

And a Happy New Year

Against All Odds, Many Teens Are Doing Just Fine

By Stephen Wallace, M.S. Ed.



Millions of American teens ringing in the New Year as responsible, confident, successful, and contributing members of their communities ... what are the odds? Actually, pretty good according to *Teens Today* research from SADD. A survey of more than 2,700 middle and high school students revealed that most young people have a positive sense of self: feeling good about their progress on the key developmental tasks of establishing an identity, achieving independence, and building meaningful relationships with peers.

Despite commonly held beliefs that adolescence is defined by anxiety, upheaval, and acting out – or “storm and stress,” a phrase coined by G. Stanley Hall, the first president of the American Psychological Association – there is significant evidence from SADD that the majority of teens feel happy almost every day and perceive themselves as friendly (77 percent), honest (72 percent), and smart (72 percent). Similarly, more than six in ten say they can handle change well and are liked by others.

In his new book, *The Good Teen*, Tufts University Professor Richard M. Lerner also offers rebuttal to definitions of this developmental stage that necessarily link it to conflict with parents, mood disruptions, and risky behavior. Conversely, his study of about 4,000 adolescents found ample existence among young people of what he calls the “five Cs”: competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring. These may coalesce, says Lerner, in a sixth C, contribution.

Indeed, adolescents seem to be less self-absorbed and more other-oriented than they are given credit for.

That teens are ready, willing, and able to “give something back” is self-evident in data from Youth Service America, which reports that millions of young people are engaging in disaster relief, registering new voters, educating their communities about good nutrition, and distributing HIV/AIDS prevention materials, for example.

Even more good (and perhaps surprising) news can be found in the fact that, according to *Teens Today*, most teens say their relationships with their parents make them feel good about themselves (82 percent), their parents respect them (68 percent), and they feel close to their parents (60 percent). Additionally, an online survey of 1,250 adults and teens conducted by Opinion Research Corporation revealed that up to 67 percent of America’s young people say they actually want to spend more time with their parents.

Who woulda thunk it?

Even during the “turbulent” transitional years of adolescence, teens seem to value time with their family above all else. And that’s a really good thing!

Young people who spend time with their parents, talk with them, and feel close to them are overwhelmingly less likely to drink (62 percent vs. 43 percent) or to use other drugs (87 percent vs. 77 percent) than are those who don’t, says *Teens Today*.

It is also interesting to note that many teens who do not have good communication with their parents say they wish they did.

Results from other studies reinforce the value of family time and support. For example, a September, 2007 report from The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse (CASA) at Columbia University states that, compared to teens who have frequent family dinners (five or more per week), those who have infrequent family dinners (two or fewer) are three and a half times more likely to have abused prescription drugs, three times more likely to have used marijuana, and one and a half times more likely to have drunk alcohol.

Here, too, recent news from the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy confounds the expectations of many: today there are 860,000 fewer young people using illegal drugs than there were in 2001.

For many, family time seems more an ideal than a realistic proposition in an age of single parent and two working parent households. Even teens themselves often appear to be caught up in a whirlwind of academic, athletic, and extracurricular activities that leave them little time or energy to pursue stronger family ties. But, there is a way to get what you both want.

The Boys and Girls Clubs of America offer parents some tips to spending quality time with their teen. Here are a few.

Create a family calendar.

Just as you keep a calendar for work, start keeping a calendar of scheduled family time. Be sure to encourage your teenager to make suggestions for what the family can do together and include him/her in making the final decisions.

Get involved.

As a parent, you should become involved in the activities your teenager participates in regularly. Volunteer to be a coach for

your teen's sport team or Girl/Boy Scout troop leader.

Involve children.

If you participate in activities such as golf or tennis, include him/her in a game or two. If you are scheduled for a business conference out of town and your budget will allow it, make plans to bring your teenager along.

Plan outings.

Family time does not necessarily have to be spent in or around the home. Plan to schedule exciting outings that include attractions such as amusement parks or museums.

Now is a perfect time to bring adult perceptions about teenagers in line with those of teenagers themselves. After all, we have much to do, and to celebrate, together in 2008.

In a special edition of *Newsweek* about adolescence, a teen from Illinois playfully jabbed at adults who presume that young people are simply obsessed with alcohol, drugs, sex, and Satan. Instead, seventeen-year-old Brad concluded that, while he may not be America's "stereotypical" teen, he is, against all odds, doing just fine.

Happy New Year.

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