

# Darien Student Survey Findings: Mental Health & Substance Use Trends

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**TYTF**

**THRIVING YOUTH TASK FORCE**

Convened by The Community Fund of Darien

# Agenda

- **Welcome**
- **Introduction to the Thriving Youth Task Force**
- **History of the Darien Youth Survey**
  - Framework
  - Methodology
- **2021 Observations & Impact of COVID-19**
- **Understanding Youth Substance Use**
- **Understanding Youth Mental Health**
- **Charting a Path Forward**
- **Panel Discussion**

# Introduction to Thriving Youth Task Force (TYTF)

The Thriving Youth Task Force (TYTF) is a volunteer coalition that convenes local community organizations to promote and empower positive youth development, with the goal of reducing teen substance use.

- Founded in 2008
- Task Force members include leaders from 35 organizations serving youth in Darien
- 7th year of grant funding focused on substance use reduction
- Recently awarded a 5-year DFC grant
- The Community Fund of Darien serves as the convener of TYTF and the fiduciary for any state or federal grants to support TYTF's prevention efforts



# Thank you

- Darien Public Schools
- MMS & DHS students and parents

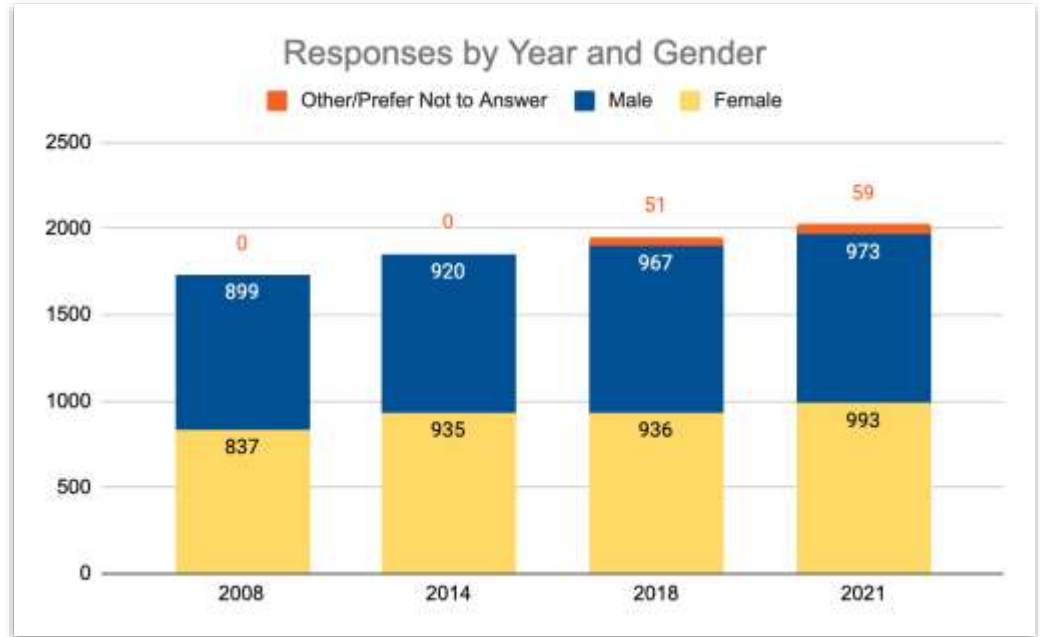
## **SURVEY COMMITTEE:**

**Co-chairs: Shelly Skoglund and Shelley Sheridan**

1. Amy Daniels
2. Allegra Erickson
3. Jennifer Fallon
4. Ingrid Gillespie
5. Georgette Harrison
6. Emily Larkin
7. Susannah Lewis
8. Sarah Neumann
9. Christina Passarretti
10. Alicia Sillars

# History of the Survey

- First completed in 2008, every three years since
  - 5th iteration
- Partnership with Darien Public Schools, 7th -12th grades
- Anonymous; parent opt-out option
- Similar student/parent surveys are implemented nationally and regionally including: Westport, Greenwich, Fairfield, Stamford and Norwalk



# What's Different This Year?

## 2018

- Two surveys
- Focus on substance use
- Descriptive Analyses - % of students who answer

## 2021

- One combined survey
- Expanded survey domains: Stress/pressure, mental health, etc.
- Predictive analyses/machine learning
  - cluster analyses to form groups
  - decision tree analyses to identify what factors drive behavior

# 2021 Survey Overview & Observations

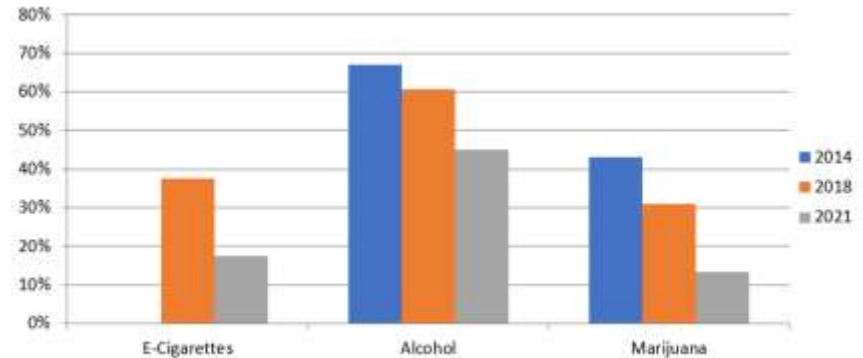
- **COVID-19's Impact on Survey Results:**
  - Survey is a snapshot of unprecedented times
  - Impact of stay-at-home orders, social distancing, close proximity to family members on access to substances
  - Hidden Pandemic: rising rates of mental health concerns
- **Two primary areas of interest: Substance Use and Mental Health**
  - Less focus on percentages
  - More insight into **WHY**
- **Actionable and insightful conclusions**

# Impact of COVID-19

## Students reported changes in how they were spending their time and how they were feeling in response to COVID-19

- Substance use decreased across all categories
- More time consuming online content and interacting with social media
- Less time playing sports or interacting with friends in person
- Majority of students reported feeling more anxiety, sadness and loneliness/isolation
  - Darien is not alone in this trend

12th Grade Substance Use Trends  
2014, 2018, 2021





# Student Substance Use

## **X** Myth

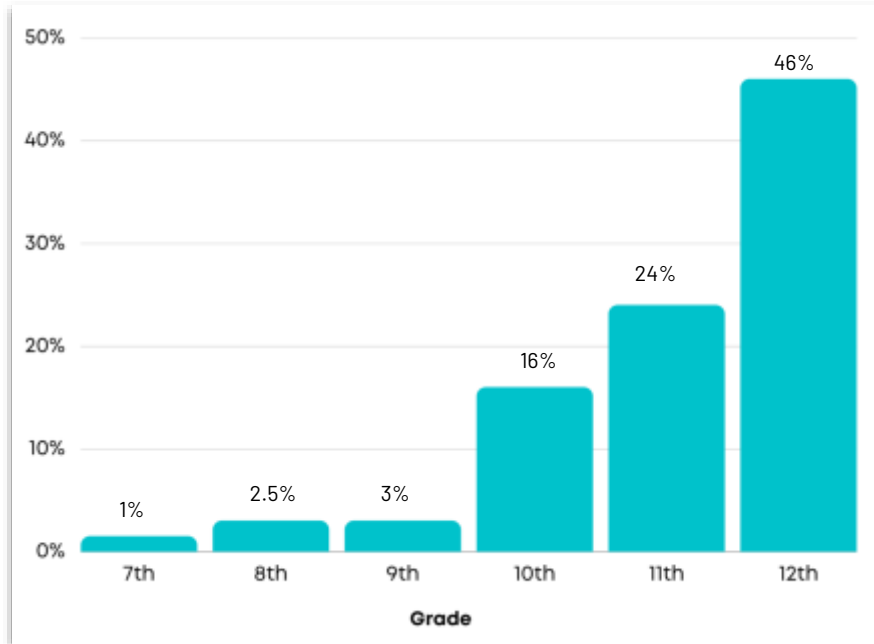
All kids are drinking in high school. It's just part of the teen experience.

## **✓** Reality

They aren't. Almost none of our students are drinking in middle school. We see a rapid uptick through high school, but until senior year, most students do not drink.

# Student Alcohol Use

2021 Past 30 Day Alcohol Use  
by Grade



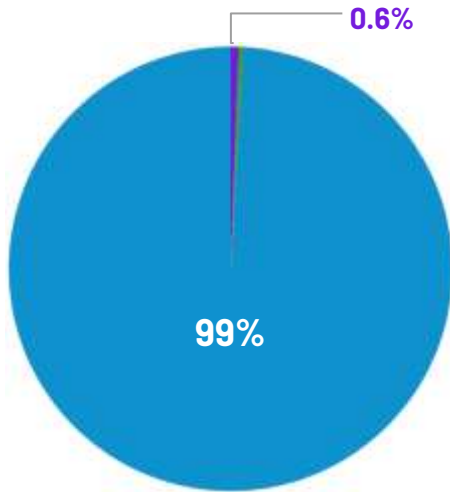
# Student Substance Use Categories

The analysis looked for patterns of use and behaviors. Findings grouped 7-12th grade students into four categories based on their responses to several questions about their use.

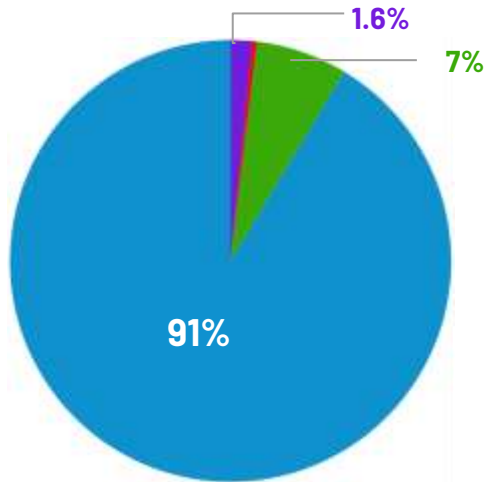
- **No use-** Students who are substance-free
- **Alcohol only-** Students who are drinking, but not too frequently or heavily and are not using any other substances
- **Moderate use-** Students who are drinking frequently AND using other substances, mostly marijuana
- **Heavy use-** Students who are drinking heavily, frequently and using other substances, mostly marijuana

# Student Substance Use: What did we learn?

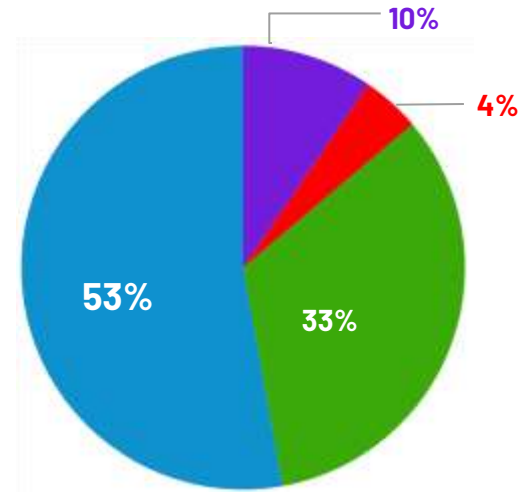
Substance use patterns change dramatically as teens get older



7<sup>th</sup> - 8<sup>th</sup> Graders



9<sup>th</sup> - 10<sup>th</sup> Graders



11<sup>th</sup> - 12<sup>th</sup> Graders

● No Use   ● Alcohol Only   ● Moderate Use   ● Heavy Use

# Student Substance Use: Observations

Our analysis highlighted interesting trends in substance use among our teens:

- For those who do use substances, the most commonly used substance for Darien teens is **alcohol**
- **Grade** is the single biggest predictor of use
- Sadness, anxiety and loneliness **did not** predict substance use
  - Unless you add exposure to **bullying** and remove grade from the model

# Who are we most concerned about: Students Who Report Moderate/Heavy Use

**Picture of a teen party culture: students in this category are drinking frequently and in large quantities and experiencing a lot of consequences along the way.**

- **Who:** 30% of 11th & 45% of 12th graders
- **Where:** Drinking at parties without adults present
- **What are they doing:**
  - The # 1 reason 11th & 12th graders drink is to have fun
  - Playing competitive drinking games
  - Blacking out
  - Experiencing hangovers
  - Taking care of friends who have too much to drink
  - Buying alcohol at stores outside Darien
  - Using multiple substances, not just alcohol



# Substance Use Findings

## **X** Myth

There's nothing we can do about it. This is the culture here. They won't listen to us no matter what we say.

## **✓** Reality

Our data is clear. Parents can greatly reduce the likelihood their teen will use substances and are the most underutilized resource to prevent teen substance use.

# Factors Associated with Substance-Free Students

## INDIVIDUAL VARIABLES:

- Top reasons for not drinking: “I just don’t want to” or “parents are strict”
- Eager to do well in school
- Feel equipped to deal well with frustration
- Peer disapproval of marijuana and alcohol use
- Presence of positive adult role models
- Report feeling safe & secure at home
- Willing to talk to their parents about alcohol, drugs or sex



# Factors Associated with Substance-Free Students

Parents have an important role to play in substance use prevention.

## PARENT/FAMILY VARIABLES:

- Parents try to **know where they are** at night/weekends
  - For younger students, parents know where they are during the day
- Parents are **on the same page** about substance use
- Parents set **very clear rules** about alcohol use
- Parents **STRONGLY disapprove** of substance use
  - However, student perception of parental disapproval of drinking **declines** rapidly in high school



Parental vigilance is the most important factor in reducing substance use in Darien teens

# Substance Use Findings

## ✗ Myth

It isn't a big deal if kids drink in high school. They need to learn to drink before they go to college or they'll go crazy in college.

## ✓ Reality

- 9 of 10 adults with a substance use disorder began using before age 18.
- Fewer alcohol-related problems develop for every year that students delay drinking.
- Alcohol use changes the structure and function of the still-developing teen brain.
- It is illegal.

# Turrisi Study

**“Allowing your kids to drink is not protective.” - Dr. Turrisi**

Source: Turrisi, R., Mallett, K., Varvil-Weld, L., & Guttman, K. (2013). *Examining the role of parents in college student alcohol etiology and prevention.*



# Key Takeaways About Teen Substance Use for Parents

Parents have an important role to play in substance use prevention.

## Factors that reduce use:

- **Vigilance:** knowing where they are and what they're doing
- Setting and reinforcing **explicit, clear rules** and expectations about substance use
- Conveying **strong** levels of disapproval of substance use
- Keeping open lines of **communication** with children

**It's possible (and vital) to have an open, trusting relationship with our teens and provide clear messages about how to stay safe**

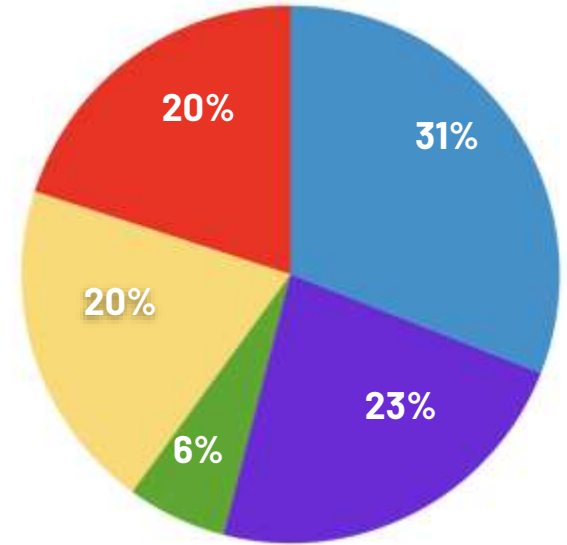
# Student Mental Health



# Student Mental Health Clusters

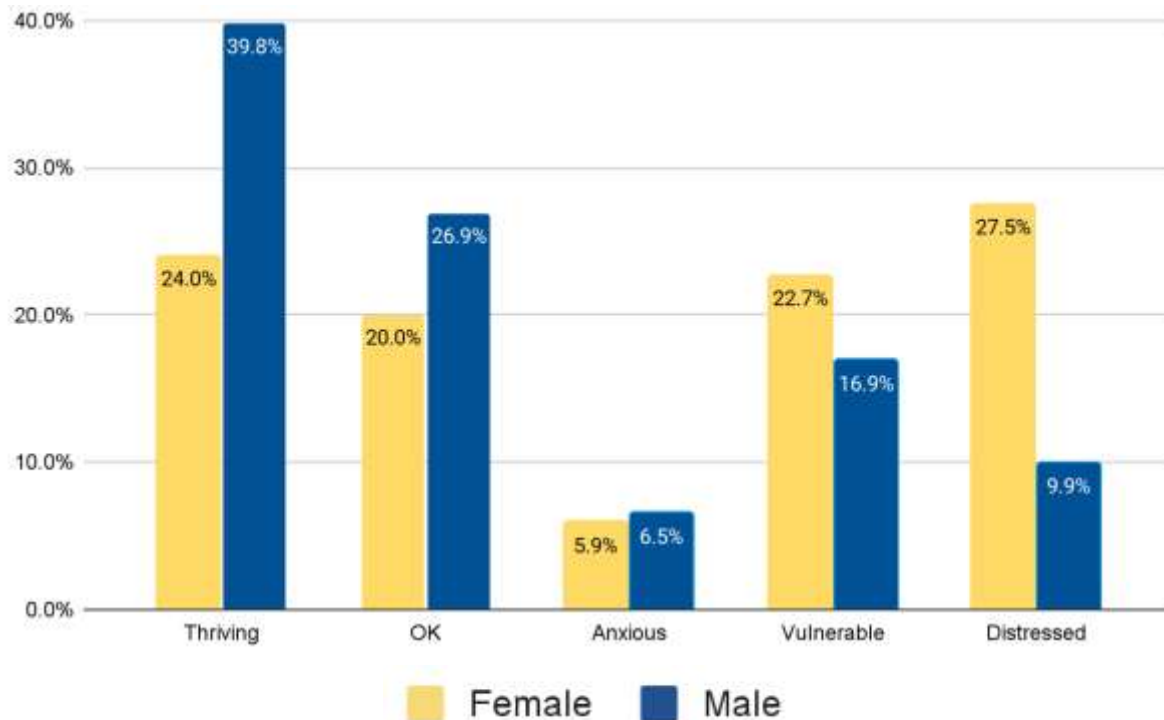
Five categories based on student responses to several questions about how they're feeling

1. **Thriving:** students feel good about themselves, experience low levels of sadness, anxiety & loneliness
2. **OK:** students feel ok about themselves, but sometimes experience some sadness, anxiety and loneliness
3. **Anxious:** students feel ok about themselves, but experience high levels of anxiety, low levels of loneliness and sadness
4. **Vulnerable:** students aren't feeling good about themselves experience high levels of sadness, anxiety and loneliness
5. **Distressed:** students are feeling BAD about themselves, experience highest levels of sadness, anxiety and loneliness



● Thriving ● OK ● Anxious ● Vulnerable ● Distressed

# Gender Differences



# Mental Health: Female Students

- Much higher levels of sadness, anxiety and loneliness across all grades, particularly in 10-12th grades
- Report more social stress
  - Social media
- Protective Factors:
  - Feeling valued by others and in control of their life
  - Family environment - perception of parental approval, comfort in talking to parents about serious issues, inclusion in family decision making





# Mental Health: Male Students

- Report lower levels of sadness, anxiety and loneliness across all grades
- Report more academic stress
- Protective Factors:
  - Social environment- mentors, coaches, teachers, neighbors
  - Family environment- open lines of communication



# Protective Factors Associated with Good Mental Health

## INDIVIDUAL VARIABLES:

- Feeling **valued**
- Feeling in **control** of their life and future
- Developing a sense of **purpose** in life
- Developing good **health habits**
- **Avoiding** things they believe are **dangerous or unhealthy**

## COMMUNITY VARIABLES:

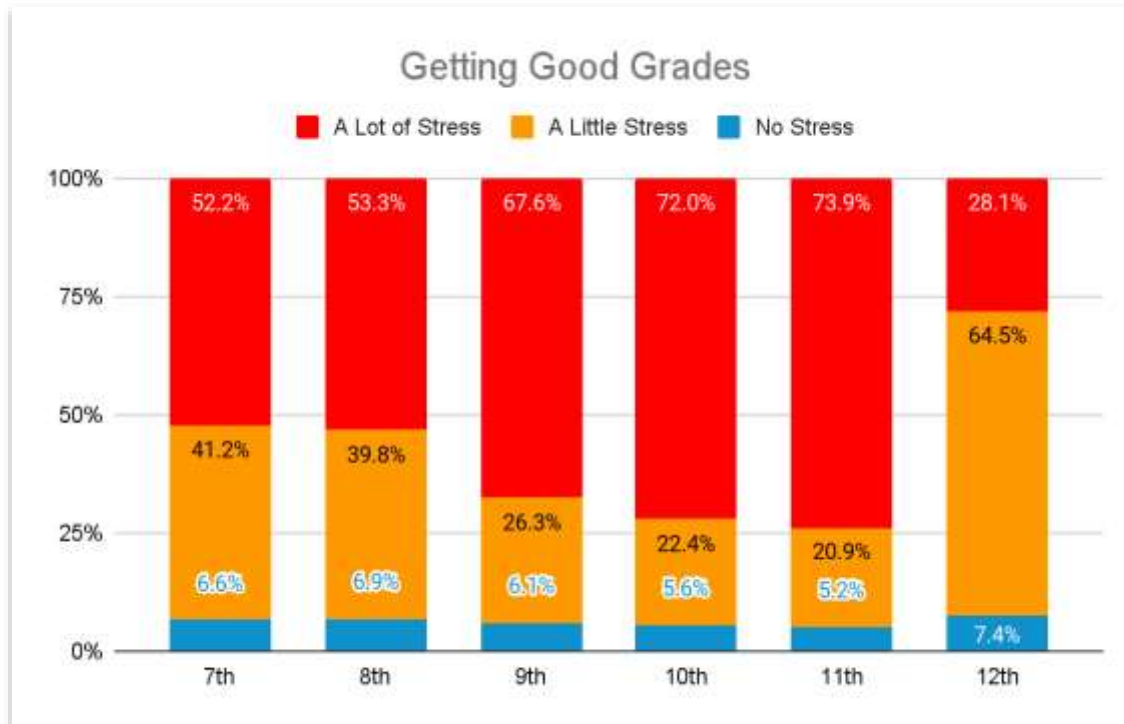
- Engaged in **learning**
- Engaged in **clubs/groups** in or out of school

# Protective Factors Associated with Good Mental Health

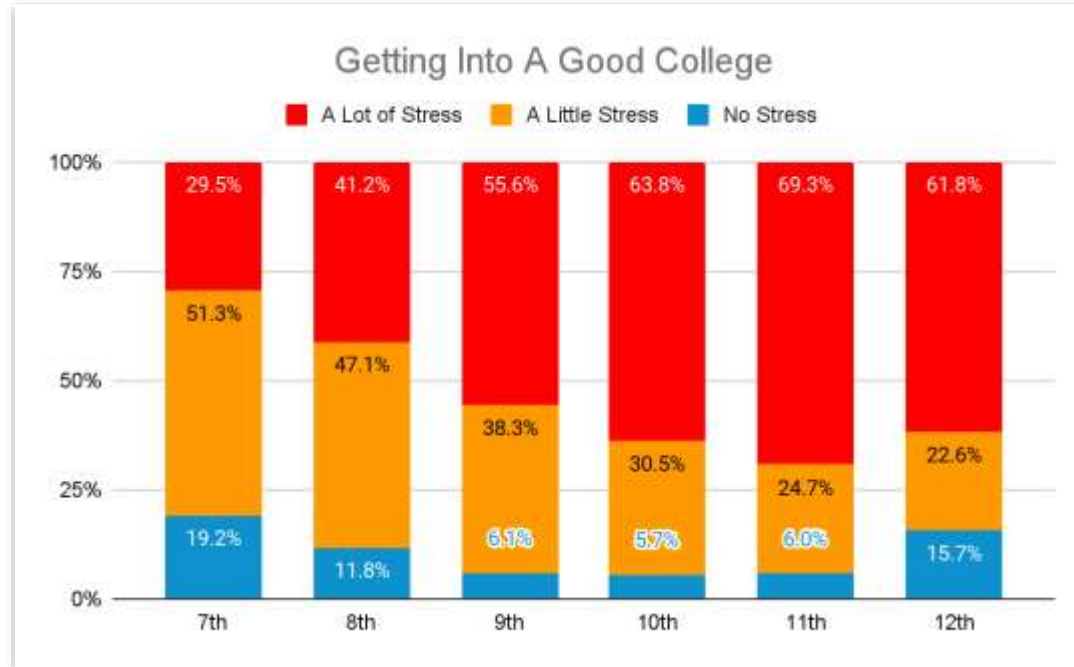
## FAMILY VARIABLES:

- Spending **quality time** with family
- **Time with parents/messages from parents** make them feel good about themselves
- Perceive **parental advice** as helpful
- Receiving strong parent messages about **prosocial behavior**
- Meeting **parents' expectations** is not a source of stress

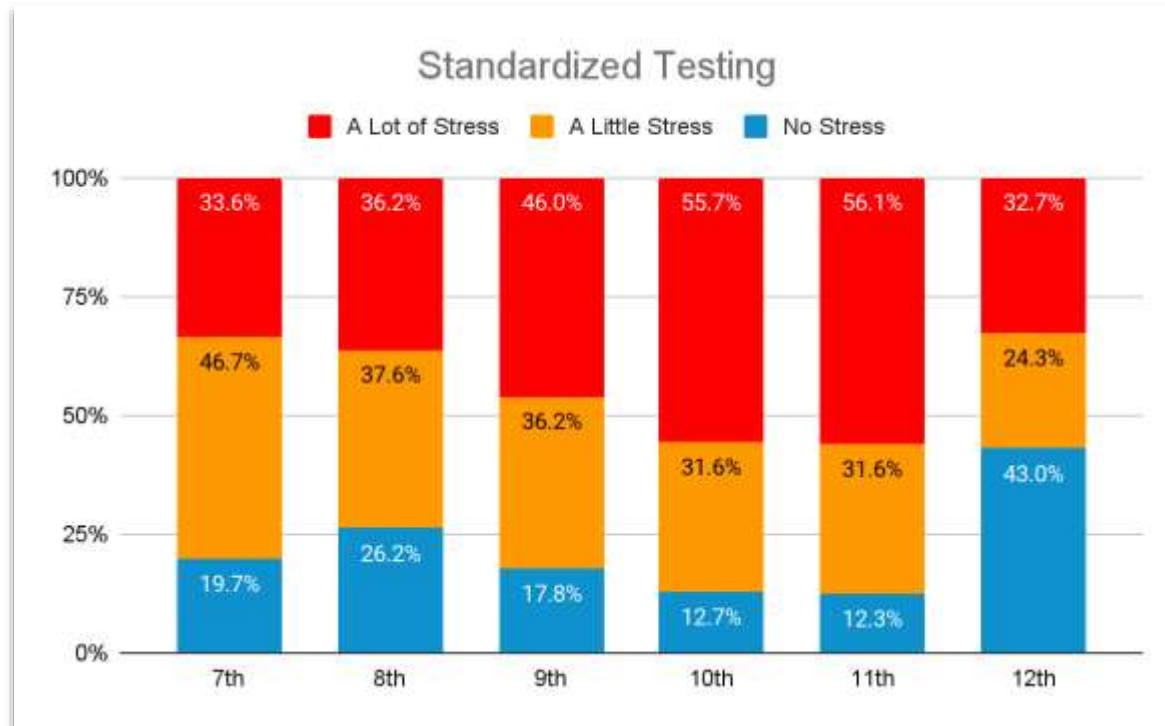
# Sources of Stress: Getting Good Grades



# Sources of Stress: Getting Into a Good College



# Sources of Stress: Standardized Testing



# Other Significant Sources of Stress

- **Meeting my Parents' Expectations**
  - Across all grades
- **Excelling in Sports**
  - Particularly true for 9th graders
- **COVID/Pandemic-Related Losses**
  - Particularly true for 12th graders

# Minimal Sources of Stress

GOOD NEWS!



Having as much money as peers



Having a boyfriend or girlfriend



Looking attractive



Peer Pressure



Being Popular

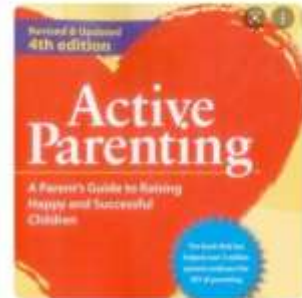
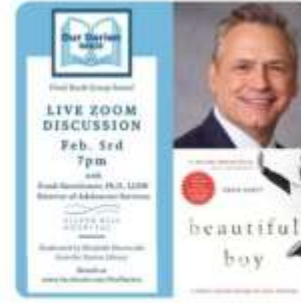


# Key Takeaways About Teen Mental Health

## Protective Factors:

- It is essential for teens to feel **valued**
- It is very important for teens to feel they are **in control** of their lives and developing a **sense of purpose**
- **Academic pressure** is a significant source of stress
- Having an **open line of communication** with teens is associated with good mental health

# TYTF Responses to Past Survey Data



# Charting a Path Forward

- **Supporting parents with:**

- Keeping lines of communication open within the family and spending time together
- Having clear messages about disapproval of substance use at this age
- Developmentally appropriate parental vigilance
- Identifying when stress becomes paralyzing

- **Engaging as a community by:**

- Helping students feel valued for who they are and feel in control of their lives
- Providing intensive support for students who report they are struggling
- Building your student's team

**This is just a start.**

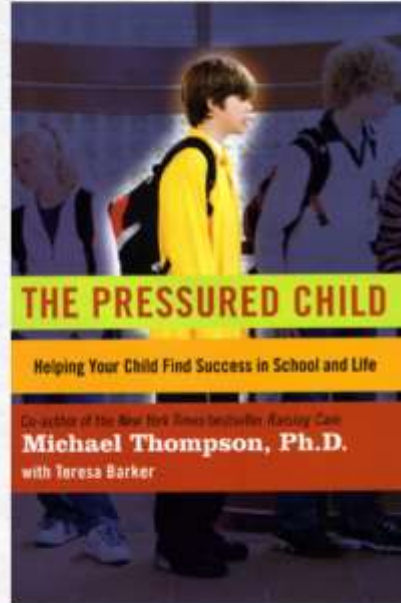
**We want to hear from you!**

# Save the Date!

Register at:  
[communityfunddarien.org/tytf-programs-and-events](https://communityfunddarien.org/tytf-programs-and-events).



SAVE THE DATE!  
Thursday, November 18th at 7pm



A discussion with NYT bestselling author  
**Michael G. Thompson, Ph.D.**

Learn more about  
our survey findings  
on our website.



[communityfunddarien.org/student-survey-results](https://communityfunddarien.org/student-survey-results)

