

Name: _____ Class: _____

Adolescence and the Teenage Crush

Teenage crushes are an early approximation of romantic love

By Dr. Carl Pickhardt
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In his article "Adolescence and the Teenage Crush," Dr. Carl Pickhardt delineates between different types of teenage crushes. According to his analysis, having a crush on someone is a normal part of adolescence and maturity. As you read the text, make an outline of what Dr. Pickhardt is arguing and consider how his analysis relates to your understanding of love. Look for evidence to answer this question: Is a crush the same as being in love?

[1] Teenage crushes have a significant role to play in the journey of adolescence.

Consider crushes of two kinds—identity crushes and romantic crushes. In both cases, the teenager feels smitten by a compelling¹ person who captivates their attention for good and ill. (A third kind is the celebrity crush that shapes ideals and stirs fantasies, but there is usually no interpersonal contact to play them out. However, this is definitely where the market for celebrity posters comes in—to decorate teenage bedroom walls.)



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In all three cases, the young person largely projects onto another person idealized attributes the admirer highly values and wants to be associated with. Then she or he attaches strong positive feelings to the perfectly wonderful image that has been created. Crushes have more to do with fantasy than with reality, and they tell much more about the admirer than the admired. It's because they usually prove unrealistic that in a relatively short time they soon wear off. But it is because of the idealization² that crushes have such momentary power. This is why parents need to respect an adolescent crush and not dismiss or put it down. After all, it is an early approximation of love. While it lasts it is seriously felt, so it should be seriously treated.

Identity crushes are formed by finding someone they much admire, want to become like, and treat as a leader or model they are eager to imitate and follow. Romantic crushes are formed by finding someone whom they find powerfully attractive, who they feel excited to be around, and with whom they want to spend a lot of time. In both cases, the person with the crush gives enormous power of approval to the object of their crush—wanting to be liked by them and wanting to be like them, willing to do a lot to get in the other person's good graces. They go out of their way to be around each attachment.

1. **Compelling (adjective):** evoking interest, attention, or admiration in a powerfully irresistible way
 2. **Idealization (noun):** the act or process of regarding or representing someone or something as perfect or better than in reality

- [5] There is a great outbreak of romantic crushes and gossip about them (“Guess who likes who?”) in middle school. By this time, early adolescence and the separation from childhood has caused young people to want to act more grown up, and sexual maturity from puberty has motivated them to act in more young manly and young womanly ways. Since girls tend to enter puberty before boys, they are more likely to experience the wave of crushes first, more drawn to boys than boys are to them, taking romantic feelings seriously that boys treat lightly or even laughably. However the time for same-age boys to become romantically smitten is not far off, and when it arrives a crush proves to be no laughing matter when they become smitten, too.

Because a romantic crush is a potent³ mix of idealization and infatuation,⁴ it doesn’t require knowing another person well at all. In some cases a superficial⁵ impression can be provocation⁶ enough. “I like how she’s so quiet and watchful and keeps to herself.” “I like how what others think doesn’t matter to him.” As mentioned, although the crush appears to be about attraction to another person, it is actually about projection of valued attributes onto another person—a statement about what they find attractive. In this, crushes are very revealing. “My son is always getting crushes on young women who seem the opposite of him, as fun loving as he is serious.” Crushes are not only the stuff that dreams are made of; they signify a lot about the dreamer.

Of course, romantic crushes can have a risky side. You don’t want a teenage crush to become a fixation, a young person unable to stop daydreaming and fantasizing all the time about this person, for example. You don’t want the young person to act out under the influence of a crush in self-endangering ways, soliciting or expressing inappropriate interest, for example. And you don’t want the crush to be exploited by the object of the crush, an older adolescent taking advantage of a romantically besotted⁷ younger adolescent, for example.

Because a romantic crush is so intensely felt, parents must not take it lightly or make fun of it. An awakening of romantic feelings provokes a lot of anxiety because there are many problematic questions for the young person to answer. “What am I supposed to do with these feelings?” Should they just be kept secret, thus increasing the risk of obsessive preoccupation? “What if I tell close friends?” Suppose I get talked about and teased, thus increasing the risk of embarrassment. “What if I have to be around the other person who doesn’t know how I feel?” Now feeling nervous, there is more risk of doing or saying something awkward. “What do I tell this person about my crush?” To declare the crush to the person creates the risk of rejection. It’s not easy managing a crush.

One way to manage it is telling the object of the crush. The language used, however, is important. The temptation, because the romanticized feelings are so intense, is to express the feelings with the “love” word. Better not. It’s best to talk about these feelings in “liking” terms because that reduces the pressure on everyone. “I like talking with you.” “I like hanging out with you.” Enough said, then leave it at that.

3. **Potent** (*adjective*): powerful, strong

4. **Infatuation** (*noun*): obsession; an intense but short-lived passion or admiration for someone or something

5. **Superficial** (*adjective*): on the surface; shallow

6. **Provocation** (*noun*): action or speech that makes someone annoyed or angry, especially on purpose

7. **Besotted** (*adjective*): strongly infatuated or obsessed with; head over heels for; in love with

[10] Most romantic crushes don't last very long because once the object of the crush becomes better known, the magic of the other person soon wears off and the ideal falls away. "I can't believe I felt he was so great! What was I thinking?" However, this kind of crush does have one lasting value. Having experienced an awakening of infatuated feelings, the adolescent has opened themselves up to the pleasure and possibility of romantic love.

Identity crushes often last longer because the adolescent is focused not so much on pleasing the other person as on altering themselves, using the leader whom they admire as a model to shape their own womanly or manly growth. So a shy 7th grade girl gets a crush on a very popular female classmate and wants to become highly social like her, hoping that regular association will rub off as she learns to become more outgoing. It's an unstated bargain. She gets acceptance and inclusion by the popular girl who gets to be looked up to in this admiring way. Sometimes sexual feelings are aroused in an identity crush, even acted on to express liking, but that does not usually signify a homosexual orientation has become established, only that the identity crush can have a sexual component.

Of course, the risk with following an admired leader is that the young person with the identity crush may be lead astray, which is what some parents fear. "Our son worships a classmate who rides his skateboard to school, stashes it in his locker, dresses like an outlaw, all in leather and black, and has this angry attitude toward authority. But if we say anything against him, our son gets really angry, defending his hero and criticizing us. What are we supposed to do?"

This is a hard situation, but in general parents need to respect the friendship, get to know the friend, and if there are behaviors the friend is into that parents don't want for their son, they need to talk to him about not doing those activities. Sometimes they discover that beneath the appearance they find alarming is a person they get to like.

Particularly during the middle school years, teenage crushes can be of the attraction (romantic) kind and of the admiration (identity) kind. In both cases growth is advanced by this influential experience, most often for the good, but sometimes not. This is why parents need to pay attention to the crush relationship, not just leave it to their son or daughter and look the other way.

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Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which of the following best describes a central idea of the passage? [RI.2]
 - A. There is a greater pressure on teenagers to have crushes than on any other age group.
 - B. Puberty and developing identities are the main reasons teenagers are more prone to have crushes.
 - C. Crushes are incidental, or insignificant, to ordinary adolescent development.
 - D. Adolescent crushes are matured expressions of love; it is a common myth that they are not.

2. PART B: Which of the following quotes best supports the answer to Part A? [RI.1]
 - A. "After all, it is an early approximation of love. While it lasts it is seriously held, so it should be seriously treated." (Paragraph 2)
 - B. "There is a great outbreak of romantic crushes and gossip about them ("Guess who likes who?") in middle school." (Paragraph 4)
 - C. "...early adolescence and the separation from childhood has caused young people to want to act more grown up, and sexual maturity from puberty has motivated them to act in more young manly and young womanly ways." (Paragraph 4)
 - D. "Most romantic crushes don't last very long because once the object of the crush becomes better known, magic of the other person soon wear off and the ideal falls away." (Paragraph 9)

3. How does Dr. Pickhardt describe and/or differentiate between the three types of crushes? Cite evidence in your answer. [RI.3]

4. How does the concept of “idealization” contribute to the author’s key argument regarding crushes? [RI.3]
- A. The author argues that most crushes are idealized and therefore cannot be considered real love.
 - B. The author argues that crushes, romantic or identity, involve the projection of idealized traits that a person values and desires onto another person (i.e. the crush).
 - C. Idealized celebrities and celebrity crushes can give teenagers an unrealistic understanding of individuals; this makes it more difficult for them to accept flaws.
 - D. Idealized relationships in popular media encourage adolescents and teenagers to seek out romance, causing them to have more frequent crushes.
5. Which of the following statements best describes the author’s point of view on how parents should react to their children’s crushes? [RI.6]
- A. Parents should discourage crushes, especially celebrity crushes and risky identity crushes.
 - B. Parents should encourage crushes, respect the child’s boundaries, and not monitor in any way the adolescent.
 - C. Parents should inform their children early on that crushes aren’t often serious—even if it feels like it—so that the adolescent will be able to face possible rejection more easily.
 - D. Parents should support their children’s feelings, but be aware of the possible risks or fallout that come with crushes.

Discussion Questions

Directions: *Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.*

1. Do you agree with Dr. Pickhardt's views on crushes? Cite evidence as to why you agree or disagree.
2. In your opinion, what are the advantages or disadvantages of having a crush?
3. What are ways to get rid of a crush? Can they go away on their own?
4. How do you think the experience of having a crush can shape a person? Do you think you have experienced what Pickhardt describes?
5. How does love emerge? Use evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature or art to answer this question.