th>
<th>Romantic Relationship Competence 32 years</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>β</td>
<td>SE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early Care (12-42 mo.)</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer Social Comp. (7-9 yrs)</td>
<td>0.18*</td>
<td>0.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent-adol. Rel. Qty (13 yrs)</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
<td>0.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dating Quality (16 yrs)</td>
<td>-0.16*</td>
<td>0.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dating Involvement (16 yrs)</td>
<td>-12†</td>
<td>0.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship Competence (23 yrs)</td>
<td>-34**</td>
<td>0.08</td>
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<tr>
<td>Overall R2</td>
<td>0.11</td>
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</table>

Note: tpc.10. *tp<.05. **tp<.01.

Conclusions

- Adolescent dating relationships are an important social context for adult romantic relationships:
  - Early adult romantic relationship competence appears to draw on individuals’ cumulative interpersonal histories, including:
    - Peer experiences in middle childhood,
    - Dating experiences during adolescence, and
    - Romantic relationship experiences in emerging adulthood.
  - Adolescents involved in several transitory dating relationships are less likely to form and maintain healthy, long-term romantic relationships during early adulthood compared to adolescents involved in fewer longer term relationships.

References