

# What VT Teen Girls Say...



## About Health and Wellness

**2008 Executive Summary**



**Girl Scouts.**



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 100 teen girls in grades 6 through 12 to address their concerns around body image, health, and wellness. Teen girls answered questions about their personal perspectives on diet, nutrition, and exercise; and, concerns around alcohol, drugs, sex, and fitting-in. Included were open-ended questions, such as "How do you define 'normal' healthy?" and "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. 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 (22%), 7th (12%), 8th (9%), 9th (19%), 10th (8%), 11th (16%), 12th (14%)
- **VT Schools:** Girls from over 51 VT schools and all geographic regions of Vermont 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 Health and Wellness

**C**hild and adolescent obesity and weight control are among today's top public health concerns. Approximately 9 million children over age six are obese and since 1980, the percentage of overweight girls ages 6-19 has more than doubled. The medical community, government, food industry, and others have been vocal about the psychological and physiological risks for children who are overweight and the consequences of carrying poor health behaviors into adulthood. We wanted to find out Vermont girls' attitudes about health, body image, diet, weight, exercise, at-risk behaviors, and more. Over 100 Vermont teen girls responded, and had much to say about healthy living as it relates to growing up in Vermont.

## The Impact of Media and Television

Significantly, 91% of VT teen girls are concerned with the way the media portrays women and girls; yet, 60% of teens say they compare their bodies to celebrities bodies and one in six compares her body with those of celebrities “most of or all the time”. Two thirds of those surveyed admitted having negative thoughts about their bodies *every day*, creating a conflict and incongruity for VT teen girls that impacts them immeasurably.

“Any advertisements are, in my opinion, bad. They tell girls that they need something else, that they are not good enough as they are. The magazine, *New Moon*, for the most part, doesn’t have photos. They don’t want girls to feel like that [photo] is the ‘norm.’”

**8<sup>th</sup> Grader,  
Orange County**

## Aspiring to be “Normal” Healthy

For most girls, being healthy has more to do with appearing “normal” in relation to other girls their own age and feeling accepted by their peers. Definitions of good diet and exercise habits vary in relation to their perceptions and are often markedly different than what would be considered healthy by those in the medical fields.

Girls often described their health and physical activity as “normal in relation to other girls my age” a concept clearly related to appearance and acceptance. In general, physical appearance and how they compare to others in their peer group are more important than what they eat or how much they exercise.

Fifty-five percent of Vermont girls surveyed indicated that their lifestyle was “healthy enough for my age and I’m happy with that.” Although over two-thirds of those surveyed indicated that “personal health and fitness is very important to me,” many of those surveyed had distorted ideas about healthy living. Twenty-one percent of those surveyed are skipping breakfast everyday with an additional 18% skipping this important meal more than once a week. Six percent of girls surveyed indicate that they binge and purge to lose weight more than once a month.

# What Teen Girls Say...

**“To be ‘normal,’ you must be happy with yourself. You must appreciate life and be healthy both physically and mentally. As long as you like where you’re at then your normal.”**

**8<sup>th</sup> Grader,  
Orange County**

“Healthy for me is more being comfortable with yourself than anything else. I mean, ‘good health’ habits like eating right and exercising regularly are very good, but as long as a person isn’t too overweight (or too thin) and is happy with their body, that’s healthy for a teenager.”

**Junior,  
Washington County**

“...being generally content would be good and having a positive attitude could affect health in a good way. I really don’t care that much, I’m all about the present, not the down-the-road future.”

**Sophomore,  
Essex High School**

“Everything in moderation ... even an activity that is, by all standards, considered to be inherently un-healthy can be okay, as long as one doesn’t overdo it.”

**Senior, Mount Mansfield Union High School**

“Healthy is eating well, getting exercise, and keeping good hygiene. A big part of health is being social. You should stay organized so you don’t get too stressed and can keep a good relationship with everybody.”

**7<sup>th</sup> Grader, Colchester Middle School**

“... that you are active and care about your body... It does not matter what you look like; it is about how you feel about yourself. ... It does not matter what other people say. It is about what you think about your body. That’s all that matters.”

**6<sup>th</sup> Grader,  
Addison Central School**

“There is not ‘normal’ anymore. There are only individuals in the world. Each person uses different goals and works towards different things in their life. It is up to each individual to decide what they want and are going to do.”

**Senior,  
Center for  
Technology,  
Essex**

“Eating food that is good for you. Getting lots of exercise and fresh air. Having a good night’s sleep”

**6<sup>th</sup> Grader, Lake Champlain Waldorf School**

...About “Normal” Healthy

## Emotional Health is Central

**M**ost girls have a holistic view of health and believe physical and emotional health are of equal importance. In a national survey 88% of girls felt that feeling good about yourself is more important than how you look. This same survey revealed that girls worry about everything from getting along with friends and being well liked, to doing well in school and getting into college, to getting enough exercise and being too overweight. This connection is reflected in the survey responses of our Vermont girls, as well.

**So, what do Vermont girls have to say?** Over two-thirds of girls reported that their personal health and fitness were very important with the other third indicating these were somewhat important. Over 95% of Vermont girls surveyed felt their general appearance was somewhat to very important. Over 39% were concerned about being overweight, whereas, only 9% worried about being too thin. And, regardless of their perceived body type, 40% reported thinking negatively about their body one to three times a week. Self-esteem (56%) and overall happiness (64%) ranked very high in overall importance. Forty-six percent of girls were concerned about fitting-in.

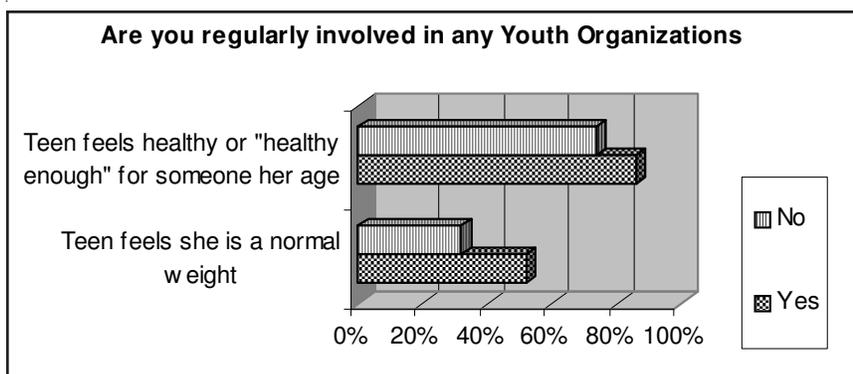
*“Health is physical and mental. Mental health is having self-esteem and the ability to empower others through one’s confidence. Physical health is eating healthy, having a reasonable body weight, and dressing in a way that makes one feel good about themselves.”*

**Junior, Mount Mansfield Union High School**

<b>Teens Emotional Health and Coping Mechanisms</b>	<b>Yup, this is me. I do this every day</b>	<b>I do this more than once a week</b>	<b>I do this more than once a month</b>	<b>I do this more than 6 times in a year</b>	<b>Not really me...Rarely do this</b>	<b>Tried it once, never again</b>	<b>Nope, not me, never</b>
Considered Suicide	5%	7%	3%	10%	6%	18%	51%
Eating and purging (making myself throw up) or using laxatives to lose weight	3%	0%	3%	1%	4%	5%	84%
Cutting myself	4%	3%	3%	4%	7%	10%	69%
Feeling sad or hopeless	12%	11%	19%	11%	17%	5%	25%
Fighting someone physically	3%	2%	4%	4%	12%	12%	63%
Skipping class	5%	2%	2%	5%	12%	6%	68%

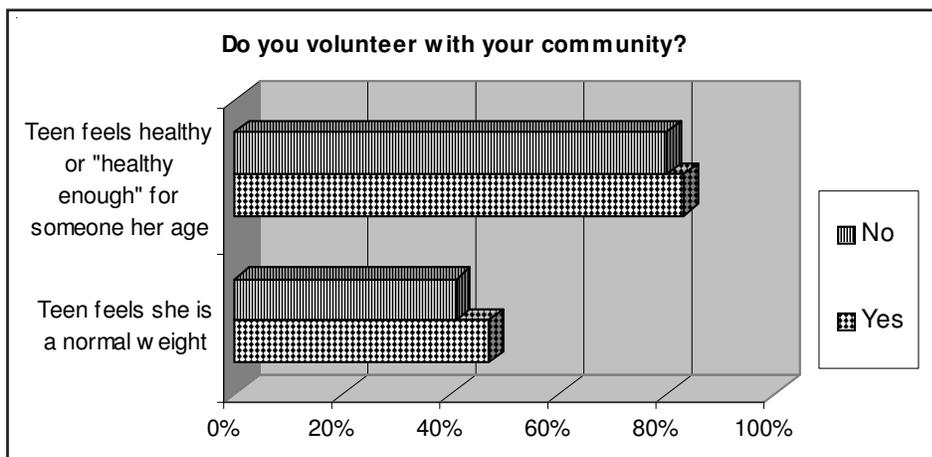
Although girls surveyed demonstrated a basic knowledge about healthy behaviors, they do not always put this knowledge into practice. For most girls, good health has more to do with presenting a “normal” appearance and being accepted than actually being healthy. While emphasis on looking and behaving like the rest of their peer group is developmentally appropriate, it often does not encourage behaviors that promote good health. In fact, “fitting-in” can be a mask allowing behaviors that require outside support to go unnoticed. And, while the percentages are still small, several “at-risk” behaviors are high enough to be cause for concern. Based on the survey results: 1 in 20 Vermont girls considers suicide every day; 1 in 33 girls binges and purges to lose weight every day; 1 in 25 girls cuts themselves intentionally everyday; and 1 in 8 girls suffers from a daily struggle with feeling sad and hopeless.

The issue of healthy living is difficult terrain for girls to navigate and they need help in making the connections that will form their attitudes and lead to healthy lifestyle choices. In general, girls who belong to youth organizations and who regularly volunteer in their communities have a better self-image than girls who do not. With appropriate support and guidance, “normal” healthy can indeed be healthy enough.



Involved in Youth Organizations	Yes	No
Teen feels she is a normal weight	52%	32%
Teen feels healthy or "healthy enough" for someone her age	86%	74%

Volunteers for Community	Yes	No
Teen feels she is a normal weight	47%	41%
Teen feels healthy or "healthy enough" for someone her age	83%	80%

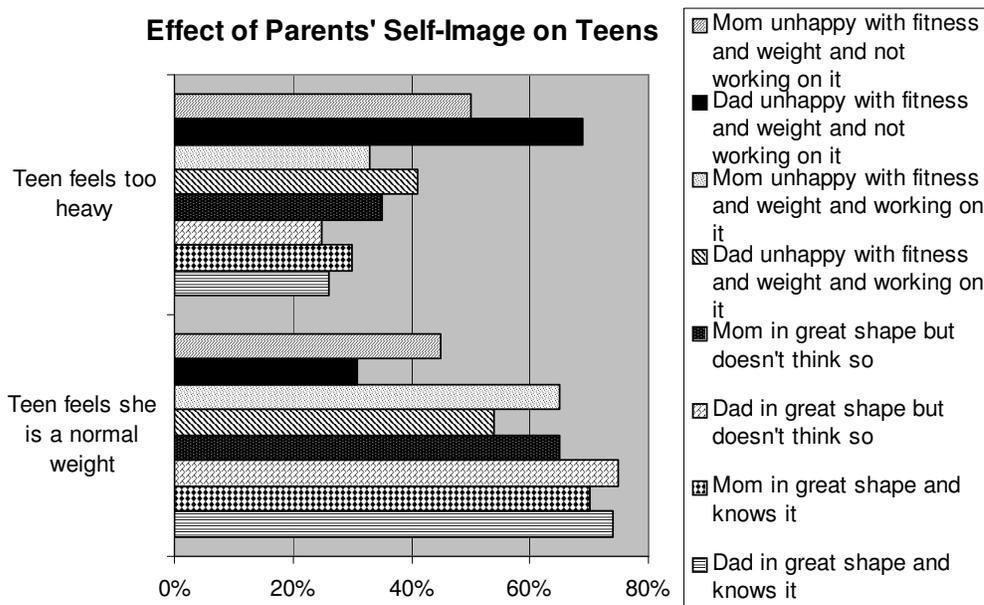


# What Teen Girls Say About...

## The Influential Role of Mothers

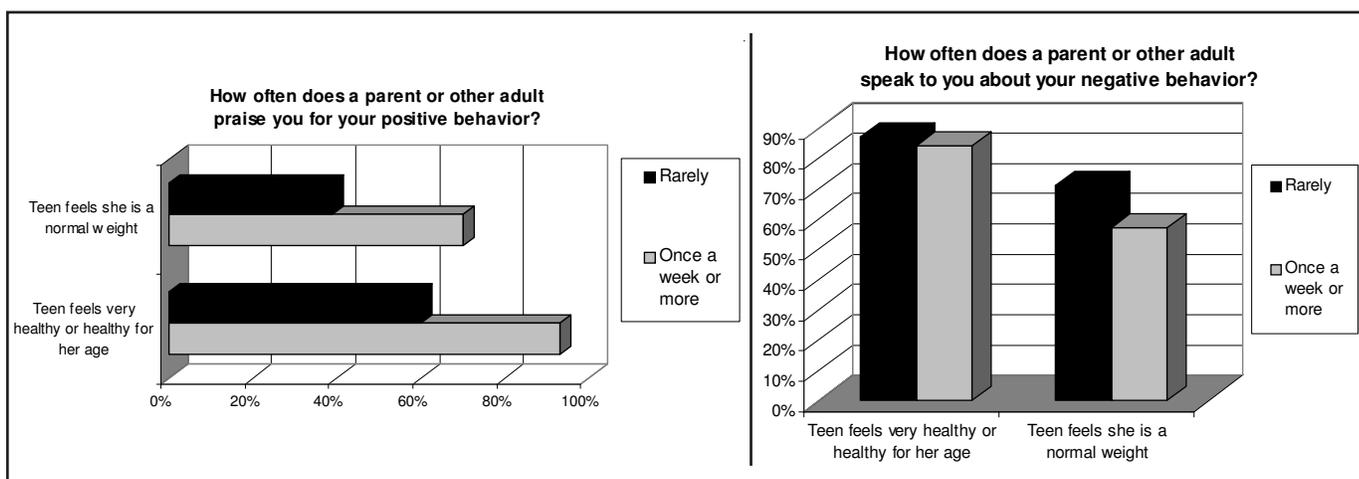
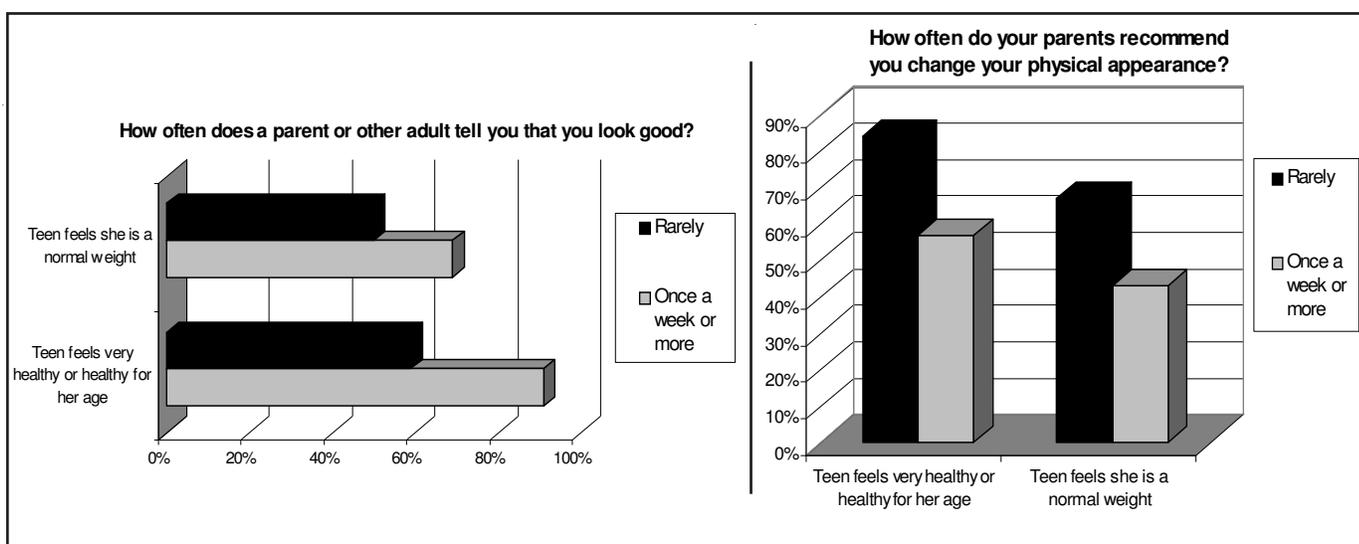
According to a national survey conducted by the Girl Scout Research Institute mothers are most frequently cited by daughters as role models and resources on healthy living. A mother's personal weight, body image, attitude, and health habits are strong indicators of whether her daughter is overweight, satisfied with her body, and physically active. Daughters of overweight mothers were less likely to mention their mothers as positive role models for healthy living. Active girls are more likely to have active mothers. Girls also note that their mother is the one most likely to compliment them.

**So, what do Vermont girls have to say?** The vote is in and "mom" scored high in Vermont, as well. Over half the girls listed "my mom" as the person they go to most often for information on health and healthy living and as the person they use to pattern health decisions after. Two-thirds of those surveyed said their mom would be the one most likely to compliment them. And, although not by much, girls perceive that their mothers are more concerned about their daughters' health and well-being than their fathers are. Their mothers' self-image has a significant impact on how Vermont daughters perceive themselves. When her mother is in good shape, a girl is more likely to have a positive self-image. Although girls do not tend to go to their fathers for information, dads do have a positive impact on their daughters' self-image, also.



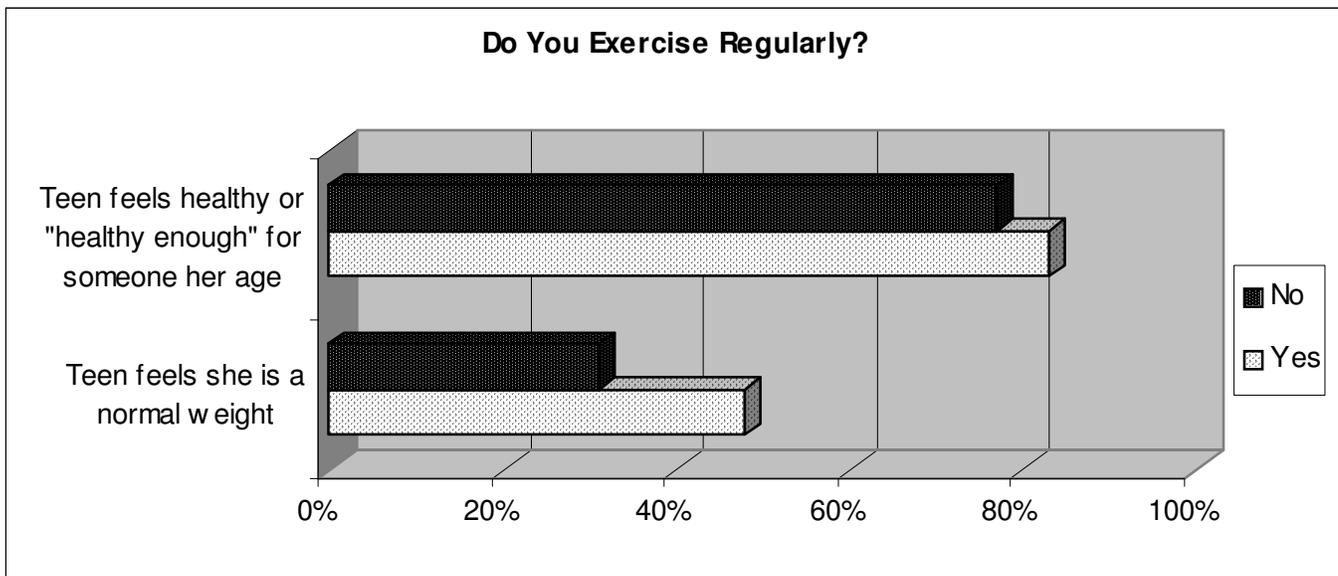
Even though teens may act like they don't care what their parents think or do, the survey demonstrates that they do. Seventy-one percent of those surveyed said that the health and health habits of family members were very important to them. Fifty-five percent said that family dinner time was important to them. Sixty-nine percent noted that they were concerned to very concerned about getting along with their family.

**Words matter.** How frequently parents compliment their daughters' appearance and praise positive behavior has a powerful positive impact on self-esteem. Similarly, parents who regularly criticize their daughters' appearance and focus on negative behaviors have a powerful negative impact.



...Their Parents

# What Teen Girls Say About...



**"I can't find the time and I don't have any body fat. Even though I should exercise, I put it off because I don't need it as much as others."**

**Junior,  
Rutland High  
School**

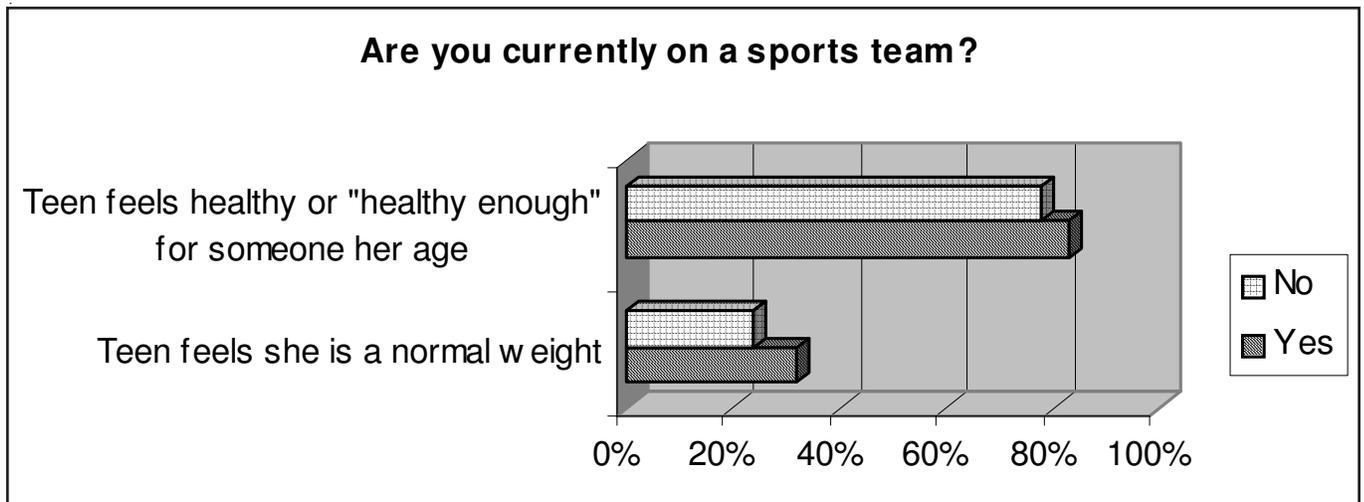
## Time is at a Premium

**G**irls are under a lot of pressure to achieve. Over 72% of Vermont girls surveyed worry about doing well in school, while nearly 60% were very concerned about getting into a good college. Homework takes up a lion's share of time and girls are left to fit their extra curricular activities, hobbies, and interests into an increasingly small amount of time. The single largest reason girls gave for not exercising was "not enough time."

When girls perceive that they are "healthy enough" in comparison to other girls their age, it is easy to dismiss exercise in favor of other interests, particularly when time is short and in high demand. Girls also noted that exercise fails to motivate them. They find it boring, tedious, and not much fun. Exercise loses out to less active pastimes

such as watching TV, playing video games, talking on the cell phone, IM-ing, and other less demanding, but unfortunately sedentary, activities.

About two-thirds of those surveyed participated in team sports. Team sports build self-esteem and have a positive effect on body image.



Still one-third of girls do not participate in a team sport. When asked why, answers varied. Many girls noted that they preferred non-competitive physical activities. Others felt they weren't good enough or noted they didn't make the team. Still others felt they just did not have the time to commit. Injuries prevented some girls from participating, but many cited a simple lack of interest.

A 9th grader from Randolph Union High School said, "I prefer reading, drawing, or singing." And, an 11th grader from Essex High School summed it up simply by saying: "I'm just not into sports. I'm not a very athletic person, and I don't have fun when it comes to sports. Plus, I tend to get a little over competitive sometimes which makes it even harder to have fun."

Bottom line, girls want to participate in activities that engage them, where they do not feel self-conscious, and where they feel they can have success.

**"Exercise is  
BORING and I have too  
much homework, even on  
the weekends!"**

**6<sup>th</sup> Grader,  
Windsor County**

# ...Exercising and Sports

# What Teen Girls Say About...

Teens Emotional Health and Coping Mechanisms	Yup, this is me. I do this every day	I do this more than once a week	I do this more than once a month	I do this more than 6 times in a year	Not really me...Rarely do this	Tried it once, never again	Nope, not me, never
Drinking Beer	0%	3%	5%	5%	7%	7%	73%
Binge Drinking or Drinking to Get Drunk	0%	4%	2%	4%	1%	2%	87%
Drinking other kinds of alcohol	0%	4%	6%	8%	13%	6%	63%
Smoking Cigarettes	2%	1%	1%	3%	4%	5%	87%
Smoking Marijuana	0%	2%	1%	4%	5%	2%	86%

## A Growing Concern for Ages 11-17

Survey participants identified drug and alcohol use/abuse and teen sex as issues of concern to them. Seven percent of teen girls are drinking alcoholic beverages more than once a week, with four percent drinking to get drunk. One in 20 girls is smoking marijuana more than once a week. Two percent of teen girls in Vermont are smoking cigarettes everyday.

While these numbers may not seem high, they demonstrate that education and support around substance abuse in teens is still warranted. This begs

the question, "What else can be done?"

Teens living in rural areas and faced with limited recreational resources, are turning to drugs and alcohol for amusement. Survey participants are calling for more healthy activities for teens throughout Vermont.

*"Drugs are becoming a big thing for teens and even younger students. It is very sad to see 12-year-olds that are having sex, drinking, and doing drugs. More and more girls are becoming pregnant at younger ages"*

**Junior,**

**Rutland High School**

# ...Drugs and Alcohol

# What Teen Girls Say About...

Teen Girls Sexual Activity	Once or more a month	6 times a year or more	Rarely	Never
Having casual, safe sex	5%	4%	2%	89%
Having casual, unprotected sex	3%	2%	2%	93%
Having safe sex with someone I am involved with	12%	2%	3%	83%
Having unprotected sex with someone I am involved with	6%	2%	3%	89%
Having oral sex with someone without intercourse	9%	2%	5%	84%

**T**hree percent of respondents are having unprotected casual sex, another six percent are having unprotected sex with boyfriends. Yet, 87% of Vermont teens identified the increase in AIDS, HIV, and sexually transmitted diseases as an important issue for them. Pregnancy aside, unprotected sex exposes teens to a variety of diseases including HPV and herpes. Teens are citing inadequate education as contributing to these risky behaviors.

“...Sex is not necessarily a bad thing, but if you are not prepared then there could be unexpected consequences. Girls need to know how to protect themselves.”

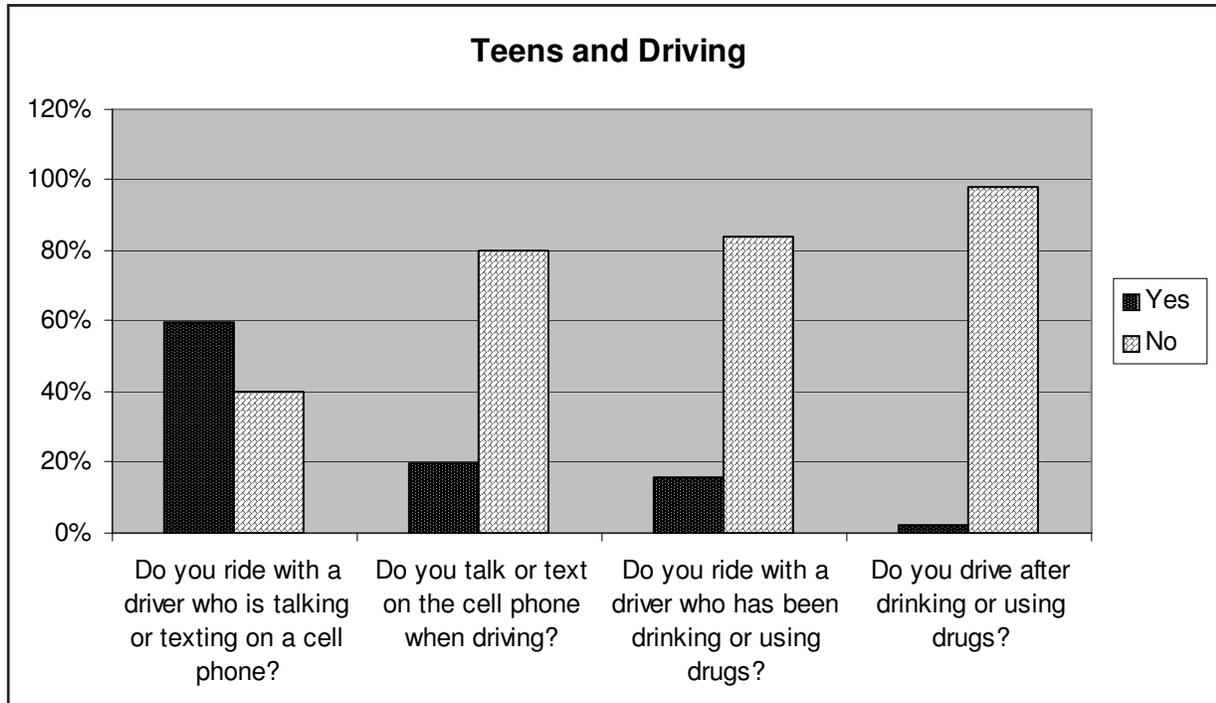
**Senior, Mount Abraham Union High School**

“Sex is a big issue. I am still a virgin and am not being pressured to have sex, but I know that my friends do regularly have sex. I’m concerned because I do not think the sex ed we received as freshman taught us enough about safe sex. It instead unrealistically focused on abstinence.”

**Senior,  
St. Johnsbury Academy**

...Sex

# What Teen Girls Say About...



## Teens and Technology

**G**rowing numbers of Vermont teens have cell phones. On an average school day 67% of respondents spend one to three hours on the phone, on the computer, playing video games, text messaging and/or watching television. Some of that time, according to the survey, is also spent behind the wheel of a moving vehicle.

Sixty percent of those surveyed indicated that they had been a passenger in a car with someone either talking or text messaging while driving. This is behavior that teens experience with adults driving as well as their peers. Twenty percent said that they talk or text while driving themselves. Cell phone use while driving is far more common than drinking/drugging and driving. Only two percent of teens surveyed drive after drinking or taking drugs. And, only 16% have been a passenger in a vehicle with a driver who had been drinking or taking drugs.

## ...Driving and Cell Phones

# What Teen Girls Say About...

"Growing up in Vermont has changed drastically over the years. The issues high school and middle schoolers face once existed only in college. We as the youth of Vermont need our legislators to adopt and adapt laws to reflect our lives. We can no longer rely on old standards."

**Senior, Rutland High School**

"Even the smartest teens, the ones taking AP classes and involved in extra-curricular activities, are engaging in risky behaviors. These are the kids who don't get caught because nobody suspects they would do these things, but they are. They need the most help."

**12<sup>th</sup> Grader,  
Caledonia County**

"There is nothing for kids to do and nowhere to go. Kids sit in someone's room getting high and having sex for recreation. There needs to be more for teens to do, whether it be a skate park or a rec building, something."

**Rutland  
County  
Sophomore**

"Giving students power lets them understand and practice responsibility, preparing them for the real world."

**Windsor County Junior**

## ...What is Important to Them

# Conclusions and Recommendations

The issue of healthy living is difficult terrain for girls to navigate, and they need help in making the connections that will form their attitudes and lead to healthy lifestyle choices. To encourage all girls to adopt healthier habits:

- **Give health social relevance.** In order to become a priority in girls' lives, health and healthy habits need to be framed not as ends in themselves, but as a means to achieve ends that are socially significant to girls.
- **Embrace a holistic definition of health.** Girls believe being healthy has many components and dimensions. Health messages need to acknowledge what is important to girls and help them address the issues in their lives ~ stress, peer pressure, feeling good about themselves, and safety.
- **Emphasize physical activity.** Physical activity is one of the strongest predictors of both physical and emotional health. Girls need access to more opportunities for informal, less competitive physical activities in safe environments where they do not feel self-conscious about their looks or ability; where they choose the activities; and where they feel comfortable.
- **Demonstrate the positive outcomes of healthy behavior.** To motivate girls to make better health choices, the positive outcomes that result from healthy behavior ~ higher self-esteem, reduced stress, and increased energy for school and extra curricular activities ~ must be clearly conveyed. Helping girls draw connections between their choices and the impact of those choices on their short and long-term health in ways that are meaningful to them will help instill healthier habits.
- **Make good health attainable.** Girls receive many conflicting messages. Efforts to encourage a healthy lifestyle must acknowledge girls as they are ~ valuing their different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds AND appreciating their differing self-perceptions and abilities.
- **Target adult role models ~ especially mothers.** Parents, especially mothers, are important influences and role models. Efforts to motivate girls to make healthier choices must focus on teaching parents to understand the impact of their own body image and personal health choices on their daughters. They need to understand how what they say and do impacts girls.

# Tips for Parents and Mentors

Makeover TV shows, fashion magazines, diet fads, casual remarks, and the latest gossip ~ girls are exposed to messages everyday about food, fitness, and appearance from family, friends, media, and school. Parents need tools to help their daughters critically examine the often conflicting information they hear and see. The right messages will help girls make positive decisions for healthy living. Check out the following-tips:

- **Be a positive role model.** Parents, particularly mothers, are the primary influence in their daughters' lives. The choices you make about food and physical activity and the comments you make about your weight and your looks have a strong impact. Model high self-esteem and confidence.
- **Emphasize the importance of healthy eating.** More than 60% of teenage girls skip breakfast at least once a week, and nearly 20% skip that important meal everyday. Too often, these skipped meals translate into trips to school vending machines with few healthy choices.
- **Encourage your daughter to get moving.** Aside from the physical benefits of a higher activity level, being physically active increases self-esteem and reduces stress. Help your daughter find physical activities that are fun so she sticks with them. In addition, engaging in physical activity as a family is a great way for parents to model and influence healthy behaviors.
- **Get involved in community efforts.** Find out what's going on in your community related to healthy living. Work with organizations and your daughter's school to make sure there are a variety of opportunities for regular physical activity and healthy food choices. Encourage your daughter to become an advocate, participant, and community volunteer. Girls who are involved in groups and who take action in their communities have higher self-esteem.
- **Be relevant.** Frame your conversations about healthy living in ways that address the topics most relevant to your daughter: friendships, fitting in with peers, self-esteem, and feeling safe. Focus on her health and behavior, giving her praise more readily than you provide criticism. Negative comments about her appearance greatly impact her self-esteem.



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