

**Attitudes about Ethics among  
18 to 24 Year Olds**

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May 2, 2005

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## I. Methodology and Sample Characteristics

Zogby International conducted interviews of 604 adults aged 18-24 at random nationwide from a Zogby compiled database of adults self-identified as aged 18-24. All calls were made from Zogby International headquarters in Utica, N.Y., from April 25, 2005 through April 30, 2005. The margin of error is +/- 4.1 percentage points. Slight weights were added to region, race, gender to more accurately reflect the population surveyed. Margins of error are higher in sub-groups.

### Sample Characteristics

Sample Characteristics	Frequency	Valid Percent*
Sample size	604	100
East	158	26
South	172	28
Central/Great Lakes	172	29
West	102	17
18	32	5
19	61	10
20	66	11
21	110	18
22	111	18
23	97	16
24	126	21
Less than high school	20	3
High school graduate	70	12
Some college	308	51
College graduate+	205	34
White	407	68
Hispanic	72	12
African American	78	13
Asian/Pacific	30	5
Other/mixed	12	2
Did not answer race	5	--
Live in large city	241	40
Live in small city	158	26
Live in suburbs	111	18
Live in rural area	90	15
Male	291	48
Female	313	52

\* Numbers have been rounded to the nearest percent and might not total 100.

## II. Executive Summary

Former Attorney General John Mitchell, of Nixon and Watergate fame, once remarked: “Watch us for what we do, not for what we say.” This survey of young people seems to bear out his claim. The young respondents are perfectly willing to subscribe to the Old Truths of Ethical behavior—honesty, integrity, good conduct, values over making money, obedience to parents and teachers—when we ask them direct questions. But when we offer them situations to respond to, the old black and white turns to grey very quickly.

It's not that they abandon ethics and morals completely, but that a competing code of ethics enters the fray and creates competition. Competing values like loyalty to friends, love trumps duty, friendship, loyalty, and (as a tribute to Miss Piggy) moi over tous take over.

Most young Americans are willing to stand by the old rules and codes, but less and less when there are situations that show conflicts. These are the children and now grandchildren of the situational ethics generation of the 1960s. As my mother used to say, “What have we brought into this world?”

## III. Narrative Analysis

*1. Imagine that you are on the verge of becoming a star athlete. You and your family have sacrificed for years and you are now on the brink of realizing your dreams. Although your sport has a strict policy against using performance-enhancing drugs, your coach tells you that many professional athletes use them. He also tells you that, due to budget cutbacks, there is a strong likelihood that you will not be tested. While you have never used such drugs, the competition is fierce and you may not advance your athletic career without using the banned drugs. Do you. . . ?*

Follow the advice of your coach and use performance enhancing drugs to help your career	15%
Refuse to use performance enhancing drugs, even though it is possible this will end of your hopes for a professional career	84
Other/not sure	1

Most of the respondents are not interested in using performance-enhancing drugs in spite of the suggestion that they will not be caught. The individuals more likely to use the drugs are 23 year olds, with 27% of them saying they would go ahead. Twenty-one and twenty-two year olds are less likely, with just 12% and 11 % respectively saying they would use the drugs to enhance their chances of achieving their dreams.

Southerners are only slightly more likely to agree to the drug use, with 18% agreeing, as opposed to 14% in all other regions. Nineteen percent of those with a college education or more would use the drugs, as opposed to 13% of those with some college.

Individuals who live in small cities (17%) and large cities (18%) are more likely than those who live in the suburbs (12%), or rural areas (10%).

There is not a statistically significant difference between males and females agreeing to use the drugs.

Jim: This question concerns the issue of honesty and following the rules. While on the surface the response seems hopeful, I'm concerned about the 15%. Although the number seems statistically small, would any of us feel comfortable with 15% of our employees acting dishonestly?

*4. You are part of upper management in a company. Company rules state that there can be no fraternization between management and hourly employees. You discover that you and an hourly employee you have worked with for a number months really hit it off. You would really like to date this person. However, you know the company policy and realize that you could not only lose your job but cost the job of another employee. Knowing that other executives in the company have sometimes looked the other way for other executives, do you. . .?*

Stick to company policy	39%
Begin a dating relationship with this person anyway, and hope that you do not get caught	32
One of you quits the job so that you can have a relationship that is not hidden	26
Other/not sure	4

The results of this question remained essentially the same among the various subgroups. Almost two out of five of the respondents would stick to company policy, but nearly a third would begin the relationship and keep their fingers crossed that they don't get caught. About one in four agreed that quitting, or having their potential date quit would be the way to handle the situation.

Twenty-three year olds again stand out, but this time it is because 44% of them *would* stick to company policy. Residents of the east are more likely to stick to company policy as well, with 45% of them adhering to company policy.

Jim: This question turns on the ethical value of responsibility and following rules. The results demonstrate that a little more than 30% of respondents would violate known company policy when it serves their own interests. If they are willing to do that, the next question becomes, "What *else* are they willing to violate company policy for?"

8. *You are one of twenty or so people working in a hospital laboratory. You have worked there a number of years and for much of that time your supervisor has given preferential treatment to his favorite employees. He allows them to take longer breaks or make personal telephone calls, while you have been criticized by this supervisor for doing the same. You are promoted and suddenly find yourself in a higher position to this person. Do you. . .?*

Retaliate against him by looking for any infraction that you can bring to his attention	15%
Treat him the same as you treat the other employees	85
Other/not sure	--

Eighty-five percent would treat this supervisor the same as they treat other employees, in spite of having been repeatedly criticized by him. One in 6 would retaliate by aggressively enforcing the rules.

One in five 24 year olds agree that they would retaliate against the supervisor by looking for any infraction. Easterners (23%) are about twice as likely than those in the any other region to retaliate.

The differences among the other subgroups are not statistically significant.

Jim: The results are positive and reflect a great deal of hope. The issue of fairness, both in the workplace as well as life, is a difficult one and comes up often in ethics scandals. When we have been injured by another there is an initial tendency to “even the score.” Although it can be a difficult task to forgive and forget, the ethical person demonstrates the necessary self-restraint to retaliate and strives to treat ALL people with fairness and respect.

10. Due to the help and influence from a close friend, you just got a job working at a large internet firm that manages a significant music and film database. You pride yourself on your honesty and integrity. However, you learn that your friend – the one responsible for getting you the job – is illegally selling files from the database. She says that “everyone does it” and “besides, I only sell to a few close friends.” The next day, the company supervisor asks you to investigate some recently discovered illegal file sharing. Do you...?

Turn your friend in to the supervisor	45%
Admit nothing and hope the supervisor does not find out	43
Other/not sure	12

The results here are pretty evenly divided, with 45% turning in the friend to the supervisor and another 43% admitting nothing and hoping the supervisor doesn't find out.

Those most likely to turn in their friends to a supervisor are the twenty-three year olds; more than half of them (54%) are willing to cooperate with the management. Southerners as well (51%) are somewhat more likely to turn in their close friend for selling the files.

Jim: Loyalty and Honesty are two important components of good character. However, time and again, when these two values conflict, individuals tend to choose loyalty over honesty. The prisoner abuse scandal at *Abu Ghraib* is only the most recent and distasteful example. Individuals often see themselves being placed in conditions that call for them to choose between loyalty to a co-worker or boss and honesty to a client or another. Once individuals fall into the “false necessity” trap there is a strong tendency to compromise other ethical principles some time down the road.

*14. You are the owner of company with a good sales team, but due to increased competition, they've been struggling lately. However, a new sales person has achieved a dramatic surge in sales by using some questionable sales methods. Although, her methods go against what you strive to achieve as good business practice, you employ fifty people and her contracts help keep them employed. Do you. . . ?*

Encourage her methods because they work	15%
Ignore her methods hoping she will move on, but in the meantime benefit from her practices	31
Ask her to change her methods or she will have to leave the company	51
Other/not sure	3

More than half would ask her to change her methods or ask her to leave the company. About three in ten would benefit from her practices, but hope she moved on

sooner rather than later. One in 6 would actively encourage her methods because they work.

Twenty-four year olds are more likely (20%) to encourage her methods for producing sales. Easterners and southerners are also more likely (20% and 19% respectively) to encourage the questionable methods. Westerners (59%) and those from the center of the country (54%) are more likely to ask her to change her sales technique. Men are more likely (35%) than women (27%) to ignore her methods and hope she moves on soon, and women (55%) are more likely than men (47%) to ask her to change her methods or be terminated.

Jim: Whenever money is in direct conflict with good ethical practice, there is a strong tendency to “do whatever it takes” to increase the bottom-line. This is the core issue of many of the ethics scandals of the last 3 years (Enron, WorldCom, etc.). Although it is a hopeful sign that 51% of respondents would ask the sales person to change her tactics or leave, 46% would ignore her methods or actively encourage them. Even if we focus on the lower percentage – that only 15% would encourage her methods – the question, again, becomes: “Would you want 15% of your employees encouraging unethical tactics in your company? If so, what would be the long-term consequences both in morale and potential fines or lost business?”

2-3-5-7-9-11-12-13-15-16. Which of the following two statements comes closest to your own beliefs – A or B?

**Table 1. Statements**

	A	B	Not Sure
2. A: I believe that doing the right thing is more important than getting ahead in my career. B: I believe that getting ahead in my career is more important than doing the right thing.	92	7	0
3. A: In sports it's okay to sometimes bend the rules because that's what others do. B: In sports it's never okay to bend the rules, no matter what others do.	26	73	2
5. A: I believe that in order to get ahead in business you sometimes have to bend the rules. B: I believe that in the long run bending the rules is not worth the result.	26	73	1
7. A: In business it's okay to sometimes bend the rules because that's what others do. B: In business it's never okay to bend the rules, no matter what others do.	27	71	2
9. A: I believe in treating others fairly as long as I am treated fairly. B: I believe in treating others fairly all of the time.	32	68	--
11. A: I believe that honesty and trust are important in my personal life. B: I believe that being seen as honest and trustworthy are not really that important in my personal life.	97	2	1
12. A: I believe that honesty and trust are important in the workplace. B: I believe that being seen as honest and trustworthy are not really that important in the workplace.	96	4	3
13. A: In business it's important for me to be honest and fair, even if it means losing an important client. B: In business it's okay to be less honest and fair if it means keeping an important client.	81	18	1
15. A: I believe in doing the right thing no matter the cost. B: I believe that sometimes the cost of doing the right thing is too high.	65	34	2
16. A: I believe that ethics are important as long as they don't compromise my goals. B: I believe that my goals are less important than being honest and responsible.	31	68	1

When asked specifically about doing the right thing, about a third of respondents agreed that sometimes the cost of that is too high. About one in five say it's okay to be less honest and fair in business if it means keeping an important client. Sixty-eight percent agree that others should be treated fairly all the time, and another 68% believe that their goals are less important than being honest and responsible.

Seventy-one percent believe that in business it's never okay to bend the rules no matter what others do, and 73% say that bending the rules in business is never worth the result even if it comes at the expense of getting ahead.

Nearly all of the respondents, and majorities in every subgroup agree that honesty and trust are important in their personal lives, that honesty and trust are important in the workplace, and that doing the right thing is more important than getting ahead in their career.

Jim: There are many positives to point to in the Statement Table that offer encouraging signs: 92% believe that “doing the right thing” is more important than getting ahead in a career (Q-2); 97% and 96%, respectively, believe that honesty and trust are important in both their personal life and in the workplace (Q-11,12); 81% believe that it's more important to be honest and fair, “even if it means losing an important client, (Q-13); and nearly all, 98%, believe that demonstrating personal integrity is important in their lives (Q-18, below) .

While these numbers are high, there is a clear difference between what people say and what they ultimately do when we compare these statements against some of the narrative questions (Q- 4, 10, 14). And the numbers drop significantly in response to the last statement choice (Q-16) when only 68% believe that their goals are less important than being honest and responsible.

*17. If there is a problem in your neighborhood, which are you more likely to do?*

Discuss possible solutions with your neighbors	79%
Do what works for you; after all it's every man for himself	18
Other/not sure	4

If there is a problem in the neighborhood, about four in five are likely to discuss possible solutions with their neighbors. The responses here were similar among the various subgroups.

Jim: In a question concerning the ethical value of Citizenship, the majority of those surveyed *are* willing to work with neighbors in a community to solve community problems. In support of this, the media does cover stories demonstrating service and duty to others. Young people have traditionally seemed to demonstrate the fact that actions speak louder than words when it comes to this important ethical value.

18. Is demonstrating personal integrity important, or not important, in being successful in your life?

Important	98%
Not important	2
Not sure	--

Demonstrating personal integrity is important to virtually all of the respondents.

**Table 2. Lying to Clients**

	Yes	No	Not Sure
19. If your boss lied to a client in order to close an important deal, would you respect your boss's decision?	27	71	2
20. If you lied to a client in order to close an important deal, would you expect your boss to respect your decision?	18	81	1

About seven out of ten agree that they would not respect their boss's decision to lie to a client to close an important deal. Four out of five agree that they would not expect their boss to respect them for lying to a client under similar circumstances.

Jim: It's important to contrast and compare the results of Table 2 to Question 12. While 96% believe that honesty and trust are important in the workplace, 27% would respect their boss's decision to lie to a client to close an important deal.

21. When it comes to ethics, I most often follow the example set by

My parents	69%
My teachers	4
My friends	9
People in the media	--
Religious/Spiritual leader	10
Other/not sure	7

Nearly 70% most often follow the ethical example set by their parents. Again, these results do not vary significantly across the subgroups.

Jim: Previous polls have shown the important influence that parents have on their kids in learning and practicing right conduct. It's interesting to note that Religious/Spiritual leaders and Friends virtually tie for second place and are noticeably ahead of teachers.

22. *It's okay to gossip because everyone does it.*

Yes	22%
No	77
Not sure	1

About one in five agrees that gossip is okay because everyone does it. More than three quarters do not believe that gossip is okay.

Jim: Questions 22 and 23 deal with respect and stand in contrast. Perhaps 18-24 year-olds do not realize that part of practicing respect is not engaging in gossip.

23. *I believe in treating others with respect.*

Yes	100%
No	--
Not sure	--

Every respondent agrees that they believe in treating others with respect

24. *Which of the following two employment opportunities would you choose?*

**Opportunity A:** *The first opportunity is at more than double the salary you had expected to be offered, but you know that the company CEO is uncompromising and believes in winning at any cost.*

**Opportunity B:** *The second opportunity is at a wage that is more in line with what you've been expecting to receive, and you know that the CEO is fair and honest with his employees, and in his business dealings.*

Opportunity A	11%
Opportunity B	89
Not sure	--

25. *Why did you choose the employment opportunity that you did in the previous question?*

Option A: More money; unethical boss

Because of the money (38)

I like the extra money and hope things will change (11)

They are the bosses morals, not mine (7)

I'm in debt and need the money (5)

There would be better opportunity to move ahead (3)

You do what you have to do (9)

**One each:** I can put up with anything at work, because it's only work; Ethics are important but money is a priority too; There is nothing wrong with being

aggressive; I would actually be looking for the money. I have chosen the right thing before and found it to be wrong

Option B: Less money; fair and honest boss

- I've been in that situation and it's not good (38)
- It's better in the long run; if the boss will do it to someone else, he'll do it to you (68)
- It's the right thing to do (51)
- It's important to always be honest and fair (82)
- I need to trust/respect the person I am working for (32)
- It would be a better place to work/more comfortable (214)
- Some things are more important than money (46)
- One each:** I believe a lot of people are over paid for what they do. I like to set high examples of standards
- Not sure (18)

Jim: It is encouraging to hear that when given a clear choice between money and an honest and fair boss, most (89%) would choose the later. When asked to explain why they chose opportunity A (the uncompromising/win-at-any-cost boss), 38 comments said that money was the deciding factor. One rationale that stands out: equating “uncompromising and winning at any cost” with “being aggressive.” Perhaps most troubling is the single response: “I have chosen the right thing before and found it to be wrong.”!

26. *Have the recent ethics scandals in the news caused you to be more responsible, less responsible or about as responsible as always?*

More responsible	17%
Less responsible	1
About as responsible as always	80
Not sure	3

The recent media exposure of ethics scandals has not significantly impacted the level of responsibility, with 80% claiming to be as responsible as always.

Jim: When it comes to influence from negative ethics stories reported in the media, it's optimistic to hear that 80% believe they act as responsible as always and 17% believe they are more aware of their own responsibilities.

27. Do you think that ethics still matter to people?

Yes	73%
No	24
Not sure	4

About three quarters (73%) feel that ethics do still matter to people.

(Asked only of those who say that ethics do not matter to people)

28. *Please explain why you feel that ethics do not matter.*

People just don't care (28)

People will do anything to get ahead (24)

It's everyone for themselves (16)

People are too greedy (15)

Government is corrupt/it starts with the government (11)

It's a different generation/it's a sign of the times (8)

Business is unethical (6)

There's a decline in morals/religion (6)

The wrong people are idolized (3)

Media is immoral (3)

People committing crimes don't pay for them (2)

Don't know why (6)

**One each:** Because morally bankrupt people seem to be the most successful; I'm finishing my final year in college and I can't believe the amount of cheating and plagiarism that goes on; A lot of people do not go by the rules.

Jim: While it's encouraging to hear that 75% believe that ethics still matter, there is some contrast to 92% who said that it's more important to do the right thing "than getting ahead in my career," (Q-2); and 97% and 96% that say that honesty and trust are important in "my personal life," and "in the workplace," (Q-11,12).

When the 24% who responded "no" to the question (ethics *don't* matter), the top three responses given reflect the unsettling statements that people either "don't care" or are willing to do whatever it takes to get ahead for themselves.

29. *In your opinion, which generation is more ethical?*

Your grandparents' generation	67%
Your parents' generation	12
Your generation	13
Not sure	8

By far the older generation wins the trophy for ethics among the 18-24 year old crowd with 67% agreeing that their grandparents' generation is more ethical. Their own generation ties with their parents' generation for second place.

Jim: It's interesting to note the virtual tie in those surveyed between parents' and their own generation as to who is more ethical. However, when asked in an earlier question (Q-21), when it comes to ethics, 69% followed the example set by their parents. The response to question 29 would seem to suggest that 18-24 year-olds do not consider their parents to be any more ethical than they, themselves, are. Perhaps grandparents and their grandkids should spend more time together.

*30. Have you ever been confronted with an ethical dilemma?*

Yes	73%
No	25
Not sure	1

Nearly three quarters admit that they have been faced with an ethical dilemma at one time or another in their lives.

Jim: This would seem to suggest that almost 75% can recognize an ethical issue when it arises.

#### IV. Conclusions and Recommendations by Jim Lichtman

The numbers would indicate an optimistic attitude held by 18-24 year-olds who are entering the workplace. Their statements seem to reflect a sincere desire to do the right thing. Loyalty, Service and Duty to others are important to them. Even though 34% believe that the cost of doing the right thing can be too high, they overwhelming (97 & 96%) believe that Honesty and Trust are important in both their personal and professional lives. And 98% say that demonstrating personal integrity is important. On a direct issue of Fairness, most (85%) would be fair even to those who were previously unfair to them.

Ultimately, however, ethics is not about what we say or what we intend, it's about what we *do*. Given a choice between Loyalty and Honesty, almost half (43%) would compromise their integrity for the sake of a friend. Given a choice between having an unethical relationship within the company, 32% would disregard company rules. And, given the right circumstances, 46% would look the other way or encourage unethical sales tactics in order to meet sales needs.

Although the numbers are encouraging, I would want to see greater emphasis placed on ethics in all educational institutions. Beyond the philosophical, the curriculum should reflect as many contemporary, real-world issues and challenges as possible. Constant discussion among teachers and students, as well as students with other students should be encouraged. Ways and means should be pursued to actively encourage ethical behavior in schools as well as the workplace – perhaps a raise or bonus based on ethical conduct. If companies are willing to offer those kinds of rewards for increased sales or efficiency, why not good ethical conduct?

Ethics training should be an on-going, mandatory part of all corporations, associations and organizations that have *any* concern about the level of trust and confidence within the organization. It should contain an ethical ombudsman to whom any and all employees can discuss ethical questions *before* they turn into problems without fear of retaliation.

The ultimate goal of all ethical conduct is the promotion of Trust. Honesty and Integrity is integral to fostering that trust. In *What Do You Stand For ?*, Chairman of the Federal Reserve Alan Greenspan makes clear that, “Trust is at the root of any economic system based on mutually beneficial exchange... Without mutual trust... no economy can prosper.”

Do ethics still matter? Clearly most 18-24 year-olds believe they do. Yet, when good, ethical conduct conflicts with what they want, many show a readiness to compromise the honesty and integrity they believe is so important in their lives.

Ethicist Michael Josephson reminds us that, *Ethics is having the character and the courage to do the right thing even when it costs more than we want to pay*. If we want to build long-term trusting relationships, each of us should strive to make a stronger commitment to practice the kinds of ethical values many of our grandparents have lived by – honesty, integrity, loyalty, responsibility, fairness, caring and citizenship.