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A New National Survey of Kids (and Their Parents) About Famous Athletes as Role Models

Children Get Mixed Messages from Famous Athletes, Both On and Off the Field

Majority of Kids Say Use of Performance-Enhancing Drugs "Common"

Menlo Park, CA – With the most recent Olympics and now Major League Baseball marred by reports of the use of banned performance-enhancing drugs, a new nationwide survey by the Kaiser Family Foundation examines the influence of sports figures in kids' lives today. Based on telephone interviews with a randomly selected national sample of 1,500 children ages 10-17 years old (and 1,950 parents), the survey found that many American kids are mirroring the behavior of famous athletes – the good and bad – both on and off the field.

"Teens don't like to admit that *anything* influences them, but they readily acknowledge the impact of famous athletes on their lives," said Drew Altman, President, Kaiser Family Foundation.

What Kids See... Three-quarters of kids (75%) believe that famous athletes teach children that being a good sport and playing fair are as important as winning. Yet, sizeable majorities also say it is common for sports figures to: yell at a referee or umpire (74%); taunt or trash talk an opponent (62%); use steroids or other banned substances to get an edge on the competition (52%); and take cheap shots or hit an opponent (46%). A quarter (26%) say even out-right cheating isn't all that unusual.

...And What They Do: While most kids agree that it is "never okay" to be a "bad sport," kids describe incidents of poor-sportsmanship as fairly routine on their own playing fields. Children ages 10-17 say that taunting or trash talking are very common (62%), as is yelling at a referee or umpire (56%). Nearly one in two kids also say that, in their experience, cheating (46%) or taking a cheap shot or hitting an opponent (45%) is commonplace among kids today.

For the nearly one in five kids who are "sports junkies" – heavy consumers of sports information – sports are more like an addiction. These kids check sports scores and watch sports as part of their daily routine. An astounding 91 percent of them want to be like or look up to famous athletes, as compared to 56 percent of other kids. In almost every category – both on and off the field – sports junkies are influenced by sports stars at nearly twice the rate of other kids.

(more)

When Famous Athletes Are Good ...

Almost nine in ten kids (88%) say that famous athletes teach children mostly “good things.” Kids rank famous athletes second only to their parents and on par with their teachers as the people they admire most (parents 92%; famous athletes 73%; teachers 72%). Many kids say they find motivation by following well-known athletes. Almost all – 96 percent – say they have learned that excelling in sports takes hard work and dedication, a lesson that three-quarters of their parents (76%) agree can be attributed to sports stars. And, more than half (54%) say they have been encouraged to work harder at a sport because of a sports figure they admire.

Is “Sportsmanship” Becoming “SportsWomanship?” Boys and girls alike credit female athletes with showing better sportsmanship (56% of boys and 45% of girls) and being better team players (39% of boys and 33% of girls). Male athletes, in contrast, are seen by both genders as being more likely to get into trouble off the field (82% boys and 76% girls) and caring more about the money (64% boys and 45% girls).

...But, When They Are Bad Sizeable minorities of children believe that their peers learn bad lessons from famous athletes about education, sex, drugs, and alcohol. Nearly one in four (24%) of 10-17 year olds say that kids learn that it isn’t necessary to study hard and finish school if you are successful at sports. And when it comes to lessons learned from the stars off the field, teens pick up the “bad” at a higher rate than younger kids. Twenty (20) percent of teens say that kids learn that you “don’t have to worry about the consequences of sex” from famous athletes. Seventeen (17) percent of teen girls and 15 percent of teen boys say that kids learn that “it’s okay to use alcohol and drugs.”

Many parents are worried that athletes send mixed signals by their behaviors *off the field*. Roughly a third believe that famous athletes teach their children negative lessons, such as: there is no need to do well in school if you are a successful athlete (38%), you do not have to worry about the consequences of sex (28%); and it is acceptable to drink or take drugs (31%). And, Mom and Dad are often left picking up the pieces after reports that a famous athlete has behaved badly. Such news has led a majority of parents to discuss alcohol or drugs (71%), crime (69%), violence (67%), AIDS (60%), and sex or a sexual issue (58%) with their children.

Methodology

A random sample of 1,500 10-17 year olds (771 boys and 729 girls) and 1,950 parents (with children aged 10-17) were surveyed over the telephone from June 27 – August 24, 1999. Both surveys have a margin of error of plus or minus 3 percentage points. A Summary of Findings and Chart Pack are also available by calling the Kaiser publications or request line at 1 (800) 656-4533 or www.kff.org.

The Kaiser Family Foundation, based in Menlo Park, California, is an independent national health care philanthropy and not associated with Kaiser Permanente or Kaiser Industries.