



Parents Make A Difference!

Teens and Diversity

November 2004

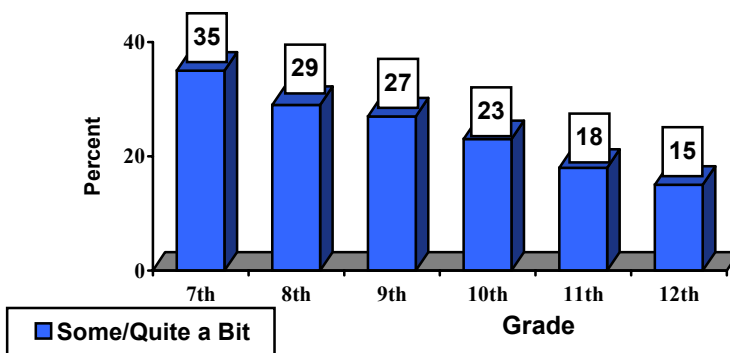
If southwest Wisconsin were an ideal world, our residents would all know and live comfortably with people of different cultures, races and ethnic backgrounds. We would all have caring relationships with many people who are not like us.

Southwest Wisconsin does not provide many opportunities for teens to live with and know people from different cultures. Over 95% of those who live in southwest Wisconsin are white, non-Hispanic. This poses some difficulty for parents and teens who would like to learn about different cultures, new places and varied ways to look at the world.

Yet, Search Institute reports that even in diverse communities “the majority of people spend time with people who look like them, think like them and act just like them. People do not do this because they are prejudiced, but because they do not know how to reach out to people who are different.”

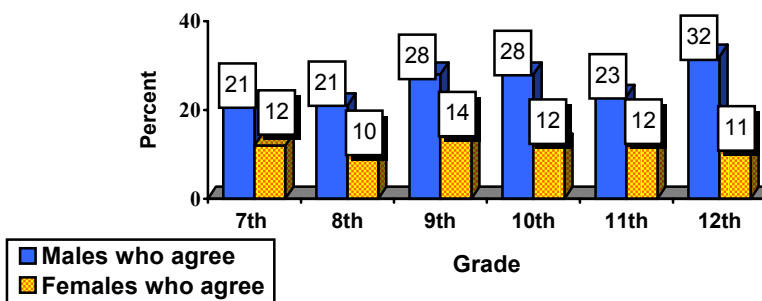
Teens in southwest Wisconsin reflected this uncertainty in the 2001 Southwest Wisconsin Youth Survey (SWYS). This survey of 5,704 7th to 12th graders found that 24% of all teenagers worry *some* or *quite a bit* about getting along with people of other races. As the chart illustrates, 7th graders worry more about this than 12th graders.

Worry About Getting Along with People of Other Races



SWYS also asked teens if they think of other people differently because of their race or the color of their skin. The results for this question show different trends than the earlier question. SWYS responses indicate more males than females *strongly agree* or *agree* that they think they would treat others differently. For males, older teens report this more often than younger teens.

Think of Other People Differently Because of Race/Color

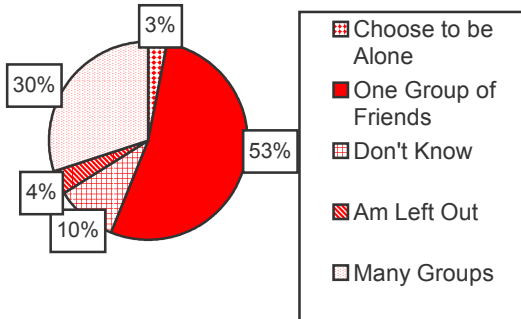


Teens today are growing up, and will work, in a world that is more racially, economically, religiously, linguistically and culturally diverse than the world their parents grew up in. Teens do express interest in learning more about those who are different. In the recent Wisconsin Conversations on Youth Development, the fourth priority issue identified was: “Provide more opportunities for youth and adults to learn about and experience cultural diversity.” Families, schools, communities, and youth organizations can help provide opportunities for youth to interact and learn about those who are different.

Getting along with teens who are different can be as simple as reaching out to new students at school or learning something about classmates. Many teens talk about how hard it is to fit in at school. In the 2002 *Mix It Up* survey conducted by Teaching Tolerance, 70% of the students named the

cafeteria as the school setting where social boundaries are most clearly drawn. SWYS results echo this. The chart below shows that 53% of the teens reported they feel they fit in best with one group of friends. Four percent report they are left out and 3% choose to be alone while another 10% report they do not know where they fit in.

Where do you fit in best?



When asked in SWYS how they think and act towards teens who are gay, lesbian or bi-sexual, 26% of teens indicated they would treat them differently than everybody else. Males in the upper grades were more likely to report they would treat these teens differently than middle school males. Conversely, females in the upper grades appeared more tolerant than females in the lower grades.

People who see others as individuals instead of labeling them according to a group they belong to are people who show respect or tolerance for each other.

In an effort to help teens learn about and respect those who are different, Teaching Tolerance is promoting the second annual “Mix It Up At Lunch Day” on November 16. Teens are encouraged to sit in a new seat at lunch, connect with new people and learn about another classmate. Parents and teens can learn more about this activity at www.mixitup.org

Parents can also help teens develop the skills they need to work and live with people from a wide variety of backgrounds and perspectives. These tips from Search Institute are a starting point.

Tips to Build Cultural Competence in your Teen

- √ **Expose your teen to different kinds of people.** Travel to different communities and states. Take advantage of cultural offerings in your community.
- √ **Help your teen develop an ethnic awareness and cultural identity of his or her own.** Together learn about your own ethnic heritage. Listen to stories from your family history. Celebrate cultural customs and rituals from your heritage.
- √ **Examine images that television, movies and books project of people of various cultures or groups.** Discuss what is authentic and what is stereotypical. How can your teen tell the difference?
- √ **Invite to dinner a family that is culturally or ethnically different from your own.** Share stories about different customs, traditions, holidays, foods, etc.
- √ **Take advantage of opportunities to host visitors from other countries.** While your family teaches the visitor about your community, the visitor will teach your teen about another culture and ethnicity.
- √ **Create an open family atmosphere that encourages discussion about differences.** Encourage your teen to talk about their own physical characteristics and those they observe in others.
- √ **Help your teen feel proud, but not superior, about his/her cultural, ethnic and racial identity.** Encourage your teen to talk about where his/her prejudices come from.

Remember: PARENTS MAKE A DIFFERENCE!

“Parents Make a Difference” is a product of the Southwest Wisconsin Youth Survey (SWYS), a program of the University of Wisconsin-Extension, local school districts and UW-Platteville. This newsletter is adapted from the UW-Extension “Whose Kids?...Our Kids!” newsletter series. This issue of “Parents Make a Difference” was written by Deb Ivey, UW-Extension Iowa County and edited by Ruth Schriefer and Sarah Weier, UW-Extension Iowa County, Bev Doll, UW-Extension Grant County and Tom Schmitz, UW-Extension Grant and Lafayette Counties. Thanks are extended to the 5,704 7th to 12th graders from southwest Wisconsin who participated in the 2001 SWYS survey. Contact UW-Extension for further information: Grant County (608) 723-2125; Lafayette County (608) 776-4820; and Iowa County (608) 935-0391. Or visit the website at: <http://www.uwex.edu/ces/cty/grant/tap/parentresources.html>