
TAPPING INTO TEEN CONCERNS, PERCEPTIONS AND BEHAVIOR GORHAM SCHOOL DISTRICT

A Report of the Teen Assessment Project (TAP) University of New Hampshire Cooperative Extension

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Teen Assessment Project Executive Summary For the Gorham School District

Concerns about local youth issues prompted communities in the Gorham School District to adopt the University of New Hampshire Teen Assessment Project (TAP) survey. The goal of TAP is to provide communities with local research-based information that can help them better support local teens and their families. Survey results provide a vehicle for youth, parent, school, and community education and action, help secure local funding, stimulate program and policy changes, and lead to changes in attitudes and behaviors that build assets/protective factors in families, schools, and communities.

A local steering committee coordinated the review and administration of a 160-item survey which asked teens about their perceptions of self, family, school, and community; their worries, concerns, and future aspirations; and their activities, both positive and problematic. The survey was administered to 7th through 12th grade students in the Gorham School District on April 18 of 2000. A total of 268 surveys were used for data analysis. This represents approximately 92% of the total student population in the Gorham School District. Following are selected local TAP survey results.

Family Characteristics

The TAP survey revealed the most common living situation for local youth is living with two parents (68%). Other reported living situations include living with a single parent (8%), and living in a step-family (15%).

The majority of youth reported that each of their parents have a high school diploma, Bachelor's Degree, or higher (fathers, 85% and mothers, 86%). Thirty-five percent (35%) of fathers and 28% of mothers have a high school diploma with no further degrees. Twenty-two percent (22%) of fathers and 21% of mothers have a Bachelor's Degree or higher. Only 5% of all fathers and 5% of all mothers were reported to have less than a high school education.

Alcohol, Tobacco, and Drug Use

The Teen Assessment Project (TAP) survey found many local youth use alcohol, tobacco and other drugs.

- Seventy-five percent (75%) of all youth have used alcohol at some time (middle school, 56% and high school, 84%). Fifty-three percent (53%) of all youth reported using alcohol once a month or more often (middle school, 28%; high school, 65%) and 27% reported using it weekly or more often (middle school, 12% and high school, 35%).
- Twenty-three percent (23%) of all middle school youth and 53% of all high school youth reported binge drinking ("*5 or more alcoholic drinks in a row*") at least once in the past month.
- Fifty-nine percent (59%) of all youth have smoked tobacco at some time (middle school, 37% and high school, 70%). Thirty-three percent (33%) reported smoking monthly or more often (middle school, 17%; high school, 42%) and 27% reported weekly or more often use (middle school, 14% and high school, 34%).
- Forty-nine percent (49%) of all youth have used marijuana at some time (middle school, 23% and high school, 63%). Twenty-seven percent (27%) reported monthly or more often use of marijuana (middle school, 12%; high school, 34%), and 16% reported weekly or more often use (middle school, 7% and high school, 21%).
- Seventy-two percent (72%) of all youth believe it is either "*easy*" or "*very easy*" to get beer/wine/liquor. Fifty-one percent (51%) believe it is "*easy*" or "*very easy*" to get marijuana.
- Ten percent (10%) of all youth have used inhalants at some time (middle school, 8% and high school, 11%). One percent (1%) of all youth have used inhalants monthly or more often (middle school, 1% and high school, 1%). Eleven percent (11%) of local youth feel that using inhalants carries "*no*" or "*slight risk*" (middle school, 10% and high school, 12%).

These emerging dependencies put youth at risk of delayed emotional and intellectual growth; developing problems with schools, friends and families; incurring ill health and reduced longevity; accidents; suicide; and unwanted pregnancies (Pedersen & Skrondal, 1996; Pfeifer, Schector, and Yoast, 1987; Small, Silverberg & Kerns, 1993).

Sexuality Issues

Overall, 42% of all youth reported they have had sexual intercourse (middle school, 19% and high school, 47%). Fifty-one percent (51%) of 12th graders have had sexual intercourse. Only 59% of sexually active teens always use some form of birth control (middle school, 52%; high school, 61%).

A high percentage of local teens do not talk with their parents about sexuality issues. Within the past year, 55% either "*never*" or "*rarely*" talked to their mothers and 69% "*never*" or "*rarely*" talked to their fathers about whether or not it is okay to have sex. Even fewer teens had birth control discussions with their parents in the past year, with 66% who either "*never*" or "*rarely*" talked to their mothers and 78% who "*never*" or "*rarely*" talked to their fathers about the issue.

Seven percent (7%) of local teens reported some degree of forced sexual activity by an adult (males, 5% and females, 10%). Two percent (2%) reported current sexual abuse by an adult and 5% reported previous sexual abuse.

Emotional Health Issues

Worries of local youth, listed from greatest to least are: getting good grades at school (59%); how they look (56%); getting along with their parents at home (48%); how well their parents get along with each other (42%); that they are too fat (32%); not fitting in with the other kids at school (31%); that they might get pregnant or make someone pregnant (18%); that their parents drink too much or use drugs (17%); being picked on or physically hurt by another teen (13%); being pressured into having sex (10%); and being pressured to drink or use drugs (8%).

Overall, 77% of all local teens reported feeling depressed or sad at some time during the past month (69% for males and 84% for females). Twenty-one percent (21%) of local youth reported having serious thoughts of suicide during the past month (20% for males and 22% for females). Nineteen percent (19%) of local youth had made plans at some time to kill themselves (17% for males and 21% for females) and 10% reported they had actually attempted suicide at some time in the past (9% for males and 11% for females).

Parent-Teen Relations

Good communication is a key part of healthy parent-teen relationships. Many local youth felt they had not had a good talk with their mothers or fathers in the past year about whether or not it is okay to have sex, birth control, AIDS and other STDs, the risks of drinking and using drugs, and personal problems. Parents were much more likely to talk with their teens about job or education plans.

Forty-eight percent (48%) of all teens reported they worried either "*very much*" or "*quite a bit*" about getting along with their parents at home (middle school, 55%; high school, 45%). A

high percentage of teens felt their parents either "*often*" or "*very often*" cared about them; 92% felt this way about their mothers and 86% for their fathers. Sixty-five percent (65%) of students felt that their mothers were fair "*often*" or "*very often*" when it came to enforcing the family rules; 65% also felt this about their fathers. Parental monitoring, sharing family values, and letting teens know there would be consequences were all found to be related to lower rates of regular smoking, drinking, and sexual activity by local teens.

Student Time Use

Local youth spend the most time (at the level of 5 or more hours a week) hanging out with friends (78%). The other activities that occupy 5 or more hours per week for local youth include watching TV (57%); participating extra-curricular school sports or activities (52%); staying at home alone with no adults present (45%); working for pay (45%); doing homework or studying (40%); using the Internet (32%); playing computer or video games (23%); and engaging in non-school activities (17%).

Perceptions of School and Community

Forty-five percent (45%) of local youth indicated they enjoyed going to school, 53% felt school rules were enforced fairly, and another 75% felt they were getting a good, high quality education.

Seventy-nine percent (79%) feel their community is a good place to live, but only 12% feel there are a lot of fun things in town for kids their age to do. Sixty percent (60%) of the youth often think about doing things so that people can have things better in the future, 61% felt it is important for them to contribute to their community and society and 81% consider it their problem if their neighbors are in trouble and need help. An additional 46% of teens would choose to give up their free time to help raise money for a neighborhood project.

Thirteen percent (13%) of students have carried a weapon onto school property in the past month, and 41% of students report having been in a physical fight in the past year.

In Closing

Youth today face many challenges as they grow and develop. The Teen Assessment Project (TAP) provides information that empowers youth, parents, neighborhoods, schools, youth-serving organizations, agencies, the spiritual community, law enforcement, and community leaders to work together to develop and implement strategies addressing concerns identified. TAP can serve as a vehicle for youth, parent, school, and community education and action. In addition, it sets a baseline from which to evaluate the impact of local efforts to encourage positive youth development in families, schools and communities.