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By The Washington Times

Monday, December 22, 2008

EDITORIAL:

A recent poll sounds alarm bells regarding the values of America's teens and the failure of adults to instill sound ethics in the nation's youth. The poll, conducted by Opinion Research, shows that many teens believe violence is acceptable for a host of reasons.

Many respondents did not unequivocally view violence as utterly reprehensible and as a last resort, according to the poll which surveyed 750 girls and boys from 12 to 17 years of age. Twenty-seven percent said behaving violently is sometimes, often or always acceptable; 20 percent said they had personally behaved violently in the past year. When asked what would justify such behavior, the teens provided a variety of responses: 87 percent said self-defense, 73 percent said to help a friend, 35 percent said to settle an argument and 22 percent said to target someone they dislike.

Some teens also said violence satisfies emotional or social needs: 21 percent said it could be used to gain respect, 14 percent said it occurred due to peer pressure and 10 percent said it happened for the "thrill" of it. Thus, it appears that for many teens, violence is one of several options they consider in their interaction with others.

The poll also shows that teens have difficulty establishing a coherent hierarchy of values. More teens said that violence was acceptable than was cheating, plagiarizing or stealing. As the poll further reveals, teens have insufficient guidance from adults. Many teens lack role models: 54 percent said their parents are role models; the rest said they either did not have a role model or their friends were role models. It is not surprising then that 86 percent of teens said they feel more accountable to themselves than to their parents, guardians, friends or society. The poll paints the portrait of youth who are adrift.

What can be done to curb the inability of many teens to grasp the gravity of violent behavior? One of the solutions is to discuss ethics in schools. Yet, we must also ponder why parents and other authority figures - such as priests, pastors, rabbis, clerics and teachers - are not fulfilling their traditional role of transmitting key concepts of right and wrong, especially the most basic injunction to "do no harm."