

# Passionate Love: How Early Does It Begin?

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**ABSTRACT.** How early are children capable of falling passionately in love? Theorists disagree. Traditionally, sex and emotions researchers have assumed that passionate love is present almost from birth. At the same time, social psychologists have assumed that passionate love does not appear until puberty. Unfortunately, there is little evidence to help researchers decide just when passionate feelings might appear.

This study was designed to begin the difficult problem of determining when passionate love first appears in children. In Hypothesis 1, we proposed that children would be able to experience and describe their passionate feelings as early as three or four years of age. Subjects were 114 boys and 122 girls, ranging in age from 4 to 18. All completed the Juvenile Love Scale (JLS), a child's version of the Passionate Love Scale (PLS), which has been used to measure love in adults. We found that even the youngest of children reported having experienced passionate love. In fact, young children and adolescents received surprisingly similar JLS scores. Boys from 10-13 received the lowest scores. There was no correlation between age, physical maturity, and JLS score. The interaction between Gender and Age was significant, however.

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In accord with Hypothesis 2, we found that girls scored significantly higher on the JLS than did boys. In addition, Gender and PLS score were significantly correlated.

These results give us some confidence that emotion researchers are on the right track when they assume that even young children are capable of passionate love.

For two decades, social psychologists have been studying passionate love. Hatfield & Walster (1978) define such love this way:

A state of intense longing for union with another. Reciprocated love (union with the other) is associated with fulfillment and ecstasy. Unrequited love (separation) with emptiness; with anxiety or despair. A state of profound physiological arousal. (p. 9)

Recently, Hatfield & Rapson (1987) have pointed out that there is a great deal of overlap between the concepts of passionate/love and sexual desire. Love is assumed to be fueled, at least in part, by sexual feelings.

### ***HOW EARLY ARE CHILDREN CAPABLE OF FALLING PASSIONATELY IN LOVE?***

Here, theorists disagree. Darwinians, Freudians, primatologists, emotions researchers, and researchers into human sexuality have long assumed that passionate feelings/sexual desire are "wired in"; they appear in early childhood. For example, Rosenblum (1981 and 1985) has pointed out that even nonhuman primates seem to experience something very much like "passionate love." The "desire for union" seems to be wired into all primates. In infancy, primates cling to their mothers. As long as mothers and children are in close proximity, all goes well. When a brief separation occurs, the primates become desperate. They howl and rush frantically about, searching for her. When she returns, the infants are joyous. They cling to their mother or jump around in excitement. If she does not return, and their frantic efforts to find her fail, eventually they will abandon all hope of contact, despair, and probably die. The experience Rosenblum describes certainly sounds much like passionate

love's "desire for union" — and its accompanying lows and highs. This, we thought, might be the groundwork for passionate attachments (see, also, Plutchik & Kellerman, 1986). Ainsworth et al. (1978) and Bowlby (1973) describe a comparable scenario of attachment, separation, and loss in children.

There is some evidence that, in humans, passionate love/sexual desire may begin at birth or shortly thereafter. Watson (1919) studied the emotional reactions of newborns. He reported three basic patterns in infants that he called *x*, *y*, and *z* which he believed resembled reactions called "fear," "rage," and "love/sexual excitement."

In 1886, Sanford Bell (1902) interviewed teachers attending normal school in Indiana and observed 800 children. He assembled 2,500 cases of childhood passion. Bell concluded that sex-love appeared in children as early as 3 1/2 years of age. Bell observed:

The presence of the emotion in children between three and eight years of age is shown by such action as the following: hugging, kissing, lifting each other, scuffling, sitting close to each other; confessions to each other and to others, talking about each other when apart; seeking each other and excluding others, grief at being separated; giving of gifts, extending courtesies to each other that are withheld from others, making sacrifices such as giving up desired things or foregoing pleasures; jealousies, etc. (p. 330)

Children were most likely to admit to being in love either between 4-8 or 12-15 years of age. Between 8 and 12 children were extremely shy and were reluctant to admit to feeling sex-love. Since 1902, there has been virtually no research on the development of passionate love.

Many theorists and researchers, then, assume that passionate love/sexual desire begin in early childhood, even though there is only sparse evidence to support that contention [see also Lazarus, Kanner & Folkman (1980), Pankesep (1986) or Griffitt & Hatfield (1985)].

Other psychiatrists and psychologists dispute the contention that children are capable of passionate love, however. They assume that

passionate love/sexual desire first appear at puberty. For example, Offit (1977) argues “. . . we do not fall in love until we suspect we are ready to leave our parents.” Some neuroanatomists and neurophysiologists assume that passionate love is fueled by adolescent hormonal changes and thus necessarily appears after puberty (see Gadpaille, 1975; Kaplan, 1979; Liebowitz, 1983; or Money, 1980). Farber (1980), in his review of research on the subject, discounts early love attachments as mere “crushes” and places the onset of romantic passion during early adolescence.

Unfortunately, there is little research available to settle this dispute as to when passionate love begins. This study will attempt to begin to remedy that omission. *In Hypothesis 1, we propose that children will begin to experience and report passionate love experiences in early childhood.*

Our real interest is in the impact of age on passionate love. We are aware, however, that boys and girls may develop at different rates emotionally, especially with regard to passionate love/sexual desire. The question as to whether or not there are gender differences in the readiness to love has long intrigued scientists. A number of studies suggest that almost everyone is *capable* of loving passionately. Adult men and women, of widely varying ages (Traupmann & Hatfield, 1981), from a variety of ethnic groups (Easton, 1985), of varying intellectual capacities, mentally ill or healthy, seem capable of falling in love. Although everyone *can* fall in love, men and women may not do so with equal frequency or intensity. Society encourages men and women to have somewhat different attitudes toward love, sex, and the desire for intimacy. Women are socialized to be more loving, expressive, and to sacrifice more in order to maintain their love relationships than are men. Men are encouraged to be more logical, in control, and to put the bulk of their energies into work. They are allowed to be more sexually expressive. There is some evidence that men and women do react as they are “supposed to.” When gender differences are found to exist, it is generally women who seem to love more passionately. (see DeLamater, 1982; Peplau, 1983; Hatfield, 1983, and Hatfield & Rapson, 1986 for a review of this research).

What about gender differences in children? There is no evidence

as to how early adult gender differences begin to appear. We can offer a tentative hypothesis, however. *In Hypothesis 2, we propose that, early on, girls will begin to receive higher JLS scores than do boys.*

The process of studying the development of love will necessarily be a long and difficult one (Plutchik, 1986). This study is, then, necessarily, only a beginning.

## **METHOD**

### ***Subjects***

Subjects were 114 boys and 122 girls, ranging in age from 4 to 18, who were systematically selected from 24 grade, intermediate, and high schools in Honolulu, Hawaii. Four children were black, 83 were Caucasian; 21 were Chinese; 3 were Filipino, 7 of Hawaiian, 47 of Japanese; 6 of Korean; 1 of South Asian, and 64 of mixed ancestry. Such a distribution is typical of Hawaii's multi-ethnic setting.

It was not easy to secure permission to interview a stratified sample of children about their passionate feelings. It took us more than two years, from the time we contacted the first Institutional Review Board, through attempting, failing, and trying again, to finally secure the various schools' approval.

### ***Procedure***

Our first step was to contact parents, explain the study to them, and secure permission to interview their children. Eventually, more than 96% of them agreed to allow their children to participate.

### ***Measure #1: The Juvenile Love Scale***

The Passionate Love Scale (PLS) has long been used to measure passionate love in *adults*. It taps cognitive, physiological and behavioral indicants of "longing for union." (Hatfield & Sprecher, 1985; Greenwell, 1983; Easton, 1985; Sullivan & Landis, 1984, Fross, 1986 and Sullivan, 1985, provide information on the reliabil-

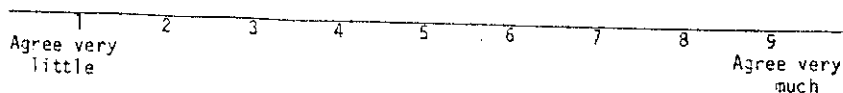
ity and validity of the PLS.) Unfortunately, the PLS is not appropriate for use with toddlers or children. Thus, our first step was to "translate" the PLS, so that it was appropriate for use with children. We spent the first two years of our research project developing the Juvenile Love Scale (JLS), a child's version of the PLS. It is reproduced in Table 1. The JLS, like the PLS, comes in a short (15 item) and a long (30 item) version. The long version contains the basic 15 items and 15 duplicate items. Originally, it was thought that the long version would be more reliable and valid than the short version. Researchers have found that the two versions yield virtually identical results, however. Thus, today, the 15-item measure is generally used in research.

Greenwell (1983) provides statistical evidence that both versions of the JLS/PLS are unidimensional, reliable, and produce comparable results when taken by 11-13-year-old children or adolescents. Both versions of the JLS/PLS appear to measure a single entity—passionate love. (A principal-components factor analysis of variance reveals that one major factor accounts for most of the variance. In various samples, the first factor accounted for between 38% to 53% of the variance. The scales are internally consistent and reliable. In various samples, coefficient alphas were found to range from .94 to .98.) Children (11-13 years of age) and adolescents, who took both the JLS and the PLS, received virtually identical scores on both scales. This is not surprising since the scales are designed to be identical, differing only in the difficulty of their language. (In various populations, the JLS and PLS scores were found to correlate .88 for children and .87 for adults.) Greenwell also provides information on item-by-item correspondences. Items are highly intercorrelated. She also correlated each item with its own scale total, the other scale total, and the combined total of 60 items (i.e., for these analyses, she used only the long version of both the JLS and the PLS). All items correlated highly with all totals, with 67 items in the .25 to .50 range, 221 in the .51 to .75 range, and 59 in the .76 to 1.00 range. Finally, Greenwell provides evidence that both scales reflect the real world experience of "being in love." For example, she asked children/adolescents to describe

TABLE 1. The Juvenile Love Scale

1. I feel like things would always be sad and gloomy if I had to live without \_\_\_\_\_ forever.
2. Did you ever keep thinking about \_\_\_\_\_ when you wanted to stop and couldn't?
3. I feel happy when I am doing something to make \_\_\_\_\_ happy.
4. I would rather be with \_\_\_\_\_ than anybody else.
5. I'd feel bad if I thought \_\_\_\_\_ liked somebody else better than me.
6. I want to know all I can about \_\_\_\_\_.
7. I'd like \_\_\_\_\_ to belong to me in every way.
3. I'd like it a lot if \_\_\_\_\_ played with me all the time.
9. If I could, when I grow up I'd like to marry (live with) \_\_\_\_\_.
10. When \_\_\_\_\_ hugs me my body feels warm all over.
11. I am always thinking about \_\_\_\_\_.
12. I want \_\_\_\_\_ to know me, what I am thinking, what scares me, what I am wishing for.
13. I look at \_\_\_\_\_ a lot to see if he (she) likes me.
14. When \_\_\_\_\_ is around I really want to touch him (her) and be touched.
15. When I think \_\_\_\_\_ might be mad at me, I feel really sad.

Possible answers range from:



their feelings for a person whom they currently loved, had loved in the past, or (if they had never been in love), who was as close as they had come to being in love. She found that children who had experienced passion scored significantly higher on both the JLS and the PLS than did those who had never been in love. Once the JLS

was developed, we could begin to explore the question in which we were interested.

### *Administering the JLS*

The experimenter interviewed children individually, in private rooms at the children's schools. He began by chatting with children for five minutes to establish rapport. Children were alerted that the JLS had been developed for use with children from age 4 to 20, and though some of the items might seem silly, but the questions were very serious and serious answers were needed.

The first step in administering the JLS was to make sure the children understood the concepts of "boyfriend" and "girlfriend," the 15 test items, and how to use the response scale.

*A. The Response Scale.* The 9-point response scale was explained first. Essentially, we wanted to teach the children that when the experimenter made a statement they could indicate how much they agreed via a 9-point scale. We did this in the following way: Children were shown a large "ruler"; its dimensions were 4 × 20 inches. It was divided into 9 blocks. The first block was labeled (1) "Agree very little." The last block was labeled (9) "Agree very much." The experimenter then conducted several "tests" to teach children how to respond via the scale. First, children were given 9 buildings and asked to put them in order. (The buildings were made from piles of checkers, and ranged from 1 to 9 checkers in height.) All children easily did this. This gave us some confidence that even the youngest children could grasp the idea of "more" and "less."

Then children were taught how to use the checkers to answer some questions. The experimenter explained: "I want you to use these checker buildings to tell me how much you agree with what I say. Suppose I said, 'I like my birthday.' Do you agree with that? Would you say so too?" The experimenter allowed time for the children to answer. Then he/she proceeded. "Show me by touching one of the checker buildings *how much* you agree that you like your birthday. If you think birthdays are great, if you agree very much, you would choose that one (9). If you think they're awful, if you agree very little, you would choose that one (1). If you are right in



the middle about how you feel, you would choose one of these (3-5).”

More examples followed—How did children feel about cleaning their rooms? Eating breakfast? From the experimenters’ tapes, it is evident even the youngest children had no trouble expressing the extent to which they agreed/disagreed via this scale.

*B. Selecting a Boyfriend or Girlfriend.* The next step was to orient the child’s thought to possible boyfriends or girlfriends. The experimenter said: “I am trying to find out how children feel when they love somebody in a very special way. Sometimes children get a crush on somebody and think they’d like to have that person for a ‘boyfriend’ or a ‘girlfriend.’ Do you know what a boyfriend/girlfriend is?” Luckily, all the children knew full well what a boyfriend/girlfriend was. If they had not, the concept would have been explained to them before proceeding (see Greenwell et al., 1983 for the procedure). Then they were asked about children in school who had boyfriends/girlfriends. Finally, they were asked about their own feelings: “Think a minute before you answer, then tell me, if you could have somebody to be your boyfriend or girlfriend, who would you pick? Tell me his/her name.”

*C. Administering the Juvenile Love Scale.* The experimenter then proceeded to administer the JLS. Here, two children did have some difficulty. The meaning of a word had to be explained to each of two children. Children indicated their responses on the 9-point scale illustrated in Table 1.

Responses on the 15-item scale were summed to form a Total index of passionate love. [Scores ranged from 18 to 135, with a mean of 95.75 and a S.D. of 24.61. This is virtually identical to scores secured in studies of mainland adults. (See Easton, 1985, or Hatfield & Sprecher, 1985.)]

### *Measure #2: Physical Maturity Ratings*

Theorists are divided as to just how puberty ought to be defined: Endocrinologists argue that a rise in the gonadotropin hormone levels signals the arrival of puberty; thus, they assume that puberty may begin anytime from age 7 to 17. Physical anthropologists define puberty in terms of the growth spurt; thus, they assume that in

American puberty begins around age 9 and ends around 17. Social psychologists use still different markers. They assume that puberty is triggered by heightened blood levels of the sex hormones, estrogen and testosterone. Thus, they assume that there are wide individual differences in the timing of puberty. For example, menstruation may begin in girls any time from 10-16 1/2 years of age, while the development of the penis and testes in boys may begin as early as 10 and may be completed as late as 18 (see Griffitt & Hatfield, 1985). It is difficult, then, to decide just how to measure "puberty" (see Brooks-Gunn & Petersen, 1984). Not surprisingly, then, researchers have developed a variety of scales to measure physical maturity (see Petersen, et al., 1983; Steinberg, 1983; and Greenwell, 1983). After consultation with the school board, we reluctantly agreed to assess physical maturity via Greenwell's (1983) measure. She asked experimenters to rate the physical maturity of children on the following scale: (1) "The subject is physically mature. (Female has menstruated; has breasts. Male has ejaculated; has beard.\*)" Ninety-four subjects fell in this category. (2) "I cannot determine if the subject is physically mature or not." Only 18 subjects fell in this category. (3) "The subject is not physically mature. (Female has not menstruated; does not have breasts. Male has not ejaculated; does not have beard.\*)" One hundred and twenty-three subjects fell in this category.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

We explored the impact of gender, age, and physical maturity on the experience of passionate love.

*Age vs. Physical Maturity.* The question with which we are primarily concerned, of course, is whether or not there are age differences in the ability to love. In Hypothesis 1, we proposed that even very young children should be capable of loving passionately. Traditional theorists, on the other hand, have argued that children are not capable of such love until puberty. If they are right, we should find that children's JLS scores should be extremely low. Not until the age of puberty—defined as endocrinologists define it (i.e., 7 or 8 years of age), as physical anthropologists define it (i.e., 9 in girls or 10-11 in boys), or as social psychologists define it (i.e., 12-13 in

girls and 13-14 in boys) — should children's JLS scores sharply increase.

The interviews we conducted with children convinced us that Hypothesis 1 appears to be correct. At least some children love with great passion. Two of the experimenters who conducted this research started out as skeptics. By the time we finished interviewing, all of us had been convinced that children do experience passionate love. It is very touching to interview children in love. They are often very shy. They blush and hide behind their hands. One 5-year-old girl talked about a boy she loved at the pre-school she had once attended. When asked the question: "If I could, when I grow up I'd like to marry \_\_\_\_\_," she began to cry. "I will never see Todd again," she said pitifully. She may well not, since her parents had no idea of the depth of her feelings. Anecdotes can be supplemented with empirical data, however.

We tried to test, more formally, just when passionate love appears — early in childhood as Hypothesis 1 argues it should vs. at the onset of puberty — in two ways:

1. First, we examined the effect of Age on the JLS scores. Figure 1 and Table 2 make it clear that there is no evidence to support the contention that passionate love is fueled by the hormonal changes of puberty. [Age effects *are* significant ( $F = 3.08$ ,  $14/206$  d.f.  $p = .001$ ) but they are not in the form of an S-Curve.] It is the youngest children and the oldest children who secure the highest scores. Twelve-year-old boys secure the lowest scores. Interestingly, these curvilinear effects are in accord with the findings of Bell (1962). It is difficult to know why 12-year-old boys should receive such low JLS scores. Perhaps boys at that age are unusually shy about discussing their feelings. Perhaps they are switching their affection from boyfriends to girlfriends, and are somewhat confused about who to select as a "boyfriend" or "girlfriend." Definitive answers will have to await further research.<sup>1</sup>
2. A second way to determine what contribution Age and Physical Maturity, as measured by Greenwell's (1983) Physical Maturity scale, make on passionate love, was to examine the correlation between these three variables. From these analy-

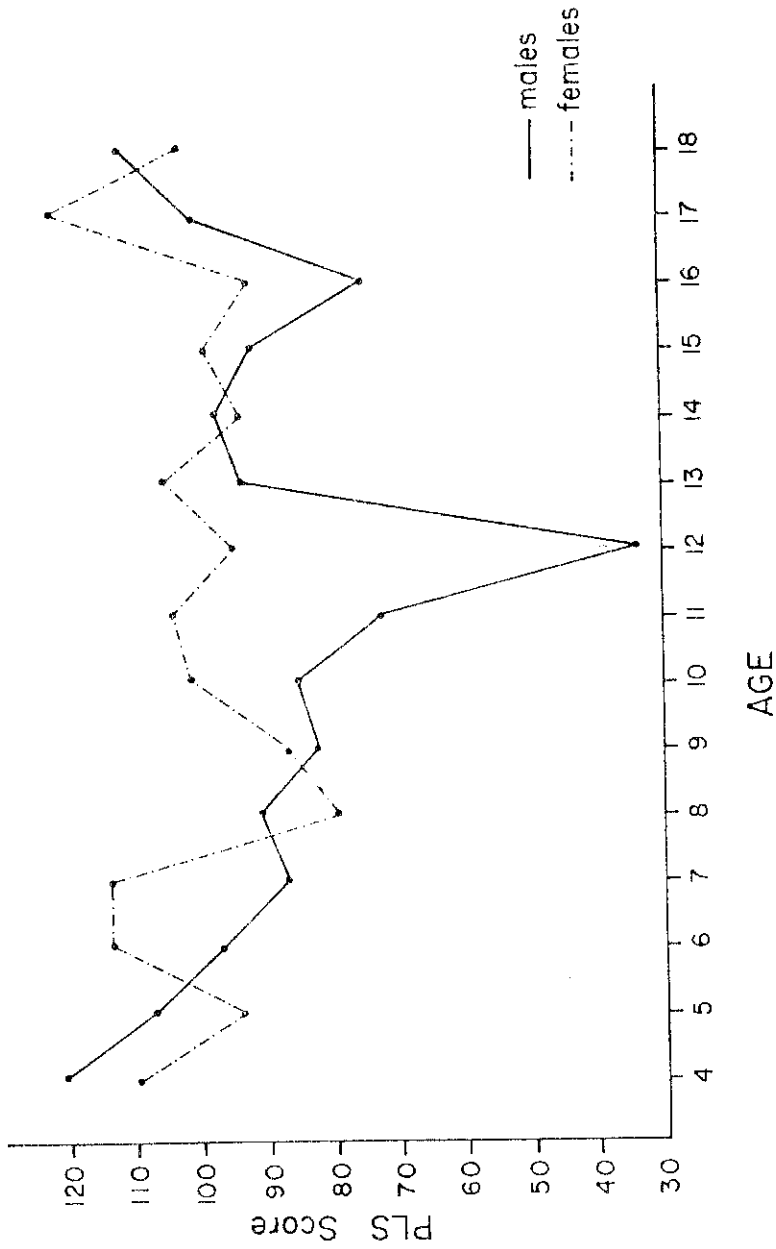


FIGURE 1. The Relationship Between Sex, Age, and PLS Score

TABLE 2. The Impact of Gender and Age on JLS Scores

Gender	Age	(N)	M	(S.D.)
Male	4	6	121.00	(13.51)
	5	6	107.33	(31.84)
	6	9	97.44	(27.02)
	7	9	86.78	(12.51)
	8	8	90.88	(16.31)
	9	7	82.43	(19.90)
	10	8	85.50	(38.47)
	11	8	71.75	(31.99)
	12	3	33.00	(14.93)
	13	7	94.00	(10.86)
	14	9	97.56	(21.44)
	15	8	92.00	(17.57)
	16	3	74.50	(20.05)
	17	12	101.33	(23.31)
	18	6	111.17	(14.50)
Σ=		114	91.58	(26.75)
Female	4	8	109.50	(22.44)
	5	10	93.70	(25.12)
	6	7	114.14	(11.19)
	7	7	114.00	(15.36)
	8	7	79.29	(23.58)
	9	8	86.75	(24.45)
	10	7	101.14	(20.42)
	11	8	104.38	( 7.84)
	12	12	94.92	(22.41)
	13	8	105.13	(21.05)
	14	10	94.30	(27.21)
	15	8	99.38	(10.25)
	16	8	92.13	(19.71)
	17	3	121.33	(13.05)
	18	11	103.27	(23.50)
Σ=		122	99.65	(21.84)
Main Effect Gender:		F = 10.73	p = .001	1/205 d.f.
Main Effect Age:		F = 3.08	p = .001	14/206 d.f.
Interaction		F = 2.67	p = .001	14/206 d.f.

ses, it is clear that neither Age nor Physical Maturity has a significant effect on passionate love. The correlation between JLS score and Age is  $-.05$ ,  $p = .47$ , n.s. and the correlation between JLS and Maturity score is  $-.03$ ,  $p = .63$ , n.s.

*Gender.* Earlier, we observed that, generally, women seem to love more passionately than men. What about gender differences in children? Apparently, gender differences in passionate love begin

early. In Table 2 and Figure 1, we see that, from 6 years of age on, girls generally secure slightly higher JLS scores than do boys (Main effect for Gender = 10.73, 1/206 d.f.,  $p = .001$ . The interaction between Gender and Age is also significant.  $F = 2.67$ , 14/206 d.f.  $p = .001$ ). The correlation between Gender and JLS scores is significant, though low. (Pearson correlation coefficient = .16,  $p = .01$ ). One should not make too much of these relatively small gender differences, however.

*Comments.* This study was simply designed to determine if we could find *any* evidence that children are capable of experiencing passionate love. We found distinct evidence that they can. Now come further questions. If children, adolescents, and adults experience passion, are their feelings similar or very different? It is possible to argue variously on this issue. Historians observe that, in the Western world, the conception of childhood as a separate stage of the life cycle is barely 400 years old. Before 1600, children were generally regarded as miniature adults. In other eras then, people would have taken it for granted that children's emotional lives mirror adults' own (see Stone, 1977; Aries, 1962; and Rapson, 1978). Today, of course, it is somewhat unsettling to think of children experiencing an emotion we assume to be so quintessentially adult.

On the other hand, subsequent research might reveal that there are differences in the way that children, adolescents, and adults experience passionate love. Do a 4-year old and a 16-year old mean the same thing by boyfriend/girlfriend? Further research from primatologists, linguists, neurophysiologists, experimental social psychologists, and child development researchers will be needed to help us uncover developmental differences in the experience of passionate love.

#### NOTE

1. Boys and girls were randomly selected from class lists for this study. As a consequence, the N for the various Gender  $\times$  Age groups varies markedly (see Table 2). By chance, only three 12-year-old boys were selected for interviews. This means that one should not make too much of the dramatic dip which appears in Figure 1; it may represent only a chance variation. Some reviewers have worried that the statistically significant Age effects might be due entirely to these "outliers." We would like to make two points: (1) From the point of view of

Hypothesis 1, it matters little whether there are or are not significant Age effects. We are predicting that passionate love will begin at an early age. Thus, the *shape* of Figure 1, as well as the significance or nonsignificance of existing differences, is all important. A change from significance to nonsignificance would in no way affect our conclusions. (2) Ms. Parpart reran our data, omitting the 12-year olds from the sample. The results remain much the same.

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