Grading GROWN-UPS 2002

How do American kids and adults relate?

Key findings from a national study by Search Institute with support from Thrivent Financial for Lutherans

According to a new national study, adults and teens in the United States have more in common than some might imagine—at least in terms of their attitudes about how the generations should connect. What's also clear is that when it comes to providing children and youth with guidance and support, adults score pretty low on the curve.

A recent telephone survey of more than 2,000 adults and youth reveals agreement about some fundamental priorities for youth-adult relationships, as well as some eye-opening input on how and why adults are dropping the ball. The findings also show that certain types of adults and youth are more likely to be engaged with one another. Social expectations and how people communicate about those expectations play an important role in determining whether or not adults get involved. That involvement in prosocial (or "helping") behaviors is also a predictor of engagement for both youth and adults. The study also points to specific actions that can be taken to increase the inspiration, motivation, and permission that adults feel to get involved in positive ways in the lives of children and youth.

***Grading Grown-Ups 2002* is part of Search Institute's ongoing effort to better understand the influence of social and cultural dynamics on the development of children and youth.**

Search INSTITUTE — *Practical research benefiting children and youth*

A growing body of research, and basic common sense, tell us that adults play a significant role in the development of children and youth. All young people need nurturing and supportive relationships both within and outside of their families. *Grading Grown-Ups 2002* was designed to shed light on the ways in which adults are—or are not—positively influencing "other people's kids."

What Adults and Youth Say Is Important

This study builds on a similar one conducted in 2000, but with several added elements, including youth voices. Using an interview protocol developed by Search Institute, the Gallup Organization asked children and youth (ages 12–17) and adults across the nation to talk about their intergenerational interactions *outside of their own families*. The questions focused on 18 specific actions (listed in the following table) that adults can take to build developmental assets among young people, both children and adolescents (see sidebar on page 7). When it came to the relative significance of these various actions, people of all ages ranked encouraging school success, teaching shared values (including equality, honesty, and responsibility), and teaching respect for cultural differences among the most important things adults can do for youth outside of their own families.

Although there was general agreement about the importance of some actions, there were also differences in what we heard from youth and adults, and consistently lower ratings by children and youth. The table below describes the actions and shows the proportion of adults who rated each action as "most important" for adults to do compared with the youth ratings of the actions.

Action	Percentage of Adults Rating This "Most Important"	Percentage of Youth Rating This "Most Important"
Encourage school success. Encourage children and adolescents to take school seriously and do well in school.	79	59
Teach shared values. Teach children and adolescents the same core values as other adults do, such as honesty, equality, and responsibility**.**	73	50
Teach respect for cultural differences. Teach children and youth to respect the values and beliefs of different races and cultures, even when those values and beliefs conflict with their own.	68	63
Report positive behavior. Tell parent(s) if they see a child or adolescent doing something right.	62	43
Guide decision making. Help children and youth think through the possible good and bad consequences of their decisions.	60	40
Report misbehavior. Tell parent(s) if they see the child or adolescent doing something wrong.	55	46
Ensure well-being of neighborhood children and youth. Feel responsible to help ensure the well-being of the children and youth in the neighborhood.	53	38
Model giving and serving to help the needy. Volunteer time or donate money to show children and youth the importance of helping others.	52	N/A*
Know names. Know the names of many children and adolescents in the neighborhood.	52	32
Pass down traditions. Actively teach children and youth to preserve, protect, and pass down the traditions and values of their ethnic and/or religious cultures.	49	32
Give financial guidance. Offer children and youth guidance on responsibly saving, sharing, and spending money.	46	29
Have meaningful conversations. Have conversations with children and youth that help adults and children and youth "really get to know one another."	46	35
Play sports/do art with kids. Help children and youth spend their leisure time in supervised, constructive activities.	46	31
Seek opinions. Seek young people's opinions when making decisions that affect them.	46	48
Model giving and serving to make life fair and equal. Volunteer time or donate money to show young people the importance of working for social justice.	41	N/A
Discuss personal values. Openly discuss their own values with children and youth.	38	21
Discuss religious beliefs. Openly discuss their own religious or spiritual beliefs with children and youth.	33	22
Provide service opportunities. Give youth opportunities to make their communities better places, such as by feeding the homeless or cleaning up a park.	N/A	41

***Several questions were asked either of youth only or of adults only.**

both adults and youth ranked over 50%
those that either adults or youth ranked over 50%
those that both adults and youth ranked under 50%

Most Important Ways for Adults to Engage with Youth*

Encourage school success
Teach shared values (equality, honesty, responsibility)
Teach respect for cultural differences
Report positive behavior
Guide decision making
Report misbehavior
Assume responsibility for the well-being of neighborhood children and youth

*According to youth and adult survey responses

What Adults Actually Do

Although youth and adults share ideas about what's important, there was general agreement among study participants that these relationship-building actions just aren't happening very often. Out of the 18 actions studied, only the top three priorities—encouraging school success, teaching respect for cultural differences, and teaching shared values—are reported to be happening with any regularity. The next table indicates what we learned about what adults and youth feel is really going on.

Action	Percentage of Adults Who Say They and the Adults They Know Engage in This Way*	Percentage of Youth Who Say Most Adults They Know Do This
Encourage school success	68	79
Teach respect for cultural differences	57	67
Teach shared values	58	55
Ensure well-being of neighborhood kids	48	55
Know names	49	51
Report misbehavior	45	49
Guide decision making	41	46
Seek opinions	40	38
Report positive behavior	42	3
Give financial guidance	35	32
Pass down traditions	42	32
Have meaningful conversations	39	29
Provide service opportunities	NA	39
Play sports/do art with kids	35	28
Discuss religious beliefs	28	26
Discuss personal values	38	25
Model giving and serving to help needy	45	N/A
Model giving and serving to make life fair and equal	32	N/A

* Adult reports of engagement on each action are an average of the proportion of adults saying they *personally* are very often engaged with children and youth in this way, and the proportion who said the great majority of the adults they know are engaged with children and youth in this way.

both adults and youth ranked over 50%
those that either adults or youth ranked over 50%
those that both adults and youth ranked under 50%

The Disconnect Between What We Say Is Important and What We Do About It

Why, given the shared priorities for intergenerational relationships, are children and youth getting so little in the way of engagement with adults outside of their own families? Why is there such a gap between belief and action?

Answers to these questions are likely complicated and beyond the scope of one or two studies. But to help us build a better understanding we can look at the characteristics of adults who say they *are* connected with children and youth outside of their own families. As found in our earlier study, some factors (such as gender and age) are unchangeable; others can certainly be changed or at least influenced. Those who were most likely to report being engaged with other people's kids were people who:

- Feel strong social expectations to be engaged with kids
- Often ask parents how to be involved with those parents' children
- Have children (especially those who have children under age 18 and who often tell other adults how to be engaged with their kids)
- Volunteer at least monthly
- Often participate in community or neighborhood meetings
- Attend religious services weekly
- Have more frequent contact with children or youth
- Have lived in their current neighborhood for 20 or more years
- Are or have ever been married
- Are women
- Are age 35 or older
- Are African American or Hispanic

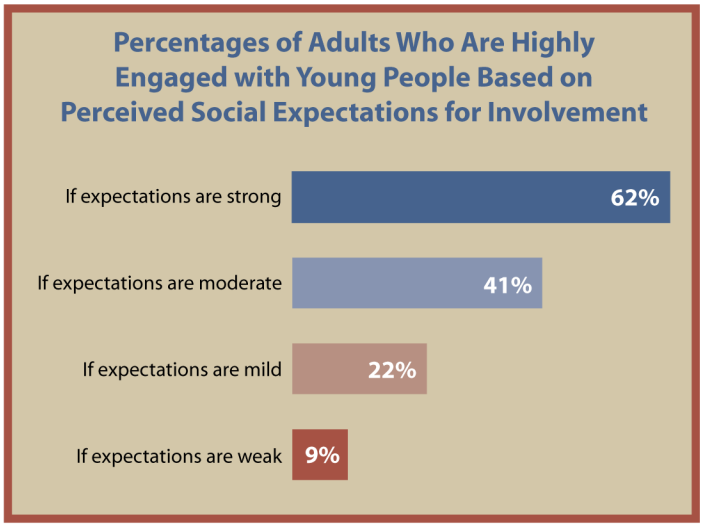
We also know some things about the *12- to 17-year-olds* who said unrelated adults are engaged with them. These young people tended to be:

- Those for whom helping younger children outside of their own families is very important, such as by playing with them or reading to them
- Those who report very often helping younger children outside of their own families
- Those for whom being religious or spiritual is very important
- Middle school students
- Girls or young women

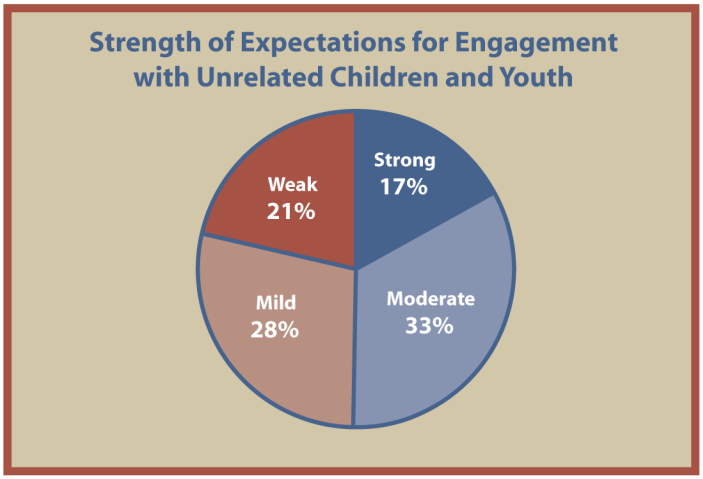
When we look at the characteristics of those who are highly engaged, we see a pattern emerge—a pattern that points to specific strategies for increasing adults' engagement. These strategies include working to increase social expectations for and acceptance of adults connecting with youth outside of their own families, and helping youth and adults get involved in their communities in ways that bring them together and encourage relationship building.

The Power of Social Expectations

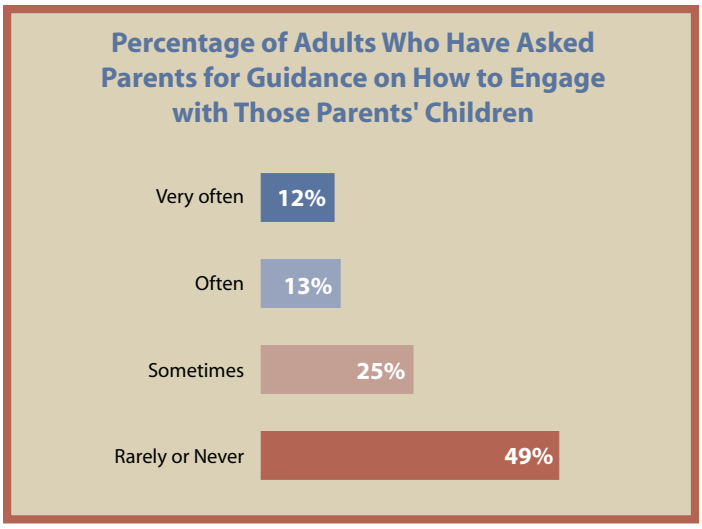
The findings show a clear link between expectations or norms for involvement and the likelihood that adults will engage with youth outside of their families. Those who said the people closest to them *expect* them to be involved with children and youth were much more likely to report actual involvement.

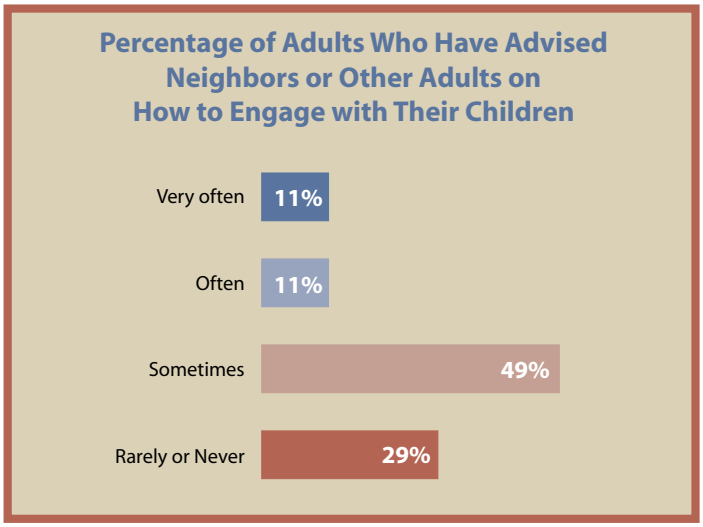


We also asked adults about the strength of the expectations they experienced for getting involved with other people's kids. Fewer than one in five adults—just 17 percent—said they perceive a *strong* expectation from the adults closest to them. Another 33 percent said there are moderate expectations for their involvement. At the other end of the continuum, 21 percent of adults said they perceive only a weak expectation for involvement, and 28 percent report a mild expectation.

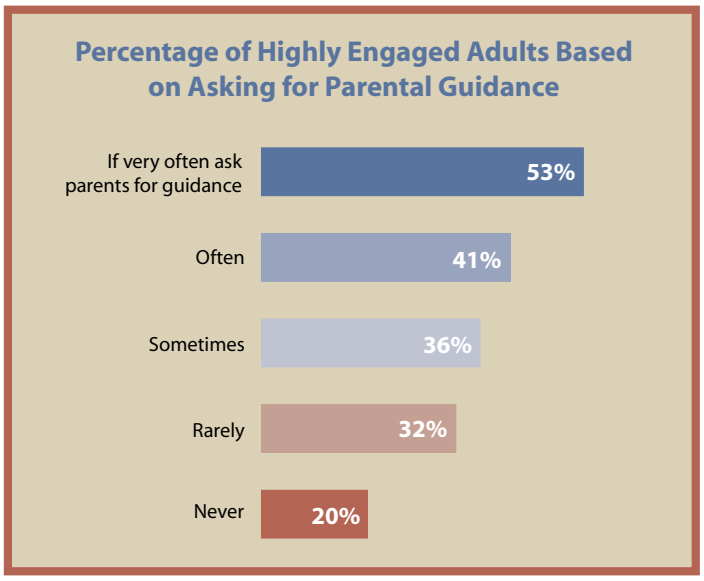


Social expectations can be enhanced by communication between parents and other adults (whether or not *they* are parents) who are or could be involved in the lives of kids outside of their families. We found this direct communication and reaching out to be uncommon.





As with social expectations, these kinds of communication are so important because those who said they had asked parents for guidance were much more likely to also report being highly engaged with children and youth outside of their families.



Clearly, most adults experience relatively weak social expectations and little or no encouragement to be involved with other people's kids in ways that promote the positive development of children and youth. But when adults do ask parents for engagement guidance, those adults report being more connected with kids. And parents who provide guidance to other adults on how they can engage with their own kids also say they are more connected with *other* people's kids.

When we look at the characteristics of those who are highly engaged, we see a pattern emerge—a pattern that points to specific strategies for increasing adults' engagement.

The Importance of Prosocial or "Helping" Attitudes and Behaviors

An often overlooked strategy for increasing interaction and relationship building between young people and adults is to engage both generations in helping behaviors. The adult helping behaviors included in this study were religious involvement (in part because research shows it tends to be associated with higher levels of service and community involvement), volunteering, and participation in neighborhood meetings. Among adults we surveyed, those more involved with these types of activities were also more likely to be positively engaged with other people's children and youth. Similarly, youth who reported higher levels of their *own* helping behaviors also reported that unrelated adults are more engaged with *them*. The youth reported that helping behaviors included the importance of being religious, and helping younger kids by playing with them, reading to them, and talking with them about important things. Examples of the connections between adult and youth helping attitudes and behaviors and intergenerational relationships can be seen in the charts below.

Relationship Between the Importance of Being Religious and Youth-Adult Engagement

Youth Rating of Importance of Being Religious (5 = very important; 1 = not at all important)	Percentage Who Say Unrelated Adults Are Engaged with Them
5	55
4	29
3	18
2	10
1	13

Relationship Between Youth Actually Helping Younger Children and Youth-Adult Engagement

Youth Rating of How Often they Actually Help Other Children (5 = very often; 1 = never)	Percentage Who Say Unrelated Adults Are Engaged with Them
5	46
4	48
3	22
2	12
1	9

What We Can Do About the Situation

We still aren't walking our talk. This latest national study shows that although adults say these positive connections with children and youth are important, we aren't actually making them happen with any regularity or consistency. Fortunately, the findings also highlight possible steps toward change. Individuals and communities committed to this work will surely find unique and inspired ways to act on this information. Listed below are several ideas that may spark your energy and creativity. Together, these and other individual and community actions can increase social expectations for adult engagement and promote young people's involvement in prosocial activities. In so doing, we stimulate a positive cycle of nurturing, connection, and healthy community that makes life better for all generations.

What Anyone Can Do

Get involved and get others involved.

Whether it's a civic group, community initiative, volunteer program, religious organization, or other effort, getting involved in your community increases the likelihood that you'll form intergenerational relationships. Adults in particular should remember the value of inviting children and youth to get involved as partners both in planning and in action.

Forge a mutual understanding of shared values in shared places.

In schools, neighborhoods, congregations, and throughout your community you can encourage adults and young people to name the values (such as equality, honesty, and responsibility) that are important to everyone and thus increase people's comfort with talking about and reinforcing those values. These settings can also become places where you and others can talk about and reinforce shared values and a shared commitment to the well-being of all children and youth.

What Adults Can Do

Talk about how to engage with other people's kids.

Find out what's expected, what's okay, what feels uncomfortable. It's especially important to ask parents how they would like you to be involved with their kids. Many adults don't get involved because they worry about negative reactions from parents or others. Initiating these conversations clarifies what's acceptable and makes more engagement with kids possible.

Clarify parents' comfort with your involvement and then tell them when their children do good things and when they misbehave.

When you tell parents about admiration or concerns regarding their children's behavior you show support for the parents, concern for the safety and well-being of the children, and a commitment to shared boundaries and expectations. Catching children and youth "doing good" and letting them know you notice helps build long-term, positive connections.

Make special efforts to get to know boys and high school–age youth.

While all children and youth benefit from your reaching out to them, these groups are especially lacking when it comes to this type of engagement. Create opportunities for them to connect with adults and to be noticed and acknowledged in positive ways.

What Youth Can Do

Spend time with younger children.

Even if you aren't old enough to baby-sit, you can spend time with kids in your neighborhood, your congregation, or your school. You can be an important role model for younger children and for adults (because when they see you getting involved they might be inspired to do the same).

Get to know your parents' friends.

When you're around your parents and other adults, rather than finding something else to do, try joining the conversation or activity.

Volunteer. There are many organizations that would love to have your energy and your commitment. And along the way you might run into some pretty great adults who would like to get to know you.

Model positive behavior with your peers.

And make it a point to thank peers who stick their necks out to model positive choices.

What Parents Can Do

Tell other adults how they can engage with your children.

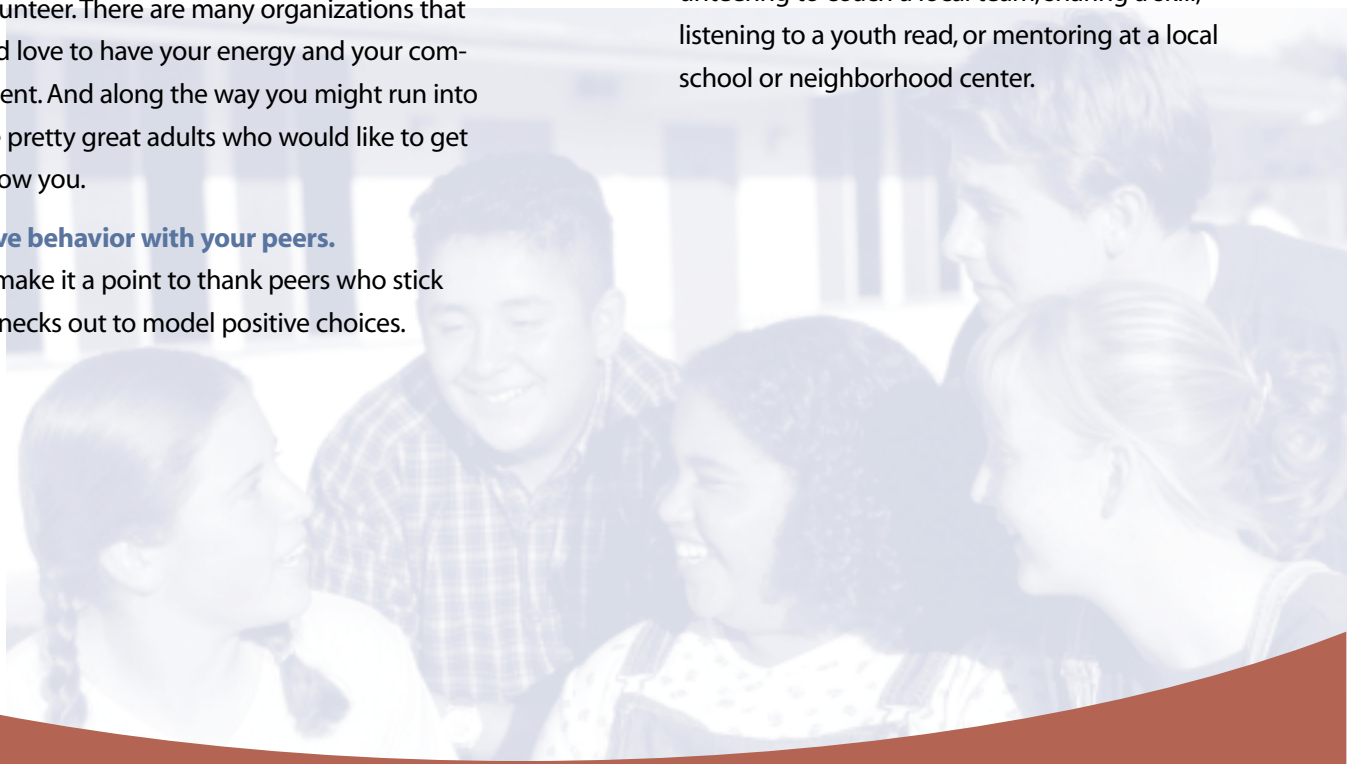
This can be as simple as letting them know that it's okay to tell you if they see your child acting inappropriately. Or, you can be bold and ask a friend or neighbor to befriend your child or teach her or him a certain skill.

Include your children when you spend time with your friends.

Kids can be great company. Even your friends who don't have children can get comfortable with, and eventually enjoy, talking and spending time with your children. Plan activities that will appeal to and be fun for everyone.

Get involved with other people's kids.

As a parent, you have a great opportunity to meet and get to know kids from other families. You can make your home a welcoming and comfortable place just by being friendly with, kind to, and interested in the children and youth who come there. Or you can connect with kids in the community by, for example, volunteering to coach a local team, sharing a skill, listening to a youth read, or mentoring at a local school or neighborhood center.



What Community Leaders Can Do

Support initiatives, programs, and policies that encourage interaction between young people and adults.

You, perhaps more than anyone, have the power to begin to change social norms and expectations regarding adult engagement with children and youth. Initiatives, programs, and policies that bring generations together are steps in this direction. They are often in need of funding and vocal support from community leaders.

Create public forums and invite young people and adults to work together to identify ways to build a more connected community.

These events can include mayors' youth forums, congregational or school district sessions, or specially planned youth-adult summits. After or during the dialogues, build relevant and feasible action plans.

Celebrate and acknowledge children, youth, and adults who model positive behaviors and relationships.

This can be done in many ways, including special awards, ceremonies, or news stories.

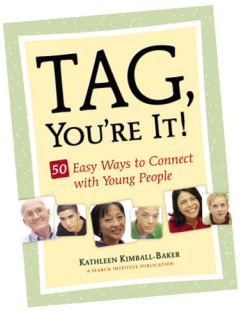
Share these findings with other leaders and with the media.

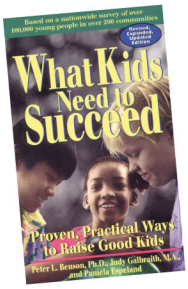
Encourage them to find ways to "tell the story" of how important it is for adults to connect with children and youth. (See "Why Grade Grown-Ups?" on page 12 in this resource.) Let them know that this kind of information has motivated many communities (including congregations, neighborhood groups, and schools) to look closely at and then improve the ways in which they help adults and kids connect. Point out that they, too, can be part of creating an expectation and acceptance of adults' involvement with children and youth.

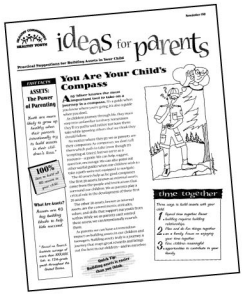
HEALTHY COMMUNITIES
HEALTHY YOUTH

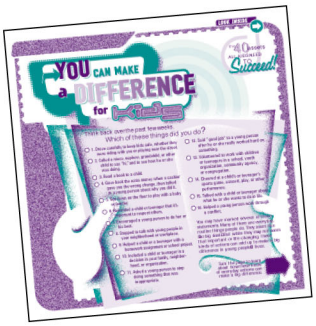
Hundreds of communities across North America have organized multi-sector initiatives to build adult-youth relationships and to build developmental assets with and for children and youth. To learn more, visit www.search-institute.org/communities/hchy.htm

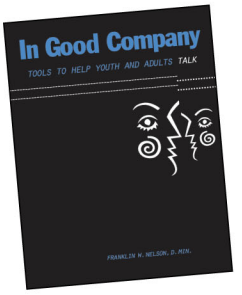
Suggested Resources for Building Relationships Between Adults and Young People











Search Institute has available a number of resources that can help individuals or groups get started in their efforts to increase intergenerational connections. Here are a few highlights.

Tag, You're It! Book and Poster—Written in an easy-to-read format, the book offers 50 common-sense ways to connect and build assets with children and youth. Each inspirational idea contains a reference to a supportive research study or expert opinion and includes action items to help you journey toward positive change. The colorful poster complements the book and can be used to spark conversation between youth and adults, raise awareness about asset building, or promote youth campaigns. The poster is perforated in the middle with one half for youth and the other for adults.

What Kids Need to Succeed: Proven, Practical Ways to Raise Good Kids—Based on Search Institute's *Profiles of Student Life: Attitudes and Behaviors* survey data from almost 100,000 children and youth, this book introduces the asset framework and shows practical and specific ways everyone can build assets, including more than 900 commonsense ideas for at home, in the congregation, at school, and in the community.

Ideas for Parents Newsletter Master Set—This set of 50 newsletter masters lets you provide parents in your community or organization with practical tips on how they can help their children grow into responsible, successful adults.

You Can Make a Difference for Kids—This eight-page booklet shows how anyone can and should build developmental assets. It introduces the concept of asset building in a fun and accessible way and motivates readers to take simple steps to build assets for children and youth in their families or communities.

In Good Company: Tools to Help Youth and Adults Talk—This hands-on workbook is for anyone who has ever found it difficult or uncomfortable to start a conversation with a young person. It includes introductory and get-acquainted activities that are perfect any time youth and adults meet. The workbook contains perforated tear sheets, one adult copy and one youth copy, so that each can work independently prior to talking together.

These and other asset-building resources are available from Search Institute by calling toll free 877-240-7251, or online at www.search-institute.org.

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About the Study

As in 2000, Search Institute and Lutheran Brotherhood (now Thrivent Financial for Lutherans) contracted with the Gallup Organization to identify and interview a national sample of adults, using an interview schedule developed by Search Institute staff. A total of 1,425 telephone interviews with adults (ages 18 or older) were completed in spring 2002. Seventy-nine percent of the respondents were non-Hispanic whites, 11 percent were African American, and 10 percent were Hispanic. Seventy-six percent of the adults were parents. Fifty-three percent were female, and 47 percent were male. Results based on the entire sample have a +/-3 percentage point margin of error at the 95 percent confidence level. Results based on subgroup comparisons (e.g., by gender, race/ethnicity) have margins of error ranging from +/-3 percentage points to +/-11 percentage points, depending on the subgroup sample sizes and the specific proportions compared. Sixty-seven percent of numbers called three times resulted in a contact with an eligible respondent, and 89% of those contacted agreed to participate.

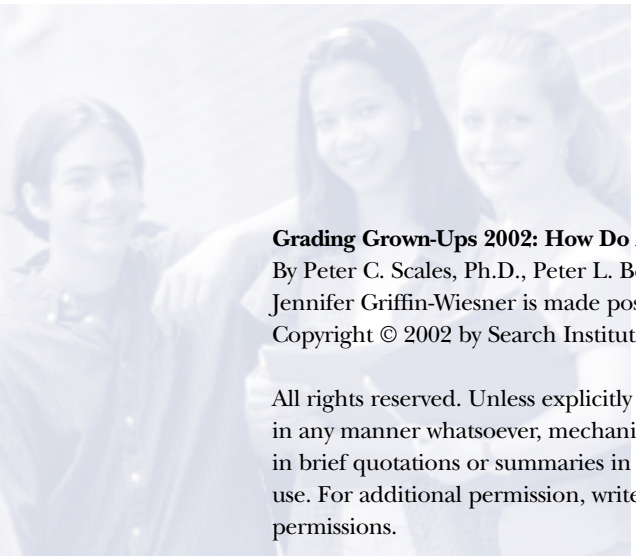
We also completed 614 telephone interviews with adolescents ages 12 to 17. Eighty-two percent were non-Hispanic whites, 6 percent Hispanic, 4 percent African American, 4 percent American Indian, and 3 percent Asian American. Fifty-one percent were male and 49 percent female. Sixty percent of the adolescents were in high school (grades 9–12), and 40 percent were in middle school (grades 6–8). Results based on the entire youth sample have a +/-5 percentage point margin of error at the 95 percent confidence level. Results based on subgroup comparisons (e.g., by gender, grade) have margins of error ranging from +/-5 percentage points to +/-13 percentage points, depending on the subgroup sample sizes and the specific proportions compared. Seventy-six percent of numbers called three times resulted in a contact with an eligible respondent, and 93 percent of those contacted agreed to participate, including those whose parents refused to let them participate and those who refused themselves. Typically, more vulnerable young people (e.g., those engaging in more high-risk behaviors) tend to be more represented among those who refuse or drop out of studies (Moore & Glei, 1995). Their overrepresentation among those not polled could have significantly and artificially raised the level of adult engagement the remaining youth respondents said they experienced. Thus, it is possible that our national sample reflects a positive bias and presents a somewhat brighter picture of how much engagement with unrelated adults American youth really experience (see Scales, Benson, & Mannes, forthcoming, for details).

Why Grade Grown-Ups?

Grading Grown-Ups 2002 is part of Search Institute's ongoing effort to better understand the influence of social and cultural dynamics on the development of children and youth. Much of this research focuses on the framework of *40 developmental assets*—the relationships, experiences, opportunities, and personal qualities that children and youth need to grow up healthy, caring, and responsible. We know from earlier research that children and youth who have more developmental assets are more likely to thrive (Benson, 1997; Benson, Scales, Leffert, & Roehlkepartain, 1999; Scales & Leffert, 1999). Both studies and anecdotal evidence tell us that most, if not all, of the assets result from significant, positive connections with elders, peers, and younger children (Scales, Benson, Roehlkepartain, Hintz, Sullivan, & Mannes, 2002; Scales, Sesma, & Bostrom, in press). Many of these relationships involve people outside of the families of children and youth.

In 2000, Search Institute and Lutheran Brotherhood (now Thrivent Financial for Lutherans) worked with the Gallup Organization to conduct the original *Grading Grown-Ups* study of adult engagement with young people. We wanted to know what was happening between unrelated youth and adults. Were youth getting the types of support and interaction they need? Were adults living up to their asset-building potential? We concluded that a majority of children and youth do not have plentiful caring connections with adults outside of their own families (Scales, Benson, & Roehlkepartain, 2001; Scales, in press). The good news was—and still is—that adults *believe* these relationships are important. The problem is that they don't often act on this belief. Children and youth simply do not have consistently positive messages and relationships in their daily lives and throughout their environments.

The current study was designed to lead to a better understanding of why the gap exists and what can be done to bridge it. For those of us who seek to expand and strengthen the web of support for children and youth, the findings provide valuable information on what motivates people to act on their beliefs. It can and should serve as yet another call to action for all Americans: Young people need and want adults in their lives in positive, nurturing ways.



Grading Grown-Ups 2002: How Do American Kids and Adults Relate? Key Findings from a National Study
By Peter C. Scales, Ph.D., Peter L. Benson, Ph.D., and Marc Mannes, Ph.D., with Nancy Tellett-Royce and Jennifer Griffin-Wiesner is made possible with generous support from Thrivent Financial for Lutherans.

Search Institute
Practical research benefiting children and youth

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About Search Institute

Search Institute is a nonprofit, nonsectarian organization whose mission is to advance the well-being of adolescents and children by generating knowledge and promoting its application. The institute conducts research and evaluation, develops publications and practical tools, and provides a wide range of training opportunities and technical assistance to support community initiatives.

About Thrivent Financial for Lutherans

The founding national sponsor for Healthy Communities • Healthy Youth is Thrivent Financial for Lutherans, a not-for-profit fraternal benefit society providing financial services and community service opportunities for Lutherans nationwide.