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Girl Scouts of the Green and White Mountains and Vermont Commission on Women

Summary

Girl Scouts of the Green and White Mountains and the Vermont Commission on Women worked with a panel of girls to create our 6th annual What Teen Girls Say statewide on-line survey. The survey of girls in grades 6 through 12 took place from New Year’s Day to March 1st, 2011. 124 high school girls and 74 middle school girls from 10 counties filled out the 12-question survey.

This year the topic girls chose was relationships. Survey results indicated girls’ closest relationships are with mothers and friends. Fathers, stepparents, siblings, boy/girlfriends, teachers and other adults figure less prominently.

As is developmentally appropriate, high school girls branch out: they are more likely to be closest to a boy/girlfriend or another adult than middle school girls are. They are slightly less attached to moms and siblings than middle school girls.

“My mom is my best friend. She is always there for me – for advice, a hug, a laugh, or a shoulder to cry on. She is authoritative but very caring and dependable.”

- 11th grade student
Mt. Anthony Union High School, Bennington

Who are you closest to?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Middle School</th>
<th>High School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No One</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Other Adult</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Boy/Girlfriend</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sibling</td>
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<tr>
<td>Friend</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Dad</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mom</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Girls favor mothers when talking about problems with teachers. Friends come in second, but surprisingly almost as many high school girls talk to fathers as friends about problems with teachers.

Middle school girls are still trying to figure out the "friend thing." They are much more likely to go to fathers or siblings to discuss friendships than high school girls.

High school girls go to friends first, moms second and boy/girlfriends third.

Whether it is good news or bad news, girls still pick moms as the overwhelming choice to talk with; friends come second. However, when it comes to talking about making a sports team, girls were more likely to tell fathers than friends.

Although it is not surprising that middle school girls go to friends first, moms and other adults are second and third choices.

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It’s Personal

Both middle and high school girls choose mothers to talk to about body changes.

Middle school girls split almost evenly between mothers and friends when the subject was sex, sexual orientation and friendships. For dating advice, they go to their friends.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Middle Schoolers: Sharing personal stuff: Whom do you talk to?</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Body Changes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sexual Orientation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friendships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dating Advice</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“I feel I can always be myself with my best friend and I can trust her with any secret and she always stands up for me. She is like my sister!”

- 7th grade student Middlebury Union Middle School

High school girls are more than twice as likely to talk with friends as mothers about sexual matters. Surprisingly, they still talk with their mothers about friendships.

Who would you tell if a friend has an abusive parent?

<table>
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<th>Who would you tell if a friend has an abusive parent?</th>
<th>Middle Schoolers</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mom</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dad</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Adult</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No One</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“If my friend had an abusive problem, I think telling an adult to solve the situation helps the most, instead of taking on the challenges yourself…”

- 11th grade student South Burlington High School

A Friend in Need

Girls were asked with whom they would talk if they had a friend who had a serious problem, such as: an eating disorder; was cutting himself or herself; had an abusive parent; or was drinking, doing drugs, or shoplifting.

Middle school girls overwhelmingly chose mothers, while high school girls were more selective depending on the issue. This is the only question in the survey where both groups were just as likely to tell another adult as they were their friends about another friend in trouble.

It is also the one question in the survey where "no one" was picked quite often, especially if the activity that their friend engaged in was illegal, such as drinking, doing drugs or shoplifting. Fifteen percent of all those surveyed would tell no one if they knew that one of their friends was shoplifting.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Who would you tell if a friend is shoplifting?</th>
<th>Middle Schoolers</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mom</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dad</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Adult</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No One</td>
<td>14%</td>
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The survey showed that relationships with siblings were complex. When asked what words best described their relationship with siblings, 50% said “It depends upon the day.” Told that they could pick more than one choice, over a third of the respondents picked "pain in the butt" or "very close (with at least one)."

High Schoolers: Sharing personal stuff: Whom do you talk to?

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<td>Dating Advice</td>
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“Of course I talk to my friend about anything and everything. It’s what makes us so close.”

- 11th grade student South Burlington High School

“Siblings”

The survey showed that relationships with siblings were complex. When asked what words best described their relationship with siblings, 50% said “It depends upon the day.” Told that they could pick more than one choice, over a third of the respondents picked "pain in the butt" or "very close (with at least one)."
Bullying

“After I talked to a friend for moral support, I would talk to a teacher or one of my parents.”
- 7th grade student
U32, Montpelier

Bullying has been identified in previous surveys as more of an issue for middle schoolers than for high schoolers. In this survey, middle schoolers report they were as likely to go to a parent, a guidance counselor or a friend to talk about a problem with a bully. Only 6% would talk directly with the bully.

The pattern changes in high school where girls were more evenly split between parents and friends as the person they would talk with. Guidance counselors and teachers were not seen as resources by high school girls. However, 16% of high school girls would confront the bully directly.

Interestingly, neither group see teachers as a major "go to" person on this issue.

Who do you talk to about problems with bullying?

When not communicating face to face, both middle and high school girls overwhelmingly chose texting as the preferred form of communication. Computer-based methods are more often used by middle school girls, perhaps reflecting that not as many of them may have access to texting.

Friendship

When asked to choose what three qualities were most valued in a friend, both age groups selected "fun to be with" and "is honest with me" as first and second choice. "Understands me" ranked third for middle school girls, while "supportive" ranked third for high school girls.

“All of these qualities except for athleticism and style/taste are very important for a friend to possess in my opinion.”
- 10th grade student
Vergennes Union High School

It is interesting to note that qualities like style/taste, athletic, hobbies/common interest and popularity all ranked in the single digits.

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Qualities Valued in a Friend</th>
<th>Middle Schoolers</th>
<th>High Schoolers</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Loyal</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doesn’t gossip about me</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understands me</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is honest with me</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hobbies/common Interests</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Style/taste</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athletic</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supportive</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fun to be with</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of humor</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Popular</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Recommendations

Moms are a very important part of a girl's support system. Moms need to make the time to listen, listen and listen to their daughters.

Moms should be careful not to overreact, make assumptions, or jump to conclusions too soon when daughters come to them with issues or concerns.

Dads should let daughters know that they are willing to listen to them, even if it's just "How did your day go?"

Girls depend more and more on friends for advice as they mature. Health classes, especially in freshman or sophomore year, should offer strategies for girls to use when friends come to them about issues like bullying, eating disorders, drinking, drugs or shoplifting.