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It's Best to Wait: Middle School Daters More Likely to Dropout, Use Drugs

By Brian Krans Wed, Mar 20, 2013

Ah, young love.

Tweens are practically bursting with feelings of possibility and new-found joy when they discover that "special someone." Then again, when you're fresh out of puberty, love is awkward and can be heartbreaking.

New research from the University of Georgia (UGA) paints a grim picture of middle school daters—they are four times more likely to drop out of school, twice as likely to drink and smoke marijuana, and tend to have worse teacher-reported study habits.

After all, Juliet was only 13 when she started dating Romeo, and we all know how that turned out.

Studying the Habits of Middle School Daters

Pamela Orpinas, lead study author and head of the Department of Health Promotion and Behavior at UGA, says that while romantic relationships may seem like the hallmark of adolescence, they don't always yield the best results.

Orpinas monitored 624 students as they moved from sixth grade to twelfth grade in six different school districts across Georgia. Every year, the students completed a questionnaire about their personal lives while their teachers evaluated each student's academic performance.

Teachers rated the students' study skills based on a variety of factors, including doing extra credit work, coming to class organized, completing homework, and doing assigned reading.

About 38 percent of the students who dated in middle school reported dating someone at almost all times during the seven-year study period. Twenty-two percent of teens in the study began dating someone in the sixth grade.

"At all points in time, teachers rated the students who reported the lowest frequency of dating as having the best study skills and the students with the highest dating as having the worst study skills," according to the article, published last week in the *Journal of Research on Adolescence*.

Adolescence is when children first begin to push boundaries on the way to adulthood. While they may think they know what's best for them, they sometimes lack the foresight to see the consequences of their actions.

Study participants who didn't date had better overall academic performance, while those who dated earlier in middle school were twice as likely to begin using alcohol and drugs in high school, the researchers said.

"A likely explanation for the worse educational performance of early daters is that these adolescents start dating early as part of an overall pattern of high-risk behaviors," Orpinas said in a press release.

Other amplifying factors include the emotional difficulties teens often face in middle and high school: bullying, depression, and anxiety. All of these have been linked to higher rates of smoking, drinking, and drug use.

Add these factors together—plus the fluctuating hormones that come with tweendom—and a relationship can be tough to handle without the right coping strategies. A nasty breakup could send a teen looking for ways to alleviate the stress.

A recent University of Toronto study showed that children of divorced parents are 13 times more likely to start smoking cigarettes, and researchers there suggested that the calming effect of cigarettes helped the teens cope.

“Dating a classmate may have the same emotional complications as dating a co-worker,” Orpinas said. “When the couple splits, they have to continue to see each other in class and perhaps witness the ex-partner dating someone else. It is reasonable to think this scenario could be linked to depression and divert attention from studying.”

Her findings were enough for Orpinas to warn that, “dating should not be considered a rite of passage in middle school.”

The Georgia researchers say more study is required to tease out the characteristics of healthy young dating versus problem behavior. And that’s where parents step in.

How Parents Can Help

Parents are a teen’s role primary model for how relationships work. Since many teens are ill-prepared to deal with the realities of dating, parents can model good behavior for them.

More importantly, parents should talk to their children about dating, along with the birds and the bees. This includes helping their children form realistic expectations for relationships and assuring them that not being in a relationship isn’t the end of the world.

After all, there's plenty of time (and opportunity) to date in college.