

Headline: U.S. teens brimming with self-esteem  
Date: 11/13/2008 12:00:00 AM  
Media Contact: E.J. Mundell  
Media Outlet: KIVI-TV - Online  
Attachment Link: <http://news.vocus.com/click/here.pl?z1689388404&z=950239508>

Compared to their counterparts from the '70s, today's youth also tended to rate themselves as more intelligent and were more likely to say they were 'completely satisfied' with themselves.  
istockphoto.com/Aldo Murillo

WEDNESDAY, Nov. 12 (HealthDay News) -- Today's American high school students are far likelier than those in the 1970s to believe they'll make outstanding spouses, parents and workers, new research shows.

They're also much more likely to claim they are 'A' students with high IQs -- even though other research shows that today's students do less homework than their counterparts did in the 1970s.

The findings, published in the November issue of Psychological Science, support the idea that the 'self-esteem' movement popular among today's parents and teachers may have gone too far, the study's co-author said.

'What this shows is that confidence has crossed over into overconfidence,' said Jean Twenge, an associate professor of psychology at San Diego State University.

She believes that decades of relentless, uncritical boosterism by parents and school systems may be producing a generation of kids with expectations that are out of sync with the challenges of the real world.

'High school students' responses have crossed over into a really unrealistic realm, with three-fourths of them expecting performance that's effectively in the top 20 percent,' Twenge said.

For the study, she and co-researcher W. Keith Campbell, of the University of Georgia, pored over data from the Monitoring the Future study, a large national survey of thousands of U.S. high school students conducted periodically over the past three decades.

The researchers compared the answers kids gave in 1975 and 2006 to 13 questions centered on students' 'self-views.' These questions solicited students' opinions on such things as how smart they thought they were, or how likely they were to be successful as adults.

'When we look at the responses of the students in the '70s, they are certainly confident that they are going to perform well, but their responses are more modest, a little more realistic' than teens in 2006, Twenge said.

For example, in 1975, less than 37 percent of teens thought they'd be 'very good' spouses, compared to more than 56 percent of those surveyed in 2006. Likewise, the number of students who thought they'd become 'very good' parents rose from less than 36 percent in 1975 to more than 54 percent in 2006. And almost two-thirds of teens in 2006 thought they'd be exemplary workers, compared to about half of those polled in 1975.

As for self-reported academic achievement, twice as many students in 2006 than in 1976 said they earned an 'A' average in high school -- 15.6 percent vs. 7.7 percent, the report found.

Compared to their counterparts from the '70s, today's youth also tended to rate themselves as more

intelligent and were more likely to say they were 'completely satisfied' with themselves.

There was one exception -- measures of 'self-competency' (i.e., agreeing with statements such as, 'I am able to do things as well as most other people') did not rise between 1976 and 2006. According to Twenge, that may mean that young people continue to feel great self-worth even as they remain unsure of their competence in specific tasks.

Twenge stressed that youthful confidence isn't necessarily bad. 'Young people have always had some degree of starry-eyed optimism, and that's probably a good thing,' she said. 'And setting goals for yourself is a good thing. It's just when those goals are wildly unrealistic, then that can cause trouble for everyone.'

For example, young people entering the workforce may score well in job interviews if they exude self-confidence, she said, but that can quickly sour if a new employer doesn't provide them with the perks or promotions they feel they deserve. 'They don't set the right goals for themselves, because they are overconfident -- and that's when it blows up in their face,' Twenge said.

The blame for all this may lie with well-intentioned adults, she suggested.

'These kids didn't raise themselves, they got these ideas from somewhere,' Twenge said. With Mom and Dad handing out endless praise, kids today readily believe they are somehow superior, she said. And teachers aren't blameless, either: According to Twenge, research shows that high school teachers now give out an 'A' grade more easily than their counterparts did in the 1970s, even though today's high school students report doing less homework than students from that era.

Not everyone interpreted the new findings in the same way, however. Jennifer Crocker is a professor of psychology at the University of Michigan and a longtime researcher in self-esteem. She said that by selecting data from 1975 and 2006, Twenge and Campbell have only presented two moments in time and have not shown evidence of any decades-long trend.

And based on available academic data, today's young Americans might be right to be more self-confident, Crocker argued.

'The fact is that we are all getting smarter -- IQ is going up quite dramatically over this same period of time,' Crocker noted. 'Students may believe that they are getting trained better than they used to, that they are learning skills that they didn't use to have. So, maybe their predictions aren't unreasonable.'

But Twenge, who is the author of a book on young people's self-views called *Generation Me*, isn't convinced. In fact, she believes that today's parents may be sending another crop of young Americans down the same path.

'I have a 2-year-old daughter,' she said. 'I see the parenting of kids around her age, and I haven't seen this changing. Look around -- about a fourth of the clothing available to her says 'Little Princess' on it.'

More information

There's more on kids and healthy self-esteem at the Nemours Foundation.

SOURCES: Jean Twenge, Ph.D., associate professor, psychology, San Diego State University; Jennifer Crocker, Ph.D., Claude M. Steele Collegiate Professor of Psychology, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor; November 2008 Psychological Science

Copyright 2008 ScoutNews, LLC. All rights reserved.