“Early romantic relationships offer many opportunities for learning”

Interview by Eveline von Arx
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Early romantic relationships play a very important role in an adolescent’s development. Researcher Sabine Walper discusses what young people learn through these relationships and the importance of parents as role models.

Eveline von Arx: How important are an adolescent’s first romantic relationships?

Sabine Walper: Romantic relationships, along with identity formation and the choice of a vocation, play a crucial role in a young person’s development. Children are entering puberty and reaching physical maturity earlier today than 50 years ago, so the topic of romance comes up more quickly than in the past. Adolescence is also a time of changes in the parent–child relationship, as young people gain more emotional autonomy. They are increasingly focused on their peers – first on same-sex friends, and then on romantic partners.

EvA: What do adolescents learn from their first romantic relationships? What role do such relationships play for other important aspects of development?

SW: A first romantic relationship is exciting, and often accompanied by a feeling of intense longing. Adolescents learn to relate their own needs and desires to those of a romantic partner. They gain practice in viewing the world from a different perspective and empathizing with others. While this is true in friendships as well, there is an element of uncertainty and insecurity in a romantic relationship that is largely absent in a friendship.

Our investigation, conducted as part of “pairfam,” a German panel study of 4,000 teenagers that focused on relationships and families, found that an adolescent’s first romantic relationship provides less emotional security than the relationships of young adults. Achieving that sense of security is an important developmental step. We should also remember that early romantic relationships are not necessarily expected to last. As adolescents grow older, their relationships tend to be longer and they become less anxious about doing something wrong.

EvA: In modelling what a partnership can be, do parents influence their teenaged children’s romantic relationships?

SW: Families, and particularly the parent-child relationship, certainly play an important role. Young people who feel insecure in their first romantic relationships are more likely to report that their families have failed to provide the security they needed. As a result, they may be quite guarded in their romantic relationships. It is very important for children to bond with their parents. Parental conflict is another factor that can make young people insecure as they embark on their first relationships.
EvA: In other words, the atmosphere in the home is crucial for adolescents’ attitudes toward romantic relationships.

SB: Yes, because it is at home that children observe whether family members value and appreciate one another, and how solidarity and emotions are shown. What they learn from their parents, and how their parents interact, are very important factors shaping their relationships with others – perhaps most importantly those with their partners. But they are not the only factors.

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EvA: Do some young people consciously avoid repeating the negative behaviors they have observed in their parents’ relationships?

SB: This certainly appears to be the case. Based on interviews with the adolescents in our study, we see that some young people are determined to do things differently and distance themselves from behaviors that they have found to be harmful. This may mean deciding not to argue so much with their partners or not to give them the cold shoulder, after seeing their mother – or father – do these things.

EvA: In a romantic relationship, young people also have to learn to handle difficult situations – rejection, for example.

SW: Yes. This is part of learning and developing. A first breakup can be very difficult, but self-esteem can mitigate the impact of that experience. In extreme cases, however, breakups can compromise a teenager’s development and self-esteem – for example if they repeatedly receive the message that they’re not accepted.

EvA: Can learning and performance in school be affected by an unhappy romantic relationship?

SW: Unhappy relationships and breakups can lead to depression. This has a negative effect on motivation and concentration, and thus also on learning. Early romantic relationships are often very emotionally intense, leading teenagers to invest a great deal of time and energy in them that would otherwise be devoted to hobbies, friends, family – and schoolwork.

EvA: What will researchers be focusing on in the future?

SW: We want to find out what resources young people need so that the beginning of their romantic lives will be positive. Some rush into relationships that aren’t good for them, choosing the wrong partner or allowing themselves to be guided by negative experiences in the past. So it is especially important to reach out to children from difficult social circumstances and family backgrounds who lack the tools they need for a successful relationship. Violence, too, can be an issue. In the United States, dating violence has been identified as a major problem. More attention should be given to this topic in Europe as well.

Sabine Walper is a professor of education at the Institute for Education at Munich’s Ludwig Maximilian University (LMU) in Germany. Her research focuses on adolescents. She has served as director of research at the German Youth Institute since 2012, and has been granted leave from LMU for this purpose until 2018. The topic of romantic relationships in adolescence has

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been one of her major research interests for many years.

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