Adolescents with Intellectual Disability and their Romantic Relationships in the Context of Families and Schools

What is this research about?
Romantic relationships become salient during adolescence. These relationships are shaped by various overlapping social contexts, including family and school.

Mixed-sex schools provide opportunities for teens with intellectual disability (ID) to meet potential romantic partners, while families regulate the pace at which teens become involved in romantic relationships. Parents of children with ID, compared to parents of typically developing children, tend to be more overprotective of their child.¹

Youth with ID often receive very limited (if any) sex and relationship education,² which puts them at risk for STIs and teenage pregnancy.³

Thus, one purpose of this study was to examine the contribution that families and schools have towards the development of romantic relationships in youth with ID.

What did the researcher do?
The researcher spoke with 31 youth (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?
Parents tended to be more overprotective in regards to dating; indicating that readiness to date for their youth should be over 18 years of age. In contrast, majority of teens felt they were ready to date between 15 and 17 years.

Parents’ perceptions of autonomy in dating did not differ between boys and girls.

There were more boys (100%) in cross-sex schools than girls (30%).

Majority of teens (86.7%) learned about relationships primarily through their parents.

Learning from Formal Sexual Education did not yield better awareness or knowledge of relationships or sexuality.

How can you use this research?
Practitioners can help in counseling and educating the families about the importance of being on the same page in relation to when to date.

It may also be important to broach the topic of dating with teens and parents separately, as youth may open up about their feelings about dating without their parents’ presence.

More social opportunities to engage with peers should be developed for these youth.

More developmentally-appropriate relationship and sex education should be provided to youth with ID.

Open communication in family, school, and mental health settings about relationships will help foster these youths’ understanding of how to have a healthy relationship.

About the researcher
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Citations

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