

by Thelma Barys

LAST WEEK we had an old-fashioned melodrama at our house. My daughter Anne was the fair maiden. Jim, her too-faithful beau, was the hero. Needless to say, I was the villain. Briefly, the plot involved a girl and boy caught in a major crisis created by her mother, who said, "I honestly believe that 15-year-old girls shouldn't go steady!"

In case your children are not teen-agers, let me tell you, them's fightin' words! And they certainly created a verbal free-for-all in our home.

The mother of

a 15-year-old girl

takes a long, hard look

at dating by young people and says:

"Teen-agers



Having a "steady" makes life more comfortable for teen-agers. Neither has to worry about dates or face problems of adjusting to series of friends. But parents wonder, "Are they ready for it?"

"But Mother," Anne protested, "you'll never understand. You're too old-fashioned. I know all about you and Daddy, and how you dated dozens of others before you went steady. But times are different now. This happens to be 1958!"

Anne is right. Things were different then, for teen-age fashions do change in dating as well as in clothes. But people—children and their parents—stay pretty much the same despite the calendar. I'm as concerned about Anne's happiness and her future this year as my mother was about mine 20 years ago. That's why I've given a lot of thought to this subject, but I still

can't see where steady dating is going to do Anne or any other young person any good.

Many parents feel that teen-agers should be allowed to make these decisions by themselves. They believe that a wise mother might better bite her tongue, temper her counsel, and look upon the positive side of steady dating. I certainly agree that youngsters should be given all the independence they can handle, but this is a problem that requires more experience than Anne has had, and thus necessitates more guidance than she would like. I would be a delinquent parent if I turned my back when she needs my help.

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"But Mother," my daughter asks, "Don't you want me to be happy? Would you rather have me sitting home alone, pining for the phone to ring, or going out with a series of drips and stuttering around for suitable small talk?"

The answers to those questions are obvious. I know how important it is for teen-agers to feel at home with their friends—to belong. I know, too, that having a "steady" makes life more comfortable for Anne and for Jim. Neither of them has Saturday-night woes about where the next date will come from, nor must they face the difficulty of adjusting to a variety of awkward teen-agers.

But is this semisecurity reason enough for steady dating? The answer in my book—an old-fashioned one, to be sure—is no.

GOING STEADY means different things at various ages and stages. My 11-year-old son, for instance, travels steadily with a group of girls and boys. That is *steadily* until baseball season starts; then the girls are dropped as fast as a hot poker. My 13-year-old daughter has a steady suitor, too—a pal who helps her with algebra. As she says, "All of us kids go steady for a week or two."

But with Anne and many other teen-agers in high school, *steady* has a far different meaning. Jim is it, the *real thing*, the comfortable, ever-present partner to whom Anne has pledged her life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness.

She walks to school with him, lunches and studies with him, accompanies him to movies and picnics and dances. Make no mistake about Jim. We like him. It would be hard not to, for he is a handsome boy with a good mind and a suitable respect for oldsters like me. And as Anne says, "We've everything in common: music, sports, chocolate sodas. Why even our fathers are alike—college, Methodist, and Republican."

The very description makes me shudder. Anne sounds like a prospective wife rather than a promising date. And it bothers me plenty that at 15 young people should be acting the role of old marrieds—faithful, settled, steady, and stuffy.

I can't remember looking for a date whose father voted or prayed the way mine did. I can't remember caring whether my dates and I had Gary Cooper or banana splits in common. What mattered then, and I think still should, was that there were dates—and the more the merrier. By playing the field and having fun, I learned the traits, the personality plusses, that I eventually wanted to find in a husband. I learned this by a process of selection and elimination.

stances developed into remarkable men. In short, without casting doubts on Jim's future, what looks divine at 15 can look dismal 15 or 20 years later.

I'M NOT ONLY thinking of marriage when I object to steady dating. I'm fairly sure—and sociologists back me up—that constant companionship at too early an age is causing an alarming increase in petting and premarital intimacy. Also I'm worried about Anne's personal development, or lack of it, for it seems to me that she is curtailing her experience and depriving herself of the joys of being young.

Sure, Jim is around. Anne doesn't have to worry about an invitation to the Junior Prom. Jim needn't scurry for a date, secretly fearing possible rejection. They know beforehand they'll go together. And once there, neither will be a wallflower, for today's rigid adolescent code dictates that they will dance the evening away together. No stags. No cut-ins. No programs or swaps. A recent poll of teen-agers showed that 42 percent approved this pattern, but what of the rest? More than a few must find the evening long when it's spent with someone a little less than the man or girl of their dreams.

All this "togetherness" strikes me as dead wrong. Anne and Jim are entirely too comfortable, too secure. Though adolescence may have its miseries, one of its advantages is that it is a time to practice at adult behavior, to learn from the bumps about oneself, other people, and about life. What have Anne and Jim learned about themselves, about gaining poise to meet new people and new situations? Almost nothing. Anne may be an authority on one boy, yet she knows nothing about boys in general. She is never asked to improve her personality, add luster to her line, sparkle to her life. Jim likes her *just as she is*. And as she is, she's a sweet, unpoised, immature girl of 15.

I've known many girls who suffered through a painful adolescence and emerged as attractive, sought-after women. Why? Simply because the lumps and bumps of growing forced them to do some self-analysis and to develop all their resources. In the long haul they've had far more fun than those who simply got along and found the going too smooth.

WE PARENTS are partially at fault, I'm sure, for we've put tremendous emphasis on popularity. To be liked—at any price—is the way our children have interpreted our advice. I think it is simply the desire to belong, to win approval, which makes girls "go too far" and makes boys feel inadequate with anything less than the prettiest girls.

Going steady is simply a perverse way of solving the whole question of popularity. It's the style, and if you're fashionable you do it.

I'd probably feel differently if Anne had been dating a variety of boys, or if she were 18 or over. Perhaps then I would bite my tongue and temper my counsel. But even mothers of older teen-agers have their worries on the subject. One old friend recently told me that she had urged her daughter to pick a woman's college. Why? "Because I thought Grace would have freedom to meet more different boys. She could date ten men without somebody saying, 'Hands off. She's

dated Fred more than once; she's claimed'."

Another college girl I know went to a coeducational school and objected violently to the restrictions placed on her by the college's pattern of steady dating. "How," she wrote angrily, "is a girl supposed to meet new and attractive people when everyone around is already paired off?"

Anne isn't experienced, and she isn't 18, and she's living at home where I can see day by day what she's missing. I blame myself, too. I think that a lot of us parents miss our chances. We should help our children meet the normal bruises of adolescence by suggesting ways they can plan their fun. If young teen-agers find formal affairs trying, we should encourage simpler parties. Recently a friend said, "You know, at this age I find costumes, even barefoot parties, help break the ice. The kids relax and have fun."

Most of us are too afraid to interfere. We let our teen-agers work out their own parties and arrangements when maybe they'd really like some advice or inspiration. We stand back, reluctant to say "no," even when we know they're wrong. We've forgotten that being 13 or 15 or 17 is hard, but that a warm and understanding family helps. We fail—or fear—to speak up with suggestions, for the melodrama that follows sometimes is hardly worth the price.

Certainly I'm out of touch and out of date in Anne's eyes. Surely she laughs at my old-fashioned notions of teen-age fun. But perhaps it would interest Anne and a lot of other teen-agers to hear that Marilyn Van Derbur, a 20-year-old Denverite, is on my side.

Recently Miss Van Derbur told a group of reporters, "I've always dated several boys at a time, and I think it's the only way to find the right husband. The teens are an especially important time to meet as many persons as possible."

I may be old-hat, but Marilyn Van Derbur is none other than the very modern Miss America of 1958.



Marilyn plays the field. Miss America of 1958.

(Family Weekly welcomes your views on steady dating by teen-agers, in 300 words or less. Letters must be postmarked no later than midnight, Feb. 3. If we print your letter, you will be paid \$25. Letters must be signed but names will be withheld on request. Letters cannot be returned. Address contributions to Dating, Family Weekly, 179 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago 1, Ill.)