

Voices for Two-Generation Success: Seeking Stable Futures

**Conversations with Mothers and Teens
Findings from 10 focus groups conducted in June 2013**

September, 2013

Commissioned by: Ascend at the Aspen Institute



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Methodology

Lake Research Partners and Chesapeake Beach Consulting conducted 10 focus groups with single and married mothers across races, separated by income levels, as well as of boys and girls of mixed racial backgrounds between ages 12-14 and 16-18. Participants in the mothers' groups were recruited to reflect a mix of educational attainment, employment status, and marital status. Participants of the children's groups were recruited to reflect a racial mix as well as to come from a mix of family backgrounds (single & married parents, non-college educated, currently enrolled, and college educated).

June 17th – Chicago, IL

- Boys, ages 16-18
- Moderate income white mothers, ages 35-50 (between 200%-400% FPL)
- Mixed-income Asian American mothers, ages 35-50
- Moderate income African American mothers, under 35 (between 200%-400% FPL)

June 20th – Denver, CO

- Boys, ages 12-14
- Girls, ages 16-18
- Low-Income Latina mothers, under 35 (below 200% FPL)

June 24th – Richmond, VA

- Girls, ages 12-14
- Low-income white mothers, under 35 (below 200% FPL)
- Low-income African American mothers, ages 35-50 (below 200% FPL)

The following findings use the terms “mothers,” “single parents,” and “parents” to refer to participants in the parents' groups, and “teens,” “teenagers,” and “pre-teens” to refer to participants in the boys' and girls' groups.

Qualitative Research Statement of Limitations

In opinion research, the focus group seeks to develop insight and direction rather than quantitatively precise or absolute measures. Because of the limited number of respondents and the restrictions of recruiting, this research must be considered in a qualitative frame of reference.

The reader may find that some of the information seems inconsistent in character upon first reading this report. These inconsistencies should be considered as valid data from the participant's point of view. That is, the participant may be misinformed or simply wrong in his or her knowledge or judgment, and we should interpret this as useful information about their level of understanding.

This study cannot be considered reliable or valid in the statistical sense. This type of research is intended to provide knowledge, awareness, attitudes, and opinions about issues and concerns.

This report cannot accurately detail the wealth of information in the non-verbal area; e.g., "body language" (posture, sleepiness, wiggling in the chair, etc.) or the amount of time lapsed between questions from the moderator and actual responses from the group. It also cannot report on the subtle area of "peer pressure"—the willingness to avoid making a particular response because of fear of what others might think or to change a response when others in the group appear to oppose his or her original position.

The following biases are inherent in qualitative research and are stated here to remind the reader that the qualitative data presented here cannot be projected to any universe of individuals.

- Bias 1. Participants who respond to the invitation of a stranger to participate in this research show themselves to be risk takers and may be somewhat more assertive than non-participants.
- Bias 2. Some participants speak more often and more forcefully in focus group sessions than other participants, so their opinions tend to carry more weight in the findings.
- Bias 3. Participants "self-select" themselves, i.e., they are those people who are available on the night a particular group was scheduled.
- Bias 4. Participants were not selected randomly so that each person in the pool of possible participants did not have an equal chance to be selected.
- Bias 5. People in groups may respond differently to a question than if asked that same question individually. They may follow the lead of a strong speaker or someone they perceive as "expert."

Executive Summary

In the fall of 2011, Ascend at the Aspen Institute, commissioned us to conduct a series of focus groups as a cornerstone of Voices for Two-Generation Success, its initiative to highlight the voices of low-income parents across race and ethnicity to hear their hopes and dreams, tap their ideas, and weave their voices into the public discussion on new policy approaches. We conducted these first focus groups with low-income single and married mothers and fathers across races in several cities. At that time, we heard a tremendous amount of hardship among a cohort of parents that were stretched financially, logistically, and emotionally. Life was not easy, and they aspired to stability in the aftermath of an economic recession caused by remote actors far removed from their daily routine. Despite the challenges they faced, they remained optimistic about the future and the likelihood that their children would enjoy a better future.

This past June, we conducted groups with married and single mothers as well as teenagers and pre-teens across racial lines to build upon our previous work and once again check in and listen to their hopes, dreams, challenges, and concerns.

Mood and Economic Context

Several years removed from the peak of the recession, mothers are remarkably positive about their life these days. They say they are less stressed than in years past. However, they continue to struggle and face many challenges. They are short of money and are facing rising costs and the fear of an unexpected expense. Single parents encounter the same challenges of juggling the need to provide for their family's financial well-being, often from multiple jobs, with their desire to spend quality time with their children and getting them to and from school and activities.

Stability remains the watchword for these mothers in today's economy. Financial stability is a core goal that both married and single mothers aspire toward. They do not wish to be rich, but simply to be ahead of their bills instead of behind them, with enough left over to occasionally enjoy some leisure activities.

Single and married mothers alike remain optimistic for their children's future. They are working hard to create the foundational conditions for their children's success: a loving healthy environment that encourages them to be independent and confident. Mothers and teens alike believe that self-esteem and self-respect are key ingredients for success.

Teen's express strong economic anxieties though remain optimistic for their futures. They think graduating college is an important step toward achieving their own financial stability and success. But at the same time they voice fears about avoiding debt, and recall their parents' financial struggles. They think they and their peers could benefit from financial education; to learn how to spend within their means and avoid debt.

Goals and Dreams

Mothers have very humble goals for themselves mainly because they are too stretched for time and money to have lofty goals and dreams. They want to be happy, healthy, financially stable, comfortable, free of debt, and without high levels of stress.

Many single mothers say they put their own personal dreams and career goals aside when their children were born, consistent with what we heard in 2011. Some dropped out or did not finish college which they feel has held them back from better paying jobs. Being a good parent and doing right by their child is now the ultimate goal.

Among the teenagers, getting into and graduating from college is a top of mind goal. Teenagers and mothers alike worry about the costs of affording college. Many of the boys have dreams of being professional athletes, but speak to broader goals of being financially comfortable and successful. Both the boys and girls bring up family – marriage and kids – as a goal of theirs though secondary behind a general desire for success.

Like the mothers, the teens also express simple goals of being happy, healthy, and comfortable. Unlike the mothers, they do not express their hectic schedules as a significant cause of stress, though they are also stretched for time with school and extra-curricular activities or work.

Both the mothers and the children show remarkable resilience. There is a broad array of problems participants in all groups mentioned from loss of jobs to loss of health care, drugs, domestic violence, homelessness, dropping out of school, sexual assault – yet most of these mothers and children are focused on the future and the next steps of their lives.

Future and Success, Barriers and Challenges

Mothers define success for their children in broad terms of being happy and pursuing the career of their choice. They want their children to be healthy, happy, grounded, confident, and with a good job.

Mothers mention child care frequently as a challenge. They struggle with the affordability of child care, finding care they can trust, and getting their child to and from care. Some mothers rely on close relatives – parents, siblings, or aunts – to provide care while they work.

Self-confidence and independence emerge in these groups as core ingredients that parents and teenagers both link to success. For teenagers it is about self-esteem and ensuring that they make good decisions. Mothers want their children to be independent so that they can take care of themselves. Some even express a desire for their children to go through some challenges so that they can get through them, toughen themselves up, and thicken their skin.

Going to college and pursuing a career is not just a goal for teenagers, but a marker of success. Having a family is important but secondary for most teens whose primary goal is to succeed in a career. Since college, career, and family are all goals for teenagers, achieving them naturally means success.

Teenagers also bring up the importance of dealing with money when they consider their future. Listening to these teenagers' anxiety makes it apparent that their parents struggled financially over the past several years of the recession and continue to do so today. These teens relay a lot of knowledge about struggles with money in their families. Boys and girls want to know more than just how to manage their money; they want guidance on how to spend it wisely, how to live within their means, and how to avoid debt. They understand how expensive a college education will cost, that they will most likely need student loans and how the debt burden of those loans could impact their economic future. However, they also intuitively understand the tradeoffs between going to college and accruing debt compared to getting a job straight out of high school.

These teenagers do not focus on any external or structural barriers that might prevent them from succeeding. Rather, they focus on themselves and believe they are the key to their own success. As a result, they believe that being confident and having self-esteem are important.

Relationships

Many of the single mothers in these focus groups value marriage and stable relationships despite data showing a rising number of women having children outside of marriage. They believe a good relationship provides stability and logistical help in the daily tasks of raising a child. They know the economic advantage and flexibility of having another wage earner.

Beyond the utility of marriage and a relationship for child rearing, many single mothers bring up the value of companionship. Many have been hurt by previous relationships and want to ensure that any future relationship rests on respect, trust, and strong communication. They want to be able to share their life with another person, and share in the good moments of having children. Boys mention one of the most important lessons they learn from their mothers is respect for women.

Married mothers recognize that having a husband makes their lives easier. They are confidants and partners in responsibility. Single and married mothers alike express the desire for their children to one day be married to a good spouse that respects and loves them. At the same time, mothers want their daughters to be able to make it on their own and say it is not worth staying in relationships that do not work.

Teens, particularly the girls, talk about the benefits of a healthy relationship for the companionship and support they can provide. Most say they want to marry one day but feel no pressure to rush into a relationship. Some have had bad relationships that made them feel inadequate and insecure, and they seek to learn from the experience to avoid the same behavior in the future. Boys, especially younger boys talk about marriage and identify a lot with their mothers but talk less about the quality of relationships. Boys and girls talked about having a family though boys refer more to marriage first. For both it is far off in the future.

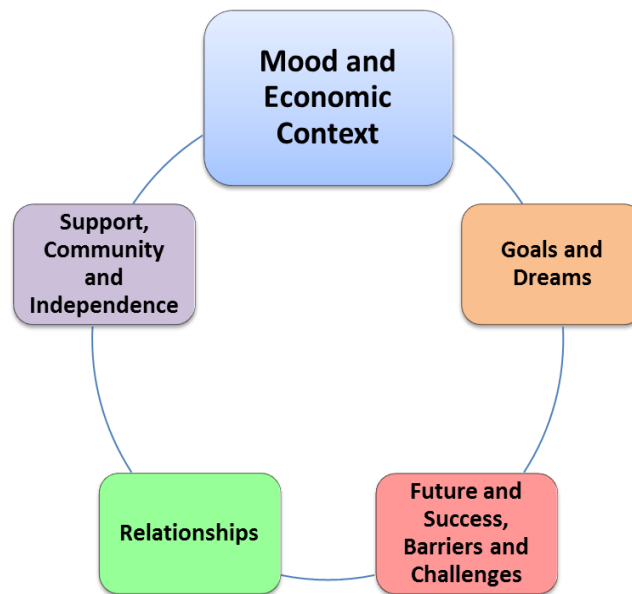
Support, Community, and Independence

Mothers show a strong desire for self-reliance and independence. Most have cultivated narrow but strong support networks consisting mainly of their close friends and family members. They do not rely on community in the traditional sense of the word; few consult with or rely on neighbors or other people in their area. Many are hesitant to trust people they do not know and do not want to intrude on those people that they do know. Most aspire to be independent and self-sufficient.

Within the circle of family and close friends however, mothers recognize the importance of helping each other with their children. When prompted, they share examples of their close friends and family helping them with jobs and career advancement. Beyond close family and some church support, the help they have received or have offered to others is very episodic. They do not expect help in return from the people they have aided.

Teenagers have strong ties to their parents and siblings, as well as close friends. They go to their parents or friends for some issues but not others; they might talk to their parents about health concerns, but to their friends about relationships. Some also have strong relationships with teachers or coaches who serve as mentors and provide adult guidance without the fear of consequences which may come from a disapproving parent.

When mothers give advice to their children, or the teens give advice to their younger siblings, a common theme emerges of being true to ones-self, independent, and confident in the pursuit of their dreams. These themes relate to the ingredients both mothers and teens link to success; confidence and independence. They are aspirational in their advice, their goals, and in their definition of success, indicating once more their optimism for the future.



Mood and Economic Context

*“I think the biggest thing for me is trying to figure out how I am going to take care of myself and how am I going to set my children up for success. I am thinking right now do I [buy a] \$1,000 bond for each of them each year and make a commitment to do that or should I do the Gerber Grow-Up Plan. But then it’s well do I do a 529 Plan you know. I don’t know. All I know is that I have been thinking about and thinking about it, and honestly, just yesterday...it stressed me out because I need to stop thinking and I need to make a plan and I need to put it in action because otherwise, it’s going to be another year gone and no money saved for them. That’s a really big challenge for me because right now I am like where the hell am I going to get my next tank of gas from.” –
White Mother, Low-Income, Richmond*

Mothers describe their current situations positively, and reflect back to harder times over the past few years. Today they feel they are generally in a better financial situation than they say they were during the peak years of the recession. Many say that while they still endure challenges today, they are less stressed than they were a few years ago.

These mothers are more optimistic about their children's future specifically than they are about the future of the world more generally. They have larger anxieties about the uncertainty of the world than they do about the future prospects for their children within that uncertain world. They are working hard to give their children a better life and create opportunities for them that they did not have. While other work shows middle class families worry their children will not have the same opportunities they had, these low-income mothers in particular still believe their children can be better off.

- "So if we are talking about just in general.....I am not complaining, but I was just...it is always room for improvement. I just feel like I am at a good point in my life, but I know things can be better." – African American Mother, Moderate Income, Chicago
- "I have been with my company for ten years now and I finally get to move into a more managerial position, so I am excited about that. And I just have more time to do things now and so I can devote more time to my career." – Asian American Mother , Chicago
- "They are getting better. I got a new job. As far as the stability with my significant other too, it was pretty shaky before we started dating and things are a lot better with that. My life has pretty much took a 360. A lot of things were going downhill. They are better now." - African American Mother, Moderate Income, Chicago
- "Compared to a couple of years ago, where I am right now is the best I can imagine." – African American Mother, Low-Income, Richmond

Many of these mothers think back to how things were for their parents' generation and feel as though their parents had an easier time. They reflect on the security of their neighborhoods compared to how it was when their parents were their age, and compare their success to that of their parents. They believe their parents were better able to get ahead and make a decent living because there was greater stability and opportunity.

- "My husband tells me to be positive, but I think my parents at 34 years old were loaded. Me at 34 years old am broke. You know. That's scary to me." – White Mother, Low-Income, Richmond
- "I think the world is a little bit harder now than it was when we were kids growing up... I mean we could go out late at night and play in the streets and we were good, and now they can't do that." - Latina Mother, Low-Income, Denver

Across race and income these parents believe their children will likely have a more stable and secure life when they are older compared to their own lives now. They are motivated to do

what they can to provide a better life and are optimistic that they will succeed in doing so. These low income parents are striving hard to be an active force in giving their children opportunities.

- “[I want] to be able to leave something for all my kids, like when I am not here leave them some kind of....to try things I have never done before.” – Latina Mother, Low-Income, Denver
- “I am going to make it better... I am going to make her life better. I will do whatever I can.” - Latina Mother, Low-Income, Denver
- “I feel optimistic just because I think my daughter has someone like me who is going to be very frank and upfront with her.” – White Mother, Low-Income, Richmond x2
- “For things to be easier for my kids than it was for me. Every way. I mean financially, family-wide, everything.” - African American Mother, Moderate Income, Chicago
- “Better because I will be on him more than my parents were on me.” – African American Mother, Low-Income, Richmond

Stability: Key Watchword for this Economy

Stability remains the watchword in this economy, replacing opportunity and security. In 2011, stability meant a lack of financial worry – that one has enough money to pay the bills and provide food and shelter. Mothers across race and income say that financial stability is a core goal. Today stability means the absence of stress when it comes to money, and a minimal sense of comfort. They are working very hard to meet their short term demands, while also preparing for their children’s future needs like higher education.

- “Stability and financial stability, a more reliable car, a lot of things right now. It’s just been a very bad week.” – Latina Mother, Low-Income, Denver
- “Being more financially stable and to have more real people in my life that I can trust.” - Latina Mother, Low-Income, Denver
- “Just more stability and just taking steps forward instead of having someone throw you back a few. In everything. The business is growing instead of being you know at a standstill. I have a stable, significant other, and my daughter is bigger, so it’s a lot of things.” – African American Mother, Moderate Income, Chicago
- “I think my challenge is more just to be financially stable in the long run, be able for her to go to college. That’s kind of like my challenge now. Like even though she is six, it’s good to think about it now just because you never know what’s going to happen in the future.” - Asian American Mother, Chicago

Time and Money: Barriers to a Better Life

Parents (and their children) feel they are short of two key resources: time and money, which is exacerbated by lower incomes. Time and money emerge as the main barriers to a better life for mothers across groups and are a source of constant stress and anxiety. Low-income mothers are more likely to bring up money as a challenge, but low-income and moderate-income mothers alike identify their struggles to attain financial stability as a principle barrier to their happiness.

- “Stress levels at work. Working very hard and not making very much money. Well not making enough money makes it stressful and then I work more like in the showroom, like a retail setting, of the plumbing things, so you’ve got people in your face all day long and they just want something and want something, and you are selling them you know really expensive things for their really expensive house, and you go home to your really cheap things...” – White Mother, Low-Income, Richmond
- “I recently set up for myself and my son a savings account because there were times...our air conditional broke and we had no money to fix an air conditioner. So I went into the savings account and I get \$25 out of every paycheck into my account and he gets \$15 into his account. His account is free because he is under 18. And mine, I think you have to put like a minimum of \$100 in it a month and they don’t charge you for it. We will never touch his; that will be his for when he gets older, but you know if something major happens we have that \$200 or \$300 or \$400 in there to pull out and use it for something.” – White Mother, Low-Income, Richmond

They are also burdened with many competing demands on their time from multiple jobs, taking care of their parents, shuttling their kids to and from activities and child care, doing chores, and hoping to have some time for themselves.

- “Mine is more or less feeling guilty for working and my son is so young. I feel like I am missing out on stuff with him, so that’s probably the biggest challenge. Yeah. I am at work for like eight or nine hours and he is at school and like I miss so much of his life just because he spends all his time with school and with grandparents. I just feel bad about that sometimes.” - African American Mother, Moderate Income, Chicago
- “It would be nice to get a break every once in a while. When you are a single mom...I mean I am real single mom...like I don’t have where she is going off on the weekends to see her dad and stuff...so I don’t get that little break that everyone around me does.” - White Mother, Moderate Income, Chicago
- “I go through the daily rituals of life and I have a smile on my face all the time and everything is great, but deep inside I am just like oh my god I need to find some balance. I need to find some time for me...For 30 years it was all about me. It was all about me. And then to have two kids so close together it just was like wow. And my son sometimes throws temper tantrums so bad that I go in the bathroom and cry. Because I am just

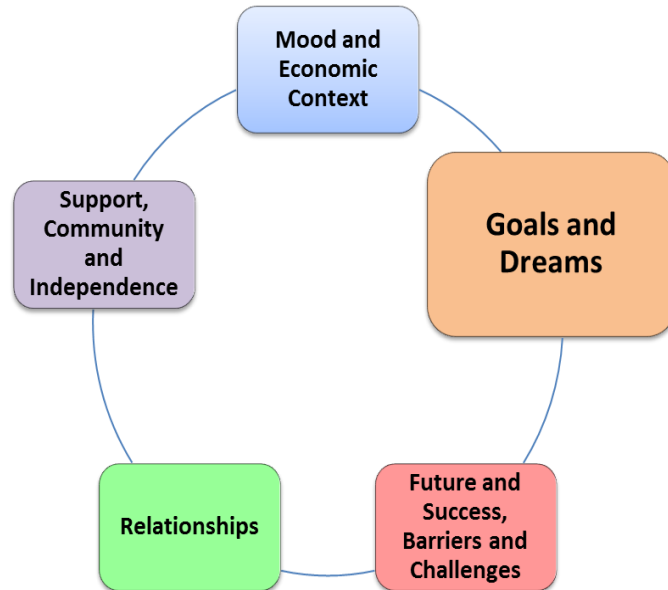
that overwhelmed...I know this is what I signed up for, but I need to find a way to keep myself healthier, but I just feel like I do not have it in me...I just need to try to find some time for me so that I can feel good. Like every day is not...when I get home from work, I kid you not, I work myself into a darn panic attack because I know when I walk through that door it is game on.” – White Mother, Low-Income, Richmond

- “Sometimes I have to ask myself am I really doing this. It’s because it is laundry and it’s grocery shopping and it’s trying to work. Like she said, trying to balance the schedule out for the boys and trying to have some time for you. It gets overwhelming sometimes.” – African American Mother, Low-Income, Richmond

Two Generations Share Optimism for Future

Mothers and their children are for the most part optimistic. While the mothers have faced hardships, the children, especially the older girls, have also been through a lot. Despite such hardships, these young women remain remarkably optimistic that they have bright futures ahead of them. The older girls revealed a variety of hardships they have already faced. Several talked about attempted suicides, one shared about a period when she and her father were homeless, and one revealed that she was sexually abused by a family member.

- “My freshman year in high school I went through an extremely tough time. I had a lot of inner issues and I was anorexic and I self-harmed and I tried to commit suicide three times. So staying out of that kind of behavior and thinking of myself as a positive and happy can sometimes get in the way. But for the most part, it’s all good. And then there is also my youngest brother...he is four. He has a different mom than I do and his mom worries me a lot. She is abusive. Not to my brother, but to my dad when they were together and now to her partner, her girlfriend, and I am just afraid that it will travel...like the abuse will travel over to my brother. And I feel really awful for him because he doesn’t have a very strong like female supportive person in his life, so that’s my biggest struggle is trying to be that person.” – Teenage Girl 16-18, Denver
- “I mean you know something happened to me last year and that’s kind of been stopping me I guess. You know I am not as much of a strong person. Well not significant you know. I was just sexually abused. It just really messed with me – my mind and my emotions – and what I think of a lot.” – Teenage Girl 16-18, Denver
- “But I did think of one. For a year, my dad and I were homeless, and our family friends from a really long time ago they let us use their basement as our house for an entire year and endless thanks goes to them. I can’t even begin to describe how lucky we were.” - Teenage Girl 16-18, Denver



Goals and Dreams

“I think that as you grow as a person and you are a parent. Your dreams become primarily about your children. I mean everything that you do and everything that you strive for it’s to not just better yourself; it’s not about you anymore; it’s about you having to be that backbone and that strong person to lead your children in the right way so that they don’t have those shortcomings that you had or some of the leadership that you didn’t have or that you had but you overlooked. You understand it better and you try to instill it more in them. It becomes about you know what can I do to better me”.

– African American Mother, Low-Income, Richmond

- “I mean I just want to be happy. Like she was saying before, I don’t need to be rich; I just want to be comfortable where I am not worried about paying this bill or doing this. Just being comfortable basically and being happy.” - African American Mother, Moderate Income, Chicago
- “I kind of feel pressured about certain things. It’s like I am so focused on doing things and that’s what kind of makes me feel hindered if something like my credit is keeping me back or small little things, but it’s a small little things that is just like man I got to do this and I got to do this. Yeah, you start to feel like trapped you know. Overwhelmed.” - African American Mother, Moderate Income, Chicago
- “To get into financially stable and be able to spend time, vacations, you know have me time, have me and my husband time, and family time. We are busy working, both of us just work you know.” – White Mother, Low-Income, Richmond

It is difficult for some of these mothers to have big dreams for themselves when they are living day-to-day and paycheck-to-paycheck.

- “I think some of the dreams I can’t pursue because of that, because I have things already holding me back, like I need to pay my mortgage. I can’t just quit my job and hope... switching jobs I am afraid because if I do, they might let me go after a little while, or it may be worse than where I am at right now.” - Asian American Mother, Chicago
- “Financial stability. We lost our house two years ago. Right after we had our daughter, my husband was out of work. So I stayed home for a while and then went back to work, and then as soon as I went back to work he was out of work for maybe two weeks ...and we got so far behind and here it is...my daughter is going to be four in August...four years later and we still are not caught up. It’s still two paychecks ago to two paychecks ago..” – White Mother, Low-Income, Richmond

Mothers’ Goals for Themselves

Many single mothers say that having children put their own goals on pause. Some report that they dropped out of college or high school, or that they needed to put their career aside when their children were born. Finishing their education remains a goal of theirs, and they believe that doing so will improve their situation. Many would like to go back to school for a class or more training but they have difficulty managing or coming up with the necessary time and money. Some parents express a sense of frustration at the opportunity cost of the responsibilities of being a parent. They love their children and do not blame them or resent them for the impact having them has had on their lives, but are very cognizant of the life they left behind in order to be there for their children.

- “I have always been at the borderline for financial assistance...some things I qualified for and other things I didn’t and it was just very hard. I was a very, very good mom. Everybody looked down on me because of it. I had my son at 14 and like I got educated early...I graduated my sophomore year and got a scholarship for Princeton and I chose not giving my son up to somebody else instead of taking my education, and I kind of regret that, but at the same time, I love my son and I wouldn’t change that decision.” - Latina Mother, Low-Income, Denver
- “I feel good about being home with my children, but sometimes I feel like I am missing out on my career and things that I could have did. Yeah, just stuff that I...because it’s like you get rid of yourself and it’s just all about the kids or whatever and it’s like...” - African American Mother, Moderate Income, Chicago
- “Well I was thinking about going back to get my master’s, and you know at this point, you know having a three year old that has to go to daycare and you know we have a mortgage payment and we have lots of other bills that come in, I can’t just quit work and go and get my master’s.” – White Mother, Low-Income, Richmond

Being a good parent and raising a good child has become the goal for these mothers. They put their children first in every decision they make. They are working hard to set a good example and their primary goal is to create a world of opportunity for their children.

- “Well like I got pregnant and had my daughter. My goals were different before I had her, but now like my goals are more for her, like I want everything for her. I put her before myself.” – Latina Mother, Low-Income, Denver
- “Everything is about her. You know seeing her do okay with her life and her career and watching her grow and become a woman.” - White Mother, Moderate Income, Chicago
- “Like I know no matter what is going on with me, I always put my daughter first. So if she needs something over what I need, it’s going to always be her... I think at this point, we are all like...you know we focus on if we had dreams, they would probably go to our children.” – African American Mother, Low-Income, Richmond

Dreams for Their Children

Similar to the single mothers and fathers in 2011, today low and moderate income mothers express their dreams as the dreams they have for their children.

- “I know no matter what is going on with me; I always put my daughter first. So if she needs something over what I need, it’s going to always be her. And I think that’s where a lot of us are struggling when you say you know what do we have for our dreams. I think at this point...we focus on if we had dreams, they would probably go to our children.” – African American Mother, Low-Income, Richmond

- “Your dreams become primarily about your children. Everything that you do and everything that you strive for it’s to not just better yourself; it’s not about you anymore; it’s about you having to be that backbone and that strong person to lead your children in the right way so that they don’t have those shortcomings that you had or some of the leadership that you didn’t have or that you had but you overlooked.” – African American Mother, Low-Income, Richmond

When prompted about different hopes and dreams for their sons compared to their daughters, many parents focus more immediately on college, jobs, and making money for their sons. They wish the same for their daughters, but also add finding a good husband one day; a partner and companion who shares responsibilities and makes their daughter happy. They see marriage as part of a happy successful life for their children, though secondary to pursuing the career of their choice and being happy and content. They also want their daughters to be independent and able to make it on their own.

Word Cloud: Mothers were asked to write their associations to the phrase “My Child’s Future.” The larger the word below, the more often it was written by participants. (tadxedo.com).



Teenagers' Dreams and Goals

Some of the older teens have specific career paths they want to pursue; Navy Seals, psychologist and graphic designer were mentioned by some of the boys, while professional dance, church missionary, and psychologist were mentioned by some of the girls.

- “My dream is to be an animator or design shoes for Nike or Jordan or Adidas.” - Teenage Boy 16-18, Chicago
- “I want to be a psychologist and work in a tall tower like this one.” - Teenage Boy 16-18, Chicago
- “I want to be a Navy Seal.” - Teenage Boy 16-18, Chicago
- “I want to be either a web designer or a computer programmer.” - Teenage Boy 16-18, Chicago
- “Being a missionary. That’s pretty important.” – Teenage Girl 16-18, Denver
- “Well I want to later become a psychologist...get my Ph.D. in Psychology so I can help people..” – Teenage Girl 16-18, Denver
- “I want to become a teacher.” – Teenage Girl 16-18, Denver
- “I want to be a pediatric nurse.” – Teenage Girl 16-18, Denver
- “I want to be a hair stylist when I grow up because like I love being around people and I love doing hair .” – Teenage Girl 12-14, Richmond
- “I want to be a chef, I love eating and I love cooking. I just want to go to Paris.” – Teenage Girl 12-14, Richmond

Many of the teenage boys in both Denver and Chicago have dreams of playing professional sports. The older teens see sports as a route to a free college education. For the younger teens who are further away from college, professional sports stardom is a fantasy future of theirs.

- “Probably college football.” - Teenage Boy 16-18, Chicago
- “Getting into the college I want to with a scholarship for baseball.” - Teenage Boy 16-18, Chicago

- “I’d like to go to the Major League, but if that doesn’t work out, I would like to be a trainer.” - Teenage Boy 16-18, Chicago
- “To be an NBA All-star.” – Pre-teen Boy 12-14, Denver
- “Probably like playing in the NBA.” – Pre-teen Boy 12-14, Denver

Across the teen and pre-teen groups, independence and self-reliance emerge as core values. Being independent, on your own, and successful are aspirational goals. These teens believe that they are in control of their own futures, and see themselves as their major barrier to being successful and being happy.

- “Sometimes you say you are going to do stuff and let it go. You are like oh yeah, I will start it tomorrow, and then some people just don’t do it and then they end up getting behind and then they still say they want to do it and then it is too late for it to be done and you can’t reach it.” - Teenage Boy 16-18, Chicago
- “I don’t want to say this, but friendships [are a barrier]. You feel a need to like feel good about yourself and be around your friends and you hang out with them more than you would.” - Teenage Boy 16-18, Chicago

Word Cloud: Teens were asked to write their associations to the phrase “My Future.” The larger the word below, the more often it was written by participants. (tadxedo.com).



Goals

For most of the older boys and girls the top of mind goal they have for themselves is going to college.

- “College.” “College.” “College.” - Teenage Boys 16-18, Chicago
- “College.” “College.” “College.” - Teenage Girls 16-18, Denver
- “To go to a good college. I want to go to VCU.” – Pre-teen Girl 12-14, Richmond
- “Because nowadays you need really a college education to have a steady job that could support you. “ – Pre-teen Boy 12-14, Denver

Some of the teenagers say that college is not necessary in order to become successful professionally, though they all recognize the need for some kind of training. They have examples from their lives of people close to them who have not gone to college but who have still found a successful career.

- “There is a way to be successful without it. I mean my aunt is a skin [] now and she didn’t go to college. She just got training. She start out like a secretary and...” – Teenage Girl 16-18, Denver
- “Because in my family too... like they graduated, but it was late when they went to college. They did it on their own, so.” – Teenage Girl 16-18, Denver
- “My mom or dad never went to college and they are doing really good. But then my mom went back to college and she is done now.” – Pre-teen Boy 12-14, Denver

However most of the teenagers believe that getting a college education is necessary in order to achieve a good paying job and a steady career. Most say that not getting a college education will hold them back in the future.

- “If you want to go like in the NBA, you have to have a good education sometimes and I don’t think they take players straight out of high school anymore. So like college is like mandatory in entry to the NBA. You have to have college to get you a really good job.” – Pre-teen Boy 12-14, Denver
- “Not getting into a college that I might want, because if you don’t get into college, then you can’t do what you want to do. You can’t learn about it and everything.” – Pre-teen Girl 12-14, Richmond

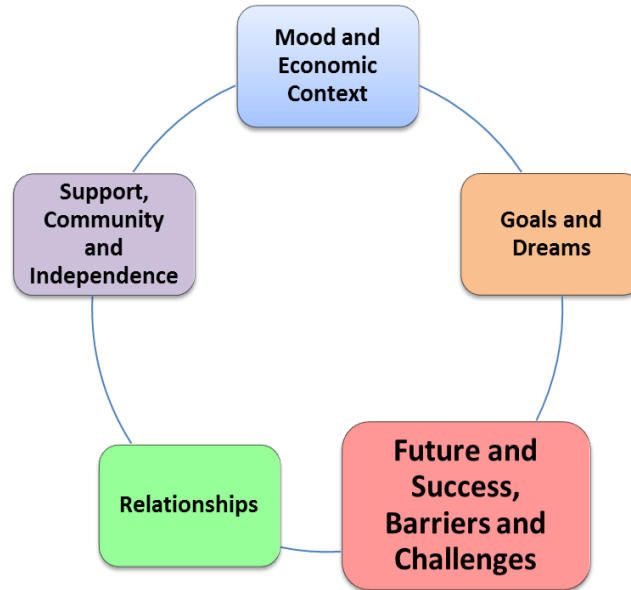
- “My stepmom she went to college for four years and she uses absolutely nothing from what she learned from college in her life. I agree with them and I am going to go to college, but that kind of stuff, it’s like oh wow.” – Pre-teen Girl 12-14, Richmond

Almost all of the older teens worry about affording college. They are acutely aware of how expensive a college education is and how many people have high debt and student loans. Some are thankful that their parents will be able to contribute, while others are thinking about taking out loans or working while they attend school.

- “Yeah, getting into a college and then paying for it because I have four brothers that are all around my age.” - Teenage Boy 16-18, Chicago
- “I am going out of state to college and it’s just going to be a struggle. Like I got a decent scholarship, but I don’t know because my sister is going next year and then parents are divorced. Like money is just a struggle.” – Teenage Girl 16-18, Denver
- “It’s just insane. I don’t understand why they are so expensive.” – Teenage Girl 16-18, Denver
- [how do you plan on paying for college?] “Loans.” – Teenage Girl 16-18, Denver x7
- “Saving up. Every time you say you want to go to the movies, you can take that money that you were going to spend and put it in the bank.” – Pre-teen Boy 12-14, Denver

Some of the boys and girls also bring up having a family as a goal of theirs one day. They want to marry and have children.

- “Taking care of my family.” - Teenage Boy 16-18, Chicago
- “I guess helping people and like having kids is a big one because that’s like setting your ___ right there in the world...like here is a person.” – Teenage Girl 16-18, Denver
- “To get married eventually.” - Teenage Girl 12-14, Richmond



Future and Success, Barriers and Challenges

“I don’t want them to have struggles like what the statistics say. Just not getting with the wrong people and stuff like that. I don’t want them to have to go through that. I just want them to stay focused on going to college and you know whatever they want to do. I just want them to stay on the straight path.” – African American Mother, Low-Income, Richmond

Success for Their Children

Mothers outline success for their children in the same way they define what they want for themselves; happiness, health, stability, and positive relationships.

They define success for their children in broad terms. They want their children to be happy and be able to pursue whatever career they want. College is an important component that many see as part of their children's future as a means to eventual financial stability. Moms of girls talk about postponing pregnancy to get a better start.

- “I want them to be able to express themselves so that they can pick and choose what they want to do and not be afraid to say whatever they want to say, but in a nice way.” - Asian American Mother, Chicago
- “I say when they have reached their goals, so whatever they want to be in life and how trustworthy they are and they are doing what they are supposed to do. I would say that's successful. I just want them to be happy, both of them. Just be happy.” - African American Mother, Moderate Income, Chicago
- “It needs a combination of a few things. I think for them to succeed they will grow up to be stable, happy adults, happy with their careers, happy with their family lives.” - African American Mother, Moderate Income, Chicago
- “Mine would that my children are healthy first and foremost and successful in whatever it is that they want to do, whether it be college...it may not be college, but if they are happy and healthy as far as mentally and financially, then I would be happy. So I am not really...” – African American Mother, Low-Income, Richmond
- “I didn't want my daughter to get pregnant.” – Latina Mother, Low-Income, Denver

Beyond happiness, mothers want their children to have a better life than their own. They want them to be able to pursue their goals, live comfortably, and not have to deal with the challenges and stresses they have endured.

- “To have a better life than what I did.” – Latina Mother, Low-Income, Denver
- “I don't know. I guess to be...my whole life was “have to”...I have to take care of my kids...I don't want them to have a “have to” kind of life where they feel they have to do something to survive or to live. I want them to be able to live a life without any kids and explore and get to know themselves before they settle down and have a family.” – Latina Mother, Low-Income, Denver
- “You always want something better for your kids.” – Latina Mother, Low-Income, Denver

- “If they want to go, they can go and do whatever... but they already know they are going to college like it or not. That is one thing I am not letting up on.” – White Mother, Low-Income, Richmond
- “My dream for my children is to stay focused in what they have already set for themselves. My daughter has been saying since she was four that she wants to be a doctor, that she wants to be a pediatrician, and she constantly sets the tone to do those things. I mean with the help from me of course, but she stays on top of her grades. She is in the Partnership for the Future Program, and she is headed in the right direction. She has a great GPA. My son says he wants to go to college. He is very focused education-wise and I just want them to remain on that. So my dream for them is that they do because I lost that focus. When it came time for me to go to college, I decided that’s not what I wanted to do, and I regretted it later. I ended up going you know after I was an adult and have gotten my degree, but I feel that I wouldn’t have had a lot of the challenges that I had had I stayed on the path that I was on.” – African American Mother, Low-Income, Richmond

Mothers believe that a college education is very important for their children. It will help them pursue and achieve a happier, easier and more stable life than their own. It will enable them to have a career instead of a job; which implies for them that they will be working on something that they are passionate about instead of simply trying to make enough money to pay bills and get by.

- “[To] go to school and college and you know not struggle with a job and make it from paycheck to paycheck.” – Latina Mother, Low-Income, Denver
- “Go all the way in school. All the way... It is probably the strongest foundation you can ever have. People can take your money, they can take your house, your car, but you will always have your education to fall back on.” – Latina Mother, Low-Income, Denver
- “Once she is like really involved in school and I see she is making progress, she is really focused on doing what she needs to do and she is getting the job done. Then I’ll know she is headed for success.” - African American Mother, Moderate Income, Chicago
- “You have to finish school to be successful.” - African American Mother, Moderate Income, Chicago
- “Involved in many activities, finish junior high school and high school and college, financially stable, staying safe. I want to have investments for her. Successful and being able to handle life.” - African American Mother, Moderate Income, Chicago
- “For my children...I have one for my daughter. I want her to be mindful, career-driven, smart decision making. Education. I like to think about her education. Just be successful and be talented in a lot of things.” - Asian American Mother, Chicago

They also believe that self-confidence, independence and self-reliance are important tools for their children to lead a happy life. Mothers want their children to focus on themselves and doing the best they can to achieve happiness on their own without having to depend on someone first. In other contexts they bring up the importance of having a stable relationship that can add value to their lives, but they say self-confidence and independence are a necessary foundation.

- “I was told you are in charge of your own happiness in your life, so just stay focused on that and just be happy.” – Latina Mother, Low-Income, Denver
- “Be yourself, be strong, keep your dreams, and never give up... Just so that you can always stay focused and never give up on whatever they want to do in life.” – Latina Mother, Low-Income, Denver
- [*best advice for kids*] “I said live your life for yourself. I found myself always trying to please...I was the only child and so I was always trying to please my mom and you know everybody else in my family. You have to do it for yourself; you can’t please everybody in the world.” – White Mother, Low-Income, Richmond

Barriers

Some single mothers describe being a single parent as a significant challenge. It challenges their time and level of patience to deal with issues on their own without a partner.

- “I would definitely say being a single parent is my biggest challenge.” - African American Mother, Moderate Income, Chicago
- “Being a single parent and going back and forth with my daughter’s father. It’s just been a nightmare. You know here it is I am just trying to go to work and take care of my daughter, and the things that I ask for from him is like I get such a hard time. I am not out trying to party or whatever; I am strictly taking care of my daughter. And I feel like I get the hardest time with that, so that’s like the biggest challenge for me right now.” – African American Mother, Moderate Income, Chicago

They frequently mention child care as a barrier. Having access to childcare would save them time and money which are two resources they feel they lack in general. They also worry about whether or not they can trust their children with the child care that is available. A lot of mothers say they rely on their family or close friends for childcare. Single moms also talk about the barrier of less education because they had children early and dropped out or didn’t go to school.

- “[*If there were affordable childcare, what could you accomplish?*] Money wise, I mean it’s a paycheck. I work to pay the daycare. It would save me a lot of money. It would save so much.” – White Mother, Low-Income, Richmond

- “[And that example of your mom taking over the childcare help in keeping you financially stable?] Yeah, because I was able to save and I still gave her money even though she didn’t want me to.” – African American Mother, Moderate Income, Chicago
- “[Have you had any help with childcare?]” “I use my parents.” “Family.” – Exchange, Latina Mother, Low-Income, Denver
- “I was just going to say that my two-year degree my dad actually paid for out of pocket, but when I went back and got my bachelor’s degree, which only took me two years...I did it on a full-time basis and worked full-time, but I am in debt right now \$42,000. I think I was just so excited because I dropped out of high school and I looked at how far I had come. But now that they are wanting me to make these \$300 payments a month and it’s really...you get the bill in the mail and it is just interest and penalties. So I don’t want my children to have to go through that.” – White Mother, Low-Income, Richmond

Word Cloud: Mothers were asked what if women really had the supported they need in our society, what would that look like? The larger the word below, the more often it was written by participants. (tadxedo.com).



Success for the Teenagers

Success for these teenagers is going to college and pursuing a career. Some bring up a relationship, kids, and family as something they know they want for themselves and include it as their idea of what a successful life is, but it is second to pursuing a career.

Teenagers bring up college not just as a goal but as a marker of and a means to success.

- “To be the first one to go to college in my family and be more successful than anybody else in my family.” – Pre-teen Boy 12-14, Denver
- “Go to college and pass it.” – Pre-teen Boy 12-14, Denver
- “I hope to go to the best college, like hope to go to college I want to go to. I hope to graduate; I hope to you know get a job I want; I hope to get a nice house and a family or whatnot.” – Pre-teen Girl 12-14, Richmond

For some of the teenage boys in Chicago, independence is an indication of success.

- “Doing what you want.” – Teenage Boy 16-18, Chicago
- “Making a living and having enough to support you.” – Teenage Boy 16-18, Chicago

Having a family emerges as an additional goal and marker of success for both boys and girls. It is not a top of mind consideration, but when pressed if they see it as part of their future and as something they aspire toward, both boys and girls say they want marriage and kids one day, and consider it part of a successful future.

- “My life dreams are to get my dream house – three levels and eight bedrooms and a party basement. Yeah, with a lot of money for me and my family.” – Teenage Girl 16-18, Denver
- “Well being successful and having a wife.” – Pre-teen Boy 12-14, Denver
- [Is marriage something that you all think about as part of your future?] “I mean if I don’t get married, there is no kids, so I mean I guess so.” – Pre-teen Girl 12-14, Richmond
- [Is marriage something that you all think about as part of your future?] “I said yes because you always want like someone there to tell you you can and you like won’t give up and someone who is like always by your side. I guess you say they are there for you 24/7 when no one else can be there.” – Pre-teen Girl 12-14, Richmond

- *[Is marriage something that you all think about as part of your future?] “I mean for me marriage is kind of far away, kids and whatnot, so it’s not like I think about it a lot, but it does come across my mind every so often. I wonder who I am going to get married to and how many kids I am going to have or whatnot.” – Pre-teen Girl 12-14, Richmond*
- “I feel like your family is going to be there with you whatever in the good or bad times. They are going to always be there for you.” – Pre-teen Girl 12-14, Richmond

Barrier to Success: They are Their Own Key to Success

Boys and girls alike acknowledge that they are the key to their own success and whether they succeed is up to their determination, ability, and perseverance. When asked to mention barriers to their success, most cite themselves as a principle barrier. When they talk about advice they would give to others it often references the idea of making it on your own. They occasionally point to possible external distractions like friends and outside events that can impact studying and pursuing their goals, but they believe it is up to them to stay on track. When they talk about younger siblings, they talk about the negative impact of peer pressure.

Boys and girls believe that confidence and self-esteem are important for success and happiness. In fact they talk about self-esteem applications for their phones and an app where you can ask for advice to real situations and get real answers.

The best advice they have received varies around a similar theme of believing in oneself – never give up, be independent, trust just yourself, be true to yourself etc. Boys also talk about learning respect for others and women from their parents.

- “Well I never really liked school, but they said just get it over with and finish it because it is something you need to be successful.” – Teenage Boy 16-18, Chicago
- “Don’t let nothing or no one get in the way. Keep at your goal. You know keep being motivated. Be optimistic and all that.” – Teenage Girl 16-18, Denver
- “A friend of mine passed away a few years ago who always told me...because I had problems in seventh grade...he always told me never think you are anything less than beautiful. Not in like looks, but like your personality too. So like always be true to yourself. So that stuck.” – Teenage Girl 16-18, Denver

Barrier to Success: Financial Knowledge

Financial management and the value of understanding what it means to earn money emerge as important issues. These children have grown up in a time when they appear to have heard their parents talk about money a lot, and were likely denied experiences and material goods as

a result of tight budgets. Even the younger children bring up money often as a barrier to their success and a challenge in their life. Boys and girls design apps that would help them make smarter decisions with their money. They are concerned about their own potential behavior; will they spend within their means or not?

Beyond the ability to manage money, teenagers acknowledge the need to be responsible with money. They say they want to know how to live within their means and not get into debt. They would like financial training education in school and think it would benefit their peers.

- "Know that you are going to have the money that you need to go to college and to graduate, to buy your own house, buy your own car and you know like have assurance that what you want to do is going to happen." - Pre-teen Girl 12-14, Richmond
- "Just like how to be smart in terms of like buying a house or renting or buying a car and stuff like that. I mean I am not saying there should be classes on that because that's not like something that is class worthy, but it's something that they should kind of touch on." – Teenage Boy 16-18, Chicago
- "I feel like...my sister, she graduated high school and she is kind of like...they didn't like teach her anything...like my parents had to teach her...like they said it should be a class even though they are paying for it, but I think that it is worthy of teaching the kid how to be smart with their money or whatever." – Teenage Boy 16-18, Chicago
- "Not really manage; just like to be smart with it and not just like...to know how much you have and to spend it wisely and to know what you can afford. Kind of like he was saying, like classes that are going to be teaching you what you are supposed to be doing like when you are older, like buy a car and pay taxes and all that, because they don't really explain much how to do that. But when you are done with all that, you are just expected to know how to do it." – Teenage Boy 16-18, Chicago
- [*Designing an app for class*] "It would be an app to help you spend the money, like what to buy and what not to buy; how to improve on what you did the last time you made a mistake." – Pre-teen Boy 12-14, Denver

These teenagers have heard many conversations in their households about money over the past several years of the recession. Their parents' worries about money have created some anxiety for them. For some of the older teens, they feel pressure from their parents to contribute financially right now. Among younger teens, the financial stress their parents endure comes through as something that causes anxiety.

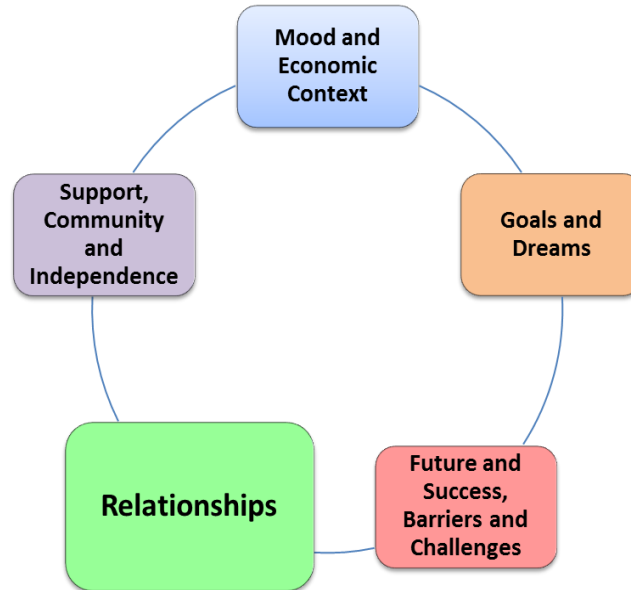
- "I mean I love my parents to death, but they are constantly like at my throat about making money and paying my own bills. Like I have to pay for the car that I drive and I have to pay for insurance. I have to start paying for my own phone bill. It's a lot to take

in because I didn't have to do...I got everything free when I was in high school and less than a month ago that was all taken away. It's a lot to take in. I mean it's a ton of responsibility that was just like thrown at me." – Teenage Girl 16-18, Denver

- "That money was never invented. Because you know everybody...everything is about money. Money, money, money. With anything. About anything. It's all about money." – Pre-teen Boy 12-14, Denver

Despite the concerns they have over money generally and affording college in particular, the older and younger boys and girls all remain optimistic that they can have a good life. They do not see external or structural barriers in their lives; it is up to them to continue to make good decisions and avoid the mistakes they have seen others around them make.

- "I like where I am at now and where I am heading. I am at a good school and I will be getting to go to college. And find a good job." – Teenage Boy 16-18, Chicago
- "Because I think it's possible to go...like I want to get a job and I think it's possible, and I guess it is just taking it one step at a time and hoping that I can get to that point. I think I can do it, so there is no reason to be negative I guess." – Teenage Boy 16-18, Chicago
- [*positive or negative about your future*] "I am positive about my future, but you know there is always still that fear in the back of my mind that I am just going to fail. You know everybody has that. Especially once you graduate." – Teenage Girl 16-18, Denver
- [*positive or negative about your future?*] "Positive." "Positive." "Positive." "Positive." – Pre-teen Boy 12-14, Denver
- [*positive or negative about your future?*] "Positive." "Positive." "Positive." – Pre-teen Girl 12-14, Richmond



Relationships

“Independence. Like that’s why I want to get married so that I have...I am happy, but I would be so much happier...”

“That’s like being codependent though. I am sorry. I know we are in a focus group”

“But just when my son goes to sleep just so...I mean when he smiles, someone else is there to see it. When he goes to the doctor, I have someone to call. Because I was very codependent to my past relationship, so I don’t know...I want him to see me happy and I want him to understand love.” – Exchange - White Mothers, Richmond

Single mothers value a healthy and stable relationship. They want respect, companionship, and someone to share in the responsibilities of raising a child. Many have been in unhealthy relationships before. They also believe it is better to get out of bad relationships and hard to find the right partner.

Many single mothers would like to be in a stable relationship with a boyfriend or a husband. They want a partner to help make their lives easier in terms of pitching in on parental duties and responsibilities but also for companionship. Latina mother especially express this sentiment.

- “I would want to be married again someday.” – Latina Mother, Low-Income, Denver
- “Companionship... They make you feel wanted and loved.” - Latina Mother, Low-Income, Denver
- “I’d like to meet somebody again. I didn’t date at all when my son was younger and it would be nice just to find a nice guy. I have been on websites and they are brutal. I can’t believe there are that many ridiculous men out there.” - Asian American Mother, Chicago
- [dreams for yourself] “I want my son to have a family and I want to buy a house. I can’t do that alone.” – White Mothers, Low-Income Richmond

Married mothers bring up how important having a partner is, and single mothers in good relationships feel very happy to have one.

- “Well I rely on my husband because if he wasn’t working then I wouldn’t have a house and meals to deal with...Everything else, I rely on myself.” - Asian American Mother, Chicago
- “I think I rely on my husband because he has like...he is not here; his work is kind of like out of town, so he is not here during the week. So when he comes back, I feel like I am relieved because then I could push off the responsibility and he could take some of what I normally try to juggle, so I could push it off on him.” - Asian American Mother, Chicago
- [What do you depend on the most?] “My husband. He is just a real grounded person, so he can easily tell me things like well it could be worse or you know...so he just kind of brings me back to reality when I am feeling stressed or overwhelmed.” – White Mothers, Low-Income Richmond

Women bring different notions of independence to their feelings about relationships. Some want to be independent and self-sufficient and see a relationship as infringing on that. Others also want to be independent, but in the context of a relationship where they can share with their partner. They all know the importance of being able to make it on your own because they know many women at some point will be alone.

- “To be independent actually. Well at the moment I need my mother to be there. But I want to be able to do it all on my own. Unlike everybody, I do not want to get married. I have done that once and it did not work well. I want to look back and be like I did it.” – White Mothers, Low-Income Richmond
- “Independence. Like that’s why I want to get married so that I have...I am happy, but I would be so much happier... But just when my son goes to sleep just so...I mean when he smiles, someone else is there to see it. But definitely, I was very codependent to my past relationship, so I don’t know...I want him to see me happy and I want him to understand love.” – White Mothers, Low-Income Richmond

Ingredients of a Good Relationship

These mothers say they need communication, trust, respect and honesty for their relationships to work, be stable and healthy. Women believe if those ingredients are not present then they should not be in a relationship.

- *[What makes a stable relationship?]*
- “Trust.” – White Mothers, Low-Income Richmond
- “Honesty.” – White Mothers, Low-Income Richmond
- “Sanity.” – White Mothers, Low-Income Richmond
- “Communication.” – White Mothers, Low-Income Richmond
- “Support.” – White Mothers, Low-Income Richmond

Role of Respect in Relationships

Mothers believe it is important to teach their children about respect when it comes to a relationship. They are actively trying to teach their sons to respect women and many boys hear that lesson. They want their daughters to respect themselves so that they can recognize when a potential partner respects them and more importantly when they do not. A relationship without respect is not worth having.

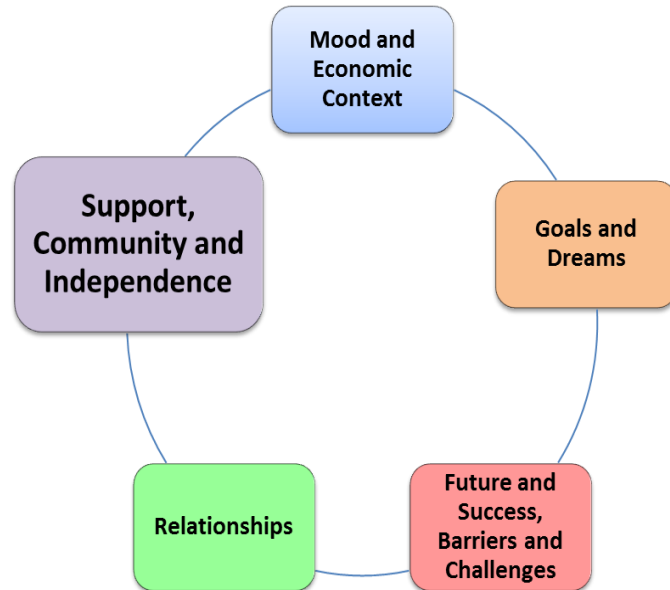
- “I teach them about relationships and that not all relationships are to be permanent, and that if you are not honest with the person that you are in a relationship with and they are not honest with you, then you have not relationship.” – African American Mother, Low-Income, Richmond
- “Kind of like trade off. I teach my children that all relationships aren’t healthy, and once you realize that you are dealing with somebody that causes you a lot of pain or hurt or if you are the one who is causing it, then there has to be a separation.” – African American

Mother, Low-Income, Richmond

- “Well I teach my kids if it’s not healthy, if it’s hindering, it doesn’t need to be a relationship.” – African American Mother, Low-Income, Richmond

Mothers talk extensively about past experiences where there was a lack of respect, or the relationship created parameters in their life that were not healthy.

- “I guess it’s kind of hard because of an 18-year relationship that went bad. I guess I kind of learned to depend on someone else to be happy is the surest way to be sad. So I am going to depend on my own self to make myself happy.” – Latina Mother, Low-Income, Denver
- “When I was in a relationship...I wasn’t allowed to do nothing and now I do whatever. So now that I am not in a relationship, I just go out a lot more and I feel better.” – Latina Mother, Low-Income, Denver
- “As I became more educated and independent, I guess I chose my career over a relationship because my career is not going to wake up one day and say I don’t love you anymore.” – Latina Mother, Low-Income, Denver
- “I have issues with my five-year-old’s father...in and out of court, in and out of court, every single month, and it’s just like it is draining mentally, emotionally, financially.” - African American Mother, Moderate Income, Chicago
- “You have to have respect to get respect and vice versa. You know if you don’t respect yourself or if people don’t respect you, you are going to get walked all over. And it’s a tough world nowadays, you have to stand up for yourself and not put yourself down or you are not going to go anywhere.” – White Mothers, Low-Income Richmond



Support, Community, and Independence

“Be successful, independent... Because you have to be successful nowadays and always depend on yourself. You can’t depend on anybody to take care of you. You always have to depend on yourself.” – Latina Mother, Low-Income, Denver

These groups helped us get a much more nuanced and thorough understanding of peoples' views on independence. Being on your own is not just simply a condition or a barrier; it is also a core value and aspiration which makes dealing with it much more complicated.

Mothers and children alike express a desire for independence and self-reliance. Mothers know that their parental responsibilities are made easier with a partner, but even married parents view their family unit as insulated from their neighbors and broader community. Single parents feel the pressures of being on their own even more, and the idea of looking for support in their network or community does not come naturally.

- [Advice to children] "Follow your dreams and don't rely on others." - Asian American Mother, Chicago
- "Be independent." - White Mother, Moderate Income, Chicago
- "I guess my hope would be that my kids will be more independent and they could be more on their own than to be attached." - Asian American Mother, Chicago
- "Be smart, strong, independent, and not naïve." - African American Mother, Moderate Income, Chicago
- "To be honest, responsible, independent adults." - Latina Mother, Low-Income, Denver
- [Advice to children] "I said don't trust everyone that says they are your friend." – African American Mother, Low-Income, Richmond
- [Advice to children] "I just think it's important now that he be a leader and not a follower. You always lead by example. Do not follow someone because you think it's cool or you think it's something that you should do, but in the back of your mind you know you shouldn't. So don't always follow. You know be the leader. Be an example. You know if it means you are going opposite, then you go opposite." – African American Mother, Low-Income, Richmond

Even the children we spoke to cite the best advice they have heard as a variation on a similar theme of 'believe in yourself' 'do not give up' or 'be independent.' They want their younger siblings to have self-esteem and confidence.

- "To never stop trying." – Pre-teen Boy 12-14, Denver
- "Stay in school and play a big role in the community and do as much as you can to be successful and like set goals and achieve higher than them and really care about what you do and be yourself and be confident." – Pre-teen Boy 12-14, Denver
- "Never settle for less than the best." – Pre-teen Girl 12-14, Richmond

- “Honestly, myself first... But like my boyfriend and my mom, they help me a lot.”- Latina Mother, Low-Income, Denver
- “My parents, husband, and my church.” – Latina Mother, Low-Income, Denver
- “I rely on my own [family] because I don’t have any other family here who would help me out. Another thing is I don’t know if it’s the same with all Asian communities or not, but we have family responsibilities. When you get married, you marry the whole family.” - Asian American Mother, Chicago
- “Well my mom, she helps with my son, and also, she picks him up from school.”- African American Mother, Moderate Income, Chicago
- “I put my mom, not really for a lot of help, but maybe an occasional drop off for babysitting, or if I need computer help, I always ask my brother. So that’s really...otherwise, I can’t think of anything.” - White Mother, Moderate Income, Chicago
- “My husband, I rant to. And my mom if I need someone to watch the kids. And my sister is another one that I talk to.” – White Mother, Low-Income, Richmond

When prompted, these parents recall episodes where friends helped them with jobs, or family members loaned them money, or a friend watched their kids or gave rides. But their overall sentiment centers around the fact that they feel they are on their own. When they have helped someone, they do not expect reciprocity even when the person would be likely to help them. While rarely volunteered, many report that friends and family have helped them get a job, however they do not see these necessarily as actively tapping into a network, but rather the recognition that many jobs today are filled through word of mouth.

- “I call her my sister, she is a friend. She provides me with resources. I want to be an entrepreneur, so every time she something I don’t see, she will shoot me an email. And of course, my husband...I’ve had some family crisis when all these networks set in...it wasn’t just me...it was just because I was connected to them that they helped my family out.” – African American Mother, Low-Income, Richmond
- “Well actually it kind of coincides with the other question that you asked about support. It’s weird because one of my support systems is the YMCA. They pick my daughter up from school and take her there until six o’clock, and then my neighbor works there and she lives next door to me. So the YMCA picks her up...I don’t get off work until 9:00, but the YMCA closes at 6:00, so since she lives next door to me, she will take my daughter and keep her until I get off work.” - African American Mother, Moderate Income, Chicago
- “With my business, there is a WB, like the Women’s Business Enterprise Network, that’s probably I would say a group that I go to try to figure out what’s my next step to get to

my next point with my business and stuff like that.” - African American Mother, Moderate Income, Chicago

- “I think of...well my kids are in Scouts and so there is three other moms that have kids the same level as my son and we, for whatever reason, are really tight, and so I think for social time, we are always having people over to each other’s houses or planning a night without the kids.” - White Mother, Moderate Income, Chicago
- “Like this one family that we know, they lost their job and they were probably right on the street with three kids, so we took them into our house for a week. I mean that’s the most I was able to do, but at least that helps them out until they find other resources.” – Asian American Mother, Chicago

Some mothers indicate that they have larger networks that they can turn to consisting of other moms, their church, and people they went to school with over the years. Facebook and other social media come up occasionally as a forum for keeping in touch with old friends and co-workers, as well as occasionally venting about daily life. But these mothers do not think of such broader networks as a source of support even if it provides support as an outlet for airing frustrations.

- “I have my mom, my husband, my brothers, but more than my brothers, my sisters-in-law – they are so great, my kids, my girlfriends, my neighbors, and other moms because I have like a book group or club.” - Asian American Mother, Chicago
- “Since I have had a baby, I see that there is more like a mother network, even if it’s just like people that I went to high school with on Facebook. It’s still company.” – White Mother, Low-Income, Richmond
- “I have my family, my friends, my church, my neighbors, my sorority, my social club, and my religious club.” – African American Mother, Low-Income, Richmond

Some mothers express reluctance to ask their neighbors or even some of their friends for help. Several reasons for this lack of interaction include being too proud to ask for help, not really having a relationship or caring to develop one, not wanting to hear other people vent about their problems, or being too tired at the end of the day to interact with others. Interestingly, some people find it easier to turn to a government program or agency than neighbors or friends because of their pride.

- “My neighbors are cool, but I wouldn’t necessary ask them for anything. And they are a lot older than we are. You know they have grandkids and stuff so.” – White Mother, Low-Income, Richmond
- “Myself first and I’d turn to a government agency or community center before I would turn to my friends and family... It’s something that I can get done on my own.” - Latina Mother, Low-Income, Denver

- “No. I feel like all the women I talk to all they want to talk about is their problems. And like I am not a therapist and I don’t want to talk about that. [Laughter.] So I want a normal conversation, you know not about your husband and he is sleeping with so and so. I don’t want to be involved with that.” – White Mother, Low-Income, Richmond

Mothers recognize the value that having a network can provide them, particularly around transportation and helping get their kids to activities. Relatives provide transportation to and from child care (or in many cases provide the care themselves). Having a network of family or friends or other mothers gives them critical logistical support; those who lack that network feel it acutely.

- “My daughter she wants to be involved in a lot of things and I want her to be, but unfortunately, with me being by myself, I don’t have the people that can help take her and pick her up, so it’s kind of like she is (me) that kind of hinders her from doing some things, and that bothers me a lot.” - African American Mother, Moderate Income, Chicago]
- “Like work sometimes, I get off later than school is open, so I have to depend upon people to take care of him and pay them and so that wouldn’t be an issue.” - African American Mother, Moderate Income, Chicago
- “They will help me pick up and drop off. My sister lives like a block away, so she has a son and she is a single mom, so sometimes we will...well now it became like this thing on the weekend...I drop my son off to her on Saturday and then on Saturday night she drops both of them back off to my house and then they stay over with me.” - Asian American Mother, Chicago

Parents do not trust people in their community that they do not know which poses a challenge for finding acceptable child care; perhaps reflecting the sensibilities within the urban and dense suburban areas they live. They would not trust a stranger with their children.

- “Like I don’t need the community like involved like that. You know I don’t look to the community for taking care of my kids or doing all that stuff. I mean that’s a trust issue among other things.” - African American Mother, Moderate Income, Chicago
- “Yeah, I feel like I don’t live in a good enough community to say I want their support to help me with my children.” - African American Mother, Moderate Income, Chicago
- “I mean it is not a lot of small kids on my block, and then I don’t think I would feel safe with him going to other ways, either behind me or the block in front of me.” - African American Mother, Moderate Income, Chicago
- “I used to be able to ride my bike and I don’t want my son to leave the block you know.” – White Mother, Low-Income, Richmond

But beyond trust, many parents do not want to intrude on those around them and do not want to make an effort to get to know their neighbors.

- “I don’t like to intrude upon neighbors. I mean I like to have a little privacy between...because the block can be very tight knit, and not just tight knit but it is very gossipy. I mean I will watch somebody’s child, that’s fine, but I don’t push my children on other neighbors too much. You know they can play here and there, but...” - White Mother, Moderate Income, Chicago
- “I would rather keep more private.” – White Mother, Moderate Income, Chicago
- “Honestly, my neighbors, they have introduced themselves, but I never try to have that connection. I guess maybe because I have been blessed enough to have so much family that I don’t really have time for neighbors or anybody else.” – African American Mother, Low-Income, Richmond
- [Do you turn to them for anything?] “No, I don’t even know them.” – Latina Mother, Low-Income, Denver

While these families could use a lot of help, assistance and help do not create the networks and community that one might expect. Importantly, while people recognize jobs are often found by word of mouth, job searches are not creating networks either.

When asked if they have ever gotten a job through their friends or others within their support network, some can recall specific stories, but it is not a top of mind conversation that they associate with the idea of a support network.

- “My network has grown with lots and lots of people that always can say oh I know about this job opening and I know about these people and I know about this and would you like to do that. So like people are always trying to give me a new venture or a new career to look into.” - African American Mother, Moderate Income, Chicago
- “I have gotten a lot of jobs from other moms.” - Asian American Mother, Chicago
- “A lot of jobs are word of mouth too.” – White Mother, Low-Income, Richmond
- “I mean the job I have now...my best friend, she is I guess like a nurse or something in the company and she called me like 7:30 in the morning and she was like hey we have an opening, come up here today and bring your resume, and I got hired that day and started I think like the next week. So I mean without her, I probably wouldn’t have known or been fast enough.” – White Mother, Low-Income, Richmond
- “My sister was a consultant in the construction company and she knew a guy that needed a job and there you go.” – White Mother, Low-Income, Richmond

- “I had just got out of CNA school and I had been trying to find a job for three months or so and I couldn’t find a job. A friend of mine knew some people that were hiring, so that’s how I got the job through a friend.” – African American Mother, Low-Income, Richmond

Many parents express a reluctance to ask for help outside of a very narrow circle of close friends and family. Siblings, parents, and other close relatives occasionally help out taking care of children, but these parents do not think of their support networks as a place to look for job opportunities and they do not think of building a larger network for the purposes of getting a job or advancing within one.

- “I don’t really...I don’t ask for help; I just [do] it myself.” – Latina Mother, Low-Income, Denver
- “I don’t know; I just feel like...I mean people can help you, but they are not going to help with everything. You have to do things yourself.” - Latina Mother, Low-Income, Denver
- “I don’t know; there is a guilt associated with asking for help.” - White Mother, Moderate Income, Chicago

People relate how they have been helped independently of how they helped other people. They do not see this as creating a permanent support network in which they help each other out over a long time span. They are willing to help others but only rarely expect that the people they help will help them in return and regard such help more as episodic rather than systemic. The exception is mothers with strong family ties; these mothers have a more constant support system between themselves and their siblings.

- “I have taken people in with their kids... Give them things as far as babysit or maybe give them toilet paper or something.” – Latina Mother, Low-Income, Denver
- “I have my friend on the couch now and her two kids are living in my living room.” – Latina Mother, Low-Income, Denver
- “I have gotten money from my nephew before... But that is like last resort.” -Latina Mother, Low-Income, Denver
- “Like this one family that we know, they lost their job and they were probably right on the street with three kids, so we took them into our house for a week. I mean that’s the most I was able to do, but at least that helps them out until they find other resources.” - Asian American Mother, Chicago
- “Yeah, a similar thing happened to me. My friend had just had a baby and she calls me and she is like in the bedroom and he had just hit her and I am like very concerned because she has a three-month-old baby and a two-year-old and she is like I am going to go do this or whatever, and so I just called the non-emergency police number to just ask their opinion, and they said that they wanted to send an officer out. And then of

course, the police get there and she texts me like we are sleeping, and I just... Anyway, I haven't spoken to her since." – White Mother, Low-Income, Richmond

These women and their children rarely rely on neighbors or others in their communities. Their views on community reflect a lack of trust of people they do not know, an aversion to intrude on those around them that they do know and trust, and an aspiration to be independent. Thinking about community will require considering new models and methods. The one exception is the few people who are tied to their church community.

Teenager Support Networks

The younger and older kids alike describe support networks as consisting mainly of their family and friends. Teachers are a real anchor for young people and some report going back to old teachers. Some of the teens have relationships with particular teachers or coaches who serve as mentors and provide them with motivation and support. Several children utilize the community in their church for support, but generally they do not think of a support network in broader terms like community or neighborhood.

Parents and older siblings are an incredibly important source of support for teenagers. They turn to them with some issues they do not feel comfortable sharing with their friends (and vice versa).

- "My older brothers." - Teenage Boy 16-18, Chicago
- "Probably one of my older cousins because like you can tell them whatever you want and not get in trouble for it." - Teenage Boy 16-18, Chicago
- "Well see your family because it's not all the times you can trust your friends unless it's like a best friend because like a best friend is pretty much family." - Teenage Boy 16-18, Chicago"
- "My mom." – Teenage Girl 16-18, Denver
- "My parents [for money and health problems]." – Pre-teen Boy 12-14, Denver
- "Two of my older cousins. I mean my mom...it's between my mom and my best friend. Like they stay by my side...and my god-sister. They stay by my side. Like I tell them everything. Okay. I tell my friend everything. I don't tell my mom everything. There is some difference." – Pre-teen Girl 12-14, Richmond

Friends are also important for support. Many of the teens confide in their friends on relationship issues that they do not feel comfortable sharing with their parents.

- “Maybe like my best friend, but I don’t really talk. So I just don’t really confide in people as much.”- Teenage Boy 16-18, Chicago
- “My mom and like two of my best friends. I tell my mom everything. My mom is like one of my best friends. And then my friends with like boys and like when I am down and stuff, but like otherwise, I tell my mom everything.” – Pre-teen Girl 12-14, Richmond
- “Well if it’s like boys, I will probably turn to my best friend.” – Pre-teen Girl 12-14, Richmond
- “Like my friends like I turn to them for because like sometimes with like boys or just when you are down and stuff because I know like they will never judge me. Like my friends never judge me whatsoever unless it’s something that really, really bothers them, they will tell me, but like everything else, they really don’t judge me on.” – Pre-teen Girl 12-14, Richmond

Teachers and coaches provide important relationships for some students. Teens can ask for advice and confide in an adult without the risk of consequences that might happen from bringing a sensitive issue up with their parents.

- “Well there is one teacher in my school that he knows a lot about college, so I think that if I want some advice about college that I can go to him.” - Teenage Boy 16-18, Chicago
- “My English teacher, Mr. Loris...when I got back my junior year after the hospitalization and everything, he sat me down and he like talked me through things. And he went over ways to get around depression. He checked in with me all through my senior year too.” – Teenage Girl 16-18, Denver
- “Well like I have this one really, really close teacher and I tell her like everything. Like one thing I didn’t want to go to my parents about because they fight sometimes and I always tell her like...I always tell her and she always compares it to like her life or like something that just like always made me think everything was okay..” – Pre-teen Girl 12-14, Richmond
- “Coaches. I had a coach and he was amazing. He is just the type of person that you can talk to and he understands. I admire him a lot. He is like my role model.” – Pre-teen Girl 12-14, Richmond

Teenagers with a connection to a church community say that they use that community for support and help when they need it.

- “Like if I need to pray, I’ll pray. If I feel like I need advice, I will find advice. I would probably go to... I don’t know I don’t really ask for advice.” – Teenage Girl 16-18, Denver

- “It depends on like what I need help with. Sometimes I will go to my pastor or like my sister.” – Teenage Girl 16-18, Denver
- “Like my church like they always help with my brothers...actually, my brother broke his wrist and like they helped because like it was expensive...and they helped pay for it too.” - Pre-teen Boy 12-14, Denver
- “At my church, we have our youth pastor. Like he is the one. Like if you ever have an issue, that’s who you go to. So he is awesome when it comes to having issues... And I like going to church because I feel like...people will judge you, but if you find the right person, he is the one to tell.” – Pre-teen Girl 12-14, Richmond

Several bring up the internet as a source of support. Some have cultivated an online community separate from traditional social media sites. However they say that social media is not the place to disclose troubling issues.

- “The Internet sometimes. And mainly myself actually because I don’t feel like my parents would understand what I would be dealing with at times.” - Teenage Boy 16-18, Chicago
- “Okay so I am on this site all the time. It’s a blogging site... It’s just like really helpful and I talk to them about literally everything.” – Teenage Girl 16-18, Denver
- “Yeah, because to me Instagram is just looking at pictures of people that you talk to in kindergarten. It’s like connecting to people that you knew when you went to Kentucky for a week or you were at the family reunion. That’s basically what it is. It’s not a lifeline.” – Pre-teen Girl 12-14, Richmond
- “It’s not something you put your personal business on.” – Pre-teen Girl 12-14, Richmond

Conclusion

These mothers and their children remain optimistic about their future. Though the hardships mothers face remain similar to those faced in 2011 and they continue to be stretched financially, emotionally, and logistically, they remain committed to ensuring their children succeed. They have a broad and humble wish to be happy and healthy, and for their children to grow up to be healthy and fulfilled.

When mothers give advice to their children, or the teens give advice to their younger siblings, a common theme emerges of being true to ones-self, independent, and confident in the pursuit of their dreams. These themes relate to the ingredients both mothers and teens link to success; confidence and independence. They are aspirational in their advice, their goals, and in their definition of success, indicating once more their optimism for the future.

Advice Mother Would Give Their Kids, Teens Would Give Their Younger Siblings (Top Themes Shown)		
	Mothers	
Advice for their child	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Be positive and true to yourself ✓ Be independent and choose your own path ✓ Pursue your dreams and never give up 	
	Boys	Girls
Advice for younger sister	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Be independent, don't let bad influences affect you ✓ Be confident, true to yourself, and believe in yourself ✓ Do not grow up too quickly 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Be confident, true to yourself, and believe in yourself
Advice for younger brother	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Be confident, true to yourself 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Be respectful, treat others well especially women ✓ Be independent

Mothers were asked: If you could give your children one piece of advice, what would it be?

Teens were asked: If you could give your younger sister/younger brother] one piece of advice about growing up, what would it be? (Asked both younger sister, and younger brother)

This report was commissioned by Ascend at the Aspen Institute.

About Ascend

Ascend at the Aspen Institute is a hub for breakthrough ideas and collaborations that move children and their parents toward educational success and economic security. Ascend takes a two-generation approach to its work – focusing on children and their parents together – and brings a gender and racial equity lens to analysis. As a new model of social innovation, Ascend is building a brain trust of diverse leaders through a national fellowship program and learning network; elevating and investing in two-generation programs, policies, and community solutions; and sparking and expanding a conversation to ensure the perspectives and resilience of families inform program design and policy development. With an emphasis on education, economic supports, social capital, and health and well-being as the core elements that create an intergenerational cycle of opportunity, ASCEND envisions an America in which a legacy of economic security and educational success passes from one generation to the next

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Chesapeake Beach Consulting is a full service research, political consulting and strategy consulting firm. Founded in the spring of 2012, the company offers an array of services, tailored to meet the clients' individual needs. President Bob Carpenter has nearly 40 years of political experience having worked for state legislatures, political parties, campaigns and most recently for 18 years as Vice President of American Viewpoint, a Republican public opinion research firm.