

Editorial: Teens Behaving Well

For the parents and grandparents of adolescents, there is good news and bad news. The good news, unearthed in a survey conducted by the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, is that today's high school students are notably resistant to all sorts of hazardous and unwholesome activities, from sex to smoking.

The bad news? This report will make it a lot harder to gripe about kids being spoiled, out of control and generally not up to the impeccably high standards of conduct established by previous generations.

The truth is, they seem determined to do everything possible to make their elders look like the cast of "Hair." Bill Albert, spokesman for the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, told The Associated Press, "I think you can call this the cautious generation."

Online porn and increasingly raunchy popular entertainment, it's often assumed, have obliterated modesty and restraint among youngsters. In fact, just 41 percent of today's high school kids have ever had sex — compared with 47 percent in 2013 and 54 percent in 1991. The proportion that is currently sexually active fell from 34 percent to 30 percent just in the past two years.

Drinking is supposed to be a rite of passage for teens. But that fashion has faded. In 1991, more than half of kids drank at least once a month; today, only one in three does.

They are not replacing beer with pot: The number who get high has also shrunk, despite the legalization of recreational cannabis in some states. Cigarettes have also lost much of their charm. For every five kids who smoked in 1999, only one does today. About one in four, however, uses electronic cigarettes and other "vaping" products.

Youngsters also behave more peaceably than was once the norm. They are only about half as prone to get in fights as the kids of 1991, and the number who have taken weapons to school has fallen by two-thirds. More adolescents even wear helmets when they ride their bicycles.

All this should not be completely unexpected, given the noticeable decline of teen pregnancy, abortion and crime. But it is bound to surprise those who take the coarsening of popular culture to be a malignant influence on young people. It turns out the kids can distinguish the models presented in music and movies from what they need to do to succeed in real life.

It's possible, of course, that they've also been diverted from forbidden fruit by modern technology. "It may be that parking at Lookout Point has given way to texting from your mom's living room couch," Albert said. It may be that Snapchat beats getting stoned. Modern teens have a lot more ways to avoid boredom than kids did 20 or 30 years ago.

They also have higher expectations. It could be that their parents' focus on promoting kids' self-esteem has sapped their motivation to misbehave. What's the point of drinking or fooling around? You don't even get a participation trophy.