

Dating, Romance, and Hooking Up

Do adolescents still date, or has dating disappeared into the recesses of the 1950s and earlier? Dating during adolescence is common, but terms such as *hanging out*, or *going out with someone* have replaced the term *dating* for most adolescents (Collins et al., 2009). Although the term *dating* may be falling into disuse among adolescents, the functions of dating remain, even among the digital generation for whom Facebook, Texting, Instagram, and Snapchat have become important forms of social interaction (Eaton, Rose, Interligi, Fernandez, & McHugh, 2016).

■ DATING AMONG ADOLESCENTS AND EMERGING ADULTS

What Has Happened to Dating?

Dating serves many different functions, including romance, recreation, companionship, raising one's social status, improving relationship skills, sexual behavior, and courtship. A dating relationship is an opportunity for adolescents to spend time with a potential or current romantic partner and, at least among heterosexuals, is a developmental turning point in relations with peers of the opposite sex (O'Sullivan, Cheng, Harris, & Brooks-Gunn, 2007). A boy-girl friendship during childhood may turn into a dating relationship and eventually into a romantic relationship during adolescence.

Parents always have been apprehensive about the dating behavior of their adolescents: nervous about teens pairing up too soon in a steady relationship and worried that dating may lead to sex (Weigel, 2016). Parent admonitions

about the dangers of dating and their advice to avoid a steady, exclusive relationship have been common parent warnings to their adolescents for as long as teens have been going out together. Long before today's concerns about the hookup culture, parents were worried about teenage "parking" and "petting parties," legitimate concerns during a time when teen pregnancies and teen marriages were much more common than they are today.

Older adolescents are more likely to date than younger adolescents, although a substantial percentage of teens have never dated, ranging from about 60% of 8th graders to about 40% of 12th graders (Child Trends, 2015b). Surprisingly, the percentage of 12th graders who have not gone on a date has been increasing since the early 1980s. Some of this historical difference may be due to changing definitions of the term *dating*, but adolescents today are less likely to pair up in a dating relationship than in times past, and more likely to engage in group dating and casual relationships.

There is much cultural variation in heterosexual dating among U.S. adolescents. For example, African American youth are less likely to date than white and Hispanic adolescents. Further, many Asian American parents view adolescents' developing interest in the opposite sex as inappropriate, and believe

In the following story, one young woman describes the progression of a relationship from first meeting, to "talking," to "Facebook official," to seduction and breakup.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

During high school, I dated a boy named Y. for about 2 years. We met through some mutual friends and started texting soon after that. Then came the awkward "we're talking" period. This meant we were more than friends, but not dating yet. However, we weren't seeing other people at the time. We would hang out with large groups of people or meet up at parties. Very rarely would we go on a date as just a couple. The whole idea sounds incredibly stupid, but in high school, it was what you did.

Anyways, we started officially dating very quickly after "talking." This meant we were Facebook official and everyone would know we were together. At this time I was very excited, considering this was the first real relationship I had had. Now we started going out alone much more frequently. We would go to movies, dinner, or each other's house.

Entering the relationship, I was a virgin and he was not. Initially, I thought he may be the one who I'd first have sex with, but quickly changed my mind after becoming bored with the relationship. Y. would ask if/when we were going to do it and I simply kept replying, "I'm just not ready." After some time he started to try more smoothly. His favorite attempt was "Let's watch a movie in the basement on the big screen." I'd agree and we would go downstairs. After about 10 minutes he'd complain of the glare on the TV and turn off the lights. Next thing I'd know I was getting a back rub and kisses on my neck. After a couple of minutes I'd thank him and then say some bullshit line such as "My legs are sore from soccer, I need to stretch out more," and then I'd go sprawl out on the opposite couch. Similar events went on for a good while until I finally ended the relationship because I had found someone else.

that dating during adolescence leads to sex and early marriage. Many Asian American adolescents, especially girls, are forbidden to date (Brotto, Chik, Ryder, Gorzalka, & Seal, 2005). Academic excellence is emphasized and dating is seen as a distraction (Kim & Ward, 2007). According to one 16-year-old Asian American boy:

“You are allowed to have friends that are girls, but you are not allowed to go out until you graduate college or until you are from 25 to 30ish. You cannot talk to any girls. I mean you can talk to girls, they can be your friends, but they can never be more than that.” (Lau, Markham, Lin, Flores, & Chacko, 2009, p. 104)

What Do We Know about Youth Who Start to Date at an Early Age?

Early maturation sets the stage for early dating, which is even more likely to occur if the adolescents are risk takers and extraverted (Ivanova, Veenstra, & Mills, 2012). In addition, adolescents who are early daters are more likely to have parents who are divorced, whom adolescents perceive as rejecting, and who are poor monitors (Ivanova, Mills, & Veenstra, 2011). Last, early daters have friends who are also dating and who tend to be involved in delinquent activities, including early sexual behavior (Friedlander, Connolly, Pepler, & Craig, 2007). In general, the early development of secondary sexual characteristics among adolescents who are risk takers, have poor relations with their parents, and have friends who engage in unconventional behavior puts adolescents on a path that includes early dating and early sexual debut (Zimmer-Gembeck & Collins, 2008).

What Is the Relation between Dating and Sex?

Sexual intercourse is considerably more common between adolescents who are dating than between teens who are not dating, and even more common if the adolescents are in some type of steady, exclusive relationship (Cooksey, Mott, & Neubauer, 2002; Zimmer-Gembeck, Siebenbruner, & Collins, 2004). Sexual activity among adolescents often occurs in an exclusive, romantic relationship, not only in the United States but also in other countries as well, such as Mexico, where premarital sex is rare (Espinosa-Hernández & Vasilenko, 2015).

What Predicts Early Sexual Activity among Dating Adolescents?

Two of the strongest predictors of whether adolescents in a dating relationship will have sexual intercourse are when both adolescents are nonvirgins at the beginning of the relationship and when both adolescents want to have sex (Cleveland, 2003). In addition, two adolescents are more likely to have sexual intercourse if the female drinks alcohol and has a history of rebellious behavior.

Further, the association between each characteristic and sexual intercourse is especially strong when both partners possess the same sexual risk characteristic (e.g., when both partners are nonvirgins or both drink alcohol).

Another factor related to whether two adolescents in a dating relationship have sexual intercourse is the gap in ages between the two youth. It is more common for girls who date boys much older than themselves to have sex than girls who date boys close to their own age (Morrison-Beedy, Xia, & Passmore, 2013; Oudekerk, Guarnera, & Reppucci, 2014). It may be that girls who date older boys are more likely to be drawn into an older peer group where sex is expected and more common. Older boys, more than younger boys, are also more likely to be nonvirgins who expect a dating relationship to be sexual. The

In the following story, one young woman describes the relationship she had with an older boyfriend and the effect it had on her. Note that his older friends became her friends, exposing her to an older peer group and the behaviors that exist in that type of group.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Living in a single-parent household, money was tight, so when we were struggling financially, I applied as a cashier at our local grocery store to help with the bills. I hated it. The uniforms were ugly, the customers were annoying, and my boss was rude. I made friends with a few people who made work more enjoyable but I noticed this one boy was always staring at me. In high school, I was friends with many guys but that was it—we were friends. So when this guy kept staring at me I was intrigued. As I continued to get more comfortable with my new job, I stopped being shy and learned more about this boy. Turns out he is 22, a senior at the university, and plays soccer. I mean he could not be a better match for me! We somehow exchanged cell phone numbers and I literally had my phone attached to my hip at all times texting him. We went out on numerous dates, but I was so hesitant to make it official. I knew he was more experienced in the dating world than I was. I was intimidated. I mean he was 3 years older than me! At first I thought it was weird he was interested in a high school senior. Why wasn't he interested in girls his own age? But I could not blame him; my senior year was such a great year.

I may have been seen as valuable catch to him. However, at the same time, the fact that a 22-year-old liked a high school senior made me feel special.

In the summer going into my freshman year at the university, we finally became an official couple. My boyfriend had already gone through the freshman partying stage and he was of drinking age so I was influenced to go out more than usual. He exposed me to new situations I would have never put myself into before. But with my older boyfriend, who already went through this stage of his life, I trusted him that I would be safe. During my freshman year of college, my friends were his older friends. I rarely met anyone my own age.

He was my first serious boyfriend. Being 3 years older, he was obviously more sexually experienced than I was and that scared me to death. I often compared myself to his ex-girlfriends and I became obsessed with trying to impress him. Many of my first sexual experiences were with him and I think it is due to the fact I felt pressured not to seem as young as I was. I had to keep up with him and at the same time fit in with his older peers. I had to be seen as older.

wider the age gap, the more likely it is that sex will occur, and the less likely it is that the pair will use some form of protection against pregnancy and STIs (Swartzendruber et al., 2013). In addition, girls in a dating relationship are more likely to be victimized—emotionally, physically, and sexually—by older boys than by boys close to their own age. Further, girls with older male partners are more likely to be depressed and involved in risky behaviors such as drinking alcohol, using drugs, and delinquency, all of which are related to early sexual activity (Young & d’Arcy, 2005).

■ ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS

What Is a Romantic Relationship?

Researchers have defined *romantic relationships* and measured them in several different ways. Building on the work of Robert Sternberg (2004), Connolly and her colleagues found that young adolescents defined a romantic relationship as including three components—intimacy, passion, and commitment (Connolly, Craig, Goldberg, & Pepler, 1999). Intimacy includes feelings of attachment, closeness, and connectedness; passion encompasses sexual attraction; and commitment includes a decision to remain together.

Some researchers studying adolescent romantic relationships use definitions of romantic relationships that are based on behavior. For example, in the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health), researchers use a behavioral definition of a romantic relationship that includes the following four behaviors in the past 18 months: held hands with someone who is not a member of your family, kissed someone on the mouth who is not a member of your family, told someone who is not a member of your family that you liked or loved them and did these things with the same person (e.g., Meier & Allen, 2009).

Other researchers emphasize the idea that a true romantic relationship is a mutual relationship in which both people agree that a romantic relationship exists (Collins & van Dulmen, 2014). A discrepancy between two people about whether they are in a romantic relationship is called *relational asymmetry*, which is common among teens, since many adolescent relationships are short-lived and characterized by volatile feelings that can change quickly (Giordano, Manning, & Longmore, 2014).

Another perspective on romantic relationships is to differentiate them from friendships. Giordano and colleagues (2014) describe three features that differentiate adolescent romantic relationships from friendships. First, romantic relationships during adolescence often include social and communication *awkwardness*, in comparison to friendships. Second, romantic relationships have heightened *emotionality* attached to feelings such as love and jealousy. Third, *exclusivity* is more common in romantic relationships than in friendships; one can have many friends, but only one romantic relationship.

All of these definitional approaches are useful attempts to define what is a fuzzy concept, but which includes a core idea of a special emotional connection to another person. None of these definitions mention gender, since romantic relationships are as much a part of LGBTQ communities as they are of the heterosexual community.

How Common Are Romantic Relationships among Adolescents?

The percentage of adolescents who report that they had a romantic relationship in the past 18 months increases from about 27% among 12-year-olds to about 73% among 18-year-olds (Carver, Joyner, & Udry, 2003). Asian Americans are considerably less likely to have a romantic relationship than adolescents of other races and ethnicities. About 2% of boys and 4% of girls report a same-sex romantic relationship.

The duration of heterosexual romantic relationships is dependent on the age of the adolescents, lasting about 5 months for adolescents under the age of 14 years and about 21 months among adolescents over the age of 16 years. Although African American adolescents are less likely to be in a romantic relationship than white adolescents, romantic relationships between African American adolescents are more stable than romantic relationships for other races and ethnicities, lasting over 24 months.

What Effect Does Timing of First Sexual Intercourse Have on Romantic Relationships?

Is it better for two people to get to know each other before they have sex or to have sex early in a relationship in order to test for sexual compatibility? Emerging adults who have sex before they begin dating or early in their relationship are less satisfied with their relationships, have poorer communication, and have less stable relationships than couples that wait longer to have sex (Harden, 2012; Willoughby, Carroll, & Busby, 2014). The findings support the idea of *sexual restraint*, which is that couples that delay sexual involvement until they really get to know each other are more likely to have more satisfying relationships, including better sexual relations, than couples that have sex early in their relationship (Busby, Carroll, & Willoughby, 2010).

It is not clear why a delay in sexual activity is associated with a good relationship. One possibility is that couples that have sex early in their relationship may later discover that they are personally and socially incompatible with their partner, a discovery that leads to relationship problems and eventual breakup. Another possibility is that individuals who wait to have sex possess characteristics such as emotional self-regulation that have a positive effect on general relationship quality (Shulman, Seiffge-Krenke, & Walsh, 2017). Whatever the explanation for the value of sexual delay, waiting to have sex is an advantage for adolescents and emerging adults in romantic relationships.

Do Parents Have an Effect on Romantic Relationships?

Parents have a major influence on the ages when adolescents first start to date, form a romantic relationship, and have sexual intercourse. Parents who approve of early dating have adolescents who reach each of these relationship milestones earlier than adolescents with parents who do not approve of early dating (Bouris et al., 2012).

Positive parent–child relations are associated with a delay in the ages when adolescents begin to date, form a romantic relationship, and have sex, while negative relations with parents are linked to an earlier achievement of each of these relationship events (de Graaf et al., 2011; Walper & Wendt, 2015). In particular, when the emotional bond between parents and adolescents is weak, referred to as low *family cohesion*, adolescents often begin dating, enter into romantic relations, and have sex earlier than when family cohesion is strong. When parent–adolescent cohesion is weak, adolescents may seek the closeness they do not get at home from a romantic partner, leading to an intense emotional connection and early sexual relations. This scenario is especially true for early adolescent females, but less true for older females and males of all ages for whom parents have less of an influence on dating, romance, and sex (de Graaf, van de Schoot, Woertman, Hawk, & Meeus, 2012).

Family stress is another family factor related to the early formation of romantic relations and to early sexual intercourse. Among young girls, family

Even if parents are strict, two teens who want to have sex will find a place to have sex, as the following story told by a young woman demonstrates.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

When I was 17, my parents had moved to Z. and I remained in our hometown in W. to finish out the school year. I was living at a friend's house and rules were much stricter there than I had ever experienced before, but it wouldn't have been a big problem if I hadn't just started dating my new boyfriend. His parents were also very strict so we had a really difficult time engaging in any sort of sexual behavior. Determined to be together, we would lie to the adults in charge of us (usually telling them we were at the town library) and go to an old graveyard that was on top of a hill and surrounded by trees. No one ever came there, especially not at 3 in the afternoon on a weekday, so we thought we were alone. We thought we were so clever. At least twice a week we would sneak off and have sex. One day we were

there and one of us, I can't remember who, realized that there was a car pulling into the graveyard. We got up immediately, pulled all our clothes back on, and got in my boyfriend's car. As we drove away, we saw the car pull up to the same gravestone we'd just been up against and an elderly couple get out and put flowers at it. Based on the date on the gravestone, it probably belonged to that couple's son, who likely died in the first Gulf War.

Thinking about this story now, I'm absolutely horrified at my actions, even though I know my boyfriend and I laughed about it at the time. It is still a bit funny to think about how desperate my boyfriend and I were to have sex and the lengths we went to in order to do so.

stress is associated with feelings of low self-worth, social isolation, low positive affect, and high negative affect, all characteristics of depression, which predicts early involvement in a romantic relationship and early sexual activity (Davila et al., 2009). These findings are consistent with the idea that some adolescents, especially girls, attempt to cope with depression caused by family stress by seeking support and validation from a romantic partner, which often leads to early sexual intercourse. Taken together, these results suggest that low family emotional support and high family stress are associated with the formation of romantic relations and early sexual debut, especially for females.

■ DATING AND ROMANCE AMONG LGBTQ ADOLESCENTS

More than 20 years ago, Ritch Savin-Williams (1994), a psychologist at Cornell University, wrote a chapter about dating and romantic relationships among lesbian, gay, and bisexual adolescents, provocatively entitled “Dating Those You Can’t Love and Loving Those You Can’t Date.” The point of the title and the purpose of the chapter was to describe the dilemma many LGBTQ adolescents face as they navigate through the complicated social scene of most U.S. middle schools and high schools. In most U.S. schools, LGBTQ adolescents have two realistic social options: date adolescents of the opposite sex or not date at all. Although LGBTQ youth are more visible and accepted by the straight community today than ever before, victimization, prejudice, and social harassment remain problems for many LGBTQ youth, problems that discourage same-sex dating (Diamond, Savin-Williams, & Dubé, 1999). In fact, few adolescents who are attracted to same-sex individuals have romantic relationships during adolescence, which typically do not emerge until after graduation from high school (Hu, Xu, & Tornello, 2016). The proliferation of school-based gay support groups such as gay-straight alliances, have improved social relations for many LGBTQ students, but problems remain, especially for students in small schools, rural areas, and conservative communities. As a result of realistic fears of bullying and retribution, not only from schoolmates but also from friends and family, many LGBTQ adolescents conceal their true feelings for someone of the same sex and form friendships with individuals of the opposite sex, which may lead to pretend dating and to the appearance of “normality.”

What Are Some Characteristics of LGBTQ Romantic Relationships?

LGBTQ dating and romantic relationships do not suddenly appear with the onset of puberty and passage into early adolescence. Instead, same-sex sexual and romantic behaviors emerge gradually throughout adolescence into emerging adulthood. In one study of *sexual milestones*, which are the first time a romantic or sexual behavior appears, two sequences were identified: one for young men

who had sexual experiences only with females, and one for young men who had sexual experiences only with males (Smiler, Frankel, & Savin-Williams, 2011). The sequence of sexual milestones for female-exclusive men and the ages when they typically occurred was kissing (13.8 years), sexual touching (15.9 years), and intercourse (17.8 years); while the sequence for male-exclusive men and the average ages was sexual touching (15.9 years), intercourse (16.1 years), and kissing (16.6 years). Note that male-exclusive men experienced first intercourse before female-exclusive men, but first kiss was almost 3 years later than female-exclusive men. The authors speculate that the sexual behavior of female-exclusive men often follows the establishment of a romantic relationship, while the sexual behavior of male-exclusive men frequently precedes the establishment of a romantic relationship. This difference may reflect the strong sexual interests of two males in a male-male relationship, while male-female relationships reveal more of a balance between male sexual yearning and female desire for a relationship.

Several characteristics of romantic relationships were identified in another study of mainly gay white males (Savin-Williams, 1998b). First, it is rare for a friendship to turn into a romantic relationship, which more typically occurs with a new acquaintance or with someone the adolescent has just met. Second, some kind of sexual behavior often occurs on the first or second date. Third, gay males report that their first romantic relationship occurs about the time they turn 18 years of age. Fourth, most romantic relationships last less than 3 months.

Gay couples often cite infidelity as a problem in gay romantic relationships, which can lead one partner to become highly possessive of the other partner (Eyre, Milbrath, & Peacock, 2007). As one young African American gay adolescent recounted:

“My most serious boyfriend would have to be the first person I was with sexually for two years, and it was good. . . . But he cheated on me. . . . One day when I got [home], he was in bed with somebody. I couldn’t even speak . . . I saw them kissing and everything. . . . My first reaction was to run to the kitchen. I picked up a knife. I was just trying to cut somebody.” (Eyre et al., 2007, p. 124)

In another study, about half of gay, adult African American men reported that they had an agreement with their partner to remain monogamous, although two-thirds reported that they had affairs since the beginning of the current relationship (Peplau, Cochran, & Mays, 1997).

What Are Some Sexual Risks for LGBTQ Adolescents in Romantic Relationships?

In which type of situation are YMSM more likely to acquire a new HIV infection: sex between two young men who have just met, or sex between two young men in a romantic relationship? The surprising answer is that sex between men in a romantic relationship has more risk than sex between new acquaintances

(Sullivan, Salazar, Buchbinder, & Sanchez, 2009). The main reason for the difference is that YMSM in romantic relationships are less likely to use a condom when they have anal intercourse than two new acquaintances (Newcomb & Mustanski, 2016). In fact, the probability of using a condom decreases as the length of the relationship increases (Newcomb, Ryan, Garofalo, & Mustanski, 2014).

There are several reasons why YMSM stop using condoms once they enter into a serious, long-term relationship: first, one partner may perceive condom use by the other partner as an expression of a lack of trust (Mustanski, Newcomb, & Clerkin, 2011); second, condoms reduce pleasure (Mustanski, DuBois, Prescott, & Ybarra, 2014); and third, the perception of the two partners that a monogamous relationship protects the partners from contracting an STI (Greene, Andrews, Kuper, & Mustanski, 2014). Unfortunately, many HIV-infected YMSM are unaware they are infected and unknowingly put their partner at risk (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2013).

■ CASUAL SEX, HOOKUPS, AND FRIENDS WITH BENEFITS

Have college students today gone wild, living in a world of alcohol-infused parties and sexual nights with people whose names the students may not know and with people they may never see again? This is certainly the view some have of the college scene from mass media reports of modern campus life (Taylor, 2013). But how true is it?

Casual sex has been around since time immemorial. People, especially the young, have been pairing off at bars and parties to have one-night stands for a long time. Casual sex did not suddenly appear in the 2000s (Garcia, Reiber, Massey, & Merriwether, 2012; Monto & Carey, 2014). The claim by some commentators and researchers, however, is that a seismic shift has occurred in relations between young men and women (Adshade, 2013; Bogle, 2008). As stated by Kalish and Kimmel (2011), “Today, American campus culture is not about dating to find an appropriate mate; it’s more about mating to find an appropriate date!” (p. 139).

According to some reporters, hooking up has replaced traditional dating as the typical setting in which young men and women meet and initiate sex. Whereas in the past people would meet, date, begin a romantic relationship, and then possibly have sex, today, according to some, the traditional sequence has been reversed and now follows a pattern of meeting, having sex, possibly dating, and occasionally becoming romantically involved.

Several perspectives exist about the sex lives of contemporary emerging adults, especially college students. On the one hand, there are those who see a moral breakdown among college students who are part of a hookup culture fueled by alcohol in which sex takes place between people who know little about each other and may not even know each other’s names (Rosin, 2012).

A FOCUS ON RESEARCH

Studying hookups brings to the forefront a fundamental issue that all social science researchers must address in their research, which is to clearly define the variables being investigated. In order to study the occurrence of hookups, for example, a researcher must define *hookup* clearly, precisely, and in a way that validly captures the meaning of the term as it is generally used. Males and females, students of different ages, and students who attend different universities all must share the same definition of hookup, otherwise results from studies cannot be compared. Asking college students a question such as “Have you had a hookup experience in the past month?” on a questionnaire may appear to be a straightforward question, but it is not if hooking up means sexual intercourse to one group of students, while passionate kissing qualifies as a hookup for another group. Ambiguity about the meaning of the term *hookup* may partly explain gender differences in reports of hookups.

Defining variables can be a problem in any area of social science research, and it is clearly a problem in the study of adolescent sexuality. Consider the following examples: What does *date* mean in the question “Have you been on a date in the past month?”; What does it mean to ask a question such as “Have you ever been in a romantic relationship?” Even a question as apparently straightforward as “Have you ever had sexual intercourse?” may have multiple meanings for people, especially middle school children who may not fully understand the phrase *sexual intercourse*. Clearly defining variables is a critical first step in any research study, especially when a variable may be ambiguous or have multiple meanings. How variables are defined and how they are understood by respondents can have a major effect on study results.

Then there are those who believe that the hookup culture is a victory for promiscuous male sexuality over female relational sex, to the detriment of females who are abandoned to a walk of shame after a night of hot, no-strings-attached sex (Regnerus & Uecker, 2011). On the other hand, there are those who view the new sexuality as an indication of how far women have come, who are now focused on their education and careers, uninterested in the complicated confusion of a relationship, but who enjoy the physical pleasure of temporary sexual connection (Kalish & Kimmel, 2011). Which perspective, if any, is accurate?

What Does It Mean to Hook Up?

Hooking up is a slang term that came into existence in the early 2000s. The phrase is not clearly defined, even by the people who use it. Hooking up generally refers to having sexual intercourse with someone you just met and may never see again, but it can also mean something less than intercourse, such as kissing, or “fooling around,” which includes sexual touching, or oral sex (Garcia et al., 2012). A group of friends may have a shared meaning of what hooking up means in their group, but that definition may be different for emerging adults in another group.

One reason why the definition of a hookup is vague is that it serves different meanings for men and women. Many men who say they hooked up with

someone may want the listener to infer that sexual intercourse occurred, as a way of inflating their self-concepts and increasing their social status among their peers. On the other hand, some women who say they hooked up with someone may want to protect their reputations by having their listeners think that something less than sexual intercourse occurred (Bogle, 2008). Thus, the ambiguous phrase “I hooked up” has a gendered meaning that serves to enhance or preserve the self-concepts and reputations of the young men and women who use it (Allison & Risman, 2013).

One feature of hooking up that is near-universally understood to be true is that a hookup does not mean that a commitment exists between the two people who hooked up. A hookup may be the beginning of a relationship, and two people may decide to see each other again, but most college students report that a hookup usually means a one-time-only erotic encounter with no emotional entanglements. Students may exchange phone numbers or email addresses, or make a date to see each other again, but most do not expect a hookup to lead to a romantic relationship (Bogle, 2008).

Although emerging adults understand that a hookup is a no-strings-attached encounter, a majority of young men and an even larger majority of young women who have hooked up indicate that they would rather be in a traditional romantic relationship than have uncommitted sex (Garcia et al., 2012). Many of these students report that they made an attempt to discuss the possibility of beginning a romantic relationship with a hookup partner even though they know most hookups do not lead to a romantic relationship (Owen & Fincham, 2011).

The following young woman describes her strong need for sex, which, to her, feels like a biological imperative that can only be satisfied with multiple sex partners. She is not interested in one-night stands, however, but has had many friends with benefits whom she calls “casual sex buddies.”

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

... I was having sex and messing around because it felt good to me and improved my lifestyle. I had sexual tension that I needed to relieve with another person and masturbation did not cut it. ... I was able to find casual sex buddies who I would hook up with “no strings attached.” The idea of consistent sex buddies excited me, because I felt I was not sleeping around with completely random people. It felt more justifiable than just one-night stands. But on the contrary, I had multiple sex buddies at one time.

... I am now at the point in my life though where I am ready for a steady relationship,

but it is proving difficult. I have never been successful in finding a guy who doesn't take advantage of the fact that I love sex. They do not seem to understand that sex is a need for me, and not a recreation. As long as we are open about it, I do not mind “adding” another sex buddy to my tally of partners. I am fully committed to the belief that sex and emotions are separate. Only in special instances are they combined to create something magical. I want magic in my life and I hope to soon find a guy who feels the same way and accepts me and looks past my sexual history.

Hookups are different from *friends with benefits*, a phrase that refers to a long-term sexual relationship with someone without being emotionally involved with that person (Furman & Shaffer, 2011; Jonason, Li, & Richardson, 2011). In one small-scale study, 60% of 125 undergraduate students reported that they had a friends-with-benefits relationship at some point in their lives (Bisson & Levine, 2009). These are complicated relationships that sometimes endure, often do not, and rarely evolve into a romantic relationship (Lehmiller, Vander-Drift, & Kelly, 2014; Manning, Giordano, & Longmore, 2006).

How Common Is Hooking Up?

Estimating the prevalence of hookups on college campuses is difficult because the estimate depends on the definition of a hookup and the characteristics of the sample surveyed. The results of three large studies indicate that about 70% of college students report that they have hooked up at least once, with about 30% of those hookups including sexual intercourse (Armstrong, England, & Fogarty, 2012; Kalish & Kimmel, 2011; Paul, McManus, & Hayes, 2000). As expected, males report a higher incidence of sexual intercourse than females, a difference that makes it impossible to determine how often intercourse actually occurs. By their senior year in college, students report that they have hooked up between three and 11 times.

Mass media reports indicate that the hookup culture is relatively recent, widespread, and has replaced traditional dating on college campuses (Freitas, 2013). Monto and Carey (2014) evaluated the claim that hookups are a recent phenomenon by using data from the General Social Survey, which is a nationally representative sample of U.S. emerging adults between ages 18 and 25 years. Comparisons were made for data collected between 1988 and 1996 and 2004 and 2012 in order to examine historical trends. Emerging adults from the recent era were more likely to report that they had sex with a close friend or a “casual date/pickup” than emerging adults from the previous era. This finding does indicate that hooking up is more common today than in the past, although emerging adults in the recent cohort did not report more total number of sexual partners, more partners during the past year, or more frequent sex during the previous year. The researchers conclude that emerging adults today are having more casual sex than before, but in other ways, their sexual behavior is similar to the sexual behavior of emerging adults from the previous generation. Many would be surprised to discover that the sexual behavior of emerging adults today is not very different from the sexual behavior of parents when they were emerging adults, with the important difference that emerging adults today have more casual sexual partners than before.

Who Hooks Up?

One study investigated the relationship between hookups and problem behavior among middle school and high school students. A hookup was broadly

defined as anything from kissing to sexual intercourse with a stranger, brief acquaintance, or friend. About 18% of middle school students and 34% of high school students reported that they had engaged in a hookup. For all students, hooking up was associated with smoking cigarettes, drinking alcohol, using illicit drugs, gambling, and skipping school (Fortunato, Young, Boyd, & Fons, 2010). The results suggest that hooking up in middle school and high school is not a normative experience, but is part of a problem behavior syndrome that includes a variety of risky behaviors. We do not know whether these specific findings hold true for college students, but they do indicate that young adolescents who hook up are more likely to be unconventional risk takers.

What do we know about the college students who hook up in comparison to students who do not hook up? In general, college students who hook up are more unconventional, higher risk takers, and more impulsive than students who do not hook up (Lyons, Manning, Longmore, & Giordano, 2014). Two other characteristics of students who hook up are a desire for sexual pleasure and a higher level of substance use (Lyons, Manning, Longmore, & Giordano, 2015). In addition, students who hook up have positive attitudes about hooking up (Owen, Rhoades, Stanley, & Fincham, 2010) and think their close friends approve of hooking up (Napper, Kenney, & LaBrie, 2015).

Also, college students who hook up have a passionate or erotic approach to relationships, and place a greater emphasis on the physical attractiveness of their partners than on their personal characteristics. Further, students who hook up have greater fears of relationship intimacy. In contrast, students who do not hook up are more likely to want intimacy in a romantic relationship, and have little interest in superficial relationships (Paul et al., 2000).

What Is the Relationship between Drinking Alcohol and Hooking Up?

The majority of hookups are preceded by drinking alcohol, sometimes a prodigious amount of it (LaBrie, Hummer, Ghaidarov, Lac, & Kenney, 2014). A large percentage of college students are drunk at the time they hook up (Johnson & Chen, 2015). In one study, men averaged almost five drinks per hookup, women nearly three (Kalish & Kimmel, 2011). In addition to binge drinking, many hookups are preceded by marijuana use, which, along with drinking alcohol, is associated with an increase in the risk of unprotected sex (Kuperberg & Padgett, 2017).

Given that many hookups are partly fueled by excessive drinking, it is not surprising that some students, especially young women, later report that the hookup was not consensual (Livingston, Testa, Windle, & Bay-Cheng, 2015). Many young women report that they engaged in a hookup at least once when they were drunk, and perceived the sex as unwanted (Flack et al., 2007). Many women are unwilling to label such encounters assault or rape, however, and, instead, blame themselves for what occurred (Stinson, 2010).

How Do Young People Feel after Hooking Up?

Hookups are not emotionally inconsequential. Most emerging adults have ambivalent to positive reactions to a hookup. In one study of U.S. college students, nearly 70% of men and 56% of women reported more positive than negative feelings after a hookup (Strokoff, Owen, & Fincham, 2015). Students typically report feeling happy, excited, and desirable, but they also feel awkward around the person they hooked up with (Glenn & Marquardt, 2001; Lewis, Granato, Blayney, Lostutter, & Kilmer, 2012). Students who are well functioning to begin with, and who have a strong friendship network, are more likely to enjoy their hookup experience than students who have psychological difficulties and few friends (Owen, Quirk, & Fincham, 2014; Snapp, Ryu, & Kerr, 2015). Most students who hook up report that they have a positive experience even when they do not think the hookup will lead to a future romantic relationship.

Even though hooking up is a positive experience for most emerging adults, some students, especially females, have negative reactions to their hookups, which include feeling used, empty, confused, and disappointed (Owen et al., 2010). Emerging adults who are distressed and lonely to begin with are more likely to experience negative emotions after hooking up (Owen et al., 2014; Snapp et al., 2015). Many of these students engage in a hookup thinking it will lead to a romantic relationship and feel betrayed when their romantic hopes are not reciprocated. Negative reactions such as regret, guilt, shame, and anger are more common following a hookup among students who have been drinking alcohol before and during the hookup, and this is especially true for young women (LaBrie et al., 2014; Paul et al., 2000). Regret is also associated with sex that is unfulfilling, a reaction that may intensify any ambivalent emotions that were present before hooking up (Fisher, Worth, Garcia, & Meredith, 2012). Negative emotions, especially for young women, are more likely to occur when the hookup includes sexual intercourse, in contrast to oral sex, sexual touching, or kissing, suggesting that many young women believe that sexual intercourse should be reserved for a romantic relationship (Eshbaugh & Gute, 2008).

Do Hookups Lead to Mental Health Problems?

Feeling regret and disappointment after a hookup is different from having more serious mental health problems, such as depression and suicidal ideation following a hookup. Are hookups associated with serious, long-term psychological disturbances? Research on a possible relation between casual sex and the poor mental health of both men and women is inconclusive. The majority of research indicates that engaging in casual sex is associated with poorer psychological well-being, including more anxiety and depression, and lower self-esteem among male and female emerging adults (e.g., Anatale & Kelly, 2015; Fielder, Walsh, Carey, & Carey, 2014; Mendle, Ferrero, Moore, & Harden, 2013). One study examined the mental health correlates of casual sex in a large national sample of U.S. college students and found that casual sex was correlated with psychological distress and diminished well-being for both young men and

young women (Bersamin et al., 2014). Although the correlations were low (ranging from $r = .06$ to $r = .26$), casual sex was related to lower self-esteem, higher depression and anxiety, and lower psychological well-being.

Two researchers at The Ohio State University attempted to untangle the relationship between casual sex and mental health problems in a longitudinal study of a national sample of over 11,000 U.S. emerging adults (Sandberg-Thoma & Duch, 2014). Findings revealed that both depressive symptoms and suicidal ideation predicted engagement in casual sex, while casual sex predicted thoughts about suicide, associations that were true for males and females. The authors speculate that individuals with a history of poor mental health may be drawn to casual sex because they cannot successfully enter into or maintain a long-lasting romantic relationship. Further, casual sex among individuals who are already depressed may lead to thoughts of suicide when these casual encounters do not turn into a romantic relationship. Thus, casual sex may not cause mental health problems, but casual sex may exacerbate already existing problems.

Other research has not found a relationship between casual sex and poor psychological well-being (Eisenberg, Ackard, Resnick, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2009). In one longitudinal study, casual sex did not predict later depression or suicidal thoughts, nor did depression or suicidal thoughts predict later casual sex (Deutsch & Slutske, 2015). In conclusion, the relationship between casual sex and poor psychological well-being is inconsistent, and when that relationship is present, it is weak.

Another factor that may influence the relationship between casual sex and mental health problems is the ages of the individuals who hook up. The relationship between casual sex and depression or low self-esteem is stronger among young adolescents than among emerging adults (Vrangalova, 2015a). Casual sex is not a norm for teens, and those youth who do engage in casual sex are more likely to engage in other problem behaviors, such as drinking alcohol, using drugs, delinquency, and poor academic performance. These same adolescents are also more likely to be depressed and have low self-esteem. In contrast, casual sex is more normative among emerging adults and, therefore, less linked to problem behaviors or to mental health problems.

One's motivation for hooking up is another reason some people who hook up may experience psychological distress (Vrangalova, 2015b). Hooking up is not related to depression, anxiety, physical complaints, or low self-esteem for students who freely choose to hook up. Well-being is lower among male and female college students who are pressured to engage in a hookup or who hook up out of a desire to please the other person. It is not clear whether feeling pressure to hook up leads to psychological distress, or if psychological distress leads to the feeling that one was pressured to hook up.

All in all, the results from studies of the relationship between hooking up and emotional distress indicate that it is an oversimplification to say that hookups are related to short-term distress or long-term mental health problems. Emerging adults, especially females, are more likely to experience short-term distress after a hookup when the hookup includes sexual intercourse, the sexual

experience is unfulfilling, the individual is already distressed and lonely, and the individual has been drinking. Hoping for a meaningful relationship from a hookup is also associated with distress when such a relationship does not materialize. In addition, youth are more likely to experience long-term mental health problems after hooking up if they are young, have preexisting mental health problems, and feel pressure to engage in the hookup.

Are Young Women More Likely to Have Negative Reactions to Hooking Up Than Young Men?

Many social commentators and researchers have voiced concerns about the possible negative short- and long-term effects of casual sex on the psychological well-being of young women. Some argue that short-term mating is evolutionarily costlier for women than for men (Buss, 2016), less in tune with a woman's natural desire to pair up (Townsend & Wasserman, 2011), and comes with more social costs because of the existence of a sexual double standard (Allison & Risman, 2013; Kreager & Staff, 2009).

Research does not strongly confirm theoretical ideas that casual sex is psychologically costlier for women than for men. Men report engaging in more casual sex than women (Owen, Fincham, & Moore, 2011; Townsend & Wasserman, 2011), but the evidence that women have more long-lasting negative reactions to casual sex than do men is inconsistent. Some researchers do find that hooking up is associated with higher distress in women than in men, especially when the hookup includes sexual intercourse (Bersamin et al., 2014; Fielder & Carey, 2010), but other researchers report no gender differences in depression or suicidal ideation (Deutsch & Slutske, 2015; Mendle et al., 2013; Sandberg-Thoma & Duch, 2014). These inconsistent findings are difficult to explain, but they indicate that casual sex is not inevitably related to more mental health problems among women than among men.

For most young women, the typical hookup is unlikely to lead to serious, long-term mental health problems, such as depression or suicidal thoughts, although casual sex can be associated with negative, short-term emotional reactions. Townsend and Wasserman (2011) suggest that women, more than men, are likely to feel unfulfilled and have stronger negative reactions shortly after a casual sexual experience, but these feelings do not necessarily translate into full-blown depression or suicidal ideation for most women.

SUMMARY

■ DATING AMONG ADOLESCENTS AND EMERGING ADULTS

Adolescents today continue to pair up and go out with each other, although many youth do not use the term *date* to describe their relationship. The term remains a useful word to describe a certain kind of relationship, however.

Dating increases as adolescents get older. The percentage of youth who have gone out on a date has declined over the past several years, perhaps replaced by group dating or more casual relationships. Some adolescents begin to date at an early age, which is associated with early sex, and those adolescents tend to be early maturers who are also risk takers and outgoing. Early daters are also more likely to live in single-parent households or with parents who are not good monitors.

Sexual intercourse is more likely to occur between two adolescents who are dating than between two adolescents who are casual acquaintances or friends. Intercourse is especially likely to occur if the two teens are nonvirgins at the start of their relationship, and if both adolescents desire to have sex. A large age difference between the two dating teens also predicts early sexual behavior.

■ ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS

A romantic relationship can be defined in several ways, but at its core it means having a special connection to another person. Romantic relationships are common during adolescence, although a substantial minority of adolescents have not been in one. Positive relations between parents and teens are associated with a delay in the formation of a romantic relationship and with a delay in the onset of sexual behavior.

■ DATING AND ROMANCE AMONG LGBTQ ADOLESCENTS

LGBTQ youth in middle school and high school face unique challenges as they attempt to find other LGBTQ youth to date and with whom they can form romantic relationships. Many LGBTQ teens have to conceal their identities and true desires for connection out of fear of victimization and discrimination. For many gay young men, sexual behavior precedes the formation of a romantic relationship, the reverse of which is more common among heterosexual adolescents. Sex between gay youth frequently occurs early in a relationship, as soon as the first or second date, a situation less common among heterosexual youth. One risk associated with sex between young gay men in a romantic relationship is that they are less likely to use a condom when they have sex than when they have sex with a stranger or new acquaintance.

■ CASUAL SEX, HOOKUPS, AND FRIENDS WITH BENEFITS

Casual sex is increasingly common among emerging adults. *Hooking up* is the phrase generally used to describe a casual sexual encounter between two people, but it is difficult to know what people mean when they say they have hooked up with someone. It may mean that sexual intercourse has occurred,

but it may not. About 70% of college students report that they have hooked up with someone, and about one-third of those hookups include sexual intercourse. Hookups are increasingly common among college students, although in other ways, college students today have sex lives that are not very different from the sex lives of college students in the recent past. Students who hook up tend to be unconventional, risk takers, and more impulsive than students who do not hook up. Alcohol plays an important role in the initiation of hookups, a situation that can lead to nonconsensual sex and even rape.

Most emerging adults report that they have positive feelings after hooking up, although some feel regret and disappointment. Young women have more short-term negative reactions to hooking up than young men, but the evidence that women have more long-term mental health problems after hooking up than men is inconclusive. Negative feelings are more common among youth who feel pressure to hook up. Although casual sex is correlated with depression, it appears that depression often is present before the hookup, rather than an outcome of the hookup.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

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