

UNSTEADY

By JeaNette G. Smith

If you're dating casually, you don't expect a relationship to become a romance. You have fun; you do a variety of things with a variety of people.

Let's see if you can correctly answer the following question: At what age are Latter-day Saint youth allowed to date? Of course, you probably immediately said, "16," showing you've paid attention to *For the Strength of Youth*, as well as your parents and Church leaders.

OK, then, how about this one: At what age are you allowed to have a boyfriend or girlfriend?

You may be thinking, "Um, 16. Didn't I just answer that?"

Well, if that was your answer, then, even though you aced the first question, you missed the second one. Just because you can date when you turn 16 doesn't mean you should immediately start looking for a steady boyfriend or girlfriend.

For decades, prophets have preached that youth who are in no position to marry should not pair off exclusively. For instance, President Hinckley (1910–2008) said, "When you are young, do not get involved in steady dating. *When you reach an age where you think of marriage*, then is the time to become so involved. But you boys who are in *high school* don't need this, and neither do the girls" ("Some Thoughts on Temples, Retention of Converts, and Missionary Service," *Ensign*, Nov. 1997, 51; italics added).

So what does this counsel really mean, and what are the reasons for it?

Two Kinds of Dating

To begin with, the general term *dating* may be a little confusing, since nowadays it sometimes seems to imply something a little more



DATING

Make the most of your teenage dating years by keeping it casual.

serious than what we intend it to mean in relation to youth in the Church. There are two different types of dating: *casual* dating and *steady* (or *serious*) dating. The distinction between the two has to do with exclusivity.

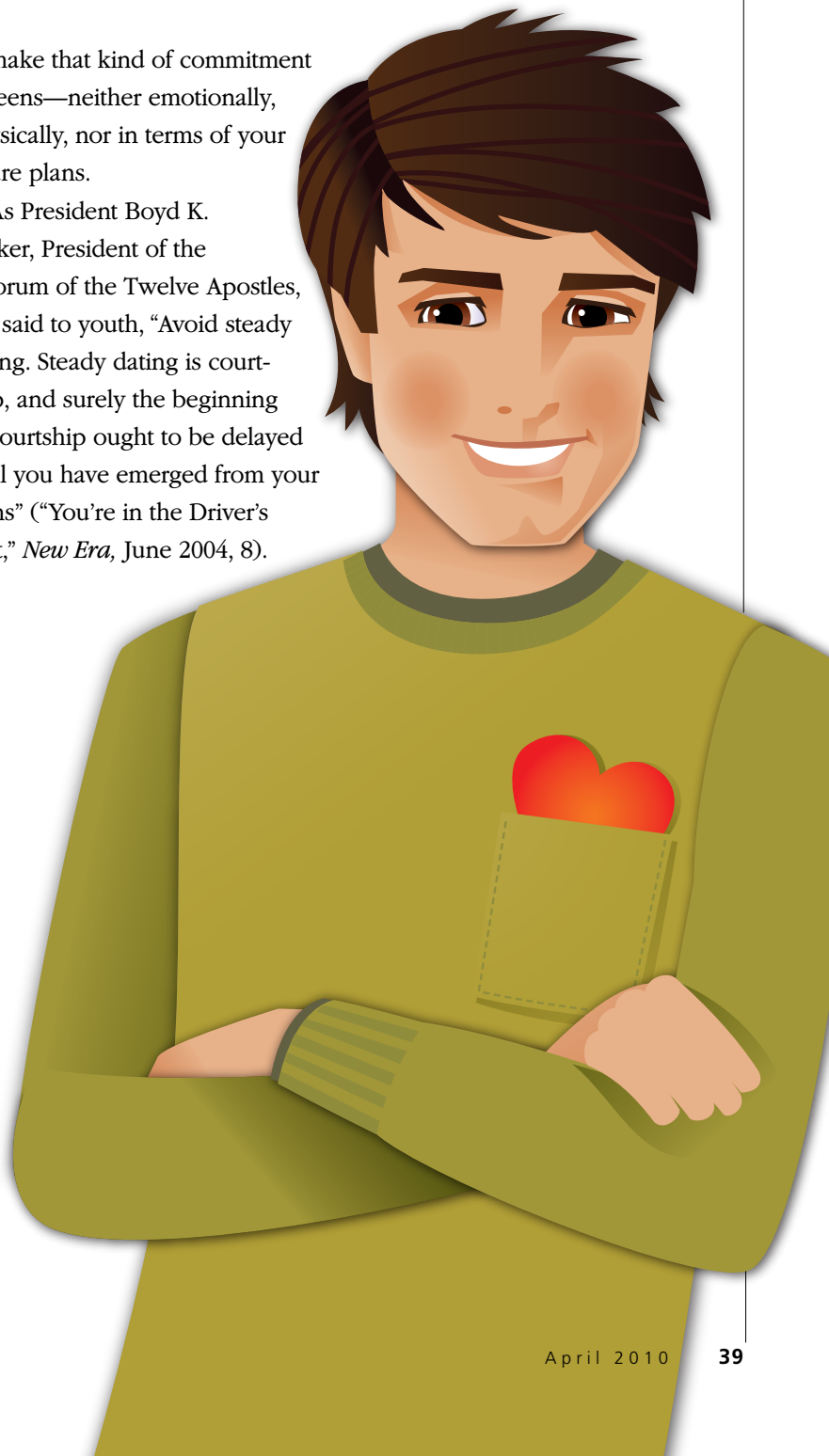
Casual Dating. With casual dating, there is no exclusivity. The two people aren't "a couple" or "an item," and they don't refer to each other as a "boyfriend" or "girlfriend." They don't pair off. People who are casually dating are simply friends. This is the kind of dating the Church encourages you to do after you turn 16. You should put aside a need to find a "one and only." If you're dating casually, you don't expect a relationship to become a romance. You have fun; you do a variety of things with a variety of people.

Steady Dating. On the other hand, steady dating means the couple is exclusive with one another. They expect each other not to date anyone else or to be emotionally or physically close with other people. Couples who date seriously consider the future, because there is a real possibility they could stay together. This is the kind of dating the Church encourages young adults (generally, people in their 20s) to progress toward, because that's the age when they should be thinking of marrying.

You should avoid becoming exclusive as teenagers, because an exclusive relationship requires a high level of commitment from both partners, and you're not in a position

to make that kind of commitment as teens—neither emotionally, physically, nor in terms of your future plans.

As President Boyd K. Packer, President of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, has said to youth, "Avoid steady dating. Steady dating is courtship, and surely the beginning of courtship ought to be delayed until you have emerged from your teens" ("You're in the Driver's Seat," *New Era*, June 2004, 8).



Relationships have different stages of emotional connectedness. The important stages for teenagers in their relationships are friendship and casual dating.

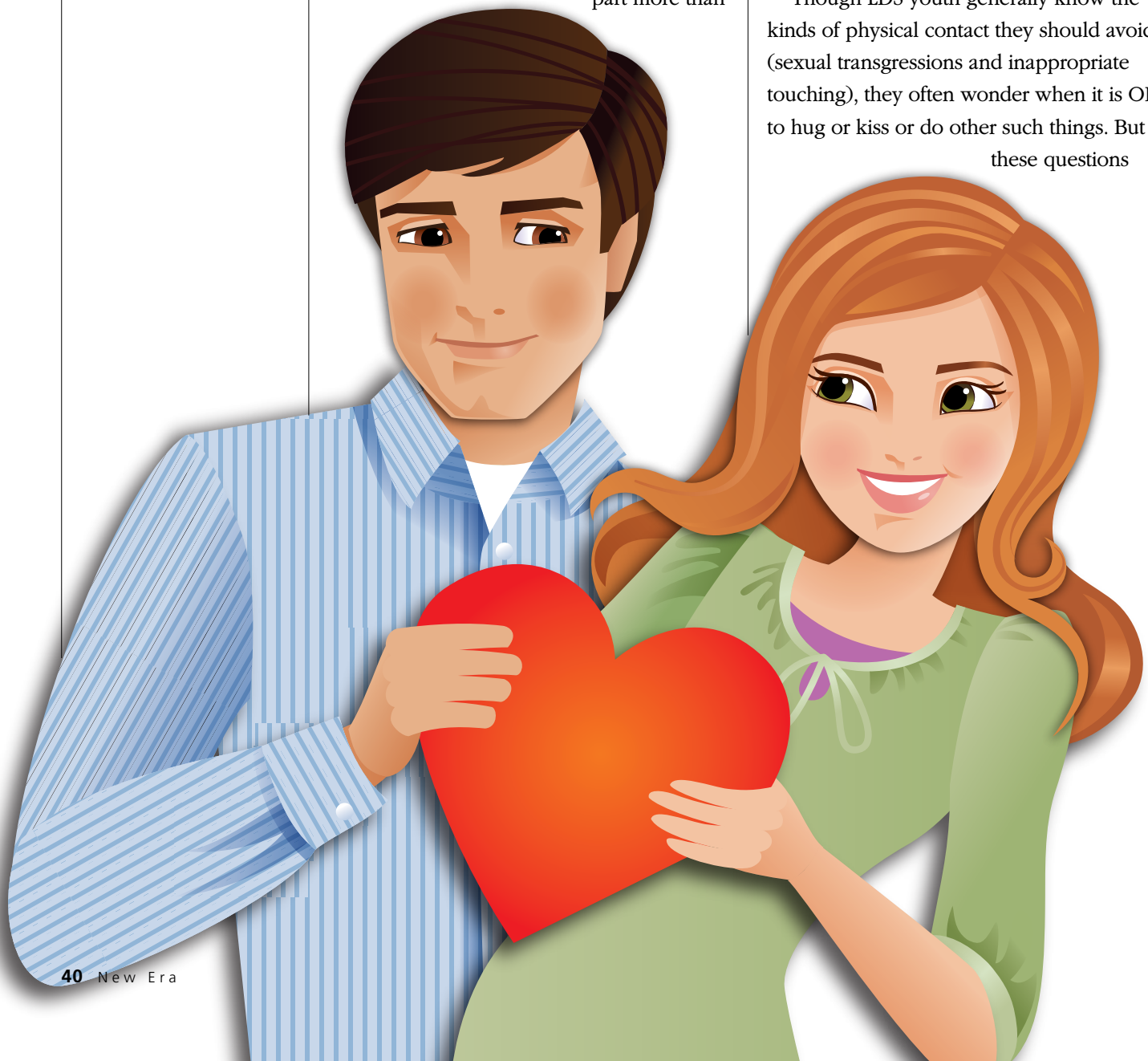
Emotional Intimacy

The problem is, a lot of teenagers jump the gun. They think these friendship-type relationships are only for younger kids, and they plunge into romantic relationships more appropriate for young adults (people in their 20s), who are in a position to think about marriage.

These romantic relationships have two components: physical and emotional. Generally speaking, boys crave the physical part more than

girls do, and girls crave the emotional part more than boys do. Because boys have less of a desire for emotional closeness, they are usually in control of how deep this aspect of the relationship will become. Likewise, because girls are less driven by a desire for a physical relationship, they are generally in control of how far that aspect of the relationship will go. Marriage is where these two components come together in more perfect harmony.

Though LDS youth generally know the kinds of physical contact they should avoid (sexual transgressions and inappropriate touching), they often wonder when it is OK to hug or kiss or do other such things. But these questions



ignore the emotional half of the equation.

The question is not simply where you put your hands, but it's where you put your heart. Often two teens (especially LDS youth who know the Lord's commandments) will be tempted to become physical only if they've already established the kind of relationship that would permit it—one that has already reached a level of emotional connectedness and commitment.

After high school (and a mission, for a young man), if young adults become emotionally intimate and naturally desire physical intimacy, they are in a position to do something about it: they could get married. But if teens become emotionally intimate and naturally desire physical intimacy, they can't do anything about it. They're not in a position to marry, so they either break the law of chastity or break one another's hearts by ending the relationship.

President Hinckley said, "Steady dating at an early age leads so often to tragedy. Studies have shown that the longer a boy and girl date one another, the more likely they are to get into trouble. It is better . . . to date a variety of companions until you are ready to marry" ("A Prophet's Counsel and Prayer for Youth," *New Era*, Jan. 2001, 13).

Fostering Friendship

Relationships have different stages of emotional connectedness (see the figure on "The Funnel Theory"). The important stages for teenagers to experience in their relationships are friendship and casual dating.

Friendship is when two people discover they have similar interests, similar views—things in common. They talk with one another, validate one another's views, and choose to spend time together. They may

FABULOUS FRIENDSHIPS FOR TEENS

Here are some reasons why, for teenagers, friendship is healthier than romance.

Friendship is more about fun. You get to do more things, meet more people, learn more about the world, and become more well-rounded than when you're in a romantic relationship as a teen.

Friendship is less stressful. It's not as scary when the person you're with really believes in friendship rather than romance. Friendship is casual. The stakes aren't so high.

Without romance, you can better balance your time between all of your friends, both male and female. There is less pettiness, jealousy, and disappointment in friendships among teens.

Friendships can last a lifetime. Without the complications of romance, you can build healthy friendships that can continue far beyond high school.

It's easier to be authentic. Teens have an easier time being honest in a friendship than a romance. Friends accept each other. They feel less of a need to put on a show or try to impress the other person.

Friends are more likely to boost your self-worth. Friendship among teens is more often based on something like character or common values rather than looks or attractiveness. The one will help you feel better about yourself, the other has a greater potential to make you feel worse about yourself.

Friendship is a foundation. When people are mature enough to engage in romance and decide to fall in love, they are more likely to succeed if they first were friends, having built a foundation of trust.

You can find true compatibility. Friends can determine what they truly like about each other (character, personality, sense of humor) rather than having to deal with the complications of romance.

Friendship makes you better at choosing a marriage partner. Youth who choose a wide variety of friends rather than restricting themselves to a single relationship will be better informed in choosing a marriage partner.

Friendship makes you better at marriage. Friends learn to communicate honestly, to make personal sacrifices, to be independent, dependable, and decisive. Dysfunctional adolescent relationships put people at greater risk of having dysfunctional adult relationships. Functional, healthy adolescent relationships—friendships—are the best preparation for healthy, unscarred adult relationships.

Casual dating has the same basic characteristics as friendship. It is casual, no-pressure fun that keeps you from getting too serious with one person.

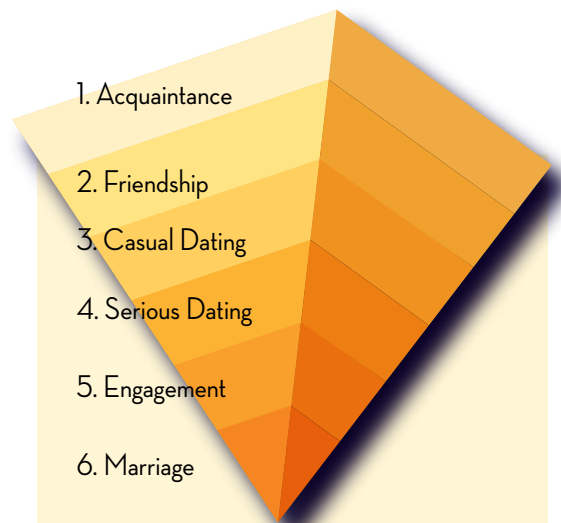
hang out in the same social circle, study together, or participate in activities they both enjoy. In the teen years, friendships between guys and girls should look like regular friendships, which have an inclusive attitude of “the more the merrier.” Casual dating has the same basic characteristics as friendship, except the friends may be paired up for the duration of an event or activity.

If you choose to date after turning 16, the Church encourages you to date in groups. The brilliance of group dating is that it prevents you from becoming too attached to one person of the opposite sex. It allows you to get to know a number of people and to interact with everybody else in the group, fostering a feeling of friendship. Friends follow a philosophy of inclusion—friendship is casual, no-pressure fun that keeps you from getting too serious with one person.

Whether you’re old enough to date or not, remember that “good friendships can and should be developed at every age” (*For the Strength of Youth* [2001], 24). And the teen years are a great time to be building those kinds of friendships, whether you’re dating or not.

As you take to heart the counsel of modern prophets, you will see how fulfilling your relationships can be, without having to deal with the complications (and potential sorrow) of teenage romance. **NE**

*JeaNette G. Smith is a licensed marriage and family therapist and licensed mental health counselor. This article was adapted, with permission, from her book *Unsteady*, published by Covenant Communications, Inc.*



THE FUNNEL THEORY

This diagram shows stages in relationships with members of the opposite sex. The top three stages can be categorized generally as “friendship” stages. Most relationships will stay in the Acquaintance and Friendship stages. The bottom three belong to the “romance” category. As you progress through these stages toward marriage, the number of members of the opposite sex you interact with gets smaller and the depth or seriousness of the relationship gets greater.

Stage One: Acquaintance—You know or have met each other.

Stage Two: Friendship—You have things in common with and choose to do things with each other.

Stage Three: Casual Dating—Same as friendship, except you’re paired together for an activity.

Stage Four: Serious Dating—You are in a position to marry and commit to date each other exclusively.

Stage Five: Engagement and Courtship—You have decided to marry one another.

Stage Six: Marriage—You enter a sacred covenant together and are sealed to one another eternally.