

Adolescent males seek intimacy and close relationships with the opposite sex

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Teenage boys desire intimacy and sex in the context of a meaningful relationship and value trust in their partnerships, according to researchers at Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health. The research provides a snapshot of the development of masculine values in adolescence, an area that has been understudied. Findings are online in the *American Journal of Men's Health*.

The researchers studied 33 males who ranged from 14 to 16 years of age to learn more about how their romantic and [sexual relationships](#) developed, progressed, and ended. The participants were recruited during routine medical visits at a community adolescent clinic that serves low-income, predominately African-American adolescents. The group's sexual history began earlier than the national average, putting them at increased risk for [sexually transmitted diseases](#).

Participants were asked open-ended questions about relationships and sex, such as desirable partner characteristics, intimacy, closeness, and trust.

"Prevailing values in our culture suggest adolescent males want sex, not relationships. However, values and behaviors related to sex and relationships are likely more complex than typically portrayed," said first author David Bell, MD, MPH, assistant professor of Population and Family Health at the Mailman School of Public Health and assistant professor of Pediatrics at Columbia University Medical Center. "In fact, very few of the participants described sex as the main goal of opposite-

sex interactions and relationships."

The study advances an understanding of adolescent males' early relationships in two significant ways. First, [close relationships](#) were important to the participants. Second, they desired intimate and caring relationships, expressed vulnerability and dependence, and placed great importance on trust in relationships.

Few participants described trying to trick or talk a partner into having sex, and few evidenced pride and boastfulness about numbers of sexual conquests. An area of vulnerability expressed by the males was the lack of knowledge about sex and concerns about their own capacity to sexually perform.

These findings starkly contrast with descriptions of older, sexually experienced adolescent males, according to Dr. Bell, in which older adolescents consistently endorse the belief that relationships should be focused around sex, an avoidance of intimacy, and the treatment of females as [sex](#) objects.

"Our sample was primarily lower-income African-American adolescent males and the results, while not generalizable, are transferrable to similar populations of adolescent males," noted Dr. Bell, who is also medical director of NewYork-Presbyterian Hospital's Family Planning Clinic/Young Men's Clinic, a provider of primary care services to adolescent and young men. Next steps in the research include analyses of how early adolescent masculine beliefs evolve over time toward more predominant masculine beliefs. These findings can assist clinicians to better address young men's sexual health needs and incorporate an understanding of adolescents' developing masculinity into health promotion.

Provided by Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health

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