

# Capacity for Intimate Relationships: A Developmental Construction

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## Abstract

An enduring hypothesis in the history of psychology is the notion that early caregiving experiences provide the prototype for later significant relationships. Although this hypothesis often has been extended to adult love relationships, compelling models of developmental processes that would account for continuity in relationship characteristics over so long a period are still needed. We propose a developmental view of the development of a capacity for intimacy in which distinct relational experiences are linked across time. Drawing on experiences and findings from a twenty-year longitudinal study of relationships and development, we illustrate evidence for intervening links during childhood and adolescence that eventually may predict the quality and significance of romantic relationships among young adults. We give particular attention to the importance of intervening links between early caregiving relationships and developing friendship capacities throughout middle childhood and adolescence. We then speculate about the links between the implications of different patterns of childhood closeness for adolescents' orientations to dating, romantic relationships, and transitory sexual liaisons. Finally, we propose criteria for future research that would advance understanding of the development of capacities for intimate relationships.

The advent of romantic relationships is a hallmark transition of adolescence in both popular perceptions and theoretical formulations. Images of the sudden onset of preoccupation with the other, shyness and self-consciousness, awkwardness in interactions, and sexual awakening suffuse popular treatments of the topic. In developmental perspective, however, romantic relationships are embedded in fundamental human motivations to form and maintain close relationships (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; MacDonald, 1992) and in a meaningful progression of relational forms across the life course (Ainsworth, 1989; Feeney & Noller, 1996; Furman & Wehner, 1994). Early caregiver-child relationships, peer relationships in preschool and middle childhood, and close mutual friendships in adolescence all potentially contribute to the behavioral patterns and emotional orientations that mark a relationship as romantic.

Romantic relationships also are distinctive from these forerunners. Romantic relationships are voluntary and symmetrical, in contrast to the kinship or legal bonds that commonly circumscribe caregiving relationships. In Western literary and popular portrayals of adolescent love, the attempts of

parents or other authority figures or social conventions to nullify or force or otherwise render involuntary the selection of a romantic partner are viewed as inimical to the essential nature of romance. Romantic relationships also involve dependency, which is reciprocal between the partners, unlike the more asymmetrical dependency of child on caregiver; and the reciprocal dependency of romantic partners is likely to be both greater and more extensive than the reliance of friends upon one another. Finally, romantic relationships are marked by an amalgam of love, passion, and actual or anticipated sexual activity. Although friendship may be caring and passionate (see Diamond, Dube, & Savin-Williams, this volume), adolescents' romantic relationships are likely either to involve sex or to be the kind of relationship in which shared feelings of love and passion make sex a likely and appropriate possibility at some future time.

The common relational threads that eventually form the fabric of romantic relationships are experiences that support the development of intimacy. During preadolescence and adolescence intimacy becomes increasingly central to social competence, because the salient developmental task of

this period is forming close mutual relationships. Indeed, Reis and Shaver (1988) have defined intimacy as:

... an interpersonal process within which two interaction partners experience and express feelings, communicate verbally and nonverbally, satisfy social motives, augment or reduce social fears, talk and learn about themselves and their unique characteristics, and become "close".... (pp. 387-388).

Reis and Shaver further note that emotionally close interactions at all ages derive their significance not only from mutually self-disclosing behaviors, but from the experiences of feeling understood, validated, and cared for as a result of them. The interactions that serve these functions change developmentally. With parents, closeness, as expressed by cuddling and extensive joint interactions, declines as children mature, but conversations in which information is conveyed and feelings are expressed increase. With peers, closeness follows an age-related pattern in which close relationships are increasingly defined in terms of mutual caring and commitment, rather than merely patterns of shared activities, which suffice as markers of friendship at earlier ages (Hartup, 1992). These adaptations are appropriate adaptations to the maturity level and changing needs of individuals (Collins, 1996).

In this chapter, we consider what is known and what still must be learned about the common features of these various forms of relating and how the distinctive qualities of each contribute uniquely to the development of capacities for intimate romantic relationships. Drawing on experiences and findings from a nineteen-year longitudinal study, we examine precursors of intimacy in early caregiver-child relationships and in relationships with peers in childhood. We then consider how experiences in these relationships might be manifested in the context of normative changes in relationships with parents and with peers and, eventually, with romantic partners during adolescence. In the final sections of the chapter, we speculate about how experiences during childhood and adolescence may serve as precursors to entry into, and growth-enhancing experiences in, romantic relationships, and we outline needs for additional research to fill gaps in this literature.

### **A Developmental Viewpoint on Intimacy**

Relationships of all types in all periods of life have several features in common. First, relationships are not simply the sum of personal characteristics of each member of the dyad; rather, relationships consist of the unique patterning and qualities of dyadic interactions that endure over time (Hinde & Stevenson-Hinde, 1987; Sroufe & Fleeson, 1986). Second, individuals and relationships are reciprocally related, such that individuals are both the products and the architects of the relationships in which they participate (Baldwin, 1911; Mead, 1934; Sroufe, 1989; Sroufe & Fleeson, 1986). Third, relationships are integral to competence, or the ability "to make effective use of personal and environmental resources to achieve a good developmental outcome" (Waters & Sroufe, 1983, p. 81). Good developmental outcomes are those which lead to healthy adaptations during later developmental phases or, at least, that do not limit or foreclose on important developmental changes (Elicker, Englund, & Sroufe, 1992; Sroufe & Fleeson, 1986).

According to attachment theorists (e.g., Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978; Bowlby, 1973; Sroufe & Fleeson, 1986), earlier and later forms of closeness reflect processes linking distinct relational experiences across time. Capacities for intimacy emerge through a transactive process, in which expectations concerning self and relationships and patterns of arousal modulation characteristic of early relationships lead to particular forms of engagement with persons and objects. Other persons commonly react in a complementary way, thus perpetuating the pattern, albeit in new forms and in new contexts, across developmental periods (Sroufe, Carlson, & Shulman, 1993).

We regard the capacity for intimacy as a classic developmental phenomenon. By this we mean both that it has "emergent properties"--not being fully specified by capacities that precede it--and that it nonetheless evolves in a logical manner from precursors through a series of transformations. At each phase of life, beginning in infancy, foundations are laid down that support the capacity for intimacy with peers in adolescence. Given the non-linear nature of development, these foundations include experiences with parents, as well as experiences with peers. At the same time, the self-disclosure and sexual intimacy of adolescence are qualitative

advances, non-obvious derivatives of earlier behavior. Certainly, nothing one can see in infancy would directly forecast such capacities. Only within an epigenetic view can links between infant or early peer experience and later adolescent intimacy be discerned.

The multifaceted nature of adolescent intimacy helps to underscore the importance of a developmental viewpoint. Intimacy involves complex motivational, emotional, and behavioral aspects. One must first be oriented toward closeness, to value it and to seek it. Closeness is an active, creative process. Second, one must be able to tolerate, and even embrace, the intense emotions that are inextricably part of intimacy and be able to freely share such emotional experiences. Finally, one must be capable of self disclosure, mutual reciprocity, sensitivity to the feelings of the other, and concern for the other's well-being.

Although this totality is a unique achievement of adolescence, foundations for each of these three aspects of intimacy are to be found in earlier development. Some have argued that certain pre-requisite capacities are drawn primarily from experiences with parents, while others are drawn primarily from peers (e.g., Furman & Wehner, 1994). There is persuasive logic underlying this analysis. Our own view emphasizes the integrative nature of family and peer experience. Closeness with friends, and reciprocity and conflict resolution between equals, must certainly be practiced and mastered within the peer group; but successful negotiation of these issues is dependent upon a history of emotional closeness with caregivers and ongoing parental support. The positive experiences with peers that are so important in channeling individuals toward the capacity for intimacy are more likely for those with supportive family experiences. Although positive peer experiences could be rehabilitative for those with unsupportive parenting histories, such children are the very ones who are least likely to have them.

Our view is epigenetic. The capacity for intimacy evolves through a series of phases, each building on the preceding ones. Consequently, our discussion focuses on early attachment relationships and early peer experiences, as well as the friendships of middle childhood which are the immediate precursors of intimacy. In the following sections, we address how early relationships with caregivers might provide a basis for establishing developmentally appropriate close relationships in

the preschool and middle-childhood periods. We give particular attention to alternative possibilities for "carrying forward" the experiences of early caregiving relationships to later voluntary relationships with age mates.

*Early Relationships and the Capacity for Closeness*

Theoretically, relationships in infancy contribute to three components of closeness and, ultimately, of intimacy. First, relationships with caregivers, when based on a history of availability and responsiveness, should lead to positive expectancies about interactions with others. Because of the caregiver's key role in comforting and other aspects of affect regulation, the "other" will be valued and appraised in parallel to the caregiver's treatment of the child. In Bowlby's (1973) terms, children develop internal working models of self and others that guide them toward similar interactions with others. Second, such relationships provide a context for learning reciprocity, even though only the more mature (parental) partners can purposefully fit their behavior to the child's actions. Further, participating in a relationship with an empathic, responsive caregiver affords learning the very nature of empathic relating (Sroufe & Fleeson, 1986), which can later be applied in more symmetrical relationships (e.g., with peers, romantic partners). Third, through a history of responsive care and support for autonomy within the relationship, the child develops a sense of self-worth and efficacy. Feelings that the self is worthy of respect and care underlie characteristics that are likely to be attractive to future partners (e.g., self-confidence, curiosity, enthusiasm, and positive affect) (Elicker et al., 1992) and orient the child to expecting and accepting certain kinds of reactions.

Bowlby's (1973) notion of working models explicitly includes the possibility that patterns of feelings, expectations, thoughts, and behaviors can change with experience. Researchers since Bowlby nevertheless have found impressive relations between early caregiver-child relationships and later key relationships and between both these earlier and later patterns and friendships in which intimacy can occur in adolescence (Elicker et al., 1992; Shulman, Elicker, & Sroufe, 1994). In the rest of this section, we outline the evidence for these links, drawing from longitudinal findings from our 19-year study of individual adaptation and from other sources (e.g., Shulman et al., 1994; Sroufe & Egeland, 1991; Sroufe et al., 1993).

*Attachment History and Emerging Closeness in Peer Relationships*

Our view of developmental precursors to romantic relationships has been shaped by experiences in the Minnesota Parent-Child Project, in which 190 first-born individuals have been studied since the third trimester of the mother's pregnancy. (See Egeland & Brunquell, 1979, for an early report.) Infants and/or mothers were seen seven times in the child's first year, twice in each of the next 3 years, and yearly through grade 7. Assessments included neurological status, motor, cognitive, and intellectual development, maternal personality and IQ, parent-child interaction, temperament, peer relationships, personality development, and contextual variables such as life stress and social support. Children were observed in home, laboratory, and school. During childhood and adolescence, all participants were seen at ages 13, 16, and 19. In addition, subsamples of these participants have been studied intensively in a semester-long nursery-school program, a four-week summer camp at age 10, and observations in a weekend retreat at age 15. These subsamples were representative of the sample at large.

The primary measure of early relationships was the Strange Situation procedure (Ainsworth et al., 1978). This 20-minute procedure involves a series of episodes with primary caregiver and infant in a playroom. The two are joined by a stranger who ultimately initiates a brief interaction with the baby, followed by two brief separations and reunions with the caregiver, with the infant left entirely alone during the second separation. Based on behavior in the Strange Situation, Ainsworth identified secure attachment with use of the caregiver as a secure base for exploration and a pattern of emotional responses to separation and reunion that indicates confidence in the accessibility and responsiveness of the caregiver. In a second, contrasting pattern, termed "anxious/resistant attachment," infants have difficulty exploring even when the caregiver is present; moreover, they both become quite upset by the separation episodes and show great difficulty settling upon reunion, even when in contact with the caregiver. In the third pattern, called "anxious/avoidant attachment," children commonly show little distress during the separations, and upon reunion they ignore, turn or move away from, or show abortive approaches to their caregivers. Earlier, we outlined several reasons why secure attachments likely would be more conducive to the subsequent development of a capacity for intimacy than the two insecure patterns.

*Links to peer relationships.* Children who manifested these three contrasting patterns during infancy also later showed striking differences in peer relationships. During preschool, the salient issue is to master challenges and problems using their own resources. Because other persons are potentially valuable resources in meeting common challenges, effectiveness in relating to adults, especially non-caregivers, and with peers is fundamental to competence. In the Minnesota sample, children with secure histories indeed demonstrated greater competence by participating more actively in the peer group, manifesting more positive affect and less negative affect in their encounters than insecurely attached children (Sroufe, 1983; Sroufe, Schork, Motti, Lawroski, & LaFreniere, 1984). Secure children also were more popular. By contrast, children with anxious-avoidant attachment history were not only significantly less competent in all of these respects, but were more aggressive in the classroom. Those with anxious/resistant attachment were easily frustrated and oriented toward their teachers at the expense of engaging peers (Pancake, 1985).

Early attachment history also forecast differences in qualities of interpersonal relationships during preschool, at times with extraordinary specificity. Children with early histories of secure attachment displayed greater reciprocity and dealt more effectively with conflicts in interactions with preschool peers (Lieberman, 1977; Sues, 1987). When we focused on specific pairs of children who played together frequently, pairs containing at least one avoidant member formed relationships that were less deep (less characterized by mutuality, responsiveness, and affective involvement) and more hostile than the other pairs (Pancake, 1985). In addition, of 19 dyadic relationships in the subsample, five involved "victimization," a repetitive pattern of physical or verbal exploitation or abuse by one child of the other (Troy & Sroufe, 1987). In each case, the "exploiter" was a child with an avoidant history, and the victim was another anxiously attached child (avoidant or resistant). Such a pattern was observed every time such a pairing occurred. Children with secure histories were never victimizers or victims. Thus, by preschool distinctive relational patterns among children with different attachment histories clearly extend beyond the confines of the family to the voluntary affiliations of classrooms and play arrangements.

The patterns extend to teachers as well as peers (Sroufe & Fleeson, 1988). Teachers were judged to

be warm and straightforward in their engagement of children with histories of secure attachment, to hold out age-appropriate standards for them, and to expect self-direction and compliance with classroom rules. With children from the resistant group, teachers were unduly nurturant and caretaking, were controlling, had low expectations for compliance, and were quite tolerant of minor violations of classroom rules. With children with avoidant histories, teachers behaved in a controlling and, at rare times, even angry manner and displayed low expectations for compliance, although they did not accept violations. For their part, avoidant children often engaged in hostile or defiant behavior that would alienate teachers as well as other children. These observations provide further evidence that the rejecting relationships of the avoidant child's early years were recapitulated in the preschool classroom.

In late middle childhood (roughly ages 10-11), children face additional demands in relationships with peers. Normatively, the prospect of future intimacy is enhanced by increased capacity to form close, mutual friendships (e.g., Bigelow, 1977; Bigelow and LaGaipa, 1975; Furman & Bierman, 1984; Selman, 1980; Selman & Schultz, 1989). Such friendships are distinctive in three ways: they are more qualitatively unique than earlier friendships; they are strongly differentiated in terms of gender and in terms of depth of friendship; and they often are emotionally deep. By middle childhood the expectations of earlier periods have become more elaborated by normative changes in such competencies as enhanced role-taking, more extensive communicative skills, and more sophisticated understanding of providing nurturance and reassurance (Barnett, King, Howard, & Dino, 1980; Hartup, 1984; Waters, Kondo-Ikemura, Posada, & Richters, 1991).

These expected patterns are clearly apparent in 10-11 year olds in the Minnesota longitudinal sample. Children who had been secure in their attachments at 12 to 18 months of age were more likely to form a friendship than those who had been insecurely attached. Moreover, children who had been securely attached in infancy tended to form friendships with children who also had secure histories. Although this might be attributable to a natural attraction among competent children, more intensive examination showed that the qualities of these friendships also were consistent with attachment history (Shulman et al., 1994). Secure-secure friendships clearly were apparent when the children

were part of a larger group, but they also freely interacted with others. Other individuals and group activities were not a threat to their relationship. Their friendship was apparent in group settings, yet they freely interacted with others. In contrast, avoidant-avoidant pairs exhibited very exclusive relationships. They often were physically separate from the others, seldom participated in voluntary groups, rarely interchanged with other individuals, and showed jealousy regarding each other. When either child was absent, the remaining partner had difficulty participating socially. Yet a third pattern characterized resistant-resistant pairs. These friends had difficulty sustaining their relationships, because one of two often was absorbed by the group, thus separating from the other. Children in these pairs showed little loyalty to each other; consequently, they were unreliable as a resource for each other. Their relationship was neither the detriment to group functioning that avoidant-avoidant relationships were nor a base for effectiveness in the group provided by secure-secure relationships.

Securely attached children also showed greater social competence by adhering to peer-group norms. In middle-childhood children are expected to favor interaction with same-gender peers (Maccoby, 1990). In the Minnesota sample, only 10% of observed interactions between 10-11 year olds were with peers of the opposite gender; and these exceptions almost always involved multiple boys and multiple girls rather than a solitary boy or girl with a member of the other gender. Moreover, many of the interactions were accompanied by disavowal (what Barrie Thorne [1986] calls "borderwork") or by a "cover" which legitimized the contact (e.g., boys frequently hurling insults rather than expressions of interest at the same group of girls; or interacting with a child of another gender because an adult has directed it). Children who violated gender boundary rules also generally showed lower social competence and less likelihood than other children to have one or more friends in the group. Longitudinally, gender boundary violation was associated with a history of anxious attachment and with earlier observed interactions with parents in which parent or child or both had shown peer-like behavior toward the other. Thus, paradoxically, maintaining separateness from the other gender in one developmental period may well be a forerunner of adaptive relating in later periods. For example, normative social separation of genders in middle childhood probably facilitates "practice for intimacy" with peers that is relatively

free of overtones of sexuality (e.g., Sullivan, 1953). These self-imposed norms parallel arrangements in some cultures in which females and males are separated by social structures and taboos against casual contact.

*Links to component skills for intimacy.* Attachment history also may contribute to capacities for intimacy by supporting the development of specific component or constituent skills. Theoretically, securely attached infants, having experienced and therefore internalized a responsive relationship, later should be more empathic. Experiencing secure relationships should lead children to expect empathy from others, to believe that this is characteristic of relationships, and thus to a tendency to be empathically responsive to others when cognitive advances allow sufficient perspective taking (Elicker et al., 1992). In the Minnesota sample, both preschool teachers' judgments of empathy and videotaped records from the classroom revealed more empathic behavior by children with secure histories than children with anxious histories (Kestenbaum, Farber, & Sroufe, 1989; Sroufe, 1983). Moreover, children with avoidant histories, who are presumed to experience chronic rebuffs to their expressed needs, were significantly more likely than both other groups to show "anti-empathy" (behavior that would make another person's distress worse; e.g., taunting a crying child); whereas those with resistant histories behaved as though the distress were their own, blurring the boundary between self and other.

One likely component of these differences is interpersonal cognitions or representations relevant to peer relationships. Comparing children who had been securely or anxiously attached as infants, Rosenberg (1984) found that those in the anxious group were less likely to incorporate people into fantasy play and that their fantasized resolutions for misfortunes or interpersonal conflicts were less likely to be positive. Such children may be less interested in interpersonal relationships, may value them less highly, or may expect negative outcomes in relationships, whereas securely attached children may regard relationships more positively. Attachment history also appears to be related to distinctive cognitive biases with respect to peers. Suess (1987; Suess, Grossmann, & Sroufe, 1993) found that securely attached children usually made realistic attributions or displayed a bias toward attributing benevolent intentions, whereas children with anxious-avoidant attachment manifested more unrealistic or hostile/negative biases in their attributions of

intention. Likewise, independent ratings of the children's "positive expectations regarding peers," based on responses to TAT-like card and sentence completions at age 11, significantly discriminated attachment groups. Those with secure histories more frequently told stories in which peers cooperated and conflict was resolved and concluded sentence items (e.g., "most kids...") with positive responses ("...like to play with me"). In short, key components of the internal working models described by Bowlby (1973) are linked to attachment history and are evinced in connection with peer interactions in later periods.

*Relations among relationships in longitudinal perspective.* Middle-childhood peer competence is linked to the salient relationships of both infancy and early childhood. In the Minnesota data, security of attachment in infancy strongly predicted preschool characteristics of self-reliance, effective peer relationships (including empathy and affective engagement), and positive relationships with teachers (e.g., Sroufe, 1983; Sroufe et al., 1984). In turn, both quality of infant attachment and quality of preschool functioning subsequently predicted middle childhood relationships, including capacity for forming close friendships, conflict resolution skill, and general effectiveness in the same-gender peer group (Elicker et al., 1992; Shulman et al., 1994). These findings carry two implications for thinking further about the developmental precursors of emerging romantic relationships in adolescence. One is that children actively contribute to the character of their relationships based upon their history of experiences in earlier relationships. The second is that these later relationships contribute significantly beyond the impact of early experiences to the subsequent development of capacities for forming and maintaining relationships.

#### *Alternative Views of "Carry-Forward" Mechanisms*

The impressive continuities in relationships outlined above may occur for a variety of reasons. Some explanations emphasize persistence of initial cause, arguing either that an endogenous child trait continues to be manifest (Kagan, Reznick, & Gibbons, 1989) or that environmental influences remain constant and account for the appearance of stability in child behavior (Lamb, 1984). Others argue that continuity results from both prior adaptation and current environment (e.g., Bowlby, 1973; Lewis, 1989). This latter view implies an interactional model, in which environmental changes may have differential influences depend-

ing on previous adaptation.

Our own view of continuity (Collins, 1995; Sroufe, 1979; Sroufe & Fleeson, 1988; Sroufe, Egeland, & Kreutzer, 1990) embodies a transactional process, whereby children with particular patterns of adaptation and expectations both assimilate and accommodate to new circumstances. This transactional view is supported by two key points from the Minnesota longitudinal findings. First, while quality of care is indeed stable (Pianta, Sroufe, & Egeland, 1989), early adaptation or experience predicts later behavior even after accounting for contemporary environmental influence both in childhood and in adolescence (Sroufe et al., 1990, Sroufe, 1995). Second, later environmental influences are not independent of prior adaptation. For example, treatment of children by both preschool teachers and classmates is predicted by patterns of adaptation in infancy and is in accord with earlier family experiences (Sroufe, 1983; Sroufe & Fleeson, 1988, Troy & Sroufe, 1987). Thus, in our view, environment is not simply an independence force in interacting with child characteristics. Children, in part, create their own environments through differential engagement and reaction based upon history of experience. This partially created environment feed back on adaptation in an on-going process. Early relationships continue to account for unique variance in later relationships and, by implication, are likely to do so with respect to romantic relationships in adolescence.

### **Peer Relationships During Adolescence**

Adolescents experience a wider and more diverse network of social relationships than children do. Romantic relationships thus emerge as part of a complex balancing of loyal friendships, intimate pair bonds, same-gender group affiliations, and mixed-gender group associations (Sroufe, Egeland, & Carlson, in press).

Despite this complexity, the normative patterns and social structures of adolescence are conducive to continuity between closeness in the relationships of childhood and later romantic relationships (Collins, 1996; Collins & Repinski, 1994). In parent-adolescent relationships, popular stereotypes notwithstanding, surveys in European and North American samples consistently reveal that parents and adolescents alike perceive their relationships with one another as warm and pleasant. Of the 20% or so of families that encounter serious difficulties in this period, most have had a history of earlier problems (Offer, 1969; Offer, Ostrov, & Howard,

1981). Adolescents more often perceive reciprocity with and acceptance by parents than children do (for reviews, see Collins, 1995, 1996; Collins & Repinski, 1994; Collins & Russell, 1991; Laursen & Collins, 1994; Holmbeck, 1996; Holmbeck, Paikoff, & Brooks-Gunn, 1995; Montemayor, 1983; Steinberg, 1990). Transitory disruptions and changes in the relative balance of positive and negative emotional expressions in parent-adolescent relationships help to realign expectations in response to developmental changes in adolescents, while preserving affectional bonds (Collins, 1995, 1996).

Normative patterns in peer relationships also support continuity in the development of intimate functioning. Although specific friendships are not typically stable throughout adolescence, relationships with a "best" friend are more often stable than unstable over the course of a school year (Berndt, Hawkins, & Hoyle, 1986; Berndt & Hoyle, 1985; Berndt & Keefe, 1995; for a review, see Savin-Williams & Berndt, 1990). As networks expand and diversify, additional opportunities for expressing and experiencing intimacy become available. Relationships with friends, romantic partners, and family members serve overlapping, but distinctive, functions, and typical exchanges within each of these types of dyads differ accordingly (Furman & Buhrmester, 1985, 1992; Furman & Wehner, 1994; for reviews, see Collins, 1996; Collins & Repinski, 1994; Laursen & Collins, 1994; Savin-Williams & Berndt, 1990). Relationships with parents are reported to be primary sources of support for children at fourth grade, but parents are viewed as less important than same-sex friends as sources of social support in early and middle adolescence and less important than same-sex friends and romantic partners at college age (Furman & Buhrmester, 1992).

By late adolescence, the functions of different types of relationships are well differentiated. Perceptions of intimacy in cross-gender relationships increase with age during early and middle adolescence, with reported intimacy between close female-male pairs at age 16 matching the level of intimacy perceived in female-female friendships (but not that reported for male-male friendships) (Sharabany, Gershoni, & Hoffman, 1981). Peer relationships may serve functions of socialization for relations among equals and also satisfaction of affiliative needs, but romantic relationships may be equally or more important for mutual sharing and emotional gratification, especially in late adolescence and early adulthood (Collins, 1996).

Within the normative adaptations, individuals show strikingly stable tendencies in the degree and nature of closeness. Individual variations in social acceptance and in capabilities for forming and maintaining friendships are among the best documented of all developmental continuities (for reviews, see Hartup, 1993, 1996; Parker & Asher, 1987; Parker & Gottman, 1989). Such continuities have repeatedly been linked to early and concurrent relationship experiences (e.g., Dishion, Patterson, & Griesler, 1994; Rubin, LeMare, & Lollis, 1990), implying that social competences transcend particular relationships (e.g., Dishion et al., 1994; Parker & Asher, 1987; Sroufe & Fleeson, 1986).

Data from our longitudinal study support the developmental underpinnings of adolescent peer competence in general and, in a preliminary way, the capacity for intimacy in particular. Both peer experiences and family experiences are strongly predictive of individual differences in adolescence. We have found significant continuity in peer competence based on teacher ratings from early elementary school (and, for a subsample of participants, from pre-school) through age 16 (Sroufe, et al., in press). Even stronger evidence has come from the sub-sample of individuals whom we have studied intensively in nursery school and summer camps. When those children who had been assessed as competent at earlier ages were observed at a weekend re-union, camp counselors rated them as more competent and observed that they participated more actively in the group. The findings were most striking for assessments keyed to age salient issues. For example, we rated behavior at the reunion according to a scale of "capacity for vulnerability." This scale was created especially to tap teens' abilities to participate in the range of reunion activities, including those in which ego-salient feelings would arise (such as engaging members of the other gender at the evening party). Scores on this scale were related to competence indices at earlier ages. Correlations were especially strong with an observationally-based intensity of same-gender friendship score in middle childhood. Scores also were correlated with the gender boundary maintenance rating from that period. Finally, for girls, both preschool and middle childhood assessments, and especially the friendship score ( $r=.64$ ), were related to an interview based measure of "friendship intimacy" at age 16 (see Ostoja, 1996). (This interview format may not have been adequate for our male participants at this age.)

Quality of attachment in infancy and quality of caregiver-child interaction at age 13 (described in a later section) also were related to adolescent peer relationship measures. Infant and early adolescent measures together were especially strongly related to reunion assessments, with correlations in the .50s (Sroufe, et al., in press). The strongest relation between attachment history and adolescence was for the "capacity for vulnerability" scale, which clearly is in accord with attachment theory. Moreover, each of the eight participants involved in a couple relationships during the reunion had histories of secure attachment, a highly significant finding, given that only half of the 41 participants had been secure. Those with secure histories were also rated higher on "leadership" and overall level of competence in a revealed differences group discussion situation; they also were significantly more frequently elected as spokesperson for their group (Englund, Hyson, & Levy, in preparation). These correlations thus link initial attachment assessments to indicators of relationships taken 14 years later.

Attachment history was also related to cognitive measures of adolescent experience. When reunion participants were interviewed concerning their knowledge of the peer-group relationship structure, those having secure histories demonstrated superior knowledge and perceptiveness. In interviews conducted with all of our participants at age 16, a friendship intimacy index, based on "closeness" and "coherence of discourse" scales, was significantly related to history of secure attachment. (Interview information concerning dating will be discussed below.)

#### **Implications of Relationship History for Adolescent Intimacy and Romantic Relationships**

Despite the stereotype of adolescence as "the age of sexual attraction and emergent love" (Zani, 1993), research on the transition to romantic relationships during adolescence is in its infancy. Little evidence exists regarding specific romantic experiences during adolescence. Consequently, there is little basis for specifying how experiences may be linked to relationship history. Some speculations are possible, however, and may serve as an impetus toward additional research.

In this section, we consider three phenomena that are commonly considered part of the development of romantic relationships: dating; being involved in a relationship that is perceived as

"romantic" (i.e., going steady; believing that one is in a relationship with at least some long-term potential); and becoming sexually active. For each of these topics, we address three key questions: (1) What is known about normative patterns for this form of romantic or proto-romantic involvement? (2) To what degree and in what ways might variations in capacity for intimacy be manifested within these normative patterns? (3) How, in turn, might variations in relationship history be associated with variations in the phenomena of adolescent relationships?

### *Dating*

Dating usually stems from involvement with social crowds, and thus is frequently no more than transitory and/or opportunistic affiliation, with no anticipation of the longer-term involvement or sexual activity that mark romantic relationships. Dating typically begins in junior high school (for reviews, see Savin-Williams & Berndt, 1990; Zani, 1993). Although often attributed to hormonal changes at puberty, dating in early adolescence actually appears to be governed largely by age-graded social expectations (e.g., Dornbusch, Carlsmith, Gross, Martin, Jennings, Rosenberg, & Duke, 1981). Roscoe, Diana, and Brooks (1987) reported that early and middle adolescents (i.e., 6th to 11th graders) in the midwestern U.S. say that they date as a form of recreation, to establish a special relationship with another person, and to gain status with their peers. In contrast, college students gave greater emphasis to intimacy, companionship, and socialization to relationships as reasons for dating. Although little is known about dating among gay, lesbian, and bisexual adolescents, social benefits such as enhanced peer status are probably less powerful inducements for them, whereas a desire for intimacy may be a relatively greater motivation than in heterosexual dating couples.

Historically, dating was highly ritualized and governed by extensively prescribed social expectations, and that is still true in some cultures. Among U.S. adolescents, however, dating increasingly is an informal activity that often is carried out in connection with group activities and is marked by relatively superficial interactions between the participants (Douvan & Adelson, 1966; Miller & Gordon, 1986). Whether or not an adolescent dates and when dating begins are probably more highly related to general social skills and acceptance by peers than to a capacity for intimacy.

Several contrasts among the peer relations of children with different attachment histories probably forecast their dating experiences. Children with secure attachment histories have consistently been found to be highest in popularity with peers, mastery of social skills, and positive engagement in peer-group activities. Attachment theory implies that these characteristics likely reflect relationships with caregivers that foster positive expectancies about interactions with others and a sense of self-worth and efficacy.

These characteristics of individuals with secure histories carry several implications for dating. One is that early adolescents with such histories are relatively likely to be affiliated with crowds and thus have ready support and social "cover" for dating (Brown, Eicher, & Petrie, 1986; Dunphy, 1963). As extensive involvement with crowds diminishes normatively in middle and later adolescence, the stage is set for securely attached individuals to move smoothly toward increasingly intimate relationships with smaller groups of friends and romantic partners. A second implication is that securely attached individuals enter adolescence with relatively high self-esteem, which is generally correlated with involvement in dating (Long, 1983, 1989; Samet & Kelly, 1987). High self-esteem may support appropriate assertiveness and self-confidence with potential dating partners and also may protect against negative emotional effects of such common experiences as rejection and competition (Mathes, Adams, & Davis, 1985). Third, securely attached children's generally higher levels of general social skills, popularity, and perceived social competence probably portend with smooth, on-time transitions from primarily same-gender to more extensively cross-gender social relationships during adolescence (e.g., Coleman & Hendry, 1990; Miller, 1990). Finally, those with secure attachment histories will be more oriented toward the emotional depth that comes from ongoing, more durable relationships.

Preliminary data from our study support some of these theoretical links. In our camp reunions, crowd-like phenomena occurred; that is, a defined group emerged that included couples and other children of both genders who consistently interacted across the days of the reunion. This was documented in independent sociograms made by each counselor, which showed remarkable concordance regarding membership in the crowd. In the one camp where this phenomenon was most clear,

all eight members of the crowd had secure histories (vs. none of six with anxious attachment histories; Sroufe, Carlson & Shulman, 1993).

Dating interviews with the total sample at age 16 revealed that participants with histories of anxious-resistant attachment were significantly less likely to have dated. This is consistent with the history of social immaturity of these children documented above. Those with secure and avoidant histories at this age were similarly active in dating. Those with secure histories, however, were significantly more likely to have consistently dated the same person for three months, in accord with their theoretically predicted orientation toward depth and intimacy.

Relationship history also may provide clues about the likely selection of dating partners. Like the social context in which dating is embedded, selection stems in predictable ways from the salient social motives of different phases of adolescent development. Early adolescents, consistent with their emphasis on the social activity and status benefits of dating, place relatively greater emphasis than older adolescents to superficial features of potential partners (e.g., fashionable clothes) and approval by others (e.g., well liked by peers). In contrast, late adolescents give more weight to personality characteristics (Roscoe et al., 1987).

These normatively preferred attributes (e.g., Zani, 1993) may be especially influential in early adolescence, when social expectations govern much data behavior. Findings from our studies of friendship pairings in childhood lead us to believe, however, that individual differences in preferences are likely, perhaps increasingly so in middle and late adolescence. Our observation of peer relationships in preschool and middle childhood showed that securely attached partners interact smoothly with both secure and anxious-resistant relationship histories. With anxious-avoidant partners, however, even secure children have difficulties. Pairs of securely attached children easily create a balance between connectedness and autonomy for each child, whereas pairs of either anxious-resistant or anxious-avoidant children differ in the salience of connectedness vs. autonomy. Relationship history may thus affect what characteristics likely make a potential dating partner more or less salient among other eligible partners.

Finally, the relation of adolescent dating to social crowds is both an advantage and a source of controversy and tension in relationships. Pairing off

can lead to increased isolation from the group and difficulty in balancing the demands of couplehood with those of group activities and relationships (Surra, 1990; Zani, 1993). Relationship history likely sets the stage for coping with these inevitable tensions. Even in middle childhood, anxiously attached pairs had notably greater difficulty in maintaining this balance than securely attached pairs. Anxious-avoidant pairs, for example, often isolated themselves from the group and rarely interacted with other individuals; and resistant-resistant pairs tended to fragment, with one or both partners being absorbed separately by the group (Shulman et al., 1994).

Attachment history thus is probably linked to dating experiences in ways that are similar to its association with other aspects of peer affiliation. During adolescence, availability of same-gender associates decreases as more and more couples are formed, and this increases pressure on the norms for selecting dating partners. The processes governing these selections for one adolescent compared to another, however, probably changes little from the processes that govern friendship selection during childhood and preadolescence.

#### *Romantic Relationships*

Romantic relationships, in contrast to dating relationships, are marked by a higher level of commitment by both partners (Diamond et al., this volume). According to contemporary norms in the U. S., romantic relationships may involve sexual intercourse or, if not, sexual relations are likely either to be anticipated in the future or to be actively delayed by explicit agreement between the partners until some later stage of the relationship (engagement or marriage) (Katchadourian, 1990).

Adolescents' self-reported experiences of love and related emotions are remarkably similar to the reported experiences of adults, according to recent findings from an ethnically and socioeconomically diverse sample of high-school students (Levesque, 1993). Just as with adults, adolescents' satisfaction with relationships was positively correlated with passion, giving and getting communication, commitment, emotional support and togetherness. In Levesque's sample, adolescent relationships were also characterized by measures of extremity of positive emotion that have not typically been included in studies of adult relationships: feelings of exhilaration, growth, appreciation, and specialness. These adolescents' satisfactions were less related, however, to negative affect, perceived trouble, or

conflict -- variables that are inversely related in adults' reports of their romantic relationships. These findings await replication, but the initial patterns suggest that entry into romantic relationships may conform to the popular stereotype of "young love" as rosily optimistic, as compared to love between adults.

For our purposes, the most important normative distinction between dating and romantic relationships is the relatively greater degree of intimacy between romantic partners (Reis & Shaver, 1988). Relationships can, by definition, be close (i.e., experience high levels of contact and causal interdependence) without being intimate (i.e., mutually perceiving understanding, validation, and caring from each other) (Reis & Patrick, 1966). Research findings with adults indicate that intimacy, in this sense, differentiates well-functioning romantic relationships from less well functioning ones (for a review, see Berscheid & Reis, in press).

Similarly, adolescent couples, like adult romantic partners, vary in the degree of intimacy attained. The data outlined above, while concluding in mid-adolescence and not focused on romantic relationships, lead us to predict that intimacy in adult relationships will be based on the foundation provided by earlier family and peer experiences. Those with secure attachment histories had deeper relationships with peers in pre-school, more intense friendships in middle childhood (and commonly with other children similarly oriented), and more capacity for emotional vulnerability and sustained dating relationships in adolescence than those with histories of anxious attachment. Moreover, the quality of their peer relationships, when directly assessed in middle childhood, revealed a capacity for simultaneous autonomy and connectedness which we see as a prerequisite for intimacy.

Forecasting from these findings, future research likely will reveal that intimacy with romantic partners is a joint function of contrasting caregiving histories and their functional sequelae in peer relationships in childhood and adolescence. One recent study, using the well-validated Adult Attachment Interview (AAI; Main & Kaplan, 1996) as a distillation of the individual's attachment history, is suggestive (Owens, Crowell, Pan, Treboux, O'Connor, & Waters, in press). These authors found that differences on security on the AAI were related to both descriptions of romantic relationships and behavior with romantic partners. Other cross-sectional research with adults shows that self-report

measures of adult "attachment styles" are correlated with concurrent self-reported differences in characteristics of romantic relationships, including orientations to intimacy (Feeney & Noller, 1990). Secure subjects obtained low scores for avoidance of intimacy, whereas avoidant adults scored high on this measure. Investigators using other attachment-style instruments also report correlations between attachment representation and aspects of romantic relationships (N. L. Collins & Read, 1990; Cohn, Silver, Cowan, Cowan, & Pearson, 1992; Feeney & Noller, 1990; Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Pearson, Cohn, Cowan, & Cowan, 1994; Simpson, Rholes, & Nelligan, 1992). The measures of attachment style used in these studies cannot be equated either to early measures of attachment security such as the Strange Situation or to the Adult Attachment Interview. Nevertheless, the results are consistent with what might be expected if appropriate measures were used in a longitudinal design. Later, in the final section of this chapter, we will speculate that even stronger relations across time might be expected with measures of closeness in childhood and adolescent peer relationships as additional predictors.

#### *Becoming Sexually Active*

Conceptually, sexual activity is distinguishable from both dating and romantic relationships; but empirically, the intercorrelations of each are significant. Most researchers agree, based on somewhat dated evidence, that first heterosexual intercourse occurs on the average at about 16 and that it usually takes place in the context of a steady relationship (for a review, see Katchadourian, 1990). This generalization clearly does not capture the experiences of adolescents in all ethnic and cultural groups (Moore & Erickson, 1985). Comparable information is lacking for acknowledged gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth.

Many adolescents, nevertheless, experience sexual activity as part of dating relationship or as a transitory encounter with little connection to on-going social relationships. Such experiences may involve relatively low levels of emotional intimacy and commitment (Diamond et al., this volume). Relationships in which sexual activity is the primary aspect nevertheless may arise for psychological reasons. Adolescents may hope that such relationships will cause them to feel, or to be perceived as, more mature, enhance their social prestige, or compensate for a lack of intimacy in their lives (Martin, 1982; Tripp, 1975). Some may use

sexual relationships as a way of exploring or testing their sexual identity (Savin-Williams, 1994). Diamond et al. (this volume) suggest that such primarily sexual liaisons may be especially likely among gay, lesbian, and bisexual teenagers, who often fear the more public nature of dating and romantic relationships.

Relationship history, incorporating both caregiver and later peer relationships, may be associated both with the likelihood of a primarily sexual relationship and with the timing of beginning sexual intercourse. Involvement in one or multiple sexual relationships, as opposed to romantic involvements, at any age is likely to be correlated with consistent patterns of insecure attachment. In the case of individuals with anxious-avoidant histories, such a pattern would likely reflect avoidance of intimacy or inadequate capacity for intimacy, even if desired. Such individuals demonstrate a tendency toward suspicion, jealousy, and unavailability that would likely impede true intimacy. In the case of anxious-resistant attachments, tendencies toward excessive dependency and anxiety, along with low self-confidence and poor regulation of affect, would interfere with the mutuality that supports intimate relationships.

Early transitions to sexual activity (i.e., becoming sexually active at age 15 or younger) are associated with broad-band assessments of personality, similar to those that characterize differences among secure and insecure individuals. Jessor and his colleagues (Jessor, Costa, Jessor, and Donovan, 1983; Jessor, Donovan, & Costa, 1991) found that early-active adolescents, compared to those who began sexual intercourse at older ages, placed higher value on non-interference by adults, professed less conventional values, and also made early transitions to other behaviors tolerated in adults, but less so in early adolescents (e.g., alcohol use, smoking). Some adolescents who manifest these values undoubtedly have experienced secure, responsive relationships with socially unconventional parents or have been reared in a community that is skeptical toward conventional values; conversely, many teenagers who show highly conventional behaviors may have experienced insecure relationships in their earlier lives. The pattern described by Jessor et al. is characteristic, however, of individuals identified in longitudinal research as having had insecure relationships with caregivers in infancy and correspondingly marked relationships with peers in preschool and middle childhood. These links may be attributed to general patterns of social incompe-

tence or pathology, or they may be seen as indications of functional coherence in the relationship patterns of individuals across time. Such coherence is consistent with individual histories in which a capacity for intimacy is limited because of experiences in early and later relationships.

We will soon have data on dating, romantic relationships and, sexuality from our participants at age 19. Our strongest prediction with regard to attachment history is that those who were securely attached will more often put a premium on sexuality in the context of intimacy. They will see intimacy as the foundation for sexuality and they will see sexuality as having a role in deepening intimacy. Although they certainly may explore their sexuality in less intimate relationships, they are unlikely to be promiscuous or casual regarding sexuality.

These speculative links between relationship history, the capacity for intimacy, and likely variations among aspects of romantic relationships could constitute a daunting research agenda. Yet they lie at the heart of widely held and compelling beliefs about the links between love in childhood and in adulthood. In the next section, we address some of the criteria for research that will finally examine these fundamental questions.

#### **Some Criteria for Further Evidence on Precursors of Intimacy in Romantic Relationships**

Research on the development of romantic relationships depends fundamentally on valid assessments both of attachment in infancy and intimate relationships with a romantic partner in adolescence and, later, in young adulthood. Our further criteria grow out of the conviction that links between earlier and later relationships reflect a transactive process. In this view expectations concerning self and relationships and patterns of arousal modulation characteristic of early relationships lead to particular forms of engagement with persons and objects, and other persons commonly react in a complementary way, thus perpetuating the pattern, albeit in new forms and in new contexts, across developmental periods.

Consequently, developmental research on romantic relationships must include multiple, longitudinal assessments of parent-child relationships, peer relationships, and relationship representations. With such data one can determine whether early attachment experiences predict adult relationship qualities beyond predictions from later family ex-

periences, how predictions from attachment measures fare in comparison to peer data, and whether both family and peer data make independent contributions. Comprehensive information eventually also will permit us to address process issues such as whether attachment experiences are mediated through peer relationships and whether representations are indeed the carriers of relationship experiences across phases of development.

Assessment of both parent-adolescent and peer interactions is integral to this approach. Measures of relationships with parents should tap both characteristics of connectedness and autonomy. Grotevant and Cooper (1985, 1986) have provided widely emulated models of coding procedures to get at these qualities in laboratory-based observations of adolescents with their mothers and fathers. Using a similar conceptual framework, Allen, Hauser, Bell, & O'Connor (1994) developed codes for behaviors that encourage both autonomy and relatedness. For example, a low score on their measure reflects:

... behaviors that make it more difficult for family members to discuss their own reasons for their position, including over-personalizing a disagreement, recanting a position without appearing to have been persuaded the position is wrong..., and pressuring another person to agree; expressions of hostility or rudely interrupting or ignoring the other's expressions of opinion. (p. 183)

Both Grotevant and Cooper and Allen et al. have demonstrated lawful links between these relational patterns and adolescent ego development and skills that support a capacity for intimacy (e.g., role-taking skills, identity development). Having such measures of family relationships, in addition to early attachment assessments, should enhance predictions of intimacy.

In our longitudinal research, we have extended the concept of balance to other aspects of relationships between parent and adolescent that may be relevant to eventual functioning in romantic relationships. After observing parents and 13 year olds complete tasks together, we coded the interactions in three ways (J. Sroufe, 1991). We first attended to balance between individuals, with particular emphasis on whether each person appeared to feel safe in taking a position and maintaining an opinion even in the face of disagreements. We next focused on the balance between individuals and relation-

ships, similar to the Grotevant and Cooper (1985, 1986) and Allen et al. (1994) balance between individuality and connectedness. Finally, we coded information about the balance between the relationship and the external world. Conceptually related to Reiss's (1984) work on "closure," this refers to the degree to which a relationship system can maintain integrity while negotiating external demands (e.g., the strictures of an experimenter's instructions; or the stress of the parent's workplace or the child's school). This extensive coding provides a relatively full picture of key components of intimacy in parent-adolescent relationships that may affect both the desire to engage in romantic relationships and success in doing so. These measures were found to be related not only to competence with peers in adolescence (above) but to Adult Attachment Interview assessments at age 19 (Weinfield, Sroufe, & Egeland, submitted). Those children in relationships rated higher on a composite of the three balance scales at age 13 were significantly more likely to be secure ("autonomous") on the AAI. In addition, those judged to be "dismissing" (the adult category equivalent of avoidant) on the AAI had earlier been in relationships more likely to be rated as low on engagement and conflict resolution and high on negative affectivity. In profile, this is exactly the pattern one would expect in relationships undergirded by avoidance.

Assessing relationships with peers during adolescence requires methods that are both different from those appropriate for parents and adolescents and from those that are valuable in research with peers during childhood. Hartup's (1996) admonition that multiple aspects of friendship are needed to comprehend their developmental significance implies that subjective, as well as observable qualities of these relationships should be considered. Interviews with children and adolescents about peer relationships are particularly valuable sources of information about representations. One can learn much about the salience of a particular relationship to a young person, the effectiveness of the processes that comprise the interactions between the two peers, the coherence of representations of the relationship, and the degree to which the relationship contributes positively to individual growth.

Although more difficult, especially among older children and adolescents, direct observations of peer interaction may yield information about the nature and course of later romantic relationships. Cooper and Ayers-Lopez (1985) demonstrated that patterns of control and autonomy similar to those

observed in parent-child interaction can be detected in preadolescents' interactions with peers. Observational studies also have revealed meaningful differences between pairs of children and preadolescents previously identified as friends or acquaintances. These differences appear to be related partly to contrasting degrees of intimacy and felt security between partners (e.g., Daiute, Hartup, Sholl, & Zajac, 1993; Nelson & Aboud, 1985; Newcomb, Brady, & Hartup, 1979). Finally, observations of adolescents in larger groups, although difficult to achieve, may provide valuable information about aspects of functioning in the social crowds in which dating relationships are embedded (e.g., Englund, Hyson, & Levy, under review).

Finally, representations of relationships should also be assessed

This framework for collecting data affords both the most comprehensive basis and the most promising prospect for establishing a link between early and intermediate close relationships and the emergence of romantic relationships during adolescence. Without intervening measures of experiences and representation, questions of how much of the relation between infant and adult measures is direct or how much is mediated cannot be addressed, nor can questions concerning change in internal working models or the relation between changing models and changing relationship experiences. These alternative explanations must be examined if we are to understand how learning to love permeates the course of human development.

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Capacity for Intimate Relationships: A Developmental Construction W. Andrew Collins and L. Alan Sroufe Institute of Child Development, University of Minnesota Abstract An enduring hypothesis in the history of psychology is the notion that early caregiving experiences provide the prototype for later significant relationships. Although this hypothesis often has been extended to adult love relationships, compelling models of developmental processes that would account for continuity in relationship characteristics over so long a period are still needed. We propose a developmental view of the devel... Capacity for intimate relationships: A developmental construction. In W. Furman, B. B. Brown, & C. Feiring (Eds.), *The development of romantic relationships in adolescence* (pp. 125-147). New York: Cambridge University Press. Google Scholar. Collins, W. A., & van Dulmen, M. (2015). "The course of true love (s)" Origins and pathways in the development of romantic relationships. In A. Booth, A. C. Crouter, & A. Snyder (Eds.), *Romance and sex in adolescence and emerging adulthood: Risks and opportunities* (pp. 63-86). New York, NY: Routledge. Intimate relationships take work. You have to invest a lot of time, patience, and commitment to developing intimacy in a relationship. It takes more to keep that intimacy alive, for once it fades, bringing that spark back could be challenging. What is your meaning of an intimate relationship? Share it with us in the comments section below. References. All healthy relationships need intimacy, and there are several types to know and put to use to build a stronger, closer connection, according to therapists. How to Build an Intimate Relationship That Lasts, According to Therapists. It starts with understanding the six elements of intimacy then putting them to use. By Nicol Natale. Jan 30, 2021. SolStockGetty Images. There's a famous scene in *Pretty Woman*, when, as things start to heat up between Vivienne and Richard, she warns him: No kissing on the lips. It's a rule she learned from her friend Kit, we later learn, because kissing is too personal.