

What Teen Girls Say...



About Bullying and Harassment

2007 Executive Summary



Girl Scouts®

Where Girls Grow StrongSM



Since 1964, the Vermont Commission on Women has been the only state agency singularly focused on women's issues, and it continues to evolve and respond to the needs of Vermont women and girls. The Girl Scout Council of Vermont is a leading voice and expert on girl growth and development, and provides activities that promote healthy living and leadership for girls. Both organizations are engaged in bringing the diverse perspectives and voices of girls in our state to the public dialogue on important issues impacting their lives. It is our hope that the concerns, viewpoints, and voices of girls contained in this report will serve to inform the policies and programs that affect their lives.

In collaboration, the Girl Scout Council of Vermont and the Vermont Commission on Women conducted this research study of over 200 teen girls in grades 6 through 12 to address their concerns around issues of teasing, bullying and harassment and to empower young women to take the opportunity to speak up. Teen girls answered questions about their experiences with social aggression, the role of peer pressure in their own actions toward others, and shared information on their cyber activity as it relates to their safety and security. Included were open-ended questions, such as "What would you like to tell a Vermont Senator or Representative about growing up in Vermont or about being a student in your school or town that they might not know?" Participants included Vermont girls in schools across the state, in after-school programs, teen centers, and clubs. Survey results were evaluated as a whole, by regions of Vermont, and in like-grade groups (6th through 12th).

Survey Participants

- **Ages:** 11-18
- **Grades:** 6th (4%), 7th (12%), 8th (10%), 9th (17%), 10th (17%), 11th (20%), 12th (20%)
- **VT Schools:** Girls from 69 VT schools completed the survey.

Please note that in the summary of findings, differences among the age groupings are noted when significant. Differences based on regions were negligible and, therefore, were not noted.

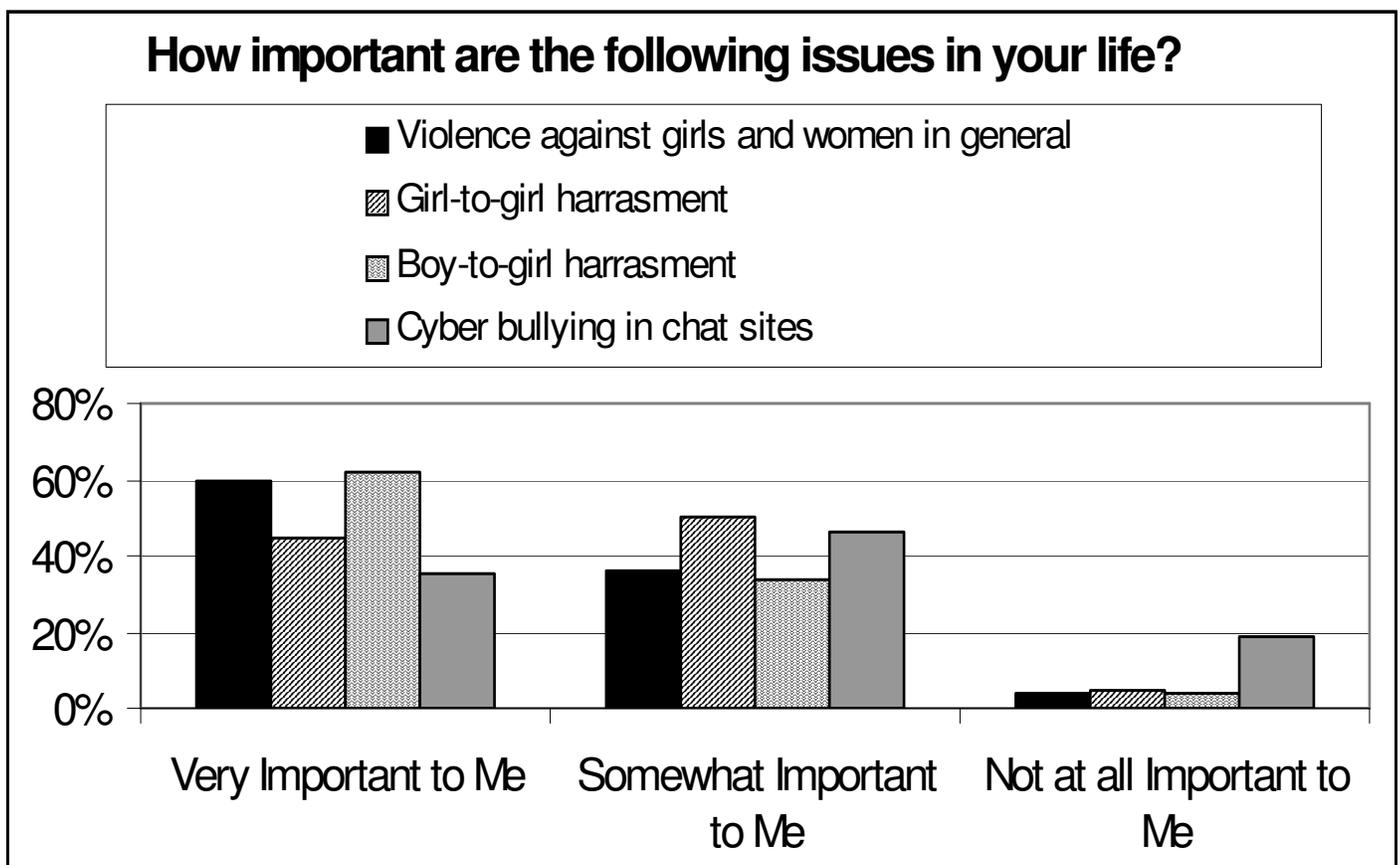
What Teen Girls Have to Say about Bullying, Harassment, and Social Aggression

Vermont's rural landscape and small towns are a picturesque environment in which to raise children, but are they risk-free? What do the teen girls who live here think? Are they spared from confronting the social isolation and aggression that exist in larger schools and big cities? Do they feel safe? Over 200 Vermont teen girls responded, and had much to say about living in Vermont.

Growing up in an “R” rated World

Visit any theater or listen to the local rock music station and it's clear that violence has become a part of pop culture that was not as prevalent when parents were teens. There is a perception that teens are surrounded by and have a zest for aggression. Violence is the focus of songs lyrics, and movies with violent scenes are marketed to appeal to teen audiences.

When asked how important these issues were in their lives, over one-half of Vermont teen girls identified violence against girls and women and coed harassment as issues of great concern.



What Teen Girls Say...

“There’s not a lot you can do about how students treat each other. By high school, kids know how you’re supposed to treat one another and just choose not to.”

**Sophomore,
U-32 Junior/
Senior High**

Girl-on-girl fights are horrible. Sometimes people feel like killing themselves and it’s very confusing. People don’t realize it and think, “oh, it’s just a stage.” But, it’s really important and people need to realize that it’s dangerous and not “just a stage.”

**7th grader,
Marlboro Elementary**

“Growing up now-a-days it seems very hard. More and more terrible things keep happening such as shooting, murders, stealing etc. that scares me often. Every day I feel not as safe as before.”

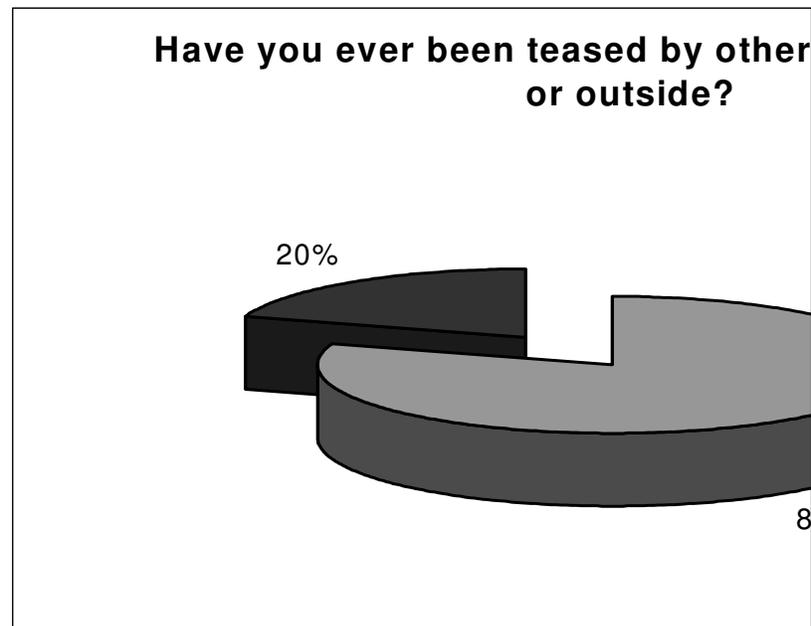
**10thgrader,
Rice Memorial**

“There are exceptions, as with everything, but it’s true when they say that girls can be much nastier than guys.”

Senior, Essex High

Vermont Teen Girls Deal with Safety on a Normal Day

When thinking of the safety of teen girls, many adults focus on Internet stalking, abduction, and issues of physical safety. The findings in this survey demonstrate that feeling emotionally safe is as important a concern for girls as physical safety. Findings reveal that what is of most concern to girls is navigating their everyday world – home, school, social settings, and routine activities – where issues of safety center more around emotional safety and bullying. Even though Vermont has focused legislative efforts on this issue, and Vermont schools have zero-tolerance policies in place for harassment and bullying, 80% of girls have been teased by others in their school settings. 80%! Even more disturbing, when teens 11-17 were asked about their harassment and bullying of others, nearly 2 in 3 girls indicated they have teased others.



...About Social Aggression

What Teen Girls Say...

I would say that there is a lot going on in schools that teachers don't know about. For instance I like the school I'm going to but I know that a lot of kids going to my school including some of my friends don't like it. A lot of them would go so far as to say hate. They (teachers) have their own bathrooms so they don't see the things written on the walls. I would say have some in-school surveys to see what the kids think and ways that students think would help to improve schools so that they like being there.

7th Grader, Mt Abraham Union High School

Because girls often are portrayed as victims of violence in the media, adults are aware of their need to be protected from physical danger. But girls are acutely aware of the adverse effects of emotional harm suffered from being teased and judged.

Girl-to-girl bullying is rampant in middle schools, and makes 6th to 8th grade miserable for many girls.

Essex HS Sophomore

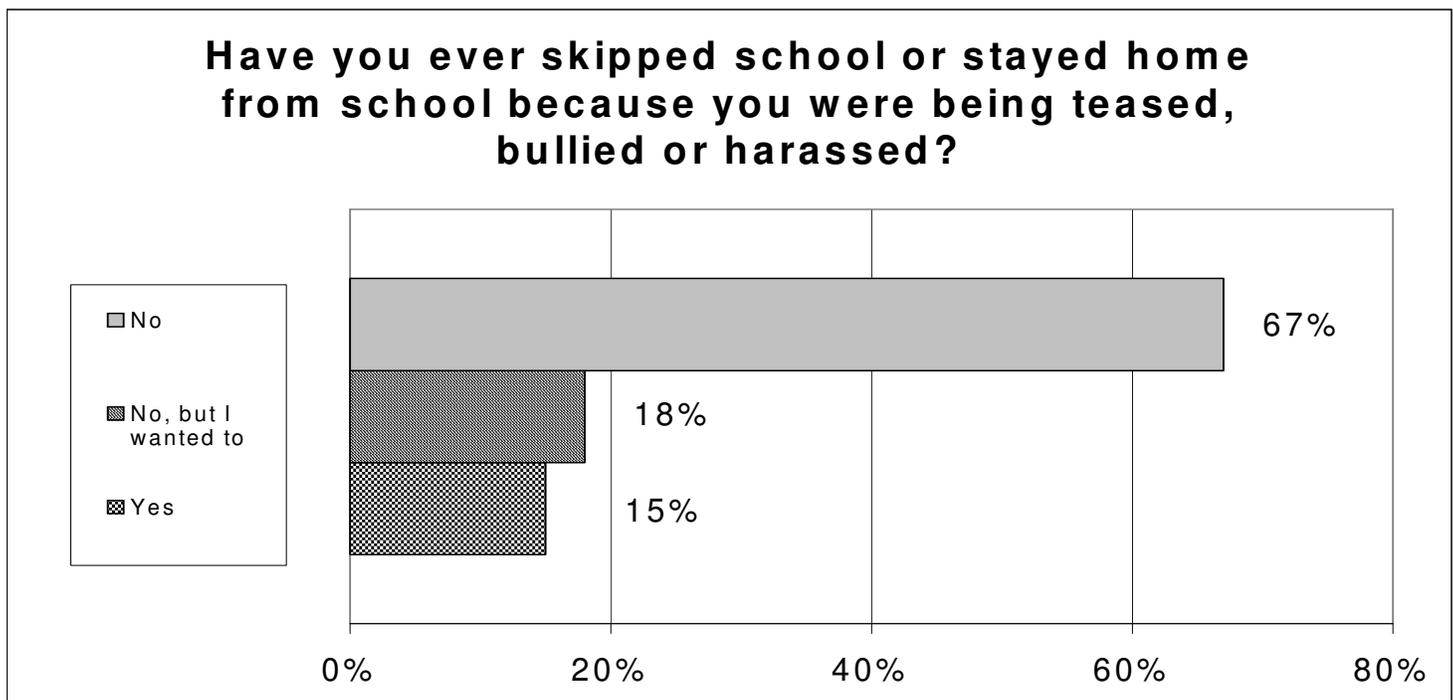
You have made good laws about bullying and harassment, but you still don't understand what we are really going through. Parents don't either.

10th Grader, Harwood Union High School

What are the negative effects of girls feeling unsafe?

According to a national survey conducted by the Girl Scout Research Institute in 2003, girls who do not feel safe are more likely to feel sad, have trouble paying attention in school, get grades below A's and B's, and have trouble making decisions. They also are *more* likely to feel that they cannot keep themselves safe, are *less* likely to feel that they can do anything if they try hard enough, and are *more* likely to worry about making new friends and about finding adults and peers they can talk to and trust.

So, how do our Vermont teens fare? The majority of girls reported that their school attendance has not been impacted by incidents of social aggression. Of greater concern is that 1 in 3 girls have either skipped school, or wanted to stay home from school because they were being teased or harassed. Girls learn best when they are in an environment that feels safe and nurturing to them, so they can focus on their school work without getting derailed by being teased or bullied.

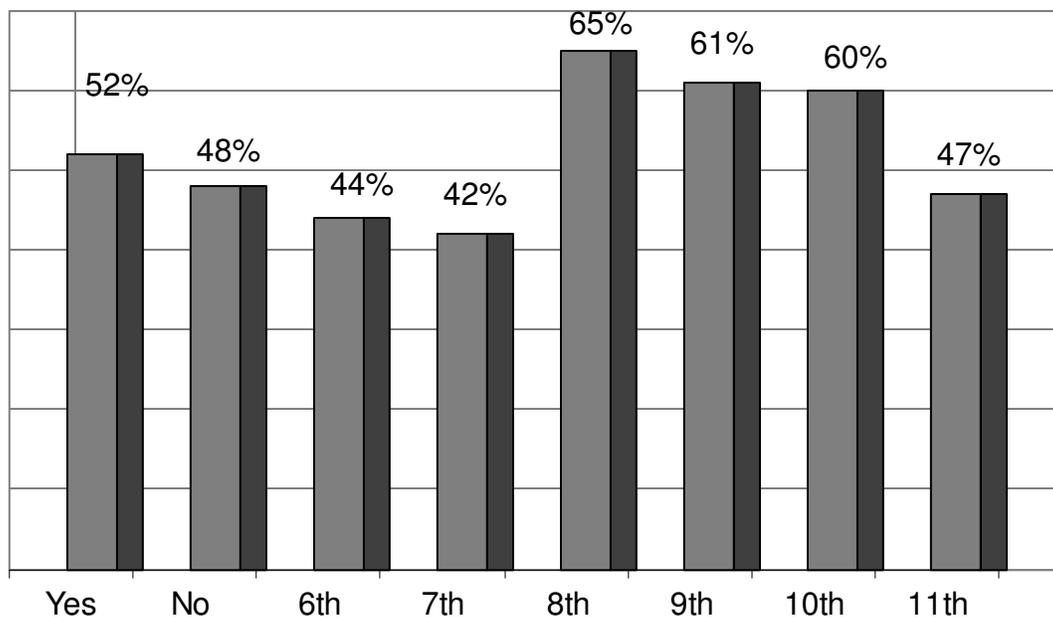


...About Their School Day

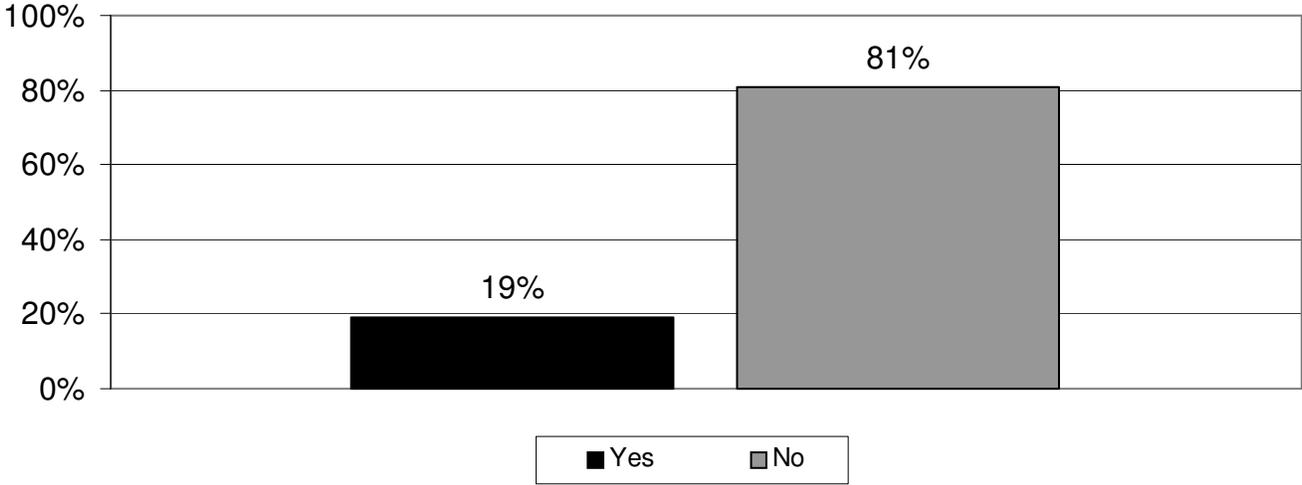
What Teen Girls Say...

Teens use social aggression in many ways and for a variety of reasons. Some remain familiar and unchanging through time. The survey showed that teen girls make fun of others because of appearance more often than for reasons that were out of another's control, like a person's race or disability. Because sports play a big role in girls' school careers, we also asked about sports team participation, and found that harassment in sports affects 1 girl in 4.

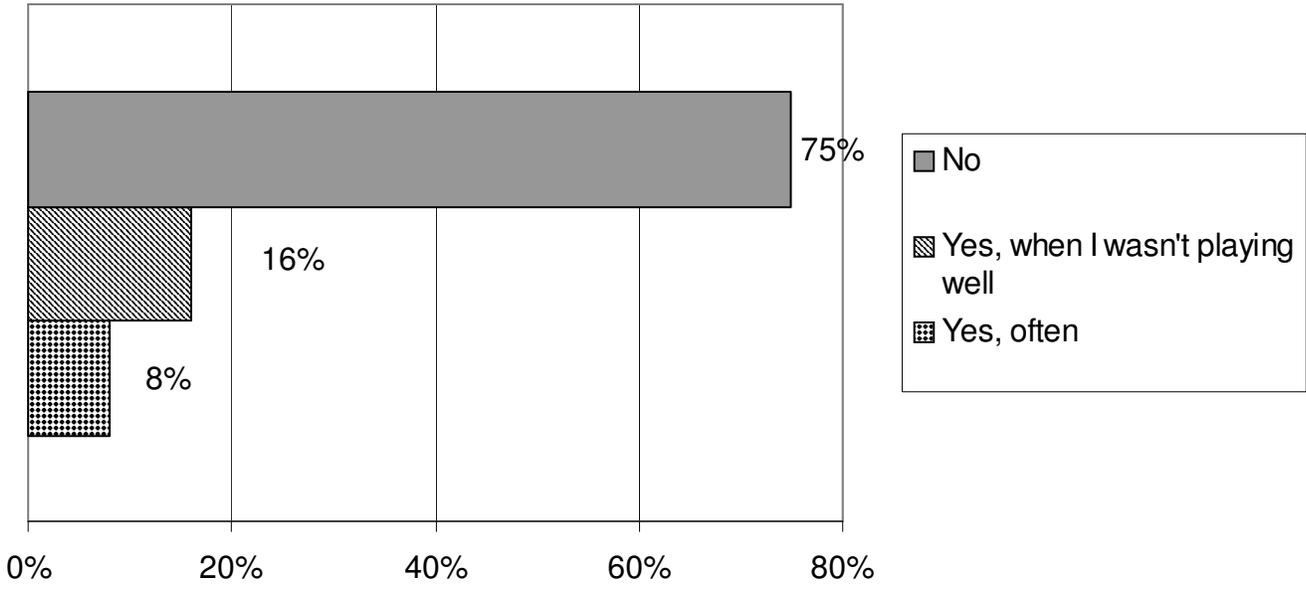
Have you ever been made fun of because of your clothes, your hair, your glasses or braces?



Have you ever been made fun of because of your race or ethnicity, your religion, a disability, or your sexual orientation?

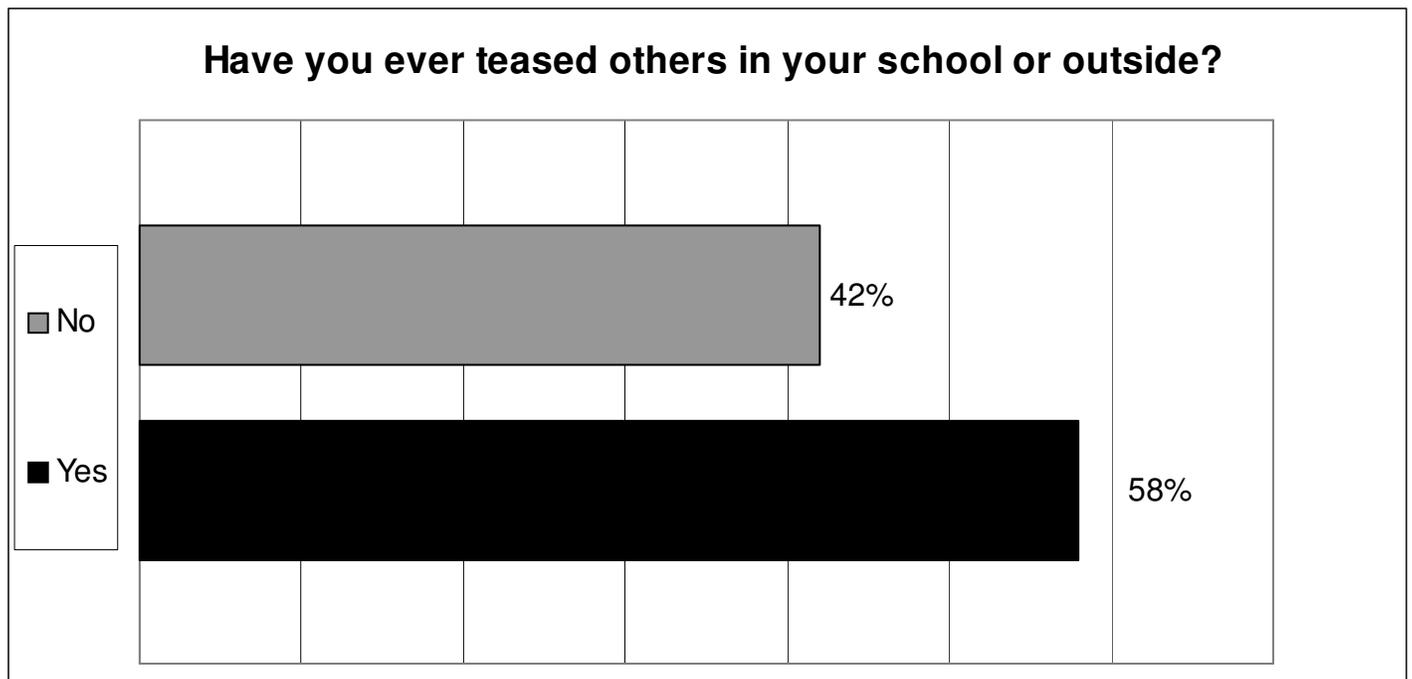


Have you been hazed or harassed on a sports team?

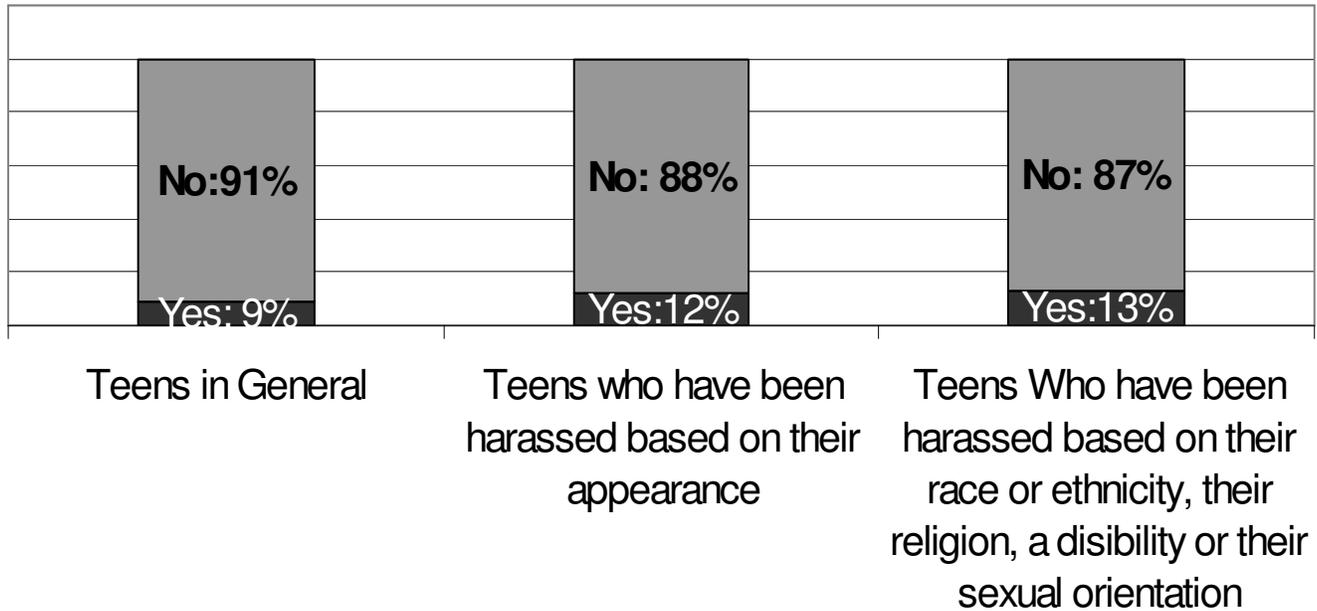


When Teens are Teased, Do They Tease Others?

58% of teen girls reported that they tease others. Surprisingly, VT Teen girls *who are teased* also admit to teasing others. In addition, those teens who are harassed for things beyond their control, like their race or disability,



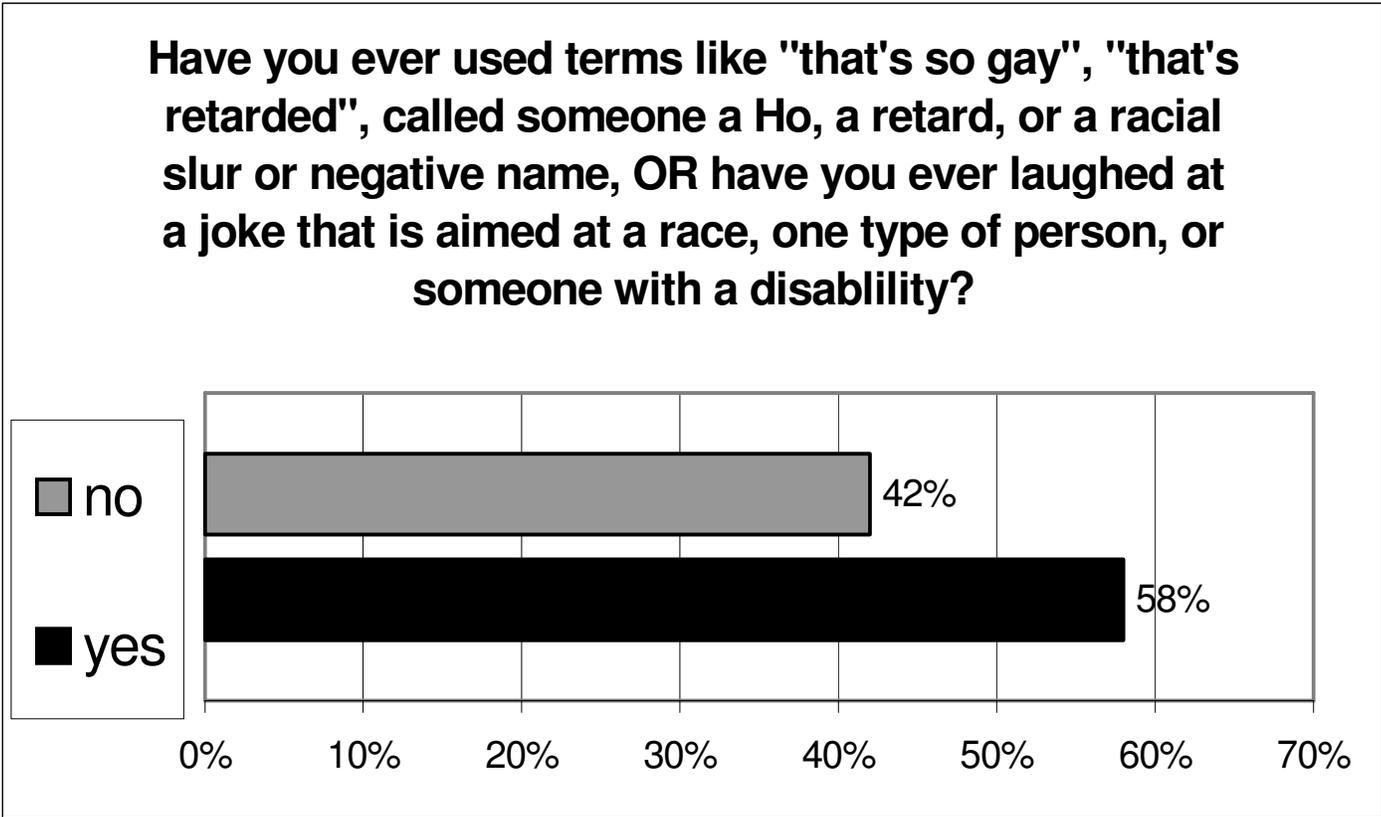
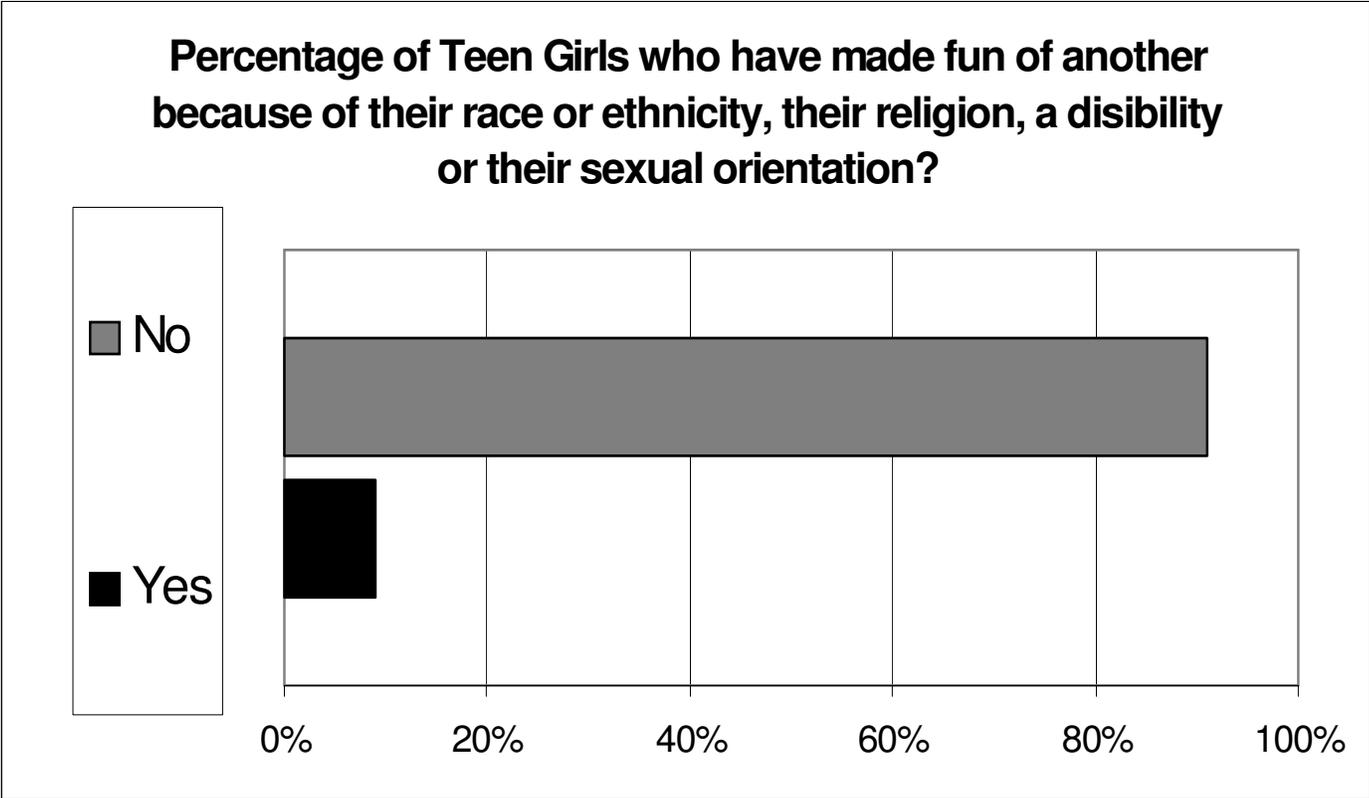
Have you ever made fun of another girl or guy because of their race or ethnicity, their religion, a disability or their sexual orientation?



It's a million times harder than you remember, even if you have loving friends and family.

**Senior,
St. Johnsbury
Academy**

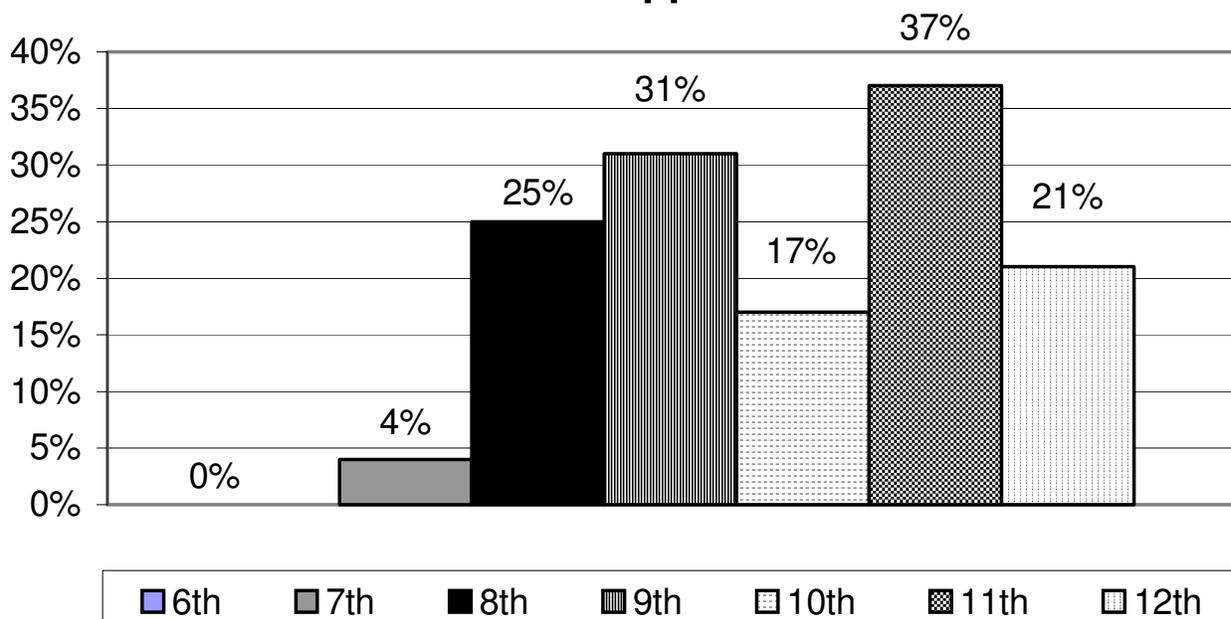
Even though Vermont prides itself on being inclusive, though small in proportion, some teen girls can be cruel. Some of the toughest kinds of harassment happen around issues of diversity.



Life is harder for girls because they have to live up to a higher standard just to fit in and not be a social outcast! But for girls if you wear the wrong shoes you could be a social outcast in one second flat!

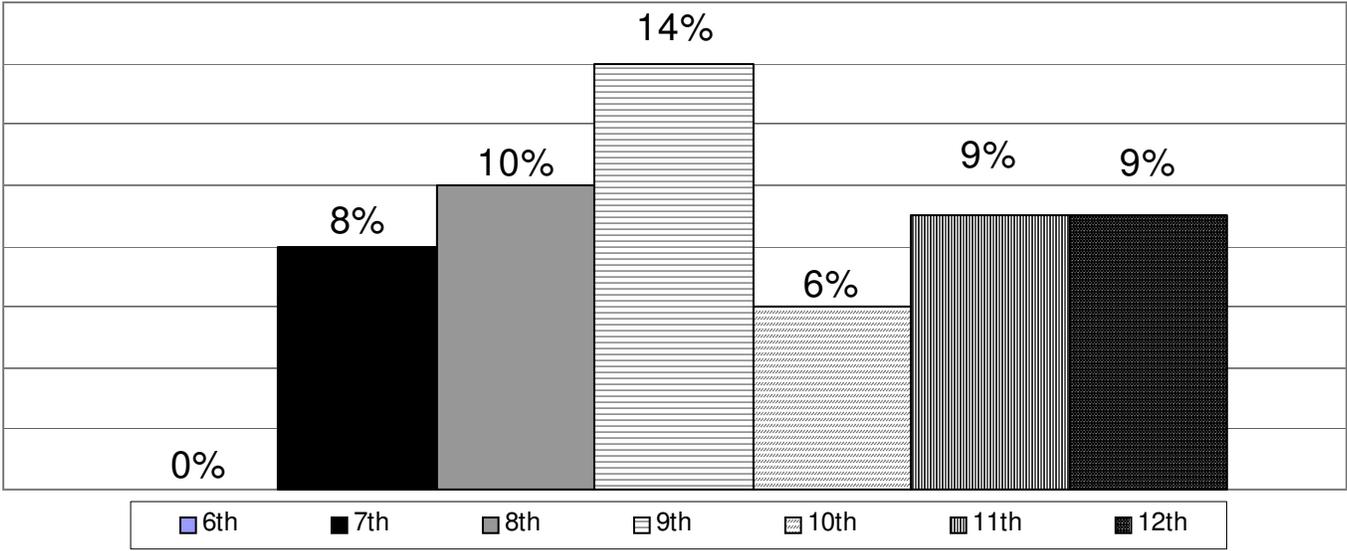
**Sophomore,
Williamstown Middle / High School**

Teens by Grade who have made fun of another because of appearance

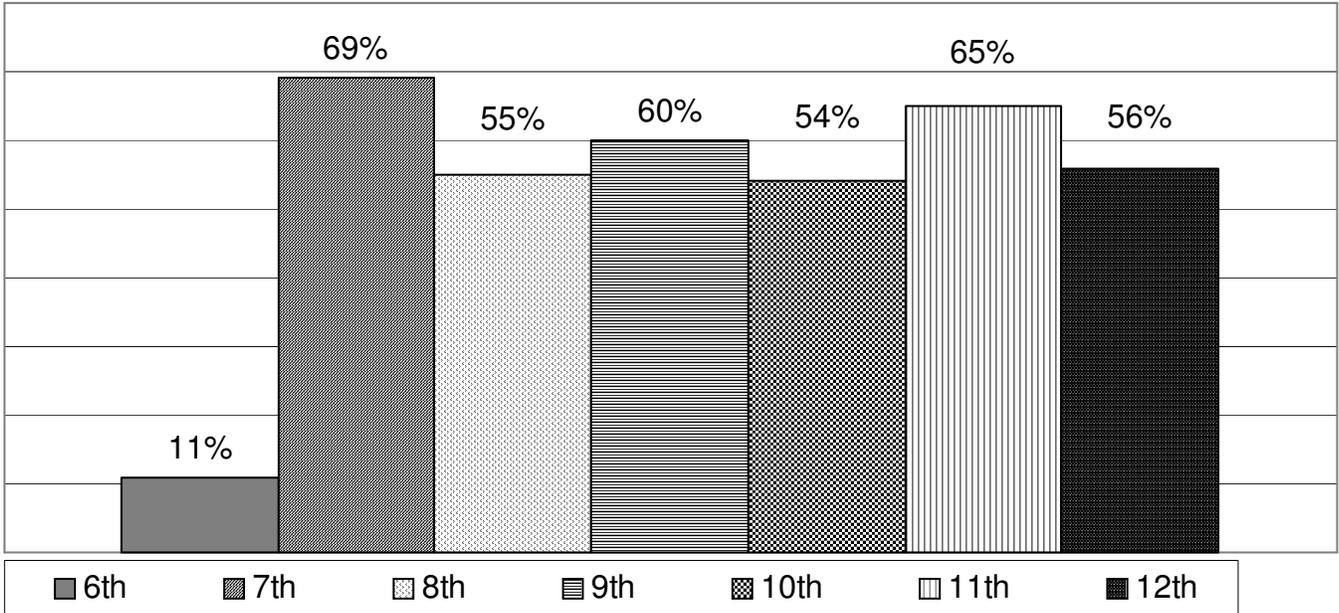


Teens in the survey give an indication that life is hardest for them in 8th -10th grade, when harassment appears to be most prevalent.

Teen Girls by Grade who Report Making Fun of another because of race or ethnicity, religion, a disability or sexual orientation



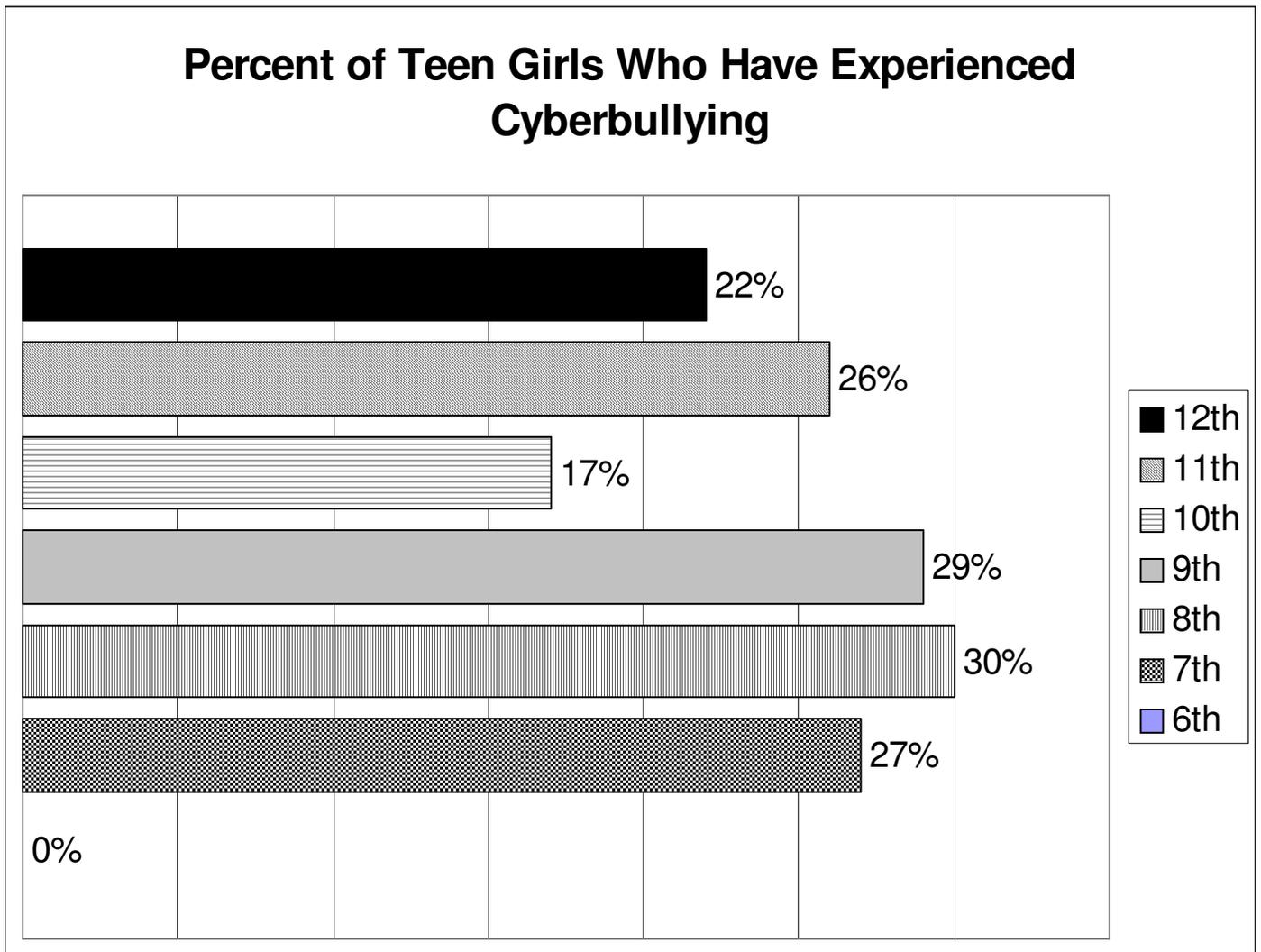
The Use of Hurtful Terms and Language by Grade



What Teen Girls Say...

Bullying has never been easier. Any teen, operating in relative anonymity on the Internet at any time of day or night, can harass and intimidate peers.

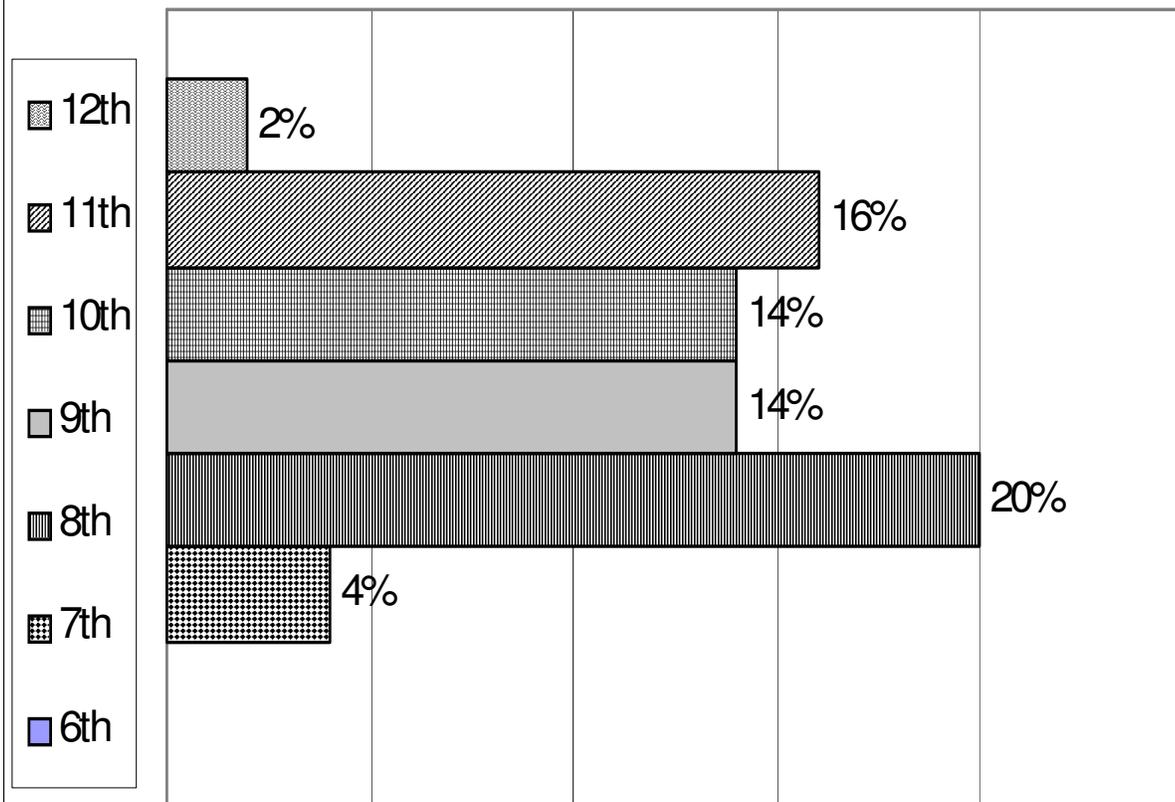
Cell phones, many with picture capability, make the most intimate places, like locker rooms, new territory for harassment.



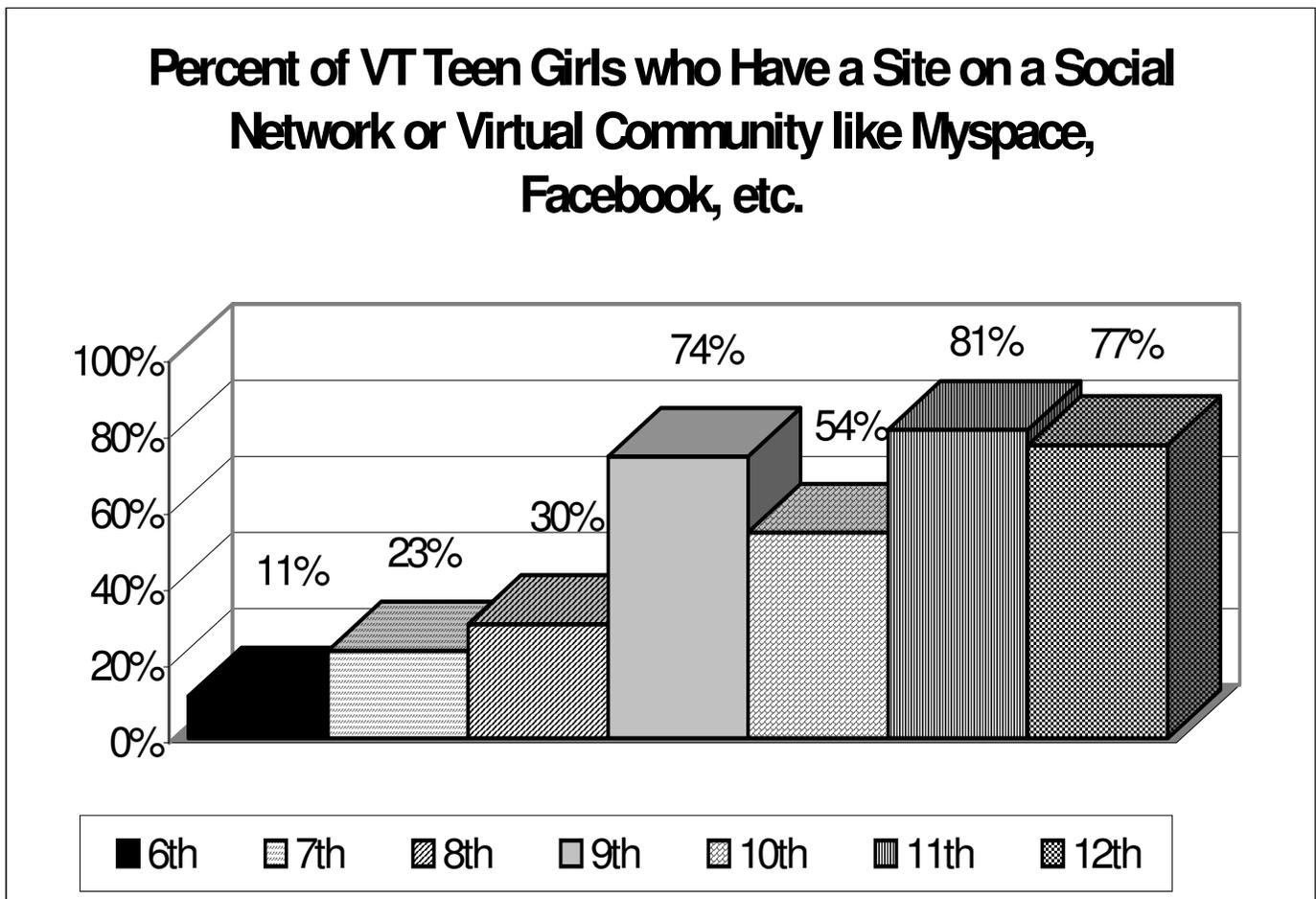
Cell phones, instant messaging and personal Web sites like MySpace and Facebook are now common ways teens communicate. They offer a whole new arena of “cyberbullying” used to spread gossip, rumors and bequeath public lashings — leaving teenagers with painful battle scars.

The technology often appeals to the strengths of girls, allowing them to fight with emotionally stinging words instead of physical brawn. Although boys and girls both participate in Internet hazing, experts say that girls are more invested in the potential of cyberbullying.

Percent of VT Teen Girls Who Admit They Have Used Technology to Tease and Harass Others

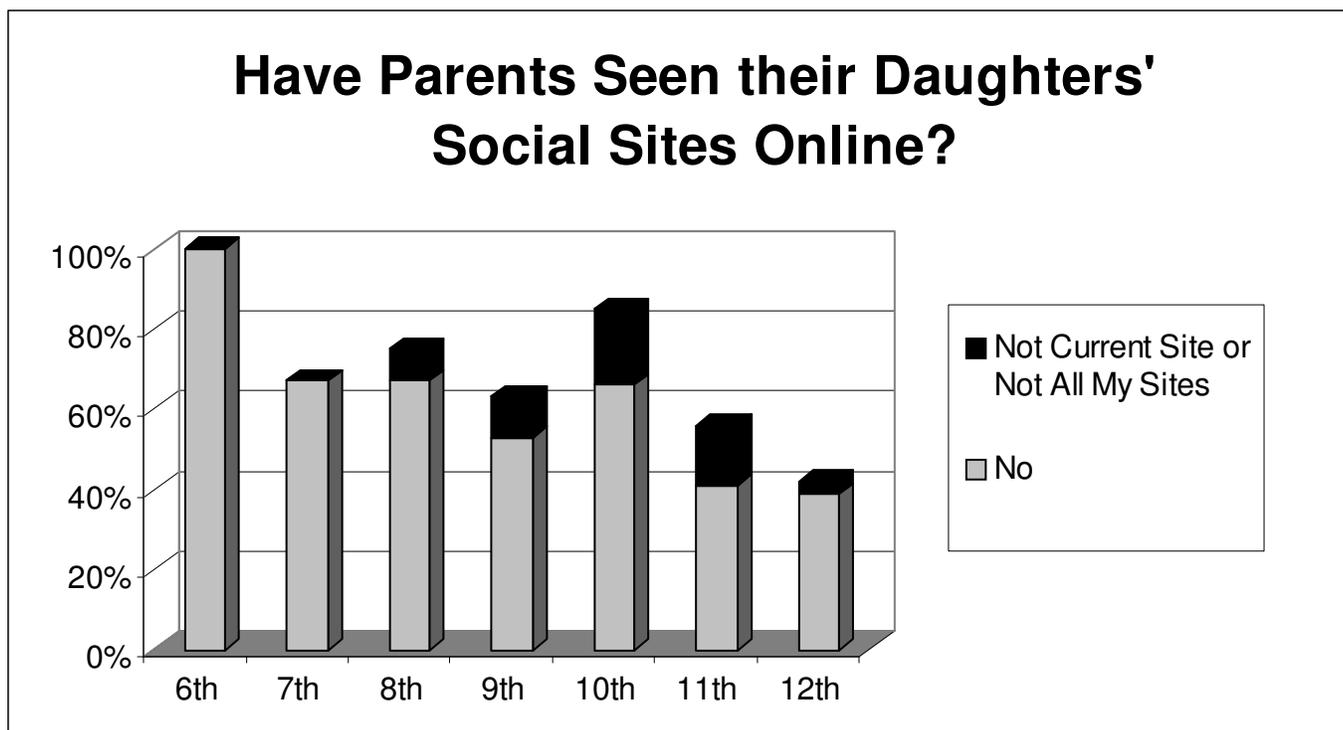


Social networking sites provide a complex web of friends connected online by common interest. The spontaneous nature of these sites plays on vulnerabilities of adolescents. They have an underdeveloped sense of empathy in terms of how their actions affect others, and an overdeveloped sense of safety based on limited experience. Social networking profiles become a way for a teen to present her self-image which can include emerging sexuality. Sites like MySpace and Facebook are loaded with suggestive and sexual images of teen girls, making them vulnerable to all kinds of online connections.



While sites limit members to those 14 and above, many teens establish pages at a much earlier age and without their parents' knowledge.

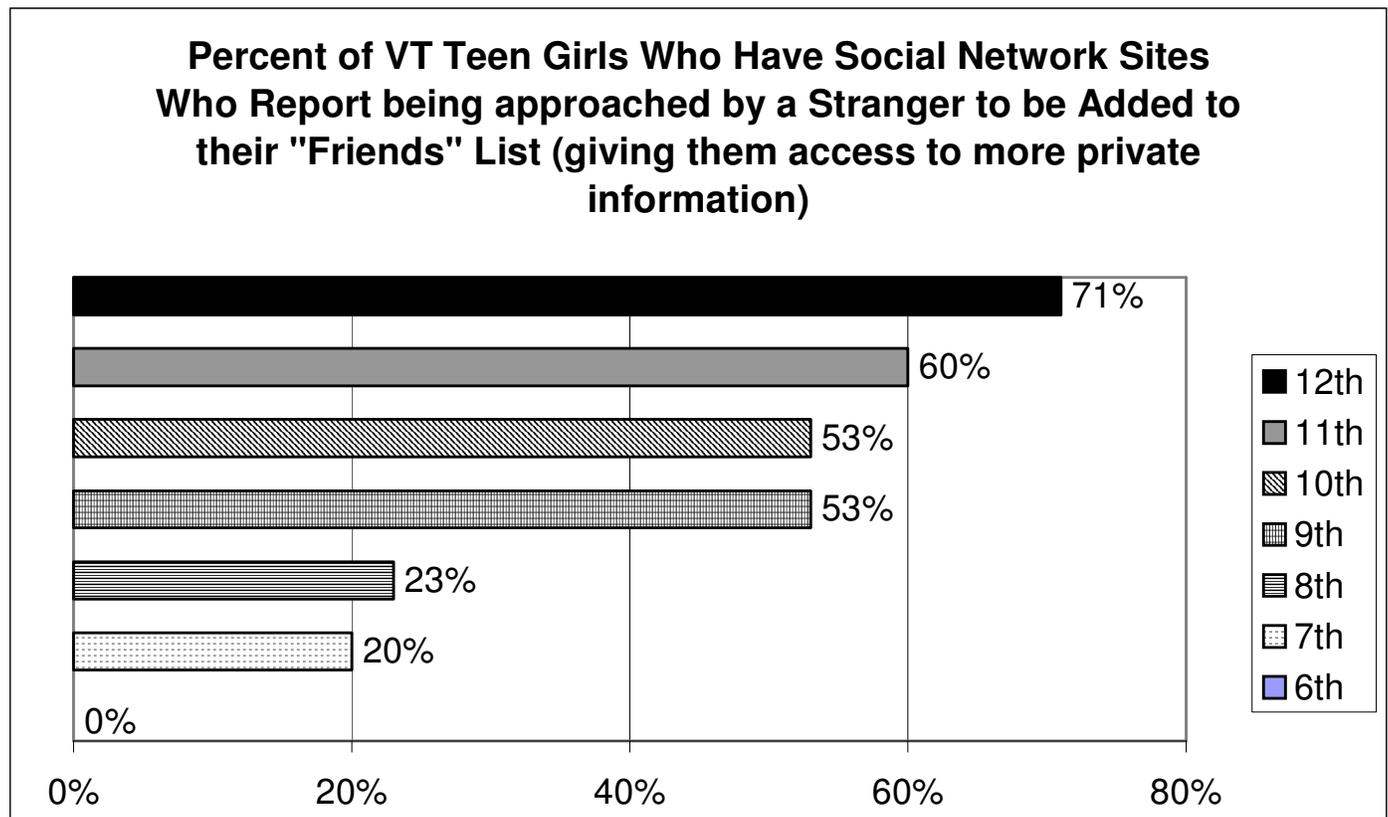
Our survey asked teens if their parents had re-viewed their site, and many had. Teens were able to indicate if their parents had not seen all their sites or had not screened their current site.



Most interesting, parents of older teens are re-viewing their daughters' sites more often than parents of younger teens. While parents may assume their young teens do not have social networking sites, 25% of the 11-13 year olds surveyed indicated they had active sites established.

High school sophmores reported that while only 40% of their parents had reviewed their sites, another 20% had not seen all their sites or their most recent site.

One only has to turn on the nightly news to hear reports of girls being approached by Internet predators. Social networking sites are designed to foster relationships between people. Teens have the option of opening their site to those on their personal friends list. Outsiders often ask to be listed as a “friend” and girls without adequate maturity can easily make dangerous decisions when approached, swayed by a false sense of security in the technology they are using. Learning to assess the safety of someone that they have only met online is an essential new life skill for teens.



When comparing this information with data on parental review, it is a concern that girls in mid-teen years have increasing contacts with strangers while their parental controls are decreasing.

What about Teens' Parents?

Balancing teen safety with greater independence is truly challenging for parents of teen girls. Monitoring their Internet use can be very difficult when most teens are savvy at technology. According to Elizabeth Englander of the Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Center, "Kids are natives to the Internet and adults are the immigrants. Adults, being so far behind the eight ball, means we won't be able to educate kids on cyberbullying."

It can be even more difficult for parents to know if their teen is hazing another, and the survey clearly showed that many are. "There are so many kids who would never bully face to face, but do online," states Englander. "Girls who cyberbully are girls who are very invested, do well in school, have friends, want to go to college. They believe that it's sort of fun and they'll never be caught."

Adults
made a big
deal about it...
and it made things
worse...but after a while it
all cooled off b/c it turned
out that they didn't have
to tell my parents, which
would ruin everything.

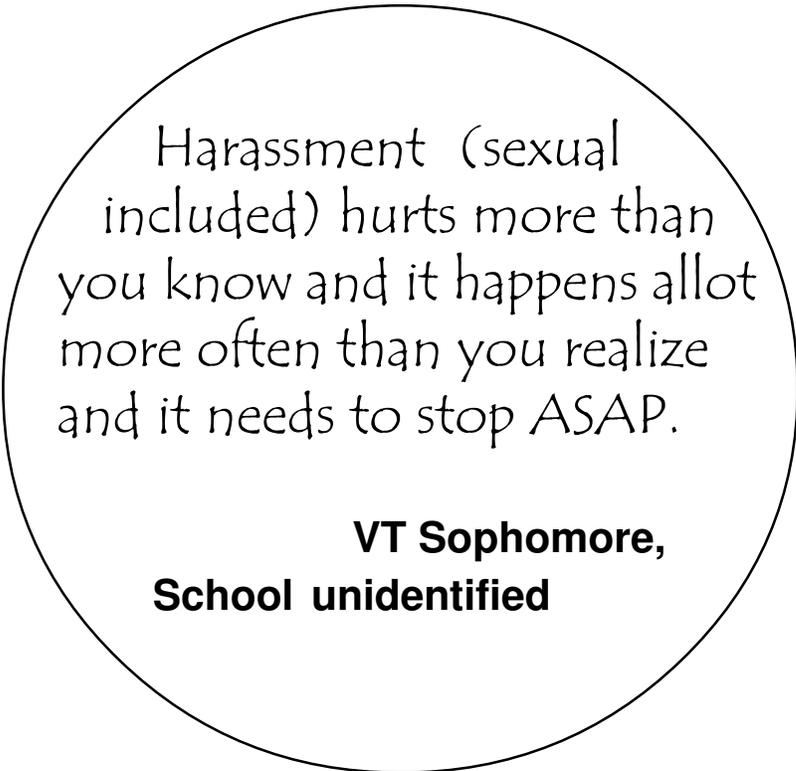
**Senior,
Mt Abraham Union HS**

I didn't want to tell
my dad, because he
had no idea how to
handle guys making
me uncomfortable in
a calm way.

**Sophomore, Mt. St.
Joseph's Academy**

What Does Harassment Look Like?...

Safety should be a shared goal between adults and girls. Many girls view their own safety as a personal problem – one they believe they have to deal with alone. The greater adult understanding about what harassment and teasing look like, and all the ways girls experience it, the better we are able to help them develop effective strategies for coping. The more adults know about how girls perceive safety, the better we will be able to help them prevent emotionally and/or physically dangerous situations.



Harassment (sexual included) hurts more than you know and it happens allot more often than you realize and it needs to stop ASAP.

**VT Sophomore,
School unidentified**

VT Teens Who Report This Happening to Them

■ Had someone force you to kiss him/her?

■ Had someone force you to do something sexual other than kissing?

■ Had someone block your way or corner you in an uncomfortable way?

■ Had someone pull your clothing off or down?

■ Had someone pull at your clothing in an uncomfortable way (including snapping your bra or giving you a "wedgy")?

■ Had someone intentionally brush up against you in a sexual way?

■ Had someone touch, grab, or pinch you in a sexual way?

■ Had someone Flash or "moon" you?

■ Had someone spy on you as you dressed or showered at school?

■ Had someone negatively refer to you as gay or lesbian?

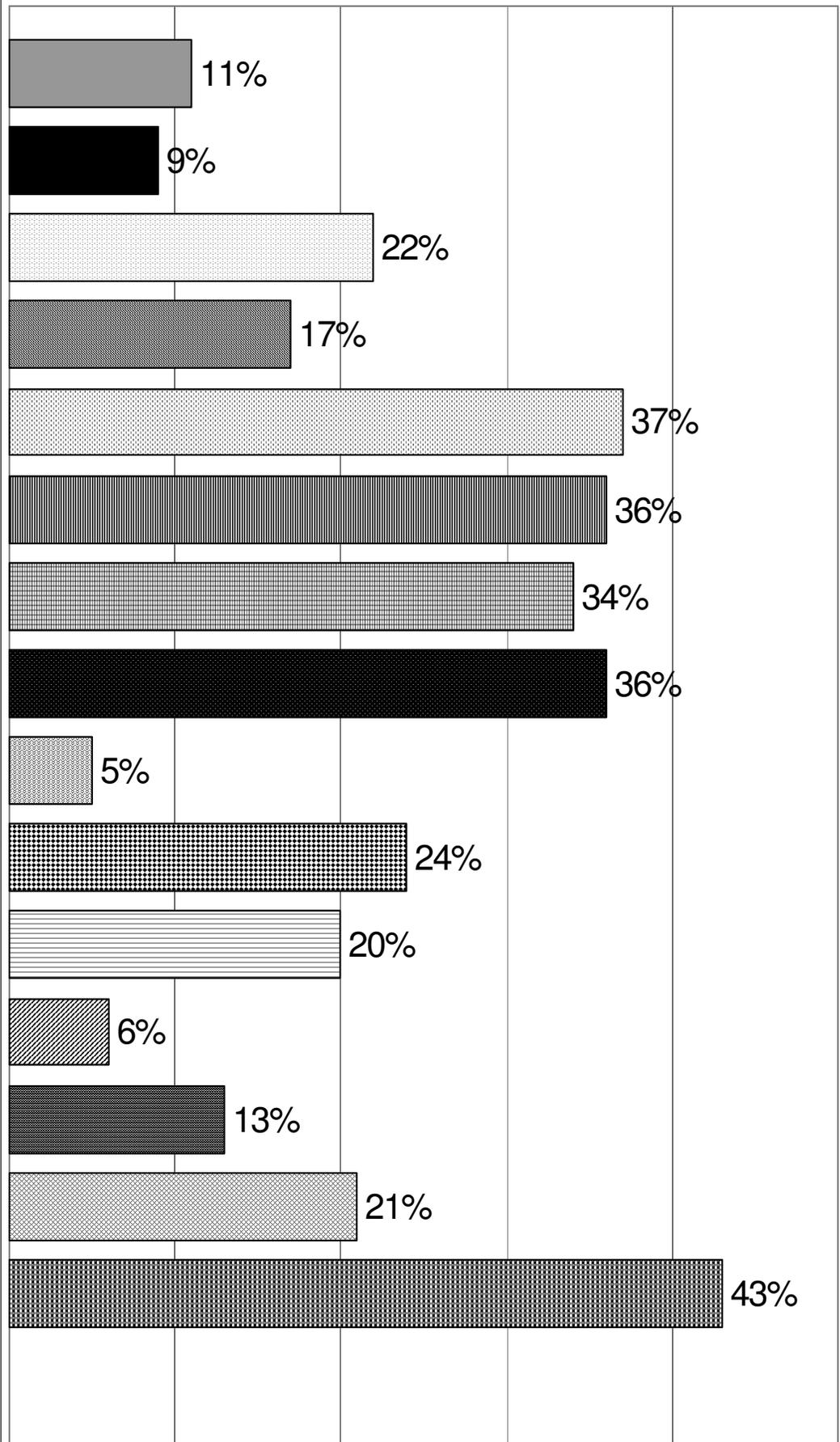
■ Had someone spread sexual rumors about you?

■ Had someone write sexual messages/graffiti about you on bathroom walls, in locker rooms, etc.?

■ Showed, gave, or been left sexual pictures, photographs, illustrations, messages, or notes?

■ Experienced sexual harassment?

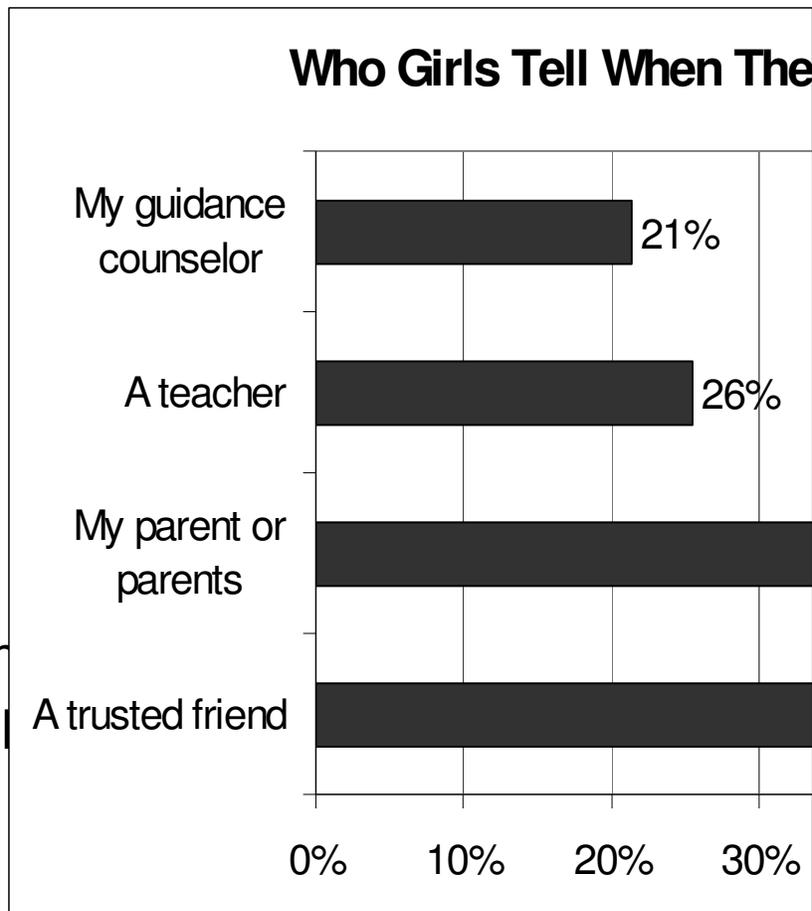
■ Experienced bullying?



What Teens Do When...

Teen girls have a lot of concerns and conflicting feelings about what they should do when they are teased and harassed. Some girls reported having the issue complicated by the very reporting system put in place to protect them. Others reported that their school procedures work very well. The first decision for all girls is in whom to confide.

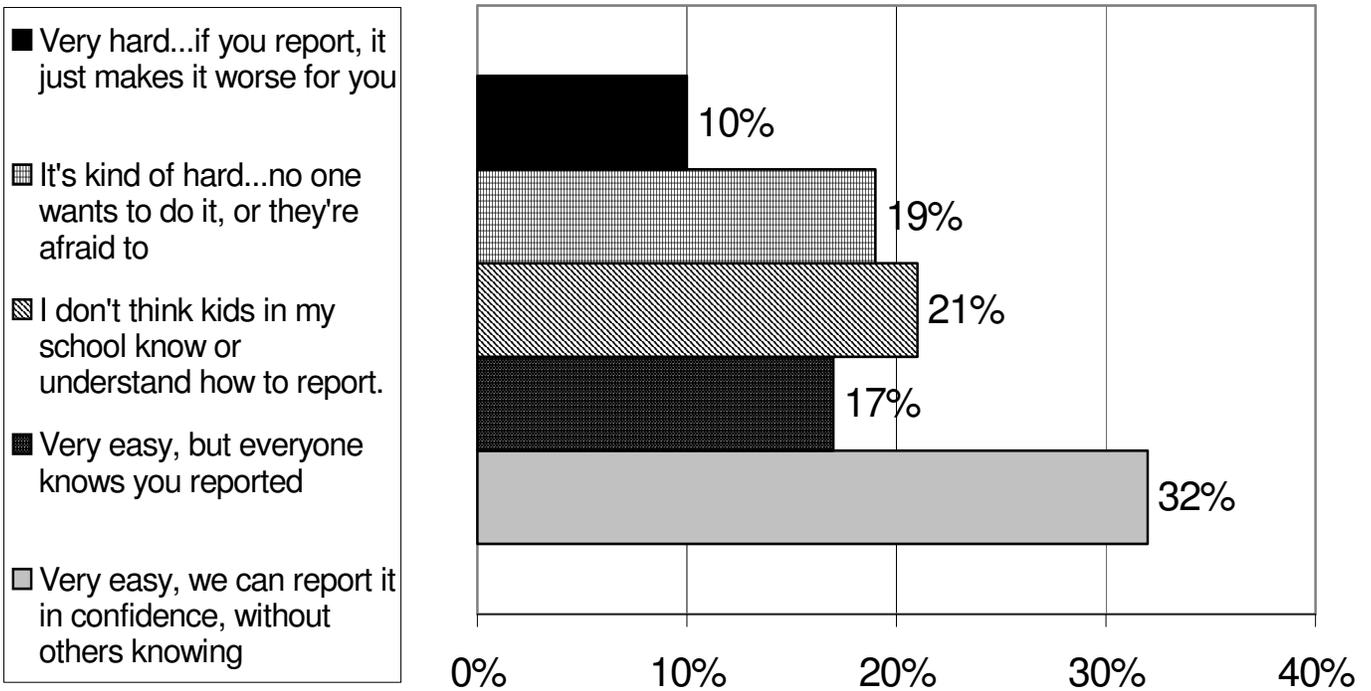
Over 1 in 4 girls reported that they are harassed, but keep



How Teens Report...

All schools in Vermont are mandated to provide students with procedures to report bullying and harassment. Teen responses went from feeling safe and protected when reporting incidents, to feeling worse off for having reported:

Ease in Reporting Harassment for Teen Girls



There is no confidentiality in school at all. I am comfortable going to only two people in our whole school and they are my guidance counselor and Assistant Principal. Anyone else higher up on the chain does exactly what they say they **WON'T...**they break confidentiality... which is illegal.
Junior, Rutland County

I think that it would decrease a lot if people felt like they could report it, but going to the guidance counselor or another adult makes you look like a suck-up, so no one really does it. I have a friend who went to the guidance counselor when someone was bullying her, and everyone just bullied her more.

7th grader, Chittenden County

When everyone knows that you reported someone it makes you feel uncomfortable and unsafe because all of the students know and get mad at you.

8th Grader,
Green Mountain Union

A lot of girls pressure other girls to do things you don't want to. It doesn't have to be anything to do with sexual activity, it can be anything, maybe even dancing with a guy. But your friend can be someone you hate in a few seconds after they make you do something you don't want to do.

7th grader,

Many teens reported that compounding the issue of social aggression for them is what they view as an increase in the use of alcohol and drugs in their communities.

I don't think that adults in general are aware of just how frequently students use drugs and drink. I used to be fairly oblivious to this fact until I got into high school. A good percentage of the kids in my high school are or have been involved in some sort of illegal activity, whether it be drinking, doing drugs, or smoking cigarettes.

11th grader, Mount Abe

Many, many people are now doing drugs and drinking alcohol and being part of experiences they are too young for.

**Freshman,
Arlington Memorial
High School**

Alcohol is getting to be a really serious problem in my school, as well as drugs. Not simply weed, but harder drugs like ecstasy and cocaine. We really need to work on fighting those issues, and enforcing the laws so that students don't feel above the laws.

**Senior,
Essex High School**

I am happy to be from Vermont and from a relatively small town, but big city pressures are in our face 24-7.

Technology has brought the outside world and a lot of its garbage into our lives. I don't think we are prepared to deal with it and a lot of adults don't see it or believe it's as rough as it is sometimes. Wake up, adult Vermonters. It's not all maple syrup sweet.

Sophomore, MAU

Schools need a lot more money to be able to offer the activities and protection they want to for their students. Instead, school budgets just take money from other places in the school program, like the arts or sports teams. It shouldn't have to be so tense about the budget, there should be enough benevolent minds in the legislature to realize that schools need more money to do what they do best - teach teenagers (soon-to-be-voters) all they need to know to live good and well-structured lives.

Junior,
Colchester High School

Conclusions and Recommendations

The voices of Vermont girls in this study can lead a charge for change. By using the information they have provided, schools, government leaders, the Vermont Commission on Women, the Girl Scouts, and other youth development organizations, will be better equipped to address the concerns and opportunities inherent in their responses.

Because emotional health and self-esteem play a critical role in girls' attitudes about themselves, messages need to acknowledge what is important to them: their friendships, fitting in with peers, feeling good about themselves, and feeling safe (emotionally and physically). In spite of extensive efforts on the part of law-makers and school systems, bullying and harassment are still major obstacles for some teens' emotional well-being. They also experience a difference between the way conflicts and harassment between boys are addressed and the way schools address the more subtle harassment used by girls. Approaches that acknowledge, recognize and address both kinds of harassment with equal seriousness will connect with teens and increase their feelings of emotional safety.

It is important to know that most teens see harassment, drug use, and drinking as unhealthy. Girls also view them as a normal part of teen life. Vermont girls reported that they are troubled by what they perceive to be an increase in these activities. Efforts that merely discourage poor choices without providing positive alternatives are incomplete. We must provide motivation for teens to continue to make sound choices.

Many teen girls express inherent leadership skills: compassion, concern, and the desire to be change agents. Teen girls also feel disconnected from local politics and community action, even though they have expressed clear opinions and ideas around community issues. Government leaders are challenged to include teens in their discussions and provide girls with ways to become involved in community solutions to hazing and harassment.

Tips for Parents and Mentors

'Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.' Remember that old rhyme? It wasn't true then, and it isn't true now. Teasing, harassment and bullying cause serious emotional harm to teens that last into adulthood. Bullying takes place in every school, but there are things you can do to help.

- **Keep the path of communication open.** Don't be afraid to have the same conversations over and over, and stay calm.
- **Don't assume** to know what girls consider important, and don't expect them to automatically share their concerns with you. Be proactive about asking how they are getting along with others, even if they are reluctant to talk.
- **Realize that a safe location is not always safe from teasing and harassment.** Take emotional harm seriously. Classrooms, sports fields, group meetings, and time on the computer all create opportunities for girls to be teased. Alert teachers, other parents and other adult mentors if you see your daughter being isolated or bullied. Teasing, gossiping and name-calling that is unwanted should never be ignored by adults.
- **Get involved in community efforts.** Work with your teen's school to make sure there are a variety of opportunities for teen girls to have a voice. Encourage your daughter to become an advocate, too. Girls have a unique girl perspective about leadership and bring a great deal of compassion to their efforts. When they have a voice and an opportunity to make a difference, their self-esteem soars and they make better decisions in all aspects of their lives.
- **Become more technologically savvy.** Learn to use your daughter's tools - instant messaging, text messaging, MP3 players, and her "lingo". Check her social networking sites, and check them often. Check out all the available virtual communities for pages posted by her.



GIRL SCOUTS

Girl Scout Council of Vermont
79 Allen Martin Drive
Essex Junction, VT 05452-3400
T 802-878-7131 F 802-878-3943
www.girlscoutsvt.org



126 State Street
Montpelier, VT 05633-6801
T 800-881-1561
F 802-828-2930
www.women.state.vt.us