

**Youth Survey: Generation Tame**

Exclusive Report: For the first time in ages, fewer teens are drinking, using drugs and having sex. What’s going on?

By [Charlie Gillis](http://www.macleans.ca/author/charlie-gillis/), April 10, 2009



Asia Reid isn’t asking for a medal. The 15-year-old went to a party last New Year’s Eve knowing full well that liquor would be flowing. And it’s not like she’s never tasted the stuff. Reid is your typical teenager in Ottawa running with your typical crowd, and the scene that night might have been drawn from a Judd Apatow comedy. There was a booze-fuelled bash at the home of a girl who is an acquaintance of Asia’s ex-boyfriend (“I’m not really close with her”), plus a rare green light from the folks to get out and enjoy herself. If ever there was a time to indulge, this was it.

Strange, then, that such old-fashioned qualms should have stopped her hand when the strong drink came around. “My parents’ opinion has always been a huge thing in my life,” the Grade 9 student admits, sounding sheepish. “It’s not so much the punishment I would get if they found out I’d been drinking. It’s that, if I ever disappoint them, it makes me feel, like, weird.” Then there was school. “The people who party a lot skip class, and I want to go into biology or engineering,” she explains. “I’m going to have to take some pretty hard courses. I won’t be able to miss school all the time.”

By taking a pass on the punch and tequila that night, Asia has contributed to one of the most remarkable shifts in adolescent behaviour in recent memory. Those timeless hallmarks of teenage rebellion—booze, cigarettes, drugs and sex—are officially out of favour, according the latest results from Project Teen Canada, an ongoing survey whose in-depth portraits of teen life date back to 1984. Alcohol use among youth has fallen seven percentage points in the last eight years. Smoking has plunged to unseen levels, while marijuana use, though still higher than it was 20 years ago, is well down from its crest in 2000. As for sex, well, if teenagers are having as much as of it as some adults fear, they’re certainly not bragging. Fully 56 per cent of respondents say they never have it at all.

To Reginald Bibby, the University of Lethbridge sociologist who oversees Project Teen Canada, the entire picture speaks to a tidal swing in values—one that reaches across lines of race, gender and geography. Since practically anyone can remember, adult society has grappled with the fear that the next generation is shot through with decadence, or headed for dissolution. Baby boomers were as susceptible to these anxieties as anyone—they were, after all, the experts in turning and dropping out. So imagine their surprise to learn that their children and grandchildren are turning their backs on the no-borders ethos, and that this new crop of teens longs for some of the very conventions their folks rejected. The discernible retreat from the venial sins is only one sign of their dissent, says Bibby. “They appear to be opting for things that were important to their grandparents,” from monogamous relationships to 1950s-style nuclear families. From a parent’s point of view, this is about as good as rebellion gets. Steering clear of drugs? Building a stable future? These are teenagers we’re talking about, right? But it does pose an interesting question. In an age of unprecedented personal freedom, with the modern tapestry of vice and opportunity spread before them, why are teenagers getting so good?

You’d have been hard pressed to find an expert who would have called it five years ago. Unshackled from the dictates of religion and unburdened of social convention, the so-called “**millennials**” were heading into adolescence with none of the external controls that governed their folks. And more than a few pessimists foretold disaster. By 2000, the last time Bibby and his team took stock of teen values, bookstore shelves were crowded with titles like *Teens on the Edge* and *Raising Children in a Socially Toxic Environment.*

But if Project Teen Canada tells us anything, it’s that our fears are founded on a faulty assumption, namely, that opportunity would necessarily lead young people to indulge. Yes, drugs are as readily available as ever; 70 per cent of teens responding to Bibby’s survey say it is not difficult to locate marijuana or hashish. Yet the proportion reporting regular or occasional use of the stuff has fallen by 16 per cent in the last eight years. More surprising still, teens are actually less permissive toward cannabis than their parents. Only 38 per cent support legalizing the drugs, versus 45 per cent of adults.

Same goes for drinking. While social advocates warned through the 1990s that the liberalization of liquor laws would lead to a spike in teenage alcohol abuse, today’s youth are less interested in drinking than their counterparts in the previous decade. Roughly seven in 10 report drinking alcohol regularly or occasionally; in 2000, that number was closer to eight out of 10.

But nothing defies conventional wisdom quite like the responses to Bibby’s queries on sex and relationships, which are demonstrably rooted in values we assume are on the wane. Today’s teenagers report having slightly less sex than youths were 10 or 15 years ago (this at a time when pornography is no more than a mouse click away), while placing a much greater emphasis on old-time romantic conventions like loyalty and love. Nearly nine out of 10 respondents said they disapprove of sexual affairs outside marriage, and fully 60 per cent said they disapprove of premarital sex in cases where the partners merely “like” each other. But factor in love, and the kids go all mushy. Fully nine out of 10 said they accept premarital sex in cases where the people truly loved each other, with 70 per cent saying they not only accept such relationships but approve of them. Clearly, marriage isn’t so important to them as the feelings behind it. Nor, for that matter, is sex.

How, then, did this moral and social redux come to pass? At least one cause, says Bibby, can be found in the well-founded, if clichéd, principle that familiarity breeds contempt. “Whether we’re talking about drugs or divorce, they’ve gone through these things, they’ve experienced them,” he says. “They’ve had a chance to do a lot of reflecting, and they’re not just reading about this stuff in books.” In the case of marijuana, the availability appears to be draining the drug of its potency as a symbol of rebellion. Meantime, teenagers are inundated with information about the health effects of tobacco, so even before cigarettes were forced by law under the counters of convenience stores, kids seem inoculated against attempts to market them. “We’re ridiculously savvy with advertisements,” one 17-year-old explains to Maclean’s matter-of-factly.

The result is a generation that tends to examine its own urges, accommodating and managing them in ways older people could scarcely imagine. Jesse Lupini, a 17-year-old from Victoria, tells the story of an impromptu meeting he and his Grade 12 classmates held over the question of whether to allow alcohol at this year’s after-graduation party. A majority favoured a dry event, even though the unsanctioned party will take place off school property. Still, says Lupini, “the general consensus was ‘let’s not ruin it for the ones who want to drink,’ and I thought that was interesting. I mean, we even sent around a survey afterward. It’s very much an attitude of choosing to live your life one way and not telling other people how to live theirs.”

On an individual level, teens are demonstrating a remarkable ability to self-correct. Erin Jardine, a 17-year-old from West Vancouver, was deeply at odds with her parents over the past couple of years, and increasingly found escape in liquor and pot. “In Grade 8 and 9 I’d been at the top of my class,” she recalls. “In the next two years I started socializing and drinking and my grades dropped. I mean, the numbers were ridiculous.” So after a prolonged period in which she lurched from partying to bouts of misery, she signed up for an outdoor camp last summer run by CanAdventure Education, an organization for troubled teens. Today, she’s excelling at a new school and is in the process of choosing a university to attend next fall.

Like many of the youths surveyed in Project Teen Canada, Erin is motivated primarily by a desire to build a stable adult life. “I see myself at 40 years old, married to someone for the long term with a family, settled down somewhere,” she says. And in fact, the 2008 survey found that a full 67 per cent of adolescents—the highest percentage ever—now rate family life as “very important,” up from 59 per cent in 2000. There was also a significant increase in the proportion who expect to get married, up by six per cent since 1992. The proportion who plan to have kids is up by an amazing 13 per cent. Perhaps most surprising was a huge increase in the number of youth, both male and female, who want to stay home to raise the kids. Since 1992, the number hoping for more of a ’50s-style family has surged from 33 to 43 per cent.

The question is how they’ll do it when they have little in the way of an example. The ubiquity of broken families, Bibby notes, has thickened teen resolve not to repeat the mistakes of their parents, the most divorced generation in Canadian history. But exactly what will there be to hold households together? In the old days, organized religion would have set a template, consecrating marriage, welcoming children into the world and generally setting down the formula for a stable and upright family. But today, only two in 10 young people attend church regularly. Breaking with the past will require a new social model that adapts old-fashioned values to modern reality.

The first outlines of such a model are starting to take form. On one hand, today’s teens put the same stock in the nuclear family as their churchgoing grandparents, yet these days, most are comfortable if that partnership is common law, or if it is between people of the same sex. The important thing appears to be the underpinnings: more than 80 per cent of teens rate honesty and trust as the most important values in their lives.

Before we give the kids all the credit, though, it’s worth pondering the role of adults in producing such a clear-eyed, well-adjusted generation. Bibby points to the unprecedented resources civil society has socked into enhancing teen lives—from addiction intervention to the construction of skateboard parks. “Just think of any kind of problem that breaks out in a school,” he says. “Think of the experts and the practitioners who come in to help deal with these things.” For some reason, we seldom try to calculate whether all this social engineering is yielding benefits. Is it possible the boomers got a few things right?

More neglected still is the role of individual parents. While many moms and dads have grown up in broken homes, or seen their own relationships fail, they are no less determined than previous generations to steer their kids onto solid ground. That means teaching bedrock virtues such as honesty and trustworthiness. “We may have chosen not to go to church,” says Jennifer Parker, a 34-year-old mom in Ponoka, Alta. “But a lot of our beliefs are still moral beliefs, and we’re conscious as parents that our kids’ values are going to have to come from us.” The task can be daunting—not least because of technology’s power to tug kids away. Understanding today’s teen requires at least passing familiarity with a disorienting array of new media. “We have to keep up with Facebook, Twitter, chat,” says Parker, “and the minute we figure out how something works, they’ve moved on to the next thing.”

Still, whatever parents are doing seems to be working. When the Project Teen Canada team asked respondents to name their greatest influences in life, eight out of 10 named their fathers; nine out of 10 cited their moms. Both figures are notably higher than they were in the ’80s. Better yet, teens don’t seem to view their folks as moralistic scolds. A surprising proportion—more than 70 per cent—actually said they get enjoyment out of their parents.

Of course, no one’s about to declare the end of teen angst. Sure, a measurable reduction in teen drinking is encouraging news, but the 70 per cent who say they imbibe is still too high. So too is the 50 per cent who know someone with a drug or alcohol problem. Just as disconcerting is the growing gulf between teenagers and, well, the real world. It’s all well and good to seek what Bibby terms “upgrades” on the lives their parents lived. But it would be nice if the proportion of youth who follow the news hadn’t declined by 11 per cent since 2000 (this in the most plugged-in generation ever). It would also be heartening if the time teenagers spend simply sitting and thinking weren’t being devoured by computer games and texting.

In light of these facts, Bibby expects strong resistance to his findings from the very teen crisis apparatus he partially credits with all the good news. “The experts act almost annoyed when you suggest kids are actually looking a little better,” he says. Some of that blowback stems from genuine difference of opinion. But a lot grows out of popular wisdom coming out of the United States. Bibby points to the work of education professor Diane Levin, whose book So Sexy, So Soon has stirred concern on both sides of the border that revealing clothing and explicit media content is driving kids toward sex at an ever younger age. Yet Statistics Canada reports that fewer teens here are sexually active before the age of 15 than was the case in the 1990s.

In the end, the kids will likely follow their own instincts. While they might be taking silent cues from their parents—and might even seek help in times of crisis—they’ve little time for adult authorities who worry about their futures. Jesse Lupini, the 17-year-old from Victoria, summed up the sentiment in a recent guest column for his local paper. “Adults have generated a number of teen stereotypes,” he writes. “Teens are irresponsible, untrustworthy, rude, sexually obsessed, loud, inclined to drink to excess, take drugs, eat badly…” But how about the adults who lie, drive drunk and do drugs, Lupini asks? What about the corporations run by adults that market junk food and sexualized clothing to youth? What about the parents who buy that stuff for their kids? “Frankly,” he concludes, having worked up a rather adult-sounding rant, “it’s a wonder we’re coping as well as we are.”