

Teens who don't date are less depressed and have better social skills

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Dating, especially during the teenage years, is thought to be an important way for young people to build self-identity, develop social skills, learn about other people, and grow emotionally.

Yet new research from the University of Georgia has found that not dating can be an equally beneficial choice for teens. And in some ways, these teens fared even better.

The study, published online in *The Journal of School Health*, found that adolescents who were not in romantic relationships during middle and high school had good social skills and low depression, and fared better or equal to peers who dated.

"The majority of teens have had some type of romantic experience by 15 to 17 years of age, or middle adolescence," said Brooke Douglas, a doctoral student in health promotion at UGA's College of Public Health and the study's lead author.

"This high frequency has led some researchers to suggest that dating during teenage years is a normative behavior. That is, adolescents who have a romantic relationship are therefore considered 'on time' in their psychological development."

If dating was considered normal and essential for a teen's individual development and well-being, Douglas began to wonder what this suggested about adolescents who chose not to date.

"Does this mean that teens that don't date are maladjusted in some way? That they are social misfits? Few studies had examined the characteristics of youth who do not date during the teenage years, and we decided we wanted to learn more," she said.

To do this, Douglas and study co-author Pamela Orpinas examined whether 10th grade students who reported no or very infrequent dating over a seven-year period differed on emotional and social skills from their more frequently dating peers.

They analyzed data collected during a 2013 study led by Orpinas, which followed a cohort of adolescents from Northeast Georgia from sixth through 12th grade. Each spring, students indicated whether they had dated, and reported on a number of social and emotional factors, including positive relationships with friends, at home, and at school, symptoms of depression, and suicidal thoughts. Their teachers completed questionnaires rating each student's behavior in areas that included social skills, leadership skills and levels of depression.

Non-dating students had similar or better interpersonal skills than their more frequently dating peers. While the scores of self-reported positive relationships with friends, at home, and at school did not differ between dating and non-dating peers, teachers rated the non-dating students significantly higher for social skills and leadership skills than their dating peers.

Students who didn't date were also less likely to be depressed. Teachers' scores on the depression scale were significantly lower for the group that reported no dating. Additionally, the proportion of students who self-reported being sad or hopeless was significantly lower within this group as well.

"In summary, we found that non-dating students are doing well and are simply following a different and healthy developmental trajectory than their dating peers," said Orpinas, a professor of health promotion and behavior.

"While the study refutes the notion of non-daters as social misfits, it also calls for health promotion interventions at schools and elsewhere to include non-dating as an option for normal, healthy development," said Douglas.

"As public health professionals, we can do a better job of affirming that

adolescents do have the individual freedom to choose whether they want to date or not, and that either option is acceptable and healthy," she said.

More information: Brooke Douglas et al, Social Misfit or Normal Development? Students Who Do Not Date, *Journal of School Health* (2019). [DOI: 10.1111/josh.12818](https://doi.org/10.1111/josh.12818)

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