



SADD Op-Ed:

Storm and Stress?

It Turns Out That Teens Aren't So Unhappy After All

By Stephen G. Wallace

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A popular "storm and stress" analysis of the modern-day adolescent experience misses the good news just below the fold: teens aren't so unhappy after all.

New *Teens Today* research from SADD and Liberty Mutual Group reveals that the majority of teens, despite often demanding schoolwork, busy schedules, and complicated relationships, feel good most of the time. Six in ten teens say they feel happy almost every day and cite positive relationships with their parents. Even more describe themselves as smart, successful, responsible, and confident. And that's important as young people navigate the path from childhood to adulthood.

Indeed, how adolescents feel – about their world and themselves – plays a significant role in the choices they make (e.g. teens who feel good about themselves are more likely to avoid alcohol and drug use). The flip side, of course, is that the choices teens make play a significant role in how they feel (e.g. teens who avoid drinking and drug use are more likely to feel good about themselves).

Not surprisingly, adolescent mental health is also linked to decisions about sex, susceptibility to negative peer pressure, and relationships with parents.

Teens who define themselves in negative terms are more likely to cite boredom and depression as reasons to have sex and to associate it with negative outcomes, including a loss of self-respect. Their positive feeling counterparts are more resistant to pressure from peers to have sex and more likely to communicate openly and honestly with their parents about this and other important issues.

Parent-teen relationships are, in fact, reliable predictors (and prevention) of risky adolescent behavior. Earlier *Teens Today* studies highlighted the impact of consistent and candid conversations between young people and their parents, driving home the point that teens whose parents talk with them regularly about drinking, drugs, and sex are overwhelmingly less likely to make poor choices.

The new *Teens Today* research is no different, zeroing in on the important role that parents can play in guiding youth. More than half of teens whose parents provide a strong level of guidance say they avoid alcohol (53 percent) and sexual activity (52 percent), as compared with those whose parents do not (19 percent and 27 percent, respectively). Two thirds (67 percent) of those teens say they avoid drugs. Not insignificantly, that guidance can also make them happier.

Of course, not all young people are immune to the stress and sadness that so often surround them. About half of teens feel stressed at least once a week, and approximately one in ten feels depressed almost every day. Both stress and depression come with a high price tag.

According to *Teens Today*, adolescents who regularly feel stressed or depressed are much less likely than other teens to avoid high-risk behaviors.



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Similar research by Columbia University's Suniya Luthar found that high pressure to achieve, as well as isolation from parents, is associated with depression and substance use among adolescents from affluent and suburban upbringings. And a study by The National Center of Addiction and Substance Abuse, also at Columbia, concluded that high stress teens are twice as likely as low stress teens to smoke, drink, get drunk, and use illegal drugs.

In many ways, it's a vicious cycle. Overworked, overscheduled, and overtired teens too often seek solace from stress and depression in alcohol, drugs, and sex. That self-medication, in turn, may actually leave them feeling worse, making it less likely they will enjoy the types of relationships with parents that can help them find sensible solutions to the challenges inherent in a quickly changing life. Breaking that cycle requires putting in place sturdy building blocks of communication. Regular parent-teen dialogue can be an effective antidote for trouble, helping to ameliorate unnecessary stress and remediate feelings of inadequacy and insecurity. It can also make more likely the early identification, and thus treatment, of depression.

There's no question that keeping teens happy and stress-free is a tough job. But the data make clear the importance of the task. What's also clear is that Mom or Dad can effectively promote positive feelings and responsible decision-making among teens. Young people need, and want, active, involved parents who take the time to engage them in conversation about the critical issues in their lives.

Despite what we may see on television or read about in newspapers, teens can not only survive but also thrive in today's society. Examples of happy, successful, and contributing teens abound, in every school and every community across the country. They stand as effective counterpoints to the presumption of storm and stress and as important reminders of the resiliency, industriousness, and optimism of youth.

That really is good news.

Stephen Wallace, national chairman and chief executive officer of SADD, Inc., has broad experience as a school psychologist and adolescent counselor. SADD sponsors school-based education and prevention programs nationwide and makes available at no charge the *SADD Contract for Life* and the *Opening Lifesaving Lines* brochure, both designed to facilitate effective parent-child communication. Toll-free: 877-SADD-INC. For more information on the SADD/Liberty Mutual *Teens Today* research, visit www.sadd.org or www.libertymutualinsurance.com.

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