

GOOD INTENTIONS

The Beliefs and Values of Teens and Tweens Today



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INTRODUCTION

Beliefs and values, and their influence on decision making, have commanded significant media and public attention in the new millennium. In particular, it has been argued that youth today are bombarded with media images of less than exemplary role models in all aspects of life, from professional athletes to politicians. But what life choices will youth make when confronted with real-life dilemmas? Who are the important people in their lives who shape their decision making? How different or similar are young people today on ethics and moral judgment compared with youth 20 years ago?

In 1989, Girl Scouts of the USA published *Girl Scouts Survey on the Beliefs and Moral Values of America's Children*. The study was informed by the work of Dr. Robert Coles, an esteemed child psychiatrist and Pulitzer Prize-winning author, as well as a team of GSUSA staff and other researchers in the field, and was the first of its kind to directly capture the voice of young people on issues such as teen pregnancy, drugs, drinking, community engagement, and more. As part of its commitment to understanding the issues affecting youth today and elevating the voice of girls in national dialogues that impact them, Girl Scouts decided to revisit this landmark research 20 years later.

In 2008, the Girl Scout Research Institute (GSRI) released *Change It Up! What Girls Say About Redefining Leadership*, a national study on youth's attitudes, aspirations, and experiences with leadership. This research revealed that the conventional command-and-control model of leadership prevalent in the culture does not resonate with girls' desire to make a difference in the world around them and that girls want a version of leadership infused with morals and social change values. In *Good Intentions: The Beliefs and Values of Teens and Tweens Today*, we further explore the actual values girls and youth aspire to and how this thinking may inform their leadership skills and qualities. As well, the findings from this study will further inform the continued development of the new Girl Scout Leadership Experience, which will help girls actualize their intentions to live out the values and beliefs they espouse.

Findings from *Good Intentions: The Beliefs and Values of Teens and Tweens Today* highlight the beliefs, values, and commitments that youth express, and generational differences from the 1989 study are highlighted where meaningful.

BACKDROP

This study is situated within the larger context of social research conducted over the last 20 years on the impact of religion, parenting styles, gender differences, and self-esteem on the lives of youth. While the original 1989 study and this follow-up measure youth-intent at one point in time, there is a raft of studies in the field of youth development conducted over the last two decades that have measured youth outcomes—changes in youth behaviors over time that have been valuable for program, policy, and advocacy work. Both types of studies have value to the youth development field, and follow-up work to determine how the intentions of youth profiled in this study may bear out and what influences their everyday actions deserves further attention.

Over the last two decades, the context in which everyday experiences of youth occur have significantly shifted:

- Technology such as the Internet and cell phones is almost ubiquitous and has vastly impacted the ways young people communicate and digest the world, as well as how they think about and share their personal identities.
- Youth today have gone through the events of 9/11 and the Iraq War.
- The economic climate has shifted significantly over the past two decades.
- Globalization has impacted young people’s worldview and sense of possibility. Youth in the United States are growing up in a more racially, ethnically, and religiously diverse environment.
- The media’s coverage of celebrity scandal and gossip has increased dramatically.
- Aggressive product marketing that targets young people has risen significantly and is now aimed at children of the youngest ages.
- At the same time, a plethora of public service campaigns have been targeted to youth regarding the dangers of smoking, drinking, drugs, and other “vice” behaviors.

NOTE ON METHODOLOGY AND TERMS

This study was conducted with Harris Interactive (formerly Louis Harris, Inc., the same firm that worked on the 1989 study). The 2009 research combined both in-school and online survey research, as well as focus groups to gain further insight into the issues covered. The original 1989 questionnaire was used, with some updates for relevance.

A distinguished panel of advisors from the youth development, ethics, education, religion, and curriculum development fields contributed to the framing and analysis of the research findings. (Please see acknowledgment page for a complete list.) Their quotes and reactions to the study can be found woven throughout this report.

A nationwide survey of 3,263 students in grades 3–12 was conducted. The sample included boys and girls both in and out of Girl Scouting. This research design was done to best mirror the original 1989 methodology as well as account for new technologies available for surveying today. Using the school-based method, a total of 1,081 students were surveyed during an English class using a self-administered questionnaire between October 2, 2008 and January 23, 2009. Using an online method, a total of 2,182 students completed a self-administered survey by means of the Internet between October 2008 and November 24, 2008. Data were weighted to key demographic variables to align it with the national population of U.S. students in grades 3–12. Unless otherwise indicated, the student findings discussed in the report are based on this combined data set.

Because past research from the GSRI has shown significant impact of mothers' attitudes and beliefs on their daughters, we also included a sample of mothers in the study. A total of 896 mothers of girls in grades 3–12 completed an online survey. These mothers were invited to have their daughters participate as well, and 506 of their daughters completed the student version of the survey online. This took place between November 7 and November 16, 2008. Throughout the report, results from the mothers' surveys are highlighted in special "Raising Daughters" sections. Findings based on analyses of the relationship between the responses of these mothers and their daughters are highlighted in the section on youth influences.

Six focus groups were also conducted to gain further insight into the study findings: two groups of girls in St. Louis, Missouri, on February 4, 2009, and four groups in New York City on February 11, 2009. The four groups in New York City consisted of

two groups of girls and two parallel groups with girls' mothers. A total of 25 girls in grades 5 – 12 participated in the groups. Most girl and mother quotes in the text come from these focus groups. As well, the GSRI worked with National Girl Consultants, a national advisory group to GSUSA composed of girls ages 14–18, to gather additional quotes from girls and mothers around the country.

For a more detailed discussion of the methodology, please see the appendix on page 47.

Throughout the report, the terms “youth” and “young people” refer to those in grades 3–12 unless otherwise noted. Some questions were only asked of those in grades 7–12, and this is made clear in the text. All percentage differences in the report are statistically significant unless otherwise noted.

It should also be noted that this report measures *intentions and attitudes* throughout rather than actual behaviors. Youth were asked what they *would do* in certain situations. This report should not be confused with one that refers to actual behavior.

HIGHLIGHTS

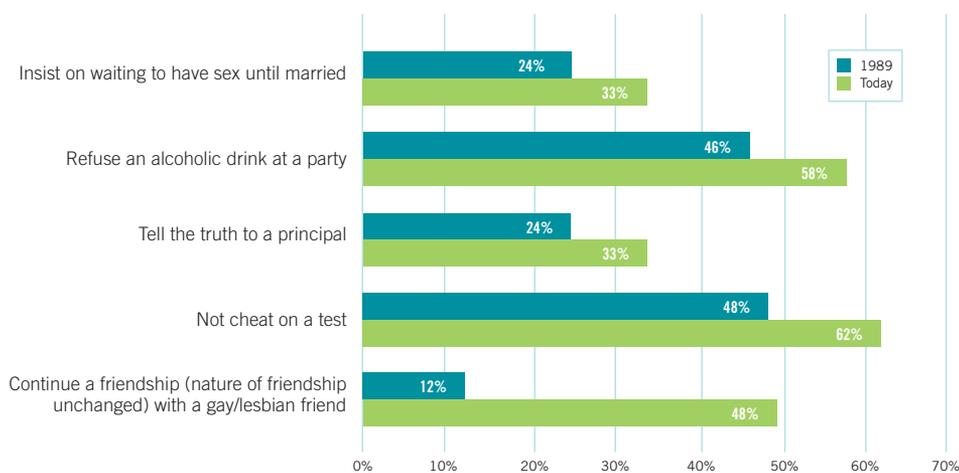
While media portrayals often depict youth as irresponsible, lazy, and morally corrupt, our study offers a different perspective, in which youth are responsible to themselves and others and value being involved in their communities. It also sheds light on an emerging generation that in many ways is more committed to these values than were their predecessors 20 years ago.

The major findings of the research are that youth today:

- Say they will make responsible choices and refrain from risky behaviors.
- Value diversity and acceptance.
- Demonstrate a strong sense of civic commitment and engagement.
- Say they can withstand peer pressures and are willing to stand up for themselves.
- Are strongly influenced by parents, families, and religion when confronting moral dilemmas and ethical decisions. As well, youth employ their own moral compasses to make decisions.
- Differ by gender in some attitudes and how they approach certain decisions.

As demonstrated in the chart below, there have been shifts in the kinds of decisions today's youth say they would make compared with youth 20 years ago, such as abstaining from premarital sex, refusing a drink when offered one at a party, telling the truth to the school principal, not cheating on a test, and continuing a friendship with a friend who is gay or lesbian.

DECISIONS YOUTH SAY THEY WOULD MAKE



All of the above constitute statistically significant differences. Questions of sex, drinking, and continuing a friendship were only asked of 7th- to 12th- graders.

Another prominent change from 20 years ago is the higher percentage of youth today who intend to be civically engaged in their communities. More youth now than in 1989 say they will vote (84% vs. 77%) and give to charity (76% vs. 63%) in the future. As well, this study demonstrates that young people draw significant influence from peers and adults in their lives to make decisions, but at the same time, employ their own moral compasses when doing so.

This report fleshes out the findings stated above and discusses the role that adults have in helping youth actualize their intentions around personal and public responsibility. Youth today say they want to take the responsible road and avoid unhealthy behaviors, but intent and action do not always match. Youth today are also committed to civic engagement through high interest in volunteering and giving back. Overall, young people need meaningful leadership opportunities so they can effect the kind of change they are most interested in—change that makes a difference in the world.

FINDING #1:

YOUTH TODAY INTEND TO MAKE RESPONSIBLE CHOICES AND REFRAIN FROM RISKY BEHAVIORS.

According to this research, youth today intend to be responsible and avoid risky behaviors.

YOUTH INTENTION: MAKE RESPONSIBLE CHOICES

When given hypothetical scenarios, many youth say they will make the responsible choice. In many cases, today's youth say they will be more responsible than said youth 20 years ago. However, enough nuance exists in the answers to show that youth still struggle with making decisions.

Cheating

Scenario: You sit down to take an important test. You know you don't know the answers to most of the questions because you haven't had enough time to study. There is a person sitting next to you who is very smart and well-prepared and you can see her answers.

About 6 in 10 youth (62%) say they would not cheat, answering the test as best they could by themselves, even if they weren't doing well. Younger youth are more likely to say that they would not cheat, and 8% of youth today say they would try to copy their classmate's answers.

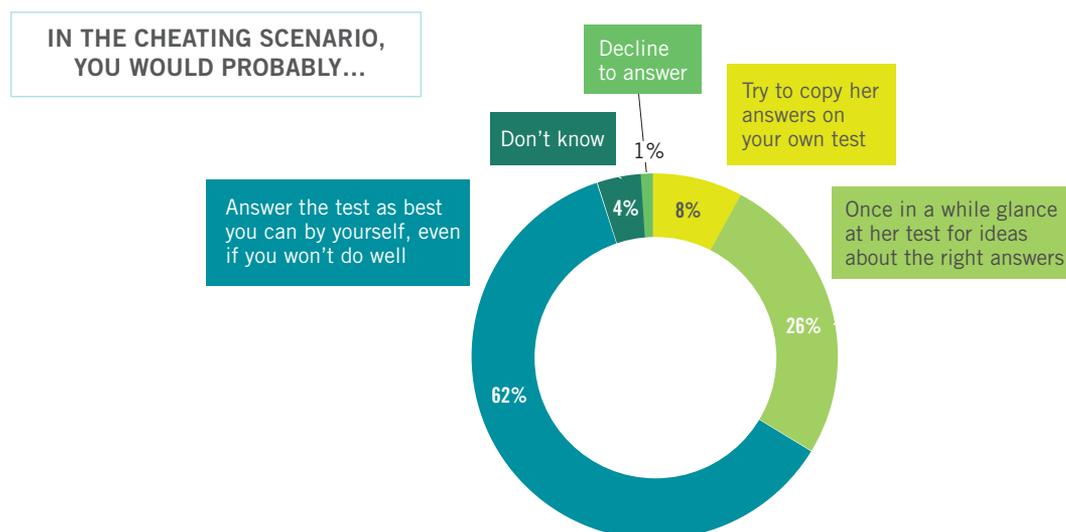
Youth are more likely today to say they would not cheat than they were 20 years ago (62% vs. 48%).

"Many people do the wrong thing at first, but then they steer themselves back into doing the right thing."

—preteen girl, New York City

"I want to go someplace with my life, and if I make bad decisions, I won't reach all the goals I have—like going to college and living a good life." —teenage girl; St. Louis, Missouri

"In school, when it comes to cheating, you know the consequences, so that whole thought process goes through your head." —teenage girl; St. Louis, Missouri



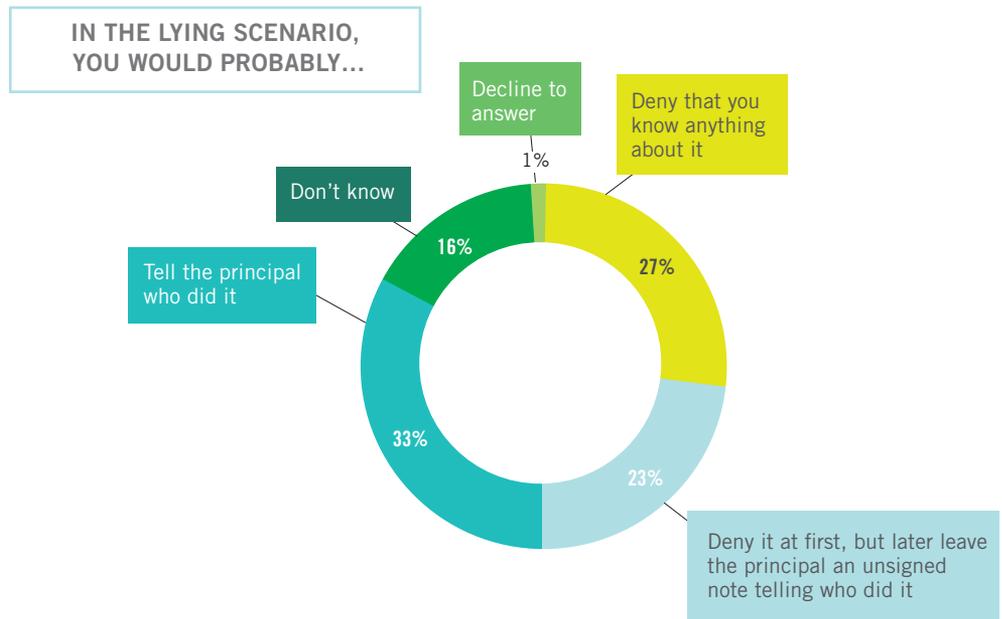
Lying

Scenario: Some school property has been destroyed. Your best friend brags to you that he did it. The school principal asks you if you know what happened.

In this situation, a third of respondents (33%) say they would tell the principal who did it and an additional 23% say they would deny it at first, but then tell the principal anonymously who did it later. Twenty-seven percent say they would deny they knew anything about it, with Hispanic youth (35%) more likely than Whites (25%) and Asians (23%) to say they would do this. One in six (16%) youth do not know what they would do in this situation.

Teenagers are much more likely than younger youth to say they would initially deny knowing anything about the incident. In contrast, 8- to 12-year-olds are more likely than teens to want to tell the principal outright who did it.

Twenty years ago, youth were more likely than they are today to say they would lie to the principal by denying they knew anything about the incident (36% vs. 27%), and less likely than they are today to say they would tell the principal the truth (24% vs. 33%).



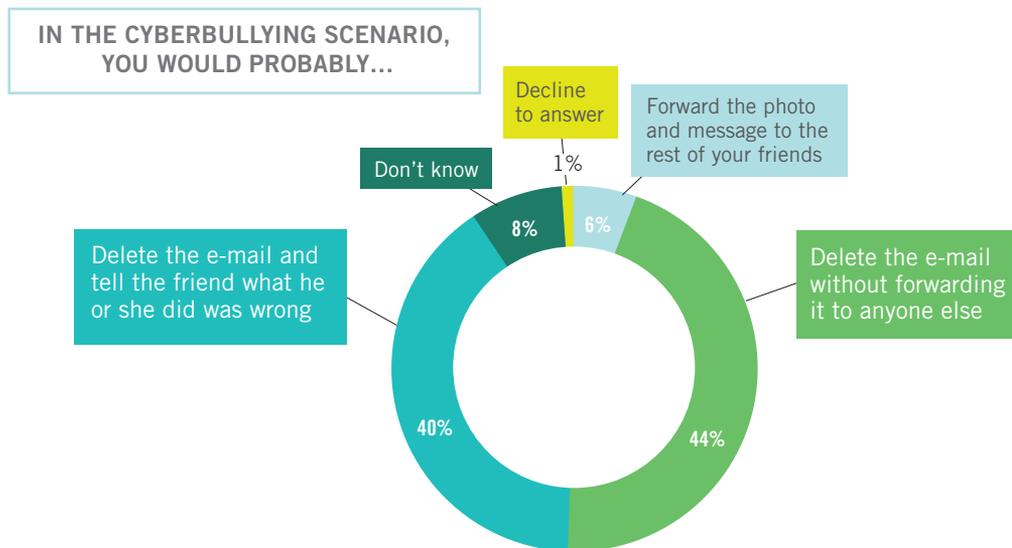
Cyberbullying

A new question added to the survey involved cyberbullying, defined as “using the Internet to harass or ‘bully’ another person.”

Scenario: A friend e-mails to you and some of your friends an embarrassing photo of a girl from school. No one really likes this girl, and you don’t know her very well.

About 4 in 10 youth (44%) say they would delete the e-mail without forwarding it to anyone else. Another 40% say they would take the extra step by deleting the e-mail and telling the offending friend that what they did was wrong, and girls (46%) are more likely than boys (35%) to say they would do this. Only 6% say they would forward the e-mail.

Nearly 1 in 10 (8%) youth overall report that they don’t know what they would do in this situation.



YOUTH INTENTION: AVOID RISKY BEHAVIORS

Many youth today say they will not engage in risky behaviors. In fact, today’s youth say they are well-intentioned in their desire for personal health and safety.

While the reasons for these shifts in attitudes are beyond the scope of this report, we can posit a few ideas as to why the desire of youth to engage in risky behavior has waned in the last two decades. For instance, these attitudes might be attributed to increased public health awareness, health education, and public service

announcements. As will be discussed in a later section, youth today also demonstrate willingness to stand up for what they believe in and are not overly concerned with conforming to peer pressure. These attitudes could translate into not feeling pushed towards “vice” behaviors just to fit in.

Some of the greatest shifts in attitudes among 7th- to 12th-graders:

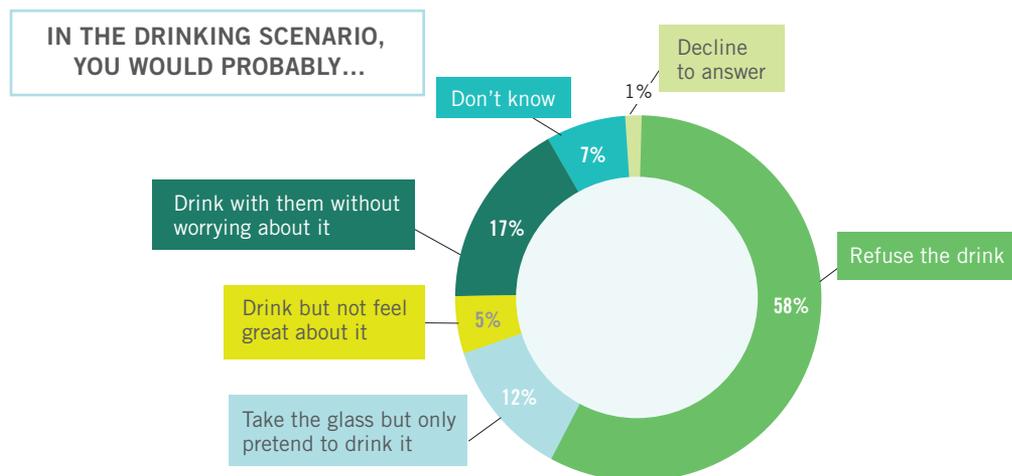
- Fifty-eight percent today say they would refuse an alcoholic drink if offered one at a party (compared to 46% in 1989).
- Thirty-three percent today say they intend to wait until they are married to have sex (compared to 24% in 1989).
- Eighteen percent today think that smoking is okay if the person finds it enjoyable (compared to 27% in 1989).

Underage Drinking

Scenario: You go to a party where some of your friends are drinking alcohol. Someone hands you a drink.

Fifty-eight percent of youth say they would refuse the drink, with 11- and 12-year-olds more likely to say this than their 13- to 17-year-old counterparts. Nearly 2 in 10 youth (17%) say they would drink with their friends without worrying about it. More girls say this than boys (20% vs. 14%). Hispanic (19%) and White (18%) teens are more likely than Asians (8%) to drink without worrying about it.

Twenty years ago, under half (46%) of youth reported that they would refuse the drink, compared to 58% today, and one quarter (25%) said they would drink with their friends without worrying about it, compared to 17% today.



It is encouraging to see that, in many areas, youth today say they will engage in less risky behaviors than they did 20 years ago. For example, young people are firmer in their negative beliefs about smoking. In addition, there is willingness and intent to abstain from alcohol at a party and wait until marriage to have sex.”

—Michael Josephson, founder and president, Josephson Institute of Ethics

Smoking

The majority of youth today do not consider it okay for people to smoke. Nearly three-quarters of preteens and teens (74%) disagree with the statement that “while smoking may not be healthy, if a person finds it enjoyable, it’s okay for that person to smoke.” Teens are more likely to agree that it’s okay for someone to smoke than preteens. In 1989, 27% of youth in grades 7–12 agreed that it was okay for someone to smoke, compared to 18% of youth today.

Drugs

The majority (77%) of today’s 7th- to 12th-graders agree with the statement “selling drugs is foolish because you might get caught.” This is similar to how youth felt about the issue 20 years ago. However, fewer youth today report that drug use is the problem they worry about most, down from 11% in 1989 to 3% in 2009.

Premarital Sex

Attitudes among youth about premarital sex also appear to have shifted. Preteens and teens today are more likely than 20 years ago to say they will insist on waiting until they are married to have sex (33% today compared to 24% in 1989). Also, fewer youth in this age bracket today say that sex before marriage is okay if a couple is in love (44% today vs. 53% in 1989). As youth age, they are more likely to agree that it is okay for a couple in love to have sex before marriage.

When asked what they would do if they were in a steady relationship for a long time, in love, and their boyfriend or girlfriend told them they were ready to have sex, more than one-third (36%) of preteens and teens said they would have sex in 1989, compared to 28% today. There are substantial gender splits at work here, with boys thinking that premarital sex is okay to a greater extent than girls. Given the above scenario, nearly 4 in 10 (38%) boys versus only 2 in 10 (18%) girls today say

“I was talking about Michael Phelps and the marijuana situation, and all of the comments were like, ‘I really looked up to him and now I see he does this and I’m really shocked.’”

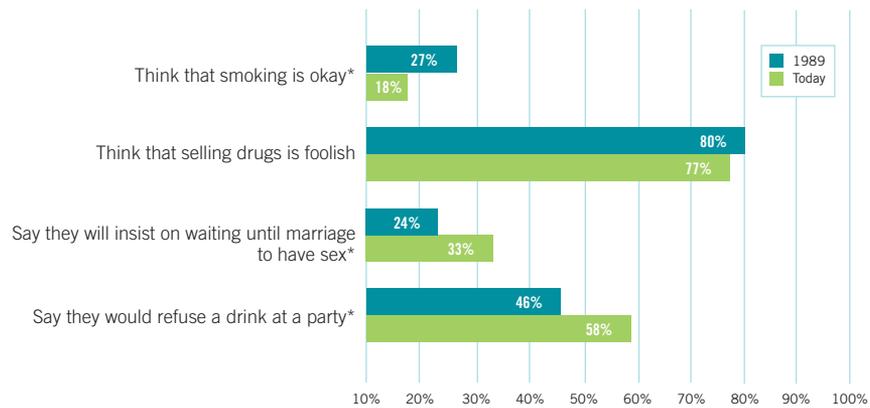
—preteen girl;

St. Louis, Missouri

they would have sex, with older youth more likely to say this than their younger counterparts.

In summary, many preteens and teens today say they will avoid risky behaviors and are less tolerant of smoking. They are also more likely than youth 20 years ago to say they will avoid “vice” activities such as drinking.

ATTITUDES OF 7TH- TO 12TH GRADERS TOWARD RISKY BEHAVIORS



*Indicates statistically significant difference

Abortion

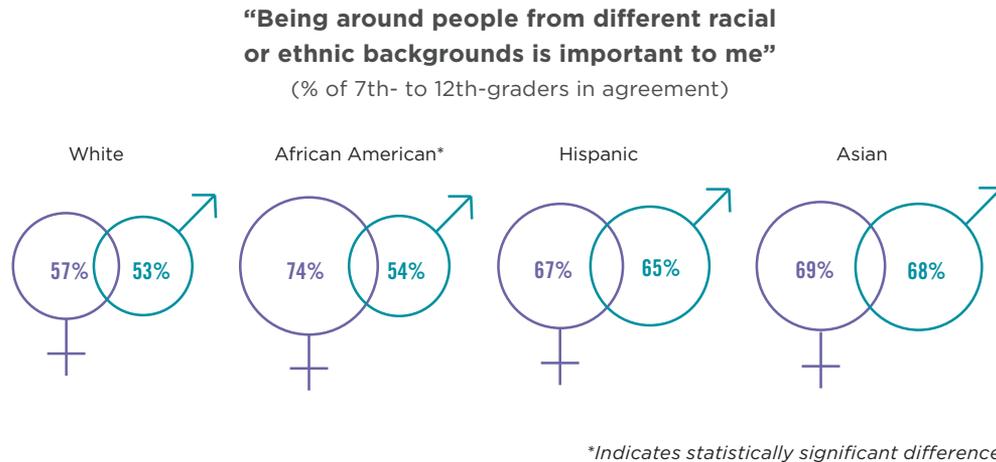
Another topic of interest in this survey was youth’s attitudes about abortion. The proportion of 7th- to 12th-graders who agree that abortion is all right is lower today than it was in 1989. Fewer youth today (25%) than in 1989 (33%) believe that “abortion is all right if having a baby will change your life plans in a way you find hard to live with.” Six in ten (60%) disagree that “abortion is all right, if having a baby will change your life plans”. Fifteen percent do not know how they feel about the matter. Boys are more likely than girls to agree that abortion is all right (29% compared to 20%), and as youth get older they are more likely to agree. White (28%) and Asian (35%) youth in this age bracket are more likely than African Americans (15%) to agree with this as well.

Finally, when asked what they would do if a friend got pregnant and turned to them for advice, a similar number of preteens and teens would advocate for an abortion today as in 1989 (9% today and 12% in 1989), or for the friend to have and keep the baby (34% today compared to 35% in 1989).

FINDING #2:

YOUTH TODAY VALUE DIVERSITY AND ACCEPTANCE.

Most youth today value diversity and accept others. Fifty-nine percent of 7th- to 12th-graders say that being around people from different racial and ethnic backgrounds is important to them. This is particularly important to girls (63% vs. 55% of boys) and Asian (68%), Hispanic (66%), and African American (65%) respondents.¹ Since this question was not asked in 1989, no comparison data are available.



Youth are also more accepting of others than they were 20 years ago. Among youth in grades 7–12 today, 59% agree with the statement “Gay or lesbian relationships are okay, if that is a person’s choice,” compared to 31% who agreed with this in 1989.² Girls are more likely to say this than boys (65% vs. 54%). African American preteens and teens (48%) are less likely to agree that gay or lesbian relationships are okay than are preteens and teens from other minority groups (68% of Asians and 64% of Hispanics).

“While it is refreshing to see evidence that nearly 60 percent of youth, particularly girls and racial/ethnic minorities, say that diversity is important to them, findings from this study suggest that there may be more we can do to assist American boys and girls in valuing the rich cultural diversity our nation has to offer.”

—Janie Victoria Ward, professor of education, Simmons College

¹ Not all of the comparisons between racial and ethnic groups for this specific question are statistically significant.

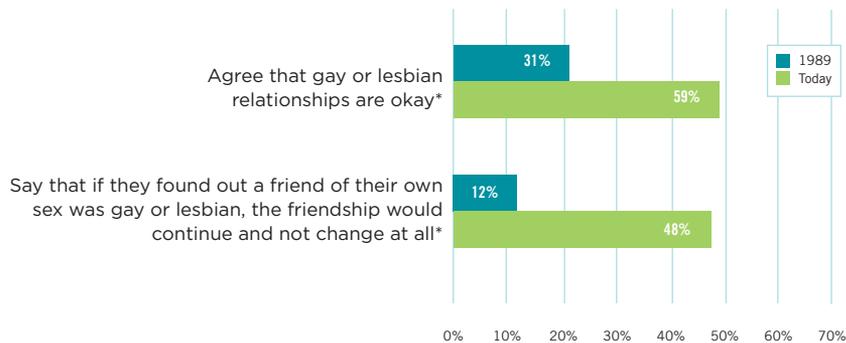
² “Gay or lesbian” was referred to as “homosexual” in the 1989 survey. For comparison purposes, it was necessary to keep the phrasing of all questions as close to the original as possible.

“I would like to be an accepting person—a person who is open to all kinds of ideas and accepts people for who they are. They shouldn’t have to hide any part of themselves around me. I’m not judging them.”

—Sohini Bandy,
National Girl Consultant
to Girl Scouts of the
USA; Austin, Texas

As well, almost half of 7th- to 12th-graders today (48%, compared with 12% in 1989) say that if they found out one of their same-sex friends was involved in a gay or lesbian relationship, they would continue the friendship unchanged. These numbers are very different by gender—almost 6 in 10 girls (59%) would continue the friendship compared with fewer than 4 in 10 (38%) of boys. Furthermore, boys are nearly three times as likely as girls to say their friendship would probably come to an end (20% vs. 7%) and a substantial percentage of boys (17%) admit to not knowing what they would do. More Asian (57%) and Hispanic preteens and teens (56%) would continue the friendship than African American (47%) and White (45%) youth in the same age bracket.

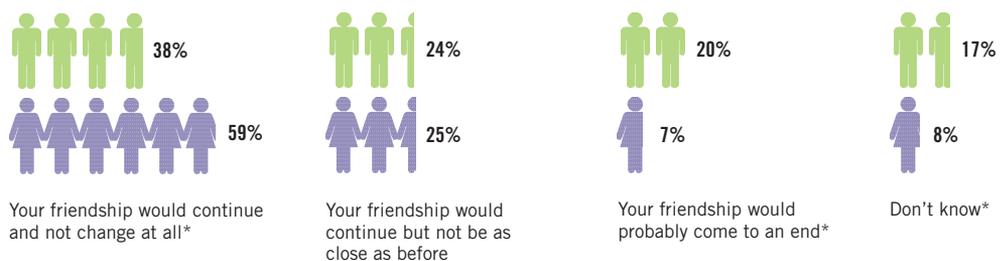
ATTITUDES OF 7TH- TO 12TH-GRADERS TOWARD GAY/LESBIAN ISSUES



*Indicates statistically significant difference

RESULTS OF DISCOVERING A SAME-SEX FRIEND IS INVOLVED IN A GAY/LESBIAN RELATIONSHIP (responses of 7th- to 12th-graders)

“I just think there is more openness about [being gay or lesbian] now. You had to keep it a secret back then.”
—mother of teenage girl,
New York City



*Indicates statistically significant difference

FINDING #3:

YOUTH TODAY DEMONSTRATE A STRONG SENSE OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT.

Most youth expect to vote in every election, give regularly to charity, and volunteer in their community. Furthermore, many youth cite being personally motivated to do these things, rather than feeling obligated to do so. More youth today than in 1989 exhibit a commitment to civic responsibility and engagement.

Regardless of age or gender, many youth say that the most important reason for helping people in their community is that it makes them feel good personally (46%). Girls and younger youth are more likely to say this (51% of girls compared to 41% of boys; 50% of 8- to 12-year-olds compared to 42% of 13- to 15-year-olds and 43% of 16- to 17-year-olds).

“This recent data presents the welcome possibility of a renewal of civic spirit among young people today and a real willingness to engage in the world outside their immediate family and friends. As adults, our role is to help youth actualize these good intentions around voting and civic responsibility so that they do in fact take action to make a positive difference in the world around them.”

—William Damon, professor of education, Stanford University, and director, Stanford Center on Adolescence.

Voting

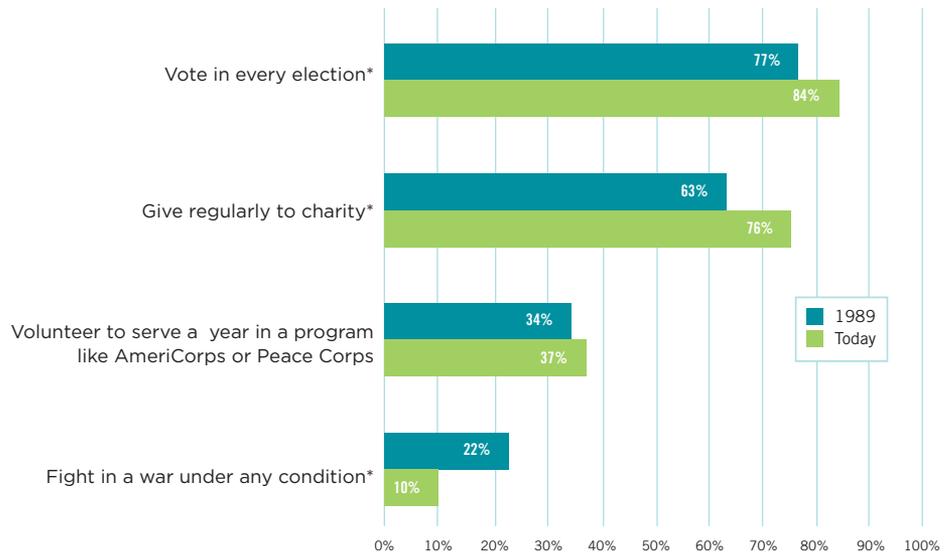
The majority (84%) of 7th- to 12th-graders say they intend to vote in every election, up from 77% in 1989. Motivation for voting has shifted in the last 20 years—more preteens and teens today say they will vote because it is personally what they want to do (59% vs. 42% in 1989). A higher percentage of youth in 1989 said they would vote out of obligation—because it’s the right thing to do (35% vs. 25% now).

Raising Daughters

Seven in ten (70%) mothers say they vote because it is personally what they want to do, and 21% vote because it is the right thing to do.

African American (66%) and White (62%) preteens and teens are more likely than their Hispanic (51%) and Asian (45%) counterparts to say that voting in every election is what they personally want to do; Asian (38%) preteens and teens are more likely to say they will do it because it is the right thing to do compared with White (23%) and African American (22%) youth of this age.

INTENDED FUTURE BEHAVIORS OF 7TH- TO 12TH-GRADERS



*Indicates statistically significant difference

Charitable Giving

Today's preteens and teens also plan to be generous. Three-quarters (76%) say they will regularly give to charity, compared to 63% in 1989. Girls plan to give to charity at a higher rate than boys (80% vs. 72%) and are more motivated by feeling it is personally what they want to do (43% vs. 26%).

Volunteering

Today's youth intend to volunteer locally and nationally. Nearly 8 in 10 youth today (79%) are interested in volunteering in their immediate community (this question was not asked in 1989 so no comparison data are available). As well, 37% of youth say they will volunteer for a year to serve their country in something like AmeriCorps or Peace Corps. This question was asked 20 years ago and the number is similar to what it was then.

Girls (81%) are more likely than boys (77%) to be interested in community volunteering, while more boys (40%) than girls (33%) intend to volunteer as part of a national program.

Military Engagement

An area where youth's interest has dropped in the last 20 years is military engagement. In 1989, 22% of youth in grades 7–12 were willing to fight in a war under any condition, while only 10% say this now. One-third of youth are not willing to fight at all (34% compared to 18% in 1989), with girls significantly more likely than boys (43% vs. 26%) to say this. African American youth (54%) are more likely than those who are White (31%), Hispanic (30%), or Asian (30%) to say they would “fight under no conditions”.

“I love to volunteer and try to help out as much as I can. I think introducing girls to volunteering teaches them to do good and be kind.”

—*mother of teenage girl, New York City*

“If no one were to volunteer, we would all just be sitting here with nothing. Someone's got to do it.”

—*teenage girl, New York City*

“Younger people are starting to realize that environmental problems are going to affect them very directly. It’s about [their] self-interest, but there’s also a spirit of community—people feel like they need to band together.”

—teenage girl;
Lawrence, Kansas

Taking Care of the Environment

Youth exhibit a strong sense of community and global responsibility in their attitudes toward environmental stewardship. Fully 78% of 7th- to 12th-graders—girls and boys across all age groups—agree that everyone has a responsibility to take care of the environment. A higher percentage of Hispanic preteens and teens feel this way (86%), compared to 82% of Asian, 77% of White, and 70% of African American youth.

Overall, today’s youth exhibit a strong sense of civic and community responsibility, and in many ways, plan to be more engaged than did youth 20 years ago.

FINDING #4:

YOUTH TODAY SAY THEY CAN WITHSTAND

PEER PRESSURES AND ARE WILLING TO STAND UP

FOR THEMSELVES.

While this research shows that young people are confident socially and say they are not overly preoccupied with conforming to peer behavior, they feel pressure regarding their futures and obeying authority figures. They are also less optimistic about their futures than were young people 20 years ago.

Pressure to Fit In

Twenty-six percent of youth report feeling pushed to fit in today, compared to 34% in 1989. About 6 in 10 (62%) youth report that they hardly feel pushed “at all” to be popular—to “fit in”—a number that has not changed significantly since 1989. This feeling fluctuates with age, with the oldest teens feeling pushed to fit in the least.

Speaking Their Minds

Seventy-nine percent of today’s youth say they would express an opinion even if it were not popular. More than half (54%) say they would express an opinion, even if it were not popular, because they were personally interested in expressing it, and a quarter (25%) say they would do so simply because it would be the right thing to do. More 7th- to 12th-graders today report that they would voice their opinions than they did 20 years ago (79% vs. 72%).

Mounting Adult Pressures

Many youth today feel pressure to be obedient to authority figures. More than 8 in 10 (83%) report feeling pressure to obey teachers and parents “a lot,” compared to 76% in 1989. Seventy-nine percent of youth also feel pushed to get good grades in school, and this increases around the middle school through high school years. Similarly, when asked what youth worry about the most, 1 in 5 (22%) cite pressures to do well in school and sports.

In addition, youth today are anxious about the future, with 72% saying they feel pushed “a lot” to prepare for the future (compared to 63% in 1989). Boys, more so than girls, feel pressure to earn money (64% vs. 56%); these numbers are similar to what they were in 1989. Youth also feel this pressure increases as they grow older.

“Some people are shy, but you have to step up sometimes so you can be a leader in the future.”

—teenage girl, New York City

“I think we’ve become more individually oriented. The herd mentality hasn’t gone by the wayside by any means, but kids are more willing to express their ideas and opinions.”

—teenage girl; Lawrence, Kansas

This research uncovered additional findings about how youth regard their current and future lives:

- Nearly two-thirds (65%) of girls believe there are more opportunities for young people in America today than there were for their parents, which is significantly more than boys (57%). However, optimism has dropped from 20 years ago, when 72% of girls and 62% of boys believed there were more opportunities for them than there were for their parents. Today, African American youth (20%) are more likely than White (15%) or Hispanic (12%) youth to say that there are fewer opportunities compared to when their parents were growing up.
- Almost four in ten (39%) youth today think it is harder for them growing up now than it was for their parents. This is down from 50% who thought this in 1989. In particular, Hispanic (38%) and African American youth (35%) are more likely than White youth (26%) to think that it is easier for them growing up today than it was for their parents.
- In 1989, 30% of youth said that making a lot of money would be the most important reason to choose a future job, compared to 21% of youth today. Boys (26%) are significantly more likely than girls (17%) to say this.
- Even in a society that is increasingly celebrity focused, about the same level of youth today as in 1989 say that becoming a famous or important person will be the most important thing for them (5% compared to 7%). Half (50%) of youth today say that being a famous or important person is the least important thing as they face the future.

In summary, youth today are optimistic realists. They are hopeful about what lies ahead but understand that challenges will exist. Today's youth worry about such concerns as their futures, as well as getting good grades and obeying authority figures. However, they also appear socially confident and not overly fixated on conforming to peer behavior.

FINDING #5:

WHEN CONFRONTING MORAL DILEMMAS AND DIFFICULT DECISIONS, YOUTH TODAY DRAW STRONG INFLUENCE FROM A VARIETY OF SOURCES, ESPECIALLY PARENTS AND FAMILY.

Parents and Families

Parents and families play a large role in the lives of young people today. The vast majority of youth say they have an adult in their life who cares about them (94%), and this percentage is highest for White (95%) and Asian (90%) respondents. Of the youth who have someone who cares, 92% specify their parent(s).

As well, youth have a greater constellation of adults who care about them than they did in 1989. Fully 68% cite a grandparent, uncle, aunt, or other extended family member as a special adult in their lives, compared to 59% who cited this 20 years ago. Youth now are also more likely to say that a teacher or coach is a special adult in their life (44% vs. 33%).

Today, White youth are more likely than African American and Hispanic youth to name a grandparent, uncle, or aunt (73% vs. 59% vs. 66%); teacher or coach (49% vs. 38% and 37%); neighbor (26% vs. 18% and 16%); or adult leader of a youth group (20% vs. 10% vs. 14%) as someone who cares about them.

Parents are also the most common source of advice (62%) when youth encounter uncertainty in a given situation. This is followed by friends (31%), and a grandparent, uncle, aunt, or other extended family member (a combined 19%). However, turning to parents decreases as youth age. Boys (65%) turn to their parents for advice at a higher rate than do girls (58%), but as they get older both boys and girls decline similarly in how often they say they turn to their parents. In addition, White youth (65%) are more likely to turn to their parents than African American youth (54%).

“One of the really positive developments is the increasing number of young people who say they have a special adult in their lives outside of their parents who cares about them, like an aunt or a coach. Having a network of concerned and involved adults in their lives is a wonderful resource for young people to draw on as they maneuver their way through the challenges and opportunities of adolescence.” —Vicky Rideout, vice president, Kaiser Family Foundation, and director of the Program for the Study of Media and Health

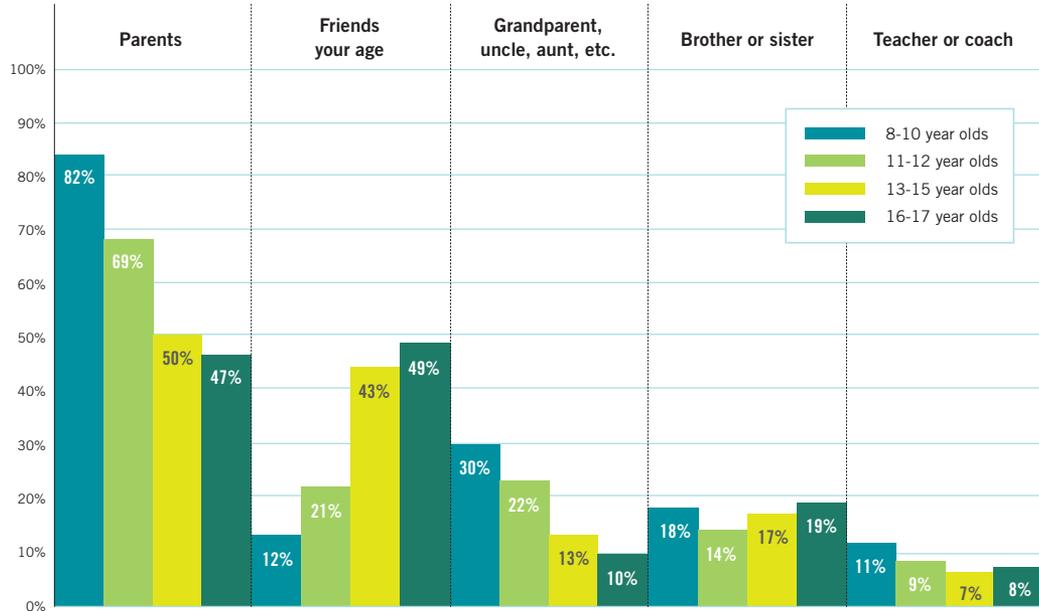
“Last year I had a big problem, so I talked to my parents and we worked it out.”

—preteen girl, New York City

“A perfect example is when we’re watching a movie. Something will happen on the screen and I’ll be like, ‘So how do you feel about that?’ It’s an open opportunity for me to have a conversation with my kids.”

—mother of teenage girl, New York City

“When you don’t know what the right thing to do is, to whom are you most likely to turn for advice?”



More girls (39%) than boys (23%) say they turn to friends. As youth get older, friends figure more prominently as a source of advice. White youth (35%) are more likely to turn to their friends than are Hispanic (25%) and African American (22%) youth.

Twenty years ago youth turned to their friends for advice at a higher rate than they do today. In 1989, 43% said they would turn to a friend their age if they didn’t know the right thing to do, compared to 31% now.

The majority of 7th- to 12th-graders (87%) look to their families to help solve America’s problems as well. This is followed by teachers and educators (85%), and the government (76%). Science and investors are also important, although more boys (70%) than girls (61%) think this. About 6 in 10 (58%) say that neighborhood or community groups play a role. This is particularly true for Asian (67%) and African American (64%) youth. As well, 57% of youth say that religious leaders and organizations have a role, and African American young people are more likely to say this (67%) compared to other racial/ethnic groups. Only 22% look to celebrities to help solve America’s problems.

“You learn by parents saying ‘no, you can’t do this’ or ‘yes, you can do that.’”
—preteen girl; *St. Louis, Missouri*

“I usually talk to my friends first, because they’re in the same boat as me.”
—teenage girl, *New York City*

Raising Daughters

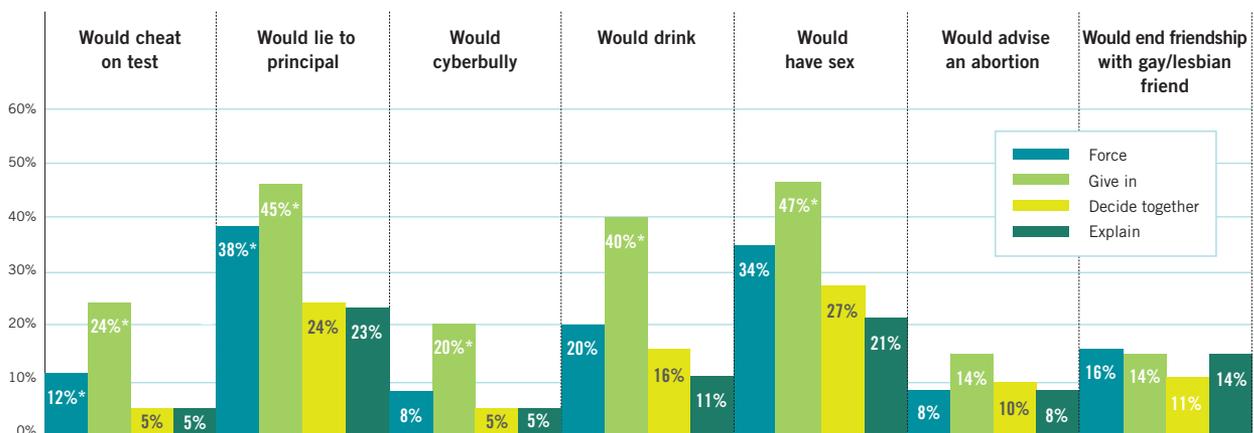
Mothers of daughters believe families play an even more important role in solving America's problems than do youth. Nearly all (98%) moms believe families play a very or somewhat important role.

Parenting style also relates to youth's choices. What kind of relationship do parents have with their children? What is most likely to happen when youth and their parents disagree about something? When asked to respond to which parenting style best represents their own experience:

- Forty percent of youth say their **parents explain** why it is important to act according to their wishes.
- Thirty percent say they **decide together** with their parents what is best.
- Twenty-two percent say their **parents force** them to do what they (parents) think is best.
- Five percent say their **parents give in** and let them do whatever they want.

While this study cannot determine behaviors that are a direct result of parenting style, some interesting distinctions emerge. For example, a higher percentage of youth who say their parents either “give in” or “force” say they would commit behaviors such as cheating and lying, compared to those who say their parents explain decisions or they decide together. Youth with parents who give in are also likely to say they would have sex, drink, and cyberbully.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN YOUTH'S RESPONSE AND PARENTING STYLE



*Indicates item is statistically different from at least one other parenting style category. Questions of sex, drinking, abortion, and ending a friendship were only asked of 7th- to 12th-graders.

Raising Daughters

Perhaps not surprisingly, mothers and daughters share many of the same ethical principles and sense of civic responsibility. Among the mother-daughter pairs that participated in a separate component of this research, mothers' and daughters' views are significantly correlated in attitude questions about social issues, with the highest correlations in the more polarizing topics of abortion and gay or lesbian relations. In addition, mothers' and daughters' views on expressing their opinions and giving to charity are highly related.³

Moral Compasses

When unsure what to do in a particular situation, youth are also guided by a variety of moral compasses. The following compasses are based on the work of Dr. Robert Coles and were used in the 1989 survey, with the exception of Conscience Follower, which was added due to its popularity as a write-in choice 20 years ago:

- **Conscience Follower—24%**: Youth follow their conscience/do what they think is right.
- **Conventionalist—19%**: Youth follow the advice of an authority, such as a parent or teacher.
- **Theist—13%**: Youth do what God or scripture tells them to do.
- **Expressivist—11%**: Youth do what makes them personally happy.
- **Civic Humanist—8%**: Youth do what is best for everyone involved.
- **Utilitarian—5%**: Youth do what improves their situation or helps them get ahead.

Nine percent of youth answered “don't know” and 11% left this question blank.

There are interesting demographic and attitude differences between youth in these categories.

³A full description of this data analysis can be found in the appendix.

“When making decisions,
I listen to my inner voice.”
—teenage girl; Austin, Texas

A quarter of youth (24%) follow their conscience, which is particularly true of teenagers. This is the most common moral compass.

“CONSCIENCE FOLLOWERS” *Key Trait: Idealistic*

DEMOGRAPHICS

- Average age of 13.6
- White (64% compared to 57% of Civic Humanists, 54% of Conventionalists, 45% of Expressivists, 50% of Theists, and 37% of Utilitarians)

ATTITUDES

- Less likely to say that making a lot of money will be the most important factor in their future career choice (19% compared to 33% of Expressivists and 31% of Utilitarians)
- Less likely to say religious beliefs are important (63% compared to 97% of Theists and 81% of Conventionalists)
- Top two sources of advice are parents (55%) and friends (45%)

Almost 2 in 10 youth (19%) say they follow the advice of an authority figure. Not surprisingly, this group seeks to follow rules and feels more pressure to do so. Younger youth are more likely to say they do this than their older counterparts.

“CONVENTIONALISTS” *Key Trait: Rule abiding*

DEMOGRAPHICS

- Average age of 12
- Younger (67% are in 7th grade or below)

ATTITUDES

- More likely to say religious leaders and organizations are very or somewhat important in solving America’s problems (70% compared to 44% of Civic Humanists, 49% of Conscience Followers, 52% of Utilitarians, and 52% of Expressivists)
- Feel a lot of pressure to obey parents and teachers (90% compared to 77% of Expressivists)
- Agree that everyone has an obligation to take care of the environment* (90% compared to 62% of Expressivists and 78% of Theists)
- Top two sources of advice are parents (82%), and grandparents, aunt, uncle, or other extended family member (24%)

BEHAVIORS

- Say they will vote in every election* (90% compared to 81% of Expressivists and 77% of Utilitarians)
- Say they will volunteer in their community* (90% compared to 69% of Expressivists, 72% of Utilitarians, and 79% of Conscience Followers)
- Say they would answer to the best of their ability, without cheating, on an important test, even if they knew they weren’t going to do well (74% compared to 54% of Civic Humanists, 45% of Expressivists, 47% of Utilitarians, and 56% of Conscience Followers)
- Say they would tell the principal if a friend destroyed school property (47% compared to 19% of Civic Humanists, 17% of Expressivists, 17% of Utilitarians, and 25% of Conscience Followers)
- Turn to parents for advice (82% compared to 58% of Civic Humanists, 45% of Expressivists, 50% of Utilitarians, and 55% of Conscience Followers)

*Pertains to youth in grades 7–12

Thirteen percent of youth say religion is very important in their current and future decision making.⁴

“THEISTS” Key Trait: Highly religious

DEMOGRAPHICS

- Average age of 12.4
- Younger (53% are in 7th grade or below)

ATTITUDES

- Say religious leaders and organizations are very or somewhat important to solving America’s problems* (92% compared to 44% of Civic Humanists, 70% of Conventionalists, 52% of Expressivists, 52% of Utilitarians, and 49% of Conscience Followers)
- Believe the most important reason for helping people in their community is that “your religious and philosophical beliefs encourage you to” (30% compared to 5% of Civic Humanists, 11% of Conventionalists, 3% of Expressivists, 7% of Utilitarians, and 7% of Conscience Followers)
- Say that sex before marriage is a sin* (87% compared to 22% of Civic Humanists, 49% of Conventionalists, 19% of Expressivists, 24% of Utilitarians, and 29% of Conscience Followers)
- State that gay and lesbian relationships are never acceptable* (66% compared to 15% of Civic Humanists, 37% of Conventionalists, 27% of Expressivists, 38% of Utilitarians, and 19% of Conscience Followers)
- State that their religious beliefs are very important to them (92% compared to 27% of Civic Humanists, 48% of Conventionalists, 33% of Expressivists, 30% of Utilitarians, and 28% of Conscience Followers)
- Say that the most important factor in choosing their future job will be “God’s will” (41% compared to 1% of Civic Humanists, 8% of Conventionalists, 5% of Expressivists, 6% of Utilitarians, and 3% of Conscience Followers)
- Top two sources of advice are parents (71%) and friends (21%)

BEHAVIORS

- Say they would tell the principal on a friend if that friend had destroyed school property (49% compared to 19% of Civic Humanists, 17% of Expressivists, and 17% of Utilitarians)
- Say they would delete an embarrassing photo they received in an e-mail and talk to the friend who sent it (58% compared to 44% of Conventionalists, 41% of Civic Humanists, 22% of Expressivists, and 29% of Utilitarians)
- Say they would refuse an alcoholic drink at a party* (81% compared to 55% of Civic Humanists, 38% of Expressivists, 52% of Utilitarians, and 59% of Conscience Followers)
- Turn to religious leaders for advice (11% compared to 3% of Civic Humanists, 2% of Conventionalists, 0% of Expressivists, 1% of Utilitarians, and 2% of Conscience Followers)

**Pertains to youth in grades 7–12*

⁴See page 38 for further discussion on religion

Eleven percent of youth are concerned primarily with their own happiness. These youth feel pressure to engage in riskier behavior and make less responsible choices, and are less likely to value civic engagement.

“EXPRESSIVISTS” *Key Traits: Independent, Rebellious*

DEMOGRAPHICS

- Average age of 13.5

ATTITUDES

- Feel more pressure to disobey parents and teachers (14% compared to 6% of Civic Humanists, 7% of Conventionalists, 6% of Theists, and 8% of Conscience Followers)
- Rate making money the highest on their list of reasons they will choose a future job
- Say they will probably not vote in every election* (13%) at higher rates than Civic Humanists (3%), Conventionalists (5%), and Theists (4%)
- Say they will probably not give to charity regularly* (21%) at higher rates than Conventionalists (10%) and Theists (3%)
- Less willing to fight in a war than other groups* (49% would be willing to fight under no conditions compared to 26% of Conventionalists, 30% of Utilitarians, and 34% of Conscience Followers)
- Top two sources of advice are parents (45%) and friends (43%)

BEHAVIORS

- Say they would forward an embarrassing photo of a girl from school (16% compared to 5% of Civic Humanists, 5% of Conventionalists, 2% of Theists, and 4% of Conscience Followers)
- Say they would consume an alcoholic drink at a party and not worry about it* (31% compared to 5% of Conventionalists, 2% of Theists, and 20% of Conscience Followers)
- More likely to say they would have sex with a boyfriend or girlfriend* (52% compared to 26% of Civic Humanists, 13% of Conventionalists, 6% of Theists, and 31% of Conscience Followers)

**Pertains to youth in grades 7–12*

Eight percent of youth seek to do what is best for everyone involved.

“CIVIC HUMANISTS” *Key Traits: Responsible, Thoughtful*

DEMOGRAPHICS

- Average age of 14.1
- Older (66% are in 9th grade or higher)

ATTITUDES

- Believe the most important reason for helping people in their community is “everyone has a responsibility to help” (30% compared to 19% of Expressivists and 17% of Theists)
- Top two sources of advice are parents (58%) and friends (46%)

BEHAVIORS

- Say they would initially avoid disclosing that a friend had destroyed school property but later inform the principal by leaving an unsigned note (36% compared to 26% of Conscience Followers and an average of 21% between Conventionalists, Expressivists, Theists, and Utilitarians)
- Say they would maintain a friendship with a friend who they learned was involved in a gay or lesbian relationship* (73% compared to 42% of Conventionalists, 55% of Expressivists, 50% of Utilitarians, and 17% of Theists)

**Pertains to youth in grades 7–12*

Just 5% of youth make decisions based on their own self-interest in getting ahead.

“UTILITARIANS” *Key Trait: Pragmatic*

DEMOGRAPHICS

- Average age of 13.7
- Male (70% compared to 48% of Civic Humanists, 55% of Conventionalists, 46% of Expressivists, 50% of Theists, and 47% of Conscience Followers)

ATTITUDES

- Say sex before marriage is okay if a couple loves each other* (65% compared to 30% of Conventionalists, 8% of Theists, and 52% of Conscience Followers)
- Ability to make a lot of money is the most important reason for choosing a future job (31% compared to 20% of Conventionalists, 13% of Civic Humanists, 13% of Theists, and 19% of Conscience Followers)
- Top two sources of advice are parents (50%) and friends (44%)

BEHAVIORS

- Say they would have sex with a boyfriend or girlfriend* (50% compared to 26% of Civic Humanists, 13% of Conventionalists, 6% of Theists, and 31% of Conscience Followers)

**Pertains to youth in grades 7–12*

These moral compasses distinguish youth's responses to the dilemmas presented. Overall, youth who identify as Expressivist (“do what makes you happy”) or Utilitarian (“do what improves your situation or gets you ahead”) are more likely than others to say they would cheat on a test, lie to a school principal, cyberbully, and have premarital sex. Expressivist youth are the most likely to say they would drink alcohol, and Utilitarian youth are more likely than most others to say they would end a preexisting friendship with a person they learned was gay or lesbian.

Age

As evidenced throughout the text, youth response tends to vary according to age. Overall, younger youth tend to stick to the rules and have a stark sense of right and wrong. As youth get older, they see the world through more nuanced eyes and are more interested in testing boundaries. For example, older youth are more likely to say they will engage in behaviors like drinking and having premarital sex. Attitudes about abortion also change—as youth get older they are more likely to agree that abortion is justifiable.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN AGE AND THE DECISIONS AND ATTITUDES OF YOUTH



As well, younger youth are more likely to say they would not cheat on a test and would tell the principal the truth if a friend had destroyed school property.

The moral compasses that youth prefer also vary by age. Those who say they follow their conscience or do what gets them ahead tend to be older than those who say they defer to an authority figure or to the dictates of their religion.

Religion

Other important factors relate to the kinds of decisions youth make, including religious inclination. Seventy-one percent of today’s youth say their religious beliefs are important to them, with religion diminishing in importance as youth age. This has remained constant over the last 20 years. More African American youth (88%) say their religious beliefs are important to them than Hispanic (69%), White (68%), and Asian (59%) youth.

Religious youth are less likely than less religious or non-religious youth to say they would lie, cheat, drink, or have sex.

Youth who are more religious are also less likely to think that smoking, abortion, gay/lesbian relations, and sex before marriage are permissible.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ATTITUDES/BELIEFS AND RELIGIOUS INCLINATION FOR YOUTH IN GRADES 7–12

○ Very/fairly religious

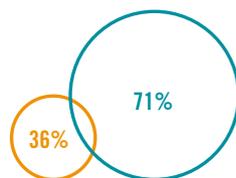
○ Not too/not at all religious



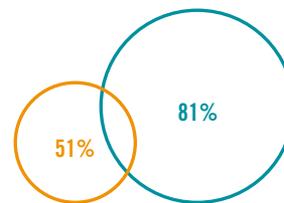
Smoking may not be healthy, but if a person finds it enjoyable, it's okay for that person to smoke*



Abortion is all right if having a baby will change your life plans in a way you will find hard to live with*



Sex before marriage is okay if a couple loves each other*

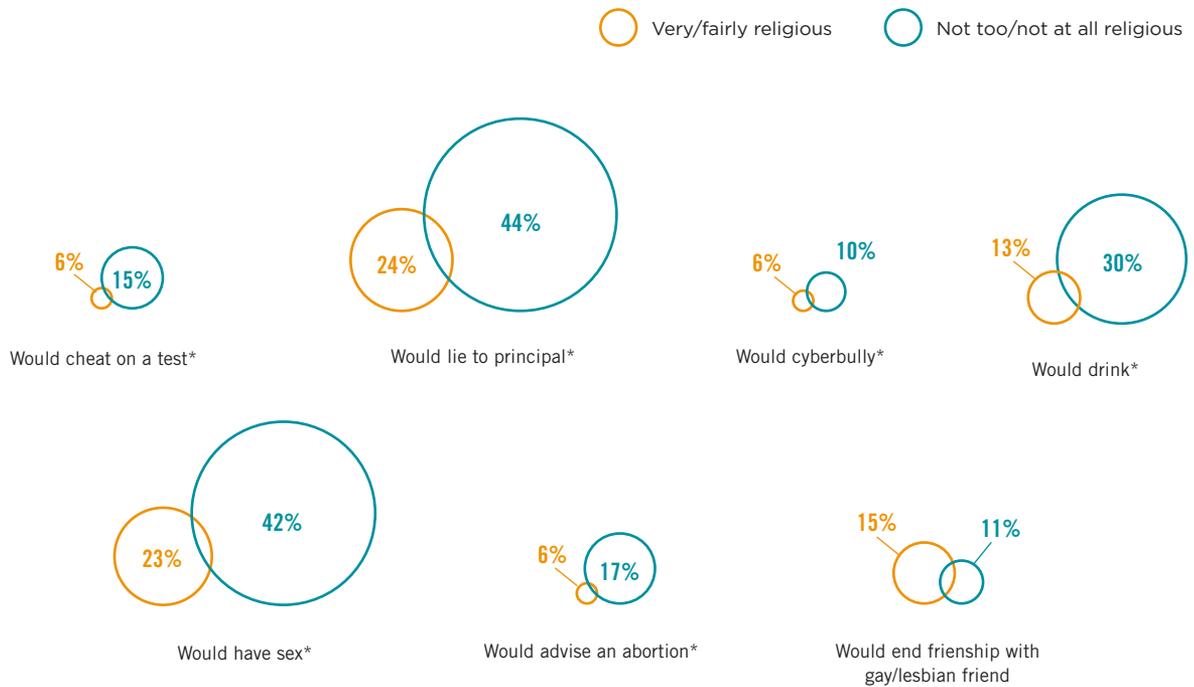


Gay or lesbian relations are okay if it is the person's choice*

*Indicates statistically significant difference

“These findings lend further support to a growing body of research regarding the influence of religion in the lives of youth. Whether or not the youth themselves are aware of it, religion is consistently correlated with a wide variety of pro-social behaviors and life outcomes, including lower rates of risky behaviors.” —Melinda L. Denton, assistant professor, Clemson University, and co-investigator on the National Study of Youth and Religion

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN YOUTH'S RESPONSE AND RELIGION



*Indicates statistically significant difference
 Questions of sex, drinking, abortion, and ending a friendship were only asked of 7th- to 12th-graders.

Academic Performance

Another factor in youth's decision making is how well they do in school. In particular, getting high grades or low grades distinguishes approaches to school-related scenarios and risky behaviors. Youth who get low grades are more likely than those who get high grades to say they would cheat on a test (13% vs. 6%), lie to a school principal (34% vs. 23%), drink alcohol (22% vs. 17%), and have premarital sex (35% vs. 25%).

Overall, this research shows that certain factors relate to how youth make decisions, including parenting style, personal moral compasses, religion, school performance, and age.

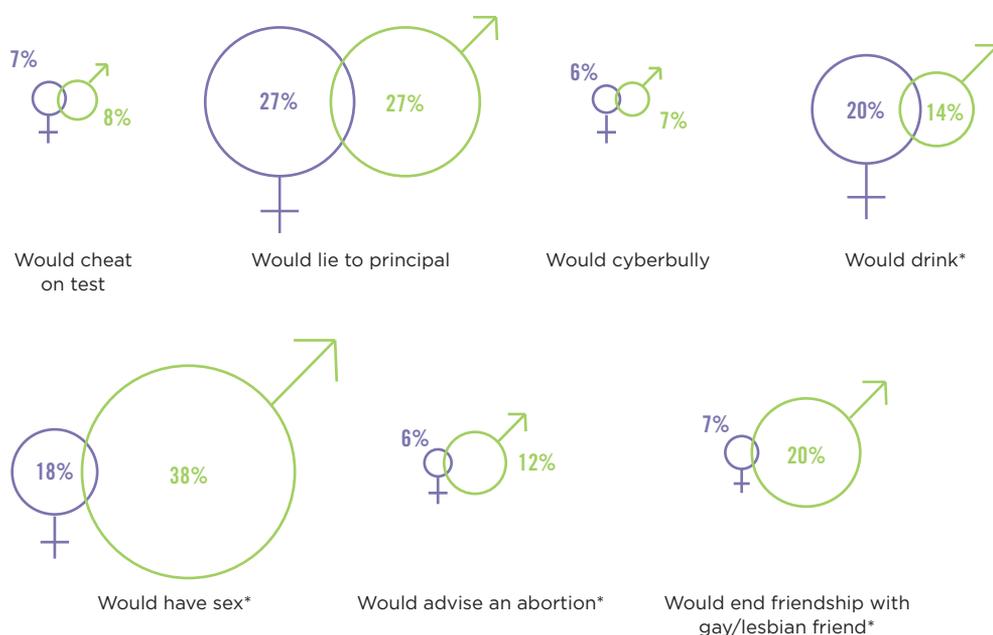
FINDING #6:

GIRLS AND BOYS DIFFER IN SOME ATTITUDES AND HOW THEY APPROACH CERTAIN DECISIONS.

As referenced throughout this report, some interesting distinctions emerge between girls and boys. For example, girls (65%) are more likely than boys (57%) to think that there are more opportunities for young people in America today than there were for their parents. In addition, boys (26%) are significantly more likely than girls (17%) to say that making a lot of money is a top priority in choosing a future job.

Girls (81%) are more likely than boys (77%) to be interested in community volunteering, while more boys (40%) than girls (33%) would volunteer for a national program. Girls are also significantly more likely than boys (43% vs. 26%) to say they would not fight in a war under any condition. As well, girls are more likely to say that the most important reason for helping people in their community is that it makes them feel good personally (51% of girls compared to 41% of boys).

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN YOUTH'S RESPONSE AND GENDER



*Indicates statistically significant difference
Questions of sex, drinking, abortion, and ending a friendship were only asked of 7th- to 12th-graders.

In terms of behaviors and attitudes, among 7th- to 12th-graders, girls are less likely than boys to say they would:

- Have sex (18% vs. 38%);
- Advise an abortion (6% vs. 12%); and
- End a friendship with a gay/lesbian friend (7% vs. 20%).

Girls in the 7th to 12th grade are more likely than boys to say that:

- Being around people of different racial or ethnic backgrounds is important to them (63% vs. 55%);
- They will give to charity (80% vs. 72%); and
- They will volunteer in their community (81% vs. 77%).

Moreover, girls are more likely than boys to take the extra step in a cyberbullying situation by telling the originator of a mean-spirited e-mail that what she/he did was wrong (46% vs. 35%). However, they are also more likely to say they would accept a drink at a party without worrying about it (20% vs. 14%).

IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

People often lament the declining moral values of youth. However, this study paints a more encouraging picture: that, generally speaking, youth today are intent on making responsible choices, respecting others, and engaging in their communities and civic life. In several ways, it is youth who are charting a new direction for the country—towards personal and public responsibility. Additionally, it is important that adults understand how they can be supportive in this process, as youth look to the adults in their lives to an even greater degree than they did a generation ago.

This report demonstrates the important roles that family (including grandparents, aunts, uncles, and other extended family members) as well as friends, religion, school performance, and their own personal compasses play in shaping youth’s decision making and sense of morality.

“I feel very strongly that we need to bridge intent and action. When we pilot our ethics curriculum in classrooms across the country we repeatedly speak with kids who have the same message: ‘We know right from wrong; but sometimes doing the wrong thing seems like it has more advantages.’ Kids don’t need more rules, just help understanding why they should go by the rules we have now.”

—Lisa Connor, product developer, Junior Achievement

“Although identifying the ‘right’ thing to do—at least according to social norms—is often fairly simple, the complexities of our world sometimes make it difficult to implement decisions. In our society, girls are socialized to talk through problems or dilemmas with others, which I think can help deepen their understanding of issues. However, girls are less likely to be socialized to trust their instincts, and because ethics are so often based on an internal moral compass, I think that presents a challenge to girls’ decision making.”

—Natalia Thompson, 18, National Girl Consultant to the Girl Scout Research Institute

When working with youth, adults should aim to accomplish the following:

- *Help Bridge Intent and Action.* Youth today say they want to take the responsible road, but intent and action do not always match. At the same time, we know that support systems are integral in how youth make decisions. Even though youth in this study report being less swayed by peers than their counterparts a generation ago, influence from peers often gets young people sidetracked from what they intend to do. One role for adults is to help youth actualize their intentions and keep them focused on their goals—to help them become the type of people they want to be in the world, emphasizing the role of their actions today in determining outcomes for the future.

- *Promote Adult Involvement in Decision Making.* Youth with parents who involve them in the decision-making process or explain to youth why they made a certain decision tend to have more positive outcomes. As someone working with youth, take the time to engage with them and make decisions collaboratively rather than tell them what to do or force them to do what you believe is right. Support youth by discussing with them their decision-making process rather than placing judgment on the choices they make. Enter conversations open-mindedly to see various sides of an issue rather than initiate a discussion about “right and wrong” that tends to divide adults and youth, stopping the conversation in its tracks.
- *Foster Adult/Youth Community Engagement.* Today’s youth also highly value civic and community engagement, but previous research from the Girl Scout Research Institute shows that they often do not feel they have the places and opportunities to fulfill this desire. Girls especially are interested in making a difference in the world around them. Provide girls and youth with meaningful leadership opportunities so they can affect the kind of change they are most interested in—change regarding issues they care about. Youth are most enthused about engaging at the community level, so try to connect what is going on locally with their interests and skills. Partner with youth in these activities to demonstrate your support.
- *Treat Personal Struggles With Respect.* Adults often think that media and celebrity culture influence youth decision making to a greater degree than they (adults) are capable of themselves. This study demonstrates that this is not the case. Youth have to deal with all sorts of daily challenges, from how they treat friends and strangers in school to whether they help a friend cheat to how they deal with defeat or victory on the sports field. Some of these issues are black and white, but a lot involve dilemmas, where truth and loyalty can collide with justice and fairness. Give youth an opportunity to talk about these issues, challenge them to think deeply about them, and ask the right questions. Treat their personal struggles with respect.
- *Value Youth Voices.* Today’s youth are more comfortable speaking their minds and voicing their opinions than were youth of previous generations. Give youth the opportunity to do just this by asking questions about their lives and engaging them on issues that matter to them. Talk to youth about what’s going on in their lives as they’re developing their own ethical judgment and voice. Ask them what influences them in their decision making, with regard to relationships, their peers, the media, and adult supports such as teachers and coaches. We know that youth feel pressure to obey authority figures and to figure out plans for their future—ask them what this pressure stems from and devise healthy ways to cope with it.

Potential areas for further exploration and research include:

- *Tough Choices and Intent Versus Actions.* While this research study provides insight into youth's intentions with regard to specific behaviors, we do not know from this report whether there is a gap between what youth say they would do in a given situation and what youth would actually do. For instance, despite the finding that more youth today than in 1989 plan to abstain from having sex until marriage, the Centers for Disease Control released research in summer 2009 showing rising birth rates among U.S. teens in 2006 and 2007, reversing a trend of decline from 1991 to 2005. Follow-up research is needed to explore how much youth's intentions and desire to take the responsible road match their actions when they're confronted with tough choices.
- *The Impact of Age/Development.* While this study demonstrates that in many cases youth say they would make more responsible decisions than their counterparts 20 years ago, what is the effect of age/development on these responses? Using this 2009 study as a benchmark, explore what youth think about life choices in five-year increments before the next 20-year mark to track changes throughout the span of adolescence and young adulthood.
- *Culture of Responsibility.* With the Obama administration in office as of 2009, there has been a renewed emphasis on the role of community service, civic responsibility, and ethical behavior. How will the current generation of youth be impacted by this and will their decisions reflect this new zeitgeist in the wake of the current economic crisis? As well, further research is needed to track public health awareness campaigns to determine if there are any other changes in youth attitudes and behaviors as a result of the new emphasis on issues such as healthy living and the environment. Based on this study, we saw changes in youth intention regarding smoking, drinking, and premarital sex as a probable result of increased public health and safety awareness of these issues in the last 20 years.
- *Mounting Pressures to Succeed.* While this generation of youth report that they feel less pressure about drinking, smoking, and sex than the previous generation of 20 years ago, is this generation of youth more stressed out about their grades; getting approval from teachers, parents, and coaches; and their future? What is the root of this stress? Is it the competitive nature of academia and sports or the pressure cooker of "success at all costs" that fuels this stress? Will this stress to succeed get further exacerbated by the downturn in the economy as youth prepare for their educational, professional, and financial futures? Further research is needed to explore the social and emotional impacts of this pressure on youth today and to determine the supports they need to cope.

Where Girl Scouting Goes From Here

The goal of this study was to explore the beliefs and values of youth today on a national scale and to compare these attitudes to those of youth in 1989. We found that, overall, today's youth are responsible to themselves and others and value being involved in their communities. These findings will continue to inform the development of the Girl Scout Leadership Experience, which engages girls in discovering self, connecting with others, and taking action to make the world a better place. The data show a seriousness of purpose and degree of intention in young people to make healthy decisions, and this deserves to be recognized and further explored.

Through offering girls opportunities to develop their voice and values, the Girl Scout Leadership Experience will help girls actualize the intentions they have shared in this study—to make positive decisions and become the best version of themselves they hope to be. Together, it is our shared responsibility to ensure that the findings of this study bear out to be true and that the next generation of youth paves the way to a more socially responsible model of leadership, changing the way the world sees youth and improving the way the world works.

APPENDIX

DETAILED METHODOLOGY

This study utilized a multimodal methodology. Students were surveyed at their schools and online, mother-daughter surveys were conducted online, and face-to-face focus groups were completed with girls and mothers.

Student Surveys

A total of 1,081 students in grades 3–12 were surveyed during an English class using a self-administered questionnaire. Surveys averaged 20 minutes in length and were conducted between October 2, 2008 and January 23, 2009.

The Harris national probability sample of schools and students is based on a highly stratified two-stage sampling design. This design employs features similar to the sample designs used in various national surveys of students and schools that are conducted by the U.S. National Center for Education Statistics. This sample is drawn from a list of approximately 80,000 public, private, and parochial schools in the United States, and is selected to account for differences in grade enrollment, region, and the size of the municipality where schools are located. For this study, public, private, and parochial schools were included. A random selection of schools was drawn on the basis of the number of students in each cell proportionate to the number of students in the universe, creating a cross section of young people in a set of designated grades.

After sending a letter to principals of selected schools soliciting their participation, Harris Interactive Inc. contacted the principals by telephone to request their participation in the survey. An eligible grade was randomly assigned to each school. If the principal agreed to participate, a random selection process was then used to select a particular class to complete the survey. The principal was asked to alphabetize all classes for the grade assigned by the Harris firm. Using a random number selection grid, an interviewer identified an individual class. For junior and senior high school, where students attend different classes for each subject, only English classes were used to make the selection. Since all students in all grades must study English, this ensures a more representative sample of students by academic track and level of achievement.

A number of steps were included in the consent process in order to maximize response rates. The alert letter contained a brief description of the survey process and some background information on the Harris organization and schools were offered a cash

incentive to participate. In addition, at a principal's request, calls were made to local boards or district offices to gain approval from the appropriate officials. If necessary, copies of the introductory letters and other materials were mailed or sent via fax to the principal and/or other school officials.

If a particular school was unable to participate, it was replaced by a school with similar demographic characteristics so as to preserve the integrity of the primary selection. Another randomly drawn school was chosen within the same region, with similar grade enrollment and size of municipality, and in the same or the nearest zip code to the original school.

Harris Interactive Inc. mailed instructions, a set of questionnaires, and additional materials for return mail to the teacher of the selected class. In addition, teachers were provided with guidelines for administering the survey. By providing teachers with educational materials, including *The Basic Primer on Public Opinion Polling*, we hope to ensure that this exercise is woven into the classroom curriculum in a meaningful way. Furthermore, by surveying only one class in each school, we imposed on the school as little as possible. (Students were given envelopes in which to seal their completed surveys before returning them to the teacher.) Note that the survey instrument used was anonymous; at no point was the student asked to provide his or her name.

All surveys were carefully edited and checked for completeness and accuracy. Surveys with significant errors or large proportions of missing data were removed; typically this represents less than 1% of the questionnaires that arrive in-house. However, as with all self-administered questionnaires, occasional questions were left blank. Findings for each question were reported based on the total number of potential respondents in the sample, and as an overall check, each questionnaire was reviewed to ensure that a majority of all possible responses had been completed.

The survey questionnaire was self-administered online by means of the Internet to 2,182 students in grades 3–12. Surveys averaged 20 minutes in length and were conducted between October 30 and November 24, 2008.

Sample was obtained from the Harris Poll Online (HPOL) opt-in panel of millions of respondents. Invitations for this study were e-mailed to a stratified random sample of individuals drawn from the Harris Poll Online database identified as U.S. residents and parents of 8- to 17-year-olds, or U.S. residents ages 13–18. Qualified respondents were U.S. residents, between the ages of 8 and 17, and students in grades 3–12.

To maintain the reliability and integrity of the sample, the following procedures were used:

Password protection. Each invitation contained a password-protected link to the survey that was uniquely assigned to that e-mail address. Password protection ensures that a respondent completes the survey only one time.

Reminder invitations. To increase the number of respondents in the survey, one reminder invitation was mailed two days after the initial invitation to those respondents who had not yet participated in the survey.

“Instant results” of selected survey findings. To improve overall response rates, respondents were invited to access results to predetermined questions after completing the survey.

HIPointsSM and HlStakesSM. HPOL panel members (age 13 and older) are enrolled in the HIPoints rewards program in which respondents earn points for completing surveys. These points can be redeemed for a variety of merchandise and gift certificates. In addition, survey respondents are offered entry in the monthly HlStakes sweepstakes drawing.

Surveys were conducted using a self-administered online questionnaire via Harris’ proprietary, Web-assisted surveying software. The Harris online surveying system permits online data entry by the respondents.

Online questionnaires are programmed into the system with the following checks:

- Question and response series
- Skip patterns
- Question rotation
- Range checks
- Mathematical checks
- Consistency checks
- Special edit procedures

Mother-Daughter Surveys

A total of 896 mothers of girls ages 8–17 in grades 3–12 were surveyed. Surveys were also completed with 506 of their daughters. Surveys were conducted between November 7 and November 16, 2008, via an online survey. The mother’s portion of the survey averaged 15 minutes in length, and the daughter’s averaged 20 minutes.

Sample was obtained from the Harris Poll Online (HPOL) opt-in panel of millions of respondents. Invitations for this study were e-mailed to a stratified random sample of

individuals drawn from the Harris Poll Online database identified as U.S. residents, female, age 18 years or older, and having a child in the household. Qualified mothers were U.S. residents and mothers of daughters between the ages of 8 and 17 and in grades 3–12.

To maintain the reliability and integrity of the sample, the following procedures were used:

- *Password protection.* Each invitation contained a password-protected link to the survey that was uniquely assigned to that e-mail address. Password protection ensures that a respondent completes the survey only one time.
- *Reminder invitations.* To increase the number of respondents in the survey, one reminder invitation was mailed two days after the initial invitation to those respondents who had not yet participated in the survey.
- *“Instant results” of selected survey findings.* To improve overall response rates, respondents were invited to access results to predetermined questions after completing the survey.
- *HIPointsSM and HIIStakesSM.* HPOL panel members (age 13 and older) are enrolled in the HIPoints rewards program in which respondents earn points for completing surveys. These points can be redeemed for a variety of merchandise and gift certificates. In addition, survey respondents are offered entry in the monthly HIIStakes sweepstakes drawing.

Surveys were conducted using a self-administered online questionnaire via Harris’ proprietary, Web-assisted surveying software. The Harris online surveying system permits online data entry by the respondents. Mothers completed the first portion of the survey and were then asked to have their daughters complete the second portion. At the beginning of the daughter portion of the survey, screening questions were asked to confirm the age and gender of the child completing the survey. Daughters had the option of completing the survey at that time or another time.

Online questionnaires are programmed into the system with the following checks:

- Question and response series
- Skip patterns
- Question rotation
- Range checks
- Mathematical checks
- Consistency checks
- Special edit procedures

For questions with pre-coded responses, the system only permits answers within a specified range; for example, if a question has three possible answer choices (“agree,” “disagree,” “not sure”), the system will accept only one response from these choices.

Weighting of mother data: Data were weighted to key demographic variables (education, age, race/ethnicity, region, household income) to align with the national population of U.S. parents of youth in grades 3–12. Propensity score weighting was used to adjust for respondents’ propensity to be online.

Weighting of daughter data: Data were weighted to key demographic (grade, gender, race/ethnicity, region, and parents’ education) variables to align it with the national population of U.S. parents of youth in grades 3–12.

Reliability of Survey Percentages

All sample surveys and polls, whether or not they use probability sampling, are subject to multiple sources of error that are most often not possible to quantify or estimate, including sampling error, coverage error, error associated with non-response, error associated with question wording and response options, and post-survey weighting and adjustments. The magnitude of the sampling variation is measurable and is affected by the number of interviews involved and by the level of the percentages expressed in the results.

With pure probability samples and 100% response rates, it is possible to calculate the probability that the sampling error (but not other sources of error) is not greater than some number. With a pure probability sample of 3,263 youth, one could say with a 95% probability that the overall results have a sampling error of +/- 2 percentage points. Sampling error for data based on sub-samples would be higher and would vary.

However, that does not take other sources of error into account. This online survey is not based on a probability sample and therefore no theoretical sampling error can be calculated. Harris Interactive avoids the words “margin of error” as they are misleading. All that can be calculated are different possible sampling errors with different probabilities for pure, unweighted, random samples with 100% response rates. These are only theoretical because no published polls come close to this ideal.

Focus Groups

Six focus group interviews were conducted: two groups of girls in St. Louis, Missouri, on February 4, 2009, and four groups in New York City on February 11, 2009. The four groups in New York City consisted of two groups of girls and two parallel groups with the girls’ mothers. The main objectives of these groups were to engage girls

and mothers in a discussion about morals and ethics and to give girls and mothers an opportunity to reflect and react to the study's major findings so that verbatim responses could be included in the report.

A total of 25 girls in grades 5–12 participated in the groups. Groups were segmented by grade level. In St. Louis, one group was conducted with girls in grades 7–8 (n=6) and one group was conducted with girls in grades 11–12 (n=8). In New York City, one set of groups was conducted with girls in grades 5–6 (n=5) with a parallel session with their mothers. The other set of groups was conducted with girls in grades 9–10 (n=6) and a parallel session with their mothers. All of the groups were conducted in English. All participants underwent a screening process in order to obtain a diverse sample of girls in grades 5–12 in terms of race/ethnicity, household income, parenting philosophy, and frequency of discussion about ethics. Participants were given a cash incentive to participate in the focus groups.

Mother-Daughter Analysis

For the mother-daughter correlations mentioned in footnote 3, the following analyses were performed:

Kendall's tau-b test. Abortion is all right, if having a baby will change your life plans in a way you will find hard to live with (corr=.686; $p < .01$); Gay or lesbian relations are okay, if that is the person's choice (corr=.673; $p < .01$); Gay or lesbian relations are never acceptable because it is unnatural (corr=.618; $p < .01$); Sex before marriage is never right because it is a sin (corr=.506; $p < .01$); Suicide is all right, because a person has a right to do whatever he wants to with himself (corr=.502; $p < .01$); Being around people from different racial or ethnic backgrounds is important to me (corr=.474; $p < .01$); Sex before marriage is okay, if a couple loves each other (corr=.454; $p < .01$); Selling drugs is foolish, because you might get caught (corr=.336; $p < .01$); People should be able to eat any food they want, even if it's fattening or unhealthy (corr=.290; $p < .01$); Everyone has to take care of the environment by doing things like recycling and using less electricity (corr=.279; $p < .01$); Smoking may not be healthy, but if a person finds it enjoyable, it's okay for that person to smoke (corr=.267; $p < .01$)

Kendall's tau-b test. Express your opinion even if your opinion is not popular (corr=.248; $p < .01$); Vote in every major election (corr=.207; $p < .01$); Give regularly to charity (corr=.199; $p < .01$)

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Girl Scouts of the USA (GSUSA) is the preeminent organization for and leading authority on girls, with 3.3 million girl and adult members. Now in its 97th year, Girl Scouting builds girls of courage, confidence, and character, who make the world a better place.

The Girl Scout Research Institute (GSRI), formed in 2000, is a center for research and public policy information focusing on girl leadership development and other key issues that matter to girls. Its main goal is to elevate the voices of girls. The GSRI originates national projects and initiatives, synthesizes existing research, and conducts outcomes evaluation to support the development of Girl Scout programs and to provide information to educational institutions, not-for-profits, government agencies, public policy organizations, parents seeking ways to support their daughters, and girls themselves. The GSRI is composed of a dedicated staff and advisors who are experts in child development, academia, government, business and the not-for-profit sector.

GSUSA's Public Policy and Advocacy Office, located in Washington D.C., educates representatives of the legislative and executive branches of federal, state, and local government and advocates for public policy issues important to girls and Girl Scouting.

For more information on this study and the work of the Girl Scout Research Institute, visit www.girlscouts.org/research. You may contact the GSRI at gsresearch@girlscouts.org.



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