

**Does Timing of Adolescent Transitions Relate to
Quality of Romantic Relationships in Young Adulthood?**

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Introduction

Learning to handle issues surrounding sexuality and intimate relationships is one of the primary developmental tasks of adolescence (Brooks-Gunn & Paikoff, 1997). Teenagers are faced with the challenge of accepting their own physical, emotional and psychological changes as well as the new roles associated with being involved in romantic relationships. Parents express universal concern as their children encounter these new experiences. Of particular concern to parents are the timing of their adolescent's puberty, initiation of sexual intercourse, and initiation of dating. Early timing of these events is anecdotally associated with negative outcomes in regard to adolescents' later romantic relationships.

The current study will investigate the associations between adolescent timing variables (i.e., puberty, initiation of intercourse, and initiation of dating) and romantic relationship qualities in young adulthood. We will further explore how supportive relationships in adolescence (with romantic partners and friends) and the personal characteristic of self-concept of ability to make friends in adolescence are related to the qualities of romantic relationships in young adulthood.

Design and Sample

The data for this study were collected as part of a 14-year, eight-wave, longitudinal project, the Michigan Study of Adolescent Life Transitions (MSALT). Data for this study comes from questionnaires completed by participants in 10th (Wave 5) and 12th (Wave 6) grades of high school and at age 21 (Wave 7). The sample includes 717 adolescents, 459 females and 258 males. Timing of puberty was assessed when participants were in 10th grade. Initiation of sexual intercourse and dating were assessed retrospectively when participants were 21 years old. Adolescent partner support, friend support, and self-concept of ability to make friends were assessed in 12th grade. Relationship satisfaction, sexual satisfaction, loving acts, and unloving acts were assessed when participants were 21 years old.¹

¹ Relationship satisfaction and sexual satisfaction were assessed at wave 7 only for participants involved in committed romantic relationships (i.e., married, cohabiting, or steadily dating one partner) n = 595 females, and n = 268 males. However, loving acts and unloving acts were assessed at wave 7 for all participants who were dating n = 870 females, and n = 531 males.

Measures

Timing Variables in Adolescence

- Timing of Puberty 1 item (For females) Grade of menarche. (For males) Grade of growth spurt.
- Initiation of Intercourse 1 item "Have you ever voluntarily had sexual intercourse? If yes, how old were you the first time?"
- Initiation of Dating 1 item "How old were you when you first began to date or go out with people?"

Relationships as Contexts in Adolescence

- Partner Support 1 item "How satisfied are you with the emotional support you get from your romantic partner?"
- (1=not at all satisfied; 7=very satisfied).
- Friend Support 1 item "How satisfied are you with how supportive your friends are?"
- (1=not at all satisfied; 7=very satisfied).

Personal Characteristic in Adolescence

- Self-concept of Ability to Make Friends (alpha = .82) 3 items, including "How good are you at making friends?" (1=not at all good; 7=very good).

Relationships Quality in Young Adulthood

- Relationship Satisfaction (alpha = .82) 5 items, including "How satisfied are you with how you and your partner communicate?" (1=not at all satisfied; 7=extremely satisfied).
- Sexual Satisfaction (alpha = .84) 6 items, including "My partner and I have a wonderful sex life" (1=never; 7=always).
- Loving Acts (alpha = .89) 7 items, including "How often did your partner tell you he/she loves you?" (1=never; 7=daily).
- Unloving Acts (alpha = .83) 6 items, including "How often did your partner criticize you or your ideas?" (1=never; 7=daily).

Results

Separate analyses were performed for males and females. Bivariate correlations indicate that in general timing of puberty, initiation of dating and initiation of sexual intercourse are not significantly related to relationship satisfaction, sexual satisfaction, loving acts, or unloving acts in young adulthood (See Tables 1 and 2). The one exception is a positive bivariate relationship between age of first intercourse and general relationship satisfaction for females.

Regression analyses that included the self-concept of ability to make friends and either satisfaction with friends' or partner's support in high school as predictors and the relationship qualities as the dependent variable were performed. Separate regressions were run to avoid a possible problem with multi-collinearity.

Regression results for females indicated that adolescent self-concept of ability to make friends and satisfaction with adolescent relationships predicted a significant amount of variance in many of the relationship qualities of their young adult relationships (See Tables 3 and 4).

The models were not significant predictors for the majority of relationship qualities in males. Although friends' support did predict general relationship satisfaction and partner support predicted loving acts in the young adult relationships of male participants (See Tables 5 and 6).

Discussion

These results indicate that perhaps the concern over early timing of puberty, initiation of sexual intercourse, and initiation of dating is misplaced. The timing of these transitions does not seem to significantly impact on the quality of later relationships. In contrast, findings indicate that experiencing supportive relationships in adolescence with peers and romantic partners and a positive self-concept of relational skills may be influential in the development of later romantic relationships.

Very little research has examined how supportive relationships in adolescence with romantic partners or friends relate to the quality of romantic relationships later in life. Familial relationships are often examined as contexts in which children and adolescents learn about interpersonal relationships; however, results of the current study suggest the need to also examine adolescents' relationships with romantic partners and peers as contexts for development of interpersonal skills.

Table 1. Correlations of Independent and Dependent Variables for Females

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Grade of Menarche	-	.17**	.04	.10	.10	-.05	.07	.05	-.02	-.02
2. Age of First Intercourse	.17**	-	.34**	-.12*	.07	-.08	.12*	.02	-.07	-.07
3. Age began Dating	.04	.34**	-	-.07	-.02	-.06	.07	.05	-.03	-.04
4. Making Friends	.10	-.12*	.07	-	.34**	.14**	.18**	.19**	.13*	.14**
5. Friend Support	.10	.07	-.02	.34**	-	.14**	.19**	.13*	.05	-.05
6. Partner Support	-.05	-.08	-.06	.14**	.14**	-	.19**	.12*	.27**	-.09
7. Relationship Satisfaction	.07	.12*	.07	.18**	.19**	.19**	-	.58**	.69**	-.48**
8. Sexual Satisfaction	.05	.02	.05	.19**	.13**	.12*	.58**	-	.48**	-.38**
9. Loving Acts	-.02	-.07	-.03	.13*	.05	.27**	.69**	.48**	-	-.23**
10. Unloving Acts	-.02	-.07	-.04	.14**	-.05	-.09	-.48**	-.38**	-.23**	-

* $p < .05$

** $p < .001$

Table 2. Correlations of Independent and Dependent Variables for Males

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Grade of Growth Spurt	-	.22**	.06	-.09	.00	-.05	-.04	-.13	-.08	-.02
2. Age of First Intercourse	.22**	-	.00	-.21**	.05	-.09	-.01	.03	.06	-.08
3. Age began Dating	.06	.00	-	-.27**	-.07	-.06	.05	.00	.08	-.08
4. Making Friends	-.09	-.21**	-.27**	-	.23**	.33**	.17	.08	.16*	.13*
5. Friend Support	.00	.05	-.07	.23**	-	.20**	.18	.21*	.11	-.03
6. Partner Support	-.05	-.09	-.14*	.33**	.20**	-	.06	.15	.27**	.13*
7. Relationship Satisfaction	-.04	-.10	.05	.17	.18	.06	-	.57**	.63**	-.38**
8. Sexual Satisfaction	-.13	.03	.00	.08	.21*	.15	.57**	-	.55**	-.26**
9. Loving Acts	-.08	.06	.07	.16*	.11	.27**	.63**	.55**	-	-.08
10. Unloving Acts	-.02	-.08	-.08	.13*	-.03	.13*	-.38**	-.26**	-.08	-

* $p < .05$

** $p < .001$

Table 3. Adolescent Predictors of Relationship Quality in Young Adulthood for Females

	Relationship Satisfaction (n=217)	Sexual Satisfaction (n=239)	Loving Acts (n=343)	Unloving Acts (n=342)
Self-concept of ability to make friends	.16*	.15*	.07	.12*
Friend's support	.15*	.12	.11*	-.05
R ²	.06**	.05*	.02*	.02*

*p < .05.
**p < .001.

Table 4. Adolescent Predictors of Relationship Quality in Young Adulthood for Females

	Relationship Satisfaction (n=227)	Sexual Satisfaction (n=247)	Loving Acts (n=349)	Unloving Acts (n=348)
Self-concept of ability to make friends	.13*	.15*	.06	.15*
Partner support	.15*	.03	.25**	.00
R ²	.05*	.03*	.07**	.02

*p < .05.
**p < .001.

Table 5. Adolescent Predictors of Relationship Quality in Young Adulthood for Males

	Relationship Satisfaction (n=86)	Sexual Satisfaction (n=88)	Loving Acts (n=189)	Unloving Acts (n=189)
Self-concept of ability to make friends	.04	.00	.10	.15*
Friend's support	.28*	.11	.11	-.06
R ²	.09*	.01	.03	.02

*p < .05.

Table 6. Adolescent Predictors of Relationship Quality in Young Adulthood for Males

	Relationship Satisfaction (n=100)	Sexual Satisfaction (n=101)	Loving Acts (n=211)	Unloving Acts (n=211)
Self-concept of ability to make friends	.14	.04	.14	.15*
Partner support	.05	.10	.23**	.00
R ²	.03	.01	.07**	.02

*p < .05.
**p < .001.