MENTAL HYGIENE

Classroom Films 1945-1970

KEN SMITH
"Your physical urges fight against your reason. In the height of emotion it's not always easy to think things through."
—*HOW MUCH AFFECTION?* (1957)

**DATING**

Dating films, viewed today, come across as stiff and small-minded. But they represent a tough admission on the part of late-1940s parents: the old, adult-supervised rituals of courtship had become outmoded in the postwar world, and kids were now free to roam, hang out, and chart their own social course through life.

That freedom, however, did not extend to the serious business of hanky-panky. Postwar teenage courtship may have escaped the watchful eyes of mom and dad, but it had not escaped the adult-dictated customs of society, which were just as unyielding and vigilant. Dating films served as a way to remind teens of that. They also allowed adults to present their views on teenage dating habits through the films' teenaged characters. It often wasn't a pretty picture. "You can't help getting into situations where petting's likely to start," cautions Lucy in *How to Say No* (1951). "Just give him half a chance, alone, and there's no stopping him!"

Dating films tackled three deep-seated fears of nervous post–World War II parents, none of which they felt comfortable discussing with their kids. The first was that their children, bereft of guidance, would end up as social misfits. The second was that they might rush into marriage without thinking things through, setting the stage for almost inevitable future divorce or lifelong unhappiness. The third was sex, either reluctantly agreed to by daughters ("Some girls think they *have* to permit it," Lucy explains, "for 'date insurance'") or genuinely consensual and leading to unwanted pregnancy.
High-school romance blossoms over the telephone in *What to Do on a Date* (1951), above, and *Dating: Do's and Don'ts* (1949), right. Nick and Kay end up sharing Cokes with the gang, while Woody and Ann demonstrate the right and wrong way to "say goodnight."
Sometimes romance goes too far. Mr. Hall aided by Coonst’s props department cautions Sue and Larry against early nuptials in *Are You Ready for Marriage?*, 1950.

These were not irrational concerns. Although the postwar years are often portrayed as a period of no-holds-barred baby making, early marriage and young families were, in fact, discouraged. Most adults were embarrassed by the “necessity nuptials” of World War II and the scandalously high divorce rates that followed. (In 1946, for example, the courts in Reno, Nevada, granted eleven thousand divorces—an average of over thirty a day—still an all-time high.) Furthermore, the middle class looked down on early marriage as a lower-class phenomenon, an indulgence of the under-educated, often triggered by unplanned parenthood.

Dating films seemed ideally suited to tackle these thorny issues, which were beyond the range of experience of most moms and dads. More than any other form of mental hygiene, they were relied on by parents as a magic new technology, crafted by experts, impossible for an older person to understand. All you as a parent had to do was to make sure your kid went to school when they showed the dating film. Presto! Everything was taken care of in the comfort of a darkened classroom.

Unfortunately, it didn’t work out that way.

Dating films, at least the ones dealing with the early stages of courtship, are the most beloved of all mental hygiene films today. It would be unfair to accuse the people who made them of lacking a sense of reality, although the films certainly lack it now. We can’t travel back in time and view *Are You Popular?* in a classroom in 1947, or *Dating: Do’s and Don’ts* in 1949, or *What to Do on a Date*.
DATE in 1951, so we will never really know if their audiences found them enlightening or just dumb. They were shown in schools into the 1970s, which suggests at least some measure of identification and acceptance.

Dating films cover a wider range of social situations than most people realize. The popular image is of films such as Date Etiquette (1952) and Beginning to Date (1954), in which a typical date unfolds for our edification: a boy nervously asks a girl out, a destination for their date is agreed upon (always a well-populated place), a return deadline is set, the boy meets the girl’s parents, the boy and girl make awkward conversation, the evening ends with a heartfelt handshake. “Considerate escorts,” notes Mary in The Prom: It’s a Pleasure! (1961), “make sure their dates don’t have to remind them that it’s time to go.” These films are filled with warmhearted, reassuring images, but they were only the first tier of dating films, aimed at social greenhorns. Older teens, wise to the messier aspects of relationships, saw darker films that addressed thornier issues.
For example, in Going Steady? (1951) Jeff and Marie encounter non-stop unpleasantness: their parents frown on their exclusive relationship, their friends offer unwelcome advice, and they aren’t even sure they want to go steady anyway. “I’d rather go out with Jeff—but I wish the others wouldn’t ignore me so!” Marie wails in frustration. The solution to their predicament is simple: they back off. It’s the same advice that’s given in films such as How Do You Know It’s Love? (1950) and Social-Sex Attitudes in Adolescence (1953): keep circulating. One-on-one relationships only lead to trouble.

Those young people who refused to heed these warnings had to contend with “marriage-training” films, the adults’ last line of defense. Some of these films featured wise teens, such as Larry and Sue in Are You Ready for Marriage? (1950), who decide to put things off when an on-screen adult counselor explains: “There’s more to marriage than just this boing.” Others showed the unwise, such as Viv and Rex in Worth Waiting For (1962), who end up living with mom and a screaming baby. Even young couples who forged successful marriages apparently enjoyed only meager happiness, especially the wife. In Marriage Is a Partnership (1951) newlywed Dottie
spends all her time in the kitchen, learns to enjoy eating liver because her husband likes it, and is elated when he drags a finger through her cake icing. "Believe me, a wife does appreciate her husband's appreciation."

The great outpouring of mental hygiene dating and marriage films ended by 1958. Only occasional stragglers appeared thereafter; usually sponsored by businesses (who only used them as a cover for product promotion) and churches. A new crisis had arisen in October 1957—the launch of Sputnik and the apparent technological superiority of the Soviet Union—that demanded the attention of America's educational film producers. Dating films were shunted to a back burner and the rapidly changing social climate of the 1960s ensured that they would stay there. Culturally defunct, hopelessly hokey, they were the least adaptable of all mental hygiene films. Like dinosaurs, they became extinct.