Peers and Romantic Relationship Patterns of Elementary School Children: A Study in Jambi City

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Article Info

ABSTRACT

Romantic relationship behavior among elementary school children is an emerging phenomenon influenced by their social interactions. This study investigates how peer interaction contributes to the formation of romantic relationship patterns in elementary school-aged children. Using Havighurst's developmental tasks theory and peer interaction theory as frameworks, this qualitative study collected data through in-depth interviews with sixth-grade elementary school students in Jambi City. Participants were selected using a snowball sampling technique, and data were analyzed thematically. Findings show that peer interaction significantly influences children's understanding and enactment of romantic behavior, primarily through shared stories and discussions. A notable finding is the role of social media as a new "role model," where children imitate romantic behaviors observed in online content. This highlights the shifting landscape of social learning in the digital era.

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Introduction

Children in elementary school, as defined by the Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture, are between the ages of 6 and 12. At this stage, they experience rapid development not only in physical and cognitive domains but also in their social and emotional capacities. One of the most influential factors in this developmental process is interaction with their social environment, particularly with peers. A significant shift occurs during this period as children develop increasing emotional and social attachment to peer groups, gradually moving away from primary reliance on the family (Papalia et al., 2014). These peer groups become more heterogeneous, including both boys and girls, and provide spaces where children share perspectives, experiences, and social values. As (Santrock, 2011) emphasizes, peer groups composed of individuals of similar age and maturity levels serve as powerful agents of socialization.

Theoretically, Havighurst's developmental tasks highlight peer adjustment as essential for successful social development. However, recent observations suggest that peer groups now play a more complex role, not only supporting developmental tasks but also introducing behavior patterns that may not align with the child's developmental readiness, most notably, romantic relationships. Romantic involvement is increasingly visible among elementary school children. In this context, peers function not only as models of social behavior but also as sources of emotional validation, particularly in cross-gender interactions. Children learn by observing and imitating behavior, including those portrayed in digital environments such as social media. Bowen and Walker, 2015) define romantic relationships as voluntary interactions marked by expressions of affection and the potential for sexual behavior. While elementary-aged children typically comprehend this concept in simplistic and concrete ways (Slavin, 2014), they show curiosity and begin to model their behavior on observed relationships in their surroundings.

Empirical data reinforce the visibility of this phenomenon. (Tandrianti & Darminto, 2018) found that 61.05% of junior high school students reported having started dating while still in elementary school. Sulistyawati and Lindawati (2019) similarly noted that 83.3% of elementary-aged respondents had engaged in behaviors considered age-inappropriate within romantic contexts. Supporting these findings, the author observed similar cases through interviews with sixth-grade students in Jambi City. One student recounted classmates who liked each other and engaged in physical affection such as holding hands, while another explained learning about dating behaviors from friends. These narratives reflect a broader cultural shift where digital and peer influences increasingly shape children's understanding of relational dynamics.

This growing trend raises developmental concerns. Children at this age typically lack the cognitive, emotional, and moral maturity required to manage romantic relationships in a healthy and responsible way. Such early involvement is not only inconsistent with their core developmental tasks but may also interfere with healthy growth, diverting attention from academic learning, encouraging premature behaviors, and introducing emotional challenges. This study aims to explore how peer interactions contribute to the formation of romantic relationship patterns among elementary school students. By investigating this phenomenon, the research intends to provide a foundation for early intervention strategies that empower parents, educators, and schools to create a social environment that supports children's growth in a healthy, developmentally appropriate manner.

Method

This study employed a qualitative approach using a phenomenological design. A qualitative method was selected as it allows the researcher to explore in depth the subjective experiences of children within their social contexts. Such an approach is particularly well-suited to investigating romantic relationships as they emerge within peer dynamics, phenomena that cannot be quantified but must be understood through the meanings constructed by the children themselves. The use of a phenomenological design aligns with the study's central aim which to uncover and interpret the lived experiences of participants in their everyday lives (Kahija, 2017; Merriam, 2002; Yin, 2011).

The study involved seven sixth-grade elementary school students in Jambi City, Indonesia, who were selected through purposive sampling based on availability and preliminary information indicating experience with romantic relationships, Table 1 displays the involved participants. The initial participant was identified through a teacher's recommendation, after which subsequent participants were referred by previous interviewees, in line with snowball sampling techniques. This approach facilitated access to information-rich cases and allowed the researcher to reach data saturation.

Table 1. Participants' Information

Identity	Participant I	Participant II	Participant III	Participant IV	Participant V	Participant VI	Participant VII
Name	NA	ZF	TF	RM	KAN	K	R
Gender	Female	Male	Female	Female	Male	Female	Female
Grade	6	6	6	6	6	6	6

Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews, with each session lasting between 30 and 45 minutes. The interview protocol included open-ended questions exploring participants' understanding of romantic relationships, personal experiences, peer influences, and the role of social models.

Data analysis followed Braun ad Clarke (2006) thematic analysis procedure, consisting of the following steps: (1) data familiarization, (2) initial coding, (3) theme identification, (4) theme review, (5) theme definition and naming, and (6) reporting the findings. To ensure data credibility, source triangulation, member checking, and peer debriefing were conducted. Dependability was supported by comprehensive documentation of all research procedures.

Results and Discussions

Results

Based on the interviews and data analysis process, the researcher identified the dynamics of peer interaction in shaping elementary school children's romantic relationships. These dynamics consist of: (1) understanding the meaning of romantic relationships, (2) emotional experience dynamics (joy vs heartbreak), (3) triggers for romantic relationships, (4) impacts of romantic relationships, and (5) social media as a new role model.

Understanding the Meaning of Romantic Relationships

In the modern era, the phenomenon of romantic relationships among elementary school children has become increasingly apparent and complex. Social environmental influences and peer dynamics contribute to shaping children's construction of what they perceive as "dating." This study found that children's understanding of romantic relationships varies, reflecting differences in cognitive development, social experiences, and the values absorbed from their surroundings.

Some children exhibit a relatively concrete understanding of romantic relationships. For instance, NA defined dating as *"two people liking each other"* and associated it with actions like *"holding hands."* RM added another physical dimension such as *"like kissing"* while ZF described dating as a relationship between a boy and a girl that begins with expressing feelings *"... the boy, like for example, asks you... saying do you want to be my girlfriend."* These statements indicate that some children begin to perceive romantic relationships as affective interactions with a certain structure, although still simplistic and heavily influenced by adult relationship models they observe.

This pattern is consistent with Jean Piaget's theory of cognitive development, which places elementary-aged children in the concrete operational stage (typically ages 7–11). At this stage, children begin to understand logic and causality in concrete terms but are not yet able to grasp abstract ideas such as emotional complexity, romantic commitment, or symbolic meanings behind relationships (Berk, 2013; Piaget, 1952). Hence, their understanding of dating remains rooted in observable behaviors, such as hand-holding or verbal expression, rather than emotional depth or relational responsibility.

On the other hand, some children were found to have no clear concept or understanding of romantic relationships. Participants TF and K, for example, explicitly said *"don't know"* when asked about dating. This may indicate that not all children have the same exposure or experiences with this concept or that they are still at a cognitive and social developmental stage where romantic notions are not yet part of their thought schema. It may also reflect family or school norms that limit exposure to topics related to romantic relationships.

Social learning theory (Bandura, 1976) further helps explain these differences. Children acquire behaviors and ideas including concepts of dating not only through direct experience but also by observing others. Those with greater exposure to romantic models via media or peers may begin to imitate those behaviors earlier. Conversely, children whose environments restrict or shield such exposure may exhibit slower development in this domain.

This diversity of understanding shows that in late childhood, the meaning of romantic relationships remains fluid, shaped through imitation, observation, and direct social experiences. According to Selman's theory of perspective-taking development (Selma, 1980), children in this stage are just beginning to develop the ability to understand others' intentions and emotions in relationships. However, this skill is still immature, contributing to inconsistencies in how they conceptualize romantic ties. At this stage, children begin to build

social schemas that blend affection, gender identification, and interpersonal norms, even though they may not fully comprehend the emotional and social consequences of such relationships.

This finding is significant as it suggests that education on healthy relationships should begin early, tailored to the child's developmental capacity, so they can learn to form relationships that are respectful and non-harmful to themselves or others.

Dynamics of Emotional Experience (Joy vs. Heartbreak)

The experience of romantic relationships among elementary school children reveals complex emotional dynamics, particularly in the form of joy and disappointment. Joy arises as a response to emotional connection and affection from a peer, while disappointment or heartbreak typically occurs when a child's expectations about the relationship are unmet. Although these relationships are simple and do not involve deep emotional commitment like those in adolescence or adulthood, children still demonstrate the ability to form expectations and experience disappointment when things do not go as hoped.

Some children described feeling happy when they received attention or acceptance from a peer they liked, such as through affectionate nicknames or meaningful social interactions. Conversely, experiences like being ignored, insulted, or having unreciprocated feelings led to negative emotions resembling heartbreak. This indicates that children have already developed emotional sensitivity toward the social dynamics present in their relationships.

From a developmental perspective, this emotional fluctuation aligns with Erikson's psychosocial theory, particularly the stage of "industry vs. inferiority," where children are actively building self-worth based on social interaction and peer validation (Erickson, 1963; Santrock, 2011). Positive responses from peers such as being liked or acknowledged foster feelings of competence and acceptance. In contrast, rejection or emotional failure may generate feelings of inferiority and emotional distress.

This emotional responsiveness is also supported by the theory of emotional development proposed by Denham (1998), which emphasizes that by middle childhood, children become more capable of experiencing, labeling, and reflecting on complex emotions, including social emotions such as embarrassment, pride, or disappointment. These abilities are strongly influenced by increasing emotional literacy and social cognition.

In Piagetian terms, while children in the concrete operational stage may not yet comprehend the abstract emotional depth of adult romantic relationships, they do understand fairness, reciprocity, and social rules which contributes to the formation of emotional expectations in peer interactions (Piaget, 1952). When these expectations are violated, it can lead to emotional upset resembling "heartbreak," albeit in a developmentally simplified form.

These findings suggest that while elementary-aged children are still developing their capacity for emotional regulation and abstract reasoning, their emotional lives are already influenced by peer interactions and social expectations. However, this emerging emotional sensitivity, when channeled into romantic relationships, may lead to psychological strain, confusion, and misaligned developmental priorities, particularly when children lack the maturity to process such experiences appropriately.

Triggers for Romantic Relationships

Before becoming engaged in romantic relationships, children experience a series of triggers or motivators that lead them to explore such connections. The findings of this study reveal that these triggers are not singular, but rather emerge from a combination of peer influence, emotional curiosity, and symbolic representations of romantic behavior absorbed from their surroundings. This reflects what Bandura (1976) described in social learning theory, where behaviors are acquired through observation, modeling, and reinforcement.

A key trigger is peer influence. Friends often serve as sources of stories and examples that shape children's perceptions of dating. For some children, these stories portray romantic relationships as fun, even special.

Dating is constructed as an enjoyable emotional experience filled with attention, closeness, and a sense of being cared for:

"Yeah, my friend said... dating is fun, we're treated like a queen." (NA)

"Dating is super fun, you get someone to care about you, remind you to eat and sleep." (ZF)

These quotes reflect how peer modeling can provide a form of social validation and initiate premature social behaviors, as peer groups become central to children's social development (Papalia et al., 2014; Santrock, 2011).

Another form of trigger comes from personal experience and the desire to try it out. Children who begin to feel emotional attraction toward peers show that the relationship is not solely externally driven but also part of emotional internalization and identity development:

"At that time, I liked him, he liked me too, he asked me out, I said yes, and then we broke up." (TF)

Some children also mentioned the influence of role models, including older siblings, teachers, or other figures in their environment who indirectly display romantic behavior. In this context, dating is not merely a relationship but perceived as something "fun" and "interesting to try," like a social game that sparks curiosity:

"Like, I wanted to try what dating feels like. Then, Miss Cl was once teased into a couple, so it looked fun to watch." (TF)

This aligns with Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) which emphasizes how children's development is shaped by multiple layers of influence, including microsystems (peers and family), exosystems (media), and macrosystems (cultural norms).

However, this dynamic does not come without resistance. Although many children show initial interest in romantic relationships, normative awareness also emerges, especially after interventions from parents or social environments that view dating as age-inappropriate. Children who initially tried dating eventually decided to end the relationship when confronted with social norms and consequences:

"We broke up because I found out (it's a sin)." (NA)

"The reason was that he got caught byy his parents." (RM)

These statements indicate a conflict between personal experiences and prevailing social values. On one hand, children naturally undergo emotional development, while on the other hand, they face rules and moral frameworks that consider romantic relationships at their age as "inappropriate." This suggests that romantic relationships among children are not merely a matter of mutual affection, but part of a broader adaptation process to social norms and expectations.

Therefore, the triggers for romantic relationships at the elementary school level can be understood as complex phenomena not driven by a single factor but by the interaction of children's affective needs, social constructions of love, and environmental pressures and regulations.

Impacts of Romantic Relationships

Romantic relationships among elementary school children have various impacts, reflecting the complexity of their emotional and social experiences. Although their age context is still early in the development of interpersonal affection, the experience of dating contributes to children's behaviors and daily motivations, both positively and negatively.

Some children reported that romantic relationships provided positive encouragement, particularly in emotional support and motivation to learn. These children felt that having a partner served as a "reminder friend" in academic and daily routines. Such relationships were perceived as a form of affection that encouraged positive habits, such as studying together or giving mutual encouragement.

"Nothing much, really. Because they always reminded me to study." (NA)

This indicates that in certain cases, romantic relationships can act as a form of external regulation that reinforces adaptive behavior. From Vygotsky's sociocultural perspective, such social interactions can act as scaffolding, support systems that momentarily help children perform functions they may not yet do

independently (Vygotsky, 1978). Psychologically, these relationships may function as supportive companionships, where social bonding fosters motivation, especially when peers direct each other toward productive goals.

However, the positive effects are not without caveats. At concrete operational according to Piaget (1952), children still struggle with abstract reasoning and future consequences, making them vulnerable to misinterpreting emotionally complex experiences such as romantic involvement.

On the other hand, many children also experienced negative impacts from dating. In numerous cases, romantic involvement became a source of distraction that interfered with academic focus and performance. Children tended to prioritize romantic interactions over school responsibilities. Interviews revealed instances where children willingly sacrificed study time for emotional or physical closeness with their partners:

"Usually, yes... like they're willing not to write just to hold hands, and they want to sit next to each other." (ZF)

"Because they don't study, Miss. Whenever there's a lesson, they're busy playing around with their boyfriend." (KAN)

This negative impact can lead to serious academic consequences, such as unfinished assignments, loss of focus in class, and declining grades. In one case, a child received a zero score due to being overly absorbed in a romantic relationship and neglecting schoolwork.

According to the framework of executive function and self-regulation (Diamond, 2013), elementary school-aged children are still developing essential cognitive skills such as inhibitory control, sustained attention, and emotional regulation. Engaging in romantic relationships during this stage may place undue emotional demands on children who are not yet developmentally equipped to manage them.

This phenomenon illustrates that at the elementary level, children's ability to regulate emotions, divide attention, and understand social boundaries is not yet fully developed. In Erikson's psychosocial theory (Erickson, 1963) the primary task of this age is developing a sense of competence (industry vs. inferiority), not managing intimate interpersonal relationships. As a result, romantic relationships that could otherwise be perceived as harmless or affectionate may become developmental burdens if not properly guided by the surrounding environment, especially parents and teachers.

From a Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) perspective (Payton et al., 2000), children's ability to engage in healthy relationships and responsible decision-making is still maturing. Thus, introducing romantic involvement prematurely may interfere with more age-appropriate tasks such as developing empathy, emotional literacy, and cooperative behavior.

Social Media as a New Role Model

The phenomenon of dating among elementary school children does not occur in a vacuum. This study shows that both external and internal factors contribute to children's interest in romantic relationships. One of the most dominant influences is social media, particularly TikTok, which has become a part of their daily life. Children absorb narratives and imagery of romantic relationships from visually engaging and emotionally charged content, often showcasing affectionate couple interactions.

Participants explicitly mentioned TikTok as the first source where they learned about dating:
"Saw it from my older sibling, and also from videos." (TF)
"TikTok." (TF)
"I saw it on my phone, often on TikTok." (R)

This exposure shapes an initial perception that dating is enjoyable and even symbolizes maturity or being "cool." This aligns with Bandura's social cognitive theory (Olson & Hergenhahn, 2012; Ormrod, 2018), which explains that children learn behaviors by observing role models and internalizing the actions they see rewarded, especially when those behaviors are repeated frequently and presented as socially desirable.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) further helps contextualize how social media operates as part of the exosystem, indirect environmental influences that still significantly shape a child's development. Though children may not directly engage with all media platforms independently,

exposure through family members, peers, or passive consumption makes it part of their developmental ecosystem.

Besides media, peer environments also play an important role in inspiring children to explore romantic relationships. Children who observe their friends involved in activities like "affectionate chatting" or emotional closeness begin to view dating as normal and enjoyable:

"Like someone chatting sweet things with each other." (TF)
"When I saw my friend, I thought dating looked nice, it made me happy just watching." (RM)

In this context, peer influence serves not only as a source of information but also as a form of social validation. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (1978) reminds us that learning is mediated by social interaction; thus, peer behavior becomes a zone of proximal development that can pull children into behaviors beyond their maturity level, especially when those behaviors are glamorized. Children feel that participating in trends followed by their peers is part of building their social and emotional identity.

Internally, factors such as curiosity, the need for affection, and the desire for exploration also motivate children to try romantic relationships. This indicates that while external influences are significant, children also have agency in this process, as expressed by participant R: "I just wanted to try it out, to see what dating feels like." This desire reflects the psychosocial developmental stage of elementary school children, where they begin to build a sense of self particularly in the context of social relationships. Hence, romantic relationships are perceived not merely as emotional connections but also as part of identity exploration and the pursuit of new experiences.

Thus, romantic relationships are perceived not merely as emotional connections but also as part of identity exploration and the pursuit of new experiences. This underscores the need for protective structures in the microsystem, such as parental mediation, digital literacy education, and school-based SEL programs, to balance children's growing curiosity with age-appropriate guidance (Payton et al., 2000).

To consolidate the thematic analysis, a summary **Table 2** is provided below. It outlines the five key themes that emerged from the data, along with their descriptions and implications. This table is intended to offer a concise overview of how children understand, experience, and are influenced by romantic relationships at the elementary school level, thereby highlighting areas where targeted interventions and further research may be necessary.

Table 2. Themes Summary

Theme	Description	Implications
Meaning of Romantic Relationships	Children's interpretations of dating range from concrete (e.g., holding hands) to absent, depending on developmental stage and social exposure.	Relationship education should begin early, tailored to children's cognitive and emotional capacities.
Dynamics of Emotional Experience (Joy vs. Heartbreak)	Children experience joy from emotional connection and sadness from rejection, despite limited emotional maturity.	Programs promoting emotional literacy and healthy coping strategies are essential.
Triggers for Romantic Relationships	Motivations arise from peer influence, modeled behavior, and internal curiosity about affection and relationships.	Support systems must guide children in processing social influence and navigating developmental norms.
Impacts of Romantic Relationships	Relationships provide both motivation (e.g., studying) and distraction (e.g., reduced academic focus).	Schools and families should monitor and regulate social interactions to support developmental goals.
Social Media as a New Role Model	Platforms like TikTok expose children to romantic behaviors, normalizing them through digital and peer modeling.	Media literacy and parental supervision are critical in shaping children's perception of relationships.

Discussion

This study reveals that romantic relationships among elementary school-aged children are shaped through social interactions, environmental influences, and media exposure, which subsequently affect how they perceive and engage in such relationships. One key finding of this study is that the meaning of dating for children does not necessarily align with the concept of romantic relationships understood by adolescents or adults. Instead, it tends to be more concrete and behavior-based, such as holding hands, sitting next to each other, or reminding one another to study.

This finding is in line with Jean Piaget's cognitive development theory which states that children at the elementary school level are in the concrete operational stage. At this stage, they are capable of understanding real cause-and-effect relationships but have not yet developed the capacity to grasp abstract concepts such as commitment, mature love, or responsibility in interpersonal relationships. Therefore, children's involvement in romantic relationships more often reflects observational learning from their environment rather than a mature emotional understanding.

From a psychosocial development perspective, Erickson emphasized that the primary developmental task of children at this age is to develop a sense of competence through school experiences (industry vs. inferiority) (Papalia et al., 2016; Santrock, 2011). When a child's attention shifts toward issues that are not developmentally appropriate such as romantic relationships, there is a potential disruption in their optimal growth. Several participants in this study reported that dating relationships distracted their peers from learning and even caused a decline in academic performance. This suggests that early involvement in romantic relationships can act as a developmental misalignment, conflicting with the developmental needs of the child.

A notable and novel finding of this study is the emergence of social media as a new role model shaping romantic behaviors among elementary school children. Children are not only mimicking peers or adult figures in their surroundings but also celebrities and influencers they observe through digital media. This imitation process aligns with Bandura's social learning theory (Olson & Hergenhahn, 2012; Ormrod, 2018; Santrock, 2018), which explains that children learn through observation, modeling, and reinforcement. When children are repeatedly exposed to romantic content in formats that are entertaining, lighthearted, and often presented without negative consequences, they begin to perceive dating as normative behavior, internalizing it as part of their social development.

However, it is important to understand that exposure to social media does not always come with the cognitive and emotional capacity required to critically filter such information. In this context, the roles of families and schools are crucial. Parents in particular need to act as active agents of digital literacy for their children. Education about healthy relationships and age-appropriate boundaries for romantic involvement should be communicated openly and contextually. Schools also play a pivotal role in developing character and social-emotional curricula that guide children in self-awareness, emotion regulation, and building healthy relationships without prematurely entering romantic dynamics inappropriate for their developmental stage.

Teachers, as authoritative figures in children's daily school life, can provide preventive guidance. They must develop sensitivity to the social dynamics among students and foster a supportive yet structured learning environment. One strategy that could be implemented is incorporating lessons about healthy relationships and social communication into thematic learning, alongside collaborating with parents to monitor children's media exposure.

From a policy standpoint, these findings suggest the urgency of stricter regulations on digital content accessible to children. Government and education policymakers need to encourage social media platforms to provide more accessible and effective parental control features. Moreover, education policy should consider integrating digital literacy curricula that equip children with age-appropriate skills to filter and interpret information wisely.

Comparison with Previous Literature

The current findings extend prior studies on early romantic involvement. For example, Tandrianti and Darminto (2018) found that over 60% of junior high school students in their study began dating during elementary school, while (Sulistyawati & Lindawati, 2019) reported early signs of inappropriate romantic behavior among elementary-aged children. However, these studies largely documented behavior frequency, without delving into the underlying developmental and social mechanisms. The present study addresses this gap by offering a developmentally grounded analysis through the lenses of Piaget, Erikson, and Bandura.

Moreover, while previous research acknowledged the role of peers, few studies emphasized the increasingly dominant role of social media as a developmental agent. This study contributes to the literature by identifying social media not merely as a passive influence but as an active modeling system that can reshape how children understand affection and intimacy. The integration of psychological theories with digital exposure provides a nuanced framework to interpret why and how early romantic behaviors emerge in the digital age.

Conclusions

This study identified five key themes related to peer interactions in shaping romantic relationship patterns among elementary school children in Jambi City: children's understanding of romantic relationships,

emotional experiences such as joy and heartbreak, triggers of romantic involvement, relationship outcomes (good or bad endings), and the influence of role models. These interrelated themes reveal that romantic relationships at the elementary school level do not emerge spontaneously but are the product of social learning processes, particularly through observation of their immediate environment, including digital media. A distinct contribution of this research lies in highlighting how social media now functions as a highly influential role model, shaping children's romantic behavior and interpretations at times rivaling or even surpassing the influence of real-life figures in their surroundings.

The findings underscore the significance of peer interaction as a vital medium for children's social learning, especially in the formation of their perceptions and behaviors related to romantic relationships. Given their developmental stage, children's engagement in romantic behaviors may misalign with cognitive and emotional maturity, leading to issues such as distraction from learning, emotional confusion, or premature social bonding. Therefore, the study highlights the urgent need for targeted intervention. Families must strengthen digital supervision and communication around age-appropriate relationships. Educators should incorporate character education and social-emotional learning into the curriculum, while policymakers are encouraged to develop digital literacy programs and regulate age-sensitive content in media.

This study is not without limitations. The sample was limited to a single city and relied on self-reported data from a small number of participants, which may not fully capture the diversity of experiences across different cultural or socioeconomic backgrounds. Future research should investigate the long-term psychological effects of early romantic exposure and how school-based programs may help regulate relationship behaviors among children. Longitudinal studies and cross-regional comparisons would offer a broader understanding of the developmental impact of early romantic involvement, particularly in relation to academic outcomes and emotional well-being.

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