**Why Your Partner May Be Like Your Parent**

**Is your childhood wrecking your romantic life?**

By Peg Strep

Perhaps nothing is as disheartening as the discovery—after years of trying to escape from your dysfunctional [childhood](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/child-development)—that you have actually managed to recreate it.

One woman, the daughter of a hypercritical and demanding mother, recently talked with me about her recently ended, two-decades-long [marriage](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/marriage):

*"I still have issues with feeling capable and doing things right. Unfortunately, I married my mother and was never able to feel competent in my husband’s eyes, either. I also never really felt loved by him, in the same way I didn’t feel loved by my mother.”*

A man emailed me recently with similar concerns:

*“On the surface, my wife and my mother have nothing in common. My wife is petite and blonde, well-educated, polished, and sophisticated; my brunette and big-boned mother is none of those things. But they both criticize me constantly. Nothing I ever did was good enough for my mother because my older brother was perfect. My wife rules the roost with a dissatisfied look on her face which is depressing and familiar.”*

How can you end up marrying your mother (or father) if, on a conscious level, you’ve been on the run from her? The answer has everything to do with [attachment](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/attachment) theory and [unconscious](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/unconscious) mental models.

A body of psychological research suggests that our earliest relationships, especially with our mother, not only can influence how we are able to connect to others as adults—in romantic and other contexts—but also create internalized scripts or working models of how relationships work.

Briefly, *securely attached* children, with loving and consistently attuned mothers, may grow up to be adults who see themselves positively, are comfortable seeking out close relationships and depending on others, and don’t worry about being alone or being rejected. *Insecurely attached* children of inconsistently attentive and attuned mothers may develop [anxious](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/anxiety) or ambivalent attachments, while those who have neglectful or hostile mothers may be *avoidantly attached*.

According to the work of Kim Bartholomew, anxiously attached people will be “preoccupied” in relationships; they have a negative view of themselves and look to others to validate them. They are needy and demanding in relationships, and they move from one romance to another. Avoidant attachment yields two different separate behaviors—“fearful” and “dismissing.” *Fearful avoidants* have a negative [self-image](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/identity), but are also passive and dependent; they actually want [intimacy](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/relationships) but they are also desperately afraid of being hurt and distrust others. Fearful avoidants are the hardest category of insecure people to partner with because they send out mixed signals. The *dismissing avoidant* has a more positive self-image but would also agree with the following statement: *I am comfortable without close emotional relationships. It is very important to me to feel independent and self-sufficient and I prefer not to depend on others and have others depend on me*.

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As human beings, we are drawn, on an unconscious level, toward the familiar. For a securely attached individual whose primary connections have taught her that people are loving, dependable, and trustworthy, this is just dandy. But for those of us who are insecurely attached, the familiar can be dangerous territory.

A study by Glenn Geher suggests that we do tend to choose a romantic partner who is similar to our opposite-[sex](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/sex) parent. In his research, he not only asked participants to self-report on how their romantic partners were like their opposite-sex parents across various categories—he actually interviewed the parents as well. The shared characteristics he discovered between his subjects' partners and their opposite-sex parents were robust. Needless to say, when romantic partners were like parents in *good* ways, relationship satisfaction was relatively high; when the similarities were related to *negative* characteristics, however, relationship satisfaction was relatively low.

When we meet someone new, it’s not just our unconscious models that are in the room or at the bar; there are conscious assessments, too. So the question remains: How do we end up marrying Mom if she’s been critical, unavailable or unloving? That’s exactly what Claudia Chloe Brumbaugh and R. Chris Fraley asked: *How do insecurely attached people attract mates?* After all, we all want a securely attached partner—one who’s emotionally available, loving, supportive, dependable—not an insecure or clingy one, or someone who’s detached and uncommunicative. How do we get roped in?

The researchers suggested that what happens is a combination of misreading by one partner and a fair amount of strategizing and even dissembling by the insecure partner. They point out that anxiously attached people may seem fascinating at first—their preoccupation may easily be confused with self-disclosure and [openness](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/openness), which facilitates a sense of connection. Similarly, an avoidant person may come across as independent and strong. In a series of experiments, the team discovered that avoidants—despite the fact that they don’t want emotional connection—actually made lots of eye contact and used touch more than securely attached people to seem more appealing in a [dating](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/mating) situation. Avoidants appear to use [humor](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/humor) in dating situations to create a sense of sharing and detract from their essential aloofness.

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Our working models of relationships may not only shape how we act but also how we *remember* acting—they actually skew our recall, Jeffry A. Simpson and his colleagues discovered, which could make it even harder to get along when the working models of two romantic partners are different. After measuring the attachment orientation of each individual, Simpson's team had each member of the couple identify a significant conflict in the relationship and, choosing one from each list, had the couple engage in a conflict-resolution discussion which was then videotaped. Right after the discussion, each person rated how supportive or emotionally distant he or she had been. They were then asked the same question one week later. What the researchers found was that the more distress there was in the conflict discussion, the more activated the individual’s working model seemed to become: For example, avoidant people, if they were relatively distressed during the discussion, rated themselves as being less supportive when they remembered the discussion than they had said they were initially. What people respond to in relationships, the researchers surmised, is "memories of the interaction filtered through their working models.”

This research explains why it is that if we have, indeed, partnered with someone whose internalized scripts are very different from our own, the discord is likely to be endless, with little resolution in sight without some kind of intervention.

It is especially true if, in fact, you married your mother.

**Erik Erikson and Self-Identity**

Angela Oswalt

According to Erik Erikson, a prominent developmental theorist of the 1950's, youth must resolve two life "crises" during adolescence. Unlike many other developmental theorists of his era, Erikson's psychosocial theory of human development covers the entire lifespan, including adulthood. Erikson used the term "crisis" to describe a series of internal conflicts that are linked to developmental stages. According to Erikson's theory, the way a person resolves the crisis will determine their personal identity and future development. In this article we limit our discussion to the crises of adolescence but more complete information about Erikson's theory can be found in the [Introduction to Child Development article](https://www.risas.org/poc/view_doc.php?type=doc&id=7927&cn=28).

The first crisis typically occurs during early to middle adolescence, and is called the crisis of identity versus identity confusion. This crisis represents the struggle to find a balance between developing a unique, individual identity while still being accepted and "fitting in." Thus, youth must determine who they want to be, and how they want to be perceived by others. Erikson believed that when youth successfully navigate this crisis they emerge with a clear understanding of their individual identity and can easily share this "self" with others; therefore, they are healthy and well-adjusted. As a result, they are confident individuals who can freely associate with other people without loosing their own identity. However, when youth fail to navigate this crisis successfully, they are uncertain about who they are. Lacking this understanding, they can become socially disconnected and cut-off from others; or conversely, they can develop an exaggerated sense of their own importance and may adopt extremist positions. According to Erikson's theory, when youth become stuck at this stage, they will be unable to become emotionally mature adults.

The second crisis, occurring between late adolescence and early adulthood, is called the crisis of intimacy versus isolation. This crisis represents the struggle to resolve the reciprocal nature of intimacy; i.e., to achieve a mutual balance between giving love and support, and receiving love and support. Thus, youth must determine how to develop and to maintain close friendships outside the family, as well as how to achieve reciprocity in romantic relationships. Erikson believed that when youth successfully navigate this crisis they emerge with the ability to form honest, reciprocal relationships with others and have the capacity to bond with others to achieve common goals (e.g., marriage). When youth fail to navigate this crisis successfully, they can become distant and self-contained; or conversely, they can become needy, dependent, and vulnerable. If youth do not resolve this crisis, their emotional development becomes stalled, and as a result, they will remain isolated and lonely without social supports.

While Erikson's theory remains influential, it has been revised over time. Most developmental theorists no longer consider this developmental process as a series of "crises" per se. In addition, this developmental process is considered to be much more fluid and flexible than Erikson first thought. Contemporary theorists now believe that the process of determining one's identity is a natural process in which youth "try on" or experiment with different identities, and experience the different outcomes of their experiments, in order to determine who they are, and how they want to be perceived by others. For instance, a girl may be curious about Gothic subculture decides she might like to ["go Goth."](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Goth_subculture) So she gets her lip pierced, dyes her hair black, and starts wearing a lot of black and purple Victorian styled clothing with a seductive flair. She starts hanging around with other Goths, and listening to Goth music. One outcome of this identity experiment might be rejection by her former set of friends, and constant friction with her parents over her "outlandish" clothing. Another outcome might be a sense belonging and camaraderie that she shares with members of this sub-culture, or perhaps she enjoys all the extra attention she now receives. These outcomes may offset the negative outcomes of her experiment. She is experimenting with a different identity and experiencing the results of her experiment. She will ultimately use this information to decide upon her identity.

Similarly, youth will experiment with different social skills and social strategies. For instance, a girl might try to be aloof and distant around boys to see if she might attract some more attention this way. Youth will also observe their peers, and adults they admire, to develop and improve their social skills. For instance, they may watch a popular teen at a party in order to learn better social skills. They might notice that this well-liked peer is very funny and tells a good joke; or they may notice how their vivacious aunt is always asking for other people's opinions, rather than monopolizing a conversation by talking about herself. This learning process enables them to create a strong, social web of family, friends, and even lifetime companions. During this process youth will experience both successes and failures along the way as they experiment with different approaches during their interactions with others. Ultimately, this social support network enables youth to create emotional intimacy with a few select people, and to find satisfaction within these relationships.

More about how youth build social bonds will be found later in [this article](https://www.risas.org/poc/view_doc.php?type=doc&id=41167&cn=1310).

James Marcia is another influential theorist who expanded upon Erikson's concept of [identity crisis and identity confusion](https://www.risas.org/poc/view_doc.php?type=doc&id=41163&cn=1310). His initial work was published during the 1960's but his theory continues to be refined in accordance with recent research findings. Although Marcia's theory originally conceptualized identity development in terms of a progressive developmental trend, his theory has subsequently become more descriptive and categorical, defining and identifying particular configurations of identity exploration and commitment.

Marcia's theory descriptively categorizes four main points or stations along the continuum of identity development. These stations or points describe very different identity conditions, ranging from a diffuse and indeterminate individual identity to a precisely defined and highly specific individual identity. Similar to Erikson, Marcia believed that certain situations and events (called "crises") serve as catalysts prompting movement along this continuum and through the various identity statuses. These crises create internal conflict and emotional upheaval, thereby causing adolescents to examine and question their values, beliefs, and goals. As they explore new possibilities, they may form new beliefs, adopt different values, and make different choices. According to Marcia's theory, these developmental crises ultimately cause adolescents to develop a progressively greater commitment to a particular individual identity via the process of identity exploration prompted by developmental crises.

Marcia used the term identity status to label and describe four unique developmental identity stations or points. These are: identity diffusion, identity foreclosure, moratorium and identity achievement. Each identity status represents a particular configuration of youth's progress with regard to identity exploration and commitment to the values, beliefs, and goals that contribute to identity. Though the different identity statuses are in some sense progressive (in the sense that they flow one to the next), Marcia's theory does not assume that every adolescent will pass through and experience all four identity statuses. Some youth may experience only one or two identity statuses during adolescence. Additionally, there is no assumption that a youth's identity status is uniform across all aspects of their development. Youth may have different identity statues across different domains such as work, religion, and politics. In this sense it is possible for youth to have more than one identity status at a time. Furthermore, unlike Erickson's stage theory, Marcia's theory accounts for multi-directional movement between and among the various identity statuses. For instance, youth may experience a traumatic event such as parental divorce, or a violent assault, which may cause them to re-evaluate their understanding of the world and their value system. This type of crisis may cause them to retreat to a previously enacted identity status as they integrate this new information.

The first identity status, identity diffusion, describes youth who have neither explored nor committed to any particular identity. Thus, this identity status represents a low level of exploration and a low level of commitment. These adolescents haven't considered their identity at all, and haven't established any life goals. They are reactive, passively floating through life and dealing with each situation as it arises. Their primary motivation is hedonic; the avoidance of discomfort and the acquisition of pleasure. By way of illustration, consider the example of Tyler, who stumbled his way through high school and graduated last year (but just barely). Tyler still doesn't know what he wants to do with his life. In fact, he hasn't really given much thought at all to what he'd like to accomplish. He hasn't applied to any colleges or technical schools. He still works part-time at the pizza shop; a job he started while in high school so that he could have a little extra spending money. He doesn't earn enough money to live on his own so he lives with his parents, but he doesn't pay them any rent or even pay for his own groceries. Nonetheless, he hasn't even considered applying for a better paying, full-time job. Whenever his frustrated mother asks, "What are you doing with your life?" he just mutters, "I dunno." Tyler hasn't even considered this question, and has no goals or plans of any sort.

The second identity status is the identity foreclosure status. This identity status represents a low degree of exploration but a high degree of commitment. At this identity status adolescents are not actively trying to determine what is important to them. They are not questioning the values and beliefs they have been taught. Instead, these youth obtain their identity simply by accepting the beliefs and values of their family, community, and culture. In a sense, they passively accept the identity assigned to them. While these youth are committed to values and life goals assigned to them, they do not question why they should be, nor do they consider any alternatives. For example, Jasmine, 17, is applying to the same college that her mother and grandmother both attended, and she has "decided" to major in elementary education. She really hasn't thought about whether or not she wants to go to college, or what other colleges she might like to attend. Nor has she considered any other career options besides elementary school teacher. If asked about her plans she might say, "All the women in my family became elementary teachers for a few years and then stayed home with their own children. My mom and grandma seemed to do just fine, so it seems good enough for me." Jasmine has accepted she will be just like all the other women in her family. She has not questioned whether the life path chosen by the other women in her family is acceptable to her, but simply accepts that her goal is to proceed according to the usual and customary path of the women before her.

The third identity status is called moratorium. This identity status represents high degree of exploration but a low degree of commitment. At this status, youth are in the midst of an identity "crisis" which has prompted them to explore and experiment with different values, beliefs, and goals. However, they have not made any final decisions about which beliefs and values are most important to them, and which principles should guide their lives. Thus, they are not yet committed to a particular identity. They are keeping their options open. For example, Tim, 14, may suddenly begin to argue with his parents about going to the Sunday worship service at the Methodist Christian Church, even though he has attended this service with his family since childhood. Instead, he likes to spend his timing reading about all the different world religions and plans to visit several mosques, temples, and churches around the area to see what their worship services are like. Or, he may question the logic of religion altogether, and he may even wonder whether God exists at all. It is clear that Tim is not quite certain what he believes yet, but he is actively exploring and considering what values, principles, and beliefs he wants to live by.

The final identity status is identity achievement. This identity status represents both a high degree of exploration and a high degree of commitment. Youth are said to have achieved their identity by a process of active exploration and strong commitment to a particular set of values, beliefs, and life goals that has emerged from this active exploration and examination. At this identity status youth will have decided what values and goals are most important to them, and what purpose, or mission will direct their life. Youth at the identity achievement status are able to prioritize what is important to them and have sorted through the many possibilities of who they want to be. They will have experimented with many different beliefs and values, and analyzed their pathway in life. To fully achieve this type of identity youth must feel positive and confident about their decisions and values. For example, Miranda cast her vote for the presidential election the very first year she was allowed to vote. But, she did so only after carefully researching all the different candidates and their positions on issues that were important to her. First, she gave a great deal of thought by considering her own beliefs and values system. Next, she figured out which issues were most important to her based on her beliefs and values. And finally, she determined which candidate best matched her beliefs and values on the issues she considered most important.

As mentioned, these four identity statuses describe points along a continuum moving from an initially diffuse, undefined individual identity to a highly specific and well-defined, individual sense of self. Inherent in Marcia's theory is the assumption that a mature and well-adjusted person possesses a well-defined and individually determined identity. This assumption reflects an implicit set of values common to many developed Western societies concerning the desirability of an individually defined identity; but, this set of values may not be universally shared. In contemporary Western cultures, there is a great value placed upon individual needs, rights, and freedoms. Therefore it is only natural that such societies would define maturity in terms of a highly evolved sense of an individual self. But some other cultures value the needs of the larger community over any single individual. In such cultures, maturity is defined by the ability to subjugate individual pursuits and desires in the service of the group's greater good. Ironically, these cultures would consider the importance Westerners assign to individual identity an indication of immaturity.

It is evident there can be a great deal of variation in determining an individual identity. Furthermore, the development of an identity cannot be separated from personal values and beliefs and is discussed in the [following section](https://www.risas.org/poc/view_doc.php?type=doc&id=41165&cn=1310). Emotional development is similarly related to the development of morality which is discussed in [another section](https://www.risas.org/poc/view_doc.php?type=doc&id=41172&cn=1310). Likewise, self-identity includes an understanding of ones gender and its role in determining "Who am I?" Gender Identity is discussed in the section on [Sexual Development](https://www.risas.org/poc/view_doc.php?type=doc&id=41176&cn=1310).

# Teen Love & Dating in Today’s New World

Sarah Villineauva

Ah, love. The stuff that makes the world go ’round, leaves us swooning, and creates that feeling of walking on air with butterflies in our bellies, barely able to catch our breath. Also the stuff that makes us want to pull our hair out, scream at the top of our lungs, and declare all-out emotional warfare. Love, despite its ups, downs, and unpredictability, is something we’re all after. Young, old, male, female, gay, straight…when we are asked about our greatest hope or goal in life, our response usually centers around obtaining a stable and loving relationship with a romantic partner. In fact, love is such an important construct that researchers have studied it for years, investigating the different types, taxonomies, and styles, as well as how to keep it once you’ve finally found that elusive and magical potion. But what I want to explore in this chapter is that transformation from the loving bonds we share with our parents and family to the passionate union we seek in a romantic partner, and which we seemingly need for survival as individuals and as a species.

What is love, anyway? The word is tossed around, overused, misused, quoted, and commercialized so much that it’s difficult to determine what it really means. Certainly, the context in which we consider this emotion matters: I love to read; I love Chinese food; I love my mother. To be clear, I am interested in how we develop and pursue the takes-my-breath-away, euphoric, romantic love that is so sought after. My two daughters and I were watching a movie the other night called Wedding Crashers (we’re all suckers for rom-coms), and we heard Owen Wilson say, “True love is the soul’s recognition of its counterpoint in another” . . . sigh. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary lists various definitions: “a feeling of strong or constant affection for a person”; “[attraction](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/mating) that includes sexual desire”; and “the strong affection felt by people who have a romantic relationship.” But do any of these descriptions really answer our question?

As children, we experience love in the form of unconditional care and affection from our parents. That is indeed love, but does that concept somehow shift as we get older? When we become teens, is one form replaced by another, or is it the same construct on some blissfully complicated continuum? Some researchers have argued that the “targets” of our intimacy change over time, so that intimacy with peers replaces intimacy with parents, and intimacy with peers of the opposite [sex](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/sex) replaces intimacy with same-sex friends. There are two problems with this line of reasoning: first, the terms intimacy and love, despite much overlap, are not the same thing and should not be used interchangeably. Romantic love is basically intimacy with the added bonus of sexual attraction and passionate commitment—the beautiful sexual icing on the delicious intimacy cake, if you will. Second, most researchers contend that, instead of anyone being replaced or made unimportant, as we get older and expand our social network, new targets of intimacy and affection are added to old ones. I propose that the same thing happens with love. Not only does our concept and understanding of love shift from that which we feel for our parents, siblings, dogs, and so on to a richer and deeper feeling for another person outside our familial circle, but it also cumulatively adds to the concept of love that we began with. This is why so many people exclaim, “I never knew love could be so . . . amazing, deep, fulfilling, complicated, exhausting...” You get the picture.

Dating

Before we continue with how romantic love develops in [adolescence](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/adolescence), let’s consider dating. I realize that many parents labor over if and when to allow their teen to begin dating. I clearly recall, when I began to show interest in dating boys, my father saying something about putting me into a convent until I was thirty! But again, because I truly believe that knowledge is power, I would like to offer some historical perspective, so as to alleviate any angst over your little girl or little boy going out with some kid you don’t know or trust. In past generations, dating in high school or college, for at least some, served a very specific function: mate selection. That was certainly the case for many in previous cohorts of college women seeking what was so optimistically termed an “MRS. degree.” Offended? Don’t shoot the messenger: I’m simply relaying historical factoids. Because [marriage](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/marriage) today, if it occurs at all, is happening much later in life (the average age is around twenty-seven for women and twenty-nine for men) dating for high school students has now taken on an entirely new meaning.

In today’s world, dating in adolescence no longer holds the sole purpose of mate selection; rather, it has become an introduction to the world of intimacy, relationship roles, sexual experimentation, and, yes, romantic love. It’s almost like practice for the real thing that is yet to come. And despite the fact that high school dating for today’s teenagers has little to do with long-term commitments and/or marriage, modern-day [romantic relationships](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/relationships) among teens are very common, with approximately one-fourth of twelve-year olds, one-half of fifteen-year olds, and more than two-thirds of eighteen-year olds reporting being in a romantic, dating relationship in the past eighteen months.

To help you put things in perspective (i.e., is the age at which my teen begins dating normal?), on average here in the U.S. teens begin dating around the age of thirteen, and by the age of sixteen more than 90 percent of teens have had at least one date.5 And finally, the average duration of romantic relationships in high school is about six months. Some of you will read this and think, “Dating? My baby? At twelve?” That thought will quickly be followed by a sense of dread that feels like someone unexpectedly delivered a hard, swift kick right to your gut. But let’s think about this: when we contemplate teens dating at twelve, or perhaps even fourteen years of age, what we must realistically consider is what dating means at that age. What are they really doing?

Most often, dating during early adolescence involves exchanging contact information (i.e., giving cell phone numbers for texting, becoming friends or followers on [social networking](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/social-networking) sites); engaging in harmless communication via text and SMSs; seeing each other at school; and maybe even holding hands as they walk through the halls, displaying their “couplehood” so that peer onlookers can eat their hearts out with [envy](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/jealousy). It’s a social status thing. By the age of fifteen or sixteen, teens move toward qualitatively different and more meaningful romantic relationships; certainly, by the time they are seventeen or eighteen, they begin to think about their romantic relationships in a much deeper, more mature, and long-term way, with significant growth in both emotional and physical interests and commitment. These older adolescents tend to form more adult-like versions of romantic love and [attachment](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/attachment), and stay in relationships that last over a year, on average. This is, whether we like it or not, when things get real.

You recall me stating earlier that dating during the teen years serves as a type of practice for future relationships? In fact, in addition to helping to develop intimacy with others, dating serves many purposes for our teens. This is good news, really. Despite our reluctance and [fear](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/fear) that our “babies” are venturing into the big scary world of dating, love, and sex, (most certainly to get their hearts shattered into a million pieces), by allowing our teens to date, we are actually helping them to become healthy, mature, informed individuals who are training to be good relational partners. Dating not only helps teens establish emotional and behavioral autonomy from their parents, it also furthers their development of [gender](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/gender) [identity](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/identity), helps them learn about themselves and their own role as a romantic partner, and establishes social status and perhaps even popularity in their peer groups.

Having said all this, I should note that there are a couple of potential pitfalls when it comes to teens in the context of romantic relationships. First, studies have shown that early and intensive (exclusive and serious) dating before the age of fifteen can have a somewhat stunting effect on adolescents’ psychosocial development. By getting involved in serious relationships, spending virtually all their time with only one person, teens can run the risk of missing out on other types of social interactions (building other types of relationships, practicing intimacy, gaining different perspectives, and simply having fun with other friends!). This can prove limiting to them in terms of achieving their full potential of psychosocial growth and development. Conversely, research has also shown that adolescent girls, specifically, who do not date at all may tend toward underdeveloped social skills, excessive dependency on their parents, and feelings of insecurity when it comes to meeting romantic interests or potential partners.

In sum, allowing our teens to date and explore romantic relationships (in moderation) is a good thing. So, the next time you cringe at the prospect of your teen dating and possibly even becoming romantically involved or falling head-over-heels in love with another teen, remember that it is yet another way for him to grow and develop into the well-rounded, caring person you want him to be, particularly in the context of long-term, loving relationships.

# 4 Ways High School Relationships are a Win-Win for Teenagers

Katie Coyle

Imagine this: a young, well-dressed man rings the doorbell. As his suitor emerges, they exchange the proper salutations. He opens the car door for her and gives her his jacket when it’s cold. He is a perfect gentleman and they wouldn’t have it any other way. Now, imagine this: a group of seven teenagers are at the movies. The unspoken tension between two of them is obvious. They like each other. They like each other a lot. Laughing and shouting, their friends subtly try to push the two toward each other.

hough dramatically different, both scenarios are completely natural. [High school relationships](https://yourteenmag.com/social-life/tips-teen-dating/talking-to-teenagers-about-dating) have no routine, no habit, and no pattern. And each high school couple is different. More important are the benefits that come alongside teen dating (and yes, there are positive effects of teenage relationships).

## ****4 Benefits of Dating in High School****

### 1. Face-to-face time

According to [Lisa Damour, Ph.D.](https://yourteenmag.com/family-life/communication/spark-notes-parents-of-teenagers-edition), a psychologist and author of New York Times bestseller Untangled and Under Pressure, “the main benefit of teen dating, whether it be in a group or as a pair, is that the dating teens are spending ‘in person’ time together.” In the world of dating, face-to-face interaction is eventually inevitable. High school dating relaxes the barrier that social media seems to create. Teenagers are able to experience companionship that extends beyond Facebook and Instagram.

### 2. Experience

Think of high school as a [training ground](https://yourteenmag.com/social-life/tips-teen-dating/teen-romance). Teens who experience a variety of relationships in high school will be more prepared for college and adulthood. Dating in high school exposes people to different personalities, different traits, and different ways of life. Through experimentation, teenagers are able to scramble through a jungle of identities, discovering what works and what doesn’t.

### 3. Identity check-in

Adolescence is all about the questions. It’s about, “[Who am I](https://yourteenmag.com/teenager-school/teenager-middle-school/path-to-self-discovery)?” and, “Who do I want to be?” It’s about, “What are my good qualities?” and, “How should I change?” Spending romantic time with another person reveals a lot. How two people treat each other reflects who they are as human beings. Although the path to self-discovery might be onerous, dating helps to push past the roadblocks.

### 4. Positive habits

Let’s take a hypothetical situation: a boy asks a girl to a dance. She’s nervous—she’s never been on a date before. After the dance, he tries to kiss her. He goes too far, and she tells him. He backs off. They talk for the rest of the night. Her parents wanted her home by midnight; she’s back by 11:59. In a few short hours, the boy and the girl have mastered three important qualities: communication, respect, and responsibility. High school couples who learn positive habits while dating often carry those skills into adulthood, making it easier to develop healthy, long-lasting [relationships](https://yourteenmag.com/social-life/tips-teen-dating/teen-dating-research).

Despite the advantages of high school relationships, it’s necessary to know when to draw the line with high school couples. Damour advises adults to “talk to parents of slightly older teens about current dating conventions so that they have a realistic yardstick for what to expect for their own teen’s dating life.” If you’re worried, talk. Talk to your friends, talk to an expert, and talk to your teenager. Communication is vital. Also learn to recognize the signs of [trouble in your teenager’s dating relationship.](https://yourteenmag.com/social-life/tips-teen-dating/teenagers-and-romance)

Has your teen started dating?

[Ask the Expert: What Age Should Teenagers Start Dating?](https://yourteenmag.com/social-life/tips-teen-dating/what-age-should-teenagers-start-dating)

Maybe your teenager isn’t interested in dating. If that’s the case, dislodge the nagging fear that your teenager will die in the company of twenty-seven cats. Everyone is different. Your goal is to support your teenager, while still looking out for their best interests. It’s easier said than done, but with communication and compromise, both you and your teenager can appreciate the true advantages of high school dating.

# The Two Simple Ways to Upgrade Your Relationship

By Harville Hendrix



Photo: Thinkstock

When a relationship is going well, it feels magical. After 40 years as a marital therapist, though, I know that good marriages depend on more than magic. They are built on habits that capture the feelings you have for each other and make them durable. I've seen couples use these skills to transform a poor marriage into one that is wonderful. My wife and I have experienced this ourselves.

In our case, Helen was the first to see that although we were developing a new type of marriage therapy professionally, our communication had deteriorated. After months of trying to analyze our way into a better marriage, Helen decided unilaterally to change the way she communicated with me. She flooded me with praise. It was as if she put on new glasses that magnified the good in our relationship and obscured the problems.   
  
I began to believe her propaganda and found myself acting in a more caring manner. Ironically, we had taught this process, called positive flooding, to thousands of couples but had not used it consistently ourselves. After a month she told me what she'd been doing, and I agreed to do the same. Now a year later, we've noticed that many problems have receded. We see the areas that still need work as challenges to be tackled as partners rather than as adversaries.  
  
We were guided by two principles that can help you transform your relationship. First principle: Energy follows attention. Every time you "invest" in the negative, you are honing your ability to detect faults. Your energy amplifies the annoying and the fragile, and you create the conditions that allow your problems to grow like weeds in an unkempt field.  
  
Second principle: Problems cannot be solved at the same level of consciousness at which they were created. We form our ideas about relationships in our connection to our parents, and when our needs aren't met, we cry, sulk, or even rebel. If we still don't get what we want, we experience what could be called a wound, and we create a defense against being wounded again, such as withdrawing emotionally or escalating our demands.  
  
When we are ready for adult commitment, more often than not, our unconscious mind selects someone who has positive and negative traits similar to those of our parents in order to have another chance to heal ourselves. All too often, though, we end up reliving the patterns that hurt us in the first place. And as we did when we were children, we let our frustrations be known—only this time, we express the pain with criticism. We use negative transactions to try to effect positive outcomes. It never works.  
  
Although it's not possible to be everything for your partner, knowing the role your backgrounds play in the relationship helps you move from "What's your problem?" to "How can I help?"  
  
[Following three steps: Mirroring, validating, and empathizing](http://www.oprah.com/relationships/Marital-Therapist-Harville-Hendrix-Tells-the-Simple-Truth-About-Love/2)

Giving this way requires learning a skill that we call intentional dialogue. It includes three steps: mirroring, validating, and empathizing. While it's best if both partners participate, one person's change in attitude can make a difference—just as Helen's solo efforts helped our relationship.  
  
Look for opportunities to communicate this way, say, when you and your partner are discussing how to spend a free Saturday. Maybe your partner wants to watch a football game on TV but you don't. When the disagreement becomes obvious, you might feel a familiar rush of anger. You think, "Football—this is your idea of being together?!"   
  
But you know what will likely happen if you say this, so instead you mirror what your partner has just said—no reacting negatively. "Let me see if I understand," you say. "This game is a way for you to relax. It will be over at four, and then you'd like to do something together. Is that right? Is there more?" The latter question is very important. There is *always* more, and we usually don't wait for it.  
  
You then validate his right to do what he wants, saying something like, "I know the game is a way to relax. I'm sad, but that doesn't mean I don't understand." Notice that you don't have to agree with him—or think he's right and you're wrong—in order to validate him.  
  
Next you empathize with him, reaffirming that you stand with him instead of against him, by saying: "I want you to feel that you have time on the weekends to do what you want."  
  
At first glance, it may look like you're swallowing your feelings in order to cater to your partner's. But you are simply letting him know you have heard him, while still holding on to your own wishes. He might reciprocate, asking you what you are thinking.   
  
If he doesn't notice your efforts, keep at it. Changing communication habits can take a long time. But letting your partner know that you hear him, respect his feelings, and can enter into his experience even when you see things differently, will make him feel loved and will demonstrate how he can do the same for you. Your partner may not participate at first, but if you hold your course, he will likely join you. A relationship cannot remain the same when one of you has changed. With some work, you both might even find yourselves back marveling at the magic of your happiness.