

The Importance of Family, Peer, and Romantic Relationships on Adolescent Development

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ABSTRACT

Family, peer, and romantic relationships each hold significance in adolescents' developmental success. This paper reviews how each relationship uniquely contributes to the development of the 5 Cs of positive youth development (competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring). Research shows that a high-quality connection between parents and children can help adolescents' confidence and competence increase. As teenagers grow up, peers start to take over more time in teens' life and direct them to different futures. Since peers mold an individual's character, being part of a positive peer group can bring countless benefits and lead teens to success all around. Finally, romantic relationships are especially promising for cultivating care among adolescents. The paper concludes with recommendations for how parents can support their children's positive development through the formation of healthy and fulfilling relationships.

Introduction

Typically, in society, developmental success is defined by the absence of problems such as mental disorders or diseases. However, the positive youth development (PYD) framework suggests that the presence of strengths and assets should also characterize positive development. As such, positive youth development is an approach used to help people characterize adolescents based on their strengths instead of their weaknesses (Damon, 2004). The PYD framework also points to the importance of external assets (e.g., family relationships, home environment) in the development of adolescents (Damon, 2004). For example, external assets such as supportive relationships may support the development of the 5 C's characterizing positive development. The 5 C's refer to competence (e.g., developing skills), confidence (e.g., one's belief in their value and abilities), connection (e.g., positive relationships with others), character (e.g., personal values), and caring (e.g., the ability to feel sympathy and show intimacy) (Benson et al., 2006). Social connections with other people are one of the most critical elements of healthy development in adolescence. This paper reviews how relationships with parents, peers, and romantic partners promote the development of the 5 Cs and how each relationship uniquely contributes to adolescents' positive development.

Family relationships

Family relationships are the first connections a teen has in their early life, and may be the most critical relationship for an adolescent's development. For families to support positive outcomes among adolescents, the relationship must have a high quality. High-quality relationships between adolescents and their families have four characteristics: attachment, reciprocity, progressive complexity, and balance of power (Li & Julian, 2012). Attachment is the emotional connection that bonds parents and children positively and lovingly (Li & Julian, 2012). Attachment leads to opportunities for reciprocation, as the family spends time together to leave room for parents to recognize the changes in an adolescent. With the recognition of adolescents' changing needs (e.g., adolescents often crave greater autonomy), parents can provide corresponding guidance and adapt parenting styles accordingly (Lerner, 1982). As adolescents

age, progressive complexity starts to show in the relationship since their behaviors become more diverse. The behavior could be as simple as teenagers going up to their parents for a question they cannot solve. This behavior shows that the teen is exploring the world in their curiosity to learn about their interest. However, complexity is a sign of a healthy family relationship since it results from the teens taking the lead in their own life, and it can be achieved through the balance of power. The balance of power is when parents slowly hand the privilege of making choices to take leadership in life to the adolescent (Bowers et al., 2015). This step is essential for PYD because ranting adolescents with greater autonomy will help them discover new interests and identities, as well as practice making important decisions independently.

In addition to the four characteristics of a high-quality relationship, involvement and support are excellent ways for parents to promote the development of the 5 Cs in adolescents. In an experiment conducted to study parental influence on the hockey learning experience of youth, it was found that young participants' attitudes and behaviors towards... are affected by family involvement (Hodge et al., 2017). Teens experienced positive emotions when their family members accompanied them during practices or games. These results suggest that family support in daily life can create an encouraging environment that helps the teen to build various interests. Players reported enjoying playing the sport more when their family was involved positively. As a result of the higher level of joy, adolescents were more committed to the activity and demonstrated improvements in hockey skills. All these positive outcomes generally result from the confidence gained from quality family relationships. Confidence creates a sense of belonging, increasing adolescents' willingness to participate and compete. (Hodge et al., 2017).

Positive interactions that allow parents to bond with their teens can also build competence (Hodge et al., 2017). Opportunities for parent-child bonding can be simple. For example, times like when parents are driving the kids to a program, or spending time at the dinner table talking about their program experience are all valuable opportunities to bring emotional closeness between the family (Rittenour et al., 1997). During these conversations, parents can build their adolescents' competence by offering them feedback and guidance (Hodge et al., 2017). Competence is the ability to do things efficiently and successfully that can be traced back to emotions, actions, and contributions (Weiss, 2008). During the communication process, real-life lessons are often taught to teenagers, and their progress is given a chance to be recognized and reinforced (Hodge et al., 2017). The positive learning environment created by the parents is a determining factor for the adolescent's success. With every piece of evidence pointing out the importance of family relationships, programs are trying to increase the positive involvement of family for more positive outcomes (Hodge et al., 2017). However, every principle applies in daily life, even when adolescents grow up. Parents should focus on having a strong connection with their children to bring out the best in them.

Finally, parents have the ability to shape their adolescents' social development building other social connections like friendship and romantic relationships (Bowers et al., 2014; Cui & Conger, 2008; Donnellan et al., 2005). Good parenting can build positive virtues and character, which is necessary when choosing peer groups (Bornstein, 2015; Douvan & Adelson, 1966). Studies have shown that the problems and quality of romantic relationships correspond to the problems and quality of family relationships (Bornstein, 2015; Douvan & Adelson, 1966). Some possible results of early-stage poor parental connection are the abundance of aggression and negative emotions in a relationship (Conger et al. 2000, Kim et al. 2001). On the other hand, accountability and support from parents can do the opposite and bring a long-lasting and loving romantic experience (Simpson et al. 2007). Therefore, parents have the potential to cultivate the development of positive individual characteristics in adolescents, such as confidence, competence, and caring, as well as the potential to build a positive foundation for adolescents' social success.

Peer relationships

Peer relationships gradually gain significance in adolescents' lives, which can guide them in good and bad directions depending on the peer group (Brown & Larson, 2009; Wentzel, 2009; Rubin et al., 2015). A lot of diversity exists in the grouping of peers, and adolescents choose their group based on their environment, identities, and abilities (Brown, 1990; Brown & Larson, 2009). Often, teens seek peers who are similar to them (Brown, 1990; Brown & Larson,

2009). Although some peer groups promote negative behaviors such as violence or substance abuse, leading to a problematic future for adolescents (Brown & Larson, 2009), in the right context, peer groups can be extremely beneficial and vital to PYD (Crosnoe, Cavanagh, & Elder, 2003). Peers are not only able to increase positive behaviors but also cultivate character (one of the 5 Cs of PYD) among adolescents (Donlan et al., 2015). Peer group members would often praise one's achievements, encouraging youth to stay on the right track and improve themselves to meet their peer's expectations and gain their approval (Veenstra et al., 2013). In one study, researchers examined the school's student group as one big peer group, and over the course of a season, they found that the students with below average grades were more likely to improve their engagement and grades to meet the average level of the group as a byproduct of their social life. (Kindermann, 2007). Teens would slowly learn which behaviors are good and which are not accepted based on their peers' feedback. So as time goes on, if they spend most of their time with peers whose actions are socially positive and accepted, their positive character will develop as the idea of moral values and social norms form (Donlan et al., 2015). Adolescents see their peers as a mirror and reflect on the behaviors. They take away their peers' personal qualities in social, mental and physical aspects and make it a part of themselves. Adolescents are more likely to be more developed, showing the significance peers can have on the PYD (Bumbarger & Greenberg, 2002).

In addition to promoting character, peer groups also cultivate a sense of connection among youth. This is especially true within friend groups. Friends are a special category of peers. They are the closest and most intimate group to an individual (Bukowski et al., 2009; Hinde, 1979). Friendships are essential to the development of connections because friends are constantly engaged in each other's lives and provide care and support when needed. Unlike peer groups, teenagers spend more time with friends outside of activities to stay socially connected. Friends are the second most important people after parents, taking up a huge part of adolescents' life (need a citation). They do not only contribute to happiness and validation, but when times get hard, their presence can help regulate adolescents' emotions and help the teen get through it (need a citation). For instance, friends can serve as a shelter when the teen is getting picked on or bullied or an emotional outlet when things go wrong in the family (need a citation). Having someone to listen to and understand is foundational to social connection. Through social connection, peers keep adolescents accompanied on the journey of growing up, helping them develop in a positive manner (Bukowski et al. 2009). Among all evidence, friends create valuable opportunities for adolescents to build social connections around them.

Romantic relationships

Romantic relationships in adolescence are a more controversial topic to the public due to their uncertain outcomes. Many parents may be uncomfortable with their teens entering romantic relationships, causing a negative influence on adolescents' romantic experiences (Collins et al., 2009). For example, Latina and African American adolescent females tend to keep their relationships secret from their parents since they are scared of being told to end them (O'Sullivan & Meyer-Bahlburg, 2003). Studies show that it is nearly impossible for parents to completely prevent romantic behavior, with more than 70% of older teenagers having gotten involved in a relationship within the last 18 months (Carver et al., 2003). Therefore, instead of disapproving, parents should support teenagers as they navigate romantic relationships, guiding them carefully and supporting them when they need help. While some studies suggest that adolescent relationships increase the chances of mental illness or substance abuse, it is one sided (Ayduk et al. 2001, Davila et al. 2004, Grello et al. 2003, Harper & Welsh 2007). Those negative outcomes might be possible consequences of toxic relationships or rejection, but research does not support that romantic relationships are necessarily detrimental to adolescents' well-being.

Genuine romantic relationships are different and can bring indispensable qualities to adolescents' development (Joyner & Udry, 2000; Shulman & Kipnis, 2001; Brown et al., 1999). A relationship requires depth in many areas, such as commitment, communication, attachment, and intimacy (Shulman, 2001). Thus, it is useful to think of romantic relationships as opportunities to promote positive development among youth. Rather than preventing youth

from engaging with romantic relationships altogether, it may be more realistic and beneficial to adolescents if parents play a role in supporting and guiding adolescents through their relationships.

A high-quality romantic relationship is associated with many benefits (Laursen, 1995). For example, relationships can bring value to one's life. Through the intimate and reciprocal interactions between a couple, a sense of belonging can be created, and the awareness of self-worth is increased as both individuals experience the feeling of being needed (Connolly & Konarski, 1994; Harter, 1999). Research has also shown that high-quality relationships are associated with higher confidence, self-esteem, and social skills (Pearce et al., 2002; Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2001). With respect to the 5 Cs of PYD, romantic relationships can help cultivate care among adolescents. Through romantic relationships, adolescents learn how to show intimacy and provide support to someone they care about. Romantic relationships provide the most realistic opportunities for youth to fully comprehend the essence of care: understanding other people's emotions and experiences and then showing empathy to make one feel better and wanted (Shulman & Kipnis, 2001).

Romantic relationships also serve as a great learning tool for teenagers. Some studies suggest that though it might not apply to all relationships, a healthy connection between a couple could potentially boost academic performance (Furman & Collins, 2008, Furman & Shaffer, 2003). This may be because the couple share the same academic experience, and the companionship of the partner could make studying a pleasant experience. Adolescents also discover many other new things within themselves, for example, their own personal interests and what they are seeking in an ideal relationship with a romantic partner (Furman & Collins, 2008, Furman & Shaffer, 2003). Lastly, during a relationship, teenagers get a chance to explore sexuality along with their partner. This simply means spending time with someone they are attracted to rather than having to be sexually active. Those explorations contribute to forming self-identity, which is also a product of healthy relationships (Collins et al., 2009). Parents could serve as an important role guiding their children through the relationship and help the children explore their sexuality through conversations.

Discussion

This article reviewed literature demonstrating the significance of family, peers, and romantic relationships and their unique contributions to the positive youth development of teenagers. Research shows that a high-quality connection between parents and children can help adolescents' confidence and competence increase. During adolescence, peers become increasingly important and influential in teens' lives. Since peers contribute to the development of an individual's character, being part of a positive peer group can support healthy social connections and overall functioning. Finally, romantic relationships are especially promising for cultivating care among adolescents and for the development of self-identity.

Parents must understand and recognize the influence of each relationship since they have the role of performing as a mentor in adolescents' life, leading teenagers to find the right peer group and providing support when romantic partners enter their lives. Teenagers also need a good understanding of how to foster healthy relationships with others, which is also important for their positive development. Their interaction should be honest, supportive, and intimate across all types of relationships. Nonetheless, all relationships should be built based on secure attachments, clear communication, commitment, and intimacy to support positive outcomes for youth.

Countless studies have been conducted on the association between relationships and PYD, yet there are still unanswered questions. Further studies should focus on: (a) determining how adolescents can still experience positive youth development even in poor or under-resourced living environments, (b) helping adolescents build the skills and motivation to remove themselves from harmful peer relationships and enter more positive and supportive relationships, and (c) showing ways for adolescents to embrace positive experiences from romantic relationships without carrying over negative experiences.

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