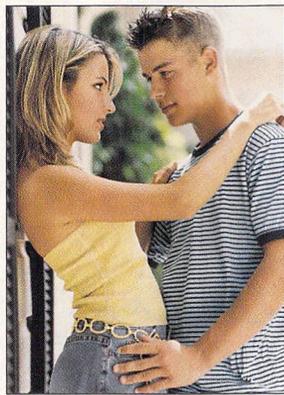


Talking points

Teenagers: Whatever happened to dating?

The Internet has profoundly changed American courtship rituals, said Brent Staples in *The New York Times*. When I was a teen, you couldn't date a girl until you got past her father. My 10th-grade heartthrob's "fear-some" dad vetted her phone calls, grilled me thoroughly whenever I stopped by, and otherwise "made clear how upset he'd be if I disappointed him." Today, thanks to the combined miracles of e-mail, cell phones, and instant messaging, adolescents have "at last succeeded in shielding their social lives" from their parents' prying eyes. Any teenage boy looking to "hook up" with a girl—or girl looking to hook up with a boy—can easily "outflank" both of their families, and covertly arrange a meeting to get down to the business at hand.

It's true—dating is dead, said Benoit Denizet-Lewis in *The New York Times Magazine*. From coast to coast, kids as young as 13 are now hooking up for a night of kissing, fondling, oral sex, and/or intercourse. These hook-ups may stem from chance meetings in online chat rooms or from friends hanging out in groups. The only common thread is an utter lack of personal attachment. "Being in a real relationship just complicates everything," says Brian, a



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And Daddy is out of the loop.

16-year-old from New England. "I have my friends for my emotional needs," says Melissa, a high school senior, "so I don't need that from the guy I'm having sex with." In this impersonal atmosphere, says psychiatrist and teen sex expert Lynn Ponton, young people are learning to view each other as interchangeable sex objects. "How can they ever be developmentally ready for real-life relationships?" she asks.

It's not quite that dire, said Claire Luna and Kimi Yoshino in the *Los Angeles Times*. Young people may claim to be beyond romance, but for all of their posturing, many of today's adolescents are less sexually jaded than you might think. In a 1991 survey, the federal Centers for Disease Control found that 54 percent of high school students had had intercourse. Last year, the figure dropped to 47 percent. Some analysts say we're witnessing a "backlash to the 'sexplosion'" of popular culture, typified by pop icons like Britney Spears. "I'm so used to it, it makes me sick," one 16-year-old said of the sexualized messages. "I'm way over it." In interviews, many teens said that while they and their friends liked to brag about their sexual exploits, most of it was just talk. Some things, it seems, never change.