



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

Summary of Findings

Do As I Say, Not as I Do?

What Children Learn from Famous Athletes Both On and Off the Field

From taunting and trash talking *on* the field to alcohol, drugs, and sex *off* the field, the lessons kids learn from famous athletes extend beyond the merits of being a good sport. Despite the notoriety, athletes remain among the people kids admire most. With sports a national obsession, even among kids – one in five is a certified “sports junkie,” a heavy consumer of sports information – what role are famous athletes playing in the lives of kids today?

Famous Athletes Score Big as Among the Most Admired People in Kids’ Lives

Children say that famous athletes rank second only to parents (92%) and on par with their teachers (72%) as the people they admire most. Both boys and girls name professional or Olympic athletes as among the people they say they “look up to or want to be like” (73%). Ten to 17-year-olds name famous athletes much more frequently than other celebrity figures, such as TV/movie stars (56%) or rock/rap musicians (32%). Sports junkies name famous athletes (91%) as often as their parents (92%) when asked who they “look up to or want to be like.”

- **On the Field: Kids Like “Good Sports,” Yet See and Do More “Bad” Behavior**

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. As kids get older, they observe more bad on-the-field behavior from famous athletes. Teens say it is commonplace for famous athletes to: yell (80% vs. 64% of 10-12 year olds); taunt or trash talk (74% vs. 42%); use steroids (60% vs. 38%); and take cheap shots or hit (51% vs. 37%).

...And What They Do: Most kids still agree that it is “never okay” to be a “bad sport” – yell at a ref or ump (62%), taunt or trash talk (76%), use steroids or other banned substances (90%), cheat (94%), or take a cheap shot or hit (87%). But when they get on the field, many young athletes are mirroring the example set by the stars. With the exception of steroid use, most kids describe incidents of poor-sportsmanship as fairly routine among their peers. Children ages 10-17 say that taunting or trash talking are very common (62%), followed closely by 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. Again, teens are more likely than 10-12-year-olds to have witnessed or engaged in bad habits on their own playing fields.

Heavy exposure to sports – but not high levels of sports participation – correlates with a greater acceptance of some negative on-the-field behaviors. Sports junkies are more likely than kids who follow sports less closely to say it is “okay” to yell at a referee or umpire (46% vs. 33%) and taunt or trash talk an opponent (35% vs. 18%). These are behaviors they are also more likely to say they or the kids they know do in their own games.

The Jocks: Sports play a significant role in the lives of today’s kids. Two in five boys ages 10-17 (43%) and nearly as many girls the same age (36%) call it “very important,” while an additional third (36% of boys and 39% of girls) say it is “somewhat important.” Virtual sports are also big among boys: 40 percent say they “often” play sports-related computer or video games; an additional 33 percent do at least “once in awhile.”

The Fans: Kids are also avid sports fans. One in five (21% of boys and 17% of girls) say that following sports is “very important,” while an additional 44 percent say it is “somewhat important.” In fact, more than half of boys (56%) and a third of girls (34%) say they “often” watch live sports on television. Boys are especially avid consumers of sports news and information. Many say they regularly watch sports shows and networks (44% “often”), read the sports section of newspapers (31% “often”) or sports magazines (29% “often”), and watch sports news on TV (28% “often”). Almost one in ten (8%) now log onto the Internet “often” for the latest scores or sports news.

The Sports Junkies: One in five kids (21%) is a “sports junkie” – a heavy consumer of sports information. They say that staying on top of the latest sports news is a part of their daily routine and that they follow closely the trials and tribulations of popular players. Boys are more likely to be “sports junkies” than are girls, and this group tends to be slightly older.

- **Off the Field: Children Learn Life Lessons – Both Good and Bad – From the Pros**

The Good... 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. More than one in two kids (54%) say they have been encouraged to work harder at their own sport. The vast majority (93%) says famous athletes inspire kids to follow their dreams.

And, the Bad... While almost 9 in 10 kids (88%) say that sports figures teach children mostly “good things,” many also indicate that famous athletes send mixed signals about some risky behaviors *off the field*. Nearly one in four (24%) of children ages 10-17 agree that kids learn that it isn’t necessary to study hard and finish school if you are successful at sports. Other negative lessons include that there is no need to worry about the consequences of sex (18%) and that it is okay to use alcohol and drugs (13%).

Kids seem to believe that stardom carries with it certain “perks,” such as that famous athletes get special treatment if they break the law (34%; 39% of teens and 25% of 10-12 year olds) and are able to have sex with anyone they want to (27% of teens and 12% of 10-12 year olds). In fact, one in two kids ages 10-17 say that athletes are at least as likely – if not more likely – than other people their age to have sex with many different partners (32% “more likely,” 29% “about as likely”), use hard drugs like cocaine or heroin (21% and 31%), drink too much alcohol (22% and 39%), and break the law (18% and 40%). Whether a child believes these behaviors are more or less common among athletes, however, depends in part on their age.

Naïve Youngsters, Jaded Teens: Nearly one in two 10-12 year olds say famous athletes are “less likely” than other people their age to break the law (53%), use hard drugs (52%), drink too much (47%), and engage in promiscuous sex (45%). Sports figures have a more tarnished image among children ages 13-17. Teens say that famous athletes are “as likely” as or even “more likely” than anyone else to get into this kind of trouble. About one in three teens also perceive wild parties (29%) and careless sex (31%) as pretty routine in the lives of famous athletes.

- **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 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).

Girls are more likely to view male and female athletes as equals in terms of athletic ability (66%), but the role models they look up to are still men: only a third of girls who had a “favorite athlete” named a woman. Boys give male athletes the strong edge across the board: 40 percent of boys (and 26% of girls) say the men have greater athletic ability, and 52 percent (and 31% of girls) say they are also more fun to watch.

- **Kids – Especially Teens – View Character of Athletes Overall as Negative, But Not When It Comes to Their Personal Sports Heroes**

While nine in ten kids give athletes credit for being “smart,” many kids describe these people they hold in such high esteem as: “into money” (66%); “flashy and show-offs” (50%); “cocky and arrogant” (40%); and “out-of-control and wild” (26%). Teens are the most likely to see these negative qualities: most famous athletes are “into money” (73% of teens vs. 54% of 10-12-year-olds); “flashy or show-offs” (57% vs. 39%); and “cocky or arrogant” (46% vs. 30%).

“Not ‘My’ Guy (or Gal)”...At the same time, boys and girls who say they have a “favorite” sports figure see their idols as mostly immune from the faults of their teammates. Of the two-thirds of boys (67%) and more than half of girls (57%) ages 10-17 who have a personal “favorite,” the vast majority see these individuals as “dedicated and determined” (97%), “good sports and team players” (97%), “well-liked and popular” (95%), and “smart” (93%). While 66 percent of kids overall say famous athletes are generally “into money,” just 29 percent believe this to be true of the person they name as their favorite. Only 12 percent say their favorite athlete is cocky or arrogant.

- **Parents Are Concerned About What Pro Athletes Are Teaching Their Children**

Roughly a third of parents 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%). In fact, one in three parents (35%) have gone so far as to try to discourage their child from following a particular athlete they considered a less-than-desirable role model.

Mom and Dad say that they have talked to their children about sensitive subjects because of something in the news about a famous athlete. A majority of parents have discussed alcohol or drugs (71%), crime or breaking the law (69%), violence (67%), AIDS (60%), and sex or a sexual issue (58%) with their children because of a news report involving a famous athlete.

- **Famous Athletes Remain Good Spokespeople – For Products and Causes**

Sports Sells...When it comes to the bottom line, kids confirm what Madison Avenue has long known: famous athletes are good for business. One in two 10-17 year olds (52%) admit to having bought or wanted to buy clothing or shoes because of a famous athlete's endorsement. "Sports junkies" are more than twice as likely as lesser sports enthusiasts to have purchased a product because of an endorsement (72% vs. 36%), and are considerably more likely to have tried to change their own body to be like an athlete they admire (31% vs. 15%). At least half of kids (51%, 42% ages 10-12 and 56% of teens) claim to view these commercial endorsements with cynicism, believing that famous athletes will sell anything as long as they get enough money to do so.

...And Makes the World a Better Place: Famous athletes get points for giving more than their fair share of time and money to support important social causes, but many kids are fairly skeptical about their true motivations. Kids are evenly split on whether famous athletes' engage in good deeds because they "personally care" (40%) or because "they are being paid to or to improve their image" (43%). Younger kids (51% vs. 34% ages 13-17) and "sports junkies" (50% vs. 29% of low-exposure kids) are the most impressionable, believing that sports figures "personally care." In contrast, nearly one in two (49%) of teens think famous athletes speak out on issues because they are paid to or to improve their image.

Despite this cynicism, a majority of kids still believe that famous athletes would be *effective* spokespersons on a number of social issues, such as drug and alcohol abuse (79%), obeying the law (74%), anti-violence (73%), and safe sex (52%). Not surprisingly, famous athletes as spokespersons score the highest with "sports junkies": drug and alcohol abuse (83% vs. 76%), obeying the law (81% vs. 68%), anti-violence (80% vs. 68%), and safe sex (66% vs. 52%).

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.