



HUGGY BUNCH

Middle and high school students, particularly girls, choose the embrace as their preferred form of greeting

By Patricia Gabbett Snow For the Journal

It doesn't matter if they haven't seen each other in weeks, or if they saw each other an hour ago. It doesn't matter if they're boys or girls. It doesn't matter if they're coming or going. They're going to hug. Despite being in nearly constant contact via cell phones, texting, e-mails and instant messaging, and unlike the generations that preceded them, Albuquerque-area middle school and high school students are adopting hugging as their favorite way to greet each other in person. If girls see other girls they know, they hug. If girls see guys they know, they hug. If guys see girls they know, they hug. If guys see guys they know, well, that's another story. Hugs are "like a high five for girls," says Michael Pupiales, 14, a student at La Cueva High School. On a recent afternoon at Century Rio 24 movie theater Pupiales and three guy friends — Jordan Warner, 14, Mike Knowlson, 15, and Connor Hickey, 14 — were getting ready to see "Wanted." All agreed that hugging is a common and accepted form of greeting among teens, as long as they're good friends.

"You don't really hug girls you don't know," Warner adds.

Throughout the theater lobby, young women said they've been hugging their female friends for so long, they can't remember when it started. "We've always done it," shrugged Alex Cason, 14. She and her friend Cheyanne Rivers, also 14, say their teachers at Eldorado generally understand that hugging is simply friendly contact.

"We just hug. It's cooler than shaking hands," added their friend

Ashley Gunderson, 16,

who was visiting from North Dakota and offered her thoughts after walking up and automatically greeting her friends with a hug. Teen guys generally shake hands, high five or bump knuckles, those interviewed said. But that isn't enough for girls. "I guess they're

more affectionate," suggested Luke Smith, 15, of Manzano High School, who was on his way to see "The Love Guru" with his brother Clay, 14.

While girls typically grow up being more physical with their friends, guys apparently don't get into the hugging scene until early middle school.

"When you're going into puberty, you start getting more outgoing," suggested Sean Cobb, 16, of Hope Christian School.

"It's just part of getting older," agreed his friend, Paul McLaughlin, 14.

Hands off the goods

Now, these aren't lingering embraces we're talking about.

Most area middle and high schools have policies against "PDAs" — public displays of affection — in their student handbooks. Many teens said their schools allow only "side hugs," as opposed to "full frontals."

Some schools are apparently more strict about enforcing those rules than others. McLaughlin said there are so many kids at his school, Rio Rancho Mid High, that no one is terribly strict about enforcing the "side hugs only" rule.

Smith said Manzano is "not really too strict" about enforcing the hugging ban, either, "unless you're being kind of nasty about it."

At Rio Rancho High School, security guards sometimes blow whistles at students who get carried away with their hugging, said Jessica Reed, 15. But, if need be, students just give each other a quick hug when no one's watching.

Even Rio Rancho elementary schools have policies on PDAs, school district spokeswoman Kim Vesley said. One reason is to help students learn about acceptable public behavior.

"Really, it's a common sense sort of thing," she said. "A couple of young ladies giving each other a quick hug is looked upon differently than someone making out, for want of a better term."

In other words, putting your arm around someone is acceptable, Vesley said, while "the big clutch" is not.

"Really, it's about trying to help students understand what behavior is appropriate not only in school but in society," she said.

And when students do get carried away, it's considered to be a minor offense, with the school principal or assistant principal to determine the level of consequence necessary, Vesley said.

One big happy family

So, why is all this hugging necessary?

"Because we love our friends," Reed said.

That, and a whole bunch of other reasons, according to Truman Middle School counselor Pat Halama. When students start middle school in sixth grade, they're undergoing numerous transitions, she said, from doing without recess to rotating among classes with different teachers.

"They're starting that process of growing up and separating themselves, and they make some different choices," Halama said.

Hugging becomes a way of both socializing and communicating, "not necessarily something that indicates something more" intimate. It isn't unusual at any middle school to see girls hugging, holding hands or locking arms and walking down the hall together, she said.

Most hallway hugs between guys and gals are "very innocuous" and "not a real big disturbance," Halama said. But, occasionally, students have to be given warnings, and if it gets out of hand, the school might call a parent to tell them that it's becoming disruptive, she said.

In general, today's kids are "a lot more demonstrative" than back in the day. "I'm in my 50s, and when I was in school, the rules were kind of harsh" and more strictly enforced, Halama said. Students saw their friends at school, and that was about it.

"Things are different now. Kids rely on their friends more," she said. Many teens live in households with single parents or two working parents, so they depend on their friends for rides, keeping them in the know and everything in between, she said.

Plus, with today's technology, teens are communicating with each "all times of the day or night."

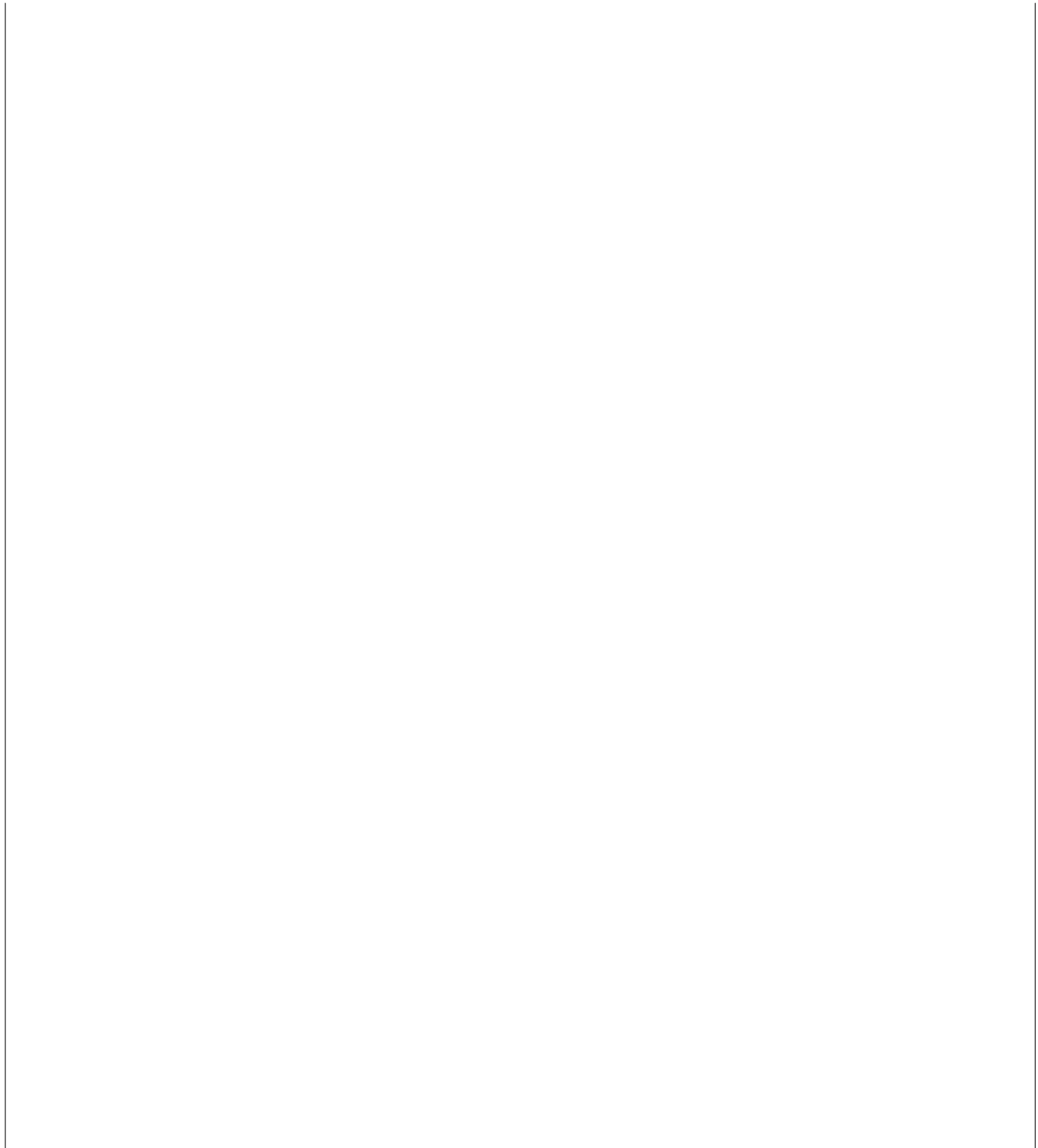
"We said hello or passed a note in class. They hug each other or text each other."

Some of it is cultural, Halama added. "I work primarily with Hispanic kids, and a lot of them have relationships with extended families." Those experiences lead them to consider and call other students their sisters or cousins, even if they're really not, she said.

And then, of course, middle school is when hormones begin racing and emotions are changing constantly, making teens more aware of each other.

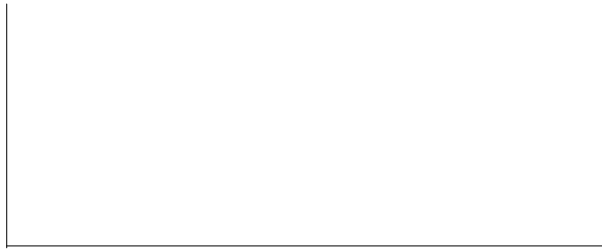
So, no matter what the motivation, no matter where or when, teens will be keeping in touch — literally.





GREG SORBER/JOURNAL Albuquerque's Alex Cason, left, greets friend Ashley Gunderson, 16, who is visiting from Carrington, N.D., with a hug at Century Rio 24 Theaters. Cason, 14, says she and her friends have "always" hugged.





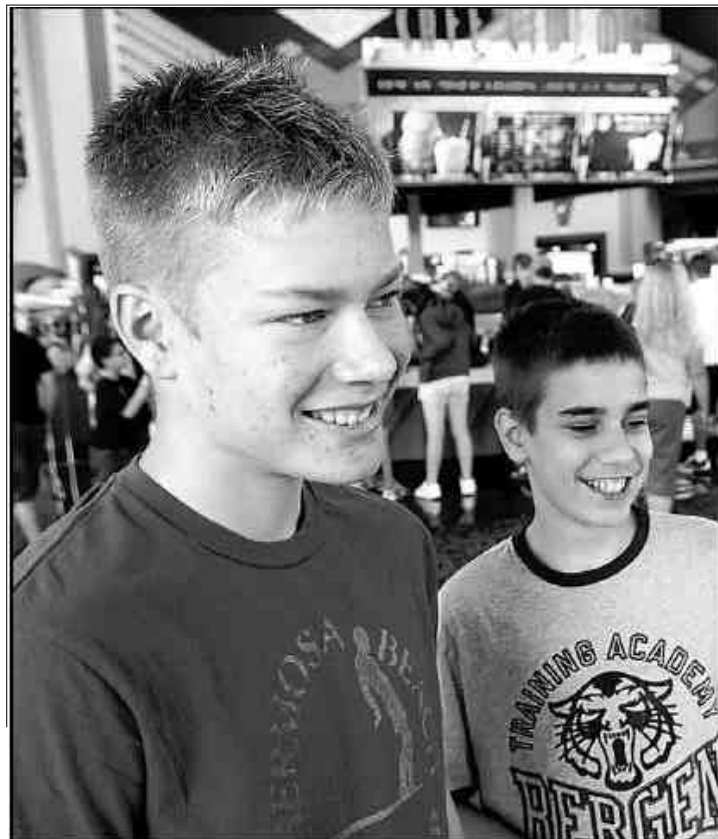
Jorden Warner, 14, left, and Mike Knowlson agree that hugging is an accepted greeting among teens. "You don't really hug girls you don't know," Warner cautions.



PUPIALES: Hugs are "like a high-five for girls"



COBB: In middle school "you start getting more outgoing"





GREG SORBER/JOURNAL Teen guys greet each other with handshakes or high-fives — not the hugs preferred by girls. “I guess they’re more affectionate,” says Luke Smith, 15, left, with his brother Clay, 14.