

Teen Perspectives on Healthy Romantic Relationships Among Racial/Ethnic Minorities

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Introduction

The initiation of romantic relationships represents a key developmental task of adolescence. The majority of teens in high school have been involved in a romantic relationship (Carver, Joyner, & Udry, 2003), and almost one-half of high school-aged teens have had at least one sexual experience (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2008b).

Emerging research suggests that several critical dimensions of adolescent romantic and sexual relationships may influence when teens first have sex and whether they use contraception, and thus their risk of a having teen birth or acquiring a sexually transmitted infection (STI) (Ford, Sohn, & Lepkowski, 2001; Giordano, Manning, & Longmore, 2005; Manlove, Ryan, & Franzetta, 2007; Noar, Zimmerman, & Atwood, 2004). These critical dimensions include how teens define the different types of relationships, how serious they consider these relationships, and how they communicate within them. Moreover, studies find that habits and relationship patterns developed during the adolescent years may have important implications for later adult relationships (Carver et al., 2003; Furman & Shaffer, 2003), highlighting the importance of focusing on teen relationships. Because of relatively high levels of early sexual activity, teenage childbearing, and STIs among racial and ethnic minorities (Abma, Martinez, Mosher, & Dawson, 2004; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2008a; Hamilton, Martin, & Ventura, 2009), the study described in this paper focused particularly on African American and Latino adolescents.

A better understanding of teens' ideas and beliefs about romantic relationships, especially what makes a healthy relationship, may help direct public policy and program providers target efforts to improve adolescent relationship behaviors and thus improve reproductive health outcomes. Researchers have identified multiple key dimensions of healthy relationships among

adults. Yet limited research has examined whether these concepts are also important for teens. Teen relationships differ from adult relationships in several ways. Adolescent relationships tend to be shorter-term, and include lower levels of communication and commitment than do adult relationships (Carver et al., 2003). Thus, a key component of our study was to have adolescents identify important characteristics of healthy teen relationships and assess whether these characteristics overlapped or differed from those identified as critical for adult relationships.

The dearth of information about teen relationships reflects, in part, what is available and measured in local and national studies. For example, it is unclear the extent to which survey questions—such as those assessing romantic relationships in the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health), dating relationships in the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth–1997 cohort (NLSY97), or sexual relationships in the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG)—capture the full spectrum of teen romantic relationships or the behaviors and expectations that characterize them. Some research suggests that current survey questions indeed may not be capturing data on the broad range of adolescent relationships, particularly those more casual or non-dating relationships that are more prevalent among teens in racial and ethnic minority groups (Carver et al., 2003; Ford et al., 2001). Accordingly, a better understanding of the range of typical relationships reported by teens will help with improving basic research and survey measurement about teens.

To address these gaps, we conducted a series of focus groups with a sample of African American and Latino middle and high school youth in order to explore several pivotal questions:

- What are the different types of romantic relationships that teens have?
- What are the characteristics of teen romantic relationships and what distinguishes the various types?
- What are the critical dimensions of healthy adolescent romantic relationships as defined by teens?

- Are the critical dimensions of healthy adolescent romantic relationships comparable to those of adults?

We selected focus groups as the methods by which to collect data for this study because a key goal of this project was to develop survey items to better measure and depict teen romantic relationships. Focus groups are an ideal medium by which to identify and collect information on the language that teens use to think and talk about romantic relationships (Presser & Blair, 1994).

Data and Methods

The data for this study came from a series of focus groups that we conducted with adolescents living in Washington, D.C. Focus groups are discussions with a small group of people (e.g., six to eight) selected because they share characteristics and backgrounds that are thought to be critical to understanding the issue at hand (Krueger & Casey, 2000). Focus groups are designed to create an environment in which participants feel comfortable sharing their ideas, opinions, and perceptions (Krueger & Casey, 2000; Morgan, 1997). Accordingly, to facilitate communication and exploration of issues that may be unique to age and gender groups, we segmented groups by gender and age (12-14-year-olds and 15-17-year-olds).

The focus groups were comprised exclusively of teens from racial/ethnic minority groups. We specifically recruited African Americans and Latinos for two reasons. First, as noted above, a key focus of the study was to help develop survey items that could more accurately depict teen romantic relationships. Existing survey measures have been largely tested with and administered to teens in white middle-class populations. Second, members of racial/ethnic minority groups report an earlier timing of the first sexual experience and higher rates of teenage childbearing and STIs (Abma et al., 2004; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2008a; Hamilton et al., 2009).

We recruited participants for the focus groups from after-school programs in Washington, D.C. Study staff visited the programs and described the study to potential program participants. In order to determine eligibility for the study and to divide groups by age and gender, we screened interested participants on site and gave them materials describing the study in further detail, along with a consent form for their parents or guardians to review and sign. Prior to the start of the each group, study staff reviewed the purpose and goals of the study, its voluntary nature, its benefits and risks, and instances under which study staff would be mandatory reporters. Given the potentially sensitive nature of the study, participants were asked to use nicknames, initials, or first names only and to refrain from talking about personal experiences, but rather to discuss things in general terms—for example, what they saw as typical among youth their age. Youth participants were then asked to provide their verbal and written assent prior to the start of discussions. An Institutional Review Board reviewed and approved the study protocol.

In total, seven focus groups were conducted—five involving girls and two involving boys—with a total of 52 teens (36 females and 16 males). Because of the relatively small number groups and participants, findings from the groups should be considered exploratory. We conducted more girl than boy groups because of previous experience suggesting that a saturation point is reached more quickly with male groups and because male teens were more difficult to recruit. Each group included three to 10 participants. In total, 79 percent of participants were African American and 21 percent were Latino. Roughly one-third of participants were between the ages of 15 and 17 (37 percent), and two-thirds (69 percent) lived in a family that was not headed by two biological/adoptive parents.

Nearly all of the focus groups were held at the after-school program sites, with the exception of one group that was held at Child Trends' offices. Program staff did not participate or observe any part of the focus groups. Study staff present at each group included the focus group moderator and co-moderator, one or two note-takers, and sometimes one other silent observer.

The focus group discussion generally lasted between one and two hours during which participants were asked to:

- describe the various types of romantic relationships among teens their age,
- discuss the terms and language used to describe the types of relationships,
- list and describe the factors that make up a “good and healthy teen romantic relationship,”
- describe what is typical in teen romantic relationships, and
- compare the elements of a healthy teen romantic relationship with those of a healthy adult relationship.

At the start of each focus group, we explained to participants that by “romantic relationship,” we meant a relationship between a boy and a girl that was more than just friendship. Thus, the term “romantic relationship” in this paper does not refer to the seriousness of the relationship, but rather to the status of that relationship as being one beyond friendship.

After each focus group, audio recordings were transcribed and members of the study team read through the transcripts and notes. Our analysis of the focus groups followed the steps recommended by Krueger and others (Krueger & Casey, 2000). We began with a systematic and sequential analysis of findings and patterns. More specifically, we produced qualitative summaries from the information gathered through the focus groups. These summaries highlighted commonalities and variations across groups, and age and gender subgroups of interest. These summaries served as the beginning of a coding scheme that was then revised and expanded as the groups were conducted. By continually updating and revisiting our coding

scheme and using multiple forms of data—including transcription of the taped group discussion and notes taken during the groups—we were able to verify our findings and ensure that they accurately reflected the dynamic themes observed across the groups. At the end of the data collection, we held a more extensive debriefing during which we further refined the coding scheme to look for patterns and themes across the groups. Finally, we identified several overarching themes, as well as subthemes, that were supported by quotes from the focus groups.

Findings

Four major themes emerged from the focus groups. These included 1) a rich language that teens use to describe their relationships; 2) a clear understanding that teens have about the characteristics of healthy relationships; 3) a pairing of this understanding with low expectations for experiencing these qualities in their own relationships; and 4) a recognition among teens that there are many similarities between the ways that they think about romantic relationships and the ways that adults define their own relationships.

Theme One: Teens have a rich and complex language to describe romantic relationships.

To learn how teens talk and think about romantic relationships, we asked them to describe romantic relationships among teens their age, whether there were different types or levels of romantic relationships, and the terms or labels that they used to describe and talk about these different types. Focus group discussions revealed that teens have a rich and wide-ranging vernacular to describe relationships and their various stages. The terms used to describe their relationships included terms such as “roller,” “friends with benefits,” and “ho” to express the least serious, least committed types of relationships to “boyfriend/girlfriend” and “hubby/wifey” to denote more serious, more committed relationships. We found that teens from all of the focus

groups used similar language and definitions to describe varying levels of relationships (see Table 1).

Interestingly, there appeared to be more consensus across the groups and among participants in the terms used to describe serious or semiserious relationships than in those terms used to describe the least serious relationships. However, as illustrated in Figure 1, which shows relationship spectrums (described below) from all five girl groups and the two boy groups, the language used to describe less serious relationships was much more rich and complex. This pattern (as discussed in greater detail below) may reflect teens' greater familiarity with these types of relationships.

We found that when teens heard the word “romantic,” they thought about romance and romantic gestures, descriptions they did not believe applied to most teen relationships:

- *“Romantic is taking his girl out and looking at stars”* – 12-14-year-old girl
- *“When I think of romance in relationships I think of like sweet little things like giving you flowers just cause it’s Wednesday. That type of thing. Just like, bliss.”* – 15-17-year-old girl
- In response to the question “When you first heard [the term “romantic relationship”] what were you thinking about?": *“I was thinking about something like [the movie] The Notebook”* -15-17-year-old girl

The terms used to describe romantic relationships reflect variation in the intensity and expectations of the relationship and in the behaviors occurring within the relationship.

When asked about the different levels of romantic relationships, teens described a wide spectrum of relationships with distinct stages and clear end points. Figure 1 shows the relationship spectrums that teen participants were asked to create together during the focus group discussions. Teens ordered relationships from left to right from least to most serious, indicating the various types of relationships that they had identified, and described how these types differed from one

another. Placed on the left end of the spectrum, for example, was “friends with benefits,” which teens said expressed a relationship in which there was no commitment and each individual had freedom to pursue other partners. Among the boy groups, Internet relationships were brought up (“computer girl,” “virtual date,” etc.), and participants placed them at the left end of the spectrum, noting that these types of relationships were common, but not very serious. At the right end of the spectrum, teens reported that a relationship in the “hubby/wifey” stage had an expectation of commitment and monogamy. Likewise, teens described relationships in the “talking” stage as consisting almost exclusively of getting to know each other, whereas they described the “boyfriend/girlfriend” stage as involving going out and doing activities regularly and a greater expectation of monogamy.

As noted above, these spectrums also showed that teens had more labels and distinct terms for less serious relationships (those at the left half of the spectrum). Indeed, teens, themselves, confirmed that relationships in the left half of the spectrum were the most typical for their age group. When asked what the most common type of relationships was for teens their age, the responses included:

- “*Roller*” – 12-14-year-old girl
- “*I think you’ve got more rollers in the school than you’ve got people who aren’t rollers...*” – 12-14-year-old girl
- “*I mean, you find some [hanging out], but not as much as you find rollers*” – 12-14-year-old girl

More generally, the various types of relationships described in the left half of the spectrums appeared to represent two types of processes: 1) physical intimacy without commitment [i.e., “friends w/ benefits,” “roller,” “hit it and quit it,” “ho”], and 2) getting to

know the other person before becoming “too serious” [“talking,” “friends/friendship,” “hanging out,” “dating”].

Theme Two: Teens have a clear understanding and expectation of what defines a healthy romantic relationship.

Teens were asked to describe what they saw as key elements of “good” and “healthy” romantic relationships. It’s worth noting that the teens needed very little prodding or probing to do so. Their articulate and nuanced responses indicated that they had a clear understanding of and strong opinions about this topic. In each of the focus group discussions (all-girl and all-boy), it was evident that teens place a very high value on respect, viewing it as key to a successful and healthy relationship. In response to questions about what makes for a healthy relationship, teens in each of the groups cited respect either as the most important or second most important characteristic of a healthy romantic relationship, as demonstrated by these quotes:

- “... you gotta have respect before anything...because you can’t just walk up to a girl and be like, ‘Hey yo, come here.’” – 12-14-year-old girl
- “Y’all gotta have respect for each other in order for the relationship to work” – 15-17-year-old boy

Teens were also asked to define and explain what they meant by each of the characteristics of a healthy relationship that they listed. On the basis of this discussion, we found that the concept of respect appears to encompass a variety of issues for teens. For example, several girls mentioned that one way to show respect was by being faithful and not cheating:

- “Because when you’re faithful, you know, you show respect.” – 12-14-year-old girl

Other girls described respect as boys approaching them and speaking to them in a nice way, not calling them names or putting them down:

- *“Don’t like, go out in public and put me down. Don’t go with any other girls”*
–15-17-year-old girl

Lastly, among teen girls, respect was also defined as being seen for more than their bodies or physical appearance:

- *“Um, I don’t know how to say it, but like, respect you for who you are is like, just because I have a butt doesn’t mean you have to touch it and stuff. Just because I have a chest doesn’t mean you go tell your friends oh this and that and the other. But you can respect me.”* - 12-14-year-old girl

Among teen boys, discussions of respect also incorporated the concept of self-respect. As with the girls, teen boys noted that respect was crucial in relationships, but also expressed the idea that teens, especially girls, need to respect themselves in order to demand respect:

- *“Self-respect. Like, you don’t respect yourself, and you won’t learn to respect others.”* – 15-17-year-old boy
- *“[Some girls] get treated bad and get called names and stuff, and they still go back to the same guy. Is that respect?...you’ve gotta respect you own self in order to be with somebody that you actually love.”* – 15-17-year-old boy

Trust and honesty were also cited in all of the girl focus groups, but in none of the boy groups, perhaps signaling gender differences in the importance, salience, or value placed on these qualities. Trust implies a level of comfort and confidence in the other person, whereas honesty pertains to telling the truth and being open about one’s thoughts and feelings. Teen girls expressed the view that having trust in a relationship may be necessary before being honest; so once trust is established, then honesty can occur. When asked to explain this difference between trust and honesty, teen girls responded:

- *“Trustworthy would be somebody that you can depend on. Not that you need to, but...if I tell you this, you’re not gonna go tell him or her, and you’re not gonna look at me differently or something like that.”* – 15-17-year-old girl
- *“Honesty is just like, no matter what, just always telling the truth, even if it’s going to hurt the person’s feelings. You just always be honest.”* – 15-17-year-old girl

- *“Trust is when you trust him enough to tell him your secrets and how you feel about things.”* – 12-14-year old girl

Other qualities that came up frequently when discussing healthy romantic relationships in the girl groups included communication, caring, attentiveness, and responsibility and reliability. Qualities that were mentioned occasionally in the girl groups included spending time together, talking out conflicts, accepting one another for who they are, self-control, consideration, patience and having a partner who is open-minded, smart, fun, and not overly jealous or overprotective.

Although similarities existed across all the focus groups, teen boys differed slightly from their female counterparts when describing what comprises a good or healthy relationship. As noted above, teen girls universally listed respect, trust, honesty, and loyalty as critical aspects of healthy relationships. Among teen boys, respect and trust were also mentioned, but honesty and loyalty did not come up. Additionally, sex was listed as one of the top components of a healthy romantic relationship in both of the boy groups:

- *“[Sex is important] because if you don’t have a good, sexual relationship with that person, then you won’t feel...some sort of connection.”* – 15-17-year-old boy
- *[Sex] plays a highly important role in, I mean, when it comes to having relationships.”* – 15-17-year-old boy

In contrast, sex was not listed as important by teen girls. It is worth noting that teen boys were more likely than were girls to explicitly talk about sex in the focus groups. Other qualities that boys mentioned less often (not in both groups) included communication, love, trust, listening, attraction, and pleasure.

The public stage is important in teen romantic relationships. Teens’ discussions about healthy romantic relationships highlighted the importance of how the image of relationships were

projected to and viewed by the public. However, boys and girls appeared to regard this importance differently.

Teen girls were concerned with how their peers viewed their relationship and how their partners behaved towards them and talked about the relationship. Indeed, many teen girls defined and described their relationships in relation to public acts. For example, girls remarked that they would not want their partner to put them down in front of others and that they would want their partner to defend them if someone else was putting them down. Additionally, girls expressed a desire to not be ignored by their partner or not have their partner act as if he did not care about them when in public, especially when the couple was around other boys their age. Such concerns manifested themselves when the girls were asked to define their concept of respect:

- *“...only call me by my name, you won’t undermine me, mimic me, that type of thing”*
“Don’t like, go out in public and put me down.” – dialogue between two 15-17-year-old girls

Likewise, girls discussed the public face of disrespect. When asked to explain the concept of “carrying” that should not occur during the “talking” stage of relationships, the girls responded:

- *“Like if I’m here talking and you see one of your friends and you just walk off, while I’m sitting here talking...”*
“...[or] if he tells you how much he likes you and then when he gets around his friends, he like, ‘I never did like you!’” – dialogue between two 12-14-year-old girls

Furthermore, in response to a question about what teens think of or consider to be a romantic relationship, one girl said:

- *“I think it’s romantic when, um, they got your back for anything. If somebody talking trash about you and [he] defendin’ you, like, “Uh-uh! I know you not talkin trash about her”* – 15-17-year-old girl

Teen boys were more likely to focus on their own image rather than how the relationship itself was perceived and, to some extent, boys saw their relationships as shaping their public image. This quote illustrates the notion that for boys, what matters is that other boys know they are in some type of a relationship with a girl—especially a sexual relationship—because this is what earns them respect from other boys:

- *“You just wanna look cool in front of your friends...All your friends, all they talk about is...who got that last night.”* – 15-17-year-old boy

The importance of love in teens’ conceptualization of romantic relationships differs by gender. Surprisingly, both of the boy groups listed love as an important characteristic of good or healthy romantic relationships, whereas love was rarely mentioned in the girl groups:

- *“If you don’t love the person you’re with, then why are you with them? Love puts you together.”* – 15-17-year-old boy

However, despite the high ranking that they give to love (it was listed third on the older boys’ list of the qualities of healthy romantic relationships), boys were quick to qualify their definition of love, noting that love was often disingenuous and defined by (or equated with) physical intimacy:

- *“You say you love them, but you don’t really mean it.”* – 15-17-year-old boy
- *“Some...teenagers, they think they’re grown enough, and they think they can handle love...They think that love is like being with a girl, having sex with a girl, and then leaving her...They think that that’s love, when it’s not.”* – 15-17-year-old boy

Teen girls rarely listed love as an important dimension of a healthy romantic relationship, as noted. Indeed, love was absent from all of the lists of the most important characteristics in romantic relationships that they were asked to create during the focus groups. When asked why love was not part of their definition of healthy romantic relationships, they replied:

- *“...I think we need to be more focused on what we need to be doing to get by in the future. I think for teenagers, you can have a committed relationship, you can love your boyfriend but...I don’t think you would be on adult terms. It would be simple.”* – 15-17-year-old girl
- *“We’re too young...”* – 15-17-year-old girl
- *“We still don’t know what love is...”* – 15-17- year-old girl

Additionally, the girls appeared to take a more practical approach when it came to love and relationships and repeated that what mattered most were respect, loyalty, and trust; if these qualities were present then that would amount to love. For example in one of the focus groups among girls aged 12-14, one participant described how love is attained, *“First, at the beginning, you care for that person, and then when you care for them, you earn respect for them, then when they get more romantic, you love.”*

Teens define healthy romantic relationships by the absence of negative characteristics. In the discussion of dimensions of a healthy relationship, teens often spoke more in terms of what a relationship should not be than what it should be. Thus, in their minds, the qualities needed for a good relationship became a list of qualities that should not occur (e.g., “not cheating or lying,” “no abuse,” “not calling them names,” “don’t hit each other,” “not bossy,” and “not overprotective”). For example, teens frequently cited cheating and physical or verbal abuse as characteristics that would be present in unhealthy relationships, and older teen girls noted the absence of both as highly desirable qualities to have in a relationship. As described in greater detail below, both teen girls and boys noted that cheating and violence were problems in teen relationships (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2008b; Liz Claiborne, 2008).

Theme Three: Teens' relationships typically fall short of their own standards of healthy romantic relationships.

Focus group participants were asked how common the qualities they listed as defining healthy relationships were in the teen romantic relationships that they knew about or had experienced.

The discussions revealed that even though teens had high standards for relationships (as illustrated in their comments about the factors that make up a healthy relationship), teens don't necessarily expect to find these qualities in a partner or relationship. The overwhelming consensus was that healthy qualities were atypical and not characteristic of the average teen relationship. For example, one girl group included a discussion about whether one relationship could have all of the qualities that participants identified as important for healthy relationships:

- *"...one boy can be...honest, respectful, and you have a connection. But then, he'll be violent or something."* – 15-17-year-old girl
- *"Good personality, maybe, but you're gonna get liars."* - 15-17-year-old girl

Boys also noted that typical teen relationships often don't have healthy qualities:

- *"[Respect] is not really common because a lot of guys, if they get mad at the girl, they curse her out...just 'cause they got mad at her over some stupid reason."* – 15-17-year-old boy

Having few role models contributes to low expectations for healthy relationships.

Some girls expressed the view that they had low expectations for relationships because the adult relationships that they see were also unhealthy. Their comments suggest that a lack of positive examples of healthy relationships might help to explain why teens had such low hopes of ever having a healthy romantic relationship themselves. When a group of older teen girls were asked why some girls, themselves, may not exhibit healthy qualities (such as respect and communication), the girls responded that it might be due to a lack of healthy adult relationships in teens' lives. The girls then described what they have observed in adult relationships:

- *“...why would you sit there and argue that in front of your child when clearly you need to be setting an example of how a relationship should be going, how it should work, so they won’t have a feeling of abandonment. ...You shouldn’t be letting your child see you argue like that.” - 15-17-year-old girl*
- *“I don’t know about for teens but...an adult, when you’re just hanging out with that person, or you’re just kinda friends, and then you become dating that person and he’s like mean to your children and he disrespects you, and everything...when they become your boyfriend you see who they really are.” – 12-14-year-old girl*

One group of 15-17-year-old girls was especially candid about their thoughts on why teens may not exhibit healthy behaviors in their relationships. Specifically, they related this pattern to the absence of positive adult role models, especially the absence of fathers:

- *“I don’t think none of those qualities are all there because [boys are] not taught to have those qualities. They don’t know how to be gentle.”*
- *“Most girls, if they don’t have a father figure in their life, they don’t have these qualities, or if they do have a father figure, they have little evidence.”*
- *“Or they could just be loose. Because they don’t have a father figure and they just want attention from a male. Like you could see a girl who keep giving this dude compliments...And I was like, ‘girl go somewhere! He don’t want you!’ But she wasn’t getting it, so I’m guessing she needed some male attention.”*

Infidelity is common among teens. All of the girl focus groups cited unfaithfulness almost immediately as a typical dimension of teen relationships and also noted that infidelity contributed to their low expectations for finding a healthy relationship. These perceptions stood in sharp contrast to the “absence of cheating” that they listed as a good or healthy quality of teen relationships. Cheating appears to be so commonplace in relationships that the teens talked about it in a very matter-of-fact tone, anticipating that it would most likely occur in their relationships.

For example:

- *“Oh no, everybody’s like cheating” - 15-17-year-old girl*
- *“Cause you can’t find faithful in none of them. In none of the guys nowadays” - 15-17-year-old girl*

- *“After you start callin’ someone your boyfriend...he will cheat anyway...When the person becomes your hubby, I doubt they’re not gonna cheat no more.”* – 12-14-year-old girl
- *“Now, like if you think from a dude’s point of view, a girl might say, ‘oh that’s my boo.’. That’s her own person. But if you think like a dude, he’s gonna be like, ‘that’s my boo’, but then he’s got other ‘boos’ around.”* – 15-17-year-old girl

These concerns and a similar attitude or expectation towards infidelity were also voiced among the teen boys who were quite open in their discussion about how common it is for boys to cheat on girls:

- In reference to the term “friends with benefits”: *“...you might have a girl and be goin’ with another girl”*
“You need them for [sex] when you’re not getting it from your girl anymore.” – dialogue between two 15-17-year-old boys

In a discussion about communication in teen relationships, one boy said that it was not good because:

- *“Us boys...we lie to them, and we talk to other girls, telling them, ‘oh, you’re gonna be my girl.’”* – 15-17-year-old boy

In discussions about the lack of healthy qualities in teen relationships and why faithfulness is so uncommon, older girls talked about infidelity among boys as stemming from the importance of sex and maintaining a public image among their peers. For example:

- *“...he’s probably gonna cheat, just to have somebody to have sex with.”* –15-17-year-old girl
- *“They’ll be like ‘I’ve got this reputation, I’m a pimp, I’m a playa, I’m not gonna let no girl dispose or just ruin my reputation like that.’”* – 15-17-year old girl
- *“They’re tempted to have more than one girl and just do whatever. It’s like every girl they see is a temptation to them.”* – 15-17-year-old girl
- *“...he keeps asking for sex, and like, you don’t want to give it to him, so he goes to another girl who will give it to him.”* – 15-17-year-old girl

On the basis of the importance teens give to the public face of romantic relationships, it is not surprising that much of the infidelity seems driven by the pressure to maintain one's reputation, especially among teen boys. Yet cheating also seems to have its own role in *shaping* teens' public image, especially among teen boys who reported placing greater emphasis on their own image than on the public impression of their romantic relationship.

Teens distinguish between “play-fighting” and violence. Verbal and physical abuse also came up frequently in all focus groups. It is worth noting that teens raised this issue unsolicited, and (as noted above) their discussions suggest that this was a concern of theirs and that it was at least somewhat common in teen relationships. However, in speaking of physical abuse, nearly all groups were quick to point out a difference between “play-fighting” and violence. Play-fighting came up in nearly all the focus groups as something that was commonplace within teen relationships, and distinct from physical abuse. When probed about play-fighting compared with violence, teens noted that play-fighting could become a prelude for violence. Consistent with the literature on common forms of violence among adult couples (Johnson, 1995; Johnson & Ferraro, 2000), we found that girls were as likely to report being the perpetrator as the initiator in play-fighting. Girls described hitting and smacking as a way for girls to express or release frustration and anger at their partner:

- “...more like play-fighting, but like in an argument, you just want to get out your frustration, so you hit him, and he hits you back, that sort of fighting.” - 12-14-year-old girl
- “...domestic violence, like, in serious relationships, like with adults, it's usually the man. But like, in our relationships, the boys, they really don't try to hit us...it's usually the girls that are hittin.”
“Like if a girl is mad, she just smack him..” - Dialogue between 12-14-year-old girls

When asked to describe what fighting in teen relationships looks like and the difference between play-fighting and violence, teens reported:

- *“I know a lot of teens like to do playful fights like that. As far as hitting going out of proportion, that’s not good.”* - 15-17-year-old girl
- *“Cause sometimes, you like, just be playin’...but then when you start goin for real and hittin each other on the face or the neck...then you want to fight. You should just be like, ‘chill out!’”* – 15-17-year-old-boy
- *“It’s alright to fight, but like, when you hit a girl, that means you’re not a man”* – 15-17-year-old boy

Teens also frequently made reference to verbal abuse, particularly directed at teen girls in the form of name-calling, which—as noted earlier—is closely tied to their notions of respect.

- *“Like verbally. I don’t think a person would usually abuse you in public, but verbally they’ll abuse you, put you down”* - 15-17-year-old girl
- *“A lot of guys, like if they get mad at the girl [they will] curse her out, and they call her a ho, a trick...”* - 15-17- year-old boy

Theme Four: There are high levels of congruence in the way that teens, adults, and the research literature define healthy romantic relationships. In the focus groups, we asked teens to compare their list of characteristics that comprise a good and healthy teen relationship (see Theme Two) with a list of dimensions of healthy adult relationships drawn from a conceptual model developed from the research literature and tested with a racially/ethnically and economically diverse sample of adults (Moore et al., 2004). Key characteristics identified as defining healthy adult relationships include commitment, satisfaction, lack of domestic violence, conflict resolution, intimacy and emotional support, communication, fidelity, and interaction and time together (Fowers, Bucker, Calbeck, & Harrigan, 2003; Moore et al., 2007).

When presented with the list of healthy components of adult relationships, the teens saw many parallels to their own lists, and they were able to line up most of their own designated

qualities with the concepts designated as important for adults. For example, the teens related their concepts of honesty and listening to communication and trust on the list for adult relationships. And they linked respect and a lack of cheating to adult concepts of fidelity and commitment. However, in each of the focus groups, the teens indicated that they did not find direct parallels between some of the qualities adults considered critical to healthy relationships and the qualities teens included on their own lists.

Among girls, especially, much debate took place over whether all the characteristics that were important for healthy adult relationships were also critical for healthy relationships among teens. In general, the girls noted that certain qualities would be needed for more serious adult relationships, but were not as critical to have in teen relationships. These qualities included commitment, satisfaction, conflict resolution, and time together. They described “commitment” as not yet important in their relationships because they were too young to be committed; dismissed “conflict resolution” as unimportant because they perceived their arguments as not being very serious; and they thought that they spent enough time with their partners (i.e., at school), thus, they did not consider “interaction and time together” to be an issue for their age group. Additionally, teens expressed dismay about why satisfaction would be a defining quality of healthy adult relationships, viewing satisfaction more as a necessary precursor to any relationship. These quotes illustrate teens’ views about why commitment, satisfaction, and interaction and time together are not important for healthy teen relationships:

- *“You don’t need to make a commitment, cause we’re too young”* – 12-14-year-old girl
- *“I think it’s important, but it’s just like, the word, satisfaction that turns me off. I think if you’re not happy in the relationship, don’t be in the relationship.”* – 15-17-year-old girl

- *“I guess the adults have that [interaction and time together] because the adults are working hard, so you forget to leave time for each other. But we don’t have a lot on our time.” – 15-17-year-old girl*

Among boys, even qualities that they had not originally identified in their lists that were on the adult list (such as intimacy and emotional support and time together) were deemed important for teen relationships as well.

Discussion

This paper has highlighted the results of recent focus groups that were conducted with African American and Latino teens. As noted earlier, the focus group study is part of a broader project that seeks to develop survey questions that more accurately represent teen relationships both with respect to the varying types of relationships and the behaviors, norms, and expectations that help to define and shape them. A second goal of this work is to develop measures that are appropriate for a racially, ethnically, and economic diverse population.

Our long-term objective is to incorporate the resulting questions and findings into current and future local and national surveys, thereby expanding and enhancing the available data infrastructure on this important, but under-measured, developmental milestone in adolescence. Indeed, a review of existing national studies suggests that current survey questions may not be capturing data about more casual relationships, which are the most common type of relationships among today’s teens, according to the participants in our focus groups. National research suggests that more casual relationships involve more risky behavior, in part, because they tend to be short-lived and often involve some degree of physical intimacy (Carver et al., 2003; Giordano et al., 2005).

Table 2 shows a listing of terms used in surveys such as the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health) and the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, 1997

(NLSY97) to describe and refer to teen romantic relationships. A comparison of Tables 1 (including terms used by teens themselves) and 2 clearly shows a mismatch between the language used in surveys and by researchers and the language used by teens. The implication of this mismatch is that teens may misinterpret survey questions as only asking about a subset of relationships and, therefore, not report information about their full relationship histories and activities.

Especially troubling is the possibility that current survey questions (which ask teens to describe “special romantic relationships,” “dating relationships,” or relationships in which they were “going steady”) may not be capturing data about the more casual relationships, which, as noted, appear to involve more risky behavior. That many teens may be underreporting the presence of and experiences with relationships that go beyond friendship is underscored by their reactions and descriptions to the term “romantic.” To them, the term conjured up images of flowers and music, a sharp contrast to how they described most teen relationships.

The results from the focus groups not only underscore the need for language and concepts used in surveys to reflect those used by teens, but also the importance of staying current both in terms of language or terminology and activities and behaviors. As noted above, the language that the teens used to describe their relationships is rich and nuanced and it is likely to show a great deal of regional variation, racial/ethnic variation, and change over time. Even though it may be difficult—if not impossible—for survey questions to incorporate the rich array of terms used to describe teen relationships, given these likely variations and changes over time, results from the focus groups speak to the need to develop questions that are more inclusive of a wider range of relationship types. Including more inclusive questions will help to counteract any tendency to inadvertently lead teen respondents to underreport some relationships (likely those that are less

serious and shorter-term but that may nonetheless involve risky behavior) and overreport more serious, longer-term relationships.

In addition, just as recent debates about whether oral sex constitutes sexual activity led to the inclusion of questions about oral sex in national surveys, findings from our focus groups highlight the need for surveys and research to remain current with the activities and norms of youth. For example, online relationships were discussed in both groups with teen boys. Although teen boys labeled these relationships as “not very serious,” they did use various terms to describe these relationships (i.e., “virtual date,” “virtual girl,” “computer date”), suggesting a high frequency of these relationships. These findings echo the results of a recent National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy survey, which found that technology is playing an important role in teen relationships both with respect to communication and in creating new types of relationships (The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, 2008).

For program providers, policy makers, and parents alike what we have learned from the focus groups is both encouraging and sobering. On the one hand, our findings suggest that teens know what makes a relationship healthy and view relationships possessing these qualities as highly desirable. In short, they know what they should be looking for. Additionally, to some extent, teens share a belief in or awareness of the idea that teen relationships should not include too many adultlike qualities, such as long-term commitment. That is, teens expressed the view that their relationships should be “teenlike” and adult relationships should be “adultlike.” On the other hand, our findings indicate that teens are well aware that adultlike characteristics and problems such as infidelity and violence are present in many teen relationships. Moreover, we found that whereas teens have high expectations and standards for what they want in their

relationships and partners, teens—girls in particular—do not appear optimistic about their prospects of finding such partners. These findings echo those of other qualitative studies with adult populations, including a premium placed on respect and trust (Moore et al., 2007; Moore et al., 2004), as well as the prevalence of cheating, multiple partners, and short-lived relationships (Edin & Kefalas, 2005; Manning & Smock, 2005). For example, as the girls voiced frustration about boys' cheating and the abundance of "players," the boys readily acknowledged that they cheated, in part, because doing so aided their reputations. Also consistent with past research on adults, was the role that the absence of role models, in particular absent fathers, plays in teen relationships falling short of teens' ideals.

Together these findings speak to the possible role that mentors can play in promoting healthy relationships and youth development (Blakely, Menon, & Jones, 1995; Hahn, 1999). Likewise, these findings speak to the potential benefit that may result from recent government programs designed to promote healthy relationships among youth. For parents and program providers, our findings also highlight the need to be aware of and prepared to discuss the full range of teen relationships. Moreover, our findings speak to the need to promote healthy intimate relationships starting from an early age. The younger teens in our study, although not as active as the older teens, were already "dating" and reported much of what was voiced by older teens. For example, in discussions of typical relationships, we found that even among the younger groups, teens' high expectations for relationships were matched with low hopes for finding and developing an ideal relationship.

Thus, the pre- and early-teen years (between the ages of 12 and 14) may represent a key learning period for establishing and promoting healthy relationship norms and ideals. Consequently, youth in this age range may be a critical group for programs to target.

Additionally, our findings suggest that programs may want to focus their efforts on how to develop and establish healthy qualities in relationships rather than on identifying or defining what a healthy relationship is.

The findings on the presence of violence in typical teen relationships are troubling but consistent with recent studies and underscore the need for programs promoting healthy relationships to begin early. Data from 2007, for example, show that 10 percent of high school-aged teens (9 percent of girls and 10 percent of boys) reported experiencing dating violence (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2008b; Liz Claiborne, 2008). It is worth noting, again, that both male and female participants in the focus groups noted that girls were as likely (if not more likely) to instigate play-fighting. Thus, programs seeking to address this issue need to be aimed at both sexes. Moreover, even though play-fighting was often seen as harmless, some of the teens acknowledged that it could turn into “real” fighting.

The focus group study has some limitations worth noting. First, it included a relatively small sample and was largely comprised of African American and teen girls. Given likely regional variations in language and the implications these variations may have for the examination and measurement of teen romantic relationships, the study should be replicated in other parts of the country and with other racial/ethnic groups. Thus, we acknowledge that our findings are not necessarily generalizable to a nationally representative sample of adolescents. In addition, because we recruited participants for the focus groups from after-school programs, these teens may have had more resources available to them than did other teens living in similar neighborhoods in the District of Columbia.

However, we believe that focus groups were the most appropriate approach to explore how teens think and speak about teen romantic relationships. Focus groups offer several

advantages for this project. Focus groups can be used to hone in on issues and problems, generate solutions, share ideas, identify innovative approaches, and ultimately, in this study, to learn about the nuances of teen romantic relationships. In addition, focus groups allow researchers to not only find out how people think about and understand an issue, but also to gain insights based on group interactions. These interactions provide insights into the importance of issues and the extent to which consensus exists on a topic or opinion. Furthermore, in the context of this study, because many participants might not have given much thought to the particulars of teen romantic relationships, the group dynamics helped to generate ideas from individual members of the focus groups which subsequent interactions could be used to identify the relevance of these ideas for the larger focus group. In this study, many of the themes that emerged from the first focus group also came up in all other groups. In the next stages of the project, we will be cognitively testing items developed from the focus groups to measure and describe teen romantic relationships.

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Table 1. Frequently Mentioned^a Terms Used by Teens to Describe for Teen Romantic Relationships

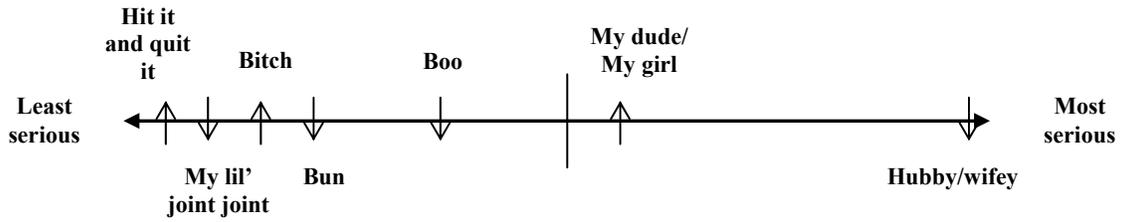
Title/Label	Definition Examples	Examples
Boo	Boo is a label that teens use to refer to someone whom they have been casually seeing/dating. It is a possessive term, but it is not typically associated with a serious relationship or an assumption of commitment.	"Boo is like, okay girl, I've got other boos scattered around." (15-17 Girl) "boo, you're not really committed" (12-14 Girl) "Boo is like another way of saying you go out with the person" (15-17 Boy)
Boyfriend/Girlfriend	Boyfriend/girlfriend is a somewhat serious relationship, characterized by going on multiple dates. There is a more public face to boyfriend/girlfriend relationships.	"...in my definition of having a boyfriend, you gotta be honest with them. I mean, you can't sit here and lie. I mean, I'm gonna wanna know, if I find out and then you try to tell me, that's gonna make me mad. I'm gonna be mad, but not as mad as if I had to find out by myself." (12-14 Girl) "If he's your boyfriend, you hangin out. You be like, goin out to the mall, or just hang out." (12-14 Girl) "You have to know each other, you have to go out...feel attracted to that person" (15-17 Boy)
Computer Girl/Virtual Date**	Primarily identified by the boys, this is a relationship that is begun, if not solely conducted online, through instant messengers or chat rooms.	"Computer date...is like meeting someone on the internet" (15-17 Boy) "[It's your] virtual girl" (15-17 Boy)
Crush/Crushin**	This is the early stage of a romantic relationship where the couple is primarily focused on getting to know each other.	"Crushin'... getting to know one another" (15-17 girl) "Cause when you're crushin,' you've gotta find out...you've gotta really like each other" (15-17 girl)
Dude	Dude is a name teen girls use to describe a boy they are casually seeing. It's a loosely possessive term, although not associated with a commitment.	"I don't know if kids that age say boo-boo, they be like, dude...that's my dude, like that's my boyfriend" (12-14 Girl) "You're flirting, he's just your dude" (12-14 Girl)
Friends with benefits	Friends with benefits is a relationship between two individuals that is primary physical/sexual in nature. It is assumed that if you are using someone for "benefits," you also have a more serious partner as well.	"the benefits come in...but then, like, after the friends with benefits goes away, you get all official" (15-17 Girl) "I'm allowed to talk to whoever I want, but when me and you together, we can do whatever we want. We can talk about us, but no commitment." (15-17 Girl) "Friends with benefits are there for when you need them...when you're not getting it from your girl any more, you go to them." (15-17 Boy)
Friends/Best Friends	This is a relationship that often precedes a more serious relationship, when two people are just getting to know each other.	"If he's your friend, you just hangin out. If he's your boyfriend, it's a date." (12-14 Girl) "Best friend isn't serious..." (12-14 Girl)
Hit it and Quit it*	Hit it and quit it is a casual, short-term relationship, where at least one partner anticipates that the relationship will end after the couple has sex.	no quotes...
Hubby/Wifey	Hubby is reserved for the most serious relationship signifies a commitment, with the expectation of long term, monogomy. However, many teens were quick to note that this did not come with an expectation of a lifetime commitment.	"If somebody's really serious about you, they may call you "wifey" or "that's my hubby". If they're really really serious. They can never part" (15-17 Girl) "But if I'm gonna call somebody my hubby, we better be together for years" (15-17 Girl) "and your hubby is one that you're fell in love with...well, not that you married him, but...he's the one you want to be with." (12-14 Girl) "Wifey...that's like your girlfriend" (15-17 Boy)
Loafin*	Loafin' is a term used to describe someone who is not putting much effort into the relationship. They may be putting on a good face, but cheating could be involved.	"Loafin' is when you say you're with somebody, but then you really not" (12-14 girl)
Roller	Similar to "hit it and quit it", a relationship involving a "roller" is very casual, and primarily sexual. Those in the relationship move from partner to partner without a sense of commitment in any of the relationships	"Rollin' is like...you go from this boy to that boy to that boy..." (12-14 girl) "To me, I think a roller is that you, like, get with different people" (12-14 girl) "A roller is a girl that only, just basically tries to get some [sex] from anyone she wants." (15-17 boy)
Talking**	Talking is a stage in a romantic relationship, when teens are just getting to know each other.	"Talkin is like you in the process of goin with someone" (12-14 Girl) "ya'll just goin together, ya'll just talkin" (12-14 Girl) "I guess, like, first you guys are talking, like you just met" (15-17 Girl) "We're just talking. Before we can become friends, I have to ask him questions; I have to interview him" (12-14 Girl)

^a Terms mentioned in three or more groups

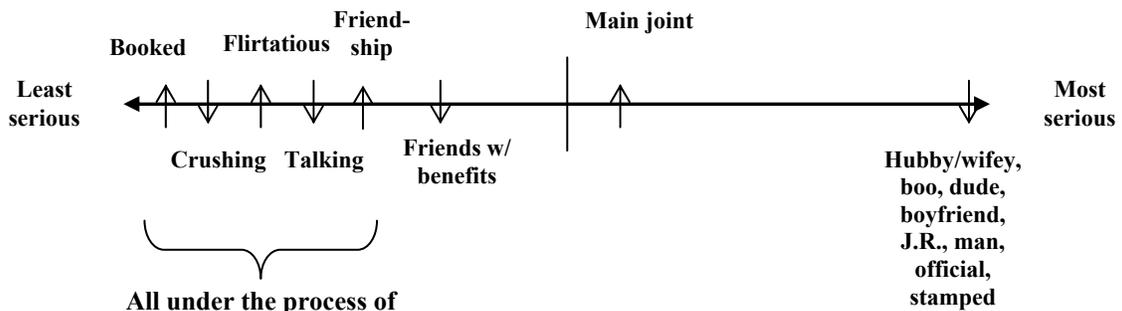
* - only mentioned in one group

** - only mentioned in two groups

Figure 1. Relationship Spectrums

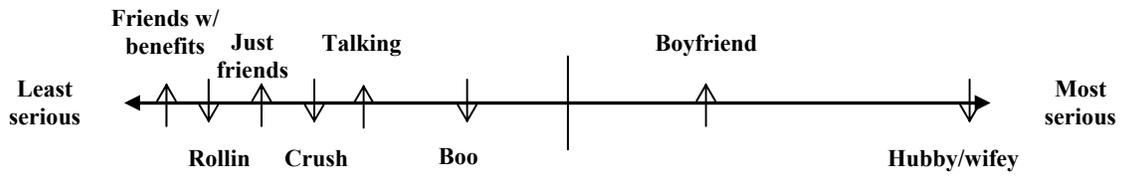


15-17 Year Old Girls



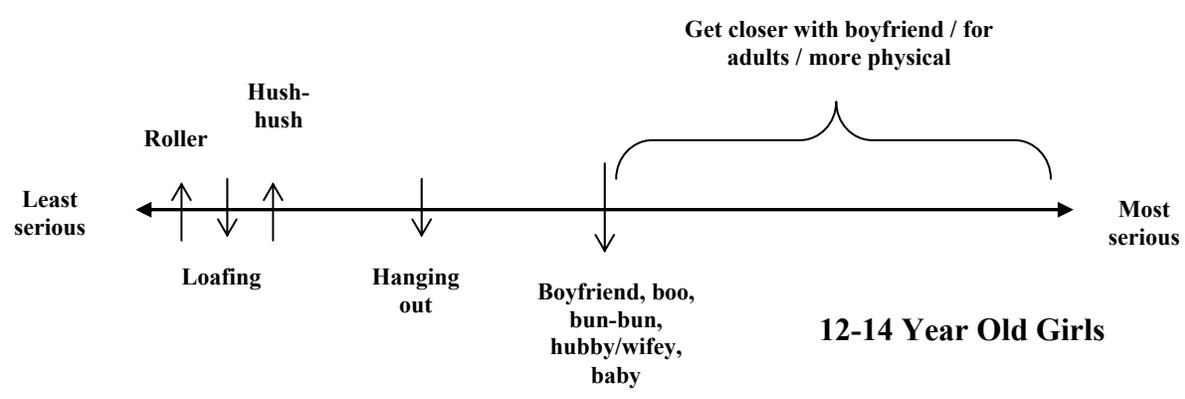
All under the process of talking / getting to know the person

15-17 Year Old Girls

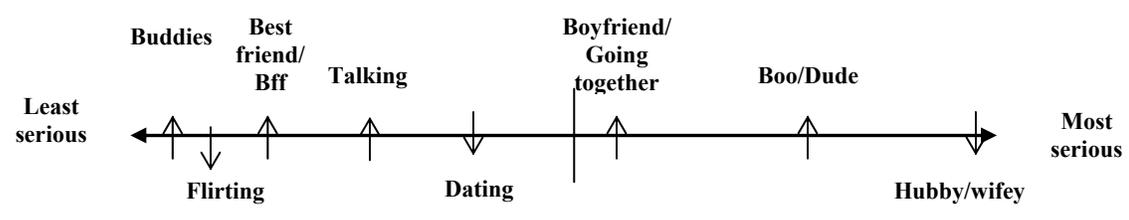


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 All under the process of
 talking / getting to
 know the person

12-14 Year Old Girls



12-14 Year Old Girls



12-14 Year Old Girls

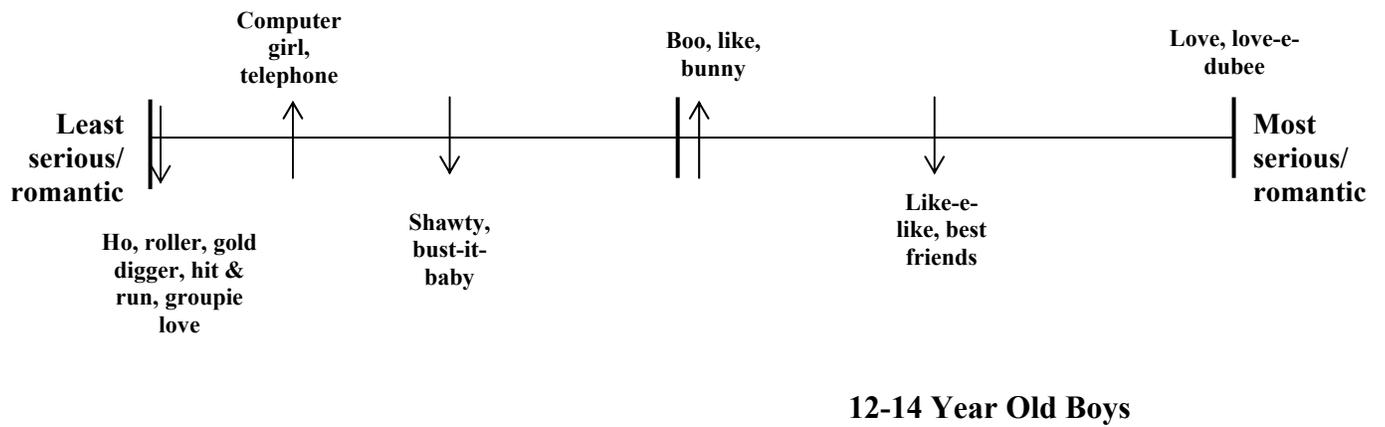
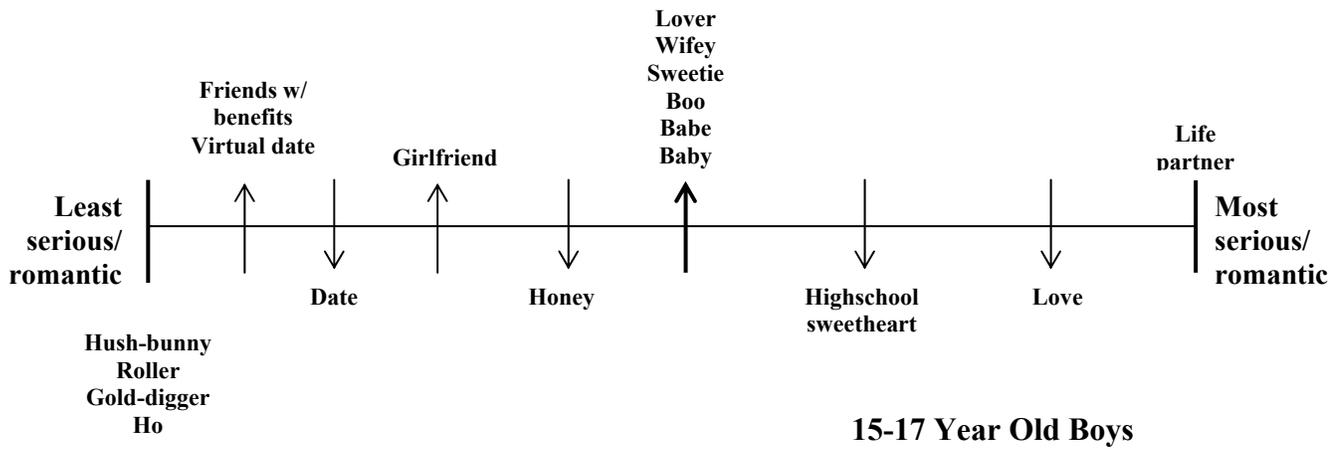


Table 2. Questions and Response Categories Used to Define Teen Romantic Relationships in Nationally Representative Surveys

National Survey	Questions	Response Categories
National Survey of Family Growth	At the time you first/last had sexual intercourse with (PARTNER), how would you describe your relationship with him/her?	Just met, Just friends, Went out once in a while, Going Steady, Engaged (but not living together), Living together
National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, 1997	Have you been in a dating relationship in which you thought of yourself as a part of a couple?	Yes, No
National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, 1997	At the time you first had sexual intercourse, how would you describe your relationship with your first sexual partner? Would you say you ...	Had just met, Were just friends, Went out once in a while, Were going together or going steady (but not living together), Were engaged (but not living together), Were living together in a marriage-like relationship, Were married, Had some other relationship
National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health	In the last 18 months have you ever had a special romantic relationship with anyone?	Yes, No
National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health	Not counting the people you have described as romantic relationships, have you ever had a sexual relationship with anyone?	Yes, No
Toledo Adolescent Relationships Survey	...when we ask about “dating” we mean when you like a girl, and she likes you back. This does not have to mean going on a “formal” date. Have you ever liked a girl/guy as more than just a friend?	Yes, No
Toledo Adolescent Relationships Survey	At that time [when you had sex for the very first time], how would you describe your relationship with him/her?	I didn’t know her/him, Acquaintance, A friend, A former girl/boyfriend, Went out once in a while, My girl/boyfriend