

# Today's teens urged to either date responsibly — or not at all

## Group social activities are becoming a popular alternative

By Cheryl Wetzstein  
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

As anyone who's ever been in a movie theater knows, dating and kissing are common activities among American teens.

How common? Nine out of 10 teens say they've had some kind of romantic involvement, according to a new study. Kissing is part of dates even for teens as young as 13.

But as the country searches for ways to reduce teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases, more than a few experts are starting to look more closely at how teens date.

Parents should "discourage early, frequent and steady dating" by their children — especially if they're younger than 16, says Sarah Brown, director of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy.

Exclusive, one-on-one dating "can lead to trouble," she told a Capitol Hill meeting recently.

Other groups, including many abstinence education programs, urge teens to date responsibly — hang out in groups, don't kiss and avoid sexually stimulating TV shows, videos and movies.

In some cases, teens are abandoning dating altogether.

"You don't need to shop for what you can't afford," writes 23-year-old Joshua Harris of Gaithersburg, who quit dating at age 17 and explained his reasons in a book called "I Kissed Dating Goodbye." It has sold 150,000 copies.

In a recent survey of 650 teens aged 13 to 18 the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation and YM (Young and Modern) magazine found that nearly nine in 10 teens report having had a romantic relations and that most teens — 72 percent among junior high students and 94 percent among older teens — kiss

### THE DATING GAME

Results of a recent survey of 650 teen-agers, ages 13 to 18.

- 89 percent of teens say they've had a romantic involvement.
- 82 percent of 13- and 14-year-olds have had a girlfriend or boyfriend, as have 93 percent of older teens.
- 72 percent of 13- and 14-year-olds say it's typical for couples their age to kiss; 45 percent say deep kissing is expected on a date.
- 57 percent of 17- and 18-year-olds say petting is common on dates, while 52 percent say intercourse is common on a date.
- 71 percent of the teens have not had sexual intercourse. Of the 29 percent who have had sex, the average age of first intercourse for both genders was 15.
- Among sexually active boys, the largest percentage (29 percent) said they did it because they had "the opportunity" to do it with someone they liked.
- Among sexually active girls, the largest percentage (37 percent) said they did it because they "met someone they really loved."

Source: "National Survey of Teens," Kaiser Family Foundation and YM magazine

The Washington Times

*"You don't need to shop for what you can't afford," writes 23-year-old Joshua Harris of Gaithersburg, who quit dating at age 17.*

on their dates.

For many teens, kissing soon leads to intercourse: 28 percent of teens aged 15 and 16 say sexual intercourse is a typical part of the dating relationship. By age 18, 52 percent of teens say dates typically include sex.

And teen girls tell researchers that the No. 1 reason they have sex for the first time is because they have met someone they "really love." The No. 1 reason for boys was that they had "an opportunity to do it" with someone they liked.

The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy urges parents to establish rules early on for such things as curfews, dating activities, and the age of the boy or the girl — before their teens start

coming up with their own weekend plans.

"Otherwise, [the teen] will think you just don't like the particular person or invitation," the campaign says in a new booklet.

Other experts are hoping that if teens have better information, they will handle their romantic relationships more wisely.

For instance, the Kaiser/YM study found that most teens think it's socially acceptable if they don't have a serious relationship, said YM Editor in Chief Leslie Seymour. This means teens shouldn't feel pressured into pairing up, she said.

The study also found that 87 percent of girls and 62 percent of boys thought saving sex for later in life



Photo by Karen Ballard/The Washington Times

Shannon Hendrickson and Joshua Harris plan to exchange their first kiss in October, at their wedding ceremony.

is a "good thing." Mrs. Seymour added. "This means a girl can say to a boy, 'You're pressuring me for sex, but most girls are virgins today... and most guys say it's cool, so leave me alone!'"

Still, the Kaiser/YM study reveals that today's teens are facing "complex sexual situations" at younger ages than ever.

If teens are struggling with sexual pressures "as early as 13, then obviously we have to start giving them information at ages 11 and 12," said Dr. Felicia Stewart, a top Kaiser official. Teens need not only information about sexuality, but must learn "how to negotiate, express themselves, stand up for themselves."

Many abstinence education groups regularly counsel teens about dating.

The 11-year-old Best Friends character development program,

### GOING DATELESS

Author Joshua Harris says young people can find love without dating if they follow a few basic rules.

- "Start with a clean slate" and end any relationship that is physical or "too close."
- Keep parents and trusted adults informed of their activities.
- Avoid situations where they'll be alone with someone of the opposite sex.
- Don't nurse a crush.
- Socialize only in groups.
- Support others' purity.
- Don't be pressured into pairing off.
- Prepare for family life by learning about parenting and financial responsibility.
- Look for divinely inspired "green lights" that indicate a friendship is ready to turn into a commitment of marriage.

Source: "I Kissed Dating Goodbye," Multnomah Publishers

The Washington Times

which is now in public schools in 22 cities, tells girls to always use "the buddy system," never go anywhere alone and leave the room if pornography is present.

The girls also role-play to learn how to reject boys' "lines" such as "You have the body of a woman; Mother Nature meant for you to have sex;" or, "It's very painful for a guy to be in this condition and not get relief," according to Best Friends founder Elayne Bennett, wife of former Education Secretary William J. Bennett.

But some teens have decided to quit the dating game altogether and pursue love "on God's terms," Mr. Harris writes in his book, put

out by Multnomah Publishers in Sisters, Ore.

Giving up dating doesn't mean sitting home "watching videos with your cat," says Mr. Harris, who is finishing an internship at Covenant Life Church in Gaithersburg. It means adopting a new attitude — embracing friendship, enjoying being single and "trusting God's timing."

Today, Mr. Harris is engaged to church secretary Shannon Hendrickson, 24. Although the two resisted developing a personal relationship, love blossomed anyway.

The wedding is in October. "Our first kiss," they say, "will be at the altar."