
CHAPTER 6

Physical and Mental Health Issues

Mental health is influenced by biological, social, cultural and psychological factors. Some researchers believe many of the recent trends in adolescent health-compromising behaviors (e.g., increased alcohol and other drug use, suicide and sexual behavior) mirror psychological and emotional difficulties teens today experience. Nationally, suicide is now the third leading cause of death among 15 to 24 year olds (Arenofsky, 1997; National Institute of Mental Health, 1999). In New Hampshire, suicide is the second leading cause of death among those in the same age group.

Feelings of depression, loneliness and despair are often associated with attempted suicides (Arenofsky, 1997; Koch, 1999). The presence of a social support system, however, can help to buffer teens from such feelings, and possible negative consequences. Similarly, teens with positive self-esteem may be better equipped to resist negative influences and pressures in the environment than teens who have low self-esteem (Arenofsky, 1997).

This chapter presents the findings of the Teen Assessment Project survey in the area of physical and mental health issues. It is divided into sections which include the Overview of Findings, a summary of key points; Presentation of Data, analysis of data presented in graphic form; and Presentation of Comparable Data, comparisons of TAP with Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) data.

OVERVIEW OF FINDINGS

Teen Worries

What do New Hampshire teens worry about? Their top concerns are: 1) getting good grades at school (63%); 2) how they look (50%); 3) getting along with their parents at home (33%); 4) how well their parents get along with each other (25%); 5) not fitting in with the other kids at school (20%); 6) that they are too fat (19%); and 7) that their parents drink too much or use drugs (8%). High school youth are more worried about getting good grades than middle school youth. Middle school youth are more worried about how they look, fitting in, and how well their parents get along. Females worry more than males about getting good grades and that

they are too fat. When teens have problems they are most likely to talk to a boy/girlfriend or another friend, their parents, a school counselor or nurse, or an adult friend. Middle schoolers are more likely to talk to a parent or school nurse or counselor, while high schoolers are more likely to talk to a peer or adult friend. Females are more likely to talk to a peer or adult friend, while males are more likely to talk to a parent, or school counselor or nurse.

Teen Depression and Suicide

National surveys of non-hospitalized youth have found between 35% and 40% of teens reported having feelings of sadness or worthlessness some of the time (Adams et al., 1995; Schichor, Bernstein and King, 1994). Feelings of sadness or mild depression are not uncommon and are often associated with feelings of loss. For example, losing an important romantic relationship can contribute to depressive feelings. Similarly, loss of self-esteem can follow experiences of failure or feelings of guilt.

Severe depression is distinguished from mild depression by the intensity and duration of symptoms. Symptoms of serious depression may include changes in appetite and sleeping patterns, loss of interest in activities, fatigue, feelings of guilt or self-blame, inability to concentrate, feeling hopeless and helpless, and suicidal thoughts or attempts (American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 1997).

The TAP survey found that many of the New Hampshire youth surveyed could identify with feelings of sadness or depression. Sixty-eight percent (68%) of youth surveyed reported feeling sad or depressed at some time in the month preceding the survey. Occurrence of these feelings increases with each year from the 7th through 12th grades. Females were much more likely than males to report feeling sad or depressed (78% vs. 58%).

Serious depression may sometimes result in suicidal ideation. The TAP survey questioned teens about whether they had seriously thought about killing themselves at any time in the month preceding the survey. Nineteen percent (19%) of youth surveyed responded they had serious thoughts about suicide in the past month. More females than males reported these thoughts (23% vs. 16%). Differences between middle and high school youth were slight. Thoughts about suicide are fairly common during the teen years. Fortunately, not many teens act on these thoughts. However, the fact they are having such thoughts may be an indication of several things, including a current disappointment or frustration, depression, feelings of alienation or detachment from others, as well as an unrealistic conception about suicide and death.

More serious than thinking about suicide is actually making a plan to carry it through. Overall, 18% of students surveyed had made a plan to commit suicide at some time in the past.

Gender differences were slight. However, more high school students than middle school students reported making a plan (21% vs. 13%). Ten percent (10%) of students surveyed had made a plan to commit suicide in the year preceding the survey, while 5% of youth had made a plan in the month preceding the survey.

Of course most serious of all is when a youth actually attempts suicide. According to the National Institute of Mental Health (1999), there are an estimated 25 attempted suicides to one completion. Also, more females than males report a history of attempted suicide. However, more males die by suicide than females. This is often because males choose a more lethal method, such as using a firearm, whereas females are more likely to take pills or cut their wrists. The strongest risk factors for attempted suicide in youth are depression, alcohol or other drug use, and aggressive or disruptive behaviors (National Institute of Mental Health, 1999). Overall, 12% of youth surveyed by TAP reported they had attempted to kill themselves at some time in the past. The frequency of suicide attempts in the past was reported as females (14%), high school youth (13%), males (10%) and middle school youth (10%). Seven percent (7%) of youth surveyed had attempted suicide in the year preceding the survey.

Dieting and Health Issues

It is clear that teens, especially females, are concerned with how they look and how much they weigh. Indeed, American society is obsessed with body image. Specialists treating eating disorders report seeing children as young as 6 years old obsessed with dieting and weight. Dieting in high school is now the norm, involving 61% to 77% of the females and 28% to 42% of the males (Emmons, 1992).

Adolescents are particularly sensitive about their appearance (National Dairy Council, 1996; Emmons, 1994). Dissatisfaction with body shape and size is prevalent, with female students less satisfied than male students (Emmons, 1994). One study of 14 to 16 year old females showed 77% wanted to lose weight and 51% had tried in the past month (Coleman, 1995). Nationally and in New Hampshire, more female high school students considered themselves overweight than male high school students (nationally - males, 23.7%; females, 36.4%; New Hampshire - males, 21.9%; females, 37.6%) (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2000).

The TAP survey asked teens about their weight control practices. Forty-six percent (46%) of teens surveyed reported they did something to try to lose weight or keep from gaining it in the month preceding the survey. Nearly twice as many females as males admitting trying to control their weight (58% vs. 32%). Differences across the grade levels were slight with as many

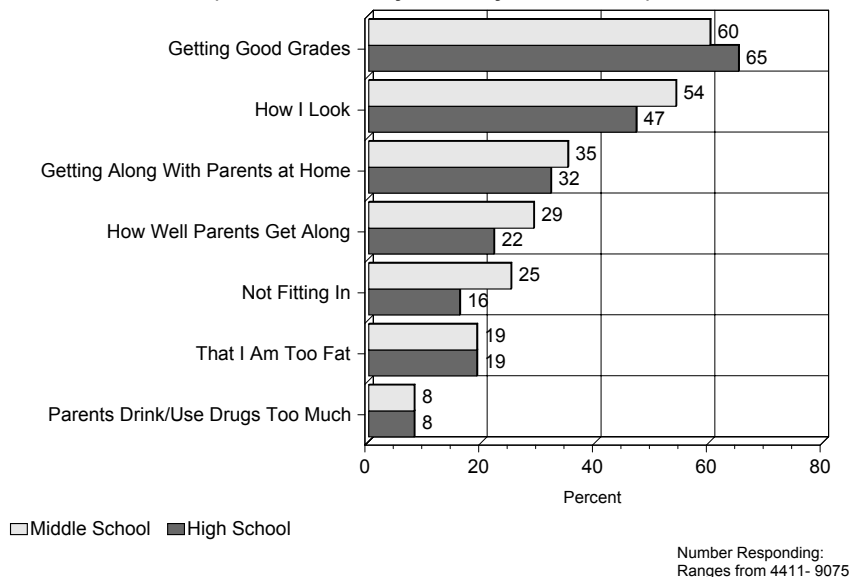
8th grade females trying to control their weight as 12th grade females. The smallest percentage of females trying to control their weight was found in the seventh grade. For males the smallest percentages were found in the eleventh and twelfth grades.

Physical and Emotional Abuse

Another factor that can affect a teen's physical and mental well-being is abuse. The TAP survey asked teens if they had been physically abused (defined as *beat up, hit with an object, kicked, or some other form of physical force*) by an adult. Most teens surveyed (84%) had not been physically abused in this way. Twelve percent (12%) reported being abused in the past, while 3% or 242 of the 8,084 youth responding reported current physical abuse. The survey also asked if teens had been emotionally or verbally abused (defined as *when someone is intentionally trying to hurt you emotionally with words or actions*) by an adult. More teens admitted to experiencing this kind of abuse than physical abuse. Thirty-four percent (34%) of teens answering this question reported they had been emotionally or verbally abused by an adult. Twenty percent (20%) said the abuse was in the past, while 14% reported the abuse was currently happening at the time of the survey.

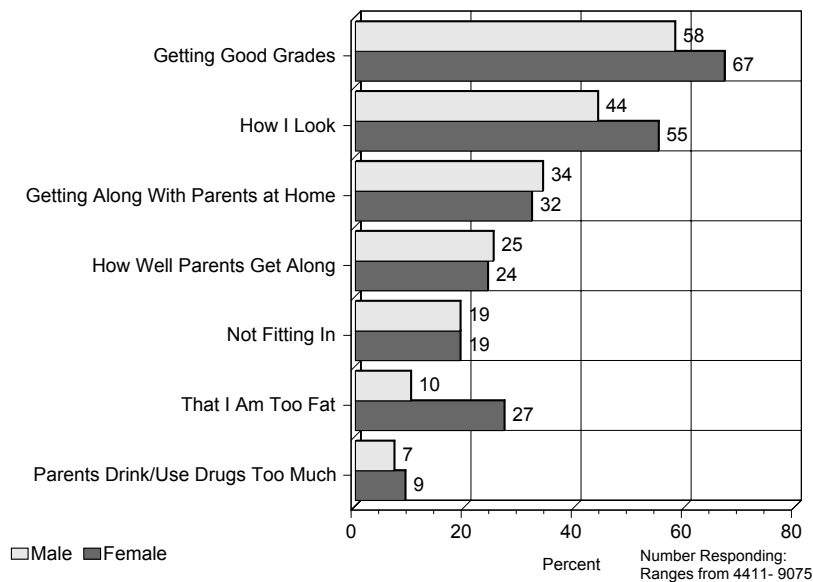
PRESENTATION OF DATA (Note: Due to rounding, graphs may not total 100%.)

Figure 6-1: Teen Worries
(Quite a Bit or Very Much, by School Level)



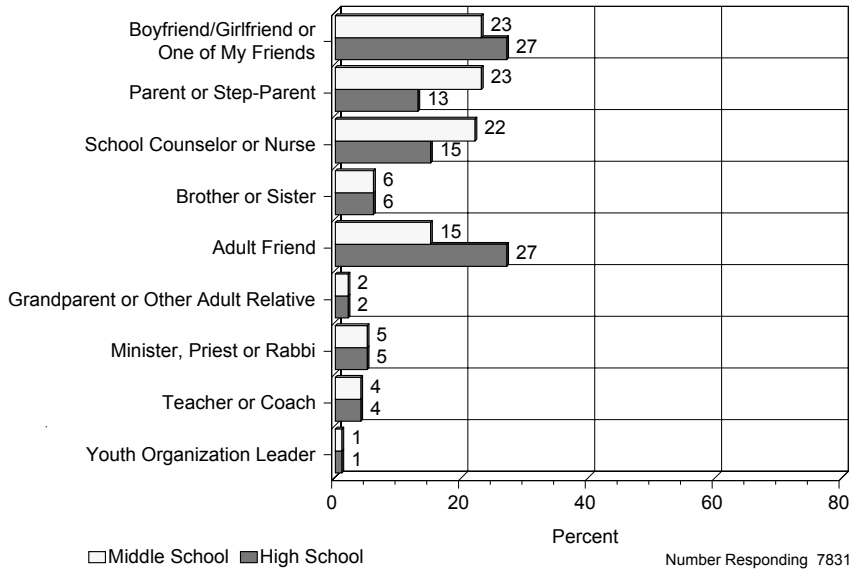
- A greater percentage of high school youth than middle school youth worry about getting good grades.
- Greater percentages of middle school youth than high school youth worry about how they look, getting along with their parents, how well their parents get along, and not fitting in.

Figure 6-2: Teen Worries
(Quite a Bit or Very Much, by Gender)



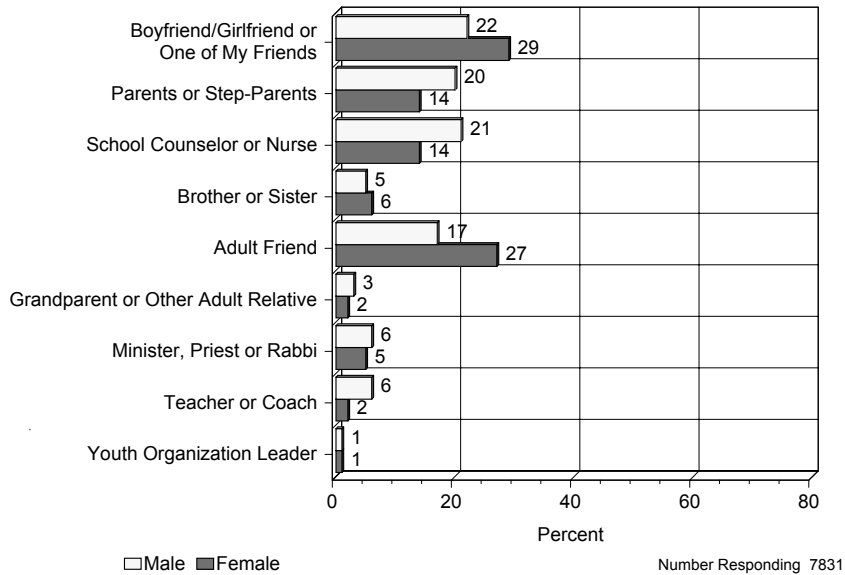
- More females than males worry about getting good grades, how they look, and that they are too fat.

**Figure 6-3: Who Teens Would Talk to About Problems
(By School Level)**



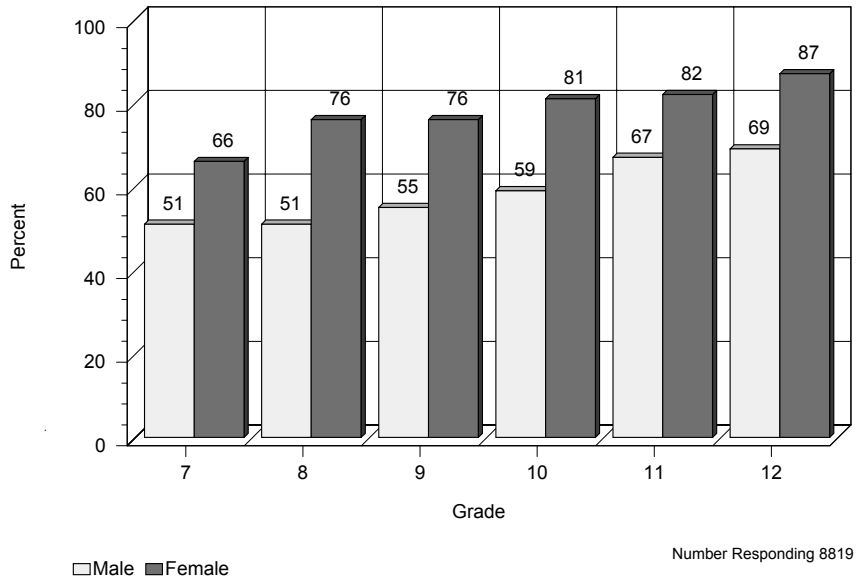
- More middle school youth than high school youth report talking to their parents or a school counselor or nurse about their problems; high school youth report talking to their boy/girlfriend or other friend (peer or adult).

**Figure 6-4: Who Teens Would Talk to About Problems
(By Gender)**



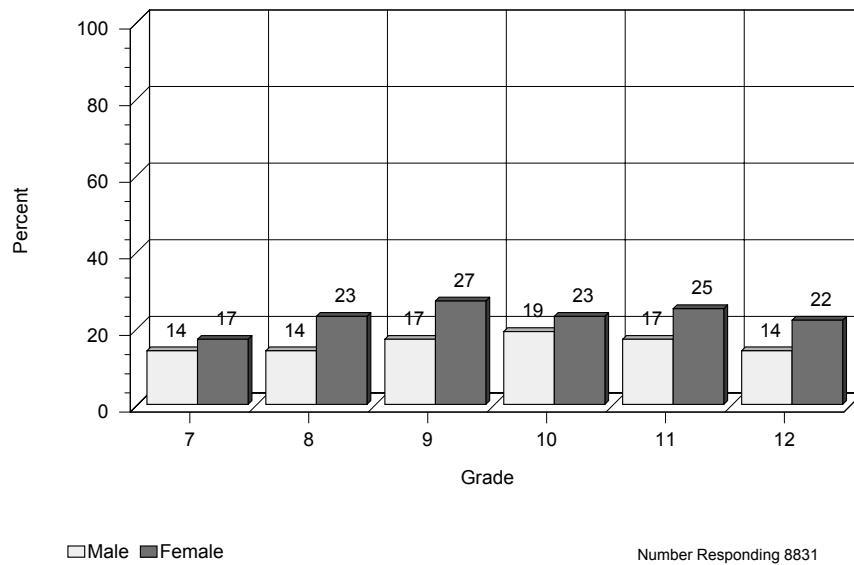
- A greater percentage of females than males report talking to a friend; more males than females report talking to parents or a school counselor or nurse.

Figure 6-5: Depression or Sadness Among Students
(At Any Time in the Past Month, by Grade and Gender)



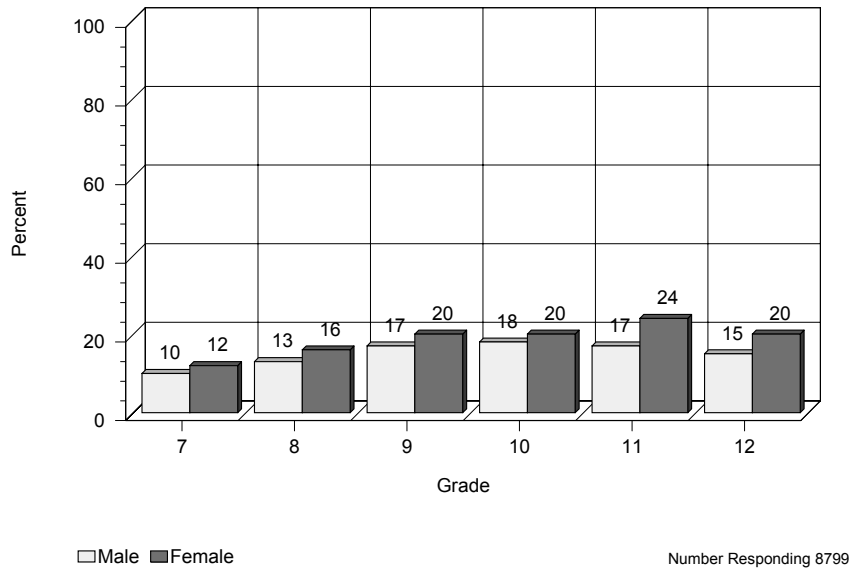
- Overall, 68% of New Hampshire youth surveyed reported having experienced depression or sadness at some time in the past month (middle school, 61%; high school, 72%; males, 58%; females, 78%).

Figure 6-6: Serious Thoughts About Killing Themselves
(At Any Time in the Past Month, by Grade and Gender)



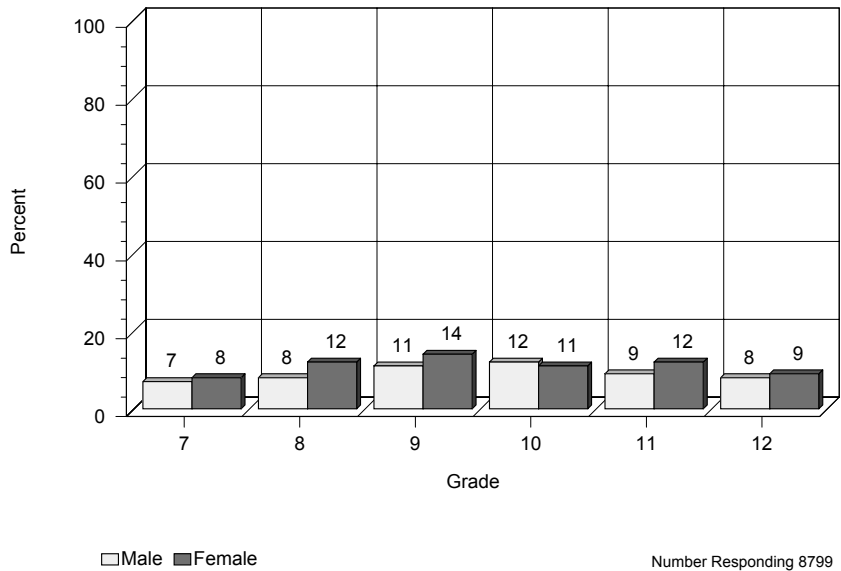
- Overall, 19% of New Hampshire youth surveyed had serious thoughts about suicide during the past month (high school, 21%; middle school, 17%; males, 16%; females, 23%).

Figure 6-7: Plans Made to Commit Suicide
(At Any Time, by Grade and Gender)



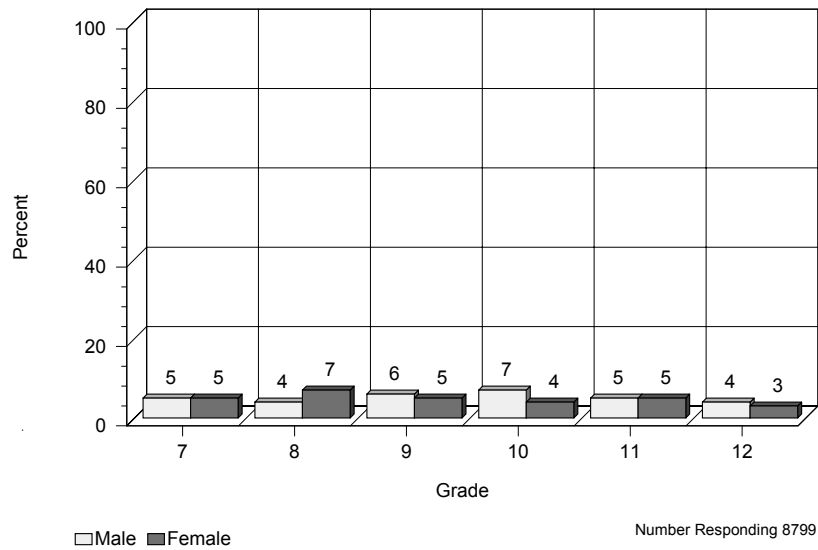
- Overall, 18% of New Hampshire youth surveyed reported making a plan to commit suicide at some time in the past (middle school, 13%; high school, 21%; males, 16%; females, 20%).

Figure 6-8: Plans Made to Commit Suicide
(In the Past Year, by Grade and Gender)



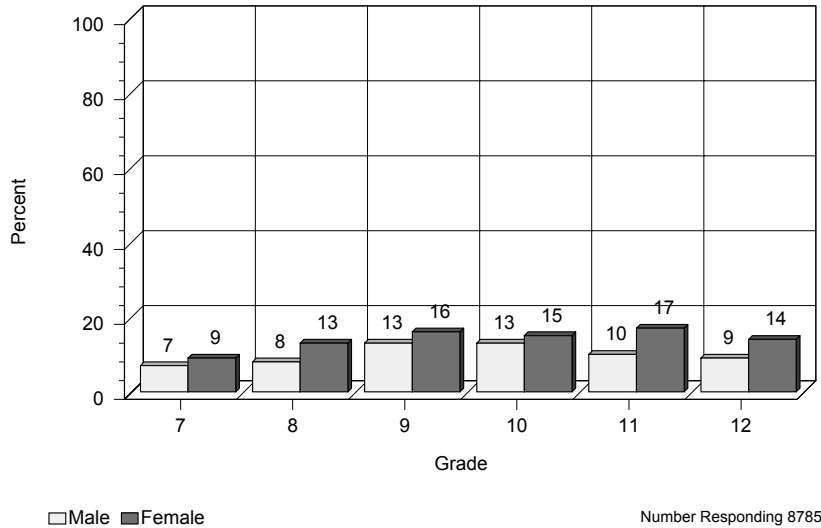
- Overall, 10% of New Hampshire youth surveyed reported making a plan to commit suicide at some time in the past year (middle school, 9%; high school, 11%; males, 9%; females, 11%).

Figure 6-9: Plans Made to Commit Suicide
(In the Past Month, by Grade and Gender)



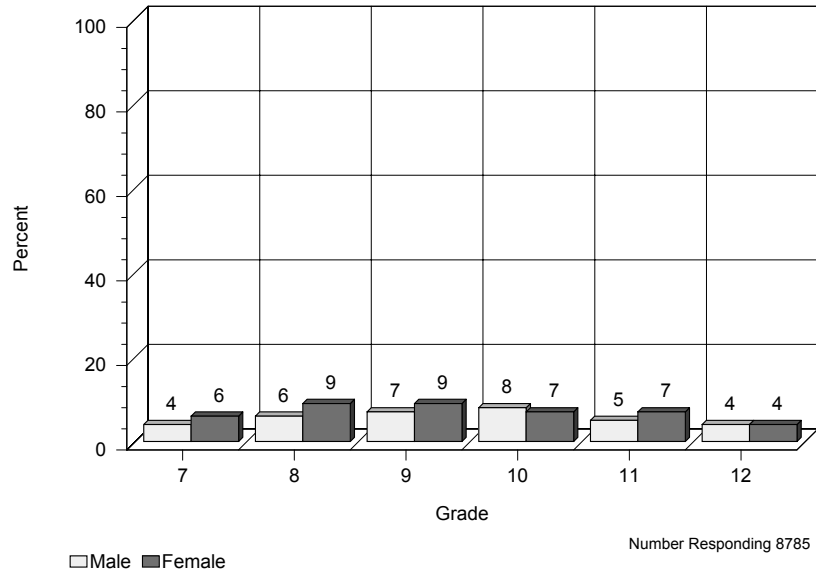
- Overall, 5% of New Hampshire youth surveyed reported making a plan to commit suicide at some time in the past month (middle school, 5%; high school, 5%; males, 5%; females, 5%).

Figure 6-10: Suicide Attempts
(At Any Time, by Grade and Gender)



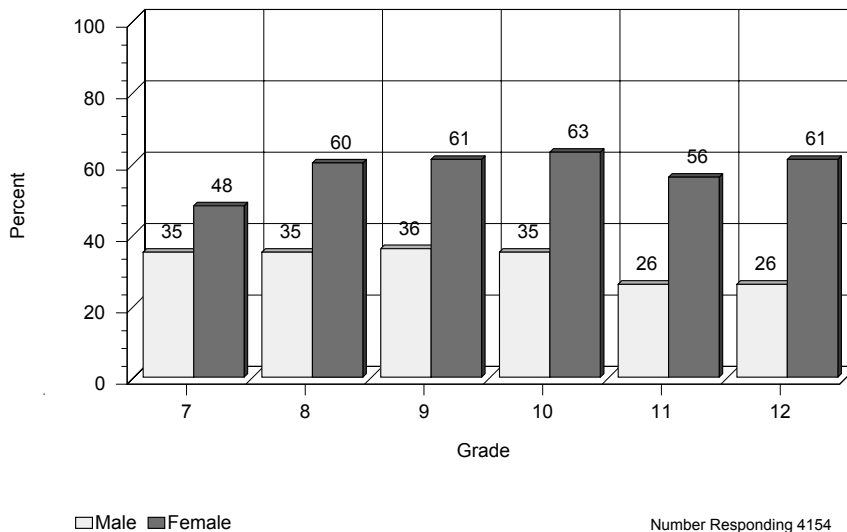
- Overall, 12% of New Hampshire youth surveyed reported attempting suicides at some time in the past (middle school, 10%; high school, 13%; males, 10%; females, 14%).

Figure 6-11: Suicide Attempts
(In the Past Year, by Grade and Gender)



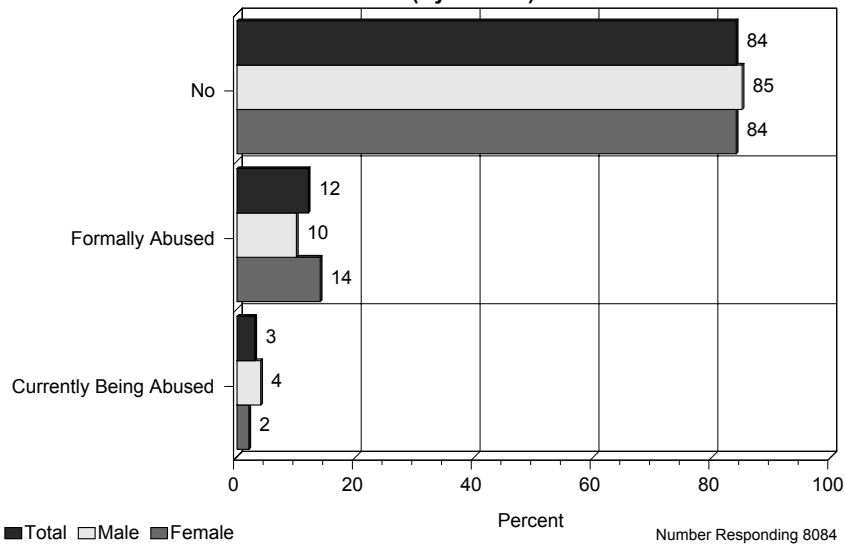
- Overall, 7% of New Hampshire youth surveyed reported attempting suicide at some time in the past year (middle school, 6%; high school, 7%; males, 6%; females, 7%).

Figure 6-12: Teens Who Tried to Lose Weight or Keep from Gaining Weight
(In The Past Month, by Grade and Gender)



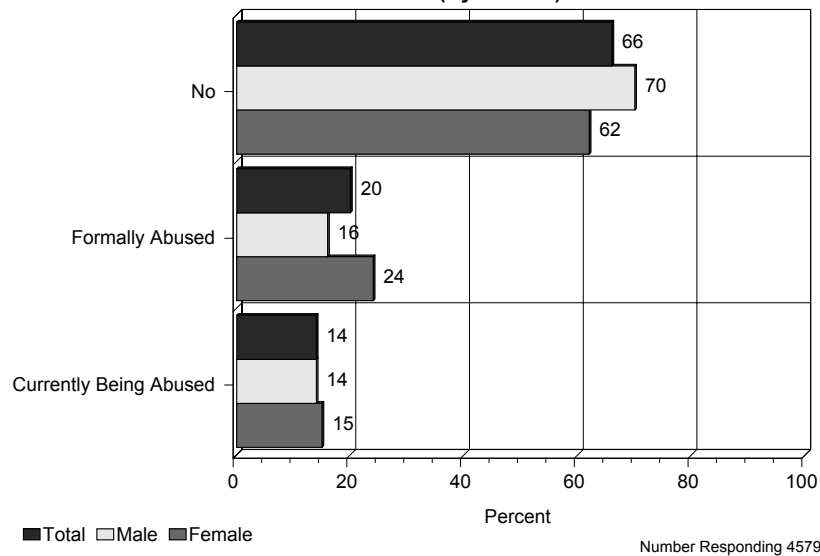
- Overall, 46% of all youth surveyed reported having attempted to lose weight or keep from gaining weight in the past month (middle school, 44%; high school, 47%; males, 32%; females, 58%).
- More females than males engaged in some form of weight control at every grade level.

**Figure 6-13: Teens Who Have Been Physically Abused by an Adult
(By Gender)**



- Physical abuse was defined as *“beat up, hit with an object, kicked, or some other form of physical force”*.

**Figure 6-14: Teens Who Have Been Emotionally or Verbally Abused by an Adult
(By Gender)**



- Emotional or verbal abuse was defined as *“when someone intentionally tries to hurt you emotionally with words or actions”*.
- A greater percentage of females than males reported emotional abuse.
- More youth reported emotional or verbal abuse than physical abuse.

PRESENTATION OF COMPARABLE DATA

In this section, TAP data are compared with national and New Hampshire statistics from the *1999 Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance Survey* (YRBS). This survey is published by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) (2000). It monitors six categories of priority health-risk behaviors among youth and adults—behaviors that contribute to unintentional and intentional injuries; tobacco use; alcohol and other drug use; sexual behaviors that contribute to unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs); unhealthy dietary behaviors; and physical inactivity. It is administered every other year and includes a national school-based survey conducted by the CDC as well as state, territorial, and local school-based surveys conducted by education and health agencies. Although the goal is to obtain representative samples, due to a lower than expected response rate, the results from the 1999 survey for New Hampshire should not be generalized to other students in the state.

**Table 6-1: Physical and Mental Health Comparison
(grades 9-12 only)**

Question	YRBS National %	YRBS¹ N.H. % (ranking)	TAP² %
YRBS: During the past 12 months, did you ever seriously consider attempting suicide? TAP: During the past month, have you seriously thought about killing yourself?	19.3	20.0 (9 th of 32)	-
YRBS: During the past 12 months, did you make a plan about how you would attempt suicide? TAP: Have you ever made a plan to kill yourself? (coded as during past mo. or yr.)	14.5	15.7 (8 th of 32)	-
YRBS: During the past 12 months, how many times did you actually attempt suicide? TAP: Have you ever actually tried to kill yourself? (coded as during past mo. or yr.)	8.3	7.7 (13 th of 33)	-
YRBS: Were attempting weight loss at the time of survey TAP: Had attempted to lose weight or keep from gaining it during the past month	42.7%	46.3 (4 th of 33)	-
	-	-	21
	-	-	11
	-	-	7
	-	-	47

¹(Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance Survey - CDC, 2000. Ranking is based on weighted and unweighted data combined.)

²(Teen Assessment Project, 2000.)

Note: Because of question wording differences, the results of YRBS and TAP are not directly comparable.