

Teenage boys want intimacy, not just sex, survey finds

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Small study revealed most younger males more interested in closeness, trust with a girl.

(HealthDay)—The stereotype of the sex-crazed teenage boy may be dead wrong, according to a small study that asked boys what they really want from romantic relationships.

In interviews with 33 boys between the ages of 14 and 16, researchers found that most said they wanted a relationship with a girl for the closeness and trust. Very few boasted about sexual conquests or saw sex as a "main goal" in starting a relationship with a girl.

"In our culture, we have lots of assumptions about how guys behave," said lead researcher Dr. David Bell, of Columbia University Medical Center in New York City.

"What this study tells us is young adolescents want intimacy and trust in

a relationship, even though the culture is telling us they just want sex," said Bell, who reported the findings recently in the *American Journal of Men's Health*.

The results are based on a small number of boys, mostly black and all recruited from an urban health clinic that serves low-income teens. But Bell said other studies have come to similar conclusions about boys from other ethnic groups—at least those in their early teens.

Older teenagers are a different story, research suggests. By then, young men often take on more of the stereotypical male attitudes toward women and [romantic relationships](#).

"Older guys tend to describe a desire to 'get as many women as they can,'" Bell said. "Our findings would suggest that maybe they weren't always like that."

The question is, what happens as boys grow older? There were some hints from the relatively older boys in this study, Bell said. In talking about past breakups, some of the boys described "being burned"—and then used that as an excuse to remain emotionally distant in future relationships.

Bell said that suggests an area where boys need help: learning how to break up.

"How do you break up 'well' and process the emotions you're feeling?" Bell said. Although this study didn't look at it, he said, it's a good bet that boys typically aren't "talking out" their feelings with friends, or even the adults in their lives.

Another expert agreed this is an area where teenaged boys could use some guidance.

"It is clear that most young men do want to have a healthy connection to young women. Where we go awry is in teaching them how to effectively do so," said Derrick Gordon, an assistant professor of psychology at Yale University who studies male adolescent development.

But the boys' claims of being burned also suggest that they expect girls not to hurt them or somehow "betray" them, Gordon pointed out.

He said young boys need to learn "what healthy relationship skills look like"—and that includes having realistic expectations of their female partners and respecting their rights, as well as knowing how to emotionally deal with the end of a relationship.

Alan Hilfer, a psychologist who treats behavioral and emotional issues in teenagers, said he was surprised by the openness of the boys in this study.

It's "encouraging" that these young teens wanted emotional connection in their relationships with girls, said Hilfer, director of clinical psychology at Maimonides Medical Center in New York City.

"Unfortunately," he added, "that does seem to fade as boys grow older, when they take on more 'macho' attitudes."

According to Hilfer, parents can help by teaching their children the importance of respect in all relationships, including romantic ones. Maybe most important, he added, "parents need to show kids this through their own relationship, by treating each other with respect."

Bell said that while teenage boys are infamous for keeping feelings inside, in his experience they will sometimes open up if you give them a "safe space" to do it.

"I think we need to look at how we socialize [boys](#) to become men," Bell said. "We need to change the norm so they don't shut down emotionally."

That, Bell added, may not only help young men develop "sustained, healthy relationships," but also boost their own well-being—since it's known that personal relationships affect mental and physical health.

More information: The U.S. Department of Health & Human Services has more on [building healthy relationships](#).

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