

Parents Are the Foundation

Caring Adults & Mentors

February 2007

Think back 20 or 30 or 40 years. Who were the adults who were most important to you when you were a teen? Why were they important? How did they influence you? What difference did they make in your life?

Research indicates that having strong relationships with caring adults is a building block of human development that helps protect youth from high-risk behaviors and helps enhance school success and other positive forms of youth development. One researcher, Dr. Peter C. Scales from the Search Institute, believes that what teens need most is positive social interaction with adults. He indicates that these interactions expose young people to real-life heroes.

As part of the Survey of Student Resources and Assets in Iowa County Schools conducted in the fall of 2005, 7th through 12th grade students were asked about their relationships and interactions with adults. Of the 1,264 students who participated in the survey, 46% reported having other adults besides their parents who they can turn to for advice and support. The teens reported having frequent, in-depth conversations with these adults. Ideally, three or more adults play this role in the lives of each teen. A teen is more likely to grow up healthy with three or more non-parent adults providing this extra encouragement and support. Chart A illustrates the percentage of Iowa County teens who reported having relationships with other adults. Teens in 7th grade and 9th grade appear to have the most relationships with adults other than their parents.

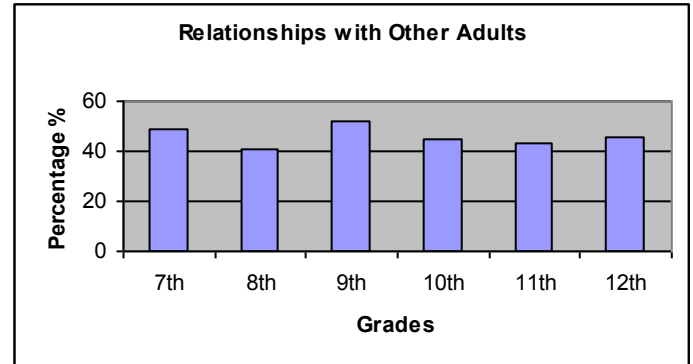


Chart A: Percentage of Iowa County teens who reported having relationships with other adults.

Besides caring adults in general, teens can also benefit from adult role models. Adult role models give teens lots of encouragement, spend time with them, and talk at least once a month. Adult role models can include parents (who are the most important role model) and other adults who “model” positive, responsible behavior. Teens who have adult role models are more likely to grow up healthy. In Iowa County, 32% of the teens surveyed reported that they had adult role models. Chart B shows the differences between grade levels of which teens have adult role models. More middle schoolers than high schoolers report having adult role models.

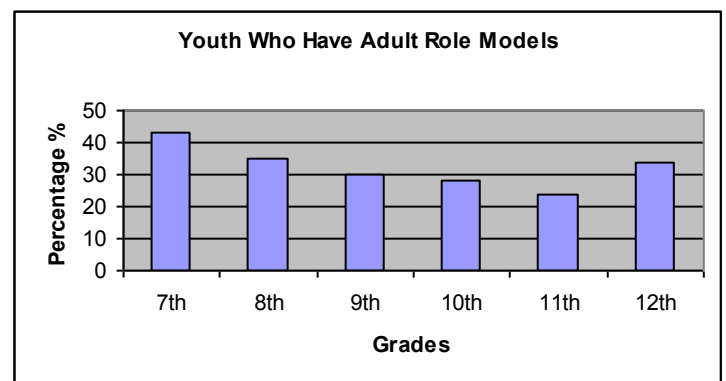


Chart B: Percentage of Iowa County teens who reported having adult role models.

Mentors are also beneficial to teens. A “mentor” is defined as an adult outside the family who cares about and spends time with the teen. Mentors can come from schools, businesses, or other organizations. Just over 25% of Iowa County teens report having a formal mentor and three out of five of those teens (60%) spend time with their mentors at least two or three times a month. According to Chart C, middle schoolers are more likely to have formal mentors than the teens in high school.

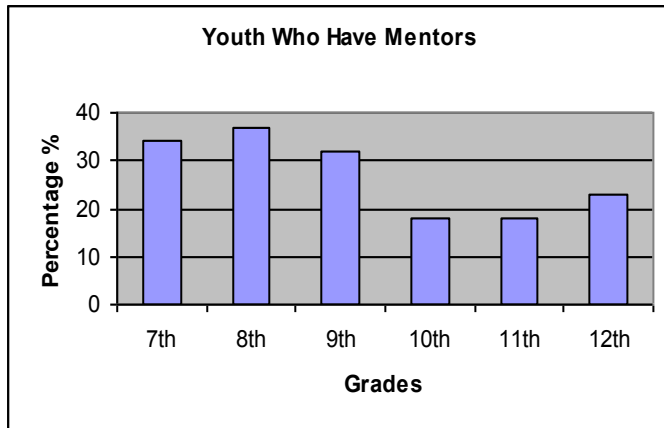


Chart C: Percentage of Iowa County teens who reported having mentors.

What can parents do to encourage teens to surround themselves with caring adults and mentors?

According to the Search Institute book “What Kids Need to Succeed”, there are many things a family can do to build relationships between teens and other caring adults:

- Give your teen opportunities to spend time with other adults – trusted neighbors, favorite teachers, or relatives they feel comfortable with and like being around.
- Encourage your teens to join adult-sponsored groups, troops or teams.
- If your teen has special interests, hobbies or skills, arrange for them to meet adult friends of yours who share their interests.

- When you have company, include your teens (and theirs) in your plans and your conversations.
- With your teen, identify the adults who regularly interact with him or her. People like teachers, coaches, club leaders, bus drivers, employers, neighbors, family members or the parents of their friends. Take some time to write a quick note to each one to express your appreciation for their care, dedication and interest to your teen.

To enhance relationships between teens and their adult role models (including parents):

- Remember that parents are the teens’ most important role model. Set high standards for yourself and follow them – even during difficult times. Treat your teen with love and respect.
- Be involved in your teen’s life on a daily basis. Spend time together as often as possible. Take advantage of “teachable moments” – times and events that invite discussion and learning about positive, responsible behavior.
- Talk with your teens about adults they know who are positive role models. Find ways to build and strengthen those relationships.
- Talk with your teens about people in the media. Discuss whether they are good role models.
- Talk with your teens about your own role models. Who do you admire and why? Who were your role models when you were a child? A teenager? A young adult?
- Talk honestly about the times when you or another adult lets your teen down. It’s good role modeling to apologize for failures and admit mistakes.

Parents are the Foundation!

“Parenting Teens” is a monthly, school-year newsletter containing information from the 2005 Survey of Student Resources and Assets in Iowa County Schools by America’s Promise and the Search Institute and the University of Wisconsin-Extension Iowa County. This series is adapted from the UW-Extension Teen Assessment Project “Whose Kids?...Our Kids!” newsletter series. This issue was written by Ruth Schriefer and edited by Sarah Weier and Deb Ivey. Thanks are extended to the 1,264 7th to 12th graders in Highland, Mineral Point, Pecatonica and River Valley who participated in the survey. For more information, contact us at UW-Extension Iowa County, 608-935-0391 or on the web at <http://www.uwex.edu/ces/cty/iowa/>