

Somebody to love: Expert says young crushes on older celebrities part of passage into adulthood

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Like the chicken pox or fifth disease, a bout of "Bieber Fever" is a childhood passage for many young girls. Moreover, it's a way to explore their sense of identity, according to a Kansas State University family studies researcher.

Karen Myers-Bowman, associate professor in the College of [Human Ecology](#)'s School of Family Studies and Human Services, specializes in children's understanding of and parent-child communication about complex issues such as sexuality and war. She said the squealing, crying and frequent Facebook updates symptomatic with "Bieber Fever" and crushes on other male celebrities is less about [young girls' physical attraction](#) to the celebrity and more about understanding themselves and where they fit in society.

"What we know about [adolescents](#) is that they're trying to figure out who they are," Myers-Bowman said. "The way they do that is through their relationships, including those that are crushes on unobtainable celebrities."

Those relationships—real and imagined—help youth decide what qualities and characteristics are important to them in a partner, Myers-Bowman said. Additionally, that celebrity crush occurs in the context of the [teen girls'](#) relationships with peers, as youth can explore how they relate to others, how they are similar and different from others, and what

their values are.

"If you and your best friend swoon over a celebrity together, then it's helping you figure out where you fit with your friends and with your peers," Myers-Bowman said. "But, for example, if all your friends like Ryan Gosling and you like Sean Connery, you get to feel what it's like to be different from everyone else, and you get to process those feelings."

Young boys are not immune to celebrity crushes, Myers-Bowman said. The major difference, though, is that boys are more reluctant to talk about these crushes—especially with their fathers.

According to Myers-Bowman, teenagers' crushes on celebrities emerged in the 1950s and 1960s as television, popular music and movies became more widespread, influential and aimed at teenagers. The proliferation of the Internet and mobile technology has only increased that influence.

"When mothers my age also had a celebrity crush, we had to go home to look at our David Cassidy posters and listen to his songs," she said.

"With smartphones, girls can instantly see pictures and videos of their crush whenever and wherever they are. It's almost like carrying Justin Bieber in your pocket. There is a constant immersion for girls now that wasn't present in their parents' generation."

Though rare, the fantasy can become too real for some adolescents, Myers-Bowman said. Some warning signs that a celebrity crush is turning into an unhealthy obsession include: if the youth begins spending less time with friends and more time looking at fan sites, pictures and videos of the crush; believing that the celebrity is in love with her and she is his girlfriend; mimicking inappropriate adult behaviors; and trying to play out the fantasy with someone she would normally have no interest in.

For many young girls, however, a celebrity crush is an emotionally safe outlet free of judgment. The crush doesn't have to return your feelings; you just imagine that he could, Myers-Bowman said.

This unconditional acceptance by a crush and the peer interaction that comes with it can sometimes cause young girls to say that they "love" the celebrity. As unnerving as some parents may find it for their preteen to drop the word "love" about an older male, it is not a cause for alarm.

"When a girl who is 8 to 10 years old has a crush on Justin Bieber and says, 'I love him,' that means something completely different to her than to a 16-year-old or a 35-year-old," Myers-Bowman said. "To preteens, it means that everybody likes him and so do I, or that I think he's cute in a giggly kind of way. It does not mean that she wants to start a sexual and emotionally complex relationship with him. We, as adults, once felt the same way about a crush, but today we're viewing the word 'love' from an adult perspective."

Some parents may feel annoyed by their child's crush on a celebrity, but the crush can provide an opportunity for parents to talk about self-image, self-respect and values with preteens, Myers-Bowman said. Examples include when a singer may dress or act provocatively during a performance or releases a song with a controversial message.

Additionally, parents can ask their daughters what they like about the celebrity and discuss how that might translate into relationships with dating partners in the future. By talking about these issues, parents can explore complex topics and convey their values to their child.

Myers-Bowman said that she has seen many mothers use their daughter's crush as a bonding opportunity. One mother-daughter pair used their mutual love of Josh Groban to attend concerts together and talk about the singer. This led to discussions about self-image, sexuality and what it

means to be a woman.

Most importantly, though, parents need to be accepting of a crush on an older celebrity.

"Remember parents, it's a lot safer if your young teen daughter likes Josh Groban rather than the boy next door, because she and Josh are not going to run off together, have sex and get pregnant; that will never happen," Myers-Bowman said. "A relationship with Josh is just a fantasy, and that fantasy is important for her identity development and feeling good about herself as a developing person."

Provided by Kansas State University

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