

# Key Evidence Messages on Young People's Relationships

March 2014

# Welcome to the third bulletin from the Relationships Alliance!

The Relationships Alliance comprises organisations working to strengthen couple relationships. Alliance members are Relate, OnePlusOne, The Tavistock Centre for Couple Relationships and Marriage Care.

## What is the purpose of this bulletin?

This monthly bulletin, produced by OnePlusOne, delivers a set of Key Evidence Messages (derived from recent research) that are of relevance to those interested in strengthening couple relationships including practitioners, policy-makers, commissioners, and Local Authorities to help them make informed and evidence-based decisions.

The Key Evidence Messages represent a summary of high quality and robust research and are drawn from a wide range of sources including recent research papers, latest statistical releases, unpublished literature, and research in progress. The evidence is carefully selected on the basis of its high quality research scope (e.g. reviews of reviews, meta-analyses), research design, methodology, and analyses.

## This bulletin and suggested subsequent bulletins

This third bulletin presents Key Evidence Messages in the area of **Young People's Relationships**. It includes a focus on:

- why young people's romantic relationships are important
- attitudes and behavior in young people's romantic and sexual relationships, and
- what factors influence the development of young people's relationships

The first bulletin, released in September 2013, focused on understanding **Relationship Quality** with the second reviewing the literature on **Parental Conflict**. Provisional ideas for future messages include:

- the impacts of parental separation on children and ways in which this can be managed;
- relationship difficulties faced by new parents and ways in which these can be alleviated;
- couple relationship interventions;
- use and attitudes to relationship support;
- factors contributing to relationships stability; and
- the benefits of stable relationships.

## Relevance to policy and Practice

The bulletins will close by including implications for research, policy, and practice and a full reference list. Please note that the full journal papers will not be available due to Copyright restrictions, although abstracts can be sent on request.

## Get in touch

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Feedback on these Key Evidence Messages is always welcome, as is interest in hearing about how they may have been used. We would also like to hear suggestions of future relationship topics where Key Evidence Messages would be beneficial.

# KEY EVIDENCE MESSAGES – YOUNG PEOPLE'S RELATIONSHIPS

## 1. What do we mean by 'young people'?

The term young person refers to a particular period of life between childhood and adulthood, yet with varying definitions of specific age ranges. The term young people is often used interchangeably with other labels such as youth, adolescent, and teenager<sup>i</sup>. Further ambiguity is created by the various policy contexts, agendas, and purposes within which these various terms are used.

For example, the United Nations (UN) and the World Health Organisation (WHO) have different definitions for young people (10-24 years), adolescents (10-19 years) and youth (15-24 years). Furthermore, it is thought that the period between childhood and adulthood is increasing. For example, new guidance for psychologists defines adolescence as up to the age of 25 for the purpose of treating young people, reflecting continued changes in social and physiological development.<sup>1</sup>

This variation makes the task of generalising and interpreting data difficult as there are vast differences, between, for example 11 and 12 years olds and 16 to 18 year olds.<sup>2</sup> The literature reviewed in this Key Evidence Summary encompass the wide age-range of 10-25 years. Where evidence allows, distinctions between specific sub-groups of young people are made.

## 2. Who do young people live with?

Young people's living arrangements have been influenced by a range of social changes, including: increased participation in higher education, continued decline in the youth labour market, rising house prices and increased international migration.<sup>3 4 5</sup>

A key change over recent years has been the increase in the number of young people living with their parents.<sup>6</sup> <sup>7</sup> In 2013, over 3.3 million UK adults aged between 20 and 34 were living with parent(s), 26% of this age group and representing an increase of 25% since 1996.<sup>6</sup> Over the past five years the rise has been most significant for those aged 20-24, 42% of whom lived with their parents in 2008.<sup>vi</sup> This is especially noticeable for graduates who may return to live with parents following higher education and prior to subsequent departure for employment and starting their own family.<sup>7</sup>

Another major change that has taken place is the increased heterogeneity in living arrangements of young people. This relates particularly to the rise in the number of young people living in shared housing with friends or other non-relatives.<sup>8</sup> These changes may result from the introduction in 1996 of the single room rate (SRR) for under 25s, from which young people would only be able to claim housing benefit based on the cost of a single room or bedsit.<sup>9</sup>

In addition, a significant minority of young people may be homeless. Estimates suggest that 1 in 100 young people will experience homelessness<sup>10</sup> and according to the UK government 19% of the young people accepted as homeless are aged 16-18.<sup>10</sup> The estimates may actually be higher than this due to the issue of 'hidden homelessness', including people 'sofa-surfing' (sleeping on friend's sofas and moving around), particularly in rural areas.<sup>11</sup>

## 3. Why are young people's romantic relationships important?

A romantic <sup>ii</sup> relationship has been defined as 'one in which the individual perceives an ongoing, reciprocated, emotional, erotically charged connection with a partner,

which may or may not involve sexual behavior'.<sup>12</sup> Earlier research on young people tended to focus on their sexual behavior alone, with the formation, development, and impact of romantic relationships largely being ignored or dismissed as trivial.<sup>13</sup> However, more recently there has been a growing acknowledgement of the importance of these early relationships.

This emerging research suggests that romantic relationships are significant for young people's functioning and for longer term outcomes.<sup>14 15 16 17</sup> Many researchers believe that adolescence represents a pivotal period in the formation of ideas about intimacy and close relationships, setting the building blocks of future healthy adult relationships, or indeed the patterns of maladaptive relationships.<sup>17 12 16</sup>

The development of partner relationships is a key aspect of youth<sup>19</sup> and an integral part of young people's social scaffolding.<sup>20</sup> Romantic experiences are common for young people, with around 80% of first relationships occurring during this time, and they also form a key area of concern.<sup>21 19</sup> Research has shown that both young people's relationships and sexual activity are related to short- and long-term outcomes for young people across numerous areas such as academic achievement levels, mental health, future relationships,<sup>22 23 15</sup> as well as psychological well-being and experience of physical aggression.<sup>13 24 25</sup> Research indicates that the sociological and psychological implications of adolescents' romantic relationships are associated with the timing, duration, and quality of these experiences.<sup>18</sup>

More recent research has shown that experiences of romantic relationships can affect later partnerships in adulthood.<sup>20</sup> Data from the US National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health showed considerable continuity between adolescent and adult relationship experiences.<sup>15</sup> Higher quality partner relationships at a young age are associated with increased likelihood of positive relationships and relationship commitment in early adulthood,<sup>17</sup> whilst lower quality partnerships have been linked to a variety of negative outcomes.<sup>24</sup> In terms of adopting an early intervention approach to strengthening relationships, the evidence suggests that young people's early experiences of romantic relationships are significant for their future wellbeing.

## 4. What are young people's romantic relationships like?

As young people age and gain independence, their social and partner relationships change and they typically spend increasing amounts of time in romantic relationships.<sup>18 26 27</sup> Compared to relationships that young people have with parents and peers, romantic relationships tend to have different dynamics; for example they contain more conflict than friendships and less responsiveness than best friend and parental relationships. However, partner relationships are perceived to offer more support than those with parents.<sup>28</sup>

Much of the existing data on duration and characteristics of young people's relationships are based on US data. For example, longitudinal survey data, found that when asked if they had ever dated, 74% of 15 year olds reported that they had, increasing to 94% among 18 year olds, and, by the time they are in their early 20s most young adults are in a relationship.<sup>17</sup>

However, reporting on the age when young people typically enter couple relationships is challenging because of different definitions and terminologies used. Also, young people may not always know exactly when their relationships began, particularly if partners were friends before they became a couple. Estimating the duration of young people's couple relationships can also be difficult as it is complicated by the different methods used to study relationships.<sup>21</sup> Nonetheless; existing studies suggest that such relationships often last a year or more.<sup>19</sup>

## 5. What are young people's attitudes towards romantic relationships?

There have been significant changes in the formation of couple relationships in Britain over the last 30+ years. Key trends include a delay in age of getting married and an overall decline in marriage rates, as well as an increase in cohabitation either as a precursor or alternative to marriage.<sup>29</sup> These wider changes in relationship formation are similar across other developed countries such as the US and some European countries.<sup>29</sup>

Comparisons across generations indicate that young people tend to have more liberal and tolerant views about relationships than older adults.<sup>30</sup> In specific data considering young people's (12-19) attitudes, Park and Colleagues<sup>31</sup> show that young people have mixed views towards marriage and cohabitation. In 2003 85% of young people believed that 'it is alright for a couple to live together without intending to get married', a slight increase from 80% in 1994. However, only 73% would advocate cohabitation for a couple intending to marry, down from 82% in 1994.<sup>31</sup>

Despite the above changing trends and attitudes, research suggests that over the past few decades, positive attitudes toward marriage have remained relatively stable. Research from the US shows that most young people view marriage as an important and desirable goal, and most expect to get married themselves.<sup>21</sup> Among US high school students in the Monitoring the Future study, 91% indicated that having a good marriage and family life was either 'quite important' or 'extremely important' to them; 81% said they expected to marry some day and 72% indicated that they felt well prepared for marriage.<sup>17</sup>

Although most young people continue to feel favorably about marriage, there are differences in the strength of support for marriage across some groups.<sup>32</sup> Young men endorse marriage more strongly than young women; however, they are more likely to want to 'delay' entering marriage.<sup>21 17</sup> Evidence also suggests that the majority of young people disapprove of divorce, although many do expect to experience divorce in their own lives.<sup>21</sup>

Young people's expectations of their relationships appear to change with age and with developing maturity of cognitive and emotional processes.<sup>18</sup> In general, younger adolescents' relationships are primarily characterised by physical attraction (e.g. infatuations or 'crushes'), and this emphasis becomes moderated in the later teen years with increased value given to emotional attachment and commitment.<sup>33</sup>

## 6. Have there been any changes in young people's sexual behaviour over time?

The most up to date information on young people's sexual behaviour is found in the third National Survey

of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyle (Natsal-3), which shows that young people are having sexual intercourse<sup>iv</sup> earlier in life. The average age of first sex for men and women under the age of 25 is now 16 years, and 30.9% of those aged 16-24 at the time of the survey experienced their first sexual intercourse before the age of 16. Over the course of the Natsal surveys this has increased in successive birth cohorts in both men and women.<sup>34</sup> However, earlier evidence from the Health Behaviour in School Aged Children<sup>35</sup> report from 2010 suggests that estimates may be higher; with between 34% to 38% of 15 year old women and 27% to 28% of men aged 15 reporting experience of sexual intercourse, with the range of percentages reflecting slight variation between England, Wales and Scotland.

As well as having sexual intercourse earlier, there is also evidence to show that young people may be engaging in sexual activity with a larger number of partners compared to previous generations. To illustrate, the proportion of women aged 16-24 reporting having 10 or more sexual partners is more than twice that of those aged 65-74 years and only slightly less than those aged 45-54 years.<sup>34</sup> In addition the proportion of women reporting sexual experience with a same-sex partner now exceeds that of men, particularly amongst younger people.<sup>34</sup>

In addition changes in the 'types' of relationships that young people enter into have been noted. One of these new relationship forms is 'Friends with Benefits' (FWB) relationships. FWBs are characterised by involving friendship and regular sexual encounters but do not involve the relational exclusivity or commitment between partners which are key elements of more 'traditional' dating relationships.<sup>36 37</sup> Research on this type of relationship is relatively recent (most journal articles have been published in the last five to eight years). Estimates of the prevalence of FWB relationships vary but some studies suggest that over half of young people may have engaged in a relationship which would be defined in this way.<sup>38 37 36 39</sup> Research has shown that friends with benefits relationships, and casual sex more generally, are much more psychologically damaging for young people if they engage in it despite having negative attitudes towards it.<sup>40</sup> It is important to note however that romantic relationships as opposed to casual partnerships are the context in which the majority of young people's sexual behavior occurs.<sup>41</sup>

## 7. What are the issues associated with young people's sexual behaviour?

Within public policy, a number of concerns have been raised around young people's sexual behaviour including teenage pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and sexual and dating violence. An aspect that has received most attention is the incidence of teenage pregnancy and teenage conception rates promote a continuing debate.<sup>42</sup> In 2011, the lowest number of conceptions was reported in the under-18 age group since 1969 in England and Wales, at a figure of 31,051.<sup>43</sup> This compares with 45,495 conceptions in 1969, a decrease of 32%. However despite this drop, teenage pregnancy continues to be a concern to some in the UK and under-18 birth rates are still high for the UK compared to other countries. <sup>v</sup> There is wide variation in the rates, from 4.3 per 1,000 in Switzerland, to 35.7 in the US. UNICEF identified the birth rate of mid ranking countries as falling between approximately 10 and 15 birth rate, but the rate for the UK is much higher at 29.7.<sup>42</sup>

It is important to consider that there is variation in young people's feelings and intent around pregnancy and parenthood. Not all teenage pregnancies are 'unwanted' or 'unintended'<sup>2</sup> and parenthood can be a positive and life-enhancing experience for some young people.<sup>44</sup> However, teenage pregnancy and early motherhood can be associated with poor educational achievement; poor physical and mental health; poverty and related factors.<sup>2 45 46</sup>

There may be negative consequences for some babies and children of teenage mothers, including lower than average birth weight;<sup>47</sup> higher infant mortality;<sup>48</sup> less likelihood of breastfeeding; greater likelihood of growing up in a lone parent family; and increased risk of poverty, poor housing and having poor nutrition.<sup>47</sup> Daughters of teenage mothers are also more likely to become teenage parents themselves.<sup>47 49</sup>

In policy terms, there have been some significant changes with regards to teenage pregnancy. The Teenage Pregnancy Unit (TPU), established in 1999 and the Teenage Pregnancy Strategy which it carried out, both came to an end in 2010. The strategy is thought to be the main reason for the drop in young people's conception rates which occurred over this period.<sup>42</sup> In England, the Department for Health (DH) recently published a Framework for Sexual Health Improvement in England,<sup>50</sup>

to create a context for commissioners and providers in the new NHS structures from April 2013.<sup>42</sup>

There are also concerns around the issue of Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs). The highest rates of STIs are among those aged 15-24 years and those under 25 accounted for 64% of all new chlamydia diagnoses in 2012.<sup>42</sup>

In addition, there has been increased recognition of a problem of violence within young people's relationships. The experience of non-volitional sex was associated with reporting of first sexual intercourse before 16 years of age, same-sex experience, more lifetime sexual partners, and low sexual function in both partners. In addition, for women, it was associated with pregnancy and abortion before 18 years of age.<sup>51</sup> However, this concern goes beyond just non-volitional sex and covers a wider range of aggressive behaviours in young people's relationships.

## 8. How do parents and peers influence the development of young people's relationships?

### Parents and Family of Origin

The diverse family structures, to which young people are exposed, may have important implications for their attitudes and expectations concerning adult relationships.<sup>17</sup> For example, young people who grow up living with both of their biological parents are more likely to disapprove of divorce or premarital cohabitation.<sup>32</sup> Meanwhile research on the intergenerational transmission of divorce has shown that children of divorced parents are significantly more likely to experience divorce themselves as adults.<sup>52</sup>

Other research has looked beyond family structure to examine how the quality of relationships among family members accounts for later development of romantic relationships. Parental conflict appears to influence young people's views of romantic relationships. Young girls with more negative perceptions of the level of conflict in their parents' relationship had greater expectations of unhappiness and divorce in their own future marriages.<sup>53</sup> Similarly, parental conflict after a divorce has been linked with less positive attitudes about marriage among adolescents,<sup>54</sup> whilst young people's exposure to family

violence and parental negativity has been linked to experience of abusive dating relationships.<sup>55 56</sup>

Conversely, research suggests that 'good' family relationships are associated with better romantic relationships in adolescence and beyond. The British National Child Development Study found that good relationships with parents and siblings at age 16 are associated with more satisfying marriages at age 33.<sup>57</sup> Other research showed how children's positive interactions with their mother during infancy is linked to more secure representations of peer and romantic relationships during adolescence and subsequently more successful romantic relationships in young adulthood.<sup>58 59</sup> Higher quality relations with parents are linked to higher self-esteem and lower incidence of depression as well as higher quality romantic relationships for young people.<sup>60</sup> In addition, there is evidence to show that a high quality relationship between parents influences the positive attitudes of children towards relationships more generally.<sup>61</sup>

## Peers

Family and peer relationships are often interrelated with one another with regards to young people's romantic relationships. For example, a stable, positive family life reduces the risk of association with less appropriate peers, and both reduce the risk of choosing high risk partners.<sup>18 62</sup>

Friends and peers may have a more direct influence on the development of romantic relationships as young people age.<sup>63</sup> Friendships act as 'practice interactions' for later romantic relationships, as they allow adolescents to test the experience and management of emotions within the boundaries of a voluntary close relationship.<sup>64</sup> Evidence suggests that general social competence with peers is associated with higher quality romantic relationships in early and middle adolescence.<sup>24</sup>

Having a larger peer network in late childhood predicts having better quality romantic relationships in middle adolescence, and in turn more stable couple relationships in later adolescence.<sup>65 66</sup> What seems to matter most is not so much the size of the friendship group, but rather the composition and quality of that network. Children who interact regularly with older peers at the age of 11-12 are more likely to report regular dating later on.<sup>67</sup> Young people's reports of the quality of their peer relationships are significantly correlated with their reports of the quality of their romantic relationships.<sup>64 68 69</sup>

Peers also seem likely to shape the standards that young people apply toward their partner relationships. For example, boys who believe that aggression is more commonly endorsed by their peers engage in more aggression in their own relationships.<sup>70</sup> Other studies have observed that adolescents' beliefs about how they should feel and behave in a romantic relationship develop through repeated discussions with their peers.<sup>71</sup>

## 9. What are the other main influences on the development of young people's relationships?

### Individual characteristics

In addition to the influence of family and peers, several enduring characteristics of children have been associated with their relationships across the life span. For example, personality in childhood has been associated with relationship outcomes in both adolescence and adulthood, and this effect appears to operate in part through the direct effects of personality on the timing of entry into dating and sexuality during adolescence.<sup>21</sup>

Data from the Minnesota Longitudinal Study shows that sociability and impulsivity assessed at less than 3 years of age predicts earlier initiation of partner relationships in early adolescence, which in turn predicted a higher number of sexual partners by age 19.<sup>72</sup> Variability among young people in terms of the timing of puberty and sexual maturation is also associated with differences in the timing of first sexual experience; however this association is far weaker with respect to when young people start dating.<sup>21</sup>

### Broader socio-cultural environment

The broader socio-cultural environment also appears to play a role in the development of young people's expectations around romantic relationships. Although not as extensively studied as the impact of parents and peers, evidence does suggest that norms influenced by race and ethnicity do affect the timing of sexual and dating experiences, as well as expectations of partners and beliefs and values around relationships.<sup>17 18</sup>

Broader socio-cultural norms regarding relationships may also be linked to the portrayal of such relationships

within the media. With increased engagement with various platforms, it could represent an important area which helps to shape their attitudes and beliefs about relationships.<sup>21 19</sup> Media representations of relationships may also affect the peer pressure other young people exert on one another, in terms of expectations of couple relationships.<sup>73 74</sup>

## 10. Is there an integrated model to explain the development of young people's relationships?

Karney et al.<sup>21</sup> propose a theoretical framework which identifies precursor conditions which are in place before adolescence and which are believed to affect young people's attitudes and behaviours regarding romantic relationships. They distinguish between factors from a 'distal context' (including culture, socioeconomic status, neighbourhood etc.), the 'immediate context' (including family structure, school, peer groups), and stable characteristics of the individual (including personality, intelligence, self-esteem).

The framework also proposes that adolescence represents a potential developmental turning point, where early patterns and attitudes formed by the above factors may be reinforced or challenged by the choices young people make during this time, in terms of their romantic experiences and behaviour in relationships. This framework indicates that both early exposure variables and experiences during adolescence impact on later relationship and other outcomes (See question 3 for evidence of this).

## 11. Why is sex and relationship education important?

Evidence from a number of longitudinal studies shows that young people's sexual and romantic experiences has both immediate and longer term implications for health, well being, and relationship formation. Healthy relationships in youth are linked to better outcomes, including more stable and positive future relationships and less risky sexual behaviours, whilst less stable relationships, including casual relationships, are associated with worse outcomes, including poorer

quality adult relationships, risky sexual behaviours and, for some, the experience of relationship violence (see question 3 and 7 for more details).

The link between adolescent partner relationships and healthy adult development suggests that targeting sex and relationship education through awareness raising, and skills development in young people can help promote future stable and positive relationships.<sup>21 16</sup>

This may offer a chance of early prevention by fostering positive relationship beliefs, values, and behaviours, as well as by challenging and replacing negative ones.

A clearer understanding of what makes a healthy relationship can help young people to explore what is acceptable in their own partner relationships, and the development of interpersonal skills could further support these relationships.<sup>16</sup> Earlier research suggests that programmes to develop young peoples' conflict-management and communication skills, in addition to challenging gender stereotypes and partner violence, are effective in reducing adolescent dating violence.<sup>75</sup> A more recent study found that although a relationship education programme resulted in improved relationship skills, this was only evidenced across some schools and students, but not all. Outcomes were best where students were mandated to do the programme rather than self-selecting in, whilst classes seemed less effective for those with low socio-economic status and those with divorced parents.<sup>76</sup>

More recent reviews on the impact of sex and relationship education (SRE) for young people suggest that conclusions of what is particularly effective is restricted due to limitations in research designs and confusion as to what the specific goals are.<sup>21 77</sup> However, there are some basic commonalities between educational approaches: many seek to shape attitudes and beliefs regarding couple relationships and address specific behaviours and choices in relationships, like commitment, whether or not to have sex, and how to choose a partner.

It is argued that effective sex and relationships education should be grounded in clear understanding of how partner relationships function and the role they play in the development of healthy adult relationships. To achieve this Karney and colleagues<sup>21</sup> suggest building curricula for relationship education around their integrated theoretical model (see Section 8) of adolescent relationships. As some adolescents may not yet be in a couple relationship when engaging with

such education programmes, it may be useful to take a broader approach and to generalise interpersonal skills across relationship domains.<sup>21</sup>

Relationship education can be offered across a wide range of settings, including schools, out of schools clubs, youth, and community groups. The topic of SRE is contained within non statutory PSHE education within the National Curriculum and is strongly recommended within government SRE guidance. Primary and Secondary Schools are also legally obliged to have an up-to-date SRE policy.<sup>78</sup>

## 12. Where do young people get support for relationship issues?

A survey by nfpSynergy found that relationships came third amongst the most important issues that young people in the UK aged 16-25 would like help with, only after education and career, and mental health and stress. One in five young people stated that they wanted help to deal with their relationships.<sup>79</sup> Young people are much more likely to consult their friends and family for advice and support when any issues arise.<sup>79 80 81 82</sup> There are many positive effects of a strong social support system; however, there could also be negative effects of this reliance on more informal as opposed to professional support.<sup>72</sup> The fact that peer-pressure is so important in young people's decisions around sexual behaviour means that they may not always be the best source of advice around such issues.<sup>81</sup>

The evidence around young people's use of more formal sources of support (including online advice) is mixed. One key conclusion reached in a recent UK survey of young people is that they want a range of communication options. This generation has grown up with the benefit of modern communication technologies and half of young adults 16-25 would communicate and seek help for various issues via e-mail and 40% by text messages.<sup>72</sup> Providers of support services for young people may need to think about offering these different options for young people, for example, Youthline reports that growing numbers of young people are using their text service since it became free in 2008 and they expect that the number of texts will soon outnumber calls to their service.<sup>83</sup> In addition support service providers need to consider the barriers that young people face in accessing support, such as overcoming stigma associated with

particular issues, an imbalance of power between the helper and help-seeker, and worries about handing over control of the issue.<sup>72</sup>

### Implications for research, policy & practice

These key evidence messages on young people's relationships have a number of implications for researchers, policy makers, and practitioners.

1. Evidence suggests that young people's couple relationships impact on their health and well being, as well as influence later relationships in adulthood. This suggests that attention should be paid to young people's attitudes and behaviour in romantic relationships, and not just to their sexual behaviour.
2. Although there appears to be some change in young people's sexual and relationship attitudes and behaviours, the majority of young people value strong, supportive relationships and despite changes in trends and attitudes many still aspire to marriage. While young people's relationship attitudes and behaviours are linked, there is, at times, some discrepancy between the two. Therefore, a clearer understanding of how attitudes link to behaviours for people in this age group is needed.
3. For many young people early partner relationships can be positive and include features which are desirable in strong adult relationships. However, for some young people these early experiences may be characterised by casual, non-supportive, and somewhat destructive encounters.
4. Youth seems to present a suitable time for early relationship intervention and promotion of stable, good quality relationships.
5. This could be achieved through SRE programme development in schools and through embedding SRE components within parenting programmes to help parents to support young people. However, programme developers need to be clear what programme aims and components would maximise the positive impacts on young people.
6. Further research to facilitate greater understanding of what is important in young people's partner relationships is also needed to help strengthen future relationship programmes. Resources are also needed

to robustly evaluate these programmes and make comparisons among different approaches.

7. Suggested areas for further research include directly testing theoretical models of young people's partner relationships, to explore the relative influence of different variables. For example, what impact do parents and peers have within the broader socio-cultural environment, when also taking into consideration individual characteristics? This may help identify risk and protective factors for good quality relationships.
8. There is limited research on the partnership experiences of young same-sex couples and how this compares to opposite-sex experiences. Further research in this area may help to identify relationship support needs for diverse groups of young people.
9. Further research in the area of young people's relationships would be advanced by the use of stronger research designs, utilising longitudinal data where possible, and following up individuals well into adulthood, as well as by going beyond self report data and including representative samples of young people.
10. An awareness of how different media portray couple relationships and efforts to promote positive models of strong, stable relationships may be important for young people as they form their own early romantic and sexual experiences.

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