



Building Strong Families

Insights from Research

Number 1, October 1, 2002

Attitudes Toward Parents: Mixed Messages?

Highlights

It is common today to point to families and parents as the foundation for raising healthy children and for building a strong community. Yet, when asked, American adults, including parents, tend to be fairly negative about parents. At the same time, most parents believe they are doing quite well as parents. These mixed messages and conflicting perceptions raise questions about whether and how parents experience encouragement and support to sustain them in their vital role in society.

Troubling Times for Today's Families?¹

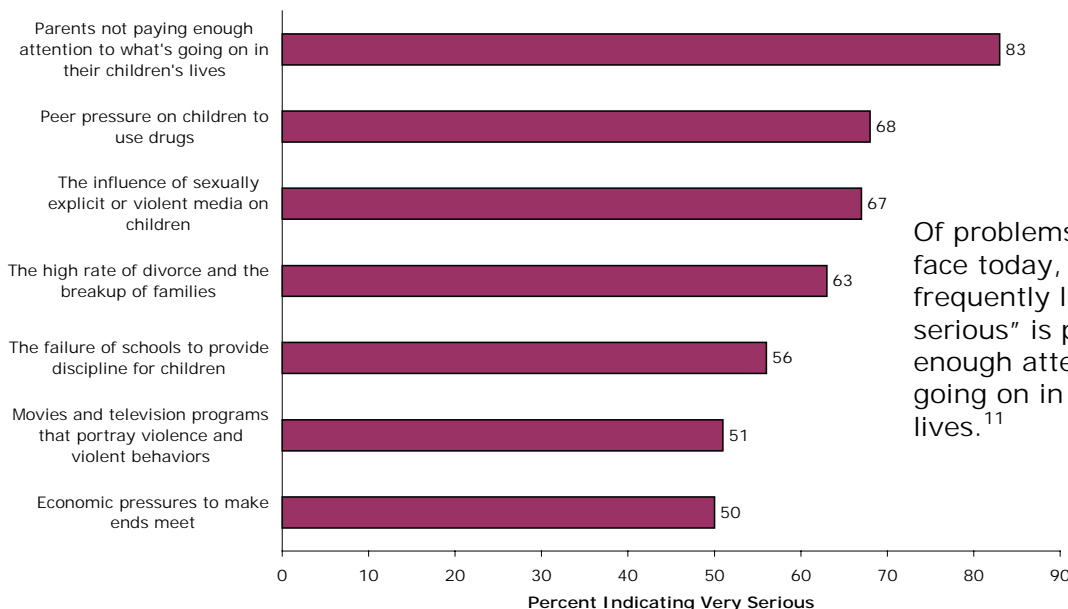
American adults generally feel that something is wrong with families, children, and adolescents today. Nearly three-quarters of American adults, including parents, have a negative perception of teenagers.² Most people also believe that family ties are less close than they used to be³ or that the American family is breaking down.⁴ One-half of people asked attribute children's many problems today to irresponsible parents.⁵

People Don't Think Parents Spend Enough Time with Their Children

What is it that the parents are doing "wrong?" Most often, Americans think that parents aren't spending enough time with their children, or are somehow inattentive. Teenagers agree. Almost 90 percent of American adults⁶ and three-quarters of American teenagers do not think parents spend enough time with their children.⁷ Further, 91 percent of adults believe teenagers should get more parental supervision,⁸ and one-half believe that very few parents really know what their teenage children are "up to."⁹ More than half (56 percent) of adults worry "a great deal" that parents don't have enough time to spend with their kids.¹⁰

Problems Facing American Families Today

Source: NBC News Poll, June 1999; N=1005



Of problems American families face today, the problem most frequently listed as "very serious" is parents not paying enough attention to what is going on in their children's lives.¹¹

But...Parents Are OK with How They're Doing

Parents, in general, do not share this view about themselves. About 60 percent of parents who have teenage children say they spend the right amount of time with their children; another 8 percent believe they spend too much time with their kids.¹²

People Don't Think Most Parents Are Very Good Parents Either

In addition to spending too little time with their children, American adults think that parents are doing a fairly poor job raising them. Over two-thirds of adults think parents are doing a "Fair" or "Poor" job raising their children, and fewer than 5 percent believe parents are doing an "Excellent" job.¹³ Adults generally feel that parents aren't involved enough in schools,^{14,15} they expect schools to do their job for them,¹⁶ and they do not set enough limits for their children.¹⁷ Many adults, particularly those over age 50, say that the baby boomers are worse parents than earlier generations.¹⁸

Parents Don't Agree

Again, parents don't necessarily share this view about themselves and their own families. More than one-half of parents of small children say they are better parents than their parents were.¹⁹ More than 80 percent of people say that family ties in their own families are not breaking down.²⁰

People Do Agree That Parenting Is a Tough Job

While people tend to think parents aren't doing a very good job raising their children, adults overwhelmingly agree (78 percent) that parenting is a much harder job today than it used to be.²¹ Additionally, over one-half (53 percent) of Americans also say it is "very common" to find parents who sacrifice and work hard so their kids can have a better life.²²

People also tend to believe that parents aren't the only ones to blame for the "problems" of our youth. In fact, nearly one-half (46 percent) of adults think that schools sometimes blame parents for issues that are actually the schools' responsibility.²³ Americans also list factors external to parents as very serious problems facing America's youth, such as peer pressure (82 percent) and violent/sexually explicit images in the media (79 percent).²⁴

What Do You Think?

- Do these statistics from the general population reflect your experiences in your community, family, or cultural group? If not, what is different?
- How do you think the negative perceptions of parents in society affects their parenting, their self-confidence, and their views of community support for parents?
- Why is there such a gap between what people think of parents and what parents think of themselves? What do the kids think? How might the gap begin to be narrowed?
- What can family, friends, and community do to support and encourage parents who face the challenges of parenting and who "sacrifice and work hard" for their kids?

*The YMCA of the USA and Search Institute are exploring these kinds of questions in their Building Strong Families initiative, which is made possible, in part, by the Kimberly-Clark Corporation, Dallas Texas. For more information, watch for future **Building Strong Families: Insights from Research** newsletters and, in late November 2002, the results of **Building Strong Families: A Preliminary Survey on What Parents Need to Succeed**. This newsletter is available at www.search-institute.org/families.*

This electronic newsletter, *Building Strong Families: Insights from Research*, is prepared by Stacey P. Rude, Search Institute, Minneapolis, Minnesota for the Abundant Assets Alliance. The alliance seeks to strengthen the capacity of YMCAs and the communities they serve to provide young people with the support and experiences they need to become healthy, caring, and competent adults.

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- ¹ Sources: Data for all polls cited were collected from the Polling the Nations database, www.orspub.com.
 - ² Public Agenda. (1999). *Kids These Days '99: What Americans Really Think About the Next Generation*.
 - ³ Shell Oil Company/Peter D. Hart Research Associates, Inc., September 2000.
 - ⁴ New York Times, October 1999.
 - ⁵ Public Agenda. (1999). *Kids These Days '99: What Americans Really Think About the Next Generation*.
 - ⁶ NBC News, September 1999.
 - ⁷ Newsweek, Inc., April 2000.
 - ⁸ CBS News/New York Times, May 1999.
 - ⁹ Newsweek, Inc., April 1999.
 - ¹⁰ Washington Post/Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, November 1999.
 - ¹¹ NBC News, June 1999.
 - ¹² Newsweek, Inc., April 2000.
 - ¹³ Public Agenda, June 2000.
 - ¹⁴ National Public Radio/Kaiser Family Foundation/Harvard University Kennedy School, September 1999.
 - ¹⁵ Public Agenda, 1999.
 - ¹⁶ Public Agenda, 1999.
 - ¹⁷ Public Agenda, 1999.
 - ¹⁸ Newsweek, Inc., April 1999.
 - ¹⁹ Newsweek, Inc., August 2000.
 - ²⁰ New York Times, 1999.
 - ²¹ Public Agenda. (1999). *Kids These Days '99: What Americans Really Think About the Next Generation*.
 - ²² Public Agenda. (1999). *Kids These Days '99: What Americans Really Think About the Next Generation*.
 - ²³ Public Agenda, 1999.
 - ²⁴ NBC News, June 1999.