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PARENTS: DO YOUR TEENS THINK “YOU DON’T HAVE A CLUE”?
THEY MAY BE RIGHT ...

Teens Today Study Highlights Poor Communication
As One Reason for Wide “Reality Gap”

BOSTON (September 13, 2000) – If men and women are said to be from different planets, then some may say teenagers and their parents are also from separate worlds. A recent SADD/Liberty Mutual Group *Teens Today* report, released today at a press conference at Brookline (Mass.) High School, reveals widely divergent views between many teens and parents on the attitudes and behaviors of today’s teenage population.

The *Teens Today* report shows that parents and teens are far apart in their assessment of critical issues in teens’ lives, how influential parents are to their teens, and how they communicate about such issues as alcohol and drug use, drinking and driving, sex, violence and driving habits. Further, the study shows that teens in families lacking effective communication are more likely to engage in risk-taking behaviors.

In an effort to quantify the “Reality Gap” between parents and teens and to identify new solutions for teens and parents to communicate about making healthy decisions, SADD and Liberty Mutual collaborated on the national study of teenagers and parents of teenagers this year. The complete study results are available online at both organizations’ Web sites: www.libertymutualinsurance.com and www.sadd.org.

“This report provides a window to the world of teen behaviors and attitudes,” said SADD National Chairman and Chief Executive Officer Stephen Wallace. “Just as important, it underscores the disconnect between the real worlds kids live in and the ‘make believe’ world many of their parents think they live in.”

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Among the findings about chief teen concerns from responses of 405 parents and 687 teenagers in grades 9-12:

- Teens are much more concerned with “drinking and driving” (ranked second among 26 concerns they face every day) than are parents (ninth), while parents are much more concerned with their teen “getting into a car accident” (second) than are teens (seventh).
- Teens rank “teen suicide” near the top of their concerns list (fifth), while the issue barely registers for parents (17th). Conversely, parents consider “casual sex among teens” a much greater concern (fifth) than do teens (12th).
- Parents and teens agree that HIV and sexually transmitted diseases are the number-one concern.

The discrepancy among these concerns is not so surprising when viewed in connection with the survey findings about quantity and quality of communication between parents and teens.

- Ninety-eight percent of parents say they discuss the issues of drinking and driving, drinking, drugs, sex and violence with their teens; only 76 percent of teens say these conversations take place.
- Eighty-eight percent of parents say these issues are discussed “during normal conversations,” while only 36 percent of teens say this is when discussions take place.
- Parents say they are the biggest influence in their teen’s lives; teens say it’s their friends. And while 82 percent of parents say they are good role models for their teens, only 60 percent of teens agree.

“With a new school year upon us, these study results remind many of us that, as parents, we may not have an accurate picture of what goes on in our teens’ daily lives – their concerns, their attitudes and their behaviors,” said John Conners, executive vice president and manager of Liberty Mutual’s personal insurance operations.

Conners references the study’s driving-related results as examples of parent misconception. “Eighty-four percent of parents think their teen is constantly wearing a seat belt when driving, and in fact less than half [45 percent] are regularly buckling up. And, even more alarming, only 5 percent of parents believe their teen would get behind the wheel after drinking, and 21 percent of teens say they have,” he said. “Undoubtedly, the lack of effective family communication is a primary catalyst to this ‘Reality Gap.’”

The study results demonstrate the positive effects of open dialogue between parents and teens. Teens who say they discuss serious issues with their parents “during normal conversation” are more likely to *want* to talk to their parents about these issues. Additionally, parents are credited with more influence on their teen’s behaviors when good, open communication is common family practice.

“As a society, we need to do a better job of facilitating open dialogue for young people with their parents,” said Wallace. “Teens are faced with making decisions on life-and-death issues every single day, and they need to know their parents will be there when they turn to them for support and guidance.”

Wallace points to drinking and driving habits as one example of how powerful open communication can be. The study results show the probability a teen would drive after drinking is reduced from 21 percent to 15 percent among those who say they engage in open, honest communication with their parents.

“Fifteen percent is still alarmingly high, yet this reduction translates into hundreds of thousands of young people who are eliminating this destructive behavior from their lives,” said Wallace.

Communication Solutions

SADD believes it has developed one solution to shrink the communication gap between parents and teens: Family Focus, a school-based program with a primary goal of bringing teens and parents together for open, constructive dialogue about the important issues faced by today’s young people.

“Family Focus programs are a forum through which parents and teens will be motivated to openly discuss such concerns as alcohol and drug use, sex and violence, and driving habits,” said Wallace.

SADD intends to pilot the Family Focus programs at gatherings of parents and teens at high schools in New England. The pilot, supported by Liberty Mutual, will take place through the end of 2000.

The Family Focus partnership continues a long commitment by SADD and Liberty Mutual to keeping young people alive and safe. Since 1992, the nonprofit organization and insurer have collaborated on an educational program to help reduce the frequency and severity of motor vehicle accidents involving teens. The program “Avoiding Collisions: How to Survive the Teenage Driving Years” includes a 15-minute video that has been viewed by more than one million high school students and many of their parents across the U.S.

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“More than 5,700 young people died in motor vehicle crashes and 554,000 were injured in 1998, making these incidents the number-one killer of young people in the United States,” said Conners, citing the most recent data from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. “We need to continually talk to our young drivers about the importance of safe driving habits.”

SADD and Liberty Mutual also have developed a series of Family Communication Tips to help parents and teens overcome obstacles to effective dialogue. The tips are available on either organization’s Web site. “Good communication hinges on genuine respect for the other person’s position,” said Wallace. “There must be a willingness on both sides for two-way dialogue.”

Another way parents and teens can close the communication gap between them is by discussing and signing the SADD Contract for Life. Through this reciprocal covenant, parents and teens have a vehicle for talking about potentially destructive behavior.

By signing the Contract for Life, teens commit to never riding with an impaired driver and to wearing their seat belts whenever they’re in a vehicle. Parents, for their part, agree to provide safe transportation home if their teens are ever in an unsafe situation. In addition, they promise to hold off on discussing what happened until it can be done calmly. A new brochure, “Opening Lifesaving Lines: Negotiating a Contract for Life,” guides parents and teens through the Contract for Life communication process. The brochure is available free from SADD.

Teens Today

The *Teens Today* partnership is an examination of the behaviors, attitudes and concerns regarding the U.S. teenage population. SADD and Liberty Mutual plan to annually study teen and parent views on important safety issues, using the data to find out what’s happening in young people’s lives – and why.

The groups announced the driving-related findings from its *Teens Today* 2000 survey May 24 in recognition of “Buckle Up America Week.”

SADD is a national education and prevention organization representing young people in more than 10,000 school-based chapters nationwide.

Liberty Mutual Group is one of the largest multi-line insurers in the property and casualty industry. Offering a wide range of products and services, including private passenger auto and homeowners insurance, Liberty Mutual Group employs 37,000 people in more than 900 offices throughout the world.

Editor's Notes:

- 1. Addenda to this release contain other key findings and the "Guidelines for Good Family Communication" brochure from SADD and Liberty Mutual.*
- 2. A published study report is available to the media by calling Glenn Greenberg at 617-574-5874 or it can be downloaded from the Liberty Mutual Web site:
www.libertymutualinsurance.com.*
- 3. Families can obtain copies of the SADD Contract for Life or the "Opening Lifesaving Lines" brochure by calling 1-877-SADD-INC. The Contract for Life also can be printed from the SADD Web site: www.sadd.org. Free copies of the "Avoiding Collisions" video are available from a local Liberty Mutual office or by calling 1-800-4-Liberty.*

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ADDITIONAL TEENS TODAY 2000

“REALITY GAP” FINDINGS

Driving Habits/Drinking & Driving

- More than three in four teens (77 percent) admit to speeding while driving, while only about half of parents (54 percent) think their teens speed.
- Eighty-six percent of teens say they ride as a passenger with another teen driver who speeds.
- Forty percent of teens say they ride as a passenger in another teen’s car in which drinking and driving occurs.
- The majority of parents (56 percent) believe their teens would call them for a ride home from a party where they have been drinking; only 13 percent of teens say they would call their parents for transportation.

Alcohol and Drugs

- Parents think their teens don’t drink: only 2 percent say teens drink “regularly” and 5 percent say they drink “occasionally”; 19 percent of teens say they drink “regularly” and 21 percent say they drink “occasionally.”
- Teens have a greater opportunity to use drugs than parents believe. Nearly 70 percent of teens say it is “very easy” or “somewhat easy” to use drugs, while only 56 percent of parents believe this to be true.

Violence, Sex

- Parents underestimate teens’ concern about their safety: 85 percent of teens say they are “very worried” or “worried” about their safety, while only 32 percent of parents think their teen feels this way.
- Thirty-three percent of parents believe their teen will wait until marriage before having sex, but fewer teenagers feel the same way (27 percent).
- Parents are less likely to think their teen will know when it is the right time to have sex (15 percent) than are teens (26 percent).

SADD-LIBERTY MUTUAL

Guidelines for Good Family Communication

- Speak in a calm voice.
- Say what you mean and be prepared to listen.
- Try not to interrupt the other person.
- Avoid sarcasm, whining, threats or yelling.
- Don't make personal attacks or be demeaning.
- Don't think your answer is the only answer.
- Try not to use words like "always" or "never."
- Deal with the present, not the past.
- Don't try to get the last word.
- If things get too heated, take a break and come back to the discussion later.
- Make allowances for the other person. Parents: remember what it was like to be a teen. Teens: remember that parents frequently react strongly because they know the stakes are high.
- Acknowledge that you are in this together. Build on your communication successes to address other subjects.