Adolescents’ Romantic Relationship Development and Parent–Adolescent Communication for Undesired Consequences Prevention

Yaowaluk Suwannakhae¹

บทคัดย่อ
บทความนี้เป็นการปริทัศน์วรรณกรรมที่ตีพิมพ์ในระหว่างปี พ.ศ. 2514 ถึง พ.ศ. 2552 (ค.ศ. 1971 ถึง ค.ศ. 2009) ซึ่งมีเนื้อหาเกี่ยวกับการพัฒนาการด้านอารมณ์ของวัยรุ่นใน즘บริกาเหนือและเอเชียในการสร้างความสัมพันธ์กับเพศตรงข้าม และการสื่อสารของผู้ปกครองกับวัยรุ่นเพื่อการป้องกันผลลัพธ์ที่ไม่พึงประสงค์ที่อาจเกิดขึ้นจากพฤติกรรมความเสี่ยงทางเพศในช่วงเวลาของการพัฒนาดังกล่าว ที่อาจนำไปสู่ผลลัพธ์ที่ไม่พึงประสงค์เช่น โรคติดเชื้อจากการมีเพศสัมพันธ์ (Sexually Transmitted Diseases), การติดเชื้อไวรัสอินฟลูเอนซ่า (Human Immunodeficiency Virus) และโรคภูมิคุ้มกันบกพร่องหรือ AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency) ที่ส่งผลกระทบทั้งร่างกายและจิตใจของวัยรุ่นในปัจจุบัน และในระยะยาวรวมไปถึงการใช้ชีวิตที่ปกติสุข และการเป็นพลเมืองที่มีคุณภาพของประเทศชาติ

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Abstract

The development of a romantic relationship during adolescence is a universal process. In this critical period of development, concern over adolescents engaging in risky sexual behaviors is considered as both a public health and global issue. Adolescents’ romantic relationship behavior and how it relates to risky sexual activity can have a profound impact on their lives both immediately and in the future. This article reviews and synthesizes previous literatures published between 1971 and 2009, which relate to the challenges faced by American and Asian teenagers; focusing attention on understanding intimate relationship development among adolescents, as well as the potential problems and risks involved. In addition, the literature was reviewed as it relates to parent-adolescent communication as possible solutions or preventions of negative health outcomes for adolescents such as the spread of Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs), Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV), and Acquired Immune Deficiency (AIDS).

Introduction

Biological, cognitive, and social changes during adolescence arouse interest in developing romantic relationships. Two individuals can have an intimate relationship without having sex. In contrast, two people can have sexual relationship without being intimate. Sternberg (1968) identified romantic love as one phase of love where there is no commitment, but there is passion and intimacy. Two well-known classical theorists illustrated the biological conditions which influences the development of romantic relationships by adolescents. Rousseau characterized the adolescence period as a time for the emergence of a sex drive. Aristotle commented on adolescents’ sexuality being changeable and inconsistent in their desires; their impulses are acted upon, however, they are not deeply-rooted, showing an absence of self-control (Muuss, 1996). These characteristics in the development of adolescent romantic relationships can possibly result in risky sexual behavior which may later affect their physical and emotional development into adulthood. There are two important objectives that direct this literature review: 1) Review and synthesize previous documents relevant to adolescent development, particularly in their romantic relationship development and parent-adolescent sexual communication in order to prevent adolescents from experiencing undesired consequences. 2) Ascertain gaps in previous studies of adolescent romantic relationships and define the parental role as mentors to prevent adolescents from harm.
Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this literature review is not based on one particular theory. Erik Erikson’s Theory of Identity Development and Harry Stack Sullivan’s Interpersonal Theory of Adolescent Development were both utilized as frameworks for this literature review. In Erikson’s view, pubescence is characterized by the rapidity of body growth, genital maturity, and sexual awareness. Falling in love is a common occurrence during the adolescent period. Intimacy is a personal matter and involves the establishment of emotional closeness to other people as a basis for enduring relationships. Erikson proposed that true and lasting intimacy is the achievement of an ego-identity. Young adults who still have uncertainties about their identity will shy away from interpersonal relationships or may seek promiscuity without intimacy, sex without love, or relationships without emotional stability (Muuss, 1996). Sullivan highlighted the importance of interpersonal relationships and communication which is essential to both normal and pathological development. Erikson and Sullivan agree on many aspects of intimacy; however, Sullivan makes the distinction that intimacy does not involve genital contact. In early adolescence, as a result of genital maturity, the individual often experiences confusion between intimacy and the lust dynamism. Young adolescents shift relationships from a person of the same sex, the friend, to the opposite sex. Late in adolescence, people explore preferences in terms of genital activity and how it will fit into their lives (Muuss, 1996). Sullivan also proposed that establishing intimate relationships with peers of the opposite sex was the hallmark developmental task of middle to late adolescence (Steinberg, 2008). These two theorists viewed romantic relationships in adolescence as a result of physical and biological changes. When adolescents begin to establish patterns of relationships in order to satisfy their genital needs, they might place themselves in situations involving risky sexual behaviors.

Adolescent’s Romantic Relationship Development and Its Undesired Consequences

Adolescents’ romantic relationship

Steinberg (2008) reported that the evolution of romance in the adolescent’s life proceeds through four phases. The first phase is infatuation when adolescents first discover an interest in socializing with potential romantic and sexual partners. The second phase is status which involves establishing, improving, or maintaining peer group status. The third phase is intimate when adolescents begin to establish true and meaningful attachments to romantic partners. Finally, adolescents are concerned about commitment and growth in their relationships. The status phase can be identified as the most critical period for adolescents to engage in risky sexual behavior because they start dating the opposite sex. A quantitative study examined adolescents’ conceptions of romantic relationships and how they contrast
with their conceptions of cross-sex friendships. Findings reported differences in adolescents’ views of cross-sex friendships and romantic relationships. Cross-sex friendships were largely characterized by affiliation; romantic relationships were differentially characterized by passion and commitment (Connolly, Craig, Goldberg, & Pepler, 1999). Indeed, teenagers did not really understand what a relationship entailed. They may be confused between the feeling of love and lust when describing their relationship. Young women and men desire sexual intercourse in their relationship; and it was constantly identified as a necessary component. Female adolescents believed that understanding, caring, being there for each other, and commitment were important qualities of a relationship. Communication was considered important for young women to have someone to converse with (Bralock & Koniak-Griffin, 2009).

Adolescents’ sexual behaviors

Adolescents’ sexuality is both a biological and psychological phenomenon. Sexual behavior during the adolescent years can be understood as a biological expression of the sexual drive which is a combination of physical, chemical, as well as psychological factors (Mitchell, 1971). Adolescents’ sexual behaviors were studied internationally in both qualitative and quantitative research. In the United States, the rate of adolescents engaging in sexual behavior leading to orgasm has actually increased. Most adolescent sex occurs within intimate relationships with partners at or near their own age (Weiss, 2004). Several factors, ranging from family structure to self-esteem, were influential factors that impact adolescent sexual behavior. Broman (2007) reported findings of sexual risky behaviors in a nationally representative study of adolescents, grades 7 through 12, in the United States. Findings revealed older male adolescents were more likely than females to have engaged in sexual behavior. Black adolescents who live in both step and single parent families are more likely to have had sexual intercourse than those from two-parent biological families. Smith (1997) studied the factors associated with early adolescent family structures, attachments, and activities of a representative sample of 1,000 adolescents in seventh and eighth grades, attending an U.S. eastern city public school during the 1987–88 school year. Findings indicated about three-quarters of these teenage boys and almost half of girls reported the onset of sexual activity at the age of 15 or younger. Similarly, boys and girls who initiated sexual activity early were significantly more likely to have frequent sex.

Research also examined factors that are associated with adolescent’s early sexual activity, such as coming from a home without two biological parents, lower parent attachment, child maltreatment, lower supervision, substance use, and having low aspirations for academic achievement. Robinson, Holmbeck, and Paikoff (2007) studied factors that motivated unsafe sexual activities in 146 African American adolescents living in impoverished neighborhoods with high rates of HIV who participated
Adolescents’ Romantic Relationship Development and Parent-Adolescent in the Chicago HIV Prevention and Adolescent Mental Health Project (CHAMP). Findings revealed males were more likely to endorse self-esteem enhancing reasons for having sex. Also, self-esteem significantly mediated the relationship between gender and a number of sexual behaviors. One survey explored sexual behaviors in sixth grade students. A convenience sample of 683 students from thirteen elementary schools in an urban, Midwestern county participated in this study. Findings indicated that more than one-half of the sixth graders intended to have sexual intercourse only after getting married. Surprisingly, findings indicated smoking was the highest predictor of engaging in sexual intercourse for all categories of race and gender. Alcohol use, having a steady girlfriend/boyfriend, and educational expectations were significantly linked to risky sexual behaviors of adolescents. Poulin and Graham (2001) reported on the findings of a cross-sectional survey of adolescent students in the Atlantic region of Canada. A total of 13,549 students in 719 classes, grades 7, 9, 10 and 12, participated in the 1998 survey. Findings revealed students in grades 9, 10 and 12 had engaged in sexual intercourse in the 12 months prior to the survey. Students in the higher grades were significantly more likely to report having engaged in sexual intercourse. There was an association between sexual intercourse and an increasing frequency of alcohol use. Cigarette smoking was found to be a risk factor for having sexual intercourse. Participants reported having engaged in unplanned intercourse when under the influence of alcohol or other drugs. Alcohol use more than once a month, daily cigarette smoking, and any cannabis use were factors for increasingly risky behavior pertaining to unplanned intercourse. The highest risk of unplanned intercourse under the influence of a substance was associated with alcohol use more often than once a month.

Another quantitative study was conducted to examine patterns of sexual intercourse among 1,279 seventh-grade students in an urban public school district in the southeastern area of the United States. In this study, vaginal intercourse was the most prevalent type of sexual intercourse reported. Most students, who had engaged in both oral and vaginal intercourse, anal and vaginal intercourse, or only anal intercourse, reported initiating vaginal intercourse either at an earlier age or at the same age (Markham, Fleschler Peskin, Addy, Baumler, & Tortolero, 2009).

Studies focusing on adolescent sexual behavior have also been conducted in Asia. In 2003, a survey of the factors that affect participating in sexual intercourse among adolescents was conducted during school hours in Korea. A convenience sampling of 952 male and female high school students were selected from Seoul, Daejeon, Gyeonggi-do, Chungcheung-do, and Jeolla-do. Findings revealed that both individual and environmental factors affect having sexual intercourse among Korean adolescents. The gender factor had a significant effect on experiencing sexual intercourse. Males had experienced sexual intercourse more than females. Social skills and personality traits, as well as uninhibited sensation-seeking factors were predictors of sexual intercourse among adolescents.
These factors consisting of parental living arrangements, career track, school records, having a boy/girlfriend, and sexual permissiveness with a boy/girlfriend were identified as significant environmental factors of having sexual intercourse (Ryu, Kim, & Kwon, 2003).

Naar-King, et al. (2008) study focused on the sexually risky behavior of Thai youths between the ages of 16 and 25 who were clients of an HIV clinic at King Chulalongkorn Hospital and two clinics at the Thai Red Cross in Bangkok, Thailand in 2004 and 2005. Results emphasized certain highly risky sexual behaviors which relate to HIV infection. Participants reported that they had sexual intercourse without a condom. Almost half of sexually active youths had sex with persons who had HIV, or whose status was unknown, and/or had more than one sexual partner.

**Major undesired consequences of adolescents’ risky sexual behavior**

Some adolescents choose to date many different people to try to find out what they are looking for in a relationship (Steinberg, 2008). These behaviors may cause adolescents to experience negative health outcomes; for instance, the acquisition of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and acquired immune deficiency (AIDS). These problems will affect adolescents’ lives when they become adults (Boyer, 1998). Adolescent’s risky and unprotected sexual behaviors may lead to unplanned pregnancy. Teen pregnancy accompanies the initiation of sexual activity at increasingly younger ages. The United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) estimated that 15 million children throughout the world are born to adolescent mothers every year; at least 60 percent of the children are born to adolescent mothers every year (Cherry, Dillon, & Rugh, 2001).

**Table 1**: Summary of adolescents’ romantic relationship development and its undesired consequences studies.

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Adolescents’ Romantic Relationship Development and Parent-Adolescent

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| Poulin and Graham (2001)     | Adolescent students in grades 7, 9, 10 and 12 | -Students in grade 9, 10 and 12 having engaged in sexual intercourse in the 12 months prior to the survey.  
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| Broman (2007)                | Adolescents in grades 7 through 12 | -Older male adolescents were more likely than females to have engaged in sexual behavior.  
                              |                                   | -Black adolescents who live in both step and single parent families are more likely to have had sexual intercourse than those from two-parent biological families. |
| Robinson, Holmbeck, and Paikoff (2007) | African American adolescents.    | Males were more likely to endorse self-esteem enhancing reasons for having sex. |
| Naar-King, et al. (2008)     | Thai youths between the ages of 16 to 25 | -Certain highly risky sexual behaviors which relate to HIV infection. |
Studies on parent-adolescents sexual communication included universal issues which emphasized parental involvement in order to prevent their children from experiencing the undesired consequences of sexuality development during this transition period. DiFiorio, Lehr, Wasserman, Eichler, Cherry, and Denzmore (2006) described a qualitative study which examined the role of African American fathers in educating their adolescents, in particular their sons, about sex and HIV prevention. Fathers clearly demonstrated a strong desire to teach their own adolescents about sexual issues. Fathers reported that they told their children about their own adolescent experiences, including sexual activity, unplanned pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), drug use, the potential for child sexual abuse, and the consequences of irresponsible sexual behavior. They also described the experiences or events that introduced them to sexual matters, including their peers, older siblings or other relatives, older friends, sexual play, educational books, movies with sexual innuendos, and pornographic items. Hutchinson and Cooney (1998) examined the patterns of parent–teen sexual risk communication and the influence of communication on sexual attitudes and behaviors of 173 late adolescent African American females from urban areas. Findings indicated low to moderate levels of parent–teen sexual communication, with particularly low rates of father–teen sexual communication. Mothers provided some information about sexual risk–related topics,
such as postponing sex, sexual pressure from dating partners, and resisting sexual pressure. Research revealed that teens feeling pressured to have sex may be less important to parents of sons than daughters. Byers, Sears, and Weaver (2008) reported parents’ own sexual health education was positively associated with the sexual health education they provided to their children, as well as with the frequency with which they had encouraged their children to ask questions.

Parents had difficulty discussing more sensitive topics, such as sexual coercion and assault, and sexually transmitted infections. Findings also demonstrated that parents who were more supportive of comprehensive sexual health education reported providing higher quality sexual health education and encouraged their children to ask questions more frequently. Additionally, findings revealed topics were discussed that acknowledge the child’s potential sexual involvement, such as sexually transmitted infections, birth control methods, abstinence, sexual decision making, and sexual pleasure, and enjoyment. Clawson and Reese–Weber (2003) reported how the timing of parent–adolescent sexual communication moderates the relationship between the amount of parent–adolescent sexual communication and sexual risk-taking behaviors. Findings highlighted that the amount of parent–adolescent sexual communication made a significant contribution in predicting sexual risk-taking behaviors. Adolescents who reported more sexual communication with their mothers and fathers also had their first experience with sexual intercourse at a younger age, and more lifetime sexual partners were more likely to have been tested for HIV/AIDS. Additionally, mother–adolescent communication was related to the risk of pregnancy. The timing of the first sexual discussion is important in predicting some adolescent sexual behaviors. In Japan, research findings showed the parent–adolescent relationships and monitoring was statistically associated with a delay of the first sexual experience for female students. Male students were also influenced by parental disapproval of the adolescent’s sexual behavior. More maternal communication about HIV/AIDS was related to a delay of the first experience of intercourse. The relationship between the father and daughter directly related to the delay of an adolescent’s first intercourse experience (Nagamatsu, Saito, & Sato, 2008).
Table 2: Summary of parent-adolescent communication about sexuality studies

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<td>- Adolescents who reported more sexual communication with their mothers and fathers reported a younger age of first intercourse and more lifetime sexual partner more likely to have been tested for HIV/AIDS.</td>
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Adolescents’ Romantic Relationship Development and Parent–Adolescent intercourse at a younger age, and more lifetime sexual partners were more likely to have been tested for HIV/AIDS. Additionally, mother–adolescent communication was related to the risk of pregnancy. The timing of the first sexual discussion is important in predicting some adolescent sexual behaviors. In Japan, research findings showed the parent–adolescent relationships and monitoring was statistically associated with a delay of the first sexual experience for female students. Male students were also influenced by parental disapproval of the adolescent’s sexual behavior. More maternal communication about HIV/AIDS was related to a delay of the first experience of intercourse. The relationship between the father and daughter directly related to the delay of an adolescent’s first intercourse (Nagamatsu, Saito, & Sato, 2008).

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| Byers, Sears, and Weaver (2008) | American parents | -Parents’ own sexual health education was positively association with the sexual health education they had provides to their children as well as with the frequency with which they had encouraged their children to ask questions. |

**Conclusion**

The review of literature highlights the emergence of adolescent romantic relationship development in this transitional period of life. Adolescent romantic relationship development, teenagers’ risky sexual behavior, the major undesired consequences of adolescents’ risky sexual behavior, and parent–adolescent communication were reviewed. The majority of sources of this literature review are obtained from research/scholarly articles from interdisciplinary journals. The range of the literature review covered 1971 to 2009. Sexual activity is common among young teenagers; and it is likely to have serious consequences in their life course (Smith, 1997). Many studies of adolescent sexual behaviors and parent–adolescent communication are conducted internationally using a variety of research approaches, samples, geographic areas, and several fields of study,
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including psychology, nursing, and education. The review of the literature revealed romantic relationship development during adolescence is a universal process. Similarly, findings from previous research revealed that both individual and environmental factors affect risky sexual behavior among adolescents in different geographic areas and ethnicities; for instance, gender differences, family backgrounds, cigarette smoking, alcohol use, educational expectations, and low self-esteem. Even though peers become relatively more important during adolescence as confidants and sources of emotional support, parents are still important (Steingberg, 2008). Several findings support Steingberg’s point of view.

The literature emphasized parent’s sexual communication has a significant association with adolescents’ early sexual intercourse experiences and risky sexual behaviors, especially with the prevention of undesired consequences. Culturally, taking about sexuality is a very sensitive issue among Thai families. There is little known about how Thai parents communicate to their adolescents about sexual behavior in order to prevent them from experiencing the undesired consequences of risky sexual behavior, such as STDs and unplanned pregnancy.

Educational Implications

Theoretically, the results of this literature review provides knowledge and understanding about romantic relationship development in adolescence, adolescent’s romantic relationship characteristics and how it relates to risky sexual behavior which can impact adolescents long-term. Essentially, the findings of this review of literature are useful and beneficial for parents to understand the importance of communication, adolescents themselves, educators, and researchers. Parents play a critical role as a mentor to communicate and provide adequate information at the right time for their children in order to prevent them from experiencing the undesired consequences of romantic relationship initiation during this critical period. Researchers and educators should collaborate; researchers have a duty to investigate and find meaningful solutions and educators must take the responsibility to disseminate and apply the findings to adolescents in specific ways.
References


