Teens not yet 16 who KISS BUT DON’T TELL

Sunday Times poll of 550 teens shows kissing at a young age is becoming common — but the youngsters are keeping their parents in the dark about their dates.

Jeremy Au Yong

TIO Chin Guan first locked lips with a girl at age 15. It was his second girlfriend and they had been going out for two weeks.

"I was at her house. We were just talking and laughing and it happened. It wasn't planned," said the 17-year-old.

For Indra, 16, her first kiss was in a cinema earlier this year, on the fifth date with a boy she met at school, while for Sam, 18, it happened at age 15 in a shopping mall with a friend from church.

Both teens spoke on condition that they need not give their full names. Like many other teens The Sunday Times interviewed, they said this was because their parents have no idea about what they are up to.

Kissing and dating before 16 may seem a little young, but a street poll of 550 teens on Tuesday found it to be the rule rather than the exception.

The poll was conducted by members of The Straits Times Media Club who were asked by The Sunday Times to survey their peers about their dating habits.

Results show the five years between age 12 and 16 is when young romance blooms, with 87 per cent of all teens who dated saying that's when they started.

It's also the time when 66 per cent of boys and girls who have kissed got their first smooch.

In fact, by age 15, nearly six in 10 of all youngsters would have had their first kiss, and eight in 10 their first date — with a few starting as young as 10.

That puppy love is blossoming may surprise some parents but not the experts.
Poll results

- Four in 10 teens spend between $10 and $30 when out on a date.
- ‘For two people to watch a movie and eat at a food court or fast-food place, it costs around $20. It’s just nice, not too expensive. After all, my allowance is only $15 a day.’
  — MELVIN LIM, 16.
- Half of the teens got to know their dates in school.
- ‘That is where we spend most of our time. It’s the best place to meet people.’
  — NURHANAH DAID, 14.
- 45 per cent go on dates between one and three times a week.
- ‘More than that will be too much. We all need a little bit of space also.’
  — MAVIS SEAH, 16.
- Nine in 10 are serious enough not to consider dating two people at the same time.
- ‘I think my girlfriend would get angry if I did that. Anyway, I have time for only one.’
  — B. SARAVANAN, 17.
- More than eight in 10 said they would wait till marriage before having sex.
- ‘Sex is a very major step. You cannot just do it with anyone. You need to think very carefully about it.’
  — STELLA TAN, 17.

‘What used to happen at 17 has been moved forward to 14,’ said Dr Brian Yeo, consultant psychiatrist at Mount Elizabeth Medical Centre.

‘Younger people are more aware now. If you watch American shows — even on the Disney Channel — you will see a lot of talk about dating and having crashes. It’s all very common.’

Other instigating forces are the increasing number of graduation proms — even for those just finishing their PSLE — and the move by companies to target their advertisements at pre-teens.

‘Now, you can even see sexy dressing for pre-teens,’ Dr Yeo said.

Assistant Professor Chung Wai Keung, a sociologist with the Singapore Management University, suggested that more liberal parents may also have hastened the pace.

‘To date, you need to have the freedom to go out without your parents. While it didn’t happen in the past, kids now can do that.’

And what starts as an innocent date often leads to kissing.

Of the teens who have dated, 70 per cent had smooched with their adolescent partner — and fairly early on in the relationship too. According to the survey, almost half the teens thought nothing of kissing within a month of dating.

‘Personally, it’s just for the fun of it. It doesn’t really mean anything,’ said Chin Guan.

Girls like Tan ZiJuan, 18, agree too. ‘I will not kiss a guy, when I’m not his girlfriend, but I don’t think kissing is a big deal.’

Experts took this as further indication that times have changed.

Said counsellor Ong Lea Teng, from the Singapore Planned Parenthood Association: ‘It’s the kind of exposure they get from the media. Kids now feel that kissing is just part of a relationship.’

However, most teens are conservative and draw a line when it comes to sex. In the poll, some 84 per cent say they will wait till marriage before having sex.

But parents interviewed are still aghast that children are dating at such a young age.

‘I’m against it,’ said Madam Serene Tan, 50, a clerk with five daughters aged between 13 and 22. ‘Below 16 is too young to commit to a relationship. It’s too young for them to deal with heartbreak and things like that.’

That said, most teens keep their romantic lives a secret from their parents.

Juliana, 15, had five boyfriends by age 13 but she kept her parents in the dark about them.

‘I don’t think they will be very happy about it. Whenever I go dating, I just tell them that I’m going out with friends. They give me a lot of freedom.’ She had her first kiss with her first boyfriend after dating for two weeks.

Yani, 16, who had three boyfriends, will tell her parents ‘when I think I’m very serious about a guy’.

If the kids aren’t talking, experts say parents need to introduce the subject.

‘There is nothing you can do to stop it. If you clamp down, you will just push it underground,’ said Dr Yeo.

Prof Chung agreed: ‘Parents need to talk to their children in a positive way and not be authoritarian. Dating is okay at that age as long as they treat it as part of their social life — not too serious and not too casual.’

Both also thought that sexual education should start as early as late primary.

While most teens want to play the dating game, Samuel Mo, 18 — who had his first date at 15 — wished he had been more patient. His first relationship lasted 10 months and ended badly.

He said: ‘At that age, I don’t think we are mature enough or ready to face the consequences. We are just indulging our curiosity. Personally, I think we should wait till 18.’

jeremyau@spf.com.sg

THE TEEN DATING POLL shows that young romance blossoms between the ages of 12 and 16, according to the majority of those surveyed.