



Study of Healthy Youth Experimentation

A research project conducted by faculty and students at the University of Minnesota

During Fall 2003 and Spring 2004, parents and teens shared their experiences with us. This is a report of what we found. We would like to thank the participants for their time and insights, and for all that they taught us.

During the teen years, the majority of youth will participate in at least one behavior that their parents would consider dangerous and health compromising. There is tremendous concern among parents regarding how to protect youth from negative outcomes. However, youth and parents often have different views of youth behavior. And, the point at which youth experimentation behaviors become dangerous is often unclear.

To better understand youths' and parents'* viewpoints, we spoke directly with youth and parents across Minnesota - from Moorhead to Virginia to Apple Valley.

What did we do?

We talked with youth:

We conducted six group interviews with teenagers (19 girls and 12 boys). Eighteen were living in a rural area, 6 were living in an urban area, and 7 were living in the suburbs. Eighteen youth described themselves as White, 8 identified as Native American, 2 identified as Hmong, 1 identified as Latina, and 1 identified as African American. We asked teens questions about their experiences with experimentation and risk-taking and what advice they would offer to parents of teens.

We talked with parents of teens:

We conducted five group interviews with parents of teenagers (11 fathers and 13 mothers). All parents identified as White, and all were living with their teenager full time. Three quarters of the parents were working full time. Twelve were living in a rural area, 6

were living in the suburbs, and 2 were living in an urban area. We asked parents questions about their teens' experiences with experimentation and risk-taking and about what it is like to parent a teenager who is experimenting and taking risks.

What did we learn?

You told us that in some situations, teens and parents think very differently. But while everyone we spoke with agreed that it is different and harder being a teenager today than it was when parents were growing up, there are many times when teens and parents have similar viewpoints.

Communication is key

Both teens and parents were clear that open communication was key to the parent-child relationship.

(teen) "I would probably tell my mom, when you talk to me, I actually listen. It may not seem like I do, but I do...sometimes I try to block it out but you always hear it no matter what, it's like going through your head constantly."

Trust, honesty, and respect

Teens and parents told us repeatedly that trust, honesty, and respect are the things they want most from each other.

(parent) "I'll go to bat for them and stand up for them... but if I catch them in a lie, they're in trouble and both my kids know that I'm there for them no matter what happens whatever choices they make. I might be real disappointed but I've always told them that no matter what they do, no matter what I'll never stop loving them."

Experimenting

Every teen we spoke with told us that taking risks and trying new things is an important

* Parents include biological, foster, and step parents.

part of growing up, and one of the primary ways they learn about themselves.

(teen) "We're not perfect so obviously we won't make the right decisions that parents and adults want us to, but that's part of growing up and being young."

Although teens admit they make mistakes, they also told us that they consider the values their parents have passed on to them. Not wanting to disappoint their family was one of the most important things for helping them make decisions about risk behaviors. And having parents as a safe base to return to when they do make a mistake provides the support they need to make decisions and take chances.

(teen) "We're not dumb, we'll call if we need help."

Parents also described experimenting. They felt that parenting was an experiment, an opportunity to think about their own teen years and their current relationship with their teen.

(parent) "I think all of parenting is experimentation.... It's all new and it's different from kid to kid and so I think it's continually experimenting and it's also kind of reconciling our own past, you know how we were at this age and what elements of the child we see in us."

Rules

Teens explained that they like when their parents set limits and boundaries, that's how they know their parents care about them. However, the most effective limit setting occurs when parents and teens are able to negotiate and make the decision together.

But parents talked about how hard it was to give their teens space to be independent and

learn from their mistakes. Parents had a hard time holding themselves back, and knowing how much advice was too much.

(parent) "Smart people learn from experience, really smart learn from other people's experience."

Parents also told us they were learning as much from their teens as their teens were learning from them.

Families

Parents described viewing their teens as critical to the functioning of the family. They explained that teens are accountable to their parents, but parents should also be accountable to teens.

(parent) "...even though we've got adults working with adolescents, in our household, there is some degree of accountability that goes both ways."

What's Next?

We are using what we learned to develop the Survey of Healthy Youth Experimentation (SHYE) to explore youth experimentation in a way that reflects teens' and parents' perspectives.

To learn more about this research and to find useful resources, check us out on the web:
www.parentingteens.che.umn.edu

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IN PARTNERSHIP...

