



Whose Kids?...Our Kids!

Merrimack School District Parent-Teen Communication

Recently, the Merrimack School District, Hillsborough County UNH Cooperative Extension and community members joined together to learn more about the youth in our community by conducting the Teen Assessment Project (TAP).

Approximately 86% of the students were surveyed in the Merrimack School District. In all, information from 1940 surveys was used for this newsletter.

		<u>Male</u>	<u>Female</u>
371	7th graders	196	175
339	8th graders	182	157
341	9th graders	156	185
311	10th graders	155	156
326	11th graders	161	165
252	12th graders	114	138

“Whose Kids?...Our Kids!” is a parent newsletter series of the Teen Assessment Project (TAP), a program of the University of New Hampshire Cooperative Extension. Support for this project was provided by a grant received from the Safe and Drug Free Schools and Communities Program. The Teen Assessment Project (TAP) originated at the University of Wisconsin at Madison under the direction of Stephen A. Small, Ph.D. TAP in Hillsborough County is under the direction of Penny Turner and Carla Billingham, UNH Cooperative Extension Educators in cooperation with Charlotte W. Cross, UNH Cooperative Extension, Youth Development Specialist. For more information about TAP call Charlotte W. Cross at (603) 862-2495 or e-mail at charlotte.cross@unh.edu.

This issue of WHOSE KIDS?...OUR KIDS! looks at the topic of parent-teen communication. It provides some ways to keep the lines of communication open in your family.

Good communication is a key part of healthy parent-teen relationships. But parents sometimes find it difficult to talk with their teens. Many teens feel that their parents “just don’t listen!”

Parent-Teen vs. Parent-Child Communication

One thing is clear. Talking with teenagers is different than communicating with younger children. In some ways, you may feel talking has become harder. In other ways, probably it has become easier.

Here are some reasons why communication may be harder.

- Teens are more likely to question family rules. They ask for reasons. They question decisions that affect them.
- Teens may be moodier than younger children. They are often more sensitive to parents’ comments.
- Teens usually want more privacy than younger children. Parents may fear they are “losing” their children during the teen years.
- Parents may want to control their teens. Teenagers want to be independent.

Here are some reasons why communication may be easier.

- Teens begin to think more like adults.
- Teens are better able to see their parents’ viewpoints.
- Teens express themselves better.
- Parents and teens usually share more personal interests, concerns, and activities.

Communicating with teenagers is different than talking with younger children.

10 Ways to Start Talking With Your Teen

- How was your day today on a scale of 1 to 10? (Where 1 is terrible and 10 is terrific.) What made it that way?
- What was the high point (or low point) of your day?
- Tell me the good news and the bad news about school today (or work today, practice this week, camp this summer, etc.).
- What is a thought or feeling you had today?
- What happened today that you didn't expect?
- I'm wondering, what are you thinking about? Would you be willing to tell me? (These two questions may be helpful if your teen seems preoccupied.)

The following points are helpful if you haven't seen your teen for awhile.

- Tell me something good that's happened since the last time we talked.
- What's something you've done lately that you're proud of?
- What's on your mind these days?
- What's coming up that you're looking forward to?

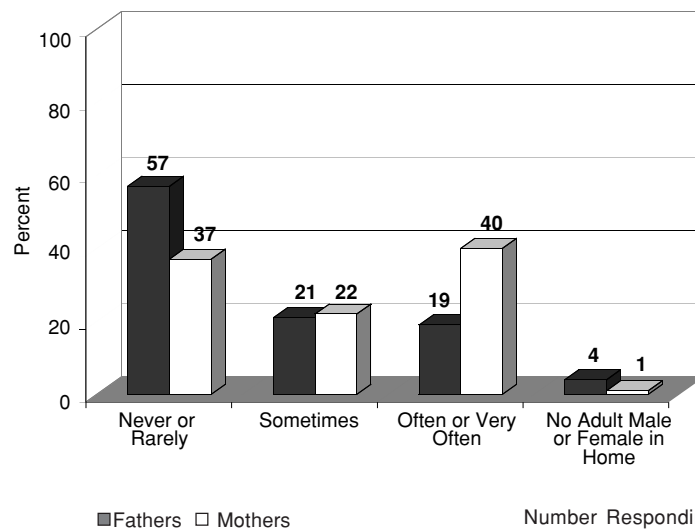
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Talking to Parents: Local Teen Responses

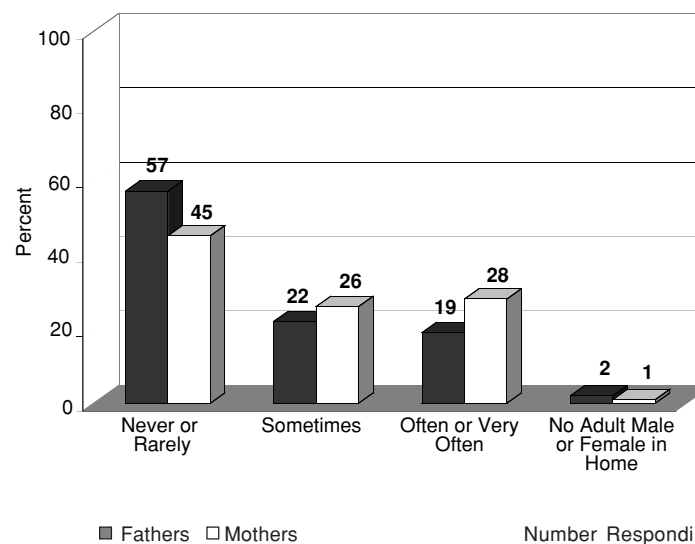
Teens may talk to their parents about some topics. But many aren't talking with their parents, especially about personal problems. In our recent survey, we asked 7th through 12th graders, "How often in the past year have you had a good talk with your mother/father about your personal problems?" As the charts show, girls and boys tend to talk to their mothers more than to their fathers.

"How often in the past year have you had a good talk with your mother or father about your personal problems?"

Girls With Mother and Father



Boys With Mother and Father



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10 Ways to Start Talking.....

You may be thinking, “But my teenager won’t talk to me!” Teens do have a great need for privacy. But they should know that you want to talk with them.

*Merrimack School District
teens feel their parents are
there for them when
they need them.*

The survey also asked the youth if their mothers and fathers were there when they needed them.

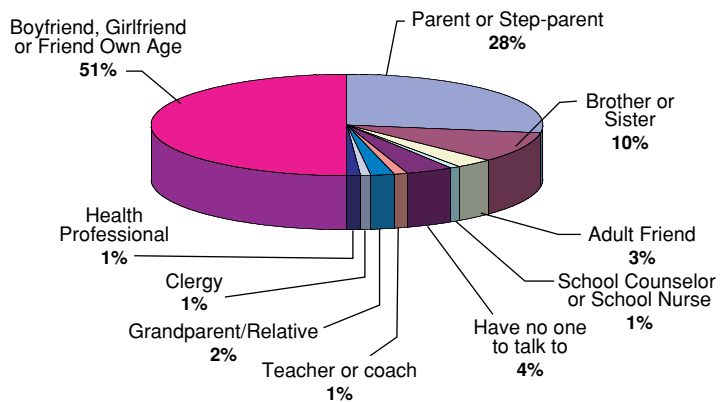
Below are the percentage of youth who said their parents are there “often” or “very often.”

	“Often” or “Very Often”
Mother there for boys	81%
Mother there for girls	75%
Father there for boys	68%
Father there for girls	58%

Teenagers may want their privacy. Many may not respond to questions like, “What’s wrong?” or “Are you upset?” However, the survey showed some local teens felt their mothers and fathers are there for them. They talk about many issues together. These issues include school, relationships with friends, drugs and alcohol, and sexuality. They also talk about family ups and downs and personal interests and hobbies.

The survey also suggests many teens have things on their mind that are troubling them. About 1 out of 6 teens (16%) reported feeling depressed or sad either “most of the time” or “all of the time” in the past month. These youth need people with whom to talk. Many students are most likely to talk to a friend their own age about personal problems. Others are most likely to talk to: a parent or step-parent; brother or sister; adult friend; school counselor or nurse; coach; teacher; grandparent/relative; clergy; or youth organization leader.

Who would students talk to?



Number Responding 1919

Eight Topics Teens Want To Talk About

Educational psychologist Torey Hayden asked hundreds of teenagers what they would like to talk about with their parents. The teenagers came up with these eight topics.

Family Matters

When there’s a problem in the family, teens want to know about it. These problems may include money troubles, job pressures, a serious illness, or a divorce. Also, teens want to talk with their parents about issues which affect them. These issues include curfews, allowances, vacations, family rules, and moving.

Issues That Can Cause Conflicts ... Difficult Issues

Teens are full of questions. Is it ever all right to lie? What do people mean when they say, “Drugs make you high?” “What does sex feel like?” “What does *homo* mean?” They wish their parents would talk with them about these issues. They don’t want them to say, “You’re too young to understand,” or “It’s just too hard to explain,” or “Don’t ever say that again!”

Teen Worries

What do most local youth worry about? What do teens have on their minds? These are the things teens want to talk about at home. Below are the top eight topics students said they worried about either “*quite a bit*” or “*very much*”:

- Getting good grades 64%
- How they look 51%
- That they might not get accepted into college 45%
- Getting along with parents at home 41%
- How well their parents get along 35%
- That a friend is considering suicide 32%
- Not fitting in with other kids at school 28%
- That they might get pregnant or get someone pregnant 21%

Students worry about these topics at certain times. For example, teens who just made the switch into high school worry more about fitting in with kids at school. Worries about getting a job after high school are more common among older teens.

Active Listening

One way to improve communication with your teen is to use active listening. Active listening means listening to your teen with your eyes and ears. Then restate your teen’s comments in your own words. Also, state how you think they are feeling.

- “Sounds like you’re not sure whether you should go.”
- “You’re pretty angry with Susan for leaving early.”
- “It seems unfair to you that you can’t go with your friend.”

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Emotional Issues

Teens would like to know how their parents really feel about things. Also, many wish their parents would tell them “I love you” more often than they do.

The Big “Whys”

Teens have gained many thinking skills since they were children. So, they’re curious about many of the same ‘big questions’ that puzzle adults. They may ask, “Why is there war?” “If there’s a God, why do people go hungry?” Teens want to talk with others about these questions.

The Future

Younger children are curious about what it’s like to be a teenager. Teenagers want to talk about college, careers, jobs, and relationships.

Current Events

Teens are often more aware of current events than many parents realize. They hear about community and world events. They are concerned and would like to talk about these things with their parents.

Personal Interests

Teens would like their parents to show a greater interest in the things that are important to them. These may include hobbies, sports, and friends.

Parents Themselves

Teens would like to know more about what their parents were like at their age. They especially like stories about their parents’ emotional sides and human failures.

Tips for Parents: Keeping Communication Open

- **Give your full attention when your teen wants to talk to you.**
Don’t read, watch TV, fall asleep, or make yourself busy with other tasks. These get in the way of good communication. Listening means “tuning in” to what is said and showing that you understand. Lean forward, establish eye contact, nod, and use brief phrases like “Really?”, “Mmmm Hmmm”, “What happened next?” If you are too busy at the moment, suggest a time when you and your teen can talk.
- **Use a courteous tone of voice that shows respect for your teen.**
Respect brings respect. Criticizing, humiliating, name-calling, or laughing at teens can hurt feelings and stop communication. Being gruff or abrupt can lead to teens getting angry. Use a pleasant tone of voice so your teen will come to you for advice and support.

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Active Listening

Restating your teens' statements in your own words and commenting on their feelings is helpful in three ways.

1. It lets your teen know you've really been listening.
2. You can find out if you understood your teen correctly.
3. It allows your teen to hear what he or she just said.

This method works better than closed responses that stop the talk between you and your teen. Examples of closed responses are:

- "You're lucky you have any choice at all!"
- "Just forget it; she probably didn't mean it."
- "We've talked about this before, so stop complaining!"

These statements tell teens they can't talk about their feelings. Closed responses, lecturing, and name-calling lead to conflicts. They also stop discussions.

"I - Messages"

Often, when parents are frustrated or angry with the way a child is acting, they don't say how they feel. "I-messages" are a way to say what you feel **without** attacking your child. There's a simple formula for "I-messages".

- Describe the behavior ("When you _____"),
- Say your feelings ("I feel _____"),
- Explain the effect of this behavior ("because ____").

For example:

"When you leave your clothes on the bathroom floor (behavior), I get angry (feeling), because it makes extra work for me (effect)."

"When you don't come home by curfew (behavior), I get frightened (feeling), because I think that you may have been in an accident (effect)."

- **Try to listen calmly. Don't make quick judgments even when you don't agree with your teen.**

Try to hear and understand your teenager's point of view. You don't have to approve of all your teen's behavior or ideas. Still, it's important to understand his or her feelings.

- **Listen with your eyes and your ears.**

Teens' words may say one thing. But, their bodies and faces tell how they're really feeling. Slumping, fidgeting, and frowning may say "I'm angry" or "I'm scared."

- **Keep the door open on any subject.**

Often teenagers don't discuss things that make their parents feel uncomfortable. Listen to, offer information, and help your teen without judging. Then, he or she will probably talk to you about most issues.

- **Use books, magazines, TV, and movies to ease into topics that are hard to discuss (sex, drugs, relationships).**

Sometimes books, pamphlets, magazine articles, TV shows, or movies can help you start talking with your teen about hard, but important issues.

- **Don't be alarmed if your teen expresses ideas different than yours.**

Often young people test their ideas when talking. They may not feel certain about them. As a parent, you need to first listen to your teen's ideas and feelings. Then give your point of view as plainly, honestly, and calmly as you can.

- **Say positive things and talk about your teen's strong points.**

Often parents focus only on bad behavior and failures. But, teens have many good points. These may be a sense of humor, a willingness to help younger brothers and sisters, a talent in music, or an eye for fashion. Words of praise, a pat on the back, a smile, or a hug are rewards your teen deserves.

- **Respect areas of privacy by not prying, opening mail, or listening to phone conversations.**

However, parents still need to take an active interest in their children's lives. Know where your teen is and what he or she is doing.

- **Hold family meetings.**

Teenagers often feel they have little or no voice in family affairs. Try using family meetings as a way to include teens in making decisions which affect everyone.

Would You Like To Get Involved?

If you are interested in getting involved with others in the community to address teen issues, please call Penny Turner or Carla Billingham at 673-2510, Hillsborough County Cooperative Extension.

Additional Reading

- Nelson, J. & Lott, L. (1994). **Positive Discipline For Teenagers: Resolving Conflict With Your Teenage Son or Daughter.** Rocklin, CA: Prima Publishing.
- Bluestein, J. (1993). **Parents, Teens and Boundaries: How To Draw The Line.** Deerfield Beach, FL: Health Communications, Inc.
- Levine, A. & Steinberg, L. (1990). **You and Your Adolescent: A Parent Guide For Ages 10-20.** New York, NY: Harper & Row.
- Dinkmeyer, D. & McKay, G.D. (1990). **Parenting Teenagers: Systematic Training For Effective Parenting of Teens.** Circle Pines, MN: American Guidance Service.

UNH Cooperative Extension Resources:

- **Publication Series:**
Living with your Teenager
- **Workshop Series:**
Family Focus: Parenting the Adolescent

Helpful Resources

Abuse

Child Sexual Abuse Info Line (Nashua)	883-0377
Child Help USA Child Abuse Hotline	1-800-422-4453
NH Division for Children, Youth and Families (DCYF)	1-800-894-5533
Rape & Assault Support Services	883-3044

Alcohol and Drug Abuse

AA/Al-Anon/Alateen	882-2259
Alcoholics Anonymous (AA)	1-800-593-3330
Division of Alcohol and Drug Abuse Prevention and Recovery	1-800-852-3345 ext. 6100
Bureau of Substance Abuse Services Hotline	1-800-593-3330
Narcotics Anonymous	645-4777
National Drug Info Hotline	1-800-662-4357

Counseling Services

Growth & Healing Groups	598-6205 ext. 20
Nashua Youth Council (counseling)	889-1090
ParentLine	1-800-640-6486
Parent to Parent of NH Family Support Network	1-800-698-5465
SAF-TALK Peer support (3-9 p.m.)	424-2822

Crisis Hot Lines

Mental Health Crisis Line	1-800-987-6562
Boys Town Hotline	1-800-448-3000
TeenLine (confidential, for any problem)	1-800-639-6095
Youth Crisis Hotline	1-800-448-4663

Family Planning/Health Services

Child & Family Services Pregnancy Counseling	1-800-640-6486
Nashua Crisis Pregnancy Center	883-1122

Information and Referral

Nashua Information and Referral	883-9330
Help Line (also crisis intervention)	1-800-852-3388
Portsmouth Pavilion (mental health referrals)	1-800-924-1086

Runaway

Child & Family Services of NH Group Home	224-9313
National Runaway Switchboard	1-800-621-4000

Sexually Transmitted Diseases

STD Information & Testing	594-3355
National STD Hotline	1-800-227-8922
NH AIDS Hotline	1-800-752-2437
Southern NH - HIV/AIDS Task Force	595-8464

Suicide and Depression

New Life Ministries – Crisis Line	1-800-639-5433
The Samaritans	424-8070

UNH Cooperative Extension

Hillsborough County, Family and 4-H Youth Development	673-2510
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Also see the “Self-Help Guide to Human Services in N.H.” at the front of your telephone book.

This newsletter was based on a publication by Susan Silverberg, University of Wisconsin at Madison. The UNH Cooperative Extension newsletter “Whose Kids?...Our Kids!” was edited by Charlotte W. Cross, Extension Specialist, Youth Development and Mary W. Temke, Ph.D., Extension Specialist, Human Development, with technical assistance from Karen M. Watts, Program Assistant, UNH Cooperative Extension. Desktop publishing provided by UNHCE Educational Marketing & Information Office.

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