“Like a Best Friend”: Adolescents with Intellectual Disability and their Conceptualization of Romantic Relationships

What is this research about?
One of the most salient changes for typically developing adolescents is the emergence of romantic relationships. It remains unclear what adolescents with intellectual disability (ID) think about these relationships.

Only a minority of youth with ID receive formal sex and relationship education regarding romantic relationships.\(^1\)

The existent research on adults with ID shows that they are interested in developing romantic relationships.\(^2\)

Thus, one purpose of this study was to better understand romantic conceptualization of teens with ID.

What did the researcher do?
The researcher spoke with 31 teens (16-19 years old) with Mild ID about their understanding of dating and romantic relationships. Parents were asked to complete related questions about their child.

What did the researcher find?
The teens described companionship (e.g., having someone to “hang out with”) as the defining characteristic of a romantic partner. These responses are similar to how typically developing youth describe friendships.\(^3\)

The distinguishing characteristic between a romantic partner and a friend for these teens was commitment (e.g., long-term committed relationships, marriage). These responses are different from typically developing adolescents, who tend to differentiate friends and romantic partners through passion (i.e. intense feelings of love and attraction).\(^3\)

How can you use this research?
When communicating about intimate relationships with these teens, it is important to address companionship and commitment as key needs.

One way to do this is to talk about what types of things the teen can do to “hang out” and what a “committed” relationship looks like (e.g., exclusive, one-on-one dating).

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

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