

# The Kids



## Are All Right

*By Maeve Hebert and Allan Rivlin*

Every year, the Horatio Alger Association of Distinguished Americans sponsors the State of Our Nation's Youth survey of young people in the United States. The 2001 survey, conducted by Peter D. Hart Research Associates from May 2 to May 15, polled 1,014 high school students between the ages of 13 and 18.

The results of this year's survey offer a mostly upbeat assessment of American high school life, with students feeling supported by their families, teachers and school administrators, working hard and keeping their studies in perspective, and making well-defined and ambitious plans for their futures. The findings also indicate that high schoolers define success in terms of

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good relationships and social contributions and place much less emphasis on fortune or fame—certainly a refreshing departure from what we're often led to believe about "kids today."

A center of teenage existence is, of course, school. Asked to grade their own schools, over two-thirds (68%) of respondents to the State of Our Nation's Youth survey put them on the honor roll. Half (48%) gave their schools Bs, and 20% awarded high honors with A grades. Only 10% of students handed out Ds or Fs. Still, these grades translated into a far from outstanding C-plus average.

Much more positive than their general impressions were students' assessments of specific aspects of school life. Especially noteworthy was the overwhelming majority (88%) who said they had a teacher or administrator to whom they could talk about school problems; the

same proportion (89%) said at least one particular teacher or administrator personally cared about their success.

These connections with their educators are particularly important in light of the strong relationship the survey showed between the degree to which students believed they could count on their teachers and administrators for support and academic performance.

### Methodological Note

To draw the sample for this poll, 505 geographic points were randomly selected proportionate to the population of each region of the US and, within each region, by size of place. Individuals were selected in accordance with a probability sample design that gives all telephone numbers, listed and unlisted, an equal chance to be included. One student from each household was included. A follow-up survey to measure youth views subsequent to the September 11 terrorist attacks is planned.

Figure 1

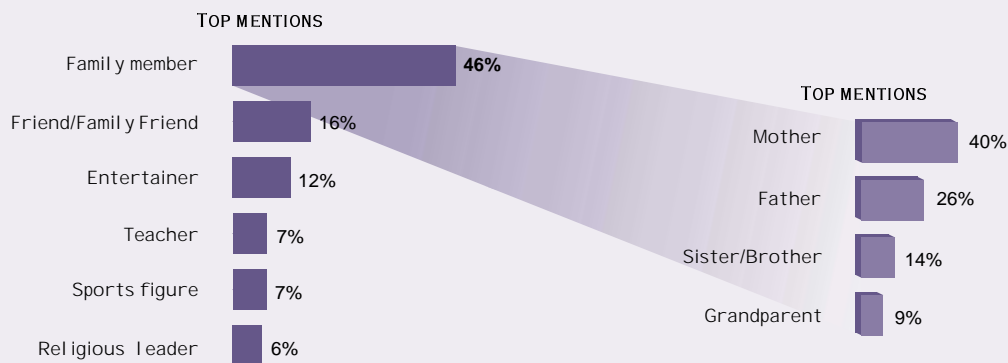
## Good Examples Close to Home

**Question:**

Please think about one particular person whom you would consider to be a role model. If you had to pick one person as a role model, which of the following categories would your role model be in?

**Question:**

What family member do you consider a role model?



**Note:** Asked of high school students, ages 13-18.

**Source:** Survey by Peter D. Hart Research Associates for the Horatio Alger Association of Distinguished Americans, May 2-15, 2000.

Students who could talk to a teacher or administrator about school problems were more likely than others to spend 10 or more hours a week on homework (17% and 7%, respectively). Those who said there was someone at their school who cared that they did their best were also more likely to get As and Bs on their report cards (62%) than those without this type of mentor (52%).

Moreover, students' trust in their teachers and administrators extended beyond the academic realm. Seventy-one percent acknowledged they had a teacher or administrator to whom they could talk about personal problems. This held true even for a majority of the students who said their primary focus was not on academics.

For this latter group in particular, high school experience transcended the classroom. Although nearly two-thirds (63%) of the sample said it was important to them to do the best they could in their classes, a third (32%) admitted their studies took second place to extracurricular activities, art, sports, and their social lives. For most students (56%), homework meant spending an hour or less a night. The 43% who reported holding jobs during the school

year said they spent more time at work than doing homework.

A strong majority (85%) of respondents said they participated in at least one extracurricular activity, and nearly one-third (30%) took part in three or more. Twenty-nine percent said that they were very involved in their schools.

One of the most significant factors at play in students' attitudes toward school and their academic success is the extent to which they can rely on support from their families.

A traditional family household, defined as a child or children residing with both parents, is the living arrangement for only 57% of the teens in the survey. Of the 28% who live in single-parent households, most live with their mothers. Overall, nearly nine in ten students (88%) live with their mothers, and that proportion is consistent across racial lines.

But the situation is dramatically different when it comes to fathers: only 63% of respondents live in households with their fathers. Although a solid majority (71%) of non-Hispanic white students live with their fathers, only

51% of Hispanics and 40% of African Americans do. [It is important to note, however, that the survey asks only about parents in a student's primary home; it does not inquire about parents who live outside the home but still take an active role in the respondent's life.]

The overwhelming majority

(90%) of students said there was at least one family member in whom they could confide. These students were 27 percentage points more likely than others to say they made their studies and grades a priority in their lives, and to perform well in school. Sixty-two percent said they received mostly As and Bs, compared with half (49%) of students who said they did not have this support in their homes.

When asked to identify just one person as a role model, 46% of students chose a member of their family (see Figure 1).

The strength of families is a consistent theme throughout the State of Our Nation's Youth survey. A strong family life provides an indicator not only of students' academic attitudes, but also of their ability to deal with the various pressures they encounter in their everyday lives.

These pressures are many, and they come from many different directions—family, school, and friends. The most common one students face is the pressure to do well academically. Twenty-six percent of respondents to the survey said that too much pressure to earn good grades created a major problem

for them, and an additional 36% felt it was a minor problem. Among minority students, 68% said they were under too much pressure to get good grades, as opposed to 59% of non-Hispanic whites. Hispanics, in particular, felt they were subject to too much academic pressure, with 71% saying it was a problem.

To lesser but still significant degrees, pressure to look a certain way (46%), pressure from family problems (46%), financial pressure (42%), pressure to do drugs or to drink (36%), loneliness (33%), and pressure to engage in sexual activity (30%) were considered major or minor problems.

Segmenting students both demographically and by the amount of pressure they say they feel allows for an analysis of the ways in which such pressure affects their lives. The responses to each of the pressure measures can be combined to divide the sample into two groups, “high pressure” and “low pressure,” the ratio between which is similar for each of the four grade levels represented in the survey.

Female students said they felt pressure to look right, family pressure, and loneliness in much greater proportions than male students; thus, they made up a disproportionate percentage (57%) of the high-pressure group. High-pressure students also tended to come from families with below-average incomes. The opposite held true for low-pressure students, who were more likely to be male (53%) and from households with above-average incomes.

It is interesting to note the degree to which these pressures related to one another. A teen’s having a problem or feeling pressure in one area increased the likelihood that he or she would have a problem in another area, in some cases with strong correlation.

Many of these relationships were predictable. It was not surprising that teens who felt pressure to drink or do drugs were substantially more likely than others to feel pressure to engage in sexual activity before they were ready. Roughly one-third (31%) of students overall said they felt pressure to engage in sexual activity, but the proportion doubled to 63% among those who said they felt pressure to drink or do drugs.

Similarly, the proportion of students who said they felt pressure to look a certain way rose from just under half to 75% among those who said they felt pressure to engage in sexual activity.

Teenagers’ plans for the future are well-defined and diverse. Seventy-four percent of survey respondents said they would continue their educations following graduation from high school; a large majority (84%) agreed that attending college was critical or very important to their success in life; and almost all (92%) planned to attend college at some point. Thirty-four percent said they would get a job after high school, 18% wanted to travel, and 10% planned to join the armed forces. Joining a volunteer organization was the choice of 8%, and 7% said they would get married.

And what, ultimately, do high schoolers hope to get out of life?

When asked their personal definition of success, the students in the survey expressed goals and values seemingly at odds with the popular image of shallow, materialistic youth. By far the largest proportion said that having close family relationships was very important to them. A large majority said that having a close group of friends would be an important measure of success. Conventional definitions, such as making money or being famous, were much less important to this generation of Americans (see Figure 2).

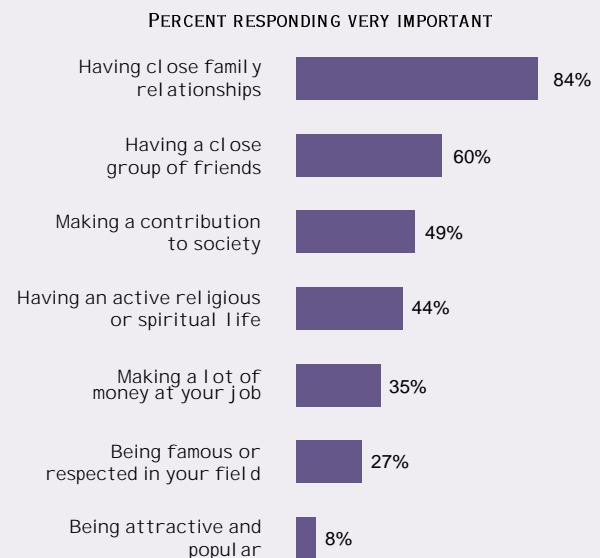
All in all, high school students of today seem serious about life and ready to confront whatever challenges their futures may hold. The state of our nation’s youth is encouraging. ●

Figure 2

### Personal Success in Personal Relationships

**Question:**

People today define success in lots of ways. For each of the following, please tell me how important the item is in your personal definition of success in life—very important, somewhat important, or not important at all.



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