

Puppy Love's Bite

Romance is great for adults. But a new study finds it can lead to depression for the young

EVEN NOW, DECADES LATER, I CAN REMEMBER THAT first romance—the notes passed at school, the endless discussions with my girlfriends containing the phrase “I know he likes me, but does he, like, like me?” Young love is bound to induce adolescent inanities, but it can also lead to serious depression, suicide and even homicide. (Andy Williams, the accused killer of two students at Santee High School, told friends he was dependent over a relationship at the time of the shooting.) Grownups may know enough to brace themselves for at least some relationship difficulties, but for kids, everything about romance comes as a shock—straight to the heart.

As a divorced parent of a 12-year-old, I have fumbled for answers to my daughter's tentative queries about romance. “It's like being an actor in the best movie you've ever seen, but you never get to see the script, and no one will tell you how the movie ends,” I told her. This didn't have quite the elucidating effect I was looking for. She looked as if she wanted to call her agent immediately.

A recent study of 8,000 adolescents in the *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* shows that love can be hell, especially when it strikes young. Although steady romantic attachments tend to increase the health and well-being of adults, those relationships are a great source of stress for adolescents and can lead to depression, the study says. Kara Joyner, a sociologist at Cornell and co-author of the study, said, “Girls become more depressed than boys, and younger girls are the worst off of all.”

A possible reason for the link between romance and higher risk of depression for girls is “loss of self.” A new University of Tennessee study of 1,300 high schoolers shows that even though boys say they “lose themselves in a romantic relationship,” this loss of self is much more likely to lead to depression when it happens to girls. Romantically involved adolescent girls tend to submerge their feelings and opinions and estrange themselves from friends and family.

Dr. Miriam Kaufman, a pediatrician and author of the very helpful book *Overcoming Teen Depression: A Guide for Parents* (Firefly Books), says 15% to 20% of teens—especially younger teens—will have diagnosable depression at some time during their adolescence, often triggered by romantic involvements or breakups. “I advise kids not to

jump into romances too early, because young adolescence is a time for girls to cement their friendships, and strong friendships—and a strong sense of self—help kids through the tough times,” she told me. “Unfortunately, some parents are overly invested in their daughters' love lives before they're ready. They think if she has a ‘boyfriend,’ that means she's popular.” Kaufman suggests that parents actively encourage their younger teens to stay involved with their friends and activities and spend



TOO CLOSE, TOO SOON? Youthful love can lead to a loss of self

time hanging out in groups and with family—with and without their “crushes.”

Parents should watch for signs of depression—increased isolation and sleep, eating or mood changes—and if they see these symptoms in their daughter or son for more than two weeks, get professional help. The good news is that the link between romance and depression seems to level off with age. Love will always make us feel like teenagers, but maturity gives us a chance to avoid the worst side effects. ■

Teen girls with questions about depression and romance can check with www.iamily.com. E-mail Amy at timefamily@aol.com