

“Hooking up,” “messaging around,” “friends with benefits,” and “dating” are terms that teens use to describe relationships today. While these labels may signify differing degrees of commitment and seriousness, according to a new national survey of teens ages 15 to 17, there appear to be few differences when it comes to what teens are doing sexually in their relationships. In fact, as many teens consider oral sex to be a routine part of a casual “hook-up” as part of longer-term dating with a boy/girlfriend. About the same percentage – one in four – as agree that intercourse is frequently part of *either* type of relationship.

More than a third of sexually active teens report having had sexual intercourse in what they term a “casual” relationship. Overall, 34 percent of teens – including those who have had sexual intercourse as well as those who have not – report having done “something sexual” in a more casual encounter.

According to many teens, what *is* different about these relationships, however, is in the choices they make about protection and negotiation. More than half of teens agree that condoms are used less frequently in more serious relationships than in casual ones. They also believe that if they are dating a boy/girlfriend there is less need to practice safer sex, although a quarter acknowledge that cheating is often part of teen relationships.

This survey snapshot examines experiences and attitudes related to sexual relationships. It is based on a national random sample telephone survey with 505 teens ages 15 to 17 conducted from July 11 to 17, 2002 by International Communications Research (ICR) for the Kaiser Family Foundation. The questionnaire was designed by staff at the Kaiser Family Foundation. Additional information is included from focus group discussions conducted with teen girls in Chicago, IL July 24, 2002. This is the sixth in a series of nationally representative surveys conducted by the Kaiser Family Foundation and *seventeen* magazine.

# Relationships

A Series of National Surveys of Teens About Sex



**SexSmarts** is an ongoing public information partnership between the **Kaiser Family Foundation** and **seventeen** magazine to provide young people with information and resources on sexual health issues. The campaign addresses a range of topics from decision making about sex, including how to say no, to the real facts on HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs).

Under the partnership, the Foundation and *seventeen* periodically survey teens about their knowledge and attitudes about sex and sexual health. These nationally representative survey snapshots shed light on the issues facing teens today and their information needs. The campaign also includes special articles in the magazine, an online monthly column on [seventeen.com](http://seventeen.com), and other consumer education materials.

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“I was talking to this guy and he was like—‘I don’t kiss girls on the mouth because if I’m not in a relationship why should I kiss.’”

—Teen Girl, 17

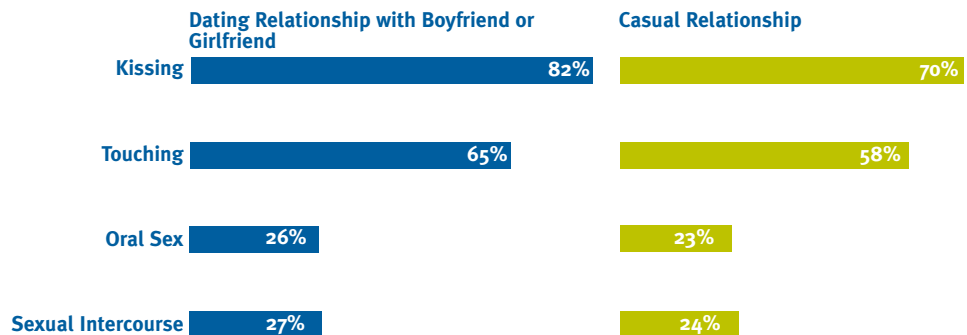
### Relationships: what’s in a name?

According to teens, both “casual” and “dating” relationships are very common among 15- to 17-year-olds; two thirds say at least some of their friends have been in relationships with partners they would define as boy/girlfriends. About the same percentage say at least some of their friends have been in more “casual” relationships, or “hook-ups.”

Overall, about one third report having done something sexual (including but not limited to sexual intercourse) in a casual relationship, including 14 percent who report having had sexual intercourse in this kind of situation (among sexually active teens, 38 percent have had sexual intercourse in a “casual” relationship). About half of teens say they have done something sexual with a boy/girlfriend and a third have had sexual intercourse as part of this type of relationship.

The “rules” don’t differ much when it comes to what teens report occurring in one kind of relationship versus another. Both casual and more serious dating relationships include many of the same sexual behaviors; they are just as likely to agree that oral sex and intercourse are part of an exclusive dating relationship as a casual “hook-up.” Teens were more likely to say kissing and touching define a dating relationship, as compared to more “casual” ones—perhaps signaling that young people consider these to be more intimate behaviors. (Figure 1)

**FIGURE 1. Defining Relationships**  
Percent who say the following activities are part of a relationship almost always or most of the time:



“If you’re just hooking up with a guy at a party you’re not gonna talk about anything. I think it’s really stupid to do, but that does happen a lot and that’s kind of scary — the consequences of that.”

—Teen Girl, 16.

**FIGURE 2. Protection and Negotiation**  
Percent who agree with the following statements:

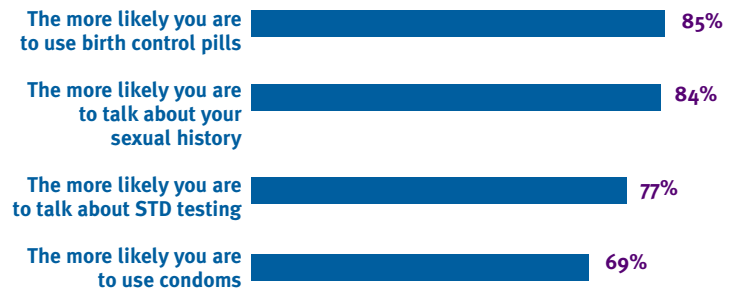


### Too Trusting?

Teens acknowledge that among their peers even more serious relationships — those with a boy or girlfriend — aren’t always exclusive: 24 percent report cheating is in fact a pretty common occurrence. Teens are equally likely to say that their peers are protecting themselves by using condoms most of the time in both casual and more serious relationships, yet many acknowledge that condoms are considered *less* of a necessity in serious relationships.

While teens consider it more important to be conscientious about condoms in their casual relationships, they acknowledge it is easier to talk about condoms and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) in more serious relationships. More than seven in 10 agree that girls are more empowered to ask that condoms be used with a boyfriend than during a “hook-up.” (Figure 2)

**FIGURE 3. Relationship Length**  
Percent who agree that the longer you are in a relationship:



**FIGURE 4. Who Is Trustworthy?**  
Percent who agree that the following make a person “trustworthy”:



The length of relationships also appears to impact teen choices about birth control and condom use, with those in longer-term relationships often shifting from methods that protect against STDs to methods that *don’t*. When it comes to birth control choices, more than eight in 10 agree they are more likely to use

birth control pills the longer they were in a relationship, while fewer agreed they were more likely to use condoms. The good news is that teens agree that they are more likely to talk about their sexual history and STD testing when they have been with some one for a while. (Figure 3)





FIGURE 5. **What Does Trust Mean?**

Percent who say if they trust someone they are more likely to:



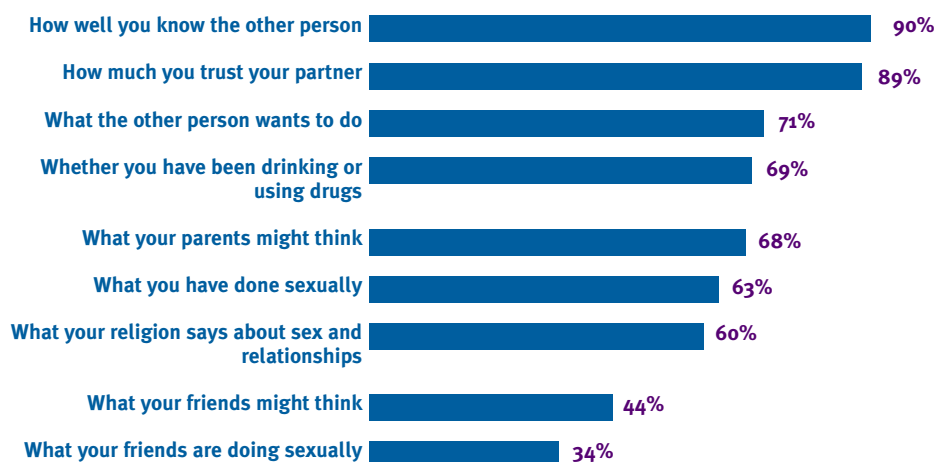
## Who do you trust?

What makes someone trustworthy? For many teens trust is equated with how long they (and their friends or parents) have known someone. Sex also has a lot to do with trust; nine in 10 teens agree that knowing someone's sexual history and that they are not "messing around" with other people makes a person trustworthy. (Figure 4)

Teens in sexual relationships built on trust are more likely to be talking frankly about their sexual health. Seven in 10 say when they are in a sexual relationship with someone they trust they are more likely to talk about STDs, including asking their partners to get tested. They are also more likely to talk about their sexual histories and contraception. Overall, girls are more likely than boys to say that trust contributes to talking about sexual health in a relationship, especially when it comes to contraception (69% versus 52%, respectively.) (Figure 5)

FIGURE 6. **Sexual Decision-Making**

Percent who say each influences what they might do sexually with someone:



When it comes to contraceptive choices in relationships, six in 10 say that they are more likely to use birth control pills than condoms when they are in a sexual relationship with someone they trust. But most teens—more than eight in 10—also say that it is still important to use condoms, and seven in 10 say that when they are involved with someone they trust they are more likely to use a condom.

## Influencing Decisions

Teens agree that knowing and trusting their partner are the top issues influencing their decision about what they might do sexually with someone. What your partner wants to do, and whether you have been drinking or using drugs also have a lot of influence on the decision. What parents might think, what friends might think, what friends are doing, and religious beliefs also factor into teens' decisions about sex. (Figure 6)