

Do Teens and Adults Agree On What Teens Should be Taught About Money—A Comparison of 1998 and 2008

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Teenagers have access to and spend a great deal of money each year, yet research indicates that their financial literacy is low. To address the growing financial illiteracy of U.S. teens, programs need to be designed that will be of interest to teens and that will help improve their financial knowledge and skills. Having information on what teens want to learn will help in the development of these programs. In 1998, a survey of teens and adult leaders was conducted to determine what teens wanted to know about money, teen sources of income, what makes money important to teens, how teens would like to learn, and how what teens wanted to learn differed from what the adults thought they should learn. In 2008, the original survey, completed by 323 teens and 67 teen leaders, was replicated with 558 teens and 49 adult leaders. What teens may want to learn may differ from what we, as educators, think they ought to learn. The focus of this poster was on the differences between the teens and adults from 1998 to 2008.

Data were collected from a convenience sample of five groups of teenagers from (1) juvenile halls/probation, (2) migrant education programs, (3) pregnancy and parenting programs, (4) public high schools, and (5) youth groups. For consistency, these were the same five groups that completed the survey in 1998. It contained the same 21 multiple-choice questions about teen sources of income; what makes money important to them; and most importantly, what types of financial information they would like to learn and how they would like to learn. Procedures for Human Subjects Protocol approval were followed.

Teens and adults differed in 1998 about what makes money important to them and they still did in 2008. For both years, there were significant differences ($p < .05$ or greater) on: buying things they need, doing things with friends, saving for their education, buying things they want, saving for future purchases, and buying to impress friends. In both years, the teens indicated that buying the things they needed was the most important use of their money vs. the adults who indicated that buying the things they wanted was what made money important to the teens.

The teens and adults still differ on what is most important to learn about. The adults in both years were more interested in teaching the teens about several items than the teens were in learning about these items. The adult leaders wanted to teach them about setting financial goals, managing an irregular income, opening and using a savings account or checking account, easy ways to save, talking about when there is not enough money, what is credit, consequences of bad credit, how to buy a car, how advertising makes you spend, easy ways to save, saving for college, and filing a tax return. Conversely, the teens indicated more interest in learning about making their money go farther, how to buy a car, using bank loans, saving for a home, buying insurance, talking with my family about money, and how to get credit (but not the consequences of bad credit). Teens still want to learn about many of the same items in 2008 as they did in 1998 and, in many instances, they agree with the adult leaders. However, adult leaders often list the same items (such as opening and using a checking or savings account) as more important to learn about than the teens listed the item.

There was only one significant change in how the teens and adults wanted to learn about money. In 1998, both the adults and teens indicated that the teens should primarily learn during school with little interest in learning on the web. Learning during school was still the priority in 2008, but learning on the web increased greatly for both the teens and the adults.

Given the concern about the economy, this may be a teachable moment for teens. The findings from this survey can help educators identify what teens want to learn about so that financial education materials can be available that are of interest to teens and highlight topics of importance. Perhaps this will help teens be more interested and willing to learn. It is possible to incorporate what we, as educators, think they should learn about (use of credit or buying insurance) into what teens want to learn about (buying a car).

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