

Research Brief

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The Dynamics in Young Adult Romantic Relationships:

IMPORTANT FOR
SUCCESS IN LOVE—
AND IN LIFE

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OVERVIEW

Young adulthood is a unique stage of development that accompanies the transition from adolescence to adulthood.^{1,2} During this time, the vast majority of young men and women move into and out of romantic relationships and are sexually active. However, the nature of these relationships is varied. In 2001, 20 percent of people aged 18 to 25 were married; 20 percent were living with a partner in a cohabiting relationship; and 35 percent were dating.³ The dynamics within these relationships are important. High-quality, satisfying romantic relationships are linked to healthy development during adolescence and can set the stage for successful relationships into adulthood.^{4,5} However, troubled or conflicted relationships are linked to negative psychological and physical outcomes, including increased engagement in risky sexual behaviors and reduced contraceptive use.⁶⁻⁸ In this research brief, Child Trends used the “Romantic Pair” subsample of a long-term study of adolescent health to describe relationship dynamics among young adults in heterosexual relationships.

KEY FINDINGS

- The vast majority of young men and women feel very positively about their relationships, and report high levels of satisfaction, commitment, and love. This is particularly the case for married youth.
- Most married and cohabiting couples report feeling their relationship is permanent, while less than half of dating couples do.
- Although most partners within a couple report similar levels of satisfaction, commitment, love, and feelings of permanence, some do not. In approximately 30 percent of couples, only one partner reported being very satisfied or very committed to the relationship.
- Three-quarters of women and nearly as many men feel that they and their partner get an equal deal in the relationship. And over half of men and almost two-thirds of women think both partners contribute equally to decisions about where to go and what to do.



ABOUT THE DATA SOURCE FOR THIS BRIEF

The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health) is a nationally representative survey of U.S. students who were in seventh through 12th grades in 1994-1995. It was designed to provide a broad understanding of the health and well-being of adolescents and their subsequent development by following respondents over time into young adulthood.⁹ As noted, this research brief uses data from the Romantic Pairs subsample of Add Health. The data from this subsample were collected in 2001-2002, when respondents were between the ages of 18 and 26. These data provide individual and relationship-related information about 1,507 randomly selected respondents and their partners in dating, cohabiting, and married relationships (partners were interviewed separately). To be included in the subsample, both the respondent and his or her partner had to be at least 18 years old and the relationships had to be heterosexual, current, and of at least three months' duration. We restricted the analytic sample to the 1,318 couples with valid sampling weights. This total included 465 dating couples, 456 cohabiting couples, and 397 married couples. In this brief, we present results from analyses of the full analytic sample, as well by gender and by relationship status. We weighted all analyses to represent the 8,206 couples eligible to be included in the subsample. All group differences presented in this brief are significant ($p < .05$).

EMOTIONAL DYNAMICS

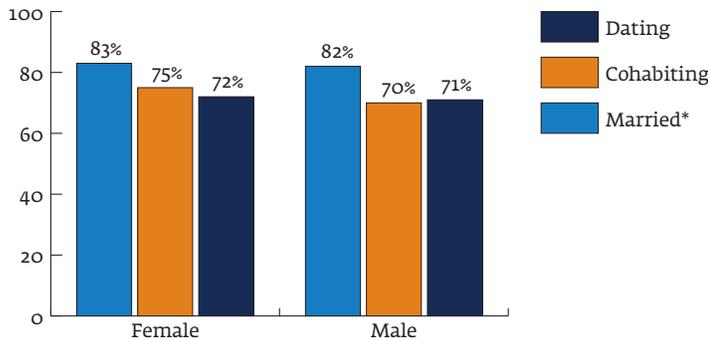
Young adulthood is a time in life when most men and women explore intimate relationships.¹⁰ This exploration can lead to a satisfying, healthy, and lasting relationship that represents a secure attachment between two people.⁴ In this section, we share findings from our analyses of four emotional dimensions of relationships that indicate a secure attachment, as reported by men and women: relationship satisfaction, commitment, love, and a sense of permanence.

Relationship satisfaction is highest among married men and women, but is also very high among men and women in dating and cohabiting relationships.

- More than four in five married men (82 percent) and married women (83 percent) in the study sample reported being very satisfied with their relationship. In contrast, between 70 and 75 percent of men and women in cohabiting and dating relationships reported that they were very satisfied with their relationship.
- In general, men and women reported similar levels of satisfaction across all relationship types (see Figure 1).



FIGURE 1. PERCENT OF MALES AND FEMALES VERY SATISFIED WITH THEIR RELATIONSHIP, BY RELATIONSHIP TYPE



Source: Child Trends' analysis of Add Health Romantic Pairs data

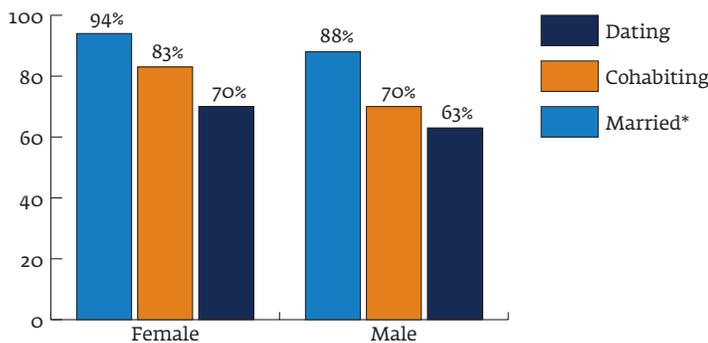
*Differences between married vs. cohabiting and married vs. dating significant for men and women at the $p < .05$ level

Married men and women also report the highest levels of relationship commitment.

Men and women in dating relationships were the least likely to report high levels of commitment; men and women in cohabiting relationships generally fell in between those in married and dating relationships on this dimension (see Figure 2).

- Ninety-four percent of married women, 83 percent of cohabiting women, and 70 percent of dating women in the study sample reported being very committed to their relationship.
- Eighty-eight percent of married men, 70 percent of cohabiting men, and 63 percent of dating men stated that they were very committed.
- Men and women in dating and married relationships reported similar levels of commitment, whereas cohabiting women reported higher levels of commitment than did cohabiting men.

FIGURE 2. PERCENT OF MALES AND FEMALES* VERY COMMITTED TO THEIR RELATIONSHIP, BY RELATIONSHIP TYPE**



Source: Child Trends' analysis of Add Health Romantic Pairs data

*Differences between men vs. women significant for cohabiting couples at the $p < .05$ level

**Differences between married vs. cohabiting and married vs. dating significant for men and women, and differences between cohabiting and dating significant for women at the $p < .05$ level

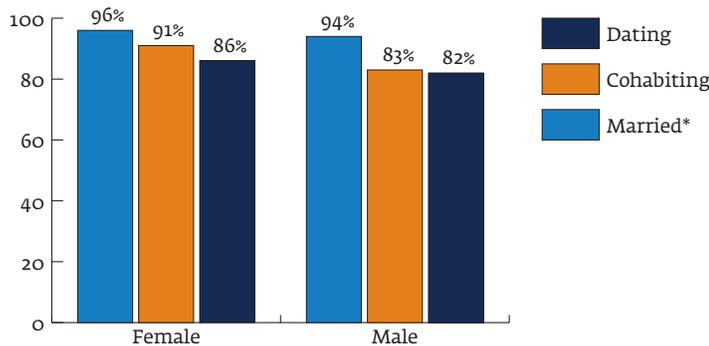


The vast majority of men and women say that they feel a lot of love for their partner.

Overall, 89 percent of women in our study sample reported that they loved their partner a lot, compared with 85 percent of men (results not shown). However, levels for men and women varied across relationship status.

- Married men (94 percent) were more likely to report a lot of love for their partners than were cohabiting (83 percent) or dating men (82 percent). Similarly, married women (96 percent) were more likely to report a lot of love for their partners than were cohabiting (91 percent) and dating women (86 percent).
- With the exception of young adults in cohabiting relationships, men and women reported similar levels of love across relationship type. However, 91 percent of cohabiting women reported that they loved their partner a lot, compared with 83 percent of cohabiting men (see Figure 3).

FIGURE 3. PERCENT OF MALES AND FEMALES* WHO LOVE THEIR PARTNER A LOT, BY RELATIONSHIP TYPE**



Source: Child Trends’ analysis of Add Health Romantic Pairs data

*Differences between men vs. women significant for cohabiting couples at the $p < .05$ level

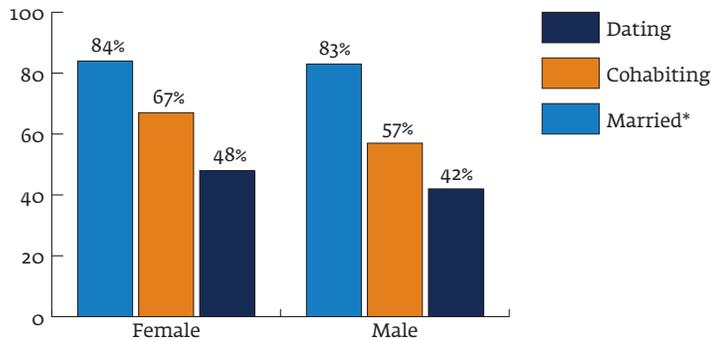
**Differences between married vs. cohabiting and married vs. dating significant for men and women at the $p < .05$ level

Less than half of men and women in dating relationships believe that their relationship is permanent.

- More than eight in 10 married women (84 percent) and married men (83 percent) in our study sample reported that they felt their marriage was permanent. Conversely, less than half of women (48 percent) and men (42 percent) in dating relationships regarded their relationship as permanent. Women and men in cohabiting relationships fell in between these two groups in their attitudes; 67 percent of cohabiting women and 57 percent of cohabiting men reported that they felt their relationship was permanent (see Figure 4).
- Women in cohabiting relationships were more likely than were cohabiting men to feel that their relationship was permanent.



FIGURE 4. PERCENT OF MALES AND FEMALES* WHO BELIEVE THEIR RELATIONSHIP IS PERMANENT, BY RELATIONSHIP TYPE**



Source: Child Trends' analysis of Add Health Romantic Pairs data

*Differences between men vs. women significant for cohabiting couples at the $p < .05$ level

**Differences between married vs. cohabiting, married vs. dating, and cohabiting vs. dating significant for men and women at the $p < .05$ level

SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES BETWEEN PARTNERS

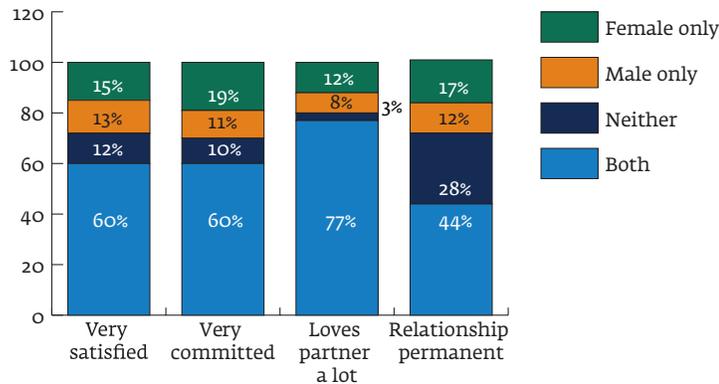
A particularly unique feature of the Romantic Pairs sample is that data were collected from both the male and female partner in each romantic relationship. Because of this feature, we were able to compare the answers of men and women within a couple.

Although most partners report similar levels of satisfaction, commitment, love, and feelings of permanence, some partners do not.

- For 60 percent of couples in our study sample, both partners reported that they were very satisfied or very committed to the relationship. However, in approximately 30 percent of couples, only one partner reported being very satisfied or very committed to the relationship.
- In more than three-quarters (77 percent) of couples, both partners reported feeling a lot of love for each other. For another 20 percent of couples, only one partner reported high levels of love for the other. It was extremely rare (3 percent) for neither partner to report a lot of love for his or her partner.
- Twenty-nine percent of couples had only one partner who thought the relationship was permanent. However, for 44 percent of couples, both partners reported that they considered the relationship to be permanent. For another 28 percent of couples, both partners reported the opposite belief (see Figure 5).



FIGURE 5. COUPLE AGREEMENT AND DISAGREEMENT IN REPORTS OF RELATIONSHIP CHARACTERISTICS



Source: Child Trends' analysis of Add Health Romantic Pairs data

Differences in reports of relationship dynamics between partners vary by relationship type.

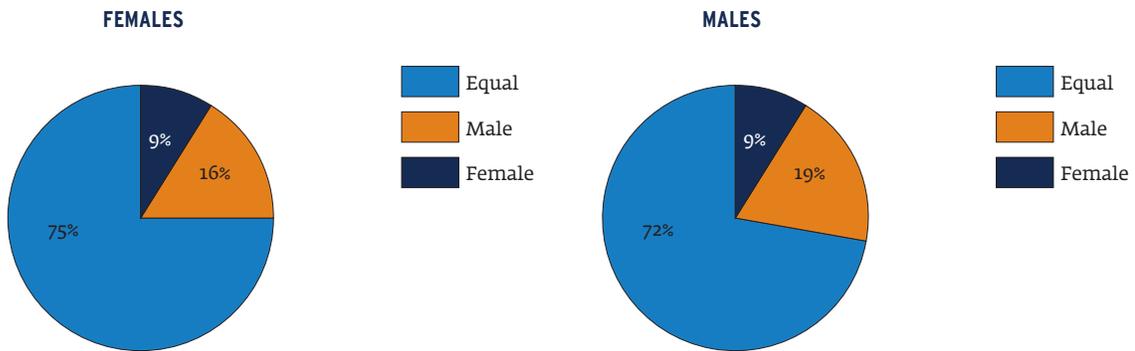
- Married couples in our study sample were the least likely to show differences in how they viewed commitment, love, and permanence in their relationships. For example, only 17 percent of married couples differed in their reports of commitment, compared with 37 percent of cohabiting couples and 33 percent of dating couples.
- Dating couples were most likely to have both partners report a lack of satisfaction, permanence, commitment, or a lot of love in their relationship. For example, in 42 percent of dating couples, neither partner felt the relationship was permanent, compared with 6 percent of married couples and 17 percent of cohabiting couples (results not shown).

FAIRNESS AND DECISION MAKING

Many adolescents and young adults in romantic relationships report equality between partners.⁴¹ However, power imbalances between partners can be problematic for men and women. For example, power imbalances have been linked to reduced contraceptive use.⁶ In this section, as an indicator of power imbalances, we present findings about young adults' perceptions of fairness and decision making within their romantic relationships.



FIGURE 6. PERCENT OF MALES AND FEMALES WHO BELIEVE THEY GET A BETTER DEAL IN THE RELATIONSHIP



Source: Child Trends' analysis of Add Health Romantic Pairs data

Most men and women feel that they and their partner get an equal deal in the relationship.

Three-quarters (75 percent) of women and nearly as many men (72 percent) in our study sample expressed this view. However, when either partner thought one person was getting a better deal, both men and women more often reported that it was the man who did so (see Figure 6).

- Sixteen percent of women reported that men get a better deal in the relationship, whereas 9 percent of women reported that they do.
- Nineteen percent of men report that they get a better deal in their relationship, whereas 10 percent of men reported that women do.
- These patterns were similar across married, cohabiting, and dating relationships—with one exception: married women were equally likely to report that the male or female partner gets the better deal (results not shown).

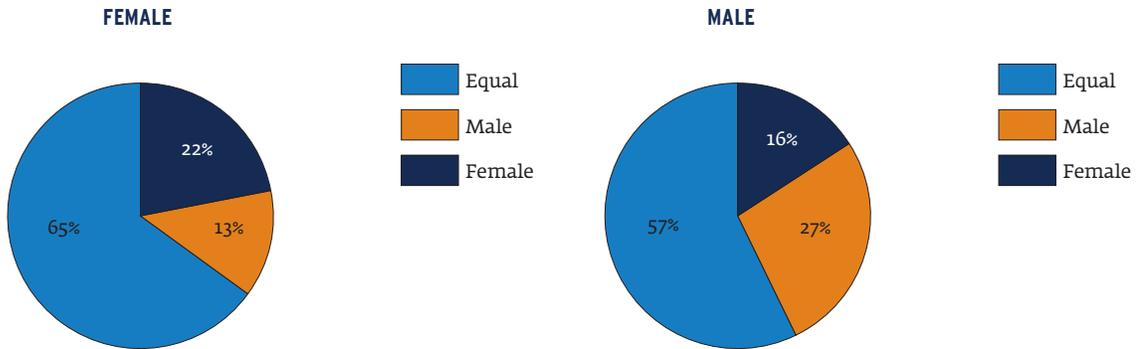
Most men and women think both partners contribute equally to decisions about where to go and what to do.

However, women (65 percent) in our study sample were more likely to report equality in decision making than were men (56 percent). Paradoxically perhaps, when men and women reported inequality in decision making, they were both more likely to report that they themselves make most of the decisions (see Figure 7).

- Twenty-two percent of women reported that they make most of the decisions in the relationship, whereas 13 percent of women reported that their partner does.
- Conversely, 27 percent of men reported that they make most of the decisions, whereas 16 percent of men reported that their partner does.
- These patterns were similar for young adults in married, cohabiting, and dating relationships.



FIGURE 7. PERCENT OF MALES AND FEMALES WHO BELIEVE THAT THEY MAKE THE MAJORITY OF DECISIONS ABOUT WHERE TO GO AND WHAT TO DO IN THE RELATIONSHIP



Source: Child Trends' analysis of Add Health Romantic Pairs data

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

This research brief has presented new information about the dynamics within young adult romantic relationships, based on Child Trends' analyses of data collected in interviews with young adult couples as part of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health). Below we highlight four primary themes that emerged from our analyses.

The majority of young adults report high levels of relationship satisfaction, commitment, love, and sense of permanence.

Young adult men and women both report very high levels of relationship quality—particularly feelings of love—in their current relationships. Married men and women are more likely to report feeling very satisfied in their relationship, being very committed to the relationship, having lots of love for their partner, and viewing their relationship as permanent than are men and women in cohabiting and in dating relationships. Despite the fact that both cohabiting couples and married couples share households, researchers have found that cohabiting couples tend to have access to fewer socioeconomic resources than do married couples. Socioeconomic stress can be a source of conflict and may partially explain the lower levels of relationship satisfaction among cohabiting couples.¹²

Many more young adults are in dating relationships than are in cohabiting or married relationships. And even though most young adults in dating relationships do not view their relationships as permanent (less than half of men and women), most still report high levels of satisfaction, love, and commitment. This finding is important because it suggests that many young adults are choosing healthy dating relationships, and healthy relationships are central to the well-being of men and women in both the short- and long-term.^{10,13}



Partners may express different views from one another about the emotional dynamics in their relationship.

The percentage of couples in which both partners report being very satisfied, being very committed, feeling a lot of love, or thinking the relationship is permanent is lower than when these dimensions are assessed from just one partner's perspective. For example, although more than 73 percent of men and women report being very satisfied in their relationship, in only 60 percent of couples do men and women both report being very satisfied. Couples in which partners both report positive relationship dynamics—such as relationship satisfaction and intimacy—have better communication¹⁴ and are more stable over time.¹⁵

Differences in reports of relationship dynamics are particularly high among dating and cohabiting couples. The discrepancies between married and cohabiting couples in this regard may reflect the uncertainty cohabitation plays in the life of young men and women. For some, cohabitation is seen as an alternative to dating, whereas for others it is seen as a stepping-stone to marriage or even an alternative to marriage.^{10,16} Nonetheless, discord in cohabiting relationships is associated with a particularly high likelihood that the couple will break up.^{10,15} This discord might be one reason that cohabiting couples have much higher levels of unintended births than do married couples,¹⁷ as poor communication is linked to decreased contraceptive use.

Most young adult relationships are characterized by a sense of fairness and equality.

In our research for this brief, we found that most young men and women feel that they get an equal deal in their relationship and, to a somewhat lesser extent, feel that they contribute equally to decision making. These findings are consistent with results of other research showing that youth today—both men and women—place a high value on equality within relationships.^{11,18} However, this is not true for all young adults. Of the roughly one-quarter of men and women who report that they do not get an equal deal in their relationship, it is men who most often are perceived to get the better deal. This finding may reflect gender-based power differences in relationships more generally, which influence couples' perceptions of fairness in the relationship. However, of the men and women who report inequality in decision making, women are more likely to report that they make most of the decisions, whereas men are more likely to report that they do.

CONCLUSION

High-quality relationships are linked to a range of positive outcomes for men and women, including those related to reproductive health, such as increased contraceptive use.¹⁹ Encouragingly, most young men and women in our sample report very high levels of quality in their current relationships. At the same time, men and women do not always report about their relationship in the same way; nor do they always feel that they get an equal deal in their relationship.

In recent years, the United States has seen an increase in marriage and relationship education programs, which aim to teach men and women the knowledge, attitudes, and communication skills that research has shown to be associated with healthy, stable relationships and marriage.²⁰ However, research also has shown that many of these



dynamics are shaped during childhood and adolescence—both by family background characteristics and by the patterns forged in early romantic relationships.⁵ The message emerging from this expanding body of research suggests that relationship education should be a focus across the life course, during adolescence as well as into young adulthood. Because reproductive health professionals have unique access to this age group, a better understanding of the dynamics within young adult relationships may help reproductive health care professionals identify and promote healthy relationships, which in turn may help promote effective contraceptive use.

About this Brief

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