Reason to Celebrate

Survey signals shift in honesty among American youth

> It's easy to feel discouraged by today's headline-grabbing incidents of dishonest and unethical behavior from political leaders, business executives and athletes. But the latest report card on the ethics of American youth, issued every two years by the Josephson Institute in Los Angeles, California, offers some reason for optimism: For the first time in a decade, students are lying, cheating and stealing less than in previous years.

“It’s a small ray of sunshine shining through lots of dark clouds,” said Michael Josephson, founder and president of the Josephson Institute of Ethics and a nationally noted commentator on behavior. “Changes in children’s behavior of this magnitude suggest a major shift in parenting and school involvement in issues of honesty and character.”

The report is based on a survey administered to 23,000 high school students. Among the findings:

**Cheating:** In 2010, 59 percent of students admitted they had cheated on an exam in the past year; in 2012 that rate dropped to 51 percent. Students who copied an Internet document for a classroom assignment dropped 2 percent, from 34 percent in 2010 to 32 percent this year.

**Lying:** Students who said they had lied to a teacher in the past year about something significant dropped from 61 percent in 2010 to 55 percent in 2012. Those who lied to their parents about something significant also dropped, from 80 percent to 76 percent.

In 2012, 38 percent of the students said they sometimes lie to save money; that is a drop of 3 percent from 2010.

**Stealing:** In 2010, 27 percent of the students said they had stolen something from a store in the past year. In 2012 that number dropped to 20 percent.

In 2010, 17 percent said they had stolen something from a friend in the past year, compared to 14 percent in 2012. The percentage who said they had stolen something from a parent or other relative in the past year also decreased (from 21 to 18 percent).

Based on the number of schools adopting the Josephson Institute’s Character Counts! program, and the number of parents who visit the institute’s website, Josephson believes “that adults interacting with young people are more concerned with teaching kids that honesty really is important.” He added, “Though there is still far too much cheating, lying and stealing, I think we have turned the corner.”

Josephson’s theory is supported by survey results showing that 93 percent of students said their parents or guardians always want them to do the ethically right thing, no matter the cost. Eighty-five percent said most adults in their life consistently set a good example in terms of ethics and character.

For more on this survey and to see a report on issues related to youth violence, bullying and high-risk behavior, visit: http://charactercounts.org/news/2012-report-card/

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**OTHER IMPORTANT FINDINGS OF THE 2012 REPORT CARD ON THE ETHICS OF AMERICAN YOUTH:**

Young people believe ethics and character are important, and they think highly of their own ethics:

99% say “it is important for me to be a person with good character.”

93% say they are satisfied with their own ethics and character.

81% believe that when it comes to doing what is right, they are better than most people they know.