

What is Happening to Our Children?

Only 37% of Parents View Kids with Hope

By Peter Applebome The New York Times

Adults' negative views of teenagers and younger children in the United States are so widespread that only 37 percent believe that today's youngsters will eventually make the country a better place, according to a new national study by a public-policy research organization.

The study, "*Kids These Days: What Americans Really Think About the Next Generation*," finds a stunning level of antagonism not just toward teenagers but toward young children as well. Two-thirds of adults surveyed for the study came up with negative adjectives like "rude," "wild" and "irresponsible" when asked to describe teenagers. Nearly half described younger children as "spoiled," and nearly a third called them "lazy."

Officials with the research organization, Public Agenda, based in New York, said that beyond the age-old and somewhat predictable divide between generations, the findings reflected a stark change from earlier surveys, both in the degree of adult alarm and in the broadening of its focus to younger children. And, they said, the responses demonstrate a fundamental concern about youngsters' moral and ethical values that is often left out of policy discussions.

"Adults are not confused, and they're not ambivalent," said Deborah Wadsworth, executive director of Public Agenda. "Instead, they're virtually riveted by the need to teach kids integrity, ethical behavior, respect, civility, compassion, social skills – all those characteristics without which these children will never become responsible adults in our society and can't function."

"They're focused like a laser beam on the question of character, and if the political leadership and policy initiatives don't reflect that, they're out of alignment with the concerns the public has."

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Public Agenda's report was based on telephone interviews with 2,000 adults. The margin of sampling error was plus or minus 2 percentage points. The poll was supplemented by interviews with 300 black and Hispanic parents, with six focus groups at sites across the country and with youngsters 12 to 17 years of age.

What is unclear from the responses though, is how much the public attitudes toward children reflect real behavioral problems, and how much they instead reflect media portrayals. The report comes at a time when a series of disturbing crimes involving youngsters have attracted enormous popular attention.

The study, one of several that Public Agenda has done on issues involving children or education in recent years, found that adults across demographic lines, and including both parents and non-parents, tended to view young people with feelings of alarm or fear.