

Study identifies mental health as a primary concern for Canada's youth

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Canadian girls report higher levels of emotional problems and lower levels of emotional well-being and life satisfaction, while boys tend to experience more behavioural problems and demonstrate less prosocial behavior, a new Queen's University-led national study of youth health behavior shows. The study also emphasizes the importance of home, school, peers and local neighbourhood in the lives of young people. The varying interpersonal relationships that arise in these four different contexts may be critical for adolescent mental health.

"In examining the connections between contextual factors and [mental health](#), one key theme emerges: [Interpersonal relationships](#) matter," says John Freeman, an associate professor of education and Director of Queen's University's Social Program Evaluation Group (SPEG). "No matter how mental health is measured and no matter what interpersonal relationship is concerned, adolescents with positive interpersonal relationships tend to fare better in terms of mental health."

The [Health Behaviour](#) in School-Aged Children (HBSC) survey has been coordinated every four years since 1989 by SPEG in partnership with the Public Health Agency of Canada and Health Canada. The study is supported by the [World Health Organization](#) and involves research teams from 43 countries in North America and Europe.

"The early years are a critical period during which a person's health and well-being can be strongly influenced," said Dr. David Butler-Jones, Canada's Chief [Public Health Officer](#). "Investing in research that focuses

on key health priorities and lets us hear directly from young people contributes to better informed policies, programs and practice to help young Canadians transition successfully to adulthood."

For the 2010 HBSC survey, SPEG researchers collaborated with Canada's Joint Consortium on School Health (JCSH), which includes representatives from provincial/territorial ministries of education and the federal/provincial/territorial ministries of health.

26,078 young Canadians aged 11 to 15 from 436 schools participated in this cycle of the survey, which focused on the mental health of Canadian school-aged adolescents. This year the researchers also asked a number of Canadian youth to comment on the study findings. These reflections have been incorporated into the final report.

Some key HBSC survey findings:

- In contrast to their higher levels of emotional problems, girls report fewer behavioural problems and more prosocial behaviours than boys. However, for both boys and girls behavioural outcomes worsen across grades such that older students demonstrate more behavioural problems and show fewer prosocial behaviours. A similar pattern occurs with [life satisfaction](#), in that it decreases across grades and is consistently poorer for girls than for boys.
- Younger students are much more likely than older students to feel understood by their parents, while boys are substantially more likely than girls to agree that they are understood by their parents at all grades. However, the overall proportion of young people feeling understood by their parents today is higher than in early years of the survey, suggesting that youth today have more positive relationships with their parents than in the past.

- Between 19 and 26 per cent of boys are physically active for at least 60 minutes on a daily basis, but only 11 to 20 per cent of girls achieve this same criterion.
- More boys than girls see their body as too thin, while more girls than boys believe that their body is too fat. By Grade 10, 39 per cent of girls believe their body is too fat, an increase from 26 per cent in Grade 6 and 7. The percentage of girls who believe that their body is too fat represents a far greater percentage than girls who are overweight or obese.
- 40 per cent of boys and 37 per cent of girls report using cannabis at least once. Binge-drinking and cannabis use show stronger negative relationships with mental health for girls when compared to boys.
- Young people who are victimized tend to have high levels of emotional problems, while young people who bully tend to have the highest levels of behavioural problems. Young people who are involved in both bullying others and being victimized tend to have elevated levels of both emotional and behavioural problems, with this group of [young people](#) having the highest levels of [emotional problems](#) and the second highest level of behavioural problems.

Other Queen's contributors to the report are: William Pickett (Community Health and Epidemiology); Ian Janssen (School of Kinesiology and Health Studies); Wendy Craig (Psychology); Matthew King and Don Klinger (Education) and Frank Elgar (Institute of [Health and Social Policy](#), McGill University).

Provided by Queen's University

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