



Teenhood:
Understanding Attitudes toward Those Transitioning
From Childhood to Adulthood

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Key Findings

Teenager...if wild rebellion comes to mind, then you are like most Americans. Whether reporting on their own past recklessness, or bemoaning today's irresponsible youth, adults express almost a sense of pride or amusement in the rebelliousness of teens. But that amusement is quickly replaced by a deep fear for teen safety and a questioning of teen values. The associations are so powerful that "teenager" may be an unsalvageable word for advocates hoping to create a positive or sympathetic view of 13-19 year olds.

Teens are between the protection of childhood and the responsibility of adulthood.

The teen years mark the point at which parents can no longer protect their children, yet teens are still in need of protection. Compared to prior generations, adults feel teens are more in need of protection than ever before, but that it is far more difficult, if not impossible, to insulate today's teens from dangers.

It is the uncertainty about the choices they will make which creates much of the anxiety about teens. Teens are confronted with stresses that a child does not face, such as sex, drugs, and violence. Yet teens do not yet have to shoulder the responsibilities of adulthood – jobs, bills, and family. This struggle between having to grow up too fast to the negative realities without having to shoulder the positive, character building responsibilities is at the heart of adults' concerns about teens. If they could, they would reverse this struggle and protect their teens from dangerous realities while promoting adult responsibilities.

Parents are solely responsible.

If parents have done their job right, adults believe, then teens will reject the temptations thrown their way. But adults assume that teens have to face these choices on their own. "Good" parents remain involved, but friends and school consume more of a teen's attention. At this stage in life, a teen is primarily responsible for their choices and a parent is only partly to blame when a teen makes a mistake. Adults see no other actor in the equation other than parents and teens, making it particularly difficult to shift people from an assumption of parental responsibility to societal responsibility.

Unusual teen appearance might be re-cast as a positive search for individuality.

People can make quick assessments of teens, both positive and negative, based on appearance. Appearance serves as a clue to a teen's character and upbringing – it signals whether or not they are a trouble-maker, their work ethic, parental involvement, etc. Teenage dress and appearance has historically been used as an indicator of whether or not a teen has the right morals and values. However, today there is general (limited) acceptance of a teen's unique appearance, offering an opportunity to reframe a youth's unusual style as individuality, positive exploration, and a harmless search for identity.

Sports and volunteerism are powerful demonstrations of a teen's values and future success, and one of the few accepted societal solutions for youth problems.

In several studies, work ethic emerges as a core value that determines a person's worth. Interestingly, adults interpret belonging to a sports team or taking part in volunteer activities as a signal that a youth has a strong work ethic and will be successful in all things in life. This offers an opportunity to portray positive images of groups of teens, and offer sports and volunteerism as societal solutions to teen problems.

Additionally, American's bootstrap mentality results in a more positive assessment of a poor or working class youth that seems on the right track than toward a similar middle class youth. Most believe middle or upper class youth will be more likely to succeed, but are resentful of these teens being handed success without having to work for it. This indicates that sports or volunteer imagery and solutions should be even more powerful for lower income or working class youth.

Building a sense of societal responsibility for youth is a difficult task. Coaches offer one solution for how to bridge to societal responsibility in a non-threatening way.

Analyzing responses to news stories developed to lead to societal action for teens demonstrate how difficult it is to break past the belief that teens are in terrible trouble and families are solely responsible. A story that outlined all the positive trends for teens resulted in an outright rejection of the statistics. It conflicted with adults' firm belief that teens are worse now than ever, so they assumed the statistics were biased. In response to a story about the declining numbers of school counselors which results in less identification of mental health problems, several parents felt the school was trying to do the parent's job. Finally, even after reading a story about parents acting together to limit the growing number of bars and alcohol advertising in their community, several re-framed this story as being about a parent's responsibility to raise children with the right values so they will not be influenced by advertising.

Breaking the assumption of parents as solely responsible for youth is a daunting task. Aubrun and Grady suggest adding a Mentoring model to advocates' communications to help move toward an understanding of societal responsibility (Aubrun and Grady, "Reframing Youth: Models, Metaphors, Messages," April 2000). These focus groups would suggest caution in how mentoring is incorporated into communications. Some participants were highly sensitive to what they viewed as any infringement on parent's rights, including actions by schools. Talking about mentoring broadly could have an unanticipated backlash. However, coaches and leaders of volunteer organizations may be the more specific examples of mentors who would be non-threatening and well received. Sports and youth activities are one of the few examples of community support that participants can cite without prompting, and they believe these activities are important in developing successful youth. Moreover, if these coaches/leaders are not parents of teens, they can help to underscore community responsibility rather than reverting to parental responsibility.

“Teenhood”

Ask the average adult what first comes to mind when they think of “teenagers” and one is likely to hear a plethora of negative adjectives revolving around sex, drugs, and wild behavior. While adults recognize “the teen years” as a developmental stage between the innocence of childhood and the responsibility of adulthood, the word “teenager” does not bring sympathetic understanding to mind. “Adolescent” or “adolescence” are terms that cause people to think more developmentally, and less judgmentally.

Teens are not children. A child is seen as “sweet,” “giving,” “innocent,” “vulnerable,” “carefree,” “curious,” “still dependent upon their parents,” and “naïve.” For many focus group participants, ten is “the magic number” that marks the end of childhood. “I think when you hit ten,” one mother of younger children noted. “When you are eleven even though you are not a teenager, you are still not a child anymore.”

Teens are not yet young adults. A young adult is a “college age person” who demonstrates “responsibility” “maturity” and “intelligence.” As an older woman joked, it is “when they become human again.” Real responsibility marks the beginning of adulthood. “You have to take some responsibility for your own,” suggested a father of teenagers. Another added, “They are starting to make some choices and trying to follow those.”

Teens are between the sweet innocence of childhood and the responsible maturity of adulthood. “They are capable of making decisions,” a mother of younger children explained. But added another, “not ready for what is going on around them.”

People recognize that the teen years are a developmental stage, but the word “teenager” does not bring that sympathetic and understanding view to the forefront. Instead, “teenager” brings to mind the negative actions by teens and the dangers they have to confront. “Adolescent” or “adolescence” are words that create a much more sympathetic mindset for people. Instead of sex and drugs, people think of “confusion,” “uncertainty,” “insecure,” “reaching out,” “searching,” “challenging,” “experimental,” “growing pains,” “immature,” and “a lot of guidance needed.”

Though the interpretation of “youth” does not limit itself to describing just the teen years, it, too, puts people in a more

Words that Come to Mind When Hear “Teenager”

Obnoxious
Rebellious
Drugs
Crime
Pregnancy
Fun
School
Adventure
College
Not all bad
Definitely hungry
Adjustment age
Peer pressure
Education
Know-it-all
Headaches
Trouble
Sports
Sex
Puberty
Driving
Worrying
Adults
Dating
Stubborn
Demanding
Expensive
Invincible
Non-fearing
All knowing
Expressive
Pampered
Trauma
Attitude
Contraceptives
Independence
Exhaustion
Messy
Relationships
Struggle
First job
Having babies
Misery
Money
Car
Kids
Irresponsible
School
Going through puberty
Beer
Part-time job
High school

favorable frame of mind. The word “youth” causes people to think of “carefree,” “excitement,” “teachable,” “impressionable,” “eager,” “naive,” “immaturity,” “free-spirited,” and “energy.”

Underneath the complaints about wild, obstinate teenagers is a sense of uneasy anticipation. They believe teens have learned their basic values, and now they are being put to the test. They still need adult support, but are ready to start making their own choices.

While they recognize that teens are not finished developing, focus group participants believe that by the time the teen years come a person’s basic character is set:

“A teenager is pretty much well formed and fairly independent.”

“I think they have already got their basic values and everything by the time they get to be a teenager.”

“You do your molding when they are very young and hope it takes.”

Mothers of younger children

However, this does not mean they believe the job of raising their children is over. “They are trying all different things,” suggested an older woman. “They go this way and back.” Another added, “but they need support.” “They’ve got the base,” explained a mother of younger children. “They have just got to build upon that.”

Adults have a certain sense of anticipation about teens. They are full of untapped potential, which can be unnerving, but also exciting. “Teens are like a box of Cracker Jacks. There is a prize in every package,” suggested a father of younger children. “They are a package and when you open them up, you never know what you are going to get out of them.” “They are like a race car that is in neutral,” suggested another father of younger children. “They are just revving and revving and revving and you’ve got to hit the right key to get them in gear and then they’ll go. The power is there. They just have to get it in gear.”

Adults see adolescence as challenging and difficult. Under the influence of peer pressure, they worry whether teens will make the right choices. Parents, in particular, need to communicate and be involved in teens’ lives. The only role for communities that most see is organizing youth activities. Because of their strong sense of parental responsibility and their cynicism about politics, focus group participants see few societal solutions other than teen centers and a vague sense of community support.

Focus group participants were asked to independently complete a word exercise designed to uncover their assessment of what adolescence is, what teens struggle with, and what can be done to help them (see selected responses in following table). The responses

demonstrate an understanding of adolescence as a challenging, difficult stage of life. Peer pressures and making the right choices are the toughest challenges they face. Listening, communicating, and being involved (especially parents) are the individual solutions they see. The community solutions they most frequently point to are youth activities and teen centers.

Selection of Responses to Word Exercise			
Going through adolescence is...	It is especially hard to...	It would help if...	Communities should...
Challenging Difficult and confusing Exciting Rough with peer pressure	Deal with peer pressure Guide without being pushy Conform to another's expectation Provide guidance Learn everything there is to know Be independent – you're supposed to "fit in" with a group Be understood	Teens had friends and role models to lean on Teens were helped to feel good about themselves People encouraged and guided Parents and adolescents could have more "rap" sessions Parents would be involved with their kids more Church was more present in family life More moms stayed at home	Be a village, that's what it takes Support programs and activities to provide teens an outlet Include teens. Not just in sports, but civic activities. Provide youth guidance Create more positive things for teens to be involved in
Adolescents today are...	They find it hard to...	We can help by...	Communities should...
Overwhelmed Challenged Confused about life Facing too many choices Faced with many issues, peer pressures	Know the right way Choose a direction Listen, and learn from adults Make the right decision at certain times Fight peer pressures Be confident Handle all that is put on their plate Grow well Be an individual	Being involved Listening Guiding, educating, loving, understanding Not giving up on them, loving them Listening, supporting and being involved Being involved Encouraging communication Being there	Provide positive role models Band together Support parents in efforts to keep things going in the community that are youth oriented. Make police or authorities mentors and friends not just control. Be supportive, offer volunteer as well as paying jobs. Have neighborhood centers where teens can enjoy!!! Encourage parental involvement

People have a hard time supporting community solutions other than youth activities, because of their strong sense of parental responsibility, but also because they are cynical about the political system. "Everything seems to be the sound bite," a father of a teenager complained. Another added, "It's a spin doctor writing whatever they are saying." With this issue in particular, people believe that the politicians' attitude is that "children can't vote so why should we discuss their problems?" (Older man)

The Teen's World

Adults struggle with the teen years in part because they believe in the importance of parental involvement, yet they know teens are beyond the point where parents can shield them from the realities of life and tough choices. Teens are faced with stresses and choices that children do not face, but they do not yet have the maturity and responsibility of adults. If they could, adults would reverse those experiences and protect teens from the emotional stresses, while giving them more responsibility.

On the one hand, they stress the importance of parental involvement. "Once the kids get older," a mother of a teenager noted, "the parents think they don't have to hire a daycare. Honestly, it says teenagers need to be supervised more than they do when they are in grade school and below." Some parents of teens continue to juggle their schedules to be home with their children. "He's home at 2:30. That's right at the time my kids are home," explained a mother of a teen. "They are never unsupervised. Somebody is always there, whether they are doing something or whatever, one of us is always accessible. He chooses not to take other jobs because this works for us right now."

At the same time, they recognize that teens are largely outside of the influence of their parents. They understand that parents cannot be there "when this kid is pressuring them in the bathroom to do the drugs" (Mother of younger children). "When people say they put a block on the TV or Internet, that is fine," stressed a father of a teen. "There is nothing wrong with that but you can't block out every association with everything that goes on during the day. If they go to school, they have friends... That is something you can't put a block on."

Teens are confronted with emotional stresses and choices that a child does not face. "I think that they get an exposure to a tremendous number of things that we as adults wrestle with," noted an older woman. "They are presented with sex, drugs, divorce, pregnancy, gangs, guns, violence. They are presented with all of these things by 10 years old and they are confronted with them at 13. I think that they don't have the emotional maturity or the intellectual maturity to be able to deal with them." "At 13, I felt like a little kid," noted a mother of a teen. "But 13 year olds now days, they don't look like 13 year olds. There's tons of 13 year olds that aren't even virgins any more." Another agreed, "They know at 13 what you knew when you were 25 and married." This knowledge and emotional stress is forced upon them. "My eight year old is telling me what her theory of sex is just from seeing commercials on TV," noted a mother of a younger child. Another mother reported that her "daughter is going to be 13 and sometimes she just says, 'Mom, if you don't have your dukes up, they just step all over you.'"

Though they struggle with adult stresses, they do not have the responsibility of adults. "The average teenager has a real easy life," an older man stated. "They just do what they damn well please, when they want to do it." "I think most teenagers probably have more things available to them than we ever did as we grew up," suggested a father of a younger child, "because most families are dual income families. I think because of that they have

the opportunity to do a lot more than we ever did. And because of that I think they also take things for granted.”

Reminding adults of their own teen years causes them to be more sympathetic toward teens, but it also sets up a stark contrast with their own youth. It makes today’s youth seem even less responsible, and in even more danger when they remember how different their own youth seemed.

As noted by Aubrun and Grady people “toggle back and forth between empathetic and objectifying mindsets; i.e., between taking account of what it's like to be a teenager, and considering teens from the outside” (Aubrun & Grady, "How Americans Understand Teens: Findings From Cognitive Interviews" 2000).

The focus group discussions also demonstrated this switching between mindsets. When asked for the first words that come to mind when they hear the word “teenager” people typically considered teens from the outside, and as a separate group: “rebellious,” “obnoxious,” “know-it-all.” When asked to remember what it was like to be a teen, they speak more empathetically, and talk about adolescence as a stage. “I remember my parents thought rock and roll was the worst music they ever heard in the world,” reminisced an older woman, “and I loved it all the more because they didn't. So I think rebellion is part of the biological age span that you are going through as a teenager.” However, it also reminds them of how different they believe today’s youth are. Most saw their own youth as full of responsibility, which is not how they see today’s teens.

“I had a lot of responsibilities. Both my mom and dad worked and so I had to do a lot of things.”

“I remember I had responsibilities, too. I was second of eight kids, so I would come home and help mom. Usually she already had dinner started and stuff, but I had to do my things.”

“My parents worked. There were only three of us at home. I had to pick up my younger brother from baby-sitting and just keep an eye on him.”

(Mothers of teenagers)

My home life was most stressful than everyone else's. My parents expected certain things even on weekends, so mine was more hectic and a little bit more stressful than everyone else's.

(Older man)

Adults believe they benefited from a strong work ethic that they do not see in teens today. “My old man was rich,” explained an older man. “You didn't get anything from him until you worked for it.” “That's right,” another agreed. “I respected him. I respected my

mom. I respected the police because that was something they taught...I knew nothing came free.”

The comparison with their own teen years also reminds them how much more dangerous they feel teen life is today compared to their own youth. When thinking of safety, most point to the world around teens as what has changed, rather than teens themselves. “I was not the most perfect teenager,” a mother of younger children confessed. “I did a lot of really stupid, stupid things and it scares me when I think about these kids today that have even more options of worse things that they can get into than we did.” They are then reminded why safety is a central concern for them.

Past Safety, Present Terror

“I felt when I was a teenager I could go out and basically go free and go where I wanted to go and not worry about other people and getting into really serious trouble. But now I have a teenager today and they were out and about and I didn't know where they were, I don't feel safe having them out in the streets.” (Father of a teen)

“I think it is horrifying compared to the way it was. I'd be scared to death to go to high school. I'm scared for my children to go into a high school knowing that there is knives and guns in there. Somebody waiting in the bathroom to offer them any multitude of pharmaceutical supplies that they might need.” (Mother of younger children)

“Hey, AIDS scares me to death. We worried about getting pregnant, we didn't worry about dying.” (Mother of a teen)

Judging Teens

Using no information other than pictures, participants were asked to describe what the teen in their picture was like and to speculate about what kind of student, family, and future they were likely to have. Focus group participants used three types of information to determine a teen's personality and values: appearance, attitude, and action. They looked at expressions and body language, clothing, and surroundings, to try to understand that youth's life and future. This exercise was useful in identifying the ways that adults think about teens, and their basis for those opinions.

Appearance

Generation after generation of parents has pointed to some aspect of teen appearance as demonstration that teens represent different values than their parents – from skirts that show ankles, to sideburns and long hair on teen boys, to pierced bodies, parents have used appearance to gauge teen immorality. Today adults continue to look to appearance to gauge values and parental involvement, but they also see experiments in appearance as a sign of confidence and individuality.

"I wouldn't want my son hanging out with somebody dressed like that because of the image that he projects." Father of younger child

Many adults see teen appearance as a healthy sign of individuality and independence, as long as appearance is not too different. "This girl seems like she is on the right track," noted a father of a teen in looking at a picture of a teen girl. "I don't see any tattoos on her or she is not wearing black makeup all over her face and her hair is not purple." He was then quick to add, "of course that is not indicative of a bad student either but it could be."

Some believe that today's youth may be more healthy in their attitude toward appearance than they were as teens. In comparing with her own youth, one mother of a teen suggested that teen appearance today is "different than the competition that there was before as far as who has the most expensive tennis shoes, who's got the most expensive jacket." "The kids are totally different now," added another mother of a teen. "Every other child is wearing something totally different than the one that just went by. So I don't think clothes actually make you popular any more like it used to." In fact, some see individuality in dress as a good thing. In describing a picture of a teen girl, a mother of a teen stated "I think she's happy with her life...because she has a straw hat on and to hell with wearing the latest fashion. She just seems to be happy with who she is."

Just as with former generations of parents, a girl's appearance is viewed as a sign of her emerging sexuality. From flappers to the introduction of the bikini, adults have judged a girl's clothing by its level of inappropriate sexuality. In describing a picture of a teen girl wearing a short top, one father of a younger child criticized "she looks like she is a 12 year old girl trying to dress like an 18 year old girl." This indicates that she is "a bit

rebellious. Perhaps sultry at too early an age.” They see this as an indication that she is “more likely to say, ‘O.K., go for it.’ Including sex, drugs and drinking, body piercing or whatever it is” (Father of teen). This judgment is less about the clothing, and more about the appropriateness of clothing based on age. Similar clothes on an older girl were not only appropriate, but modest. “She’s got a little bit of midriff showing but it is not the thin spaghetti straps, cleavage that kind of thing at her age that you see an awful lot of,” stated a mother of younger child.

Adults recognize that girls are judged differently than boys in this regard:

“I think that is unfair but I think you are probably more protective of a female than you would be a male.”

“I’m one of five and there were three boys and two girls and my parents were always more protective of us for the pregnancy issue. With the boys it was drinking and driving. I was more apt to sit there and put way too much makeup on and attract the wrong attention where they were more apt to steal tires or do something . . .”

“They can go out and do what they want and they zipped up and they came home.”

Mothers of younger children

Several focus group participants alluded to their belief that middle class or upper class youth are more likely to be successful than lower or working class youth. “I would think based on the house and the environment,” explained a mother of a younger child, “they have a reasonably good chance of making it in the world.” However, the American work ethic creates some resentment toward those who do not have to work to be successful, which shows up in their attitudes toward teens. “I said he is good looking, clean cut, probably plays team sports,” explained an older woman. “Comes from a middle-class family. Will probably go to good schools and college. Probably have a professional career and life will be good for him. I think he is typical of the kind of person where everything goes his way whether he deserves it or not.” Added another, “He probably takes a lot for granted because a lot comes his way.”

They show more admiration for a youth with fewer advantages who seems to be on the right track. “I see him as an urban or inner city, disadvantaged youth,” a father of a younger child described, “who is active in maybe church groups or civic groups. He is maybe participating in something like that now; something to get him out and into the workplace. I see him as being lower, middle class but happy and hopeful despite his circumstances and disadvantages and wants to take the right path in life.”

Lastly, attire is one signal for whether or not parents are involved in a teen’s life. “I think he comes from a good family,” noted an older man. “I think he’s got rules to follow. I think his family, just by the way he’s got his haircut and the clothes he is wearing, you

know his parents are telling him something.” “I think she has a parent or parents very involved in her life,” explained a mother of a teen. “She looks – she’s not outlandish.”

Attitude

Many of adults’ concerns about teens are expressed through their assessment of teen attitude. Focus group participants think of a variety of adjectives to describe this attitude: “rebellious,” “all knowing,” “stubborn,” “demanding,” “disrespectful.”

Adults are so accustomed to the picture of the moody, sullen, angry youth, that expectations for teens are low when it comes to attitude. A father of younger children spoke about teens in his neighborhood: “I have some extremely intelligent, articulate, young -- 12 to 16 year olds. Surprisingly, actually, to speak with such perfect English, respectful. Sometimes it shocks me.”

There are positive sides to teen attitude, but a fine line between confidence and cockiness. “They really just think they know what they are talking about, which I find amusing and play with that,” suggested an older woman. “As long as they listen. Now if they are out of control and think they know everything and they are going their own way no matter what you say, now you have a problem.” Added another older woman pointing to a picture of a serious-looking youth, “It says so much when you smile. It makes you look like you have confidence.”

Teens today look sullen and angry. “When I see teenagers coming out of high school or when my son was in high school, they didn’t look particularly happy,” remembered an older woman, “which always made me feel bad for them...they just never look really happy.” They project an intimidating image:

“Everybody’s got a chip on their shoulder these days. You look at somebody and you turn your head away because you think they are going to jump on you.”

“They think you are mad dogging them.”

“What are you looking at me for?”

Older men

Action

One of the most interesting findings in this research is the power of sports and volunteerism to demonstrate that teens share adult values and are on the right path.

In reviewing pictures of different youths, focus group participants consistently pointed to pictures of teens involved in

Sports May Signal Work Ethic More Strongly Than Work

“Not the kids I know. Usually they are working to help themselves be able to buy one of those things.”

“Car insurance.”

“Clothes.”

“Video games. But I can’t name a kid who works to help his actual family situation.”

Mothers of Teens

sports and volunteer activities as examples of kids on the right track. They are youth who will be successful adults. “When I see a girl in sports, I immediately think she has a chance to succeed in life,” explained a father of a teen. “She will likely have a better chance at having some good self esteem than a girl who is not participating... If she's got any technology skills, she will probably be my boss some day...She'll come out of this good. I feel very hopeful seeing that picture of a girl.”

They are also youth who have good values. “To me it seems any time a child can stay active in some organization as far as sports,” explained a father of younger children, “I think it teaches a kid a lot as far as dealing with others, working as a team not as a loner. Just things that makes a person more well-rounded.”

They are judged to be youth who will help build strong communities. “He is going to be an asset to his community just because he is already at a young age involved in community,” described a mother of younger children. “He is probably a pretty good student because most kids that are poor students are not going to care to get involved in the community... I think he is probably a decent student and all around good kid.”

The power of sports and volunteerism is so strong, in fact, that there may be an opportunity to point to sports, clubs, and volunteer activities as solutions to deal with teens in trouble. It may serve to bridge parental and societal responsibility.

Throughout the group discussions, participants pointed to the positive aspects of youth activities. “I think one of the strategies that parents try to use today to keep their kids out of trouble is they keep them busy,” suggested a father of a younger child. “They try to keep them in sports; they try to keep them in extra-curricular activities, clubs and stuff. It is a good strategy.”

Sports and volunteerism may help to bridge the gap between parental and societal responsibility. Note one woman’s transition from parental to community responsibility:

“They should have more mentoring. They should have more family support. We felt that it wasn’t the community’s responsibility to raise your child. The support should come from the family. Another thing we thought, too, was that we see a lot of kids get into sports and clubs, and I think it was mentioned over here that there should be more things offered to children, or teens, or youth, or whatever you want to call them. More things should be offered. I threw out that a lot of kids – sports are good; they do teach responsibility.” (Older woman)

One reason sports and volunteerism may be a comfortable way to broaden outside the family, is that people assume sports requires a certain level of parental involvement to begin with. “Well, I think if kids are going to belong to clubs and be in sports and stuff,” suggested an older woman, “that they need family support to get them there. To maybe pay the fees, help them with the uniform, whatever. That is a community effort but I think the family has to support it.”

Influencing Teen Image Through the Media

The average teen never makes it into the nightly news. Those doing horrific crimes, or, occasionally, the exceptional teen, are the ones that make “news.” While adults say they understand the teen in the news is atypical, they refuse to accept statistics demonstrating that teens are doing fine.

“When you expect and assume that kids are doing everything that they are writing about, what chance do they have? You assume they are already doing it.”

Mother of Teen

People recognize that television projects a skewed image of teenagers. “I think that the bad things we see on TV -- I know it happens,” explained an older woman. “I know it happens way too much. I know that good kids can be drawn into the bad things, but I don't think it happens as much as TV fiction would have you believe.”

What types of teens do you see on the news?

“Rebellious.”

“Ones into drugs and violence.”

“The ones that shot somebody.”

“Yes, the ones that are selling drugs on the street corner.”

The teens they see on television are either the very bad, or the very good – not the average kid. “If some teenager robs a store or kills his parents or what have you, they will be on the news,” noted a mother of a younger child. “And if someone wins a beauty pageant, she will be on the news. But in the middle...” And the bad are far more present in the media than the good. “The bad teens are the ones that make the headlines,” suggested a mother of a younger child. “That is what you hear about all the time...They don't do these reports on teens

that are in poetry contests and win or working in the soup kitchens -- a list of kids that made the honor roll. You don't hear that...So when you think of a teenager, you are automatically going to associate with the bad rap that they have gotten just by a few.”

While most point the finger of blame at the media for this skewed view, some point to consumers. “So who is really responsible?” asked a mother of younger children. “You are saying it is the media, but it is not the media. It is the people who watch it. It's the people who buy the papers. It's the people who support these and if people straight across said, ‘we don't want this. We're not going to read it. We're not going to buy it. We demand that we have a community section in the paper that does this.’ And advertisers will go there. It could be changed.”

During the course of the discussions, focus group participants were asked to respond to three news stories that each attempted to create a positive dialogue about society's responsibility for youth. The dialogue following each story underscored the difficult task that lies ahead in creating societal responsibility for youth.

School Counselors (Attachment 1)

One news story outlined the declining number of school counselors and how that trend is making it more difficult to spot mental health issues among teens before the problem reaches a crisis. This story intended to take a central concern (teen values as demonstrated through their mental health) and marry it with a well-loved actor (schools) to provide a societal solution for teen problems. It also included the most challenging opposing frame (parental responsibility).

The response to this story underscores the difficulty in shifting people from their frame of parental responsibility to a shared responsibility. This struggle is demonstrated in the divide in a fundamental understanding of what schools' mission should be. Some believe schools' sole role is to educate children, while others believe schools have a broader responsibility to nurture children. Those who oppose the suggested solution of more counselors in the schools are doing so largely based on the inferred threat to the parents' primary responsibility for children's values.

Those who see schools' mission limited to education believe that other tangential objectives for schools keep them from doing a good job with the primary mission of education. "I think the schools take on too much," noted an older woman, "and that's why they do a poor, even lesser job at everything they do." In reacting to the story about school counselors, one father of a teenager argued, "But if you turn the school into a clinic...I just have to believe the kids are going to suffer. I don't think you learn when you are not in class."

Others see school responsibility more broadly. "You basically have these kids more hours during their waking hours than their parents do," argued one mother of a teenager. "And if you go back to all the kids who are now our age, they'll tell you who had the most influence." For those who see a nurturing role for schools, the problem is that teachers are no longer allowed to fulfill that role. "Teachers can't give opinions anymore," a mother of a teenager complained. "Teachers can't give a pat on the back anymore. Teachers can't do anything...yet they are expected to be a mentor."

This news story struck at the heart of parental responsibility v. societal responsibility. Some state outright that it is not the school's place to take on a parent's responsibility. "I don't think our public school system, regardless of what kids do or don't have, should be dealing with our children's personal issues," argued the mother of a younger child. "That belongs in the families, or in the churches, or wherever." "Teachers who are with these children all day, every day should be able to spot youth they feel have problems," suggested another mother of a younger child, "and parents, if they are in touch with their children also should be able to recognize this. I think it is a family issue."

Part of their reason for concern is that parents see counselors' roles as primarily academic in nature, and this news story appeared to them to inappropriately broaden that role. "I always thought a counselor was somebody you didn't want to go see," stated an older

man. Another agreed, "I never used a counselor. I didn't see where there was any need for the counselors."

If counselors today are dealing with mental health issues, then that is a responsibility that has been taken on without the conscious knowledge of parents. "If you went to the counselor before, you went because you started your period and you didn't know what to do," complained a mother of a younger child. "The types of issues you went to back in the days when they had them are nothing like they have today." If they see a counselor's role as largely academic, then this news story must be about a different type of counselor. "We sort of have always seen counselors as being in schools for the purpose of guidance," explained a father of a teenager. "...In order to place mental health professionals in every school would cost much more money than any of us could ever conceive of paying to the state government."

The preventive message is powerful, but conflicts with their understanding of a counselor's role. In response, they move to support what they believe is a much smaller solution. "As a possible solution, we see training of those counselors, teachers, or whoever, the administrative staff, in what areas to pinpoint so they can make referrals," a father of a teenager explained. "I don't mind the nurse putting a band-aid on my child but they are not going to do open heart surgery."

Those who accepted the frame of the article did so in a way that reaffirmed their frame of parental responsibility. "The parents that are in touch with their children, yes they would use their insurance," argued a mother of a younger child. "They would get their child help. But what about these children that the parents aren't? They don't know where their kids are." Another added, "because the children that have the biggest problems are not the children that had a good family structure." One mother of a teenager even suggested that a family member other than a parent is an inadequate substitute. "A lot of kids don't have someone they can trust and tell their anxieties or fears or how they feel...The parents are too busy and they come home tired...Something may be bothering them, and they need someone they can trust. And a lot of times, unfortunately, they will go to other family members instead of their own parents." (Mother of teen)

Finally, this exercise also outlined the importance of setting up the solution through the frame people already accept. While it is difficult to extrapolate from qualitative research, when a paragraph supporting people's frame that "today's youth have more issues to face than in the past," led the article, people seemed more supportive of the school solution.

Good News (Attachment 2)

A second news story attempted to convince people that teens are not in crisis. It outlined all the positive trends in key indicators, while tempering the good news with the caution that there is still room for improvement and some areas are worse. The intent of this story was to use good news about teens (trend statistics) and point to societal solutions as explanations (communities as a key force in raising healthy children).

This story is the perfect example of FrameWorks President Susan Bales' warning, "when the facts don't fit the frame, the facts get rejected, not the frame." People reacted to the positive statistics with disbelief and skepticism. They were so focused on trying to fit the statistics into their knowledge of the world that they largely ignored the suggested solution of nurturing communities.

Most people simply did not believe the statistics. "I questioned almost the whole story," a father of a teen stated. A mother of a younger child queried, "How did they do this poll?" Another asked, "40% of youth involved in community service? That seems awfully high." "A meteor? I mean how many times has a human been hit by a meteor?" argued an older man.

Others skeptically looked for some explanation that would make the statistic technically true, but not with the intended definition. "But is it forced community service?" asked a mother of a younger child attempting to understand the statistic that 40% of teens volunteer. "Well that's because the schools make it mandatory now," explained an older woman. "Kids today use marijuana less than their parents did," read a father of a teenager, "maybe, maybe not. But it doesn't mention anything about other substances."

A few re-defined the positive statistics as negative. "Here we are now in 2000 and you would think that with all the technology that we have, 30 years later, you would think they would have more tools to work with that could provide better education," a father of a younger child complained.

They concluded that the objective of this story was to rationalize further cuts for children. "They are going to cut something because we're doing so great or they are going to take something away," suggested a mother of younger child. A father of a teenager asked, "Is that an organization run by whatever party is in power to cook the books or the stats to make it look like 'Hey, we've done a great job' when maybe we haven't?"

Few found a rationale for why the statistic might be true. "I was going to say personally I wouldn't know because I haven't volunteered to do it," stated a mother of a younger child. "I see them (teens) at church because I go and I'll see them in the mall because I go. But perhaps if I went and served at a soup kitchen, I might see it jack full of teenagers. Because my butt is at home eating my soup in front of the TV, I don't see them."

The article explicitly credited "the social cohesiveness of neighborhoods" with driving the positive statistics. Still, this attempt to lead people to community responsibility largely failed. In most groups there was little dialogue about the importance of community. When there was dialogue about community, it tended to result in nostalgia for different times. "We just say, 'hi,'" explained an older man, "and I'll go if he is digging a hole to fix his sprinklers, I'll go help him, but we don't get involved no more than just a friendly, 'hi.' I don't say, 'Come over and have a beer,' and he doesn't say, 'Come over and have a beer.' They used to do that."

Billboard (Attachment 3)

A third news story told of a small town that was being overrun by bars and liquor advertising. This story attempted to use the strong frame of parental responsibility, but bridge that responsibility into parents acting together as a unified force to take action for their children and community. It included a specific call to action. It also included competing frames of free speech and economic opportunity.

The attempt to bridge parental responsibility into community action was only partially successful. While many accepted an active role for parents and community, several participants became trapped in stronger competing frames that kept them from accepting the proposed solution.

Instead of accepting the story's frame of parental responsibility through community action, many people reverted to a more traditional parental responsibility frame: if the children were raised right, they would be immune to the advertising. "Far more important than the legislation is the comment about why can't we immunize communities against bad influences," stated an older woman. "It's prevention. Look at parents to talk to their kids."

Several other competing frames were very powerful: first amendment rights, big brother government, supply and demand, and the free market system. While some respondents believed these important values were at risk, others simply appeared helpless in the face of these frames – as though individuals could not act.

First Amendment

"We decided we didn't think you should legislate the number of billboards that can be put up because you are infringing on a freedom of expression. Freedom that we don't want to sacrifice and it wouldn't matter whether it was five billboards or fifty billboards." (Mother of a younger child)

Big Brother

"How involved do we want government? How much control do we want them to have because the more you give them, the more it takes the responsibility off the parents." (Mother of a younger child)

Supply and Demand

"You've got to get to the root of it and it starts in the home. The market will shrink itself. It will go away. All that stuff will come down if they stop buying." (Father of a teen)

Free Market

“The whole nature of this country is to drive profits up and everything. Then all of a sudden something gets out of whack. The kids are doing this and then we say, ‘Oh, we’ve got to stop all the advertisements. Stop all of these other.’ Do everything that is against what we’re fundamentally about – advertising to make this stuff sell.” (Father of a teen)

“It’s free enterprise. I don’t know that anything could be done about it. Limiting the number of billboards would be the only thing that comes to mind, but I don’t know if that would be possible. It’s the almighty dollar. There is a space and a company wanted to sell billboard space. Someone is going to buy it. You can’t tell them what to do, so I’m not sure that there is anything you can do.” (Older woman)

Once people accept one of these frames, they see the solutions as ones that fit within that frame. For example, advertising can fight advertising within the First Amendment frame. “All the billboards seem to be advertising, ‘Hey, it’s great. It’s cool,’” remarked a mother of a teenager. “They need to show the effects of what can happen.” Others pointed to ways the market could help combat the problem. “And another thing we talked about was the companies that rented the billboards to put the ads up that they should donate money to the teen center and maybe help the kids,” an older woman suggested.

Conclusions

- “Teenager” may be an unsalvageable word. It brings to mind wild and irresponsible youth, even when used to describe one’s own teen years. There is almost a sense of pride in the rebelliousness of teens. “Adolescent” or “youth” are more positively received and cause people to think about a transition in life.
- Teenage dress and appearance have historically been used as an indicator of teens’ lack of morality and values. However, there is an opportunity to reframe a youth’s unusual style as individuality, positive exploration, and a harmless search for identity.
- There is an enormous opportunity to use sports and volunteerism to demonstrate that teens share society’s core values and work ethic. They can also be used as societal solutions to youth problems, i.e. a way for adolescents to find their identity in a positive, supportive environment.
- Adults default to a parental responsibility frame at every opportunity. It is very difficult to shift people from parental to societal responsibility, even when the example is parents acting together for their own children, or schools filling an acknowledged need.
- Schools can be the center of a community’s involvement with teens, but even here, communication needs to be careful not to imply replacing traditional academic work or parents’ responsibility.
- There may be an ability to reframe coaches and leaders of volunteer organizations as mentors, as a demonstration of the ways that all of us help to raise young people in our communities. Importantly, if these people are not parents of teens, it helps to underscore community responsibility rather than reverting to parental responsibility.
- Advocates should be cautious in trying to debunk entrenched beliefs about teens. Taking these myths on directly could result in outright rejection rather than a questioning of stereotypes.

Methodology

This report is based upon an analysis of six focus group conversations held in February and March 2000. Each focus group included 9-10 participants recruited to the following criteria:

- Mix of party identification, no more than 2 strong Democratic identifiers, no more than 2 strong Republican identifiers
- Mix of parent age (except for groups 1 and 6, where half were 50 – 70 years of age)
- Mix of education
- 2-3 African Americans recruited per group (Richmond and Baltimore)
- 3-4 African American/Asian/Hispanic per group (California)
- The following occupations were eliminated: teacher, principal, school counselor, other school employee, police officer, social services, marketing research
- Two-thirds to three-quarters employed
- Have not been to a focus group in over 1 year

In addition, gender of participant and the ages of their children or grandchildren divided the groups:

Group 1, February 2, 2000: Baltimore Older Women, children already out of high school (no more than 3 with a child still in college, none with a grandchild in middle or high school)

Group 2, February 2, 2000: Baltimore Fathers of Younger Children, oldest child in elementary school

Group 3, February 8, 2000: Richmond Mothers of Younger Children, oldest child in elementary school

Group 4, February 8, 2000: Richmond Fathers of Teenagers, child in middle school or high school

Group 5, March 2, 2000: Riverside, CA Mothers of Teenagers, child in middle school or high school

Group 6, March 2, 2000: Riverside, CA Older Men, youngest children already out of high school (no more than 3 with a child still in college, none with a grandchild in middle or high school)

Focus group conversations are qualitative in nature, meaning the findings are for exploratory purposes and not to be generalized to the population.

Attachment 1

CASE OF THE DISAPPEARING SCHOOL COUNSELOR

From drugs and AIDS to gun and media violence, today's youth have more issues to face than in the past. Ironically, they have fewer supports in place to help them over these hurdles, according to a new report released today that asserts that California is doing less than it should to support teen mental health.

When kids get in trouble, the first person who used to know was the school counselor, the person you were sent to see after you did your time in the principal's office.

Today, that chair is empty. Between 1979 and 1999, a quiet transformation took place in our public school system, and the Pomona Valley was no exception. The counseling office became the technology center or the community service center or whatever the latest education fad dictated. But the counselors are no more. Today, the ratio for most California counties is one counselor to every 1,900 elementary students, according to newly released data from state agency sources. For older students, the ratio is better – in middle schools, about one to 650, and in high schools, one to 550.

The result is that mental illness, and its opposite, mental health, are not widely discussed with children, families and communities, say teachers and children's advocates, and with so few counselors, schools have little ability to help uncover the early signs of a problem. The newly formed California Education Coalition announced today that it will campaign statewide to get children's mental health services covered under the state's CHIP (Children's Health Insurance) Program, and to lobby the legislature for more attention to prevention and treatment services and more funding for additional school counselors.

"You can catch a kid before he falls," says Coalition leader Ron Mander. "But under the federal plan for children's health insurance, mental health is not considered basic enough to cover."

California Health Commissioner Rene Bost says the state needs to make choices, and basic health care has to come first.

Some opponents, like the Rev. Orin Thomas, contend that "it's the school's job to teach, not to try to guide teens in the complex emotional decisions they need their parents for."

Advocates point to a host of new problems that kids are experiencing in response to stress and social pressures, from eating disorders to disruptive classroom behavior and copycat crimes.

But for now, the reality is that any student who feels like she is going under will have to wait in a very long line to get a little help.

Attachment 2

SOME KIDS DOING BETTER, OTHERS FALL BEHIND

New Report Pinpoints Victories and Problem Areas for California

The well-being of California children has held amazingly steady, despite the horror stories that we all hear, says a new report from the state's leading child advocacy organization.

School achievement, as measured by the National Assessment of Educational Progress, shows scores at par with those of the early 1970s, while the percentage of California youth who work part-time and contribute to family incomes has remained constant over the same period. More young people are volunteering than ever before, with 40 percent of all youth regularly involved in community service. And, while it is commonly believed that drugs and crime occupy young people's time, in fact marijuana use has declined substantially, and "kids today use marijuana less than their parents did," says the report. The violent crime rate has increased from 1 in 100,000 youth to 3 in 100,000 youth, but that statistic is interpreted by California Kids First leader Jim Johns as meaning "the chance of being involved in teenage violent crime is about as high as being hit by a meteor."

Johns attributes the good news to "the social cohesiveness of neighborhoods." He explains this as "when adults socialize, care about their community, go to church, and join clubs," the community does a better job of "nurturing young people." "What we need to do," according to Johns, "is reach out to those areas without a community focus, and help them build a sense of neighborhood through community centers, churches and schools."

On some factors, however, California lost ground. Poverty continued to rise among the poorest families, and the number of teen deaths reached an all-time high in 1998. The number one reason for teen death is auto accidents, followed by suicide. Teen pregnancy has receded in recent years, but it is too early to tell if this is a trend or a blip on the screen, say experts. The report tracked four key indicators of youth achievement — health, education, safety and financial security — and found 1 in 7 children in the state is at risk to such a degree that "their chance of becoming a productive adult is seriously at question."

Attachment 3

RURAL COMMUNITY RALLIES TO KEEP BREW OFF BILLBOARDS, REDUCE BARS

A diverse community known more as a pit stop between highways than as a home to civic activists has won a first step toward reclaiming its streets from a powerful business interest. The issue is teen drinking, and whether parental values matter more than economic development.

Sesqualla, wedged between Interstate 403 and the popular Lees Highway, just outside Earlham, had seen the number of liquor licenses issued by the state climb from 14 just ten years ago to nearly 50 this year. While the impact is debatable – some say incidents of violence have increased, but not to the point of documentation – the Parents Association of Greater Sesqualla felt it was only a matter of time before alcohol promotion took its toll on the town's youth. That possibility was made all the more visible by the increasing number of billboards featuring alcohol advertising along the two routes.

“You just couldn't walk from school to the teen center without getting the message that you'd be cooler and more popular if you popped open a brew on the way,” says Parents leader Roxanne Milton. “We told the local authorities we wanted it stopped at least two years ago, but they said they couldn't do anything unless something happened,” she explained. “How do you document what hasn't happened yet, what is just a bad influence?”

The Parents Association first asked the local Chamber of Commerce to get involved, explaining that the decline of the neighborhood was likely to drive out business and harm quality of life. Representatives of the Chamber turned them down, Milton says, “because they couldn't see a link between their business interests and the youth of our town.”

In a separate interview, the President of the Chamber of Commerce, Sam Thurston, explained that “the business climate has been enhanced by the addition of new clubs and nightlife. It is helping to draw more tourists to the area, which will bring more jobs and opportunities for our young people.” He pointed out that youth unemployment is at a record high in Sesqualla, and many kids could use the extra cash they get from tourism-related jobs for college tuition.

Milton counters that “we immunize people against bad germs; why can't we immunize communities against bad influences? It's basic prevention. And we need it just as much for the parents, who are our kids' role models, as for the kids themselves.”

Three months ago, Milton and an army of 20 parents, teachers and religious leaders led a delegation to the mayor's office. When nothing happened, and the number of licenses went from 40 to 48, Milton and her band went to the legislature with a petition signed by 90% of the town's registered voters. “That show of support is pivotal,” says Milton.

Although the billboard company is raising charges of tampering with free speech, the Parent group was notified last night that the State Legislator Kevin Aubrey will introduce new legislation to limit the number of alcohol advertisements to a population formula that would make all but one billboard illegal in Sesqualla. According to Milton, "If every parent in the state took 5 minutes to write their state legislator, we could take back our communities."

Attachment 4 -- Selected Letters Written by Respondents

At the end of the 2 hour group discussion, each respondent was asked to:

“Write a letter to the candidate of your choice, at any level --- for president, mayor, etc. and tell them the most important thing you think about young people today, or the question about young people you would like answered.”

The intention of this exercise was to see what issues or issue frames were top-of-mind at the end of the conversation.

What is notable about the content of the letters is that even at the end of two hours of dialogue, most people do not refer to factual points or specific policy recommendations. Instead, they approach these issues simply and emotionally:

“Kids need direction by parents, family, and even peers.”

“Bring back respect.”

“With every generation it seems to get worse. I don’t know the solution.”

“Please help us build up our youth rather than take them down – after all, they are our future!”

This exercise serves as a reminder that even after in-depth, focused dialogue, most people do not incorporate a public agenda or a policy dialogue into their thinking. A direct “policy wonk” debate, no matter how compelling, is difficult to incorporate into real people’s thinking. Their view of the world is grounded in their general sense of an issue and the core values that issue taps. It is through shifting the associations they make between their interpretation of an issue and the solutions that extend from that interpretation that advocates can have an impact.

Each letter follows, transcribed exactly as the author wrote it. The letters have been categorized into the following groupings: those that mention oral health specifically, those that mention health generally, those that address some other specific issue raised in the group dialogue, and those that are about children and teens more generally.

Letters Mentioning Oral Health

Dear Surgeon General,

I believe that poor oral health is one of the most pressing issues affecting our youth today. We can do so much to improve this issue if it is brought to the attention of parents and educators.

Can you, in your position, instigate a program to help present this issue and implement funding.

Sincerely,

Joyce

Dear Mayor O'Malley,

You have done such a magnificent job with senior citizens during the recent snow storm, that I'd like to propose that you use your influence in funding a oral health program for our youths. This program should be set up to diagnose children's oral health program so that speech defects, eating disorders, pain, etc. can be reduced.

Adele

Dear _____,

How do you plan to ensure that all children are given the health care, dental care, and mental health care that they need when parents don't have the resources to do so.

Lisa C.

Letters Mentioning “Health” Generally

Dear Mr. President,

I am concerned with the rising cost of health care. Even as a working mother with insurance. Things are still outrageous in price. There should be more help for the working families in the US to control these rising costs.

Kathy H.

Dear Gore,

Why does the greatest nation in the world still not have a universal health program, one of the lowest education/intelligence levels and highest crime rates.

Certainly, we are taxed heavily enough already that additional spending is not the answer.

Armand

Dear _____,

I feel the education system should be highly improved. They need to be more aware of the childrens need and the community needs. Have more resources available for the not only troubled but not so troubled. Drug problems, teach how bad they are. Also teach health, better health.

Cindy

Dear Sir,

How can we help our children to have a better life. Health and education are the most important subjects for me.

Dan

Letters Mentioning a Specific Issue from the Group Discussion

Dear School Board,

Our children today have a greater number of things to cope with and fewer resources than ever before. Please fund:

smaller schools neighborhood
counselors
use of schools for after school activities

Mary

Dear Mayor,

The youth today need more guidance than ever before in history. Perhaps because of the media or maybe because there are more of them. Along with educational improvements why can't we have more guidance counselors to help troubled students to set goals.

I believe if youth can see a future it will give them hope and perhaps keep them on track. I would like to see this in the home, but most parents won't take the time.

I appeal to you to look at this cause. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Teresa

Dear Pres. Gore,

We need more counselors in our schools. The current ratio of students to counselors is unacceptable

-- Gary Z.

Dear sir,

I would like to ask why the state is not doing anything about getting help to kids that mental problems?

Frank

Letters About General Teen Concerns and Issues

Dear Mayor,

How are we going to get parents and children together again – so that we can both have a greater life.

Kathy

Dear Mayor,

The most important thing that we should be thinking about today is how to encourage teenagers.

Teens feel that adults are against them. We are constantly telling them that they don't anything, and how we were treated when we were their age.

Question: How can you make teenagers feel that you care about them? How are you going to protect them from crime, drugs and alcoholism.

Vernetta

Dear Mayor,

The most important think I think about young people today – is that they need more nurturing from the school personnel and community officials. You should see that more funds are allocated for medical care, etc.

Ruth

Dear Mr. O'Malley,

Education is sorely missing for our young. Accentuate the positive for them. Their need to know the whole picture should be kept in tow till they are old enough. Crime needs to be cleaned up especially in the schools. Our youth is afraid on the streets in school. They should not live in fear. What about volunteer groups. Lets get it together.

Mary Louise

Dear Mr. Mayor,

The most important thing about young people today is that they tend to waste most of their teenage years worrying about, dwelling on things that are not of importance. They need to be tougher to become an independent thinker and a member of society that has merit in what they do. They need to be taught to think of the future and not just of today.

Sherry

Dear County Executive,

Our trade school students are not being sufficiently challenged for learning. Shaping the curriculum for the recent testing blocks introduced is robbing them of exploring other meaningful information.

Please insure the breadth of education extends beyond the latest testing "band-aid."

Mark

Dear Mr. President,

The most important thing about young people today is civic involvement and community development. We need to provide opportunities and direction to children of all ages. We need to start young and keep in touch through (illegible) into college.

Adam

Dear So and So,

Please try to focus on the tough areas for young people today. Which I believe to be safety, in school and otherwise. The overall condition of the Independent educational systems throughout the state and country, and overall opportunity.

John

Dear Mr. President,

My biggest concern about young people is preventing so much violence involving them. I feel that the level of violence among is extremely too high, and I would like to see it drastically reduced. After all, I do have a vested interested in this topic.

Terry

Dear Mr. President,

I would like to take this time to ask you a question on education issue. What would it take to raise our learning standards so that our children could excel. The teaching method have lacked off to where our children lost in the paper work.

Thank very much,

Angelo

Dear Presidential Hopeful,

Without speaking words in terms of what you know we want to hear so that you will be surely elected, what will you do to improve out children's education!!

Melvin

Dear Gubernatorial Candidate,

I think that the most important issue facing young people today is education in Maryland. Some portions of the state have "magnet" schools where kids have an opportunity at an early age to focus on a particular subject area (i.e. arts, languages, sciences, etc.). Not all areas in the state have magnet schools. What is your opinion of magnet schools? Should they be expanded to all counties in the state? Have they proved valuable? Are there any statistics to support them?

Andy

Dear Mr. Bush,

I would like to know your position on education, and specifically, how do you intend to improve American education so that the many problems facing young people today will be satisfactorily addressed and, hopefully, rectified?

Alan

Dear President,

I believe that there should be more opportunities for disadvantaged teens to pursue higher education. Also, I feel that there should be substantial increase the amount of monies allocated to low social economic schools district and children. This I believe would lead ultimately and indirectly to more product members of society.

David

Dear Governor,

I am very concerned about peer pressure among kids today. Parents are not involved enough with their kids lives. A lot do not know what their children are doing after school. I worry about drugs and violence.

Lisa A.

Dear Gov. Gilmore,

Your challenge is to figure out how to encourage parental involvement in all facets of today's youth. Not by imposing legislation that can and often is construed as threatening to rights. Education is the key to resolving a good deal of these issues.

Stacey

Dear whoever,

There should be scholarships awarded to our youth for technical training or college based not on academic achievements but rather community contributions.

Sandra

Dear Congress,

Young people today are dealing with more problems. But I think one of their biggest problem that fitting in. But they need more recreational center or training program and get paid through this program. And teach them to be independent so that they can learn to save money and also pay some little bills.

Deborah

Dear George W. Bush,

Many young people today are not valued as highly as they should be. Often, parents are too busy, and our youth fall through the cracks. With so many fragmented families, our kids need as much support and love as we can give them. Please help us build up our youth rather than take them down – after all, they are our future!

Alice

Dear _____,

Teenage awareness – “support groups” to help parents understand the pre-teen - teen years. What steps to take in guiding them. Helpful hints – support groups are lovely – you as a parent find out that they – are not alone. (More advertising for community service.) (More emphasis on church for families.)

Kathy L.

Dear Governor,

I would like to see more emphasis on better curriculum in our public schools. Our youth are being poorly trained and ill prepared for their futures. SOL's are a joke. They were meant to be a checks and balances for our teachers to make sure they are teaching appropriately. Instead they are (the SOL's) are being used against these students. Not everyone can afford private schools which offer better curriculum. Consider the vouchers.

Madonna

Dear President George W. Bush Jr.,

The most important thing I feel about the young people of today would be that we need to break the chain/cycle. With every generation it seems to get worse. I don't know the solution. I simply wish the problems did not get worse and effect younger children with each passing generation. I personally feel that if people (adults) made more of an effort to retain their youthful memories it wouldn't be as difficult to deal with teenagers.

Tina

Dear Governor,

I feel the most important issue facing teens today is the quality of education. We must continue to improve or schools system so that students from Virginia can compete in an ever-changing, global society.

Michael J.

Dear Sir or Madam,

I personally feel children are the most important resource today. We must nurture to insure our future is one devoid of prejudices etc. To extend love would make for a positive start toward actualization across the spectrum!

Damon

Dear Governor,

What youth programs have you started or proposed which make our youth feel like they are part of the community?

Richard

Dear Bush,

How much thought is being done about today's youth and their part in the scheme of the future.

Timothy

Dear Governor,

Today's kids seem to be bereft of values and particularly the value of communities of people. Your standards of learning are not sufficient, we need choices to be schooled outside of the single public school in a school which encourage standards of living based on cohesive beliefs.

Michael B.

Dear Candidate,

The young people of today are essentially the same as you and I were back then.... Young, ambitious, impressionable, full of hope an wonderment of the future.

Above all I would implore you to be honest and forthright in your presentation of your views and positions on the issues, to these young people, as they will bear the burden or fruits of your decisions should you be elected.

Charlie

Dear Sir,

Young people today seem to have lost a moral fiber that kept me strong as a teenager. There are too many choices with too little guidance.

My kids would like to know if you're really interested in eliminating the harmful effects of smoking and not just making money. Why not eliminate nicotine.

Duncan

Dear Local Official of Richmond,

Why do we not have more fully funded programs to bring teenagers from different groups together.

Ulysses

Dear President,

I think that the young people of today need to be protected from the bad things out there in the world in that nothing is kept from them so that they keep the innocence of their childhood. I think the media is the major cause of this.

Sherry

Dear Mr. President,

Our young people are growing up to fast today. We need to control the music that is being put out on the radio, about violance, rape beating up on each other. We need to teach more about love, compassion, bring the prayer back. Think of other people's feelings. Bring back respect. Thank you.

Yvonne

Dear Mr. President,

What can we do to fight gun control, gangs, and crime?

Gina

Dear Mr. Gray Davis,

You have made a lot of improvement in schools, yet, why do kids of today still seem so lost and confused?

Pat

Dear Presidential Candidates (all),

What are you honestly going to do about the education (or lack thereof) system? I'm a single mom and want to know that my daughter will get the best education she can. I also want her to feel safe in school. What will you do about gun control and making our schools safe again?

Kelly

Dear Mr. McCain,

How are you going to reduce teenage violence?

How will you improve education? Will you make sure everyone has equal access to good, safe schools.

Maggi

Dear Al Gore,

I would truly like to see more emphasis placed on financial assistance on education, regarding our teachers and their salaries, what's expected of our students, teachers, parents. More financial aid to provide all students with the appropriate books, computers, etc. I would hope that by doing this it would show our youth how much we truly care about their lives and their future.

Sophia

Dear Mr. Bush,

I believe that are young children should be the priority of our nation. Parents need more time at home. Economy keeps parents away 10-11 hrs of the day when time is important. So they can get to know their children, their problems, their fears, their friends, they need to feel loved, important meaningful. They need to keep busy active with healthy activities and not in front of the T.V.

Morals are important, they need to be respected so they can learn to respect and respect life. Education, quality, caring, role models.

Lupe

Dear _____,

Why do we only have incentives for children in trouble or who are doing poorly in school? Can't we give incentives to young people who work hard in school or get involved in community activities?

Darlene

Dear Mr. Bush,

Young kids get pulled in to many directions. Kids need direction by parents, family, and even peers. Kids left to learn are their own, usually will choose the wrong way.

Fred

Dear President,

Our schools need to be made interesting places to be. Schools and teachers must find a way to get children to want to go to school!

Mike M

Dear Mayor,

Our children loosing direction. Is there any way the schools can help me understand what we, as parents, can do to remove this problem?

Dick

Dear _____,

I would like for you to tell me why is there so much violent crime among our teens. Gun usage is a big problem.

Mike A.

Dear _____,

Keep English in our schools, take away the police involvement between teens and their parents. More laws to take gangs off the street.

Gary C.

Dear Pres.,

Young people are the lifeline of our world, and if we don't use all means possible to educate and enlighten them on solving lifes mysteries on health and socialism the world will be in dire need.

Sam

Dear Mayor O'Malley,

I like your principles, caring, basic guts. It's a big snowball, you can't do it all – but the children deserve the best. What a shame you have to police everybody – but if you can delegate to “worthies” it can work. The best stay on top.

Betty