High schoolers who don't date are less depressed than their counterparts who do, study says

**Kirsi Goldynia, CNN**

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**(CNN)**Dating is a normal part of adolescence -- and a formative one at that. Decades of research have suggested a link between romantic relationships and identity development as teenagers mature into young adults.

But a [recent study](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/josh.12818) published in the Journal of School Health reveals that adolescents who choose not to date fare as well as, or better than, their coupled counterparts in social and leadership skills.

They're also less depressed.

"We know that romantic relationships are very common among adolescents -- in fact, a majority have been involved in some type of romantic activity by 15 to 17 years of age," says Brooke Douglas, a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Georgia who conducted the study with Dr. Pamela Orpinas.

"It's also known that romantic relationships are important for teenagers' individual development and wellbeing. So that made us ask: What does this say about teenagers who are not dating? Are they social misfits?"

**It turns out, they're not**

Through a combination of self-reported student surveys and teacher feedback, data was gathered on the dating habits of sixth through 12th-graders, along with key emotional and behavioral information.

The data was [originally published](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/jora.12029) in a 2013 study conducted by Orpinsas, which revealed a number of dating patterns among the students -- some dated more frequently with age, others took breaks from relationships at various times.

But Douglas was most interested in the "low" dating group comprised of students who dated, on average, once throughout middle and high school, with some reporting no romantic relationships at all.

To follow the 2013 study, Douglas and Orpinas compared the social and emotional data of 10th graders and found that a lack of romantic relationships had not hindered the development of the "low" daters.

On the contrary, based on the teacher feedback, the students in this group were overall rated higher in social and leadership skills, and lower in depression than those in other dating groups.

**One thing to note**

As Douglas points out, the teacher surveys were a crucial aspect of the study, as self-reported surveys can lead to a response bias from participants. Especially when probing sensitive issues -- like depression and suicide -- that students might not feel comfortable reporting, "teachers are the best people to give information."

Other limitations of the study include that all the participants were from a single region in Georgia and had limited racial diversity. While almost half of the students were white, just over 1% were Asian.

Nonetheless, the results stand counter to the notion that to be a well-adjusted and socially competent adolescent, you must experience a romantic relationship. Students who don't date are doing just fine. "They don't lack general social competence, they have friends, just like teenagers who are dating," says Douglas.

She emphasizes, however, that the study should not be interpreted as a suggestion that teens should not date. Remaining single is simply one choice that adolescents can make -- and it doesn't make them abnormal or socially stunted.

"In school-based programs we focus a lot on healthy relationship skills, which are important, but also assume that teenagers are dating," she said. "This study affirms that it's ok if you decide to date or decide not to date. Both are acceptable and healthy."