

UVA Today

Having A Teen 'Bestie' Can Predict Satisfaction In Adult Romantic Relationships

January 23, 2019 • Jane Kelly, jak4g@virginia.edu

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A new UVA study finds that teens who have high-quality, same-sex friendships are more likely to find romantic fulfillment as young adults.

Anearly two-decade study from the University of Virginia has found that adolescents who had healthy same-gender relationships can look forward to satisfying romantic relationships in adulthood.

Joseph Allen, a UVA professor of psychology and lead investigator of the study, said he and his team set out to learn what in adolescence would predict adults' romantic satisfaction by their late 20s, when romantic life starts to stabilize.

It turns out that things like physical attractiveness or the amount of romantic or sexual experience as a teen did not predict future romantic fulfillment. But the quality of same-gender peer relationships, especially with best friends, pointed to good relationships in adulthood.

Allen said the reason for this is that adolescent romantic relationships are not very similar to those of adults. "They are typically very unstable," he said. "They are not necessarily based on common interests or long-term commonalities. This means those young relationships are not the best place to learn the skills you will need to be a romantic partner."

Conversely, Allen said stable friendships, especially same-sex friendships, are a great proving ground for young people to practice with intimacy and negotiating differences. "Those are all key skills to managing romantic relationships in adulthood," he said.



UVA psychologist Joseph Allen said close friendships teach teens skills that come into play when they enter romantic relationships as adults. (Photo by Dan Addison, University Communications)

There was no sexual divide between males and females in this study. "We found that the friendships were just as important for males as they were for females," Allen said. The research did not focus on a person's sexual orientation.

Researchers from UVA and James Madison University have interviewed and observed 165 racially, ethnically and socioeconomically diverse adolescents aged 13 to 30 in the longitudinal study.

They assessed teens' reports of the quality of their social and romantic relationships, as well as reports by teens' close friends.

Each year when the youth were in their late 20s, researchers also interviewed participants about how satisfied they were with romantic life.

The study found that progress in key social developmental tasks in adolescence predicted future romantic competence at ages 27 to 30, even though the adolescent tasks were in nonromantic areas.

For example:

- At age 13, adolescents' abilities to establish positive expectations of relationships with their peers and to be appropriately assertive with peers were the best predictors of future romantic satisfaction.

- At ages 15 and 16, social competence – teens' ability to establish close friendships and to manage a broad array of relationships with peers – was the best predictor.
- From ages 16 to 18, teens' ability to establish and maintain close, stable friendships was the best predictor of satisfaction romantically.

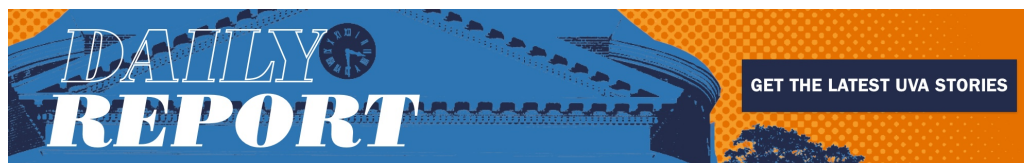
Allen said parents can tend to minimize or see as trivial the amount of energy and thought tee put into their relationships. But he said this is a critical phase and parents should take it seriously.

"That is the training ground for adult peer relationships for not only romantic relationships, which is the focus of this study, but equally for work relationships and adult friendships," he said.

What then do poor peer relationships in adolescence suggest for adulthood?

Allen said many teens who reported poor friendships as teens may be lonely in their 20s.

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These teens handled conflict, even the most minor kind, very poorly, he said. In observing the teens, Allen said he would see snippy, defensive and almost bullying behavior.

In adulthood, "They're more likely to be depressed. They obviously have less-positive romantic relationships," he said. "They're somewhat less likely to be in romantic relationships, and when they are, they're more likely to be high-conflict relationships."

Allen stressed that the study, published Thursday in the journal Child Development, is correlational and that teens without close, same-sex relationships are not doomed to unfulfilling romantic lives. People can change, he said.

"But it is a major warning sign," he said. "We know that being socially isolated as an adult is as big a risk factor for dying early as is cigarette smoking. So, take it very seriously and look for ways to get your teen help."

Allen said that could take the form of a teen talking to a guidance counselor at school or talking with his or her parents or guardians.

Allen also noted that the quality of the relationship between parents and teens tends to predict how teens are going to do with their peers. "Look closely at your relationship with your teen, and if it's not that great, think about how you might improve it," he said.

Listening well, being encouraging, handling discussions well and spending quality time with teens all predict a good outcome.

Allen said being able to follow the same cohort of people for 20 years is a testament to his staff and their dogged determination to make it a good experience for the young people participating in the study.

"We've got two full-time staff, five or six graduate students and at any given time, five to 15 undergraduate research assistants" working in the lab, he said.

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