
TAPPING INTO TEEN CONCERNS, PERCEPTIONS AND BEHAVIOR EXETER COOPERATIVE SCHOOL DISTRICT

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

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Impact Reporting: UNH Cooperative Extension wants to know how individuals and groups use "Tapping into Teen Concerns, Perceptions and Behavior." If you use the information in this report for educational purposes, writing grants, planning community efforts, changing programs or policies, gaining positions for your organization, strengthening community linkages, or in any other way, please contact Lynn Garland at 603-679-5616 or e-mail lynn.garland@unh.edu or contact Charlotte Cross at 603-862-2495 or e-mail at charlotte.cross@unh.edu.

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The Teen Assessment Project (TAP) originated at the University of Wisconsin at Madison under the direction of Stephen A. Small, Ph.D. The University of New Hampshire Cooperative Extension adopted TAP for use in New Hampshire communities.

The Exeter Cooperative School District TAP committee was co-led by Karen Pelletier, Director of Health and Physical Education 6-12 and Lynn Garland, Extension Educator, 4-H Youth Development. Charlotte Cross, Extension Specialist, Youth Development for UNH Cooperative Extension served as the Teen Assessment Project director and liaison.

The Cooperative School Board, Dr. Arthur Hanson Superintendent of Schools, and the school administration endorsed TAP. The purpose was to hear directly from our youth about their concerns, attitudes and behaviors, relating both to protective and risk factors. Based on the ecological model of youth development, the goal of TAP was threefold: to bring together youth, families, the school and the community for the purpose of localizing and administering the survey; to share the TAP results; and to plan educational and community programs that will impact our youth in a positive way.

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Teen Assessment Project Executive Summary For the Communities of Brentwood, East Kingston, Exeter, Kensington, Newfields and Stratham

Concerns about local youth issues prompted the communities listed above to adopt the University of New Hampshire Teen Assessment Project (TAP) survey for use in the Exeter Cooperative School District. The goal of TAP is to provide communities with local research-based information to better support teens and their families. Teen survey results provide valuable information about our youth, parents, school, and community. It can stimulate program and policy changes, help secure local funding 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. This survey asked teens about their perceptions of self, family, school, and community. It also asked about their future aspirations, worries, concerns, and their activities, both positive and problematic.

Seventh through twelfth grade students in the Exeter Cooperative School District were surveyed in October, 1999. A total of 2,045 surveys was used for data analysis (791 from the middle school and 1,254 from the high school). This represents approximately 89% of the total student population in the 7th to 12th grades. Percentages used in this summary are calculated from the overall total and the total from each school. Percentages for middle school students reflect only those surveyed in the 7th and 8th grades. **Sixth-graders were not surveyed.** Following are selected TAP survey results.

Family Characteristics

The TAP survey reveals that 67% of the youth live within a two parent family. Other common living situations include living in a single parent family (14%), and living in a blended or step-family (13%).

The majority of youth reported each of their parents have a high school diploma, bachelor's degree, or higher (fathers, 87% and mothers, 90%). Twenty-one percent (21%) of fathers and 23% of mothers have a high school diploma. Twenty-two (22%) of fathers and 23% of mothers have had some college or technical school or achieved their associates degree. Forty-four percent (44%) of the fathers and 44% of mothers have a bachelor's degree or higher. Only 3% of all fathers and 2% 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 a number of the 2,045 youth in the 7th to 12th grades use alcohol, tobacco and other drugs. Percentages vary between grade levels.

- Forty-eight percent (48%) of all surveyed youth have used alcohol at some time (middle school, 25% and high school, 63%). Twenty-three percent (23%) of all youth reported using alcohol once a month or more often (middle school, 7%; high school, 33%). Seven percent (7%) of all surveyed youth reported using alcohol weekly or more often (middle school, 3% and high school, 10%).
- Ten percent (10%) of all middle school youth and 32% of all high school youth reported binge drinking ("*5 or more alcoholic drinks in a row*") at least once in the past month with 46% of all seniors reporting binge drinking in the past month.
- Sixty-one percent (61%) of all youth believe it is either "*easy*" or "*very easy*" to get beer/wine/liquor. Forty-two percent (42%) of the youth surveyed believe it is "*easy*" or "*very easy*" to get marijuana.
- Thirty-five percent (35%) of all youth have smoked tobacco at some time (middle school, 19% and high school, 45%). Thirteen percent (13%) of surveyed youth reported smoking monthly or more often (middle school, 6%; high school, 18%) and 11% of all youth reported weekly or more often use (middle school, 4% and high school, 15%). Weekly smoking habits peak in the 11th and 12th grade for males (18%) and in the 12th grade for females (26%).
- Twenty-nine percent (29%) of all youth have used marijuana at some time (middle school, 10% and high school, 42%). Fourteen percent (14%) of all youth reported monthly or more often use of marijuana (middle school, 5%; high school, 20%), and 8% of surveyed youth reported weekly or more often use (middle school, 2% and high school, 12%).
- Eight percent (8%) of all youth have used inhalants at some time (middle school, 8% and high school, 8%). Two percent (2%) of all youth have used inhalants monthly or more often (middle school, 2% and high school, 2%). Twenty-one percent (21%) of local youth feel using inhalants carries "*no*" or "*slight risk*" (middle school, 29% and high school, 17%).

These indicators of use and abuse of alcohol and other drugs put youth at risk of delaying emotional and intellectual growth; developing problems with schools, friends and families; incurring ill health and reduced longevity; accidents; suicide; STDs and unwanted pregnancies (Pedersen & Skrondal, 1996; Small, Silverberg, & Kerns, 1993; Pfeifer, Schector, & Yoast, 1987).

Sexuality Issues

Overall, 23% of all youth reported that they have had sexual intercourse (middle school, 7% and high school, 32%). Fifty-nine percent (59%) of 12th graders have had sexual intercourse. Only 43% of sexually active teens report always using some form of birth control (middle school, 31% and high school, 44%).

A high percentage of local teens don't talk with their parents about sexuality issues. Within the past year, 58% either "*never*" or "*rarely*" talked to their mothers and 74% "*never*" or "*rarely*" talked to their fathers about whether or not it's okay to have sex. Even fewer teens had birth control discussions with their parents in the past year, with 72% who either "*never*" or "*rarely*" talked to their mothers and 83% who "*never*" or "*rarely*" talked to their fathers about the issue.

Four percent (4%) of local teens (males, 3% and females, 5%) reported a degree of forced sexual activity by an adult. One percent (1%) reported current sexual abuse by an adult and 3% reported previous sexual abuse. Fourteen percent (14%) of all youth (males, 9% and females, 17%) reported they had been forced to do something sexual by another teen.

Emotional Health Issues

Overall, 60% of all local teens (50% for males and 70% for females) reported feeling depressed or sad at some time during the past month. Sixteen percent (16%) of local youth (12% for males and 19% for females) reported having serious thoughts of suicide during the past month. Sixteen percent (16%) of local youth (15% for males and 18% for females) had made plans at some time to kill themselves. Ten percent (10%) of all surveyed youth (8% for males and 12% for females) reported they had actually attempted suicide.

Worries of our teens, listed from greatest to least are: getting good grades at school (56%); how they look (38%); getting along with parents at home (27%); that they are too fat or too thin (24%); how well their parents get along with each other (21%); that a friend is considering suicide (17%); not fitting in with the other kids at school (15%); that they might contract a sexually transmitted disease or AIDS (14%); being picked on or hurt by another teen (10%); that they might get pregnant or get someone else pregnant (9%); being pressured into having sex (8%); being pressured into drinking or using drugs (6%); whether they are "straight" or "gay" (5%); and that their parents drink too much or use drugs (5%).

Parent-Teen Relations

Good communication is an essential 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's okay to have sex, to use birth control, the topics of AIDS and other STDs, the risks of drinking and using drugs, feeling sad, depressed and suicidal, and personal problems. Parents were much more likely to talk with their teens about job or education plans.

Twenty-seven percent (27%) of all teens (middle school, 28% and high school, 27%) reported they worried either "*very much*" or "*quite a bit*" about getting along with their parents at home. A high percentage of teens felt their parents either "*often*" or "*very often*" cared about them; 92% felt this way

about their mothers and 84% for their fathers. Sixty-four percent (64%) of students felt that their mothers were fair "*often*" or "*very often*" when it came to enforcing the family rules; 60% felt this about their fathers. The TAP survey found that parental monitoring, sharing family values, and letting teens know that they would get in trouble at home 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 (5 or more hours a week) doing homework or studying (63%). The percentage of teens indicating they spend five or more hours weekly in the following activities are: watching TV (49%); participating in extra-curricular school activities (45%); keeping in touch with friends (43%); being at home with no adults present (40%); "hanging out" with friends (39%); working for pay (29%); playing computer/video games (21%); searching the Internet (17%); participating in non-school activities (16%); engaging in family activities (15%) and doing volunteer work (4%).

Perceptions of School and Community

Seventy-seven percent (77%) of all 7th to 12th grade students felt they were getting a good, high quality education; 57% of our youth indicated they enjoyed going to school. Forty-seven percent (47%) of all surveyed teens felt school rules were enforced fairly.

Sixty-five percent (65%) of all surveyed youth often think about doing things so that people can have things better in the future; 62% of all youth felt it is important for them to contribute to their community and society; and 81% of our 7th to 12th grades consider it their problem if their neighbors are in trouble and need help. Additionally, 48% of all teens would choose to give up their free time to help raise money for a neighborhood project. Eighty-nine percent (89%) of teens surveyed feel their community is a good place to live.

Seventy-eight percent (78%) of students feel they are safe in school. However, 5% of students have carried a weapon onto school property in the past month, and 22% say they are aware of days in the past month when other students have brought weapons onto school property. Nine percent (9%) of students have been threatened or injured at least once in the past year with a weapon on school property. Thirty-two percent (32%) of students report having their property stolen or damaged at least once in the past year and 34% have been in at least one fight in the past year (males, 46%; females, 22%).

In Closing

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 address concerns identified. TAP can serve as a vehicle for education and action involving youth, parents, schools, and the local community. In addition, research results from the survey is a baseline for future evaluation of local efforts that encourage positive youth development in families, schools, and communities.