

GOOD INTENTIONS

The Beliefs and Values of Teens and Tweens Today

2009 STUDY SUMMARY



BACKGROUND

Beliefs and values, and their influence on decision making, have commanded significant media and public attention in the new millennium. But what life choices will youth make when confronted with real-life dilemmas? Who are the important people in their lives who shape their decision making? How different or similar are young people today on ethics and moral judgment compared with youth 20 years ago?

Good Intentions: The Beliefs and Values of Teens and Tweens Today answers the above questions and more, courtesy of research conducted with 3,263 3rd- to 12th-graders from around the country. This work builds on a study published in 1989 by GSUSA, *Girl Scouts Survey on the Beliefs and Moral Values of America's Children*, and paints an encouraging picture about a generation of youth responsible to themselves and to others, and who value diversity, acceptance, and community involvement. *Good Intentions* also shows that young people today are in many ways more committed to these values than were their predecessors 20 years ago.

“I want to go someplace with my life, and if I make bad decisions, I won’t reach all the goals I have—like going to college and living a good life.”

—teenage girl; St. Louis, Missouri

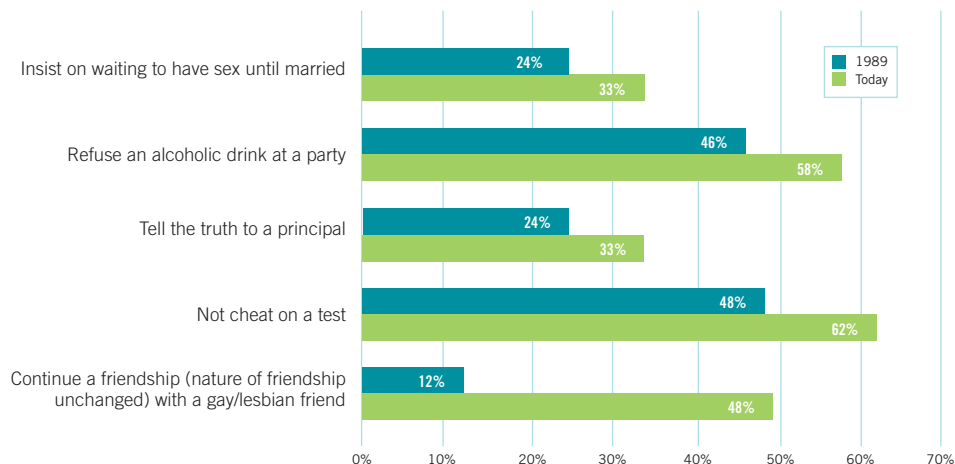
MAJOR FINDINGS

1) Youth today intend to make responsible choices and refrain from risky behaviors.

When presented with hypothetical scenarios and asked their response:

- Sixty-two percent of youth say they would not cheat on a test (compared to 48% in 1989).
- Thirty-three percent say they would tell the truth to their principal immediately (compared to 24% in 1989) on learning that a friend had destroyed school property. An additional 23% would tell the principal the truth anonymously later.
- Only 6% say they would cyberbully by forwarding an embarrassing picture of a classmate to their friends. Fully 40% would take the extra step by telling the originator of the e-mail what he or she did was wrong.

DECISIONS YOUTH SAY THEY WOULD MAKE



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

Among 7th- to 12th-graders surveyed:

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

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

2) Youth today value diversity and acceptance.

Many young people value diversity. Among 7th- to 12th-graders:

- Fifty-nine percent say that being around people from different racial and ethnic backgrounds is important to them.
- This is particularly important to girls (63% vs. 55% of boys) and youth from diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds. (Note: This question was not asked in 1989.)

Youth are more accepting of gay/lesbian relationships than they were 20 years ago. Among 7th- to 12th-graders today:

- Fifty-nine percent agree with the statement, “Gay or lesbian relationships are OK, if that is a person’s choice,” compared to 31% who agreed with it in 1989. Girls are more likely to say this today than are boys (65% vs. 54%).
- Forty-eight percent (compared to 12% in 1989) say that if they found out one of their same-sex friends was involved in a gay or lesbian relationship, they would continue the friendship.

3) Youth today demonstrate a strong sense of civic engagement.

Compared to 20 years ago, youth today are more likely to say they intend to vote in the future (84% vs. 77%), as well as give to charity (76% vs. 63%).

Among 7th- to 12th-graders:

- Seventy-nine percent say they will volunteer in their community.
- Seventy-eight percent agree that everyone has a responsibility to take care of the environment.

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

4) Youth today say they can withstand peer pressures and are willing to stand up for what they believe in.

Some relevant points:

- Compared to 20 years ago, youth feel less pressure to fit in (26% vs. 34% in 1989, with 62% of today's youth reporting hardly any pressure "at all" to fit in).
- Youth in grades 7–12 are not afraid to speak their minds, with 79% stating they would express an opinion even if it wasn't popular, compared to 72% in 1989.
- At the same time, many youth say they feel pressure to obey parents and teachers "a lot" (83%) and are pushed to get good grades in school (79%).

5) When confronting moral dilemmas and difficult decisions, youth today draw strong influence from a variety of sources, especially parents and family.

Key points:

- Parents are the most popular source of advice (62%) for today's youth when they don't know the right thing to do. This is followed by friends (31%), and a grandparent, uncle, aunt, or other extended family member (19%).
- Youth today have a greater constellation of adults who care about them than did youth in 1989. Fully 68% of young people cite a grandparent, uncle, aunt, or other extended family member as a special adult in their lives, compared to 59% who said this in 1989. More youth today also say a teacher or coach cares about them (44% vs. 33% in 1989).

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

—*preteen girl, New York City*

"When making decisions, I listen to my inner voice."

—*teenage girl; Austin, Texas*

- When unsure what to do in a particular situation, youth draw from a variety of moral compasses to help them decide.
Conscience Follower—24%: Youth follow their conscience/do what they think is right.
Conventionalist—19%: Youth follow the advice of an authority, such as a parent or teacher.
Theist—13%: Youth do what God or scripture tells them to do.
Expressivist—11%: Youth do what makes them personally happy.
Civic Humanist—8%: Youth do what is best for everyone involved.
Utilitarian—5%: Youth do what improves their situation or helps them get ahead.
- The way parents interact with their children is also related to the choices young people make. Those youth who report their parents either give in to them or force them to do what the parent thinks is best are more likely to say they would engage in behaviors such as cheating and lying than those who report that their parents explain their decisions to them or that they decide as a unit what to do. Youth with parents who "give in" are also more likely to express the intention to have sex, drink, and cyberbully.

- Seventy-one percent of youth today say their religious beliefs are important to them. This group of youth is less likely than less religious or non-religious youth to say they would lie, cheat, drink, and have sex. They are also less likely to say that smoking, abortion, gay/lesbian relations, and sex before marriage are okay.

6) Girls and boys differ in how they approach certain decisions.

Among 7th- to 12th-graders, girls are *less* likely than boys to say they would:

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

Girls in grades 7–12 are *more* likely than boys to say that:

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

Girls are also more likely to say they would:

- Take the extra step in a cyber-bullying situation by telling the originator of an offensive e-mail that what he or she did was wrong (46% vs. 35%).

However, girls are also more likely to say that they would accept a drink at a party without worrying about it. (20% vs. 14%)

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

While many youth have good intentions about making responsible choices, they need help connecting these desires to action. This report demonstrates the important role adults play in shaping youth's decision making.

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

- **Help Bridge Intent and Action.** Youth today say they want to take the responsible road, but intent and action may not always match. At the same time, we know that support systems are integral in how youth make decisions. One role for adults is to help youth actualize their intentions and keep them focused on their goals, emphasizing the role that their actions today shape in determining outcomes for the future.
- **Promote Adult Involvement in Decision Making.** Youth who have parents who involve them in the decision-making process or explain to them why they made a certain decision tend to have more positive outcomes. Help support youth by discussing with them their decision-making process rather than placing judgment. Enter conversations open-mindedly to see various sides of an issue rather than initiate a discussion about “right and wrong” that tends to divide adults and youth and stop the conversation.
- **Adult/Youth Community Engagement.** Today's youth also highly value civic and community engagement, but previous research from the Girl Scout Research Institute shows that they often do not feel they have the places and opportunities to fulfill this desire. Youth are most interested in engaging at the community level, so try to connect what is going on locally with their interests and skills. Partner with youth in these activities to demonstrate your support.
- **Treat Personal Struggles with Respect.** Adults often think that media and celebrity culture influence youth decision making to a greater degree than they (adults) are capable of themselves. This study suggests that this is not the case. Youth have to deal with all sorts of daily challenges, from how they treat friends and strangers in school to whether they help a friend cheat to how they deal with defeat or victory on the sports field. Treat their personal struggles with respect. Give youth an opportunity to talk about these issues, challenge them to think deeply about them, and ask the right questions.
- **Value Youth Voices.** Youth are more comfortable speaking their minds and voicing their opinions than were youth of previous generations. Give them the opportunity to do so by asking questions about their lives and engaging them on issues that matter to them. Ask what influences their decision making, with regard to relationships, their peers, the media, and adult supports such as teachers and coaches.

NOTE ON METHODOLOGY AND TERMS

This study was conducted with Harris Interactive (formerly Louis Harris, Inc., the same firm that worked on the 1989 study). A nationwide survey of 3,263 students, boys and girls in grades 3–12 (both in and out of Girl Scouting), was conducted using online and school-based techniques. Data was weighted to key demographic variables to align it with the national population of U.S. students in this age group. Unless otherwise indicated, the student findings discussed in the report are based on this data set.

As well, a small sample (896) of mothers of girls in grades 3–12 completed an online survey. These mothers were invited to have their daughters participate as well, with 506 of them (daughters) completing the student version of the survey online.

Six focus groups were also conducted to gain further insight into the study findings: two groups of girls in St. Louis, Missouri, on February 4, 2009, and four groups in New York City on February 11, 2009. The NYC component consisted of two groups of girls and two parallel groups of girls' mothers. A total of 25 girls in grades 5–12 participated.

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

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

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

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