

# The Real Relationship

*What is replacing the dating game? The search for friendship and love in depth that implies a serious mutual commitment*

Nora and Mike have almost never had a formal date, but they go everywhere together. She is seventeen, a senior at Newton High; he's a Harvard sophomore.

For more than two years they've been a couple. Winters, they skate and ski; and summers, they hitchhike to the beach whenever they can. Mike helps Nora with her biology, she sews for him (wild ties, a leather vest). Saturday nights they often have friends over for pizza at Nora's parents' house, saving up for extras like smoked oysters and wine. Nora has not worn Mike's fraternity pin—although she saves the beer-can tab he once put on her finger in a mock-engagement ceremony.

Now, though they've successfully weathered some rough times together, they find themselves on the brink of change. Mike, Nora says frankly, is becoming interested in another girl. The two are still very close but perhaps know one another too well. If their closeness has been too much of a strain for both of them, they've had a

long happiness together. There's no rancor. And though they are sad about breaking up, each will bounce. "It's been a real relationship," Nora says. "That's the important thing."

Nora and Mike's experience—an intense friendship which emphasizes sharing and being together rather than dating—is typical of a new pattern on the young American scene. The ideal of popularity is giving way to something much more earnest: the concept of a real relationship.

A generation ago every girl longed to be popular. That meant having lots of dates, preferably with many different boys, and being booked weeks or even months ahead for a special occasion like New Year's Eve. In order to be busy Saturday night, the popular girl might accept an invitation from a boy in whom she had no interest. There was always the chance that by going out, she might meet someone she *did* like. The important thing was to be seen.

"When I was in college," says a young matron now in her

thirties, "dating was a game with marriage as its goal. To play it well, you had to protect yourself—from overexposure, from premature involvement. The most successful kids had a 'line,' a sort of all-purpose patter that kept things on a light, safe level."

Formal dating still flourishes in many high schools and on all-boy or all-girl campuses where plans have to be made in advance. At coed and city colleges, however, it has been largely replaced by an easier sort of boy-girl association. "I haven't been asked out or met anybody on appointment for about two years," says a Brandeis senior. "It's just not done that way."

How, then, does a girl meet boys? "You run into them—in the snack bar or coffeehouse, or at concerts in the park. If you groove, you become constant companions. The relationship starts when you begin revealing yourself."

A real relationship, however, involves much more than self-revelation. Sincere interest in the other person is essential.

Since the aim is perfect understanding, there must be perfect honesty. One helps the other with schoolwork or with family chores. One helps the other respond to the world outside. Each feels accountable to the other for something, is responsible for taking care in some way—even if only by listening. The real relationship is above all a sharing one and, while it lasts, a commitment. "What we have," says a Swarthmore girl of her current boy, "is a temporary permanence. We don't make promises. There's graduate school, and the draft . . . how can you plan?"

What distinguishes a relationship from "going steady"? A relationship implies a deep commitment at many levels and is, therefore, very demanding; it is completely informal and quite private. Steadies may also feel strong emotional bonds, but not necessarily; because social recognition of their status is important, it is traditionally formalized by tokens such as pins or rings. Partners in a relationship may behave toward friends

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