Adolescents with Intellectual Disability and their Dating Experiences

What is this research about?
In developing romantic relationships, typically developing teens tend to progress through “dating stages” where they initiate mixed-sex friendships followed by casual and then more serious dating experiences.¹

Friendship experiences are important building blocks for romantic relationships and also provide opportunities for developing romantic relationships.¹

Although it remains unclear what happens in dating development for adolescents with intellectual disability (ID), these teens may not have the same opportunities with peers as typically developing youth do. Perhaps not surprisingly, slower cognitive abilities, language, and communicative skills tend to hinder teens’ with ID peer interactions.²

Thus, one purpose of this study is to better understand the “dating stages” of teens with ID.

What did the researcher do?
The researcher spoke with 31 teens (16-19 years old) with Mild ID about their experiences with dating and questionnaires and some open-ended questions were used. The teens’ parents also completed some questionnaires on related topics about their child.

What did the researcher find?
Majority of teens with ID (85%) wanted a romantic relationship “right now,” and 48% have had a previous or current romantic relationship.

85% of youth with ID want a romantic relationship “right now,” and 48% have had a previous or current romantic relationship.

Compared to typically developing teens³, youth with ID dated later.

More boys with ID, compared to girls with ID, were dating.

In comparing youth with ID and Autism (ASD) and those without ASD:
• No differences were found in dating experiences
• Teens with ASD were more likely to withdraw from social situations, had a lower awareness of different types of romantic relationships, and had less knowledge of how to initiate relationships.

Importantly, better social competence was linked with better mental health in youth.

How can you use this research?
Understanding the interest in and experiences with dating that these teens have provides a foundation for opening up dialogue around appropriate and healthy behaviors in these relationships.

There should be more emphasis and support for youth with ID around relationship education to promote healthy relationships and mental health.

More focus on relationship education should be emphasized in social skills programs for youth with ASD.

About the researcher
Marina Heifetz is currently completing her Ph.D. in Clinical-Developmental Psychology at York University. She is also currently an intern at Surrey Place Centre. Dr. Jennifer Connolly, Psychology Professor at York University, was the supervisor for this project.

Citations

Special Thanks to: Participating families, Dr. Connolly, Drs. J. Weiss and B. Isaacs, Surrey Place Centre, Youthlink (Roger Smith), Fragile X Foundation (Lori Beesley), and other wonderful agencies that supported this project.