

# PITTSBURGH TRIBUNE-REVIEW

## Despite negative perceptions, most young adults are doing pretty great

By Kellie B. Gormly  
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Frisky kittens in a rainbow of colors -- tortoiseshell, white, black, orange -- climb up the inside of their metal cage walls, meowing with excitement as they clamor for attention from Brianne Bindschadler of Ridgemont.

"We try to make them feel happy, warm fuzzies when they see people," says Brianne, 17, as she scoops out litter boxes and puts food in the 12 cages along the wall. She and her mom, Sandy Bindschadler, come to the Humane Society of Western Pennsylvania on the North Side three times a week to help care for the litters of foster kittens kept in one of the offices.

Brianne, with her community service, fits into the "good kid" category. And according to a new, research-based online book, most American teenagers -- despite often getting a bad rap in society -- are good kids, and doing just fine. Clea McNeely -- co-author of "The Teen Years Explained: A Guide to Healthy Adolescent Development," from the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health -- says that her book summarizes years of research.

Adults often view teenagers as troublemakers -- with issues including substance abuse, bullying, criminal mischief -- and parents tend to dread the adolescent years as a time of emotional turbulence, drama and maybe depression. Yet, McNeely says, badly behaving, troubled teens are the minority.

"We don't want to sanitize away problems that are really real," McNeely says. She is vice president of programming for the Society of Research on Adolescence, an assistant professor of public health with the University of Tennessee at Knoxville. "But, the teenage years, for most people, are not traumatic, and most people survive the teenage years in a very healthy way. Teens enjoy them more than their parents do."

Teenagers often struggle with a negative reputation from adults, who may see images of teens doing community service and volunteer work, and presume that the kids are doing it as punishment for getting in trouble, McNeely says.

"I think it's tragic," McNeely, a former faculty member and current adjunct at Johns Hopkins University, says. "It just shows how deeply entrenched this negative perception of young people is."

Sandy Bindschadler, 53, agrees. Some kids may deserve the bad reputation

they give teens, but so many young people do wonderful things, and the good ones often aren't the ones who get attention, Sandy and Brianne Bindschadler say.

### **From another perspective**

The key to changing teens' bad reputations, McNeely says, is to look at the flip side of statistics. The book cites many figures from different studies that aren't as bad as they seem.

For instance, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention figures from 2002 estimate that about 30 percent of American teens have been involved with bullying as a perpetrator, spectator or victim. But look at the flip side, McNeely says: 70 percent of teens have not been bullies or bullied.

Figures from the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry in 2008 say that, before age 20, one in 10 young people experience a severe emotional disturbance that disrupts their ability to function. That means that nine out of 10 kids haven't had such difficulty.

As far as teen sex goes, CDC figures from 2007 say that 50 percent of boys and 46 percent of girls in high school have had sexual intercourse -- but almost just as many, then, are virgins.

Many Western Pennsylvania teens do regular volunteer work to help the community, and report feeling happy and healthy.

Alex Levy, 17, of Point Breeze, joined a classmate, David Jimenez, at Shady Side Academy in Fox Chapel and started an alternate spring-break program. They drove to Camden, N.J., across the river from Philadelphia, to work in a poor area with the organization Urban Promise during their spring break. The kids' work included volunteering in a food bank and helping kids in after-school programs.

"It was a really eye-opening experience," Alex says. "I had never spoken to a homeless person before."

Negative perceptions of teenagers, she says, are based on a small group of teens.

Courtney Edgar, 17, of Kiski Township, agrees.

"A lot of teens, they work hard for what they do, and they really strive to meet their goals," Courtney says. She volunteers at the information desk of Alle-Kiski Medical Center in Natrona Heights, and says she loves helping people. "Some, unfortunately, get under the wrong wing."

Courtney's teen years have been very exciting for her, she says. Having a positive peer group helps.

"I think it all just depends on what a teen's habitat is," Courtney says.

Zac Fertig, 13, of Tarentum, says he enjoys helping people by volunteering at the hospital's gift shop.

"It gives me something to do, and I meet people," he says.

Becca Thompson, 13, of Delmont, participated in the BUDDIES Club at Greensburg Salem Middle School. Through this involvement, Becca got to help students with disabilities, such as those with Down syndrome. She helped students with preparing lunch and played games with them.

"It's lot of fun; I really enjoy doing that and helping the different kids," Becca says. "I think it helps their social skills. I think they enjoy getting to hang out and have some fun during the day."

The bad rap of adolescents, Becca says, comes from mistaken assumptions, and from people not knowing the many good teens out there.

"I think there are a lot of people who ... don't take the time to find out what (teens) do," she says.

## **TEENS MEASURE UP**

The 2009 High School Youth Risk Behavior Survey by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention asked Pennsylvania teens about their behavior. Looking at the flip side of these stats, most teens are doing fine.

- 10.2 percent rarely or never wore seat belts in a car driven by someone else -- so nearly 90 percent do.
- 21.1 percent had ridden with a driver who had been drinking, in the past 30 days -- so nearly 80 percent didn't get in the car with a drinker behind the wheel.
- 4.6 percent had driven while drinking alcohol, in the past 30 days -- so more than 95 percent don't drink and drive.
- 2.1 percent had carried a weapon on school property, in the past 30 days -- 98 percent are weapon-free.
- 46.6 percent had ever tried smoking -- More than half have not tried smoking.
- 73.6 had drank at least one alcoholic beverage in their lives -- Almost 28 percent haven't tasted alcohol.
- 35.2 percent had tried marijuana at least once in their lives -- Almost 65 percent haven't sampled it.

Source: [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)

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