

LUCILE PACKARD FOUNDATION FOR CHILDREN'S HEALTH SURVEY

How Preteens are Faring in San Mateo and Santa Clara Counties: *A Survey of Parent Opinions*

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

June 2003



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INTRODUCTION

PURPOSE

The Lucile Packard Foundation for Children's Health (the Foundation) was established in 1996 and is devoted to promoting, protecting, and sustaining the health of children in San Mateo and Santa Clara counties. The Foundation focuses on fundraising for Lucile Packard Children's Hospital, grantmaking in the areas of child abuse prevention (ages 0-5) and promoting preteen emotional and behavioral health (ages 9-13), and disseminating quality information to promote children's health.

The Foundation's Information Program aims to draw public attention to children's health issues through the development and dissemination of focused, objective information on significant topics. Recognizing that the preteen years represent one of the most important transitions in the human life cycle, and that information regarding this population is scarce, the Foundation contracted Applied Survey Research (ASR), a non-profit social research and evaluation firm, to conduct a parent survey to learn more about this age group in San Mateo and Santa Clara counties. The Foundation was particularly interested in gathering more information about preteen emotional health, as this issue affects all aspects of children's lives, including mental, physical, and behavioral health, education and skill development, and the ability to make healthful choices.

Therefore, the purpose of the survey was to begin to gain a better understanding of the overall status of local preteens, with an emphasis on their emotional health. The Foundation set out to understand, from parents' perspectives, ways in which preteens are doing well, ways in which they may be struggling, and areas of most concern for parents. This preliminary survey is a first step in gathering data about this important population, and is intended to help shape future, more comprehensive data collection efforts.

METHODOLOGY

ASR conducted surveys with 460 parents or guardians of preteens ages 9-13 in San Mateo and Santa Clara counties during April and May of 2003. Surveys were conducted using random digit dialing, utilizing a listed sample of families with 9-13-year-olds living in these two counties. If the family had more than one preteen, only one child chosen at random was used in the study.

An over-sample of 72 surveys of Latino respondents was completed to provide a more ethnically diverse sample. In addition, quota sampling based on county of residence was utilized to ensure that a proportional number of parents or guardians were interviewed across the two counties.

Confidence Level

Based on the obtained sample of 460 respondents, a 95% confidence level exists that the opinions of survey respondents do not differ from those of all parents or guardians of children age 9-13 within Santa Clara and San Mateo counties by more than +/- 4.6%. This "margin of error" is useful in

assessing the range of values that likely would be observed in the population of all parents or guardians of 9-13 year olds within these two counties, if all of these parents or guardians were to be polled.

Data weighting

Examination of the distribution of respondents' household income in comparison to U.S. Census 2000 figures for Santa Clara and San Mateo counties revealed that the sample of survey respondents were skewed slightly toward higher income levels. In order to adjust for this discrepancy, the survey data were weighted along the dimension of household income. The result is an overall set of survey responses that are more closely representative of households in Santa Clara and San Mateo counties with regard to household income. Three household income levels were used: less than \$50,000 per year, \$50,000 to \$100,000 per year, and more than \$100,000 per year.

Survey Design

The survey consisted of both open-ended and quantitative questions, including several demographic questions. Respondents were asked a range of questions about common preteen issues, with a focus on emotional health issues. This summary focuses on three key sets of survey questions:

- Respondents were asked open-ended questions to find out, in parents' words, ways in which preteens are doing well and areas of most concern.
- Respondents were asked to rate their present level of concern regarding their child on a set of carefully selected social, physical, educational, and emotional issues, such as bullying, substance use, school performance, thoughts of suicide, and feeling sad or depressed.
- To gather preliminary information on how well parents perceive preteens as functioning in areas related to emotional health, respondents were asked to rate their child on a set of key issues.

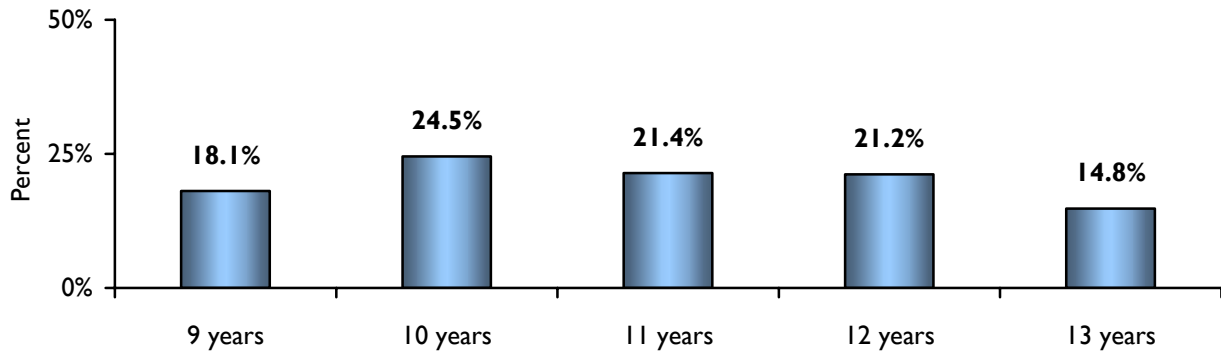
Parent respondents also were asked about types of information that would be helpful to them and to their preteens. The survey included other questions related to parent perceptions of when a child becomes a "preteen" and to after-school care arrangements. Analysis of these questions will be included in the final report expected in July 2003.

FINDINGS

CHILD DEMOGRAPHICS

Survey respondents included 460 parents of preteens. If the family had multiple preteens, the survey questions only addressed one randomly selected preteen. Each survey respondent was asked the age of his or her child. The chart below shows the percentage of children in each preteen age group covered in this survey.

Percentage of each age group discussed by parents



The survey included a greater percentage of 10-year-olds (24.5%) followed by 11- and 12-year-olds (21.4% and 21.2%, respectively). A little over eighteen percent (18.1%) were 9-year-olds and 14.8% of parents responded about their 13-year-olds.

Slightly over half of parent respondents indicated their child's ethnicity was Caucasian (54.1%) and about one-fifth (21.6%) indicated their child was Latino. Thirteen percent of the children were multi-ethnic, 8.0% were Asian, and less than 1% were African American.

About half of the preteens (52.2%) were male and half (47.8%) were female. The greatest percentage were in 4th grade (23.0%) followed closely by 5th grade (22.4%), 6th grade (20.1%), and 7th grade (19.1%). Almost 9 percent (8.7%) of children were in 3rd grade while 6.6% were in 8th grade. Most (79.3%) of the parents indicated their child attended public school, but 18.5% attended private school. A little over two percent (2.2%) of children were home schooled or attended a charter school.

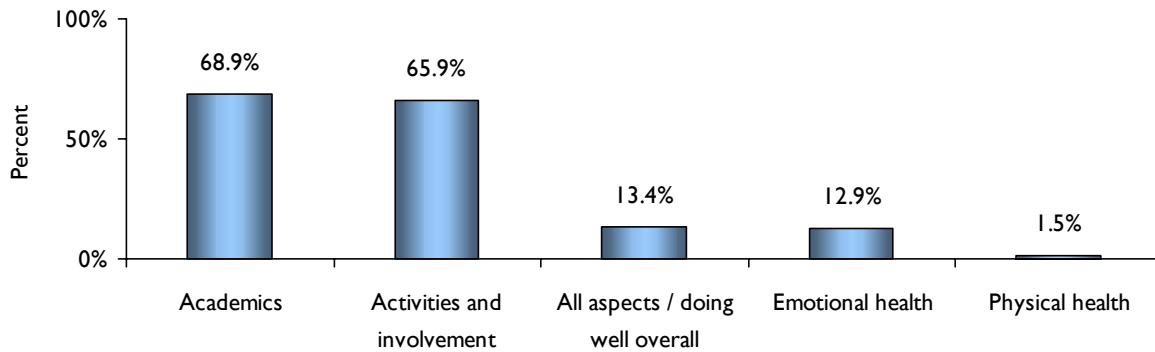
WHERE PARENTS SEE SUCCESS

In alignment with prevailing literature and the *youth development*¹ approach, the Foundation considered it a priority to focus on positive aspects of preteen functioning as well as areas of concern. Parents were first asked an open-ended question about areas in which they believe their preteen is doing well. Parents were not prompted in any way regarding the specific interests of the survey.

Parent responses were carefully analyzed and organized into a set of broad categories and subcategories. The following chart shows the percentage of parents who provided at least one response in each broad category. Since respondents could provide more than one answer, the percentages will total more than 100%.

¹ According to Grantmakers in Health, "Positive youth development is not a specific program, but rather an approach to structuring services, systems, and supports for youth so that young people develop the skills and competencies they need to thrive...". GIH, *Positive Youth Development: A Pathway to Health Teens* (2002).

As a parent, in what areas of his/her life do you feel your child is doing really well?



Note: Chart reflects a total of 452 respondents offering 750 responses.

Parents most frequently mentioned academics (68.9%) and activities and involvement such as sports and social activities (65.9%), as areas in which their preteen was doing well. Thirteen percent of parent respondents indicated that their preteen was doing well overall, and 12.9% said that their child was doing well emotionally.

The table below shows the total number of responses within each category, as well as subcategories of parent responses within emotional health and activities and involvement.

WHERE PARENTS SEE SUCCESS	NUMBER OF RESPONSES
ACADEMICS	
Academics	311
ACTIVITIES AND INVOLVEMENT	
Athletics / sports	154
Social activities	151
Arts / music / dance / creativity	65
Non-specific extracurricular activities	7
Girl or Boy Scouts / organized clubs	5
Using computers / video games	3
ALL ASPECTS / DOING WELL OVERALL	
All aspects / doing well overall	61
EMOTIONAL HEALTH	
Emotional well-being / personal development	30
Spirituality / church	13
Family / family relationships	9
Personal responsibility	8
PHYSICAL HEALTH	
Physical health	7
OTHER SPECIFIC NON-CATEGORICAL RESPONSES	
Examples: fashion, loves animals	181

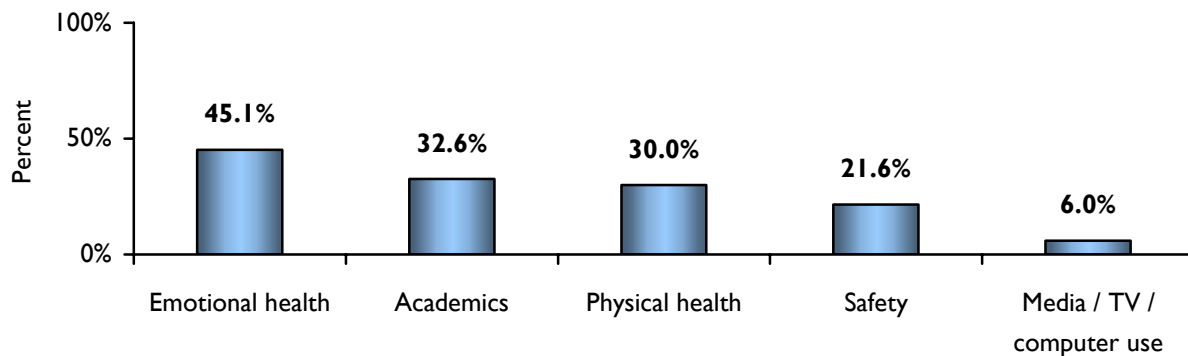
Open-ended question with 452 respondents offering 842 responses.

Note: This table provides greater detail about the previous graph and contains more responses. This table contains all responses (multiple responses per category per person were permitted), while the previous graph contains only one response per category per person.

PARENTAL CONCERNS

In addition to listing areas in which preteens were doing well, parent respondents were asked an open-ended question about their biggest concerns for their preteen child. Parents were not prompted in any way regarding the specific interests of the survey. Their answers were grouped into broad categories shown in the following chart.

As a parent, what are your biggest concerns about your child?



Note: Chart represents a total of 456 respondents answered this question offering 667 responses.

Figures above indicate the percentage of parents who provided at least one response in each category. Respondents could provide more than one answer, therefore percentages will add up to more than 100%.

Emotional health issues, such as peer pressure and social skills, were the most frequently cited concerns for parents (45.1%). The following germane quotes from parents are examples of their peer pressure and social skills concerns:

- “The socialization in his peer group. He has a tough time finding friends. There are not that many children in his age and ethnic group here.”
- “That she doesn’t run with the wrong kids and do stupid things.”

About one-third of parents mentioned academics and physical health as key areas of concern. Slightly more than one-fifth of parent respondents raised concern about their child’s safety, and 6% said their biggest concern was media or TV and computer use.

Parent responses were analyzed and categorized into themes. The table below shows subcategories of responses within the categories above.

As a parent, what are your biggest concerns about your child?

ISSUES	NUMBER OF RESPONSES
EMOTIONAL HEALTH	
Peer pressure	67
Social skills / friendships	47
Puberty / adolescence	28
Emotional development	21
Time pressures / stress	15
Family dynamics / relationship with parents	14
Personal responsibility / decision making	14
Happiness of child	12
Self-esteem / self-confidence	12
Sex / dating	12
Spiritual well-being	9
ACADEMICS	
Academics / success in school	105
Future – college / successful career / economically stable	33
Quality of schools / education	22
PHYSICAL HEALTH	
Health	58
Drugs and alcohol	52
Not enough exercise / physical activity / physical fitness	15
Weight / obesity	11
Learning disabilities / ADHD	9
SAFETY	
Safety in neighborhood / outside world	78
Staying out of trouble	11
Safety in school / bullying	10
MEDIA/ T.V. AND COMPUTER USE	
Media / external influences	17
Too much TV / video games / computer	10
NO CONCERNS / DOING WELL OVERALL	
No concerns	24
OTHER SPECIFIC NON-CATEGORICAL RESPONSES	
Examples: being the third child, life skills	27
Don't know	3

Open-ended question with 459 respondents offering 736 responses.

Note: This table provides greater detail about the previous graph and contains more responses. This table contains all responses (multiple responses per category per person were permitted), while the previous graph contains only one response per category per person.

PARENT CONCERNS ABOUT PRETEEN ON SELECTED ISSUES

Parent respondents were asked to rate their level of concern on a set of carefully selected social, physical, educational, and emotional issues. Parents were asked to respond on a four-point scale, from “not at all concerned” to “very concerned,” and were permitted to answer “don’t know.” The table below highlights their responses. The following categories were offered to the respondents.

Parents’ level of concern regarding their preteens on each issue:

ISSUE	NOT AT ALL CONCERNED	A LITTLE CONCERNED	MODERATELY CONCERNED	VERY CONCERNED
Thoughts of suicide	81.4%	7.9%	1.6%	9.0%
Using cigarettes	81.0%	6.7%	1.5%	10.7%
Using alcohol	77.8%	8.5%	3.3%	10.4%
Using drugs	74.3%	10.1%	4.4%	10.8%
Sexual behavior	66.7%	13.0%	9.7%	9.7%
Discipline problems	56.1%	22.3%	13.4%	8.2%
Feeling sad or worried about family problems, such as divorce	56.0%	20.4%	14.6%	8.9%
Friends and popularity	50.7%	29.2%	13.7%	6.4%
Feeling sad or depressed	48.7%	25.8%	13.3%	12.2%
Body image – how he/she feels about his/her body	47.2%	30.2%	13.7%	8.5%
Overall physical health	45.9%	23.0%	18.0%	13.1%
Bullying	42.7%	26.7%	15.1%	15.5%
Safety at school	42.3%	29.4%	13.2%	15.1%
Self esteem – how he/she feels about his/herself	40.5%	31.1%	15.6%	12.6%
School performance	37.8%	25.7%	17.4%	19.1%
Feeling stressed	26.4%	38.7%	23.3%	11.6%

Note: Some rows may not total exactly 100%, as some parents responded “don’t know.”

By examining the combined percentages of parents who said they were “moderately concerned” or “very concerned,” six areas emerged as key concerns for parents:

- School performance: 36.5%
- Feeling stressed: 34.9%
- Overall physical health: 31.1%
- Bullying: 30.6%
- Safety at school: 28.3%
- Self-esteem: 28.2%

Conversely, the following areas had the greatest percentages of parents who said they were “a little concerned” or “not at all concerned”:

- Thoughts of suicide: 89.3%
- Using cigarettes: 87.7%
- Using alcohol: 86.3%
- Using drugs: 84.4%
- Sexual behavior: 79.7%

While most parents did not rate thoughts of suicide as a high level of concern, it is noteworthy that 10.6% of parents were “moderately concerned” or “very concerned” about this issue. Similarly, while it may not be surprising that parents of children 9-13 years old did not report a high level of current concern about substance use or sexual behavior, a considerable percentage of parents (14-19%) were “moderately concerned” or “very concerned” about these issues.

It also is important to note that over a quarter of parents (25.5%) indicated they were “moderately concerned” or “very concerned” about their child feeling sad or depressed. In addition, over one-fifth of parents (22.2%) were “moderately concerned” or “very concerned” about their preteen’s body image.

HOW PARENTS SEE THEIR PRETEENS

In addition to gathering information on pressing parental concerns, data were gathered on how parents believe their preteens are functioning in areas related to emotional health. Recognizing that emotional health is a complex, multidimensional issue, 14 key areas were selected in which parents assessed their child’s functioning.

Parents were asked to rate their child on a four-point scale from “very good” to “poor” and were permitted to provide a “don’t know” response. The table below displays parent responses.

In general, how would you rate your child's:

	VERY GOOD	GOOD	FAIR	POOR
Physical health	66.7%	27.0%	5.5%	0.8%
School performance	54.6%	31.5%	11.3%	2.7%
Ability to have close, caring relationships with adults, besides parents	50.1%	38.8%	9.1%	1.2%
Interest and involvement with activities such as clubs, sports, and music	49.2%	34.9%	12.5%	3.4%
Ability to have close, caring relationships with friends	48.2%	39.7%	10.2%	1.4%
General acceptance of rules at home and school	47.6%	40.2%	9.5%	2.7%
Ability to be happy and see life in a positive way	40.9%	44.2%	13.7%	0.7%
Willingness to talk to you about difficult issues or situations	38.5%	43.5%	13.7%	3.7%
Self-esteem – how good he/she feels about himself/herself	32.6%	51.0%	13.2%	2.4%
General motivation level at home and school	30.0%	48.4%	18.2%	2.9%
Body image – how good he/she feels about his/her body	26.9%	48.7%	20.2%	2.7%
Ability to make sensible decisions in general, whether it is about doing homework, ignoring pressure from friends, etc.	25.0%	49.1%	22.0%	3.9%
Self-control – ability to control his/her impulses	22.7%	48.0%	23.9%	5.4%
Ability to handle difficult situations	18.5%	51.1%	26.7%	2.0%

Note: Some rows may not total exactly 100%, as some parents responded “don’t know.”

Parents said their children were doing well in many areas, with several issues rated the highest. The following five areas had the greatest percentages of parents who rated their child as “good” or “very good”:

- Physical health: 93.7%
- Ability to have close relationships with adults, besides parents: 88.9%
- Ability to have close relationships with friends: 87.9%
- General acceptance of rules at home and school: 87.8%
- School performance: 86.1%

While parents felt their children had many strengths, they also indicated several areas for improvement. The following issues had the highest combined percentages of parents who rated

their child as doing “fair” or “poor”:

- Self-control: 29.3%
- Ability to handle difficult situations: 28.7%
- Ability to make sensible decisions in general: 25.9%
- Body image: 22.9%
- General motivation level: 21.1%

REQUESTS FOR ADDITIONAL HELPFUL INFORMATION

In an effort to learn more about ways to support parents and preteens, parent respondents were asked what kinds of additional information would be helpful for their child. Parents provided their own answers instead of choosing from a list of possible responses. Respondents were allowed to provide more than one response.

Thinking back to the issues we talked about in this survey, what kinds of information would be helpful to your child? (top 5 responses)

KINDS OF INFORMATION	NUMBER OF RESPONSES	PERCENT
Dealing with peer pressure	51	15.1%
Self-esteem / body image	49	14.6%
Drugs / alcohol / cigarettes	49	14.6%
Friendships / peer-interaction /interacting with the opposite sex	47	14.1%
Puberty / what’s normal	38	11.4%

Open-ended question with 336 respondents offering 500 responses. Only top responses shown above.

The most common request for helpful information for preteens was about dealing with peer pressure (15.1%), followed closely by information about self-esteem (14.6%) and about drugs, alcohol, and cigarettes (14.6%). Parents’ request for information about drugs, alcohol, and cigarettes is surprising when compared to the fact that the overwhelming majority of parents were “not at all concerned” about their child using cigarettes (81.0%), using alcohol (77.8%), and using drugs (74.3%).

Other types of information that parents indicated would be helpful were about friendships, peer-interaction, and interacting with the opposite sex (14.1%), and about puberty or what is normal in terms of physical development (11.4%).

Parent respondents also were asked if there were anything they would like to learn more about regarding their preteen.

In terms of your role as a parent of a child 9-13, is there anything that you would like to learn more about? (top 5 responses)

KINDS OF INFORMATION	NUMBER OF RESPONSES	PERCENT
Adolescence / puberty	62	24.4%
General parenting skills / parent support groups	35	13.9%
Communicating with child	33	12.9%
Emotions / emotional development	28	11.0%
How to motivate child	24	9.6%

Open-ended question with 253 respondents offering 371 responses. Only top responses shown above.

Almost one-fourth (24.4%) of parents indicated they would like to learn more about adolescence/puberty, while 13.9% said learning more about general parenting skills or parent support groups would be helpful. Parents also expressed interest in learning more about communicating with their child (12.9%), emotions / emotional development (11.0%), and how to motivate their child (9.6%).

CONCLUSION

FUTURE RESEARCH

The purpose of this survey was to begin to gather baseline information on the overall status of local preteens (ages 9-13), from a parental perspective, with an emphasis on emotional health issues. The survey provides new data about a population that has received less research attention than others. However, a comprehensive picture of the status of preteens in San Mateo and Santa Clara counties will require much more research.

Additional data are needed on differences related to ethnic groups, gender, ages within the 9-13 spectrum, income level, geography, and other factors. Future data collection efforts also should include mechanisms to gather input directly from preteens. Information should be gathered from both preteens and their parents together, to learn about key differences in their perspectives. In addition, more research is needed on effective strategies for families, schools, and communities to promote positive preteen emotional health.

Findings from this survey are preliminary and should be used to inform future data collection efforts rather than form broad conclusions about preteens or parental views. Recognizing that the survey is not exhaustive, it does shed new light on the lives of preteens in San Mateo and Santa Clara counties.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

When parents were asked an open-ended question about areas in which their preteen is doing well, they most frequently mentioned academics, and activities and involvement in things like sports and clubs.

However, when asked an open-ended question about biggest parental concerns regarding their preteen, almost half of parents mentioned emotional health issues. Within “emotional health,” parents raised specific concerns related to peer pressure, social skills, puberty, emotional development, stress, family relationships, personal responsibility, child happiness, self-esteem, sex/dating, and spirituality. Separate from emotional health, parents also mentioned concerns related to academics, physical health, child safety, and media or TV and computer use.

Based on a list of predetermined social, academic, physical, and emotional issues, parents were most concerned about school performance, stress level, overall physical health, bullying, safety at school, and self-esteem. While parents indicated less concern about thoughts of suicide, substance use, and sexual behavior, between 10-20% of parents were still “moderately concerned” or “very concerned” about these issues.

Parents rated their preteens’ functioning in areas related to emotional health. Overall, parents felt their preteens were doing particularly well in terms of their physical health, relationships with others, general acceptance of rules, and school performance. However, parents indicated that the greatest areas for improvement were self-control, ability to handle difficult situations, ability to make sensible decisions, body image, and motivation.

Findings related to physical health and academics may be less contradictory than they appear. When parents were specifically asked to rate their child in these areas, a large percentage responded “very good.” However, parents indicated a considerable level of concern about these two areas, both in open-ended and quantitative questions. These may not be contradictory findings, as parents may believe their children are doing well in an area, yet still feel concerned about the issue.

When asked what types of information would be helpful to their preteen, the most common response was information about dealing with peer pressure, followed closely by information about self-esteem and about drugs, alcohol, and cigarettes. When asked what types of information parents themselves wanted to learn more about, the greatest percentage of parents indicated that they would like to know more about adolescence and puberty issues.

While much more data are still needed, these findings provide a first-ever glimpse, through the lens of parents, into the lives and emotional health of preteens in San Mateo and Santa Clara counties.