

Excerpted from "Thematic Contents of Student Essays on the Laws of Life: A study of contemporary youth morality and wisdom," by Dr. William Damon, Principal Investigator, and Dr. Susan Verducci, The Stanford Center on Adolescence, Stanford University. The study will appear in *Today's Teens: Adolescence A to Z*, to be published by ABC-CLIO.

Reading between the lines:

What do teenagers' *laws of life* essays tell us about them?

Americans have become increasingly concerned about what we perceive as the degenerating moral values and behavior of young people. Our willingness to believe the worst may stem from a trend in the way that adolescents are thought about and portrayed in the media. Writers, journalists, and many researchers focus on the cynicism, despair, and demoralization of contemporary youth, characterizing them as hopeless, aimless, materialistic, hedonistic, and even nihilistic.

But is this true of most adolescents? Looking for an answer to this question, we studied 476 essays written by teenagers for the John Templeton Foundation's *Laws of Life* Essay Contest. Our study describes what these adolescents say when they reach for their deepest insights into the "laws" that govern their lives.

Excerpts from *laws of life* essays

Positive Emotional Outlook (67%): "Love, the essence at the core of all humans, can be the only true happiness."
(16 year-old male)

Responsibility for Self (42%): "First of all, you have to like yourself before everyone else does."
(12 year-old female)

Responsibility for Others (32%): "Honesty is a strange thing sometimes. A little kid could have more honesty than a politician. Honesty, like honor, is needed in order to have a happy and good civilization."
(13 year-old male)

Spirituality and Religion (18%): "I love Jesus...One day, I found a cigarette on the floor...I began to smoke it... I told my parents what I had done. Most of all I told God."
(13 year-old male)

Six basic themes emerged from the essays. Teenagers most frequently articulated the importance of a Positive Emotional Outlook on Life and Others (67%). This was followed by Responsibility for Self (42%) and Responsibility for Others (32%). Spirituality and Religion (18%) also was important to many adolescents. Surprisingly, there were very few Skeptical essays (.02%).

"The essays reflect young people with strong and positive veins of moral wisdom."



On the whole, the essays coalesce into an unusual portrait of adolescent thinking on the *laws of life*. Instead of painting a cynical, materialistic, and demoralized youth, the essays reflect young people with strong and positive veins of moral wisdom from which to draw. What the media find most compelling about adolescents may be what is most unusual. For example, the essays suggest that skepticism is low to the point of being negligible among males and nonexistent among females.

In addition to the absence of the expected cynicism and demoralization, the essays demonstrated a lack of materialism as well. Students spoke eloquently of being grateful, but not for their material possessions. The teens expressed thanks for personal health and the health of their family and friends. They also spoke of how fortunate they felt to have friends and be receiving an education. The positivity expressed in the essays did not come from material desires but out of a sense of appreciation for what they have.

Most of the *laws of life* came out of teenagers' personal experience and from moral exemplars. Many *laws of life* were articulated as responses to things that had happened to students, what we commonly think of as unfortunate or traumatic life events. The positive spin the young people placed on these experiences is notable in that it is usually considered a special sign of wisdom. The essay writers seemed to find joy in unexpected places and inspiration in small moments. One young woman found unexpected happiness in taking care of her disabled sister. Another young man found his lapsed faith in God in a small moment with his girlfriend.

It may be cause for concern that the thinking in the essays on moral issues was, on the whole, consistently confined to small and local communities. In general, students' circle of moral concern extended to self, family, friends, and congregation. The contents of the essays reflected little concern about society beyond home, school, or neighborhood. Concepts such as civic duty and patriotism were all but absent. Nor was there much mention of social causes, political leaders, or news events.

If the essays we examined are representative of contemporary society's adolescent population, they reveal a positive view of life, as well as a great deal of compassion, spirituality, and personal and social responsibility. These characteristics suggest that young people have a strong moral sense. But the moral sense seems to be confined to the students' immediate interpersonal relationships, and their essays reveal a lack of civic responsibility. It may be that, in today's world, young people have not yet worked out their societal beliefs and concerns. But it may also be that the cynicism associated with public life has caused teenagers to turn inward, at the expense of their civic growth.

