

Minds matter

Exploring the mental wellbeing of young people in Northern Ireland

Secondary analysis of the Health Behaviour of School Children survey (1997/98)

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Young people and mental health

Background

The Health Behaviour of School Children (HBSC) survey is a unique cross-national research study conducted in collaboration with the European Region of the World Health Organization (WHO). The HBSC study aims to gain new insight into and increased understanding of the health behaviours and lifestyle of young people and their context. The study involves extensive quantitative data collection from a representative sample of 11-15 year olds every three to four years. The 1997/1998 HBSC was carried out in 26 European countries, as well as the USA and Canada. In Northern Ireland, the Health Promotion Agency for Northern Ireland administers the study.

This report is based on data from the 1997/1998 survey, which gathered responses from a representative sample of 6,589 pupils in Primary 7 to Year 12 throughout Northern Ireland. In addition to a set of core questions that are included in every survey, the 1997/1998 survey had a particular focus on psychosocial aspects of health and the school environment.

The data relating to mental health and wellbeing has been selected and analysed in order to provide an overview of certain aspects of mental wellbeing among school children in Northern Ireland. Since respondents range from Primary 7 to Year 12 pupils, spanning the most formative years of early adolescence, the data has been analysed by age and gender in order to explore variations between the experiences of boys and girls, and between different age groups.

Introduction

Mental health problems are among the most common forms of ill health in Northern Ireland, and depression is particularly on the increase among young people.¹ Yet, in spite of the recognition of the importance of mental health and wellbeing, physical ill health continues to attract more interest in terms of research and attention is focused more on mental illness rather than mental wellbeing.² In particular, little attention has been given to the mental wellbeing of young people. International studies show that between 17% and 22% of teenagers suffer developmental, emotional and behavioural problems,³ and in Northern Ireland, a quarter of all deaths by suicide occur among those under 25 years of age.¹

Factors that impact upon mental health and wellbeing include self-esteem, self-awareness, early bonding, feelings of security, interpersonal interaction, social participation, social responsibility and tolerance.³ Using data from the HBSC study, this report explores

how young people assess their own health, appearance and their satisfaction with life, as well as their social relationships and confidence.

This report also examines young people's experiences of their school environment, as we know that perceived school performance has been a particular cause of worry for adolescents in Northern Ireland.⁴ Mental and emotional issues are commonly associated with use of alcohol and other drugs and physical activity, and therefore findings dealing with these issues are also reported.

Self perceptions of health

Perceived health status impacts upon one's self-image and self-esteem, which are important aspects of mental wellbeing. Young people were asked to assess their own health (Table 1).

- Young people's perception of being healthy appears to decrease as they get older. Three times as many Year 12 pupils described themselves as 'not very healthy' compared with Primary 7 pupils.
- Girls appear to be more likely to consider themselves as 'not very healthy'. This difference between boys and girls increases with age, with around 10% of Year 12 boys considering themselves to be 'not very healthy' compared to 23% of Year 12 girls.
- Accordingly, those who thought they were most healthy were the youngest boys, and those who thought they were least healthy were the oldest girls.

Satisfaction with life

Negative emotions such as feelings of helplessness are associated with poor mental health.⁵ Likewise, experiences of happiness, loneliness, irritability, nervousness and sleeping difficulties all contribute to overall mental health status. Young people were asked how content they were in general with their current circumstances (Table 2).

- The majority of young people report that they are happy (89%). More young children report feeling happy than older children, but this age variation is more marked for girls than boys, as fewer older girls are happy than boys.
- While there were no notable differences between the genders in Primary 7, among Year 12 pupils, 10% more boys than girls report being happy. Moreover, roughly three times as many girls than boys in this age group reported to feel 'not very happy' and nearly twice as many girls than boys were 'not happy at all'.
- Although more than 90% classified themselves as

Table 1: How healthy do you think you are?

BOYS	All %	Primary 7 %	Year 8 %	Year 9 %	Year 10 %	Year 11 %	Year 12 %
Very healthy	27.5	35.4	28.7	27.7	27.0	23.6	23.6
Quite healthy	64.8	58.3	66.7	65.0	65.9	65.1	66.7
Not very healthy	7.7	6.3	4.6	7.4	7.2	11.3	9.7
Base	3439	477	606	665	601	573	517
GIRLS	All %	Primary 7 %	Year 8 %	Year 9 %	Year 10 %	Year 11 %	Year 12 %
Very healthy	16.8	30.5	25.1	17.9	11.7	8.4	7.5
Quite healthy	70.4	64.4	68.4	71.0	75.4	72.9	69.6
Not very healthy	12.8	5.0	6.4	11.1	12.9	18.7	23.0
Base	3037	478	513	549	512	502	483

healthy, pupils in Northern Ireland had a relatively negative assessment of their own health when compared with pupils in other European countries.⁵

- When compared with adolescents throughout Europe, young people in Northern Ireland are among those who most often report feeling happy.⁵
- Forty eight percent of young people report feeling lonely sometimes. The oldest girls are most likely to feel lonely on a regular basis, with one in five feeling lonely often compared to one in ten boys of the same age.

- One in four feel low on a weekly basis. Among the Primary 7 pupils there were no gender differences in the reported experiences of feeling low. Among Year 12s, however, twice as many girls as boys reported feeling low on a weekly basis.

- The older the pupils were, the more frequently they reported feeling occasionally irritable or bad tempered.

- Around one in four boys and girls in Primary 7 reported never to feel irritable or bad tempered. This declined with age, dropping to 20% among boys and 10% among girls among the Year 12 pupils.

Table 2: In general, how do you feel about your life right now?

BOYS	All %	Primary 7 %	Year 8 %	Year 9 %	Year 10 %	Year 11 %	Year 12 %
Very happy	48.1	64.4	49.9	50.2	46.1	41.0	38.2
Quite happy	43.6	29.4	42.8	40.5	44.6	49.2	54.5
Not very happy	6.2	4.6	5.0	7.1	7.0	7.3	5.6
Not happy at all	2.2	1.7	2.3	2.3	2.3	2.4	1.7
Base	3436	477	605	666	599	573	516
GIRLS	All %	Primary 7 %	Year 8 %	Year 9 %	Year 10 %	Year 11 %	Year 12 %
Very happy	44.4	62.0	56.4	46.5	35.9	33.7	31.7
Quite happy	42.8	31.1	35.6	41.3	48.7	50.2	49.9
Not very happy	10.0	6.3	6.8	9.1	10.1	12.7	15.5
Not happy at all	2.8	0.6	1.2	3.1	5.3	3.4	2.9
Base	3035	479	514	550	507	502	483

Table 3: Is there anything about your body you would like to change?

BOYS	All %	Primary 7 %	Year 8 %	Year 9 %	Year 10 %	Year 11 %	Year 12 %
Yes	42.3	27.6	33.8	39.1	49.8	49.8	52.9
No	57.7	72.4	66.2	60.9	50.2	50.2	47.1
Base	3325	482	580	612	582	566	503
GIRLS	All %	Primary 7 %	Year 8 %	Year 9 %	Year 10 %	Year 11 %	Year 12 %
Yes	67.3	40.8	49.4	67.8	79.1	83.7	82.3
No	32.7	59.2	50.6	32.2	20.9	16.3	17.7
Base	2994	480	496	534	507	498	479

- One third (34%) of the young people feel helpless sometimes or more often.
- In all age groups, boys were more likely to report 'never' feeling helpless, while girls more frequently reported feeling helpless 'sometimes'.
- Around 40% of the young people reported feeling 'nervous' on a weekly basis, and 8% felt this way daily.
- Girls reported feeling nervous more frequently than boys in all age groups. Pupils in Year 10 were most likely to report feeling nervous on a weekly basis.
- One in three young people reports experiencing difficulties falling asleep on a weekly basis. This is more closely associated with schoolwork among older pupils than among younger pupils.
- Primary 7 boys most frequently report having difficulty sleeping, followed by girls in Year 12.
- Few of the young people take medication for sleeping difficulties (7%). The youngest boys are those who do so most frequently (10.1% of boys in Primary 7), followed by the oldest girls (9.4% of girls in Year 12). Six percent of the total sample reported taking medication for nervousness.

Body image

When asked about their appearance, there were marked differences between the responses from girls

and boys. There were also noticeable differences across different age groups (Table 3). Respondents were asked if there was anything about their body they would like to change. They were also asked to comment on their body size and how good looking they thought they were.

- Girls are much more concerned with the appearance of their bodies than boys (67% of girls would like to make changes to their body compared to 42% of boys).
- This concern with body image increases with age for both genders, but the increase is more dramatic for girls. There is a notable increase in concern about body image for girls between Year 8 and Year 9.
- Two thirds of girls in Year 12 think they are too fat, compared to one quarter of boys. Only 12% of boys and 3.5% of girls at this age do not think about their body size.
- Unlike their perceptions of their body image, the views the respondents had about their looks did not vary much in terms of age or gender. One in two think they are average looking, and 14% of girls and 18% of boys think they are 'quite good looking'. However, more girls than boys think they are not very good looking (25.5% compared to 10.9%).

Social relationships

Family

Interaction and communication within the family affects the wellbeing of all family members. Young people were asked to assess how easy they found it to talk with the other members of their family about issues or concerns that were bothering them.

- Both boys and girls said they found it easier to communicate with their mothers than their fathers (see Table 4).
- In all age groups, girls found it more difficult than boys to talk with their fathers, and this difficulty increased with age. A particularly big increase occurred in girls between Year 8 and Year 9.
- Girls find it easier than boys to talk with their mothers.
- Both boys and girls find it easy to talk with their older siblings.
- For girls, communication with parents seems to become more difficult as they grow older, whereas communication with elder siblings becomes easier.
- For boys, communication with parents also becomes more difficult with age, while communication with siblings remains more constant.
- Young people seem to find same-sex communication within the family easier than communication with family members of the opposite sex.

Friendships

Throughout adolescence, social relations outside the home become increasingly important for personal and social identity.⁶ In general, young people appeared to find friendships easy to establish and maintain.

- Most young people find it easy to talk with friends of their own sex (77%).

- For most, communication with friends of the opposite sex is more difficult than with friends of the same sex (20.8% find it difficult to talk to friends of their own sex compared with 49% who find it difficult to talk with friends of the opposite sex). Communication with friends of the opposite sex becomes easier, however, as they get older.
- The vast majority of young people have three or more close friends. Less than 2% report not to have any close friends.
- More than 80% of the respondents found it easy or very easy to make new friends. This was the same for both boys and girls and remained consistent across age groups, although more younger boys reported finding it easy than any other group.
- The most marked change in the patterns of maintaining friendships seems to take place between Year 8 and 9, the younger group engaging in much more frequent interaction. From Year 9 on, young people still meet up with their friends regularly, but not as frequently (Table 5).
- In spite of finding it easier to find new friends and to talk with friends when older, experiences of being left out of social relations seem to increase with age. The number of girls who felt left out 'often' was slightly higher in all age groups.
- Boys report feeling confident more often than girls (63.8% of boys feel confident most of the time compared with 47.8% of girls).
- Levels of confidence appear to decrease with age. For example, while 28.5% of Primary 7 boys report always feeling confident, 16.1% of boys in Year 12 gave this answer. Among girls, the corresponding figures are 17.7% among Primary 7 girls and 7.7% among Year 12 girls.

Table 4: Percentage finding it difficult or very difficult to talk to their father and mother about things that bother them.

	All %	Primary 7 %	Year 8 %	Year 9 %	Year 10 %	Year 11 %	Year 12 %
BOYS							
Father	40.3	28.2	34.7	36.5	42.3	48.8	50.1
Mother	27.9	17.2	19.9	25.3	31.1	35.3	37.1
Base	3324	467	569	627	587	563	510
GIRLS							
Father	53.7	40.0	44.7	57.7	60.8	60.0	58.4
Mother	21.5	15.8	15.9	19.0	23.4	21.9	23.2
Base	2975	473	487	533	507	496	476

Table 5: How often do you spend time with friends?

BOYS	All %	Primary 7 %	Year 8 %	Year 9 %	Year 10 %	Year 11 %	Year 12 %
4-5 times a week	54.8	76.5	76.2	46.2	48.0	45.2	38.9
2-3 times a week	28.2	16.4	16.6	32.3	31.2	34.3	37.3
Once a week or less	16.0	6.2	5.7	20.1	19.8	19.9	23.0
No friends	1.1	0.8	1.5	1.4	1.0	0.7	0.8
Base	3364	481	583	632	587	569	512
GIRLS	All %	Primary 7 %	Year 8 %	Year 9 %	Year 10 %	Year 11 %	Year 12 %
4-5 times a week	53.8	84.6	85.2	42.2	41.6	36.6	34.2
2-3 times a week	26.1	9.2	10.4	32.6	33.7	32.8	36.9
Once a week or less	19.5	5.6	3.8	24.4	23.9	30.4	28.2
No friends	0.6	0.6	0.6	0.7	0.8	0.2	0.6
Base	3004	480	499	536	507	500	482

The school environment

Young people spend a considerable amount of their time in school. Their interaction with fellow pupils and their teachers is therefore important for their overall wellbeing. Moreover, the perception that young people have of their parents' and teachers' expectations and satisfaction with their school related performance, as well as the degree of pressure young people experience from their schoolwork, has an influence on their mental wellbeing (Table 6).²

On average, young people in Northern Ireland report that they like school with the same frequency as young people throughout Europe, although they perceive school rules and regulation as stricter and pupil participation poorer than the European average.⁵

- More girls than boys feel that they belong at their school (68% compared to 59%), but for both genders this feeling declines with age, the most marked change occurring between Year 8 and Year 9.
- The vast majority thought that their classmates enjoyed being together, and they assessed their classmates as kind and helpful. These assessments were more negative among the older pupils.
- Three quarters of the pupils felt accepted as "themselves" by their peers.
- One in four had experienced bullying during the term the survey was being carried out. The

youngest boys were most likely to report such experiences. Four percent were bullied on a weekly basis.⁷

- Older pupils experienced higher expectations from parents and teachers in relation to schoolwork than younger pupils. A similar increase in perceived expectations can be observed in other European countries, but nowhere is the increase more marked than in Northern Ireland.⁵
- More boys than girls thought their parents expected more of them in terms of succeeding at school.
- More young pupils thought their parents and teachers were satisfied with their schoolwork than older children. Girls were more likely to think their parents and teachers were satisfied with their work than boys.
- Older pupils reported more frequently that they had too much schoolwork and that their schoolwork was tiring. The biggest difference among girls occurred between Years 8 and 9 and among boys between Years 11 and 12.
- Two thirds of all pupils feel pressured by their schoolwork, and this increased with age. In Primary 7, more boys felt pressurised than girls, while in Year 12 this pattern was reversed.
- Seventeen percent of pupils experience difficulties getting to sleep as a result of pressure from their schoolwork, with greater numbers of older pupils reporting trouble sleeping, than younger pupils.

Table 6: How pressured do you feel by the schoolwork you have to do?

	All %	Primary 7 %	Year 8 %	Year 9 %	Year 10 %	Year 11 %	Year 12 %
BOYS							
Not at all	23.8	34.9	27.6	27.4	24.1	18.4	11.1
A little/some	65.3	57.5	64.2	63.3	66.3	70.0	69.7
A lot	10.9	7.6	8.2	9.2	9.5	11.6	19.3
Base	3104	461	503	554	555	543	488
GIRLS							
Not at all	21.2	34.5	34.6	27.4	16.9	9.6	5.1
A little/some	67.1	61.9	61.2	65.4	69.2	79.0	65.6
A lot	11.6	3.6	4.1	7.1	14.0	11.5	29.3
Base	2837	472	439	492	486	480	468

Substance abuse and wellbeing

Substance use or risk behaviour in adolescents is also an important indicator of wellbeing and social relations.⁵ In Northern Ireland, the 1997/1998 HBSC survey asked pupils about their use of alcohol, cigarettes and other drugs.⁸

Smoking

- Forty two percent of the survey group had tried smoking at least once. The average age at which they tried their first cigarette was 11.⁷ More of those who had tried smoking reported not feeling very happy (15.2%) compared to those who had never tried cigarettes (7%). This tendency was most marked among pupils in Years 8-10, and more noticeable among girls than boys.
- There were no notable differences in reported confidence between smokers who smoke less than daily and non-smokers.
- For those who smoke daily, there appeared to be an unusual variation. This group had higher proportions reporting feeling 'always confident', as well as a high proportion of those reporting feeling 'never confident'. This finding lends support to recent research which argues that both high and low self-esteem is linked with adolescent smoking and that different social groups among young people may have different reasons for smoking.^{9,10}

Drugs and solvents

- Twelve percent of all respondents had tried drugs and 12% had tried solvents. Nearly one third had been worried or depressed after using drugs, and a similar proportion had been sick afterwards.
- One in five of those who had tried drugs reported having experienced trouble with parents, school, friends or police as a consequence of their drug use.

Alcohol

- Seventy four percent of the survey group had tasted alcohol. Of these, nearly half were classified as regular drinkers, ie those who drank at least monthly.⁷
- Young people were presented with several reasons for drinking and asked to choose those relevant to them. The frequency with which the young people chose psychosocial reasons, eg gaining confidence, relaxing, cheering oneself up, facing pressure and avoiding problems, varied by gender. For example, 65.3% of girls chose 'to be confident' compared to 28.2% of boys and 30.5% of girls chose 'to escape problems' compared to 16.5% of boys.
- Older children, especially girls, were more likely than younger children to choose more psychosocial reasons for drinking. Seventy percent of pupils in Year 12 who have tried alcohol reported that they drink to relax, whereas 25% of the Primary 7 pupils said the same.
- A quarter of Year 12 pupils identified being under pressure as a reason why they drink, and a similar proportion replied that they drink to escape problems. Forty percent reported that they drank to gain confidence, and there was a marked increase in pupils who gave this answer between Year 8 and Year 9.
- Slightly more of those who had been drunk more than 10 times reported feeling less happy than the others, although they also reported feeling less lonely and being more confident in themselves.
- Those who drink, smoke or take drugs or solvents on a regular basis spend time more frequently with their friends than others, and more of this group also report finding it easy to form new friendships than the others. On the other hand, they find communication with parents marginally more difficult than other groups.⁵

Physical activity

It has been established that physical activity has positive effects on mental health among adults.¹¹ Although the evidence base regarding children is much more limited, there is "no logical reason why [the effects of physical activity] should be uniquely associated with the adult population".¹² Among the HBSC sample, there seemed to be certain links between mental wellbeing and the level of physical exercise the young people engaged in outside school (see Table 7).

- Boys engage in physical activity outside school more frequently than girls, and although participation declines with age among both genders, the gender difference increases as the children get older.
- A higher proportion of those who think of themselves as being 'very happy' exercise four times or more a week.

- Among those who report feeling unhappy, 17.7% take relatively little exercise, ie on a monthly or less frequent basis.
- A higher proportion of those who consider themselves to be 'very healthy' exercise daily or more than four times a week compared with those who see themselves as quite healthy or not very healthy. Overall, 65.7% of the boys and 52% of the girls who consider themselves 'very healthy' exercise daily, while 22.8% of the boys and 10.8% of the girls who see themselves as 'not very healthy' do the same.
- Those who report feeling low daily or several times a week are less likely to engage in frequent exercise outside school than those who report feeling low less frequently or not at all.
- Those who consume most cigarettes and those who report having been drunk on many occasions are less likely than others to engage in frequent physical activity.

Table 7: Frequency of exercise by level of satisfaction with life at the moment

BOYS	All %	Very happy %	Quite happy %	Not very happy %	Not happy at all %
4 times or more a week	70.5	77.0	65.7	61.9	67.6
1-3 times a week	25.1	19.6	30.8	30.5	14.9
Monthly or less frequently	4.4	3.4	4.5	7.6	17.7
Base	3412	1639	1489	210	74
GIRLS	All %	Very happy %	Quite happy %	Not very happy %	Not happy at all %
4 times or more a week	48.0	57.7	41.0	38.4	34.9
1-3 times a week	43.8	36.2	50.4	49.2	47.0
Monthly or less frequently	8.1	6.2	8.6	12.5	18.0
Base	3029	1348	1293	305	83

Conclusions

Young people in Northern Ireland have concerns about a range of issues that impact, both positively and negatively, on their emotional wellbeing. The differences in health behaviours and attitudes among young people mean that interventions to improve or promote wellbeing may have to focus specifically on particular age and gender groups. The settings for such interventions should include the family and school environment, and should address issues identified in this research.

Most of the young people who took part in the survey regard themselves as healthy, but many young people in Northern Ireland (especially girls) have a relatively negative view of their health compared to those in other European countries.⁵ Perceptions of feeling healthy decrease as children get older, more so among girls than boys. Moreover, more boys than girls report feeling happy as they get older and boys are less likely to feel lonely. Girls are much more concerned with how they look than boys, with a large majority of girls from the age of 15 onwards wanting to "change" their appearance in some way.

In general, the changes with increased age are most marked among girls, with the older girls having a much more negative assessment of themselves and their situation than the younger girls and all boys. A particular change in attitude can be observed in girls between Years 8 and 9. Among boys, the changes are less marked although the older boys have a less positive self-assessment. The youngest boys were more likely to be bullied, experience difficulty sleeping, and to feel pressured by school than the youngest girls.

More children feel able to communicate more easily with their mothers than their fathers, but as they get older both boys and girls report more difficulty in communicating with parents. The oldest girls' communication with their fathers seems to be most difficult.

Levels of physical activity seem to be linked with the perceived mental health status of young

people, as those who participate most frequently in physical activity are more likely to consider themselves as healthy and happy. This may also be connected to gender differences, as boys are more likely than girls to engage in frequent physical activity.

Most young people report feeling pressurised by schoolwork and girls seem to feel more pressure to achieve than boys as they get older. Although most make positive assessments of their schoolmates, almost one quarter report having being bullied at some time at school.

Some young people report drinking alcohol as a way of coping with pressure from school. Relaxation is, however, the most frequent reason for drinking. This, and other psychosocial explanations for substance use, were given more frequently by girls than by boys.

Many of those who have tried drugs and solvents had been in trouble with parents or teachers as a consequence. Together with those who have experimented with cigarettes, they are also more likely to report feeling lonely. Those who used drugs, solvents, alcohol or cigarettes on a regular basis, however, reported to spending time with friends more often, feeling more confident and finding it easier to form new friendships than others. These social aspects of substance misuse should be further explored and taken into account in efforts to promote wellbeing.

No young person can realise their true potential unless they have knowledge of, respect for and belief in themselves. A sense of mental and emotional wellbeing will improve their ability to meet life's challenges positively. Yet, young people will take risks and experiment with their health and social behaviour within their social environments, and aiming to eliminate such behaviour altogether would be unrealistic. What we can do, however, is address issues and concerns such as those highlighted in this report, and tackle these together with our young people, their friends and families, and their schools.

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