

Ready or

Pressure to date is everywhere, but you don't have to fall for it.

What would you do if all your friends started going out with somebody, and you were the only single one? How would you feel if your younger cousin had a boyfriend or a girlfriend and you didn't? For some teens, it wouldn't matter. For others, though, those things would be a reason to go out and find someone of their own, even if they don't really want to. It may seem like everyone but you is going out with somebody. Gossip magazines love to announce the latest hookups and breakups of celebs such as Hilary Duff and Justin Timberlake as if they are of monumental importance. So if you don't date, what does that say about you? Absolutely nothing!

It's perfectly normal to like someone once you become a preteen and puberty kicks in, and it's also normal to not be ready for the lovey-dovey stuff, says psychologist Karen Gail Lewis. But between what you see your friends doing and media messages, the pressure can be overwhelming. Here's how to deal.

No Comparisons

Although it may seem like "everyone" is coupled up, that's not true. A little less than half of all teens between the ages of

12 and 14 have been on dates in the past 18 months, according to the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy. Even if your friends fall into the dating group, don't make comparisons. Everyone develops at different rates, so what works for a friend right now might not necessarily be for you. That doesn't mean he or she is more mature. It just means the two of you are different.

James, 11, from Atlanta, says that some of his friends date, but he also says they don't bug him about not being ready to date. "If your friends are real friends, then they don't care if you are dating or not," he says.


Focus on Other Stuff

If telling friends the straightforward "I'm not interested in dating yet" line doesn't get them to lay off, another good response to dating pressure is, "I'm too busy." Charlotte of Wellesley, Mass., feels dating will get in the way of other priorities. "I don't really feel like I need a boyfriend right now," the 12-year-old says. "Maybe when I'm older; but right now, I'm focusing on other stuff, like sports and schoolwork."

Instead of stressing about not having a boyfriend or girlfriend, get out and do

Not?

By Tamekia Reece



One of four teens feels pressured to date, according to a recent survey.

What's Right, When?

There's no best age to start dating. It's all a matter of personal choice. Here's what experts Dr. Theresa Rohr-Kirchgraber and April Masini, a relationship expert, say is appropriate:

Group Dates: ages 13 and 14

Double Dates: 15 or 16

One-on-One and/or

Exclusive Relationships: 16 or older

something, says April Masini, a relationship expert. "Make some plans for yourself that are fun, so you're not focused on being 'the only single one,'" she says. How to keep busy? Do volunteer work, hang out with another nondating friend, watch a movie, throw a party, or take up a new hobby, Masini says. By having things to do, you will be telling the truth when you say you're too busy to date.

Blame Your Folks

Madonna has said there will be no dating for her 11-year-old daughter, Lourdes, until she's 18. So Lourdes has an ironclad

reason to turn guys down: her mom! If you're not ready to start dating, you can use your parents as an excuse too, says Dr. Theresa Rohr-Kirchgraber, an assistant professor at Emory School of Medicine in Atlanta. If you're asked out but not ready to get involved, she suggests you simply say, "Can't. My parents won't allow it." No further explanation is needed—and your parents probably won't mind if you use them as an excuse!

Do the Friend Thing

Just because you're not ready to date doesn't mean you should avoid the opposite sex. Liz, 13, of Milford, Mass., says that a lot of girls in her grade feel pressured to date, but she's fine with just being friends with boys. "I like [being friends] a lot better than dating because you can be yourself and get to know people," she says.

Being friends without having to worry about impressing a boyfriend or a girlfriend also helps you learn how to understand and deal with the opposite sex, Rohr-Kirchgraber says. Those lessons will come in handy when you do decide to date because you'll already know why members of the opposite sex act the way they do! **CHI**

Quiz Are You Ready to Date?

1. I sometimes break my curfew.

true false

2. I do odd jobs, such as babysitting, for spending money.

true false

3. If my friends and I are invited to a party by someone we don't know, I'll go.

true false

4. I sometimes lie to my parents about where I'm going.

true false

5. Even if I feel I'm ready, if my parents say I can't date, I won't.

true false

6. My schoolwork and other activities are top priorities.

true false

If you answered true to questions 1, 3, or 4, or false to 2, 5, or 6, you're not ready. Dating requires you to be responsible, trustworthy, and able to make good decisions. If you need your parents to always pay for your date, and you're willing to break the rules or hang out with strangers, you're not ready yet. Wait a while.