Middle Childhood Inside and Out:

The Psychological and Social World of Children 9-12

Full Report

United Way of the Lower Mainland

HUMAN EARLY LEARNING PARTNERSHIP

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Middle Childhood Inside and Out: The Psychological and Social Worlds of Canadian Children Ages 9-12 *Full Report*

United Way of the Lower Mainland Report

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A Community Effort

Beginning in 2004, the United Way of the Lower Mainland convened a group of people dedicated to improving the lives of children ages 6 to 12 in our region. The School-Age Children Advisory Committee was instrumental in guiding the rationale, intent and design of this research. They understood that we needed to know more about this population, including how children are doing, what they are doing outside of school hours and what they need to be supported when and where they live.

Finally, special thanks go to the following committee members involved in the early stages of this work:

Irma Mohammed	BC Federation of Labour
Claire Schuman	BC Association for Community Living
Carol Matusicky	BC Council for Families
Suzanne Strutt	BC Recreation and Parks Association
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Sandra Gebhardt	Boys and Girls Club Community Services of Delta/Richmond
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Vera Lagasse	National Crime Prevention Centre
Annie Ehman	Parent representative
Jill Wurflinger	Scouts Canada Pacific Coast Council
Mary Clare Zak	Society for Children & Youth of BC
Kimberly Barwich	South Burnaby Neighbourhood House
Kelly Ng	S.U.C.C.E.S.S.
Jeff Calbick	United Way of the Lower Mainland
Pippa Rowcliffe	United Way of the Lower Mainland
Dan Marriott	Vancouver School Board
Kathleen Shiels	Western Society for Children
Gillian Barnickle	YMCA of Greater Vancouver

Foreword

United Way of the Lower Mainland (UWLM) developed a formal partnership with the University of B.C. (UBC) in 2005 to engage in in-depth research to help answer these key research questions:

How do children spend their after school/non-school time? Where are they? What do they need? And what is the relation between children's experience during the after school time and their social, emotional and school adjustment?

UWLM pursued a research partnership with UBC to ensure that our investments and activities are guided by evidence and to help realize a goal to make our communities measurably better - the kind of knowledge that will show the difference we can make together. To that end, we have collaborated in the development of the research and provided significant staff time and funding to see this through. We have provided learning opportunities to share this new knowledge and have distributed the findings widely through the research Highlights report, resulting in a significant increase in public awareness about Middle Childhood. This research is affecting how we work with community, the kinds of partnerships we pursue and how we invest donor dollars in our region. It has provided a foundation for the ongoing development of a UWLM strategy for Middle Childhood that focuses on community and organizational capacity building, prevention and early intervention, and strengths-based programming. We are living our commitment: *from research and planning to action.*

Jeff Calbick
Director, Strategic Priorities
United Way of the Lower Mainland

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Executive Summary

The middle years of childhood (ages 6 to 12) represent the second stage in early human development, between early childhood and adolescence. As well as being an outcome indicator of early childhood experiences, middle childhood is also a powerful predictor of adolescent adjustment and success. For this reason, middle childhood is an opportune time to optimize health and promote development. And yet, to date, few data have been available in Canada documenting children's experiences both in and out-of-school during middle childhood.

The research reported here, funded by United Way of the Lower Mainland and led by Dr. Kimberly Schonert-Reichl, provides a first look at the lives of children in their middle years. It is through this research that children's voices are being represented for the first time in Canada.

This report presents the results of a collaborative research project that explored the social emotional health and out-of-school experiences of 1,402 children aged 9 to 12 years. The children involved in this study came from eight school districts in Metro Vancouver (namely, Burnaby, Coquitlam, Maple Ridge/Pitt Meadows, New Westminster, Richmond, Surrey, North Vancouver, and Vancouver).

The objective of this study was to explore three areas of research:

- How are children doing during middle childhood?
- How do children spend their after-school/non-school time? Where are they? Who are they with? How do they wish they could spend their time?
- What is the relationship between children's experiences during the after-school hours and their social, emotional and school adjustment?

Major Research Findings

What are some main causes for concern identified in this report?

Social-Emotional Development	• Generally, boys scored lower than girls on measures of social-emotional development (e.g., empathy, perspective-taking, altruism, interpersonal sensitivity). Boys also reported having lower optimism, self-esteem, and life satisfaction than girls. • For both girls and boys, children's social-emotional well-being was lower in Grades 6/7 than in Grades 4/5. In general social-emotional well-being decreased more for girls than for boys.
School Experiences	• Compared to children in Grades 4/5, children in Grades 6/7 reported feeling less connectedness and less belonging at school. • Children's confidence in their academic ability was lower among children in Grades 6/7 than among children in Grades 4/5.
Social Connectedness	• Children who felt disconnected to parents, friends, or other adults in the community reported lower optimism, self-esteem, and empathy for others than children who had these connections. • Compared to children in Grades 4/5, children in Grades 6/7 reported feeling less connected and less happy at home. This decline in home-life experience was more dramatic for girls.
Physical Health and Well-Being	• 25% of children in this sample were not getting the daily recommended amount of exercise.[1] • Teasing about children's bodies increased 10% from Grades 4/5 to Grades 6/7. By Grades 6/7, 1 in 3 children had been teased about what their body looked like.
Time Use	• Children who engaged in greater use of technology during the after-school hours (i.e., computer, TV, videogames) reported being less happy and feeling less competent than children who spent less time using the computer or TV. • Time children spent home alone increased from Grades 4/5 to Grades 6/7. Between Grades 4/5 and Grades 6/7, time spent watching TV and using the computer increased by nearly 15%.

[1] 90 minutes of physical activity per day; Active Healthy Kids Canada, 2010

What is encouraging news?

- The middle childhood years are an ideal time to promote social-emotional development. Children in Grades 6/7 who felt connected to a parent, peer, or community adult reported greater empathy towards others, higher optimism, and higher self-esteem than children who felt less connected.
- Children who engaged in structured activities after-school (e.g., sports teams, arts clubs, youth organizations) reported feeling more optimistic, more satisfied with life, and better about themselves than children who did not engage in these activities.
- Despite increases in time spent alone during the older grades, most children (85%) were still getting some form of social engagement after school. 76% of children in Grades 6/7 said they still ate dinner with an adult family member 5 or more days per week.
- Most parents (over 70%) were somewhat or very satisfied with the way their children spent their after-school time. Parents said the largest barriers to involving their children in more activities were being able to get their children to the activities and cost.

What do we conclude for the well-being of Canadian children ages 9 to 12?

The three most important findings from this report were:

1. **There was a significant decrease in children's self reported confidence, self concept (self worth), optimism, empathy, satisfaction with life, and social responsibility across the elementary school years. Children in Grade 4 reported the highest rates and children in Grade 7 reported the lowest.** More specifically, the findings revealed significant grade as well as gender differences across a wide range of the psychological and social dimensions of functioning. Whereas in Grade 4, children reported feeling quite optimistic and positive about themselves and school life, children in Grade 7 reported feeling less positive and reported lower levels of school belonging. In the area of social responsibility and related constructs, such as altruism and concern for others, there were significant differences between the grade levels, with Grade 4 students reporting higher levels than Grade 7 students. For factors related to empathy and social responsibility, overall the scores of girls were higher than for boys.
2. **The ways in which children in Grades 4 to 7 in Vancouver's Lower Mainland spend their after-school time are diverse. About 50% of all school-age children in the study reported that they participated in structured enrichment activities, including sports, lessons, clubs or after-school programs. A total of 13% of children reported being alone during the out-of-school hours, and many children reported being engaged in a wide range of computer-related activities, such as on-line computer games, and instant messaging (MSN).** When asked what they would like to be doing during the out-of-school hours, almost half of the children reported that they wished to be engaged in physical activities, such as team sports and individual lessons.
3. **A number of factors appeared to interrupt the downward spiral that can characterize the middle childhood years.** Specifically, we found that children who engaged in after-school "structured" activities scored higher across almost all dimensions of psychological and social well-being in contrast to those students who did not participate in these activities. As well, we found that children who engaged in excessive technology use during the after-school hours, mainly in the form of on-line computer games and TV viewing, had more negative adjustment than children who did not engage in such activities. Finally, we found that *relationships mattered.* Children who reported connections with parents, friends, school-related adults, and neighbours had more positive adjustment than those children who did not report such positive relationships.

Part 1: Introduction

"When people think of dramatic changes in children over time, they typically think about the first two or three years of life. Although these years are marked by striking changes, the developmental and social changes that occur between 6 and 14 are dramatic as well." (Eccles, 1999, p. 30)

"If the goal is to change the competence of children, multiple directed strategies need to be considered ranging from efforts to change child capabilities (e.g., tutoring) to interventions directed at the context (e.g., parent education or school reform or opening of opportunities) to those directed at finding a better fit between a child and his or her context." (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998, p. 206)

"Out-of-school time is critically important to children's development. It encompasses over 90% of a child's time in a given year, and gives children the opportunity to learn social skills, develop new interests and competencies, and form meaningful relationships with caring adults." (Miller, O'Connor, & Sirignano, 1995, p. 1250)

Middle childhood is the term commonly used to refer to children between the ages of 6 and 12 years, though in this report we focus on children ages 9 to 12 because this age period is a critical transitional period in which key developmental, social, and contextual changes occur. These years universally mark a distinctive period in which individuals undergo important social and emotional development transitions that set the stage for later development. Currently in Canada we gather little, if any, data on children's social-emotional development. This study was the first large-scale study to look at how Canadian children spend their after-school time.

Throughout this report we use both the terms "middle childhood" and "school-aged children" in reference to children who are 9-12 years of age.

Research accumulating in the US and elsewhere is finding where and how children spend their time during the out-of-school hours has important developmental implications. Yet, almost no research to date has examined how Canadian children during the middle childhood years spend their out-of-school time. This is particularly surprising when one considers that the average child has approximately *67 hours of discretionary time* each week. Excluding the weekend hours, *children have 30+ hours during the after-school period from Monday to Friday*.

An abundance of research has demonstrated that the early years are critical for healthy child development and has illuminated a need to better understand how experiences during the middle childhood years further influence development (Hertzman & Power, 2006). For instance, it is during the middle childhood years that children's personalities, behaviours, and competencies consolidate into forms that persist into adolescence and on into adulthood. Middle childhood is therefore a time of great opportunity to optimize health and promote development.

1a. Theoretical Framework for the Study

Ecological model

This study approaches middle childhood development and after-school time use from a developmental perspective that presupposes that the developing child is influenced by a network of factors in his or her environmental context. More specifically, consistent with Urie Brofenbrenner's contextual perspective (1979), we believe that a child's unique development cannot be viewed without seeing the child in his or her broader social and cultural context.

Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model provides a framework for the study of the interrelationship and comparative importance of the different environments surrounding a child. He suggests four types of nested ecosystems each having an effect on a child's development.

The first level, the **microsystem**, is the small immediate environment in which the child lives and includes the family, school, peer group, and neighbourhood.

The **mesosystem** encompasses the relations between the various microsystems (e.g., the family-school connection or between the parents and the child's peer group and peers' families). The absence of mesosystem links may also be an important risk factor in development, such as when the neighbourhood does not have institutions that provide support for the child and/or his or her family.

Both the microsystem and mesosystem are often affected by circumstances that do not directly involve the child. For example, children may be significantly affected by changes in family circumstances such as parental divorce, parental social support, changes in the legal system (e.g., changing definitions of neglect or abuse), the social welfare system (e.g., welfare reforms, boundary changes for categorical services), the mass media (e.g., controls on children's exposure to television violence, the availability of troubling media via the internet), or other social structures that set policies and practices that alter microsystem and mesosystem interactions.

The **exosystem** involves those contexts and actions that indirectly impact the child's development, such as a society's beliefs about how children develop and the supports needed to lead children along a path to positive development. Different societal policies and practices reflect different expectations of children and beliefs about how a child can realize these. Many preventive interventions may be viewed as changes at the exosystem level that alter interactions among lower system levels.

Finally, the **macrosystem** represents the widest level of influence, consisting of the broad ideological and institutional patterns and events that define a culture or subculture.

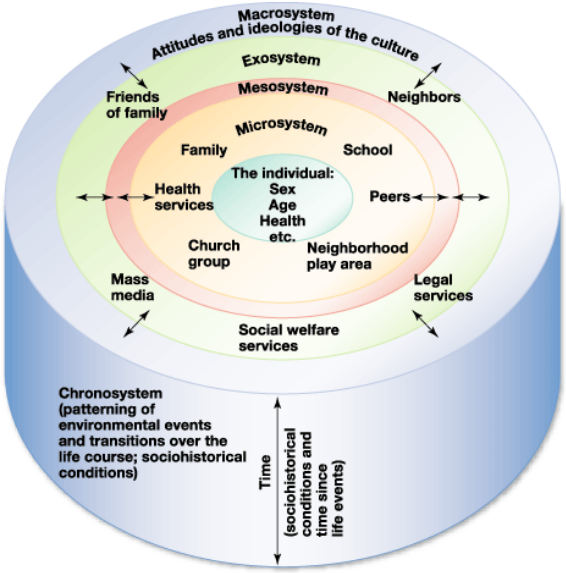


Figure 1: Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model
Source: Feldman (2003)

With respect to the exosystem level, societies' beliefs about children and child development shape childrearing practices and reflect the particular achievements valued in a society. According to Newman, Bidjerano, Ozdogru, Kao, and Ozkose-Biyik (2005), "Child rearing practices, including the structure of children's after-school activities in a particular society, are indicative of how that society projects itself into the future" (p. 3). This is important to keep in mind when considering the community and societal supports in place to foster children's development during the out-of-school hours.

When considering this ecological perspective, there are three dimensions of after-school time use and activity among children during middle childhood that have implications for child development, namely **who** participates, **how** an activity is carried out, and **why** an activity is undertaken. In this model, according to Bronfenbrenner (1979) the effects are likely to be from the interactions among the child, the activity, and the environment. This means that the same experiences may have different implications for different children in different settings.

A strengths-based approach

The second perspective taken in this study is that of a strengths-based approach. Our focus is on identifying the ways in which children can be supported to reach their highest potential rather than solely focusing on reducing risk in children's lives.

A promising framework for efforts to promote well-being focuses on resilience. The study of resilience has increased dramatically in recent years (Masten & Motti-Stefanidi, 2009). The popularity of this construct is due, in part, to the increased recognition that the key to prevention and intervention efforts is the identification of factors that lead to success rather than to just those factors that reduce risk.

> "There is a regrettable tendency to focus gloomily on the ills of mankind and on all mankind and on all that can and does go wrong . . . The potential for prevention surely lies in increasing our knowledge and understanding of the reason why some children are not damaged by deprivation . . . " (Rutter, 1979, p. 49).

Recasting our priorities in terms of facilitating positive adjustment or strengths among children and youth, rather than only limiting risk, extends our focus to *all* children and youth, at every level of advantage and opportunity.

1b. The Developmental Tasks of Middle Childhood

Competence is “a pattern of effective adaptation in the environment, either broadly defined in terms of reasonable success with major developmental tasks expected for a person of a given age and gender in the context of his or her culture, society, and time, or more narrowly defined in terms of specific domains of achievement, such as academics, peer acceptance, or athletics.” (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998, p. 206)

The five dimensions of middle childhood development

In this study, data were collected regarding 5 areas of children’s lives that are critically important during the middle childhood years:

- *Social-emotional development*
- *School experiences*
- *Connectedness with parents, peers, school, and community*
- *Physical health and well-being*
- *Constructive use of time*

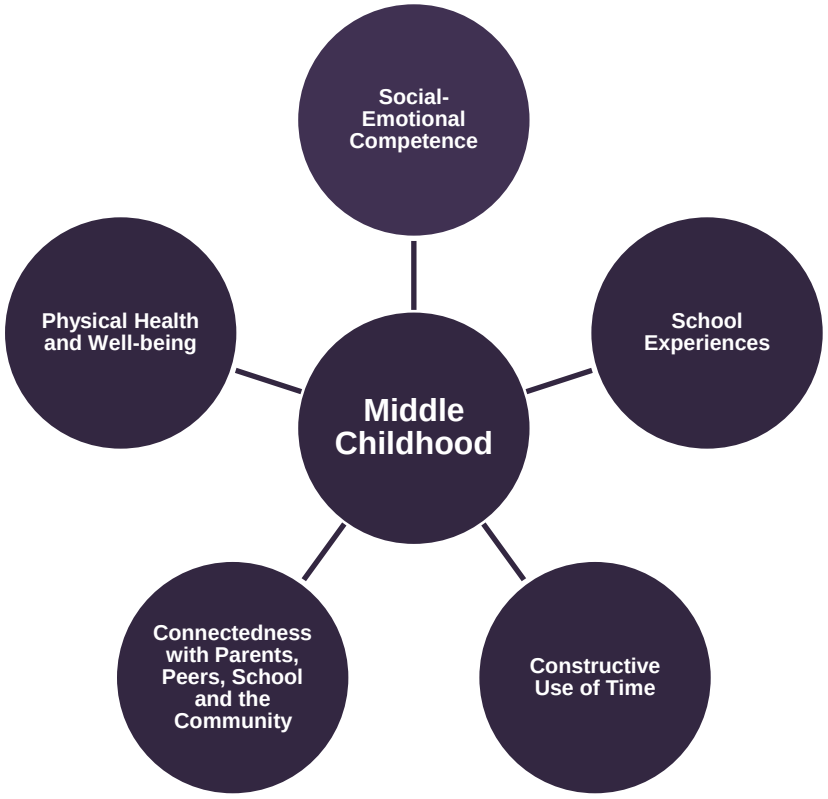


Figure 2: The five dimensions of middle childhood development

“Industry” versus “inferiority”

The middle childhood years have been described as a time of “industry versus inferiority” (Erikson, 1959). Children at this developmental level need to be engaged in activities that they see as worthwhile and allow them to build competencies through the learning of new skills.

Adults play a pivotal role in helping children develop a sense of industry. If adults provide tasks for children that are perceived to be interesting and worthwhile, and that children believe they can accomplish, they are more likely to develop a sense of their own industry or sense of efficacy. If family life has not prepared the child for school life or if the things the child has already learned to do well are considered to be insignificant by the teacher and classmates, the period can lead the child to have a sense of inadequacy and inferiority.

Competence is developed through complex interactions between a child and the environments in which he/she spends time (Roeser, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2000). So, competence will change as a child changes and as his/her environment changes.

Why study middle childhood?

The age period between 9-12 years is critical developmentally because it represents the beginning of the transition from childhood to adolescence. Transitional phases are particularly important time periods to study development because they illustrate and afford ways in which children’s growth can be fostered. Although transitional periods are considered to be times of ***increased risk*** (such as the stress pile-up that occurs when multiple changes occur in a relatively short time period), they are also times in a child’s development in which there is ***increased opportunity*** for prevention/intervention efforts. Specifically, we identify 3 shifts that make middle childhood an opportune time to promote healthy development:

1. A shift in brain development

Research on brain development during middle childhood and adolescence is still in its beginning stages, but more is known today than ever before (Steinberg, 2005). For example, current research has found that the brain is more adaptable than once assumed; the brain is constantly re-shaping itself and some areas appear to develop more rapidly during adolescence in contrast to later developmental periods (Doidge, 2007; Paus, 2005). Rapid changes that occur during adolescence are seen predominantly in the *prefrontal cortex* - the area of the brain responsible for reasoning, planning and decision-making, emotional regulation, and abstract and hypothetical thought. Recent research has also shown that changes occurring in different areas of the brain become more interconnected as an individual matures (Luna & Sweeny, 2001). This development occurs through processes of “pruning,” where nerve connections deteriorate, and “myelination,” where connections are strengthened. The growth or deterioration of these pathways is determined by whether these connections are being used.

Some of the key findings from the latest research on brain development in middle childhood and early adolescence include the following:

- Beginning in late childhood, the area of the brain responsible for decision-making and emotional regulation (the prefrontal cortex) begins to develop rapidly.
- Older children and adolescents (ages 10-18) become better at assessing risk and reward as they grow. Pubertal development and social norms also influence risk-taking behaviour during this period.
- The human brain is always changing, and it is during the middle childhood/early adolescent years that the brain undergoes its most rapid acceleration of development since infancy.

2. A shift in the developmental tasks of a child

What we know from the existing research on this age period is that the changes that occur during middle childhood are quite dramatic. It is between the ages of 9 to 12 years, in particular, in which fundamental changes occur across almost every sphere of life – intellectual/cognitive changes, physical changes due to puberty, and social and emotional changes.

During this time, children master both academic skills, such as reading, writing, and arithmetic, and become more self aware, reflective, and planful. It is also during these years that children become less egocentric and are able to consider the feelings and perspectives of others – they develop a sense of right and wrong and have the capacity to act in accordance with their higher levels of social understanding.

3. A shift in the proximal environments in which children spend their time

During middle childhood children spend more of their time in social settings, such as schools, that lead them to encounter pressures that present them with new developmental challenges: an entire new world of expectations outside the family. Some children may enter school with an assortment of skills and motivations that facilitate learning and the formation of positive new relationships with adults and peers; other children may enter school with behaviour problems and negative expectations regarding themselves and others that hinder their learning and friendships.

Expanding contexts beyond the family to the school, neighbourhood, and larger community, middle childhood represents a time in the life cycle in which individuals undergo marked changes across multiple spheres. At this time, children's developmental pathways are impacted by an increasing influence and exposure to out-of-home environments.

Top 5 reasons why middle childhood matters

1 Middle childhood represents a unique and critical developmental period in the life span in which important competencies are developed.

Recent research points to a growing recognition that children in middle childhood have distinct social, emotional, cognitive and physical needs that need to be addressed. For instance, children's personalities, behaviors, and competencies during middle childhood consolidate into forms persisting into adolescence and adulthood (Collins, 1984).

Between the ages of 9-12, children start to develop more sophisticated cognitive capacities that enable them to engage in more complex intellectual problem solving. These more complex intellectual capacities also provide children with the capacity to have more intimate friendships than in early childhood (Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 1998).

How children understand themselves and others becomes more complex than in early childhood. For instance, in early childhood children describe themselves in very concrete, observable characteristics (e.g., I have brown hair) and overt abilities or activities (e.g., I am a good runner). During middle childhood there is a move to describing the self more in terms of inner, psychological characteristics (e.g., I am a person who gets angry easily) and comparison to others (e.g., I am the worst speller in my class) (Harter, 1990).

2 A significant number of children experience mental health problems that emerge during the middle childhood years.

Attention to children's mental health during middle childhood is particularly important because it is often during the elementary school years when problems first emerge. Frequently, it is educators and other professionals that first identify these problems and issues. Given that several of the most common mental health disorders emerge during the school years, such as anxiety and conduct disorders, it is important for teachers, counselors, and school administrators to understand the nature and symptoms of these disorders because they may well be the first to recognize a concern with an individual child's well-being.

The Culture of Affluence: The Psychological Costs of Material Wealth

Research reported by Luthar (2003) indicates that children and youth from affluent families are more vulnerable to depression, anxiety, and substance abuse than are children and youth from non-affluent families.

For many years, we have known that a high proportion of children and youth experience significant mental health problems that warrant social services, yet oftentimes are undiagnosed and untreated (Offord, 1986; Romano, Tremblay, Vitaro, Zoccolillo, & Pagani, 2001). More recently, estimates of prevalence rates of various mental health problems among children and youth suggest that at least 14% of 4 to 17-year-olds experience some type of mental health disorder (well over 800,000 children across Canada; Waddell & Shepherd, 2002)

3 In Canada, a significant number of children in these years have been identified as being at risk for poor present and long term outcomes.

In Canada there are a growing number of children experiencing risks that compromise both their present and future adjustment. According to the 2006 census 19.6% of BC children under age 6 lived in low income households; in Metro Vancouver it was 21.5% or 1 child in 5 (before tax rates). Children living in poverty are generally considered to experience more challenges than those children living in higher income households. The rise in unemployment and current state of the economy has widespread implications for children and families.

- In 2007, the poverty line (LICO) for a four person household living in a metropolitan location was **$40,259 before taxes** and **$33,946 after taxes.**
- The BC child poverty rate in 2007 was **18.8%** - above the national rate of 15 %.
- While the risk of poverty is over three times greater for female lone-parent families compared to two-parent families, the majority of impoverished children live in two-parent families.
- The poverty rate for BC children living in two-parent families in 2007 was 7 %. The rate for children living in families headed by lone- parent females was 37.4 %.

In his 2002 book entitled "Vulnerable Children," J. D. Willms posited that 29% of Canadian children were considered to be "vulnerable" as identified via a composite score culled from multiple sources data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth. Unfortunately, this number has not improved in recent years. In 2009, the Human Early Learning Partnership reported that 29% of children arrive at kindergarten developmentally unprepared and therefore vulnerable to further physical, social, emotional, and cognitive development (Kershaw, Anderson, Warburton, & Hertzman, 2009). The criteria used to assess developmental preparedness

included coming to school properly dressed, nourished, and rested, being able to hold a pen and use the washroom independently, knowing at least 10 letters of the alphabet, and being able to get along with peers and follow instructions.

New research is provoking increased concern about the physical, emotional, and social-emotional health of children. According to the Child and Adolescent Task Group of the Federal/Provincial/Territorial Advisory Committee on Population Health and Health Security (2004), this generation of children (including the children who participated in this study) will be the first generation to have poorer health as adults than their parents. This risk can be alleviated by adequately addressing their current developmental needs.

4 Changes in family composition, mobility, and parental employment has led to decreases in the family and community support available to children compared to previous decades.

Parents of school-aged children report higher levels of stress and dissatisfaction than parents from previous generation. The Canadian Council on Social Development (2002) reported that more than two-thirds of full-time employed parents reported being highly dissatisfied with the balance between their job and their home life. Moreover, a full 38% of married mothers, 38% of single mothers, and 26% of married fathers reported severe stress.

5 During middle childhood many problems arise, that left unchecked, will become exacerbated as children move into adolescence.

Although there is much variation among children in terms of rate of growth and development, middle childhood development can be a more powerful predictor of adolescent adjustment and life success than early childhood development (Pedersen, Vitaro, Barker, & Borge, 2007). Problems that occur during middle childhood can forecast much more troubling outcomes for adolescence and adulthood.

Although out-of-school time programs for school-aged children were not fully implemented until the 1970's and 1980's in both the US and Canada, out-of-school programming for children in some form or other dates back to the late 1800's. During these early years, there were settlement houses that were used to create a safe after-school environment for children who were left either alone or caring for younger siblings. These early initiatives grew out of the social work field and emphasized social and emotional development.

Federal funding for out-of-school time first began during the Second World War when the US government began funding after-school programs (many of which were 24-hour programs in public schools) as a means of providing childcare for women entering the workforce for the first time. Within these programs meals were even provided for mothers who were factory workers to take home with them when they picked up their children. Federal support stopped when the war ended.

(Harvard Family Research Project, 2000)

Context of the current study

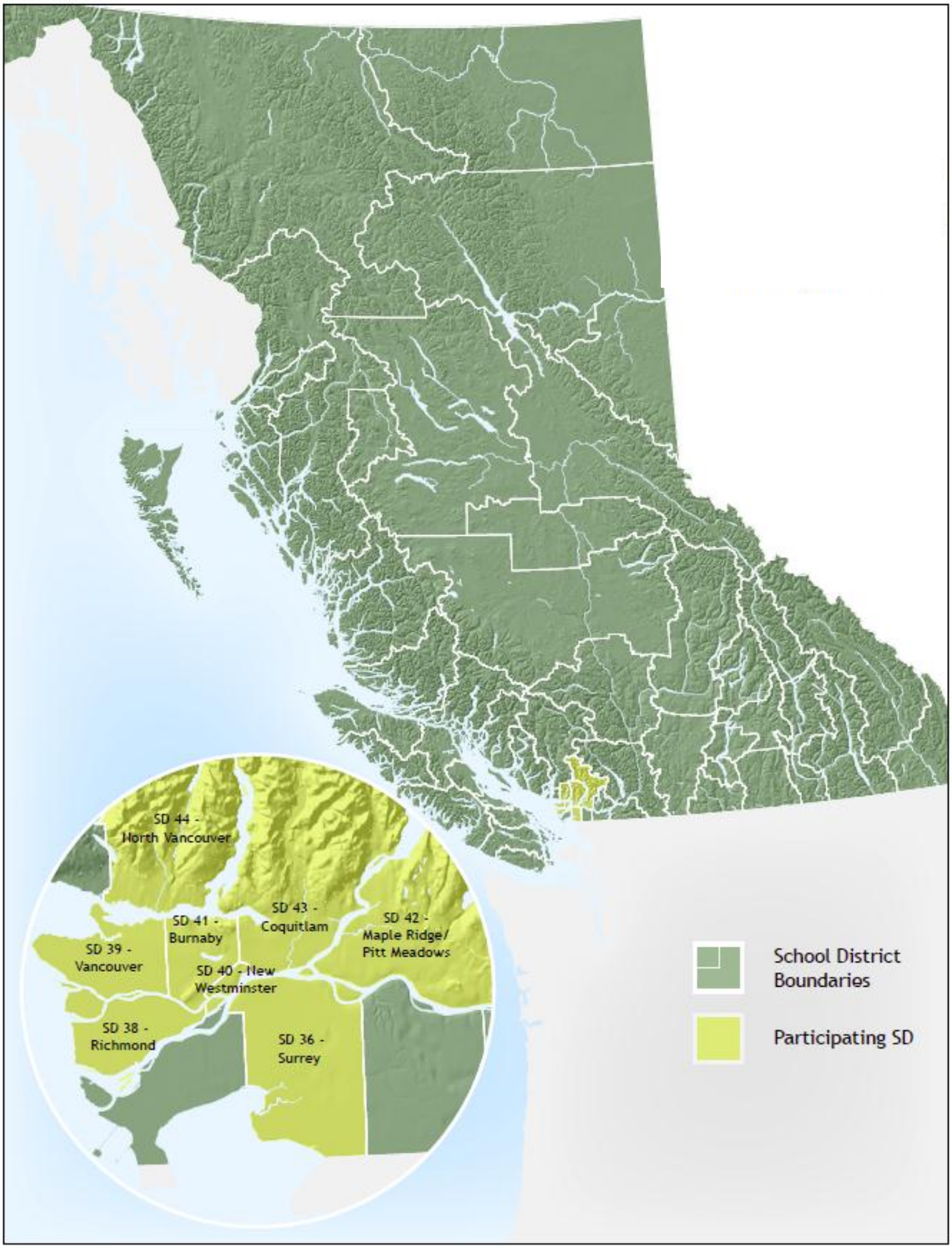
Our research on the psychological and social lives of children ages 9 to 12 was conducted in Metro Vancouver, an area located on the southwestern tip of British Columbia, Canada. At the time of this research (September 2006 - June 2008), 2.2 million people lived in this area. In 2009 the population surpassed 2.3 million. Metro Vancouver represents people from a diverse range of cultures and backgrounds. The 2006 National census counted over 68 different first languages spoken in Metro Vancouver alone. Thirty-six percent of the population (800,000 people) had emigrated from other parts of the world, predominantly from Europe, China, and India.

There are also great socioeconomic disparities in this area; people live in extreme poverty alongside others with great wealth. In 2007 the poverty line for the Metro Vancouver area was $40,259 before taxes and $33,946 after taxes. The living wage for a two-parent family with 2 children was $18.17 per hour (working full-time).

Children today live in a world in which the majority of parents both work. According to the 2006 census in British Columbia 68.5% of mothers with all children under 6, 68.4% with children both under and over 6 years, and 72.5% of women with all children older than 6 were in the labour force; the comparative figures for working mothers in Metro Vancouver were 69.6%, 67.4%, and 69% respectively.

Children in their middle years comprise a significant proportion of our children and youth. In 2006, nearly 250,000 children ages 5 to 14 lived in Metro Vancouver, hence 43% of all children in British Columbia were enrolled in a school in this one urban area. Metro Vancouver is split into 11 school districts, 8 of which agreed to participate in this study.

Figure 3. Map of participating school districts in Metro Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada



Genesis of the research

In 2004, staff at the United Way of the Lower Mainland (UWLM) began to engage in a series of interviews, focus groups, and discussions with an extensive group of community members, service providers, and educators across Metro Vancouver in order to examine the needs of school-aged children (ages 6 to12 years). This initiative stemmed out of a growing recognition that children during the middle childhood years have often been overlooked by both researchers and policymakers. Indeed, in general, there is a relative absence of information and research about the needs of children during middle childhood. The breadth of the partnership that has supported and guided this research is captured in the acknowledgements to this report.

Conducting the research

This collaborative research project examined the well-being and out-of-school experiences of 1,402 children ages 9 to 12 years. The children came from 8 school districts in Metro Vancouver (Burnaby, Coquitlam, Maple Ridge/Pitt Meadows, New Westminster, Richmond, Surrey, North Vancouver, and Vancouver). This study was conducted via a university-community partnership between staff from the United Way of the Lower Mainland and Dr. Kimberly A. Schonert-Reichl and her colleagues from the Department of Educational and Counseling Psychology, and Special Education in the Faculty of Education at the University of British Columbia.

1c. Methodology

Sampling procedure

In order to obtain a sample representative of children residing in Metro Vancouver, a stratified random sampling procedure was employed across the 8 participating school districts. For each school district, researchers first stratified the schools within the district with respect to their level of vulnerability as indexed by the Human Early Learning Partnerships' Early Development Instrument (EDI).[2] This allowed researchers to include children in areas of high to low vulnerability. This sampling method was found to obtain similar results to the socioeconomic status (SES) vulnerability levels per the 2006 national census.

Children, their teachers, and their parents were recruited from 58 classrooms (Grades 4 to 7) across 26 schools in the 8 school districts. The proportion of schools identified for participation in each of the school districts was proportional with respect to the enrollment of students in Grades 4 to 7 for that district. A breakdown of proportion of students participating in each district can be found in Figure 4.

[2]The EDI is a validated measurement tool developed by the Offord Centre for Child Studies at McMaster University. It measures five dimensions of school readiness in 5 and 6 year-olds, including physical health and well-being, social knowledge and competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive development, and communication skills. These indicators are used to create an index of vulnerability at the neighbourhood level. For a further description of this measure and the community mapping reports please visit www.earlylearning.ubc.ca.

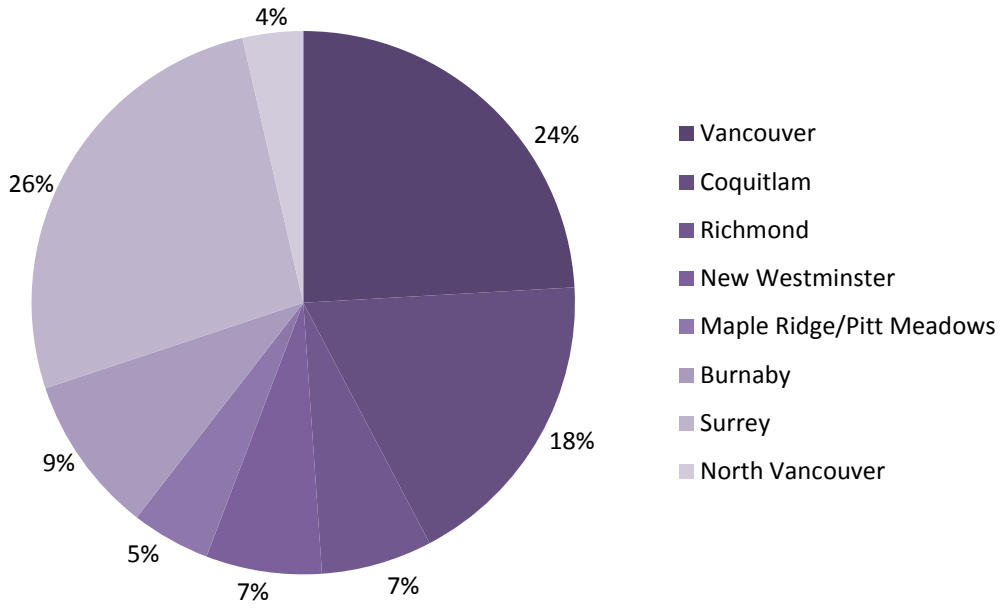


Figure 4. Percentage of students by school district

After school district permission had been obtained to conduct the research study, schools in each district were randomly selected and administrators at each school were invited to have their school participate in the study. For each school, it was requested that at least 2 Grade 4 to 7 classrooms be included (in some cases, more than 2 classroom teachers requested that their classrooms take part in the study). Following this, a UBC researcher visited the classrooms to explain the study to students and request that they bring home a parental permission slip describing the intent of the study and asking the parent/guardian to provide active consent for his/her child to participate. Given the diversity of the population in Metro Vancouver, these permission forms were translated into 5 languages (Chinese – simplified and traditional, Spanish, Vietnamese, Punjabi, Korean) in order to obtain a sample of children representative of the population.

In total, 88% of those children invited to take part in the research received parental consent to participate, resulting in a total of 1,402 participants (660 girls, 742 boys). Table 1 presents a breakdown of gender and grade for the sample. Teachers were asked to identify which of the participating students in their classroom had special learning needs, such as physical disabilities, learning challenges, or ESL.[3] In the study sample, 238 (17%) of the children were so identified.

Table 1. Distribution of students in each grade completing surveys, broken down by gender

	Grade 4	Grade 5	Grade 6	Grade 7	All Grades
Boys	75 (51%)	148 (48%)	257 (55%)	262 (55%)	742
Girls	72 (49%)	158 (52%)	214 (45%)	216 (45%)	660
Total	**147 (100%)**	**306 (100%)**	**471 (100%)**	**478 (100%)**	**1402**

[3] Note that those students whose English was not sufficient to complete the survey were excluded from participation.

Metro Vancouver is one of the most multicultural cities in Canada, and this diversity was represented in our sample. Specifically, as can be seen in Figure 5 when asked what was the first language they learned, the majority of children in this study responded with “English” followed by Chinese, Punjabi, Korean, and Vietnamese, Tagalog (Filipino), Spanish, and Hindi. In total, children reported over 25 different first languages (see Figure 6). Languages that were spoken by less than 1% of the sample were categorized in this figure as “other.”

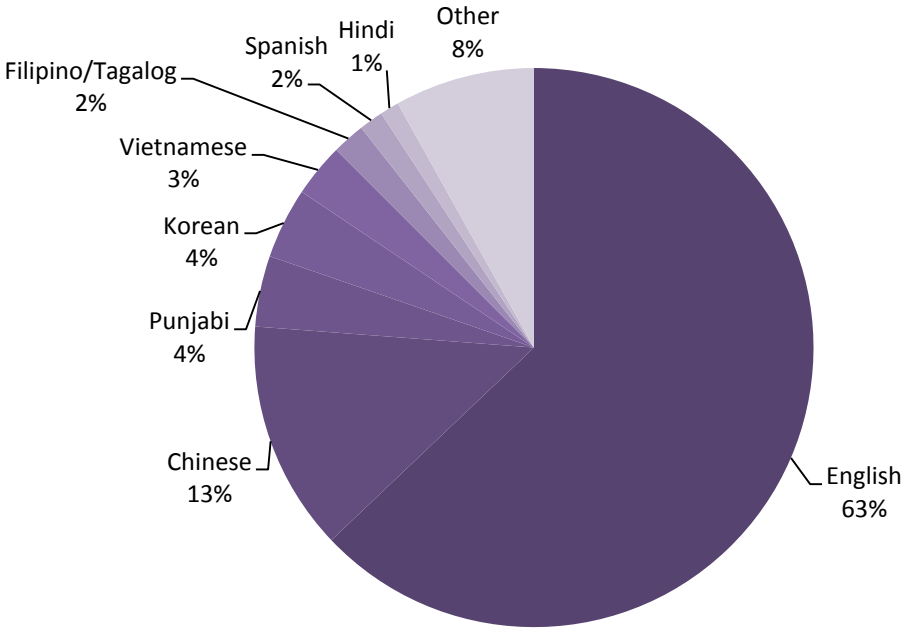


Figure 6. First languages learned by students

In the study sample, children lived in various family configurations. The majority of children (75%) lived with both a mother and father (note that this includes biological as well as reconstituted families with stepparents). 9% of children reported living half of the time with their mother and the other half with their father, and the remaining children reported other family arrangements, including mother only, grandparents, and foster care.

As mentioned in an earlier section of this report, recent statistics in British Columbia report that more than 72% of mothers of school-age children work outside the home. This prompted us to ask the children in our study to report whether or not their mothers work outside the home. In our sample, 71% of the children indicated that their mothers are in the work force, indicating the true representativeness of this sample.

With regard to part-time versus full-time employment, of those children reporting that their mothers were working, 65% reported that their mothers worked full time.

Research tools

An innovative aspect of this research study was that it provided a vehicle in which we could obtain and record the "voices" of children during the middle childhood years. Via a variety of self-report measures and daily diaries, children told us how, where, and with whom they spent their after-school time. Unique to this study was our focus on obtaining information regarding their wishes for after-school time. That is, children were not only asked *what they do* during the hours after school, they were asked to report what they *wished* to be doing.

Child self-reports

Children's voices were central to the current study and hence provided the majority of data described in this report. Children participating in this study completed:

- A self-report paper and pencil survey of about 90 minutes in length assessing children's social and emotional development along with their experiences with families, friends, schools, and neighbourhoods. Although there were a few questions that required children to write their responses, almost all questions could be answered by selecting a response option on a scale (often from 1 to 5). Surveys were administered to children in their classrooms during two forty-minute periods;

- A daily diary of about 30 minutes in length, focusing in detail on children's time use the previous day. Children completed the "Daily Diaries" for four consecutive school days.

Survey instruments

The scales that comprised the surveys utilized in the present investigation were derived from well-validated and reliable measures that have been used frequently in other research studies examining child development and resilience during the school-age years. More specifically, measures were chosen based on their strong psychometric properties, meaning that they truly measured what they were designed to measure (valid), and consistently arrived at the same results (reliable). The Measures Key for this study which includes information on the psychometric properties of each measure and the survey booklet can be found online at www.uwlm.ca.

In the following sections of this report, we report data that indicate children's responses to a range of the measures, from optimism, happiness, depression, and anxiety to empathic concern and perspective-taking abilities. On every measure, we compare the results for boys and girls during the younger grade levels (Grades 4 and 5) and older grade levels (Grades 6 and 7).

Rating scales

On most questions, children were asked to rate their responses on a scale from 1 to 5, with lower scores indicating lower frequencies of a certain experience (e.g., feeling optimistic) and higher scores indicating higher frequencies of an experience. For example, a child who scored a "1" on the optimism scale would be a child who was "low" in optimism, whereas a child who scored a "5" would be considered as "high" in optimism.

Children's responses on each outcome measure are presented either as average ratings, or as the percentage of students who responded a certain way.

Data analyses

Statistical significance

The research findings discussed in this report were analyzed using standard statistical tests of significance. The most common statistical tests used were tests for differences in population proportions and analyses of variance (e.g., t-tests) for differences among means (average scores). All tests have been adjusted to take sample design and weights into account. Because of the large sample size, standard levels of significance were applied at the $p < .01$ level (that is, differences as great as those noted would occur by chance no more than 1 time in 100).

Most of the findings are presented in bar graphs by gender and grade. Due to the extensiveness of the data that were collected, it was not possible to present all of our research findings in this report, thus it was necessary to select key issues and items. To obtain further information about all of the questions that were included in our survey, inquire at www.uwlm.ca.

Interaction effects

An "interaction" occurs when one factor, for example gender, influences the outcome of the variable of interest, such as students' optimism, depending on the level of another factor such as grade level. Interactions make it impossible to make sweeping statements about the effect of either grade or gender individually on an outcome, because the effect of one is conditional on the level of the other. For example, in Figure 7 one might be interested to know, "Is optimism higher among boys or girls?" Because there was a statistically significant interaction in this case, we cannot answer this question simply. We can only report that "it depends" on grade level. More specifically, at lower grade levels, girls display more optimism than boys, but at higher grade levels there is no significant difference between boys' and girls' levels of optimism.

Multiple informants

Another strength of this study was the use of multiple informants. Although children's voices were at the heart of this research, asking parents and teachers about their children/students provided us with a more complete picture of children's environments than obtained in previous research, and therefore allowed us to corroborate what children had reported.

Parent Reports

Over half (53%) of the children in this study had a parent or caregiver who completed a brief questionnaire themselves regarding their satisfaction with the availability of activities and after-school care for their children, as well as their perceived barriers to accessing these services. The research results from these parent surveys are presented in Part 4.

Teacher Reports

Teachers were also surveyed in this study, but for the purposes of the current report these results are not included here.

Part 2: How are children 9 to 12 doing?

"Human beings of all ages are happiest and able to deploy their talents to best advantage when they experience *trusted others* as standing behind them." - John Bowlby

“Every child requires someone in his or her life who is absolutely crazy about them.”
- Urie Bronfenbrenner

In the following section, we report on four dimensions of children’s health and well-being: Social-Emotional Development, School Experiences, Social Connectedness, and Physical Health and Well-being. For each dimension, we present the data in the following format:

- A definition of each of the constructs measured within each dimension.
- A brief summary of recent literature explaining the importance of the health dimension in middle childhood.
- An overview of how our data compare with previous research.
- A graph showing our results by gender and grade level.

There are three forces that work together to influence self-confidence and engagement in the activities and tasks of children during the middle childhood years:

1. **Cognitive changes heighten children’s ability to reflect on their own successes and failures;**
2. **The world of children expands beyond the family to encompass peers, other adults, and activities outside the family;**
3. **Children are exposed to competition and comparison with peers in school rooms and peer groups.**

2a. Social Emotional Development

The middle childhood years are characterized by many changes in children’s cognitive and social-emotional development. As children leave early childhood behind them, they experience rapid cognitive growth and begin to acquire the abilities that enable them to take in the perspectives of others and be more self-reflective and self-aware. It is during these years that children begin to fashion a personal identity, a self-concept, and an orientation toward school and achievement that will shape their success in school, work, and life. Children’s development during this time period is driven by three basic psychological needs:

1. to have a sense of **autonomy** or ownership over one’s experiences;
2. to experience relatedness and a sense of **belonging** and connection to others; and
3. to achieve **competence** or a sense of accomplishment.

Self-determination theorists have emphasized the critical role that autonomy - the opportunity to freely choose and self-direct one’s own behaviours and follow one’s interests - plays in predicting school success and overall psychological well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2001). Research suggests, for instance, that children who are provided with greater levels of autonomy in academic situations, such as having a high degree of choice and self-direction, are more motivated and engaged in school and less likely to drop out. Additionally, research has consistently documented the psychological benefits of autonomy-supportive environments – that is, environments that take a child-centered approach and provide autonomy to children in a way that is calibrated to their developmental level. During the middle childhood years – particularly between the ages of 9 and 12 -- children become progressively more independent from the family. At this age, children may begin to express their autonomy by their inclination to independently perform actions including engaging in activities of their own choosing (e.g., doing homework, household chores), making decisions on how to spend their free time (e.g., out-of-school activities), expressing their own

independent thinking, and making choices regarding clothing and music (Ryan, Deci, Grolnick, & LaGuardia, 2006).

During this stage, there is an increase in opportunities for children to develop a wide variety of competencies and interests. They begin to develop a sense of their own “industry” and feelings of competence and personal esteem and develop a sense of confidence that they can master and control their own worlds. When such experiences are not supported, children can develop a sense of “inferiority”; they can lose their confidence and sense of competence necessary for achieving future success.

Strong social and emotional health is linked to overall child well-being and provides a foundation for a positive transition to adolescence. Children with higher levels of social and emotional health do better as they make the transition to middle or to secondary school.

It is important and possible to intentionally build systems and programs to stabilize and improve children’s declining social and emotional health. Out-of-school, as well as in-school, programs and activities can play an important role in maintaining and promoting social emotional health.

In addition to developing a sense of autonomy, belonging, and competence, middle childhood is also a time when children are developing a sense of social responsibility. Only one province in Canada to date has explicitly targeted social emotional as well as social citizenship goals directly – British Columbia. In 1989, BC’s Mandate for the School System specified human and social development as one of the major goals of the BC school system. However, it was not until 2001 that the BC Ministry of Education established social responsibility as one of four “foundational skills” (see http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/perf_stands/). In doing so, the Ministry recognized that social responsibility is a standard that should be promoted to the same degree as reading, writing, and numeracy. The framework for BC’s Social Responsibility Performance Standards includes a common set of expectations for the development of students in four broad areas - contributing to the classroom and school community, solving problems in peaceful ways, valuing diversity and defending human rights, exercising democratic rights and responsibilities. These four areas and the behaviors that exemplify them are delineated in Table 2 (see www.bced.gov.bc.ca/perf_stands/social_resp.htm for the full report). Note that it is now mandatory for these standards to be reported on report cards for students in Grades K to 10.

During the past several years, many schools throughout the province have initiated social responsibility programs and activities and have made social responsibility a primary accreditation goal. Unfortunately, however, school adoption of the social responsibility goals remains optional, not mandatory. Moreover, although there appears to be an understanding of the importance of social-emotional development and its benefits in the classroom, no funding or mandatory curricular changes have accompanied this initiative.

Table 2: Categories of BC's Social Responsibility Standards

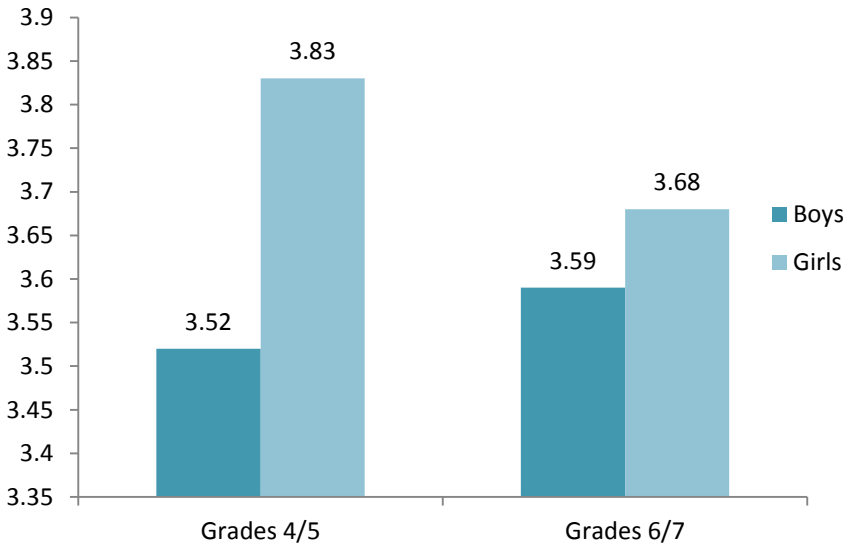
Social Responsibility Dimension	Example Behaviours
Contributing to the classroom and school community	▪ Sharing responsibility for their social and physical environment ▪ Participating and contributing to the class and to small groups
Solving problems in peaceful ways	▪ Managing conflict appropriately, including presenting views and arguments respectfully, and considering others' views ▪ Using effective problem-solving steps and strategies
Valuing diversity and defending human rights	▪ Treating others fairly and respectfully; showing a sense of ethics ▪ Recognizing and defending human rights
Exercising democratic rights and responsibilities	▪ Knowing and acting on rights and responsibilities (local, national, global) ▪ Articulating and working toward a preferred future for the community, nation, and planet—a sense of idealism

Optimism and happiness

Research conducted in the United States has demonstrated that, across the elementary school years, there is a downward spiral effect in children's self-reports of optimism and happiness (Eccles, 1999). In this study a similar pattern emerged, but as Figure 7 shows, optimism declined only for girls.

Optimism is a valuable psychological resource that serves as a protective factor for both mental and physical health and an optimistic attitude has been reported to be an essential contributor to resilience. Our Optimism measure assesses a child's "positive perspective on the world and future" (Song, 2003, p.31).

Figure 7. Optimism



Optimism:

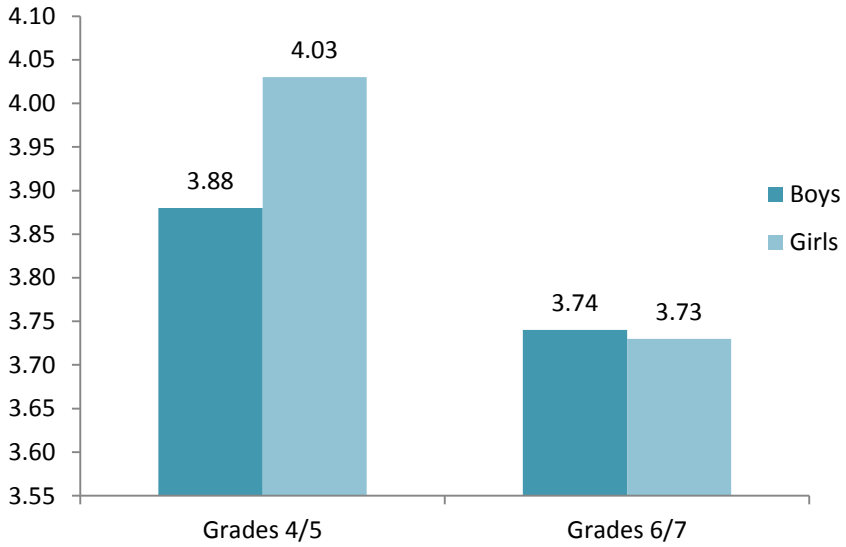
Children were asked how true a series of statements such as "I have more good times than bad times" was for them, on a scale of 1 (not at all like me), 2 (a little bit like me), 3 (kind of like me), 4 (a lot like me) or 5 (always like me).

This graph presents children's average ratings.

Figure 7: In Grades 4 and 5, girls reported significantly higher optimism than did boys, yet by Grades 6 and 7 this gender difference was no longer statistically significant. Optimism was significantly lower among girls in Grades 6/7 than in girls in Grades 4/5; there was no statistically significant change in boys' optimism from Grades 4/5 to 6/7.

The **Satisfaction with Life Scale** (SWLS) is a measure that assesses an individual's degree of satisfaction with his/her life and accomplishments. Research has shown that happy people – those that have a hopeful and/or optimistic view of the future – have better relationships and life outcomes.

Figure 8. Life Satisfaction



Satisfaction with Life:

Children were asked how much they agreed with a series of statements, such as "I am happy with my life" on a scale from 1 (disagree a lot), 2 (disagree a little), 3 (don't agree or disagree), 4 (agree a little) or 5 (agree a lot).

This graph presents children's average ratings.

Figure 8: Life satisfaction (happiness) was significantly lower for children in Grades 6/7 than those in Grades 4/5. There were no significant gender differences for either age group.

Empathy and perspective-taking

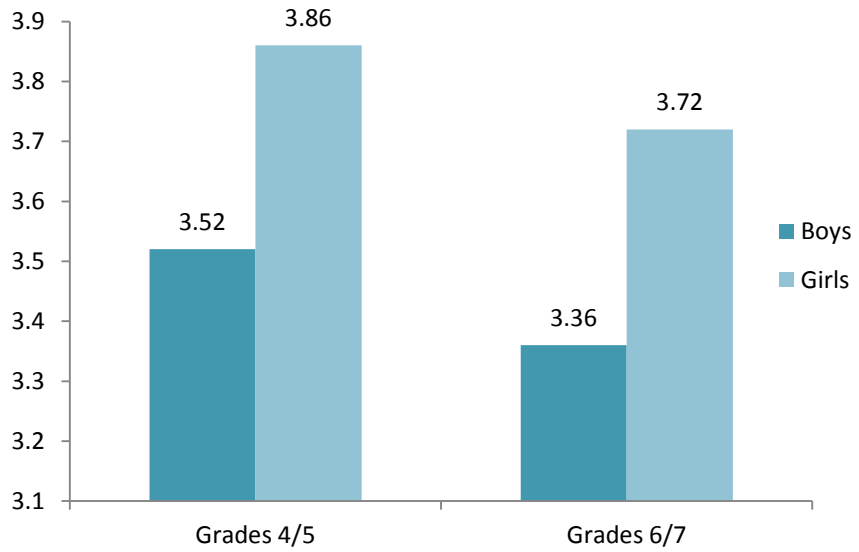
Neuroscientists Hein and Singer (2008) contend that there are two different routes one can take to adopt the perspective of another person. One route, *empathizing*, is to share another person's feelings; the second route, *perspective-taking*, is to infer about another person's thoughts and feelings. Although these two constructs are similar, empathy refers to *feeling* what another person feels, whereas perspective-taking is *thinking about* what another person feels or thinks. Hein and Singer discovered that these processes actually occur in different areas of the brain.

Empathy and perspective-taking are building blocks of compassion and prosocial behaviour, and help both children and adults to maintain positive relationships with others. The next few graphs display results for children's empathic concern, perspective-taking, interpersonal sensitivity, and altruism.

Overall, we found that girls generally scored higher on these dimensions of empathy-related responses, but that children in Grades 6 and 7 reported lower levels of concern and compassion for others in than children in Grades 4 and 5.

Empathic Concern, the emotional dimension of empathy, refers to the tendency to have feelings of positive regard and concern for another person. In this study, the empathic concern scale assesses the tendency to feel compassion and concern for other individuals (Davis, 1983)

Figure 9. Empathic concern



Empathic Concern:

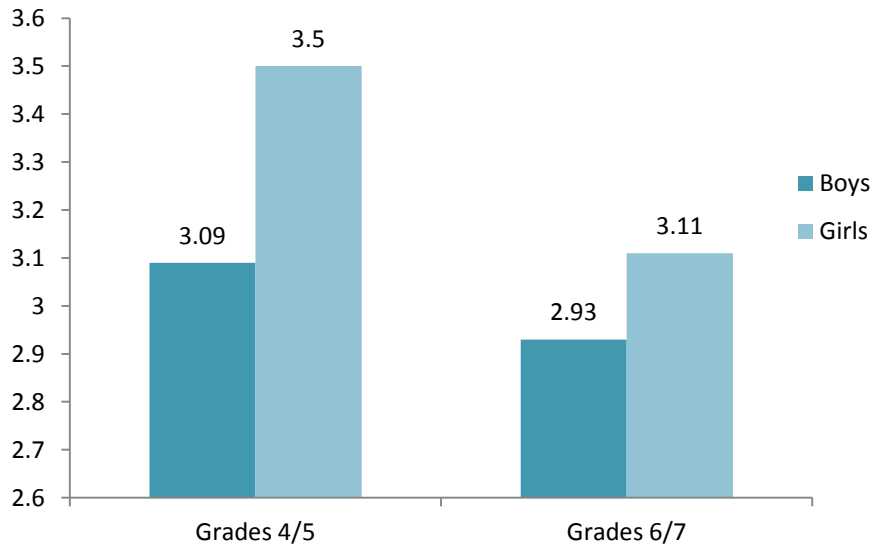
Children were asked how true a series of statements, such as "I often feel sorry for other children who are sad or in trouble" was for them, on a scale that included 1 (not at all like me), 2 (a little bit like me), 3 (kind of like me), 4 (a lot like me) or 5 (always like me).

This graph presents children's average ratings.

Figure 9: Across both time periods, boys had lower empathic concern than girls. Additionally, empathic concern was significantly lower for children in Grades 6/7 than those in Grades 4/5.

Perspective-taking refers to the cognitive dimension of empathy -- a person's cognitive consideration of another's thoughts and feelings. It involves the cognitive appraisal of what another person is feeling and/or thinking, including putting yourself "in another person's shoes."

Figure 10. Perspective-taking



Perspective-taking:

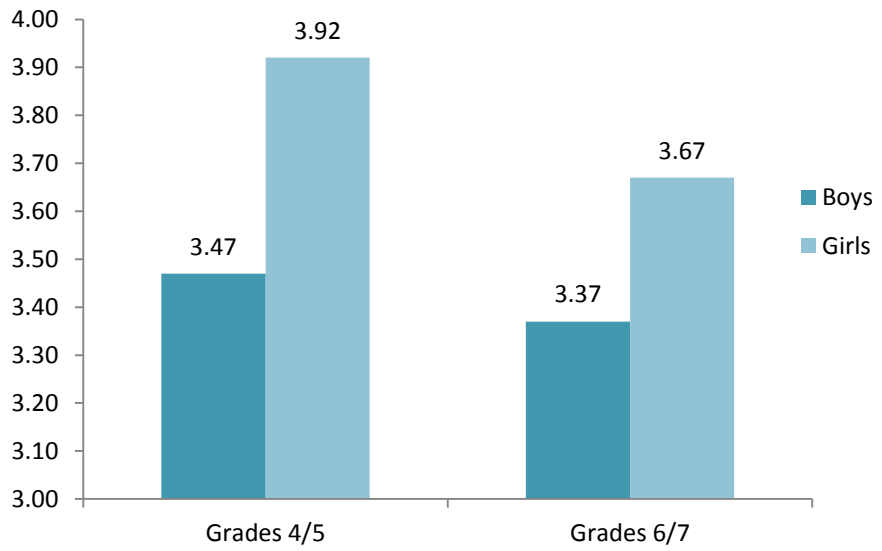
Children were asked how true a series of statements, such as "Sometimes I try to understand my friends better by imagining how they think about things" was for them, from 1 (not at all like me), 2 (a little bit like me), 3 (kind of like me), 4 (a lot like me) or 5 (always like me).

This graph presents children's average ratings.

Figure 10: In Grades 4/5 and Grades 6/7, girls reported engaging in perspective-taking more than boys. Perspective-taking was also significantly lower for all children in Grades 6/7 in comparison to those in Grades 4/5; this difference was more pronounced for girls than for boys.

Interpersonal sensitivity is an individual's ability to notice and respond to another person's verbal and nonverbal experiences. It can also be seen as a person's "initiative to help others and improve one's surroundings." Children who score high on this subscale are empathic towards others coupled with a desire to help others (Song, 2003).

Figure 11. Interpersonal sensitivity



Interpersonal Sensitivity:

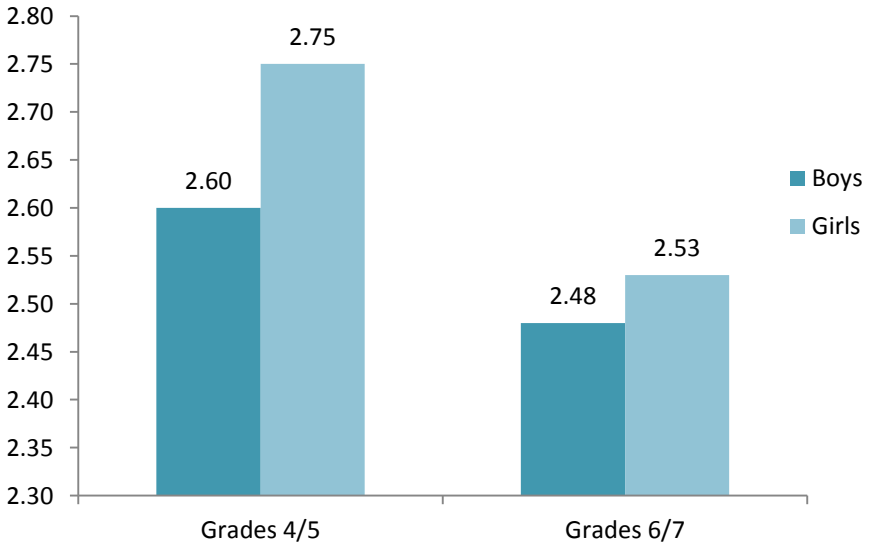
Children were asked how true a series of statements, such as "If I don't like something about someone else, I try to say it in a nice way so they don't get hurt" was for them, from 1 (not at all like me), 2 (a little bit like me), 3 (kind of like me), 4 (a lot like me) or 5 (always like me).

This graph presents children's average ratings.

Figure 11: Across all grade-levels, girls scored significantly higher on interpersonal sensitivity than did boys. Girls scored significantly lower on interpersonal sensitivity in Grades 6/7 than in Grades 4/5. A similar trend emerged for boys, yet for boys this change was not statistically significant.

Altruism refers to the unselfish concern for the welfare of others. It is the desire to do good without reward or recognition. Often these acts are self-less, and involve a high degree of consideration or concern for others. Altruism differs from interpersonal sensitivity because it involves actions, not just feelings.

Figure 12. Altruism



Altruism:

Children were asked how often they engaged in altruistic behaviours, such as "Helping someone who was hurt" since the start of the school year on a scale from 1 (never), 2 (once or twice), 3 (a few times), or 4 (many times).

This graph presents children's average ratings.

Figure 12: Girls scored significantly higher in altruism than did boys, but only in Grades 4 and 5; by Grades 6 and 7 there was no longer a significant gender difference between boys and girls. Reports of altruism were significantly lower for girls in Grades 6/7 in comparison to girls in Grades 4/5. This grade difference did not emerge for boys.

Confidence and competence

Research has shown that although children typically enter the middle childhood years confident about their ability to master a wide array of tasks and activities, there is a decline in this positive perception of themselves across the elementary school years.

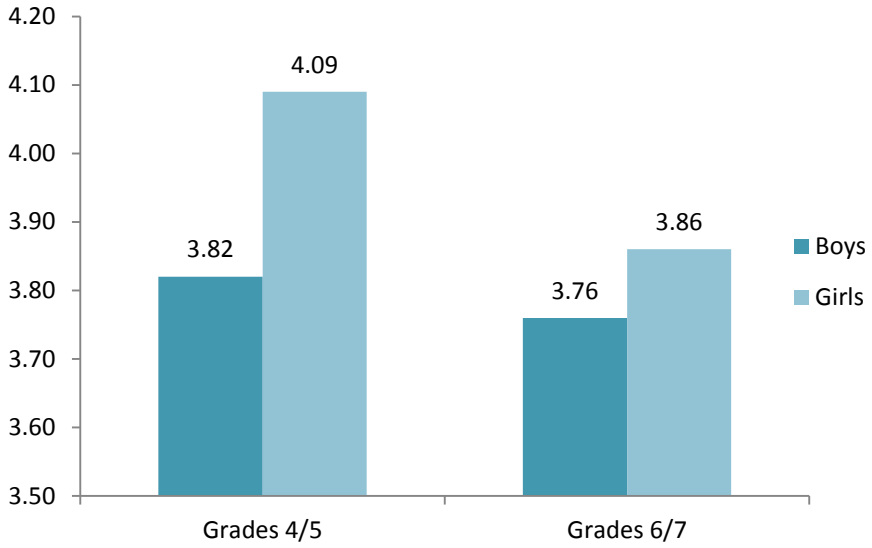
As children move toward adolescence, increasing self-awareness leads to increased social comparison. Children in their middle years examine themselves inwardly (for example, emotions, beliefs, attitudes, wishes) in contrast to younger children who judge themselves more by overt and external characteristics, such as achievements, possessions, and physical attributes. With this shift during middle childhood from an external focus to one that is more internal and abstract, a more critical self emerges – one that is often tremendously concerned about the impression he or she is making on others. A child's sense of competence may become particularly unsteady in the move to adolescence.

The results of the current research support this trend from a more positive to a more negative view of the self. In our research, we operationalized competence with two specific dimensions:

self concept, and self efficacy. Our results showed a significant downward trend from Grade 4 to Grade 7 grade in competence. This trend was more pronounced for girls than for boys. However, in every grade level boys consistently reported a lower sense of competence than did girls.

Self-concept (self-esteem) is a multidimensional construct that includes how a person thinks and feels about his/her physical, social, academic, and emotional abilities. It affects how people think and feel about themselves, and it influences how they interact with their environments. Results from research across a variety of psychology disciplines support a multidimensional perspective of self-concept and attest to the powerful explanatory power of specific facets of self-concept for influencing and explaining relations among a wide range of constructs of practical significance and that inform theory and practice (Marsh et al., 2006, p. 410).

Figure 13. Self-concept (self-esteem)



Self-Concept:

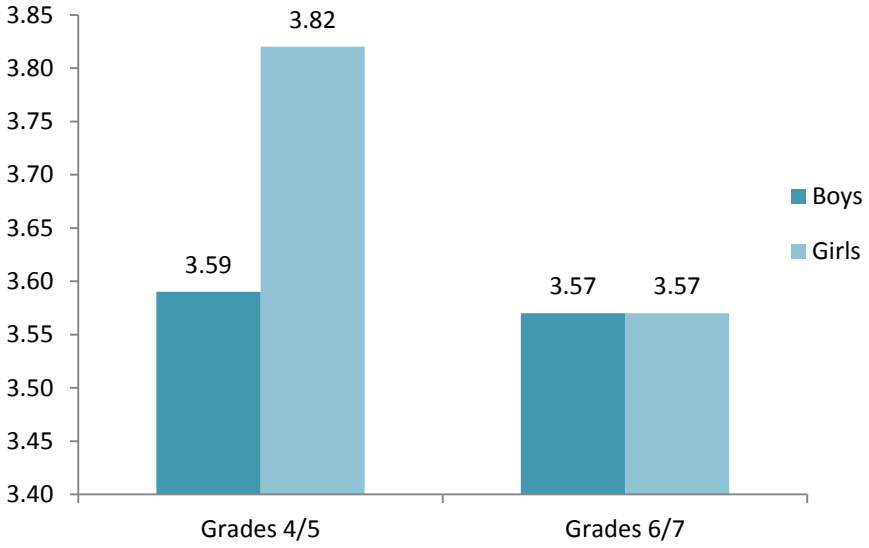
Children were asked how often a series of statements, such as "In general, I like being the way I am" described them, from 1 (never), 2 (hardly ever), 3 (sometimes), 4 (often) or 5 (always).

This graph presents children's average ratings.

Figure 13: Across all grade-levels, girls reported significantly higher self-concept than did boys. However, Grade 6/7 girls' self-concept was significantly lower than that of Grade 4/5 girls. Boys' self-concept remained somewhat consistent across Grades 4/5 and Grades 6/7.

Self-efficacy is measured by evaluating an individual's confidence in their "ability to deal with situations or things effectively" (Song, 2003, p.31). Most importantly, it is how people believe they will do that effects how they approach challenges and difficult tasks.

Figure 14. Self-efficacy



Self-efficacy:

Children were asked how true a series of statements, such as, "If the way that I am doing something isn't working I try to think of different ways to do it," was for them, from 1 (not at all like me), 2 (a little bit like me), 3 (kind of like me), 4 (a lot like me) or 5 (always like me).

This graph presents children's average ratings.

Figure 14: In Grades 4 and 5, girls reported having significantly higher self-efficacy than did boys. However, Grade 6/7 girls' self-efficacy was significantly lower than that of Grade 4/5 girls, and was equal to that of the boys. There were no differences in boys' self-efficacy across Grades 4/5 and Grades 6/7.

Social responsibility goals

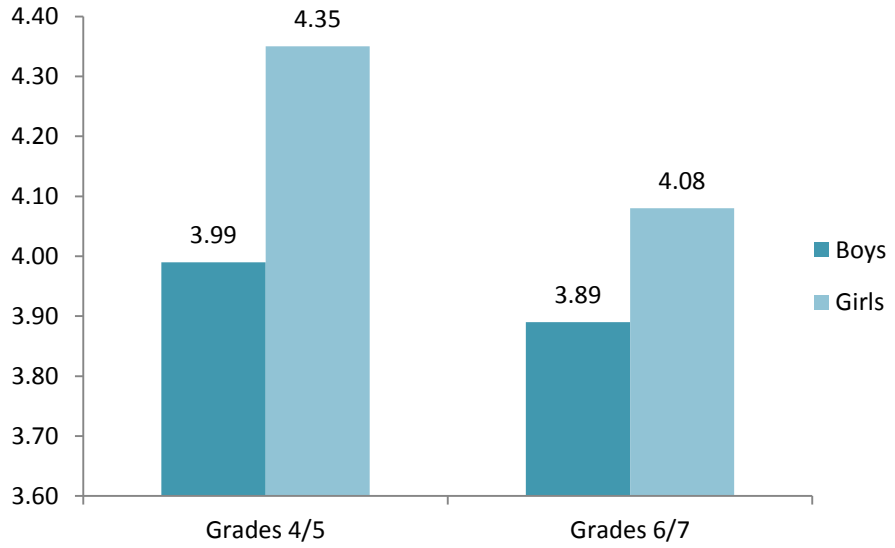
Socially responsible behaviour highlights the importance of internalization, meaning when one takes over the values and attitudes of society as their own so that socially acceptable behaviour is motivated not by anticipation of external consequences but by intrinsic or internal factors (Grusec, 1991).

In the present study, children's responses to a series of questions assessing social responsibility was used to index their overall social awareness and responsibility. The specific measure used in this study was developed by Kathy Wentzel at the University of Maryland, and measures social responsibility goals with a focus on the children's efforts to share and help peers with personal and academic problems.

The chart below shows that, although levels of social responsibility are relatively high, we can also see that they are lower among older students in comparison to younger students, and this trend is particularly marked for girls.

Social Responsibility Goals refers to how often students try to keep promises and commitments made to peers and follow classroom rules (Wentzel, 1991).

Figure 15. Social responsibility goals



Social Responsibility Goals:

Children were asked to respond how often they engaged in certain behaviours, such as "try to cheer someone up when something has gone wrong" on a scale from 1 (never), 2 (hardly ever), 3 (sometimes), 4 (often) or 5 (always).

This graph presents children's average ratings.

Figure 15: Across all grade levels, girls had significantly higher social responsibility scores than did boys. For both boys and girls, however, social responsibility was significantly lower among children in Grades 6/7 than those in Grades 4/5. This difference was more pronounced for girls than for boys.

Psychological well-being

A recent study of mental health among children and adolescents found that 1 in 5 youth experience mental health problems severe enough to warrant professional help (Romano et al., 2001). Although later adolescence is often considered the major period of change and turmoil, middle childhood can be a stressful transitional phase as well, as greater expectations are being placed on children across contexts (Eccles, 2004). During this period children spend more time away from home than they did when they were younger (Schonert-Reichl, 2007), and their social networks begin to change. Furthermore, mental health problems, such as anxiety, depression, and conduct problems, often first appear during childhood (Russo & Beidel, 1994). Treating these problems in childhood may be more effective than treating them later in life. For this reason, researchers, educators, and policy-makers are taking a greater interest in children's mental health.

In Canada, suicide is the second highest cause of death for youth aged 10-24 (Canadian Council on Children's Rights, 2002). Each year, on average, 294 youths die from suicide. Many more attempt suicide. Aboriginal teens and gay and lesbian teens may be at particularly high risk, depending on the community in which they live and their self-esteem.

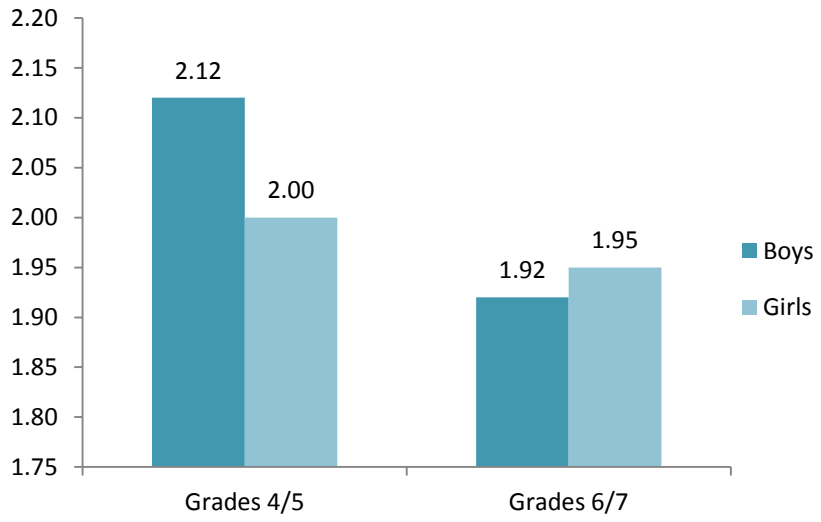
Here in British Columbia, the Ministry of Education has made children's social and emotional well-being one of its primary concerns. As noted earlier, in 2001, the Ministry of Education included social responsibility as a core area of school outcomes, alongside reading, writing, and numeracy. This follows a growing movement towards ensuring children's holistic development into not only knowledgeable, but healthy, adults.

Depressive and anxious symptoms are indicators of poor mental health. They are related to lower school performance and difficulty forming and maintaining relationships with peers and adults. As the incidence of mental health issues in adolescence grows, it is important to examine how children in the middle years are doing on core measures of mental health. Note that the measures used to assess mental health in the current study were not designed to diagnose clinical levels of depression or anxiety.

Depressive symptoms are the feelings associated with being unhappy. It involves a lack of feeling enjoyment in everyday things.

"Depressive symptoms" refers to experiences that are associated with feeling depressed (e.g., feeling unhappy, tired, unfocused, not having much fun), but that are not necessarily indicative of clinical depression. The measure used in this study was not designed to diagnose clinical levels of this affliction.

Figure 16. Depressive symptoms



Depressive Symptoms:

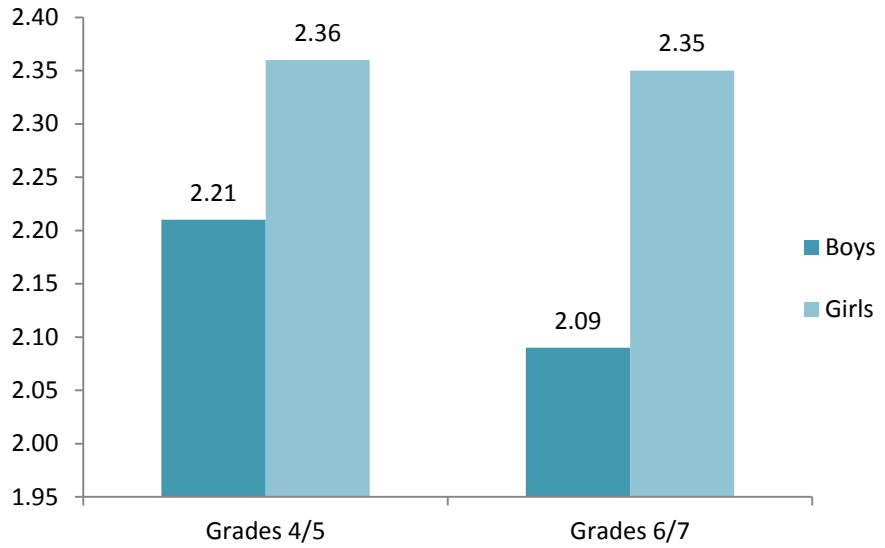
Children were asked to respond to a series of statements, such as "Do you feel unhappy a lot of the time?" and indicate how true it was for them on a scale from 1 (not at all), 2 (a little bit), 3 (sometimes), or 4 (always).

This graph presents children's average ratings.

Figure 16: In Grades 4 and 5, boys reported experiencing more depressive symptoms than did girls. However by Grades 6/7 this gender difference disappeared. Older boys reported fewer depressive symptoms than younger boys whereas girls reported similar levels of symptoms at both grade-levels.

Anxiety is a response to a *perceived* threat or danger. It can include being afraid of many things, and worrying about future events or about what others think of you. Anxiety can effect a person's cognitive and social development and often begins in childhood. When left untreated, anxiety can lead to an increase in depression, substance abuse, and interpersonal conflict. The measure used in this study was not designed to diagnose clinical levels of anxiety.

Figure 17. Anxiety symptoms



Anxiety Symptoms:

Children were asked to indicate how true a series of statements, such as "Do you feel afraid a lot of the time?" was for them on a scale ranging from 1 (not at all), 2 (a little bit), 3 (sometimes), or 4 (always).

This graph presents children's average ratings.

Figure 17: At both grade-levels, girls reported higher levels of anxiety than did boys. Self-reported anxiety symptoms were significantly lower among Grade 6/7 boys in contrast to Grade 4/5 boys. For girls, self-reported anxiety was similar across Grades 4/5 and 6/7.

2b. School Experiences

Children spend more time in school than they do in any other place outside their homes (Eccles, 2004); therefore what happens in schools plays a very important role in children's social emotional development. Eccles, a leading researcher on this subject, developed a theory of stage-environment fit to explain the challenges and difficulties experienced during the middle childhood years. She found that paradoxically, as children become more mature and crave more autonomy, respect, and control, teachers begin to give them less of it. Compared to the early elementary school years, the late elementary and middle-school years are characterized by higher teacher control and discipline and less student choice and self-management. This mismatch creates an atmosphere where students feel less motivated and less interested in school. Boredom and disinterest within the classroom are often cited as contributing to acting-out behaviours, which often emerge at this time in development.

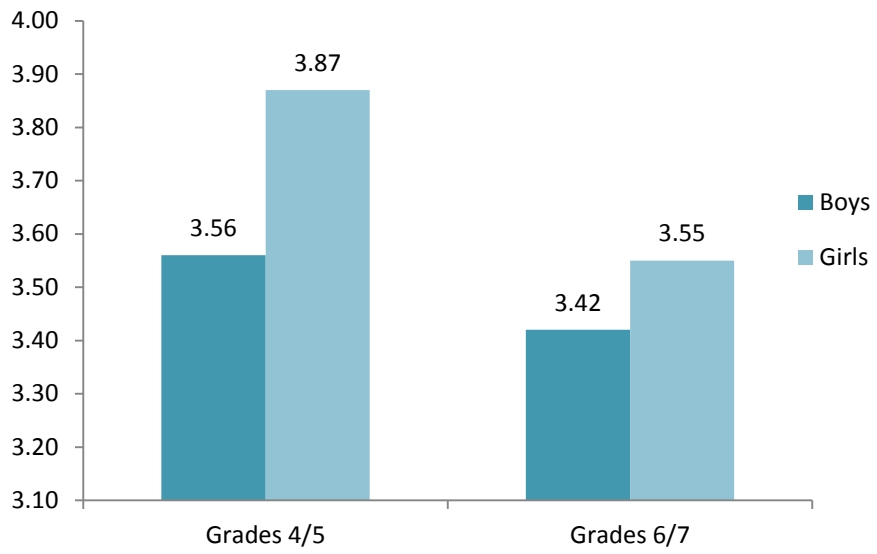
In this study, we used measures that were designed to assess students' feelings of belonging and respect in the classroom, as well as their sense of competence in school. The potential role of the school context in creating risk has received recent research attention. Research has consistently demonstrated that the late middle childhood and the early adolescent years mark the beginning of

a downward spiral that leads some children to experience school failure and subsequently leave school before graduating.

Consistent with other research across North America, our data show that as children move from Grade 4 to Grade 7, there is a significant decrease in their sense of belonging and their sense of connection to others. Another consistency we found is that boys have a significantly lower sense of belonging and connection than do girls. That said, although girls report a higher sense of belonging and connectedness overall, the decline in these positive experiences from fourth to seventh grade is more drastic for girls than for boys.

School belonging refers to students' sense of community and connectedness in their school. Belonging includes students feeling supported and respected by their classmates, teachers, and other school adults.

Figure 18. School Belonging



School Belonging:

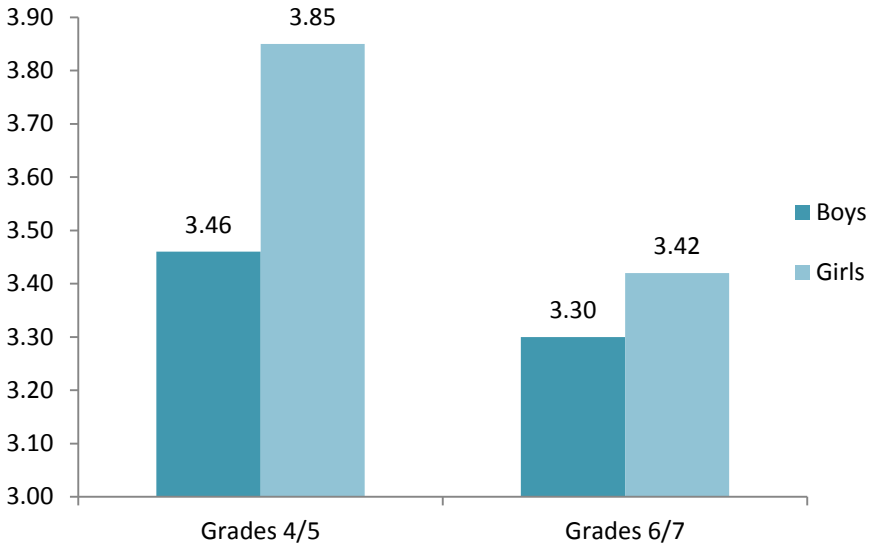
Children were asked how much they agreed with a series of statements, such as "Students at this school really care about each other" from 1 (disagree a lot), 2 (disagree a little), 3 (don't agree or disagree), 4 (agree a little), or 5 (agree a lot).

This graph presents children's average ratings.

Figure 18: In Grades 4/5 and 6/7, girls reported experiencing more school belonging than boys. Although school belonging was significantly lower for all children in Grades 6/7, the decrease was steeper for girls.

School Self-concept refers to children's beliefs about their academic ability. That is, it refers to children's perceptions of themselves as students, including how interested and confident they feel in school.

Figure 19. School self-concept



School Self-Concept:

Children were asked how true a series of statements, such as "I am good at school subjects" was true for them, from 1 (never), 2 (hardly ever), 3 (sometimes), 4 (often), or 5 (always).

This graph presents children's average ratings.

Figure 19: In Grades 4/5 girls reported having a significantly higher school self-concept than boys, however by Grades 6/7 this gender difference was no longer significant. School self-concept was significantly higher among Grade 4/5 boys and girls than Grade 6/7 boys and girls.

2c. Social Connectedness

"Human beings of all ages are happiest and able to deploy their talents to best advantage when they experience *trusted others* as standing behind them." (Bowlby, 1973, p. 25)

As posited by Bowlby (1973), "We are born with an innate need to be connected to others" and this need to belong and attached to others remains important throughout the course of middle childhood.

In addition to the new cognitive and social emotional competencies that children acquire during middle childhood, it is also a time when children's environmental contexts expand beyond the family, to the school, neighbourhood, and larger community setting. In contrast to the first years of a child's life when the influence of family is most central, it is during middle childhood when out-of-home environments influence children's developmental pathways (Bianchi & Robinson, 1997). Children at this age, although still heavily influenced by the family milieu, are increasingly engaged in other environments and may be influenced by teachers, school environments, and peer groups.

Relationships with parents, family members, peers, and non-related adults in the school and community are central in fostering children's social and emotional competence during the middle childhood years. Research has documented that those children who report connections and

quality relationships with key individuals across multiple contexts – family, peers, school, and community – are higher on almost all dimensions of well-being than children who report a lack of such relationships.

During middle childhood the need for independence and autonomy becomes prominent. As with the second year of life, a hallmark of the commencement of the second decade of life is the emergence of a search for a new, more differentiated and complex sense of self. A child's need to distinguish him/herself as someone separate from parents takes on many forms, although often with a common theme – anything that the parent feels is acceptable is often rejected by the early adolescent (with an eye roll, etc.). Children at this age are pushing for "autonomy" or "self-rule" and again want to do things their own way and not have their parents dictate what is appropriate or inappropriate behaviour/clothing/music etc. Peter Blos (1979) has argued that a second individuation process occurs during this developmental period and it requires a psychological restructuring which results in the formation of an adult sense of self. That is, according to Blos, this strive for independence serves an important function by setting the stage for a strong sense of identity and independence that is necessary for healthy adult adjustment.

Parent-child connectedness

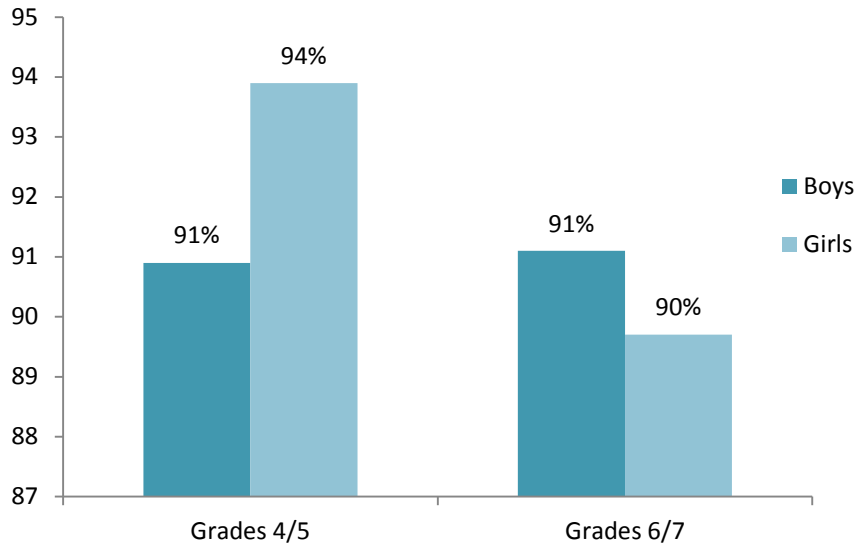
One obvious consequence that arises from the quest for more independence during middle childhood is increased conflict with parents. Parents themselves perceive middle childhood and adolescence as the most difficult stages of their children's development.

Research supports the claim that conflict is an integral component of parent-child relationships. Some of the recent research findings that have emerged with include the following: 1) conflict has most often, but not universally, been reported to be at its highest levels in middle childhood and at its lowest levels in late adolescence; 2) conflict between parents and children is more likely when the child is experiencing depressed mood, and when the child is an early-maturing girl; and 3) parent-child conflict has been found to vary as a function of gender, with conflict more often involving children and their mothers than fathers, and daughter-mother dyads in particular.

Though conflict with parents is often characteristic of middle childhood and emerging adolescence, research also suggests that this is a period when children crave more support from their parents (Offer & Schonert-Reichl, 1992; Steinberg, 2001). Moreover, parents who are kept informed of daily events in their children's lives reported enjoying their relationships with their children more than parents who did not make this effort (Laird, Pettit, Dodge, & Bates, 2003).

Our data are consistent with these findings. Although the data revealed that older children, in contrast to younger children, reported having lower interest in their parents' opinions of them and that their parents had less knowledge of what they were doing, our data also show that the vast majority of the emerging adolescents (90%) still reported feeling connected to their parents.

Figure 20. Importance of parent approval



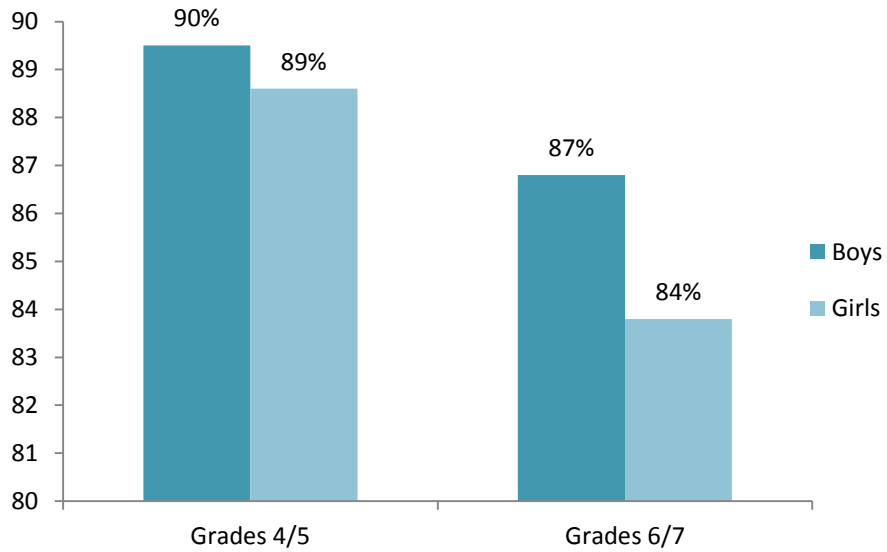
Importance of Parent/Caregiver's Opinions of the Child:

Children were asked to indicate the degree to which the statement, "What my parents/ caregivers think of me is important" on a scale of 1 (never), 2 (sometimes), 3 (often), or 4 (always).

This graph presents the percentage of children who said this was true for them "often" or "always."

Figure 20: In Grades 4/5 and in Grades 6/7 there was no statistically significant difference between boys and girls with regard to the degree to which they felt what their parents thought of them was important. For boys, there was no significant change from Grades 4/5 to Grades 6/7 for this item. A different pattern emerged for girls – Grade 6/7 girls reported being less concerned with what their parents thought of them than Grade 4/5 girls.

Figure 21. Happy home life



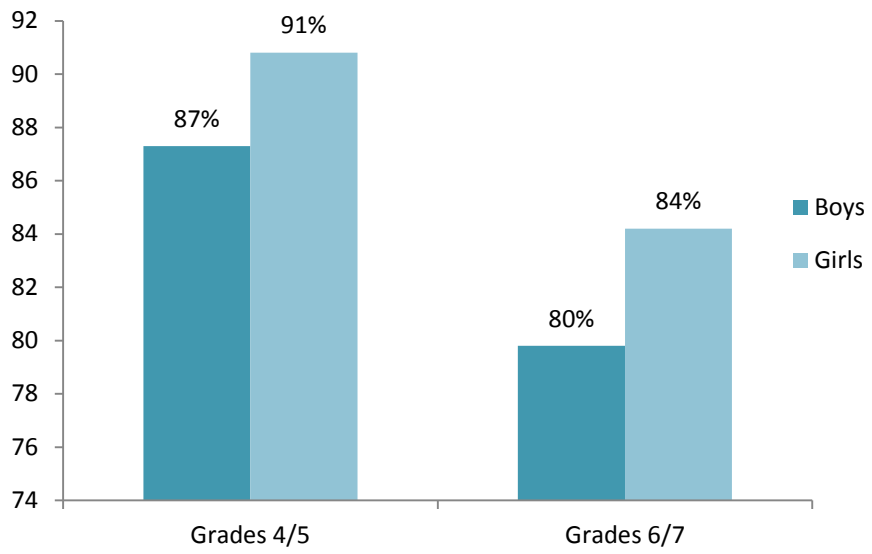
I have a happy home life:

Children were asked how often this statement was true for them, from 1 (never), 2 (sometimes), 3 (often), or 4 (always).

This graph presents the percentage of children who said this was true for them "often" or "always."

Figure 21: Boy and girls reported having an equally happy home life in Grades 4/5. By Grades 6/7 both boys and girls reported less favourable home life experiences than children Grades 4/5, and girls were slightly more likely to report having a less happy home life than boys. However, 84% of children at this age still reported being happy at home most of the time.

Figure 22. Parental knowledge: Who you spend time with



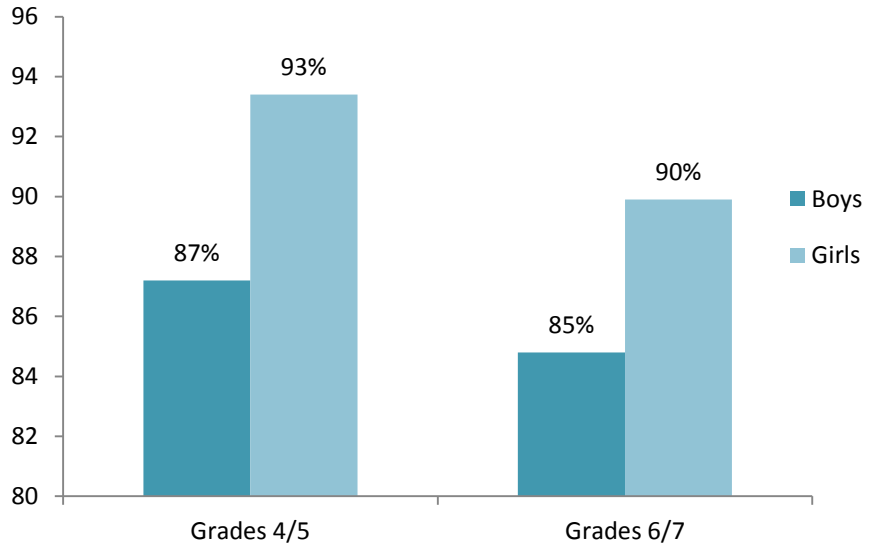
Parental Knowledge:

Children were asked to report the degree to which their parents or caregivers knew about "who you spend your time with," on a scale ranging from 1 (doesn't know at all), 2 (knows a little bit), 3 (knows a lot), or 4 (know everything).

This graph presents the percentage of children who said their parents knew "a lot" or "everything".

Figure 22: Across grade-levels, girls reported that their parents knew slightly more about who they were with than boys. Older children of both genders, however, reported that their parents knew less about their friends than younger children.

Figure 23. Parent knowledge: Where you go after school



Parental Knowledge:

Children were asked the degree to which their parents or caregivers knew about "where you go right after school" on a scale ranging from 1 (doesn't know at all), 2 (knows a little bit), 3 (knows a lot), or 4 (know everything).

This graph presents the percentage of children who said their parents knew "a lot" or "everything".

Figure 23: Again, in general girls reported that their parents knew more about their whereabouts than boys. Older children also reported that their parents knew less about where they went after school than younger children.

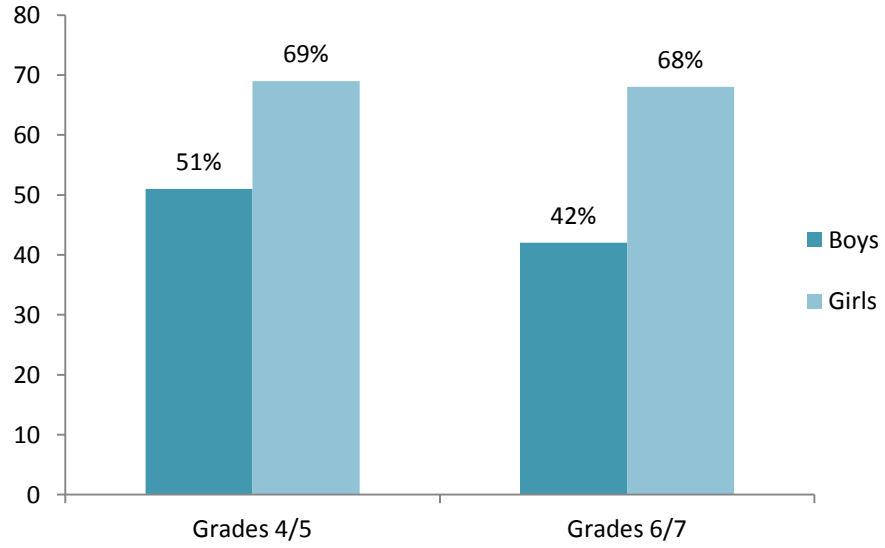
Peer connectedness

We know that children associate more with peers and less with family as they enter the later elementary school years. We also know that peer relationships grow in complexity as they get older. As they develop, children begin to seek friendships rich in quality (having a friend who cares, talks to them, and helps with problems) rather than quantity. In middle childhood peer relationships and social interaction provide an essential context for interpersonal understanding and moral reasoning. Research shows that having strong peer connections has a positive influence on development and well-being (Yugo & Davidson, 2007; Larson & Richards, 1991).

Friendship plays a pivotal role in development and as children near adolescence, peer acceptance and relationships take center stage. There is a shift in focus and social belonging with peers taking precedence over familial relationships. Middle childhood is the time when children begin to exercise more agency and independence in how and with whom they spend their time. Research has shown that peer relationships can have both positive and negative effects on psychosocial functioning, and can impact children's attitudes towards school and adults, as well as behaviour (Zarbatany, Hartmann, & Rankin, 1990). This increase in peer influence is potentially due to the rise in intensity and intimacy that friendships undergo at this developmental stage.

Our data showed that girls, in general, reported having higher quality friendships than did boys. This supports historical research that identifies differing developmental trajectories for boys and girls with girls being more concerned about relationships and interpersonal connections than boys (Gilligan, Lyons, & Hanmer, 1990). Contrary to what might be expected, we did not find that children reported much change in the quality of friendships for either boys or girls from Grade 4 to Grade 7. We did not ask children how many close friendships they had.

Figure 24. A friend who cares



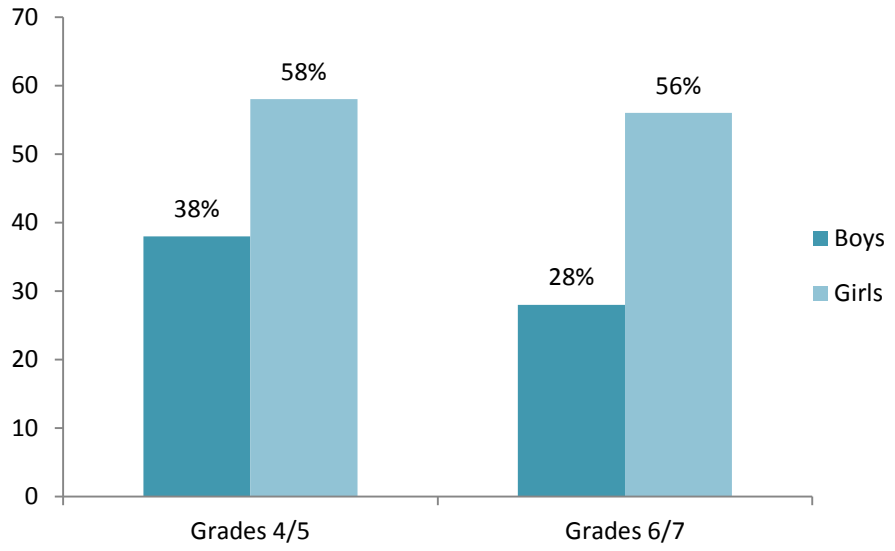
Friendship:

Children were asked the degree to which the statement "I have a friend my age who really cares about me" is true for them on a scale from 1 (not at all true), 2 (a little true), 3 (pretty much true), or 4 (very much true).

This graph presents the percentage of children who said this was "very much true."

Figure 24: In both Grades 4/5 and Grades 6/7, girls were more likely than boys to report having a friend who cared about them. "Having a friend who cares" did not change significantly from Grades 4/5 to Grades 6/7 for girls, however boys in Grades 6/7 were less likely to report having a close friend than boys in Grades 4/5.

Figure 25. A friend who helps



Friendship Help:

Children were asked to indicate the degree to which the statement "I have a friend about my age who helps me when I'm having a hard time" was true for them, from 1 (not at all true), 2 (a little true), 3 (pretty much true), or 4 (very much true).

This graph presents the percentage of children who said this was "very much true."

Figure 25: In both Grades 4/5 and Grades 6/7, girls were more likely than boys to report having a friend who helped them during a hard time. The percent of girls with "helpful friends" did not change from Grades 4/ 5 to 6/7, but the percentage of boys with "helpful friends" was significantly lower in Grades 6/7 compared to boys in Grades 4/5.

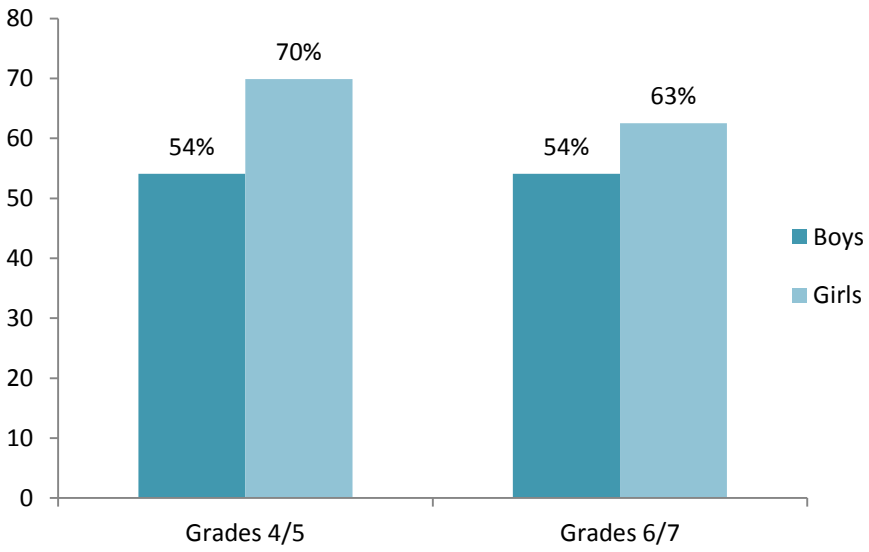
Community connectedness

It is during the middle years that children's physical and social contexts begin to broaden. Many children negotiate the freedom to get themselves to and from school, or to hang out with their friends before coming home. As children get older, they also spend less of their spare time with family; by Grades 7-9 children spend half as much time with their families than they do in Grades 5 and 6 (Larson & Richards, 1991). This time away from family is spent instead with friends or alone. It is therefore critical that children have safe, connected neighbourhoods in which to explore.

Sampson (1999) defined communities as places where there is safety, mutual trust, willingness to intervene for the common good, and social support for childrearing. For example, in a well-developed community a neighbour might intervene if he/she observed a fight breaking out among two children, or a shop owner might get to know the names of his/her school-aged patrons. Social cohesion in a neighbourhood provides children and adolescents with a sense of safety, support, and responsibility.

Studies have shown that community social cohesion is associated with decreased problem behaviour, community violence, and adolescent depression (Aneshensel & Sucoff, 1996; Elliott et al., 1996; Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997). Furthermore, a study conducted by Dubois and Silverthorn (2005) found that children and adolescents who reported having a "natural mentor" within the community (for example, a team coach, religious leader, employer, friends' parent, coworker, neighbour) were more likely to graduate from high school, attend college, work more than 10 hours a week, and were also less likely to be involved in gangs, violence, or risk-taking behaviour. Children who had these significant relationships within the community were also more likely to report higher levels of self-esteem and life satisfaction.

Figure 26. Caring neighbourhood adult



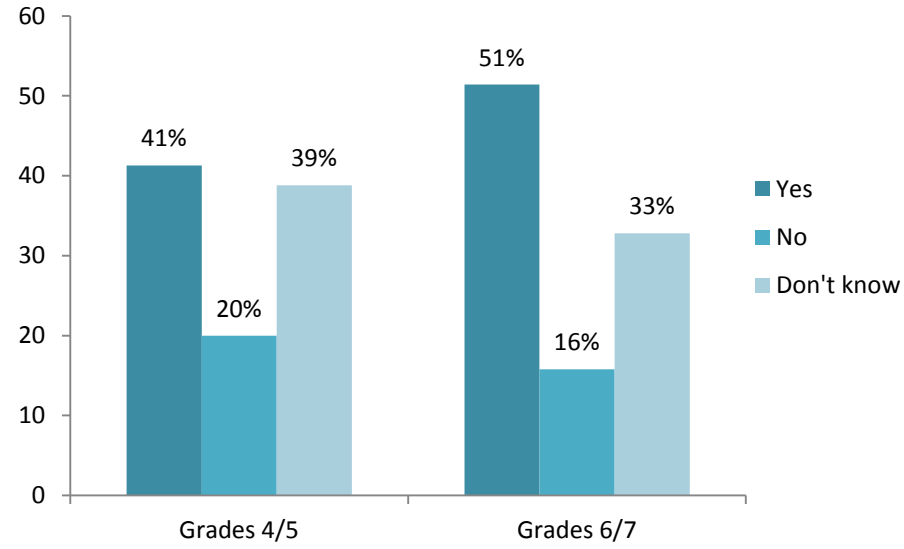
Caring Non-Related Adult in Neighbourhood:

Children were asked how true the statement "In my neighbourhood, there is an adult who really cares about me" was for them, from 1 (not at all true), 2 (a little true), 3 (pretty much true), or 4 (very much true).

This graph presents the percentage of children who said this was "pretty much true" or "very much true."

Figure 26: Across both grade-levels, girls were significantly more likely than boys to report knowing an adult in their neighbourhood who cared about them. Grade 4/5 girls were more likely to report knowing a caring neighbourhood adult than Grade 6/7 girls, but this difference did not reach statistical significance.

Figure 27. Community organizations



Community Organizations:

Children were asked to think about the neighbourhood in which they lived when answering this question. Children could respond with "yes," "no," or "don't know."

This graph presents the percentage of children who responded within each category.

Figure 27: This graph shows us some interesting trends. First, nearly half of children surveyed, whether in Grades 4/5 or 6/7, were familiar with neighbourhood organizations that provided after-school programs. Over 30% of children, however, were unaware of such organizations. The data also showed a slight difference in this awareness in Grades 4/5 children in comparison to Grades 6/7 children; older children were more aware of organizations providing activities than younger children.

2d. Physical Health and Well-Being

Middle childhood is a time when many physical changes occur alongside emotional and cognitive changes. Hormones change as puberty begins – which is generally between the ages of 10 and 11 for girls, and between the ages of 12 and 13 for boys. On average, between the ages of 11 and 14, girls are taller and heavier than boys.

The physical changes that occur in the later portion of middle childhood have a significant effect on boys' and girls' sense of identity and body image. With the increased cognitive capacity to take the perspective of others -- that is, "think about what other people might be thinking" – children during this age period become increasingly self aware and self-conscious about their bodies and how they compare to their peers. This increased focus on the self during this time in development coincides with an increased focus on a need for social acceptance from one's peer group – which in turn is associated with greater levels of social comparisons with peers (evaluations that involve both seeking information about the self and making judgments about the self relative to others). For girls in particular, more conversations occur in their peer groups that focus on appearance and physical comparisons.

Body image satisfaction, that is, how satisfied or dissatisfied a child is with his or her own body, has received considerable research attention during the past decade because of its important role in forecasting later depression, low self esteem, and eating disorders. Children as young as 6 have reported feelings of dissatisfaction with their bodies, and research has indicated that body dissatisfaction increases with age. Even among children, body image disturbances can be associated with weight control techniques, such as unhealthy eating (including dieting) and excessive physical exercise.

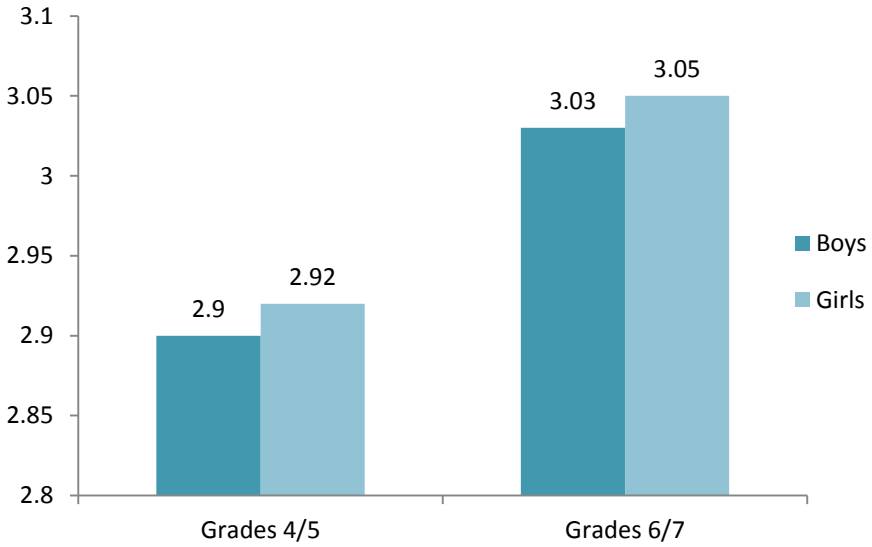
Studies have shown that teasing about appearance increases and that bullying and rejection are common occurrences during this age period (Griffiths, Wolke, Page, & Horwood, 2005). Additionally, peer criticism about physical appearance and body weight is a well-documented phenomenon in late childhood and early adolescence that may be particularly deleterious to an individual's body image because it generates a direct and potent negative evaluation of one's body by another.

Physical activity has also been linked to body image, with an inverse relation being found between physical activity and body dissatisfaction – indicating that more physical activity is associated with greater levels of body satisfaction. Additionally, most of the research conducted to date has found that activity interventions (programs that increase an individual's level of physical activity) lead to improvements in body image among adolescents (Duncan, Al-Nakeeb, & Nevill, 2009; Neumark-Sztainer, Goeden, Story, & Wall, 2004). It should be noted that there is less research on this during middle childhood.

Body image

Body image refers to how people view their own bodies. People can have perceptions of their bodies that are different from what other people see, or that are different from what is physically accurate. Our data did not suggest any evidence of negative body image – children at all grade levels rated their own bodies as about average. Although this finding was encouraging, the data still showed that Grade 6 and 7 children reported higher levels of teasing about their bodies than Grade 4 and 5 children.

Figure 28. Body image



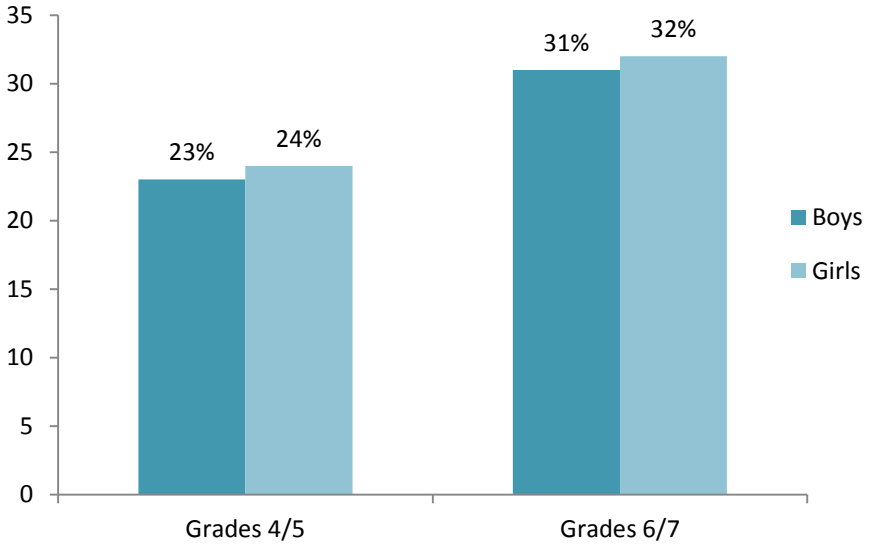
Body Image:

Children were asked how they perceived their bodies, on a scale ranging from 1 (very underweight), 2 (slightly underweight), 3 (about the right weight), 4 (slightly overweight), or 5 (very overweight).

This graph presents children's average ratings.

Figure 28: In Grades 4 and 5, both boys and girls rated their bodies as average to slightly underweight, whereas Grade 6/7 boys and girls tended to see themselves as average weight. There were no significant gender differences at either grade-level.

Figure 29. Teasing about the body



Teasing about Body:

Children were asked if other kids at school had ever teased them about what their body looked like. Children could respond either "yes" or "no."

This graph presents the percentage of children who answered "yes."

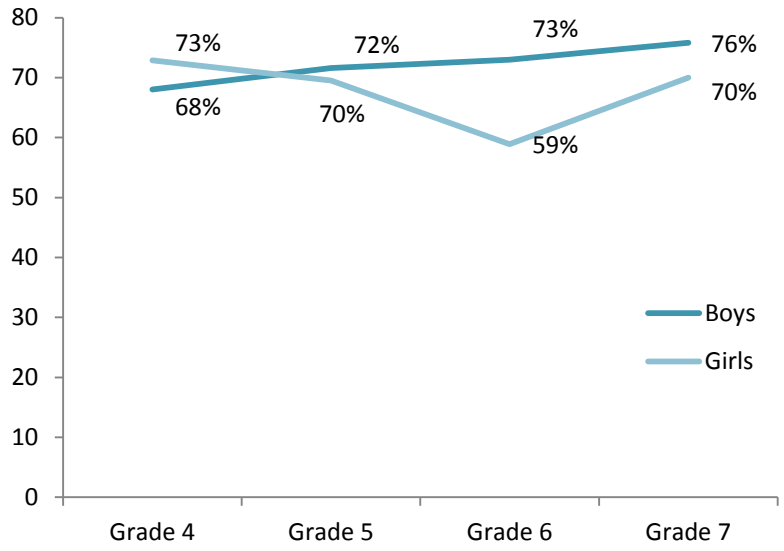
Figure 29: Girls and boys in Grades 6/7 reported higher rates of teasing about their bodies than did children in Grades 4 and 5. Within each grade group, boys and girls did not differ in the amount they reported being teased.

Physical exercise

Physical well-being is an essential component of overall health. In 2010, Canadian health standards suggested that children should be getting at least 90 minutes of exercise every day. A recent study reported that only 12% of children and youth were getting this daily recommended amount (Active Healthy Kids Canada, 2010).

Our data showed two important trends. First, at most, only 76% of children were getting some form of physical activity 4 or more days per week. This left 1 in 4 children who were failing to get enough exercise. Second, we saw a grade/gender interaction effect, where girls were getting similar amounts of exercise as boys in Grade 4, however by Grade 6 boys reported that they were getting more exercise than girls.

Figure 30. Weekly physical exercise by grade level



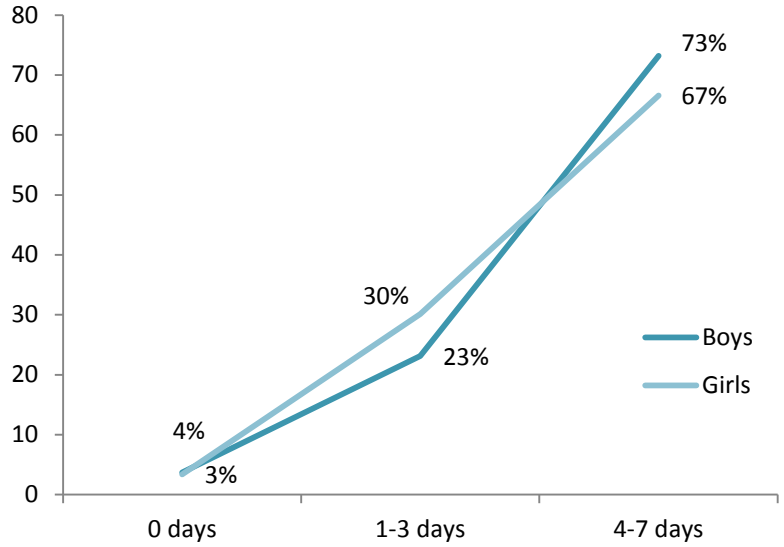
Weekly Physical Exercise:

Children were asked how many days each week they exercised, danced, or played sports. Children could answer anywhere from 0 days to 6 or 7 days per week.

This graph presents the percentage of children who got some form of exercise more than 4 times per week.

Figure 30: Trends indicated differences in frequency of physical activity for boys and girls from Grade 4 to Grade 7. Boys and girls reported similar activity levels in Grades 4 and 5, but by Grade 6 boys reported engaging in physical activity more often than girls.

Figure 31. Weekly physical exercise by amount



Physical Exercise:

This graph shows results from the same question about children's *amount* of exercise during the week.

This graph present the results by the number of days during the week children got some form of exercise, collapsed across grade level.

Figure 31: Across Grades 4 through 7, most children reported engaging in physical activity 4 or more days per week, though generally boys reported engaging in more physical activity than girls.

Summary

Our data illustrated two consistent trends: 1) that older children reported lower well-being than younger children, and 2) that boys in general reported lower well-being than girls until Grades 6/7 when girls' attitudes and beliefs dropped to match that of the boys. We also found that children in the older grades – those experiencing the most distress – felt their parents knew less about their lives compared to children in the younger grades. It is critical that we continue to ask children about their needs and experiences during this time in order to better provide for them during this difficult transition.

This chapter concludes our section on "how children are doing" in the middle years. The following section discusses *what* children are doing.

Part 3: What are children doing when they are not in school?

We know that the environments in which children spend their time is important, but prior to this study we knew very little about *how* school-aged children actually spend their out-of-school hours. Children's everyday activities outside school provide distinct developmental and socialization opportunities. The activities in which children participate during the after-school hours provide distinct and important opportunities for promoting children's development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Indeed, different activities afford children with different types of socialization and competence building experiences.

For well over a century it has been argued that activities, such as sports, arts groups, and community organizations provide rich contexts for promoting the positive development of children and youth. Current research is emerging with empirical evidence to substantiate this claim (Eccles & Barber, 1999; Larson, 2000; for a review of this literature see Mahoney, Larson, & Eccles, 2005).

The current research attempts to fill in some of the gaps in existing research on activity participation. Furthermore, we have been able to gather data that for the first time provides a picture of multiple dimensions of time use during the after-school hours, namely:

<u>what</u> children are doing
<u>who</u> they spend their time with
and what they <u>wish</u> they could be doing

There are four ways in which activity involvement can influence development, and that is via opportunities for:

1) Knowledge and skill acquisition,

2) Development of self expression and the formation of identity,

3) Development of social ties with peers and adults, and

4) Development of affiliations with differing social institutions

In order to gain a better picture of how children were utilizing their out-of-school time, we asked children to keep a daily diary charting how they spent this time. This took about 30 minutes to complete and focused in detail on children's time use the previous day. Diaries were kept for four consecutive weekdays, Monday-Thursday. Based on this self-report method, we learned how children spent their after-school time on a given day.

The diary conceptualizes after-school time as the time between school dismissal and 6 pm and evenings as 6pm to bedtime. Children reported on where, what, how long, how enjoyable and with whom they spend their after-school time. Questions ranged from the quality of their after-school snack (if they had one) to who they spent most of their after-school time with. Children recorded their engagement in structured activities (educational, community-based, extracurricular-in-school, extracurricular-outside-of school) and unstructured activities (watching TV, recreational reading, video games, creative activities, hanging out). They elaborated on these activities by answering questions about the location of the activity, their overall feelings about the activity, and how long they engaged in the activity.

The next section of this report provides an in-depth look at children's experience during out-of-school time, with data taken from the daily diaries that children filled out during the study.

3a. What are children doing when they are not in school?

What are children doing right after-school?

Typically, boys and girls across different grade-levels engaged in similar activities during after-school time. We found that the majority of participants engaged in a variety of activities, both structured and unstructured, and an overwhelming majority of participants engaged in computer-based media activities on a daily basis.

This study captured extensive data on how children Grades 4 to 7 use after-school time, which provided the following insights:

- The ways in which children in Grades 4 to 7 in Metro Vancouver spend their after-school time are diverse and layered.
- 72% of children spent after-school time doing homework, on average of about 30 min -1 hour, and about 29% of children spent 1-2 hours or more on homework every weeknight.
- Nearly 50% of children in this study reported that they participated in structured activities after-school, including sports, lessons, clubs or after-school programs.
- In Grades 6/7, 20% of children reported being alone during the out-of-school hours 4 or more days per week.
- Many children reported being engaged in a wide range of computer-related activities, such as on-line computer games, and instant messaging (MSN).
- 50% of children reported playing sports or exercising for fun.
- Only 7% children reported attending an after-school daycare program.

Structured activities are organized scheduled activities that are extra-curricular, are supervised by an adult, and are focused on skill–building and goal attainment. Examples include sports-team practice, piano lessons, tutoring, or drama club.

Unstructured activities are activities that are not scheduled and are not necessarily supervised by an adult. Examples include hanging out with friends, watching TV, doing crafts, or playing guitar for fun.

Structured time

Figure 32 shows the structured activities in which children participated on a typical day after school. Forty-eight percent of children reported being involved in a structured activity after school (e.g., playing on a sports team, participating in the arts, taking extracurricular academic classes, being involved in youth organizations or religious activities). The following chart provides a breakdown of these activities.

Figure 32.

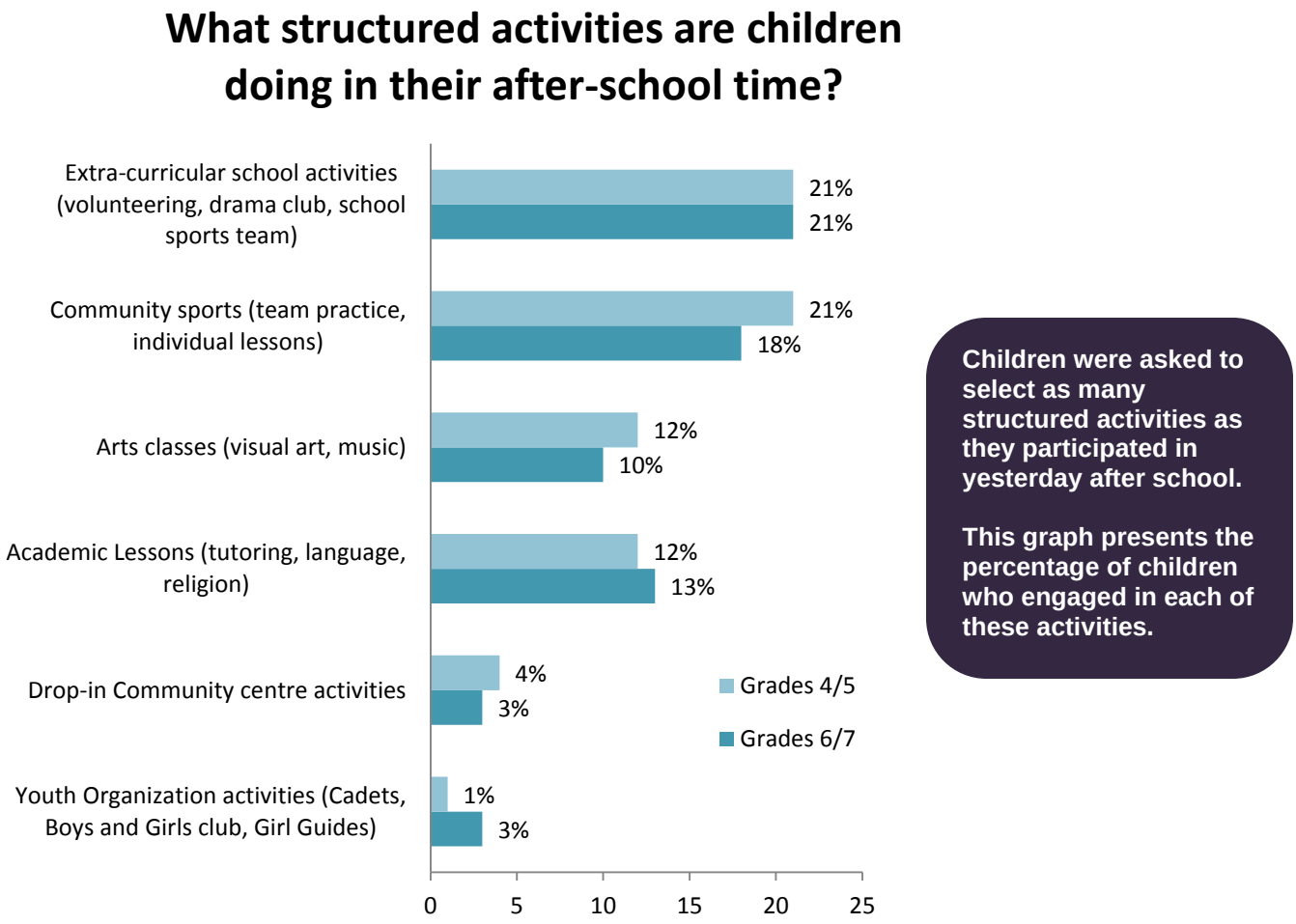
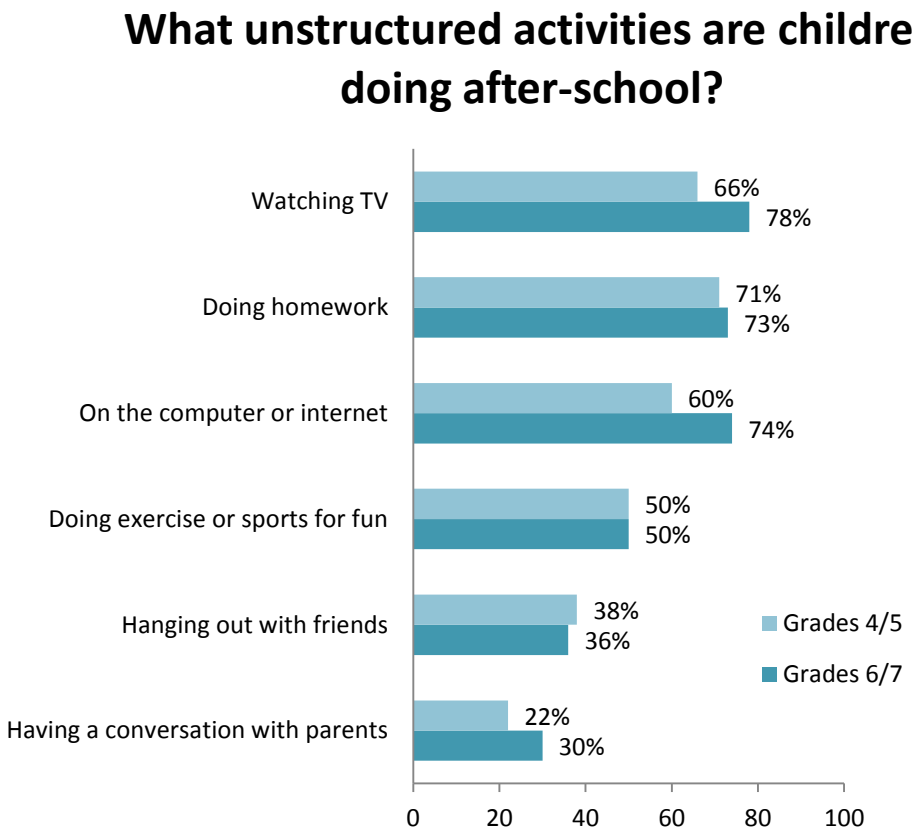


Figure 32: This graph shows that there were not that many differences in how Grades 4/5 and Grades 6/7 children spent their after-school time in terms of structured activities. From younger to older grade-levels, participation in community sports outside of school and extra-curricular arts classes decreased slightly, and participation in youth organization activities increased slightly.

Unstructured Time

Figure 33 shows what children are doing in their unstructured time after school. Generally, most children reported watching TV and doing homework. Many also reported talking with their parents and hanging out with friends.

Figure 33.



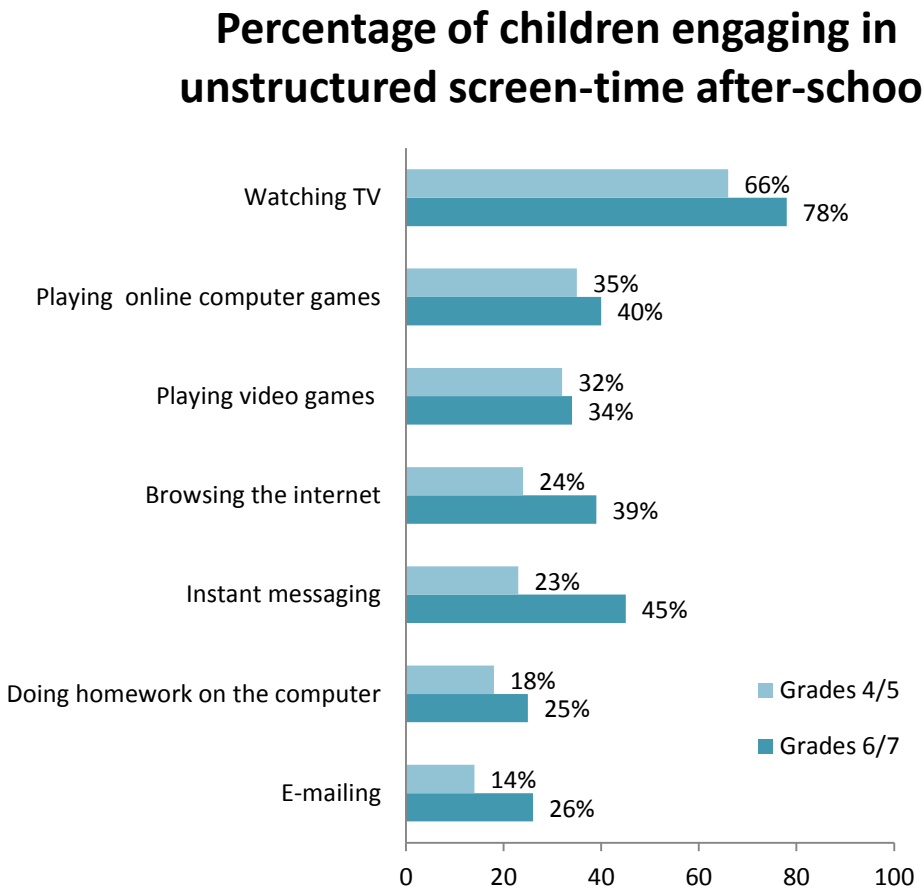
Children were asked to select as many unstructured activities as they participated in yesterday after school.

This graph presents the percentage of children who engaged in each of these activities.

When asked what they were doing while hanging out with friends, boys most often reported playing sports, playing videogames and computer games, and just talking. Girls most often reported just talking, playing sports, and listening to music.

Figure 33: This graph shows some dramatic changes in the ways Grades 4/5 and 6/7 children spent their unstructured time. TV watching increased 12% from the younger to older grades, and computer use increased 14%. Across grade-levels, most children also spent time doing their homework and exercising. Children in the older grades reported spending more time talking to their parents than children in the younger grades.

Figure 34.

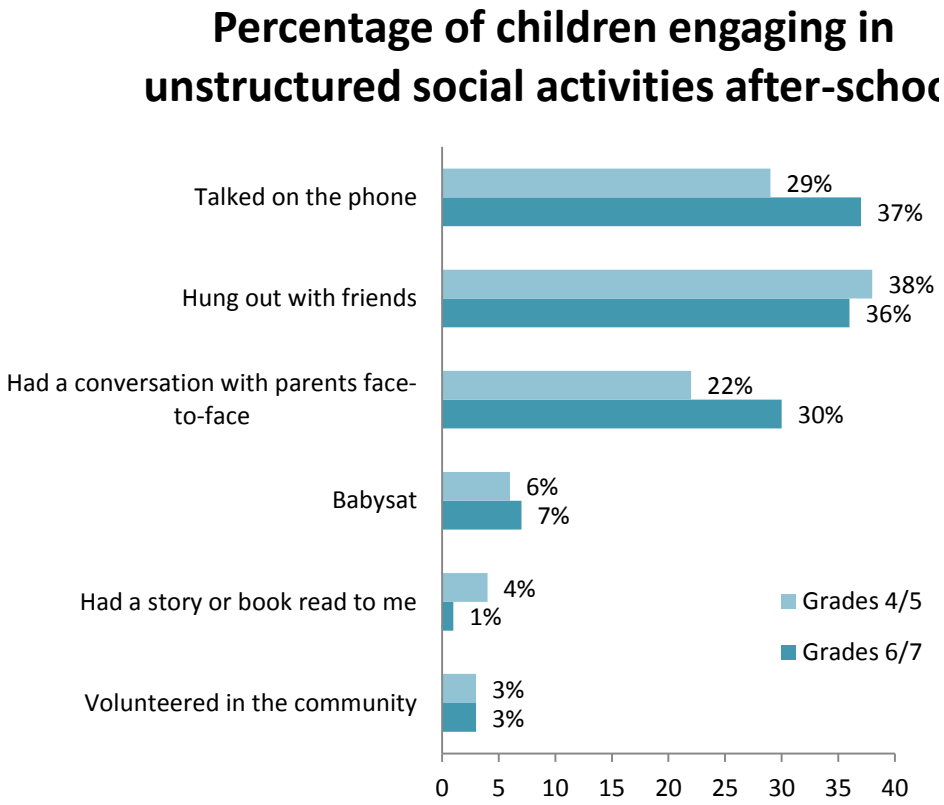


Children were asked to select as many unstructured screen-time activities as they participated in yesterday after school.

This graph presents the percentage of children who engaged in each of these activities.

Figure 34: 83% of children in Grades 4/5 and 93% of children in Grades 6/7 engaged in unstructured "screen-time" after-school; this graph shows specifically how that time was being spent. Children in Grades 6/7 generally spent more time on every screen-time activity than Grade 4/5 children, particularly watching TV, browsing the internet, instant messaging, and emailing.

Figure 35.

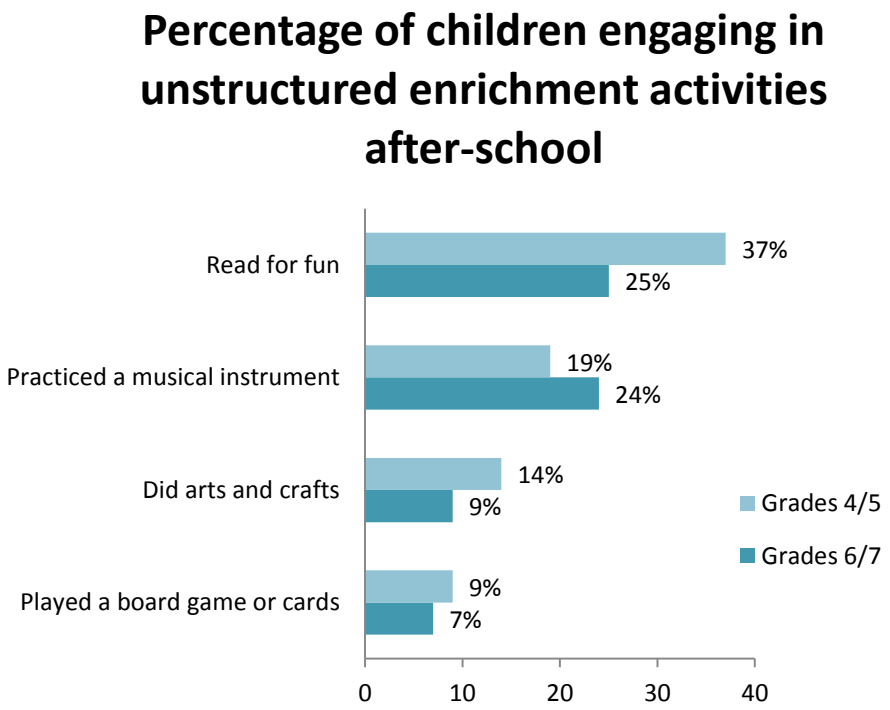


Children were asked to select as many unstructured social activities as they participated in yesterday after school.

This graph presents the percentage of children who engaged in each of these activities.

Figure 35: 65% of children in Grades 4/5 and 70% of children in Grades 6/7 engaged in unstructured social activities after-school. This graph shows that most children were talking on the phone, hanging out with friends, or conversing with parents. Between Grades 4/5 and Grades 6/7, the largest increases were in the time children spent on the phone and talking with their parents.

Figure 36.



Children were asked to select as many unstructured enrichment activities as they participated in yesterday after school.

This graph presents the percentage of children who engaged in each of these activities.

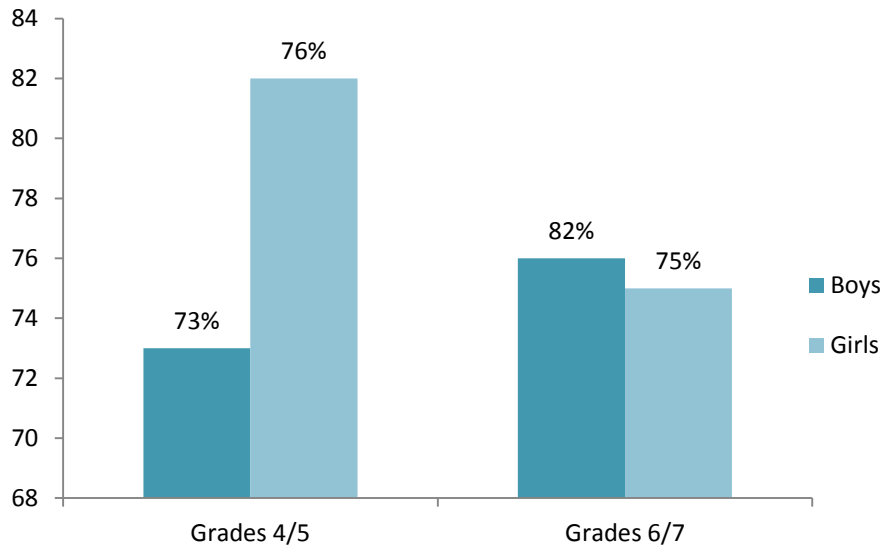
Figure 36: 54% of children in Grades 4/5 and 48% of children in Grades 6/7 engaged in unstructured enrichment activities after-school. Most of these activities included reading for fun, or playing a musical instrument. This graph shows that older children were more likely to be involved in music, but were less likely to be reading for fun, doing art, or playing a game (not on the computer or TV) after-school.

How are children spending their time in the evening after 6:00pm?

Family Dinner

The daily diary also asked three questions about how youth spend their evenings, beginning with what time and with whom they had dinner. Studies have indicated correlations between the occurrence of family meals with indicators of healthy development, such as more positive values and social competence as well as decreased depression, substance abuse, school problems, and eating problems (binge eating/ not eating enough) (Fulkerson, Story, Mellin, Leffert, Neumark-Sztainer, & French, 2005; Zarrett & Lerner, 2008). It is widely assumed that family dinners can serve as a protective factor against high-risk behaviours. We found that most children in this sample ate dinner with others, but as children got older there was a steady increase in dining alone.

Figure 37.



Children were asked to indicate how often they ate dinner with an adult family member from 1 (never), 2 (1 or 2 days a week), 3 (3 or 4 days a week) to 4 (5 or more days a week).

This graph presents the percentage of children who said they ate dinner with an adult family member 5 or more days a week.

Figure 37: In Grades 4 and 5, girls were eating dinner with an adult family member more frequently than boys. However, by Grades 6 and 7, the percentage of girls that were eating dinner with family dropped below the boys.

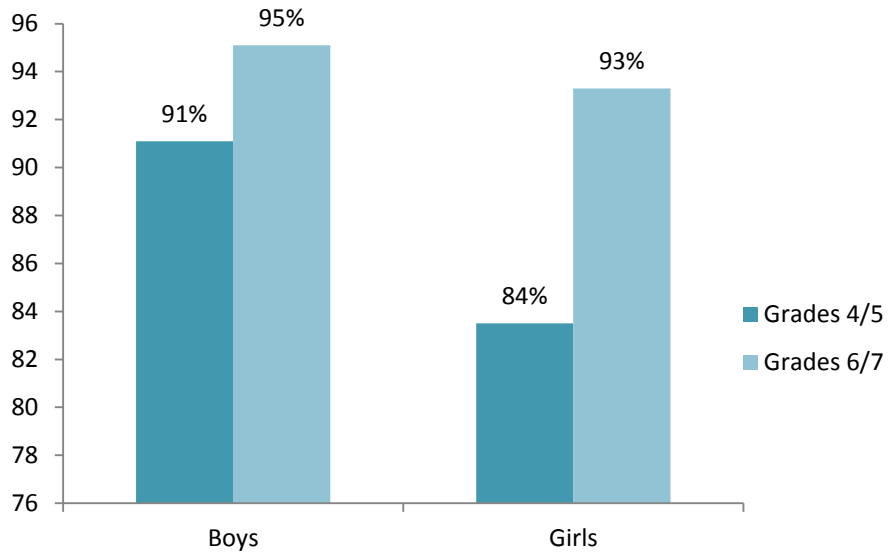
Bed Time

We also inquired into what time children went to bed on weekdays. We found that girls in this sample typically stayed up later than boys and that the majority of children went to bed between 9pm and 10pm.

Evening Activities

Finally, we wanted to know what activities children engaged in on weeknights between dinner and bedtime. The most recent study conducted by the Kaiser Family Foundation (2010) investigating media use by 8-18 year olds found that over the past five years youth exposure to media (TV, computers, video games and music or other audio) has increased from almost 6.5 hours to 7.5 hours per day. We found that a majority of the participants endorsed spending their evenings on screen-time (on computers, watching TV or videos, video games, online chatting or messaging). Grade 6 and 7 boys reported the highest frequency of screen time at 95%. Many scholars today are focusing their efforts studying how exposure to media impacts development. In the current study we found a correlation between media exposure and lower interpersonal sensitivity. These correlations are presented in Part 5 of this report.

Figure 38.

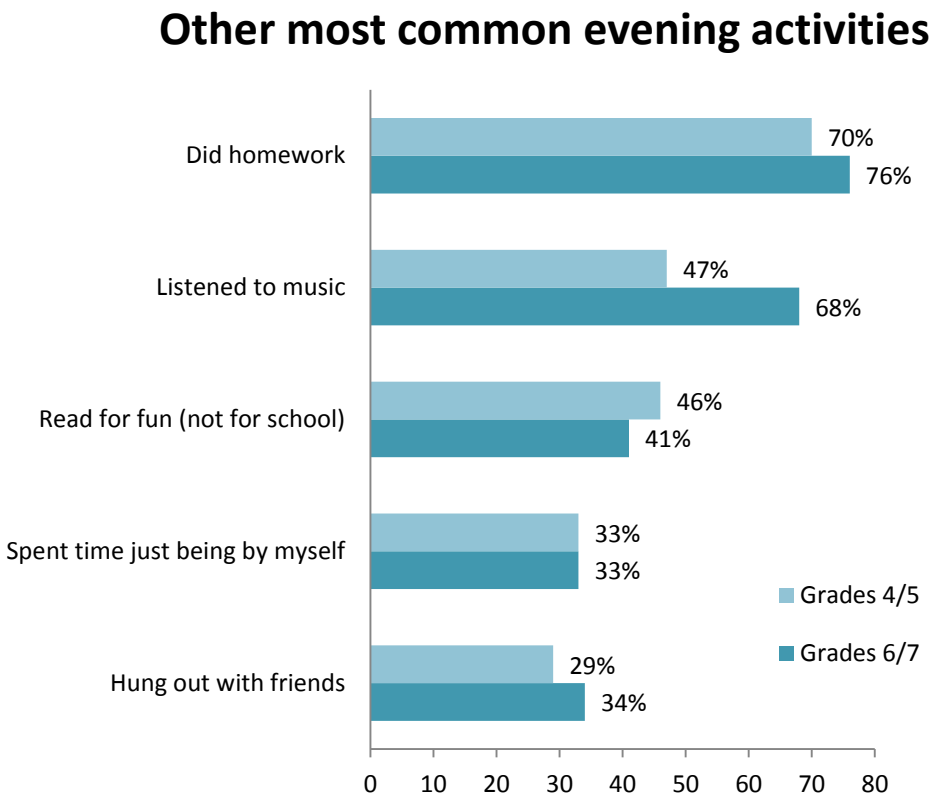


Children were asked to select as many activities as they participated in the evening (dinner to bedtime) during the week (Monday to Thursday).

This graph presents the percentage of children who watched TV, were on the computer, played videogames, or messaged with friends.

Figure 38: 84% to 95% of children reported watching television or being on the computer weekday evenings. In Grades 4/5, boys reported engaging in screen-time more frequently than girls. However, by Grades 6/7 boys and girls engaged in screen-time equally often.

Figure 39.



Children were asked to select as many activities as they participated in the evening (dinner to bedtime) during the week (Monday to Thursday).

This graph presents the percentage of children who were doing activities other than watching TV or being on the computer.

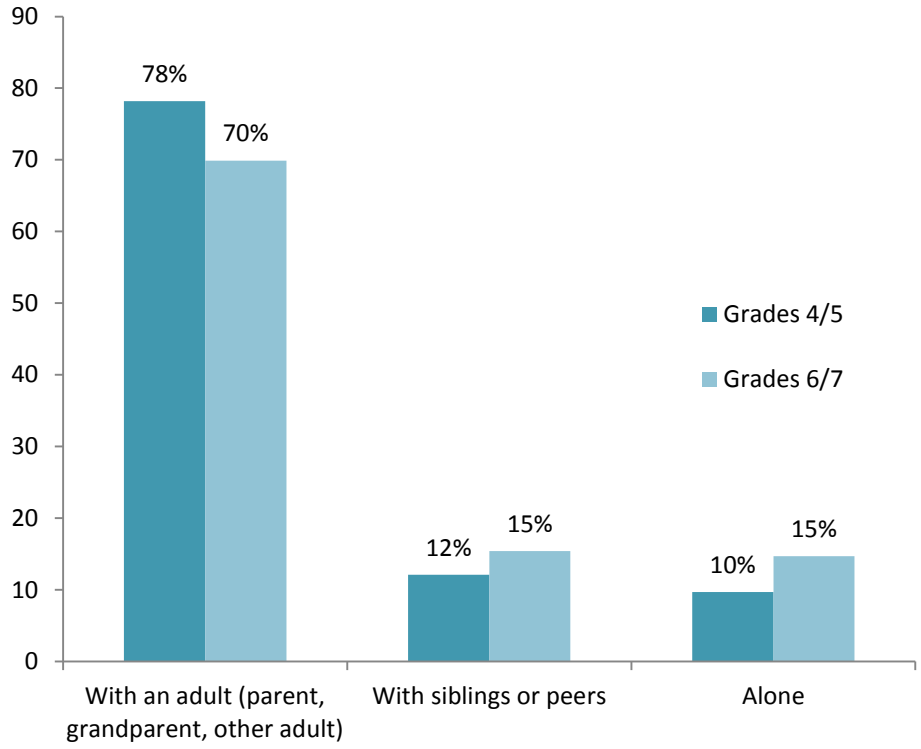
Figure 39: Besides watching TV or being online, most children spent the evenings doing homework, listening to music, reading, spending time alone, or hanging out with friends. As seen in this graph, there were not many differences in what children were doing between Grades 4/5 and Grades 6/7, except that older children were more likely to be doing homework or listening to music in the evenings.

3b. Who are children with when they are not in school?

At a time when an increasing number of parents are working, we are seeing significant levels of children alone at home in our communities. This is of concern because we know from our research that although children are beginning to become more independent, contact with adults and particularly attachment to parents remains a critical factor in the healthy development of children.

Children spending time alone suggests a degree of social isolation and a lack of involvement in developmentally appropriate activities. It is important to consider how we can increase the accessibility and quality of care in after-school programs for children and how we can ensure that parents have the information they need to involve their children in such activities. This part of the research study asked children who they spent time with after-school.

Figure 40.

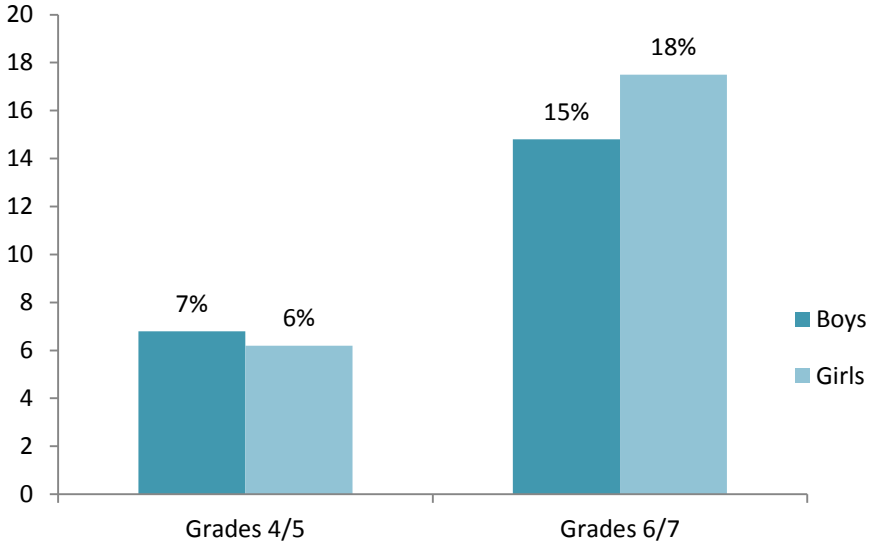


Children were asked to indicate who they were with for most of the afternoon yesterday after school.

This graph presents the percentage of children who were with an adult, with siblings or peers, or alone.

Figure 40: The majority of children between Grades 4-7 spent their time after-school with adults: mothers, fathers, grandparents, or other adults and 12-15% of children spent time with siblings or peers. In Grades 4/5 nearly 10% of children reported that they were alone from 3pm to 6pm.This figure rose to nearly 15% in Grades 6/7.

Figure 41. Home alone 2-3 days per week

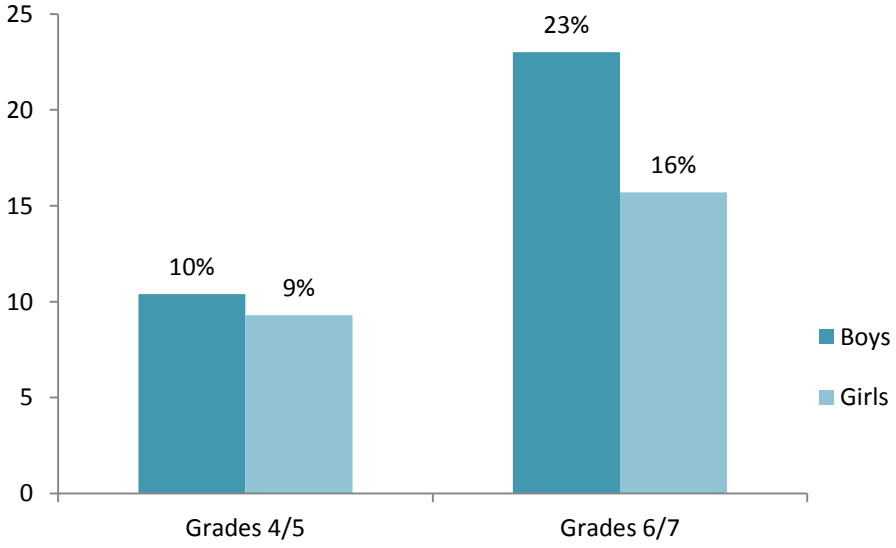


Children were asked to rate how often they had been home alone after school without an adult since the beginning of the school year.

The scale ranged from 0 (not at all), 1 (once or twice), 2 (about once a week), 3 (2-3 days/ week) to 4 (4 or more days per week).

Figures 41 and 42 present the percentage of children who were home alone 2-3 days a week and 4 or more days a week, respectively.

Figure 42. Home alone 4 or more days per week



Figures 41 & 42: These graphs provide a perspective on children who are on their own after-school either for a portion or for most of the week. In this sample 23% of boys and 16% of girls reported being home alone 4 or more days of the work week by Grades 6/7.

3c. What children wish to be doing after school

Kids crave to be active, engaged, connected and competent. Figures 43 and 44 compare what children are doing after-school to what they wish they could be doing. Key findings were that only 8.6% of the children in this study said that they wanted to be spending more time on the computer. No children reported wanting to watch more TV. Indeed, the vast majority of children told us they want to be engaged in activities that built their competence, their physical health, and their connectedness.

Children were asked what activities they participated in after school.

This graph presents children's responses by activity type.

Figure 43.

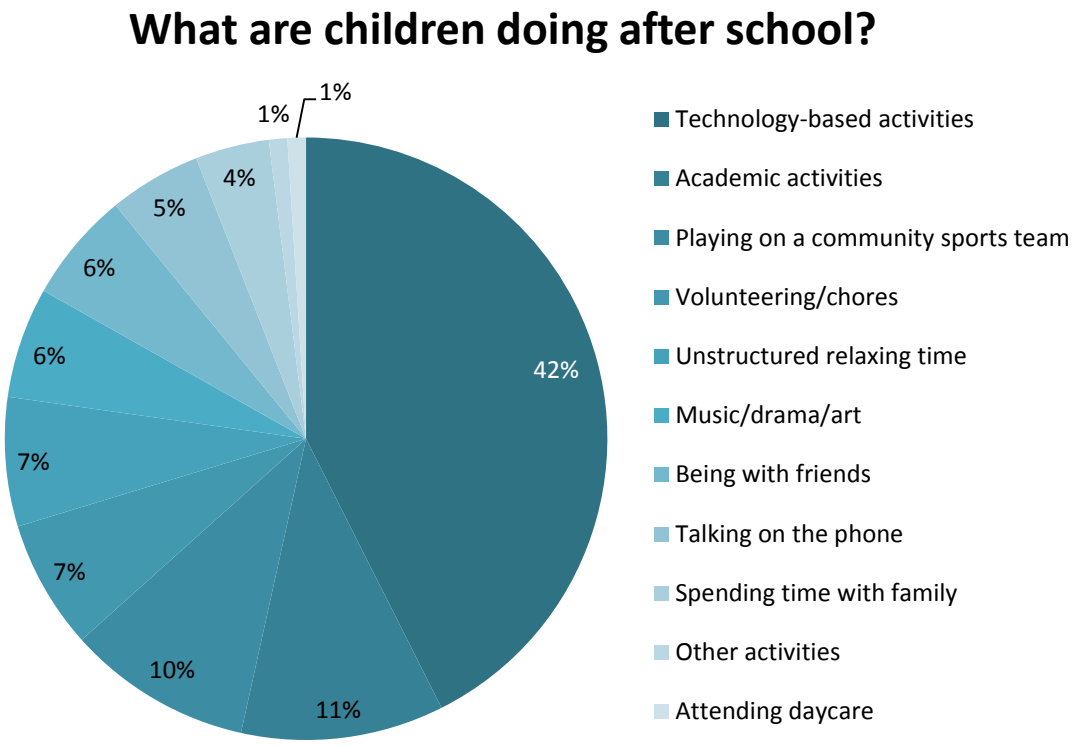


Figure 43: The majority of children reported spending time in technology-based and academic activities, or playing on a community sports team.

Figure 44.

Children were asked what activities they wished they could participate in after school.

This graph presents children's responses by activity type.

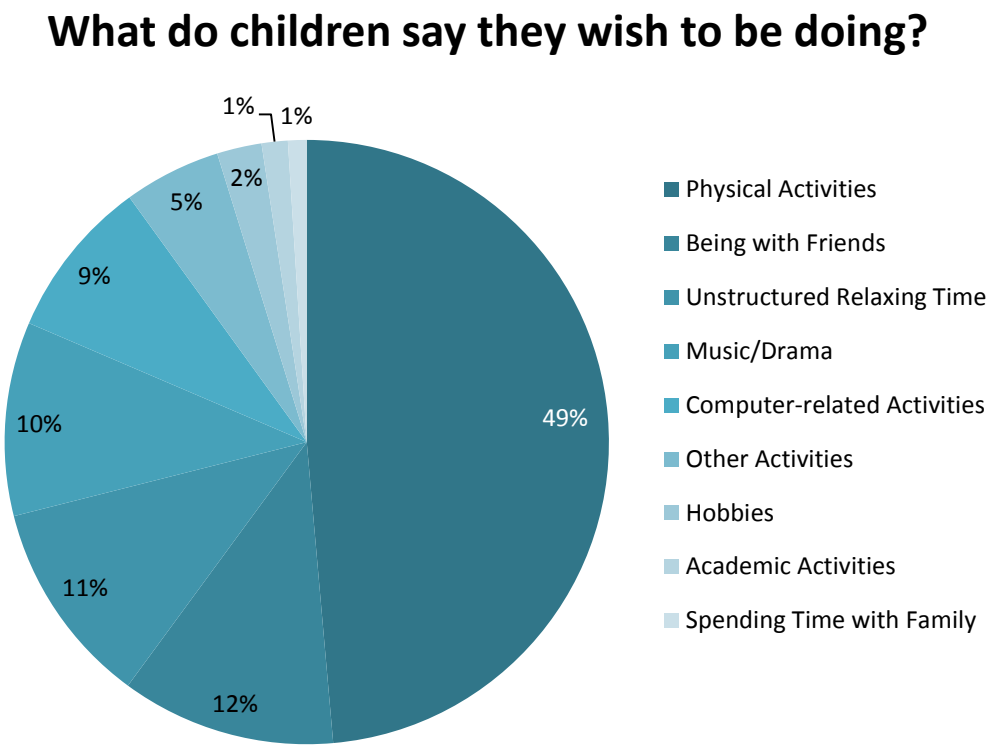


Figure 44: Almost half of children sampled reported wanting to do more physically activities while only 8.6% reported wanting more time to spend on computer-related activities.

Summary

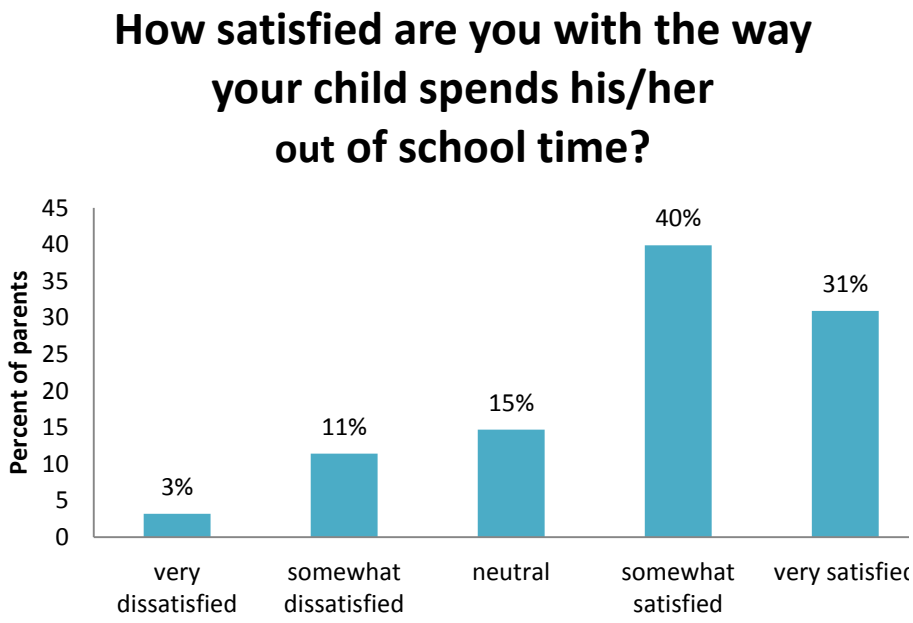
Our data were consistent with past research identifying competence and social acceptance as primary needs for children during their middle childhood years. That is, children have a natural determination to excel at something and to be socially engaged. Most children in this sample reported spending their after-school time in technology-based or academic activities. When we asked what children wished to be doing, they said more physical activities, hanging out with friends, music or drama activities, and unstructured time to relax.

Part 4: What do parents say?

Another unique aspect of this study was that it included the voices of parents. Obtaining the perspectives of children's parents with regard to their children's out-of-school time was critical for painting an inclusive portrait of the world of children ages 9 to 12. 739 primary caregivers (over 50% of the parents whose children participated in this study) completed a one-page questionnaire in which they were asked to report on their general levels of satisfaction with their children's after-school time use, as well as the barriers they perceived to accessing activities for their children during after-school time. Development of the items regarding satisfaction with after-school time was informed by an earlier research project funded by United Way of the Lower Mainland on parents' perceptions and experiences of their child's activities during the after-school hours obtained via focus groups.

4a. How satisfied are parents with their children's after-school activities?

Figure 45.

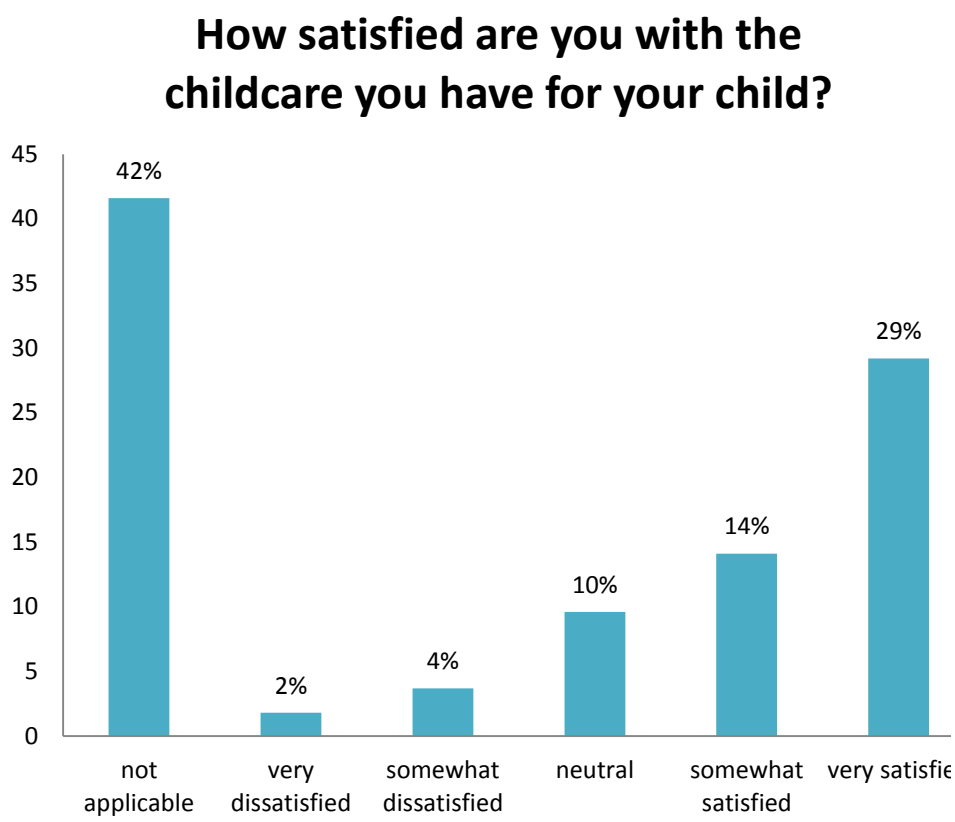


Parents were asked to rate how satisfied they were from 1 (very dissatisfied), 2 (somewhat dissatisfied), 3 (neutral), 4 (somewhat satisfied) or 5 (very satisfied).

This graph shows the percentage of parents who responded at each level of the rating scale.

Figure 45: Overall, parents reported being satisfied with the way children spent their after-school time. As previously seen in Figures 22 and 23, children at this age reported that their parents mostly knew what they were doing after school and who they were with, though this was less true among older children and boys.

Figure 46.

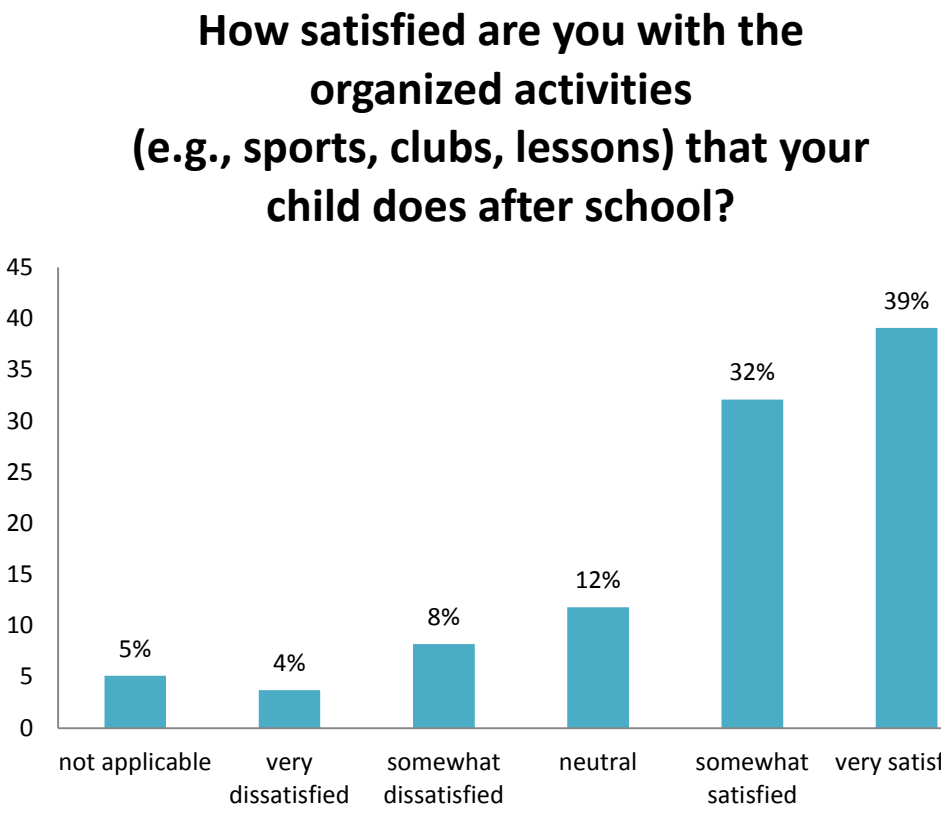


Parents were asked to rate how satisfied they were from 1 (very dissatisfied), 2 (somewhat dissatisfied), 3 (neutral), 4 (somewhat satisfied) to 5 (very satisfied). Parents could also select "not applicable" if they did not use after-school childcare.

This graph shows the percentage of parents who responded at each level of the rating scale.

Figure 46: The majority of parents who relied on after-school childcare were very satisfied with the service they used. However, on a separate survey item over 30% of parents who required afterschool childcare reported that they "seldom" or "never" had access to it. Therefore, although parents who did have access to childcare were satisfied with it, 1 in 3 parents needed this service but did not have access.

Figure 47.



Parents were asked to rate how satisfied they were from 1 (very dissatisfied), 2 (somewhat dissatisfied), 3 (neutral), 4 (somewhat satisfied) to 5 (very satisfied). Parents could also select "not applicable" if their child did not participate in after-school activities.

This graph shows the percentage of parents who responded at each level of the rating scale.

Figure 47: Again, most parents were satisfied with the activities their children participated in after school. As children reported, most of these activities involved watching TV, doing homework, hanging out with friends, and playing sports (see Figures 32 and 33).

4b. Perceived barriers to involving children in after-school activities

Figure 48.

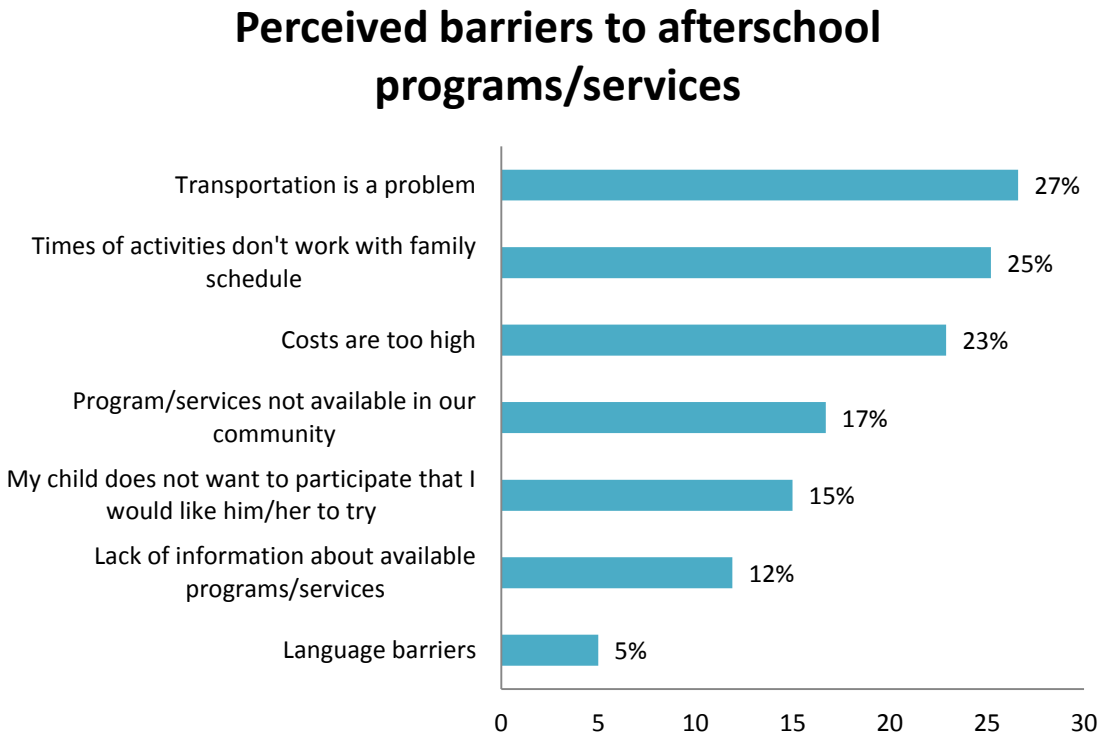
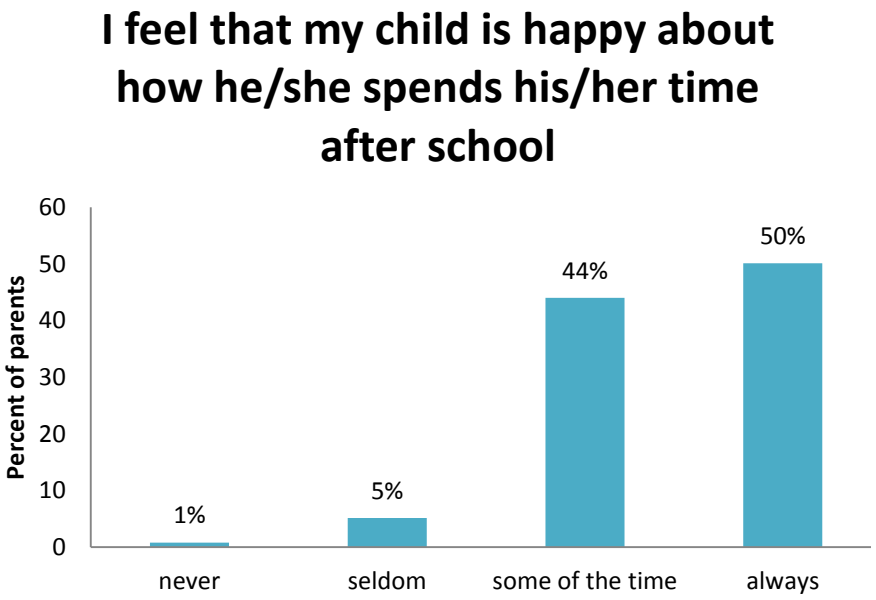


Figure 48: The greatest barriers parents perceived in terms of involving their children in after-school activities were gaining access to transportation, fitting it into the family schedule, and cost. As shown in Figure 44, what children wished they could be doing more of was physical activities. Together these findings indicate a need for recreation activities to be more accessible to families and communities.

Parents were asked to indicate what they perceived as barriers to involving their children in after-school activities or services. Given this list of 7 potential barriers, parents could select as many or as few barriers as applied to them.

This graph shows the percentage of parents who perceived each item as a barrier.

Figure 49.



Parents were asked to rate how true this statement was for them from 1 (never), 2 (seldom), 3 (some of the time), to 4 (always).

This graph shows the percentage of parents who responded at each level of the rating scale.

Figure 49: Despite the barriers, the overwhelming majority of parents in this sample felt their child was happy after school either some of the time or always. This corroborated the reports from children in the sample, who on average rated their satisfaction with life around 4 out of 5 (see Figure 8).

Summary

Overall, although parents indicated some areas where after-school activities and services for their children could be improved, parents were generally satisfied with how their children spent their after school time. The following section concludes this report on middle childhood, presenting key findings and their implications.

Part 5: Can we make a difference for children?

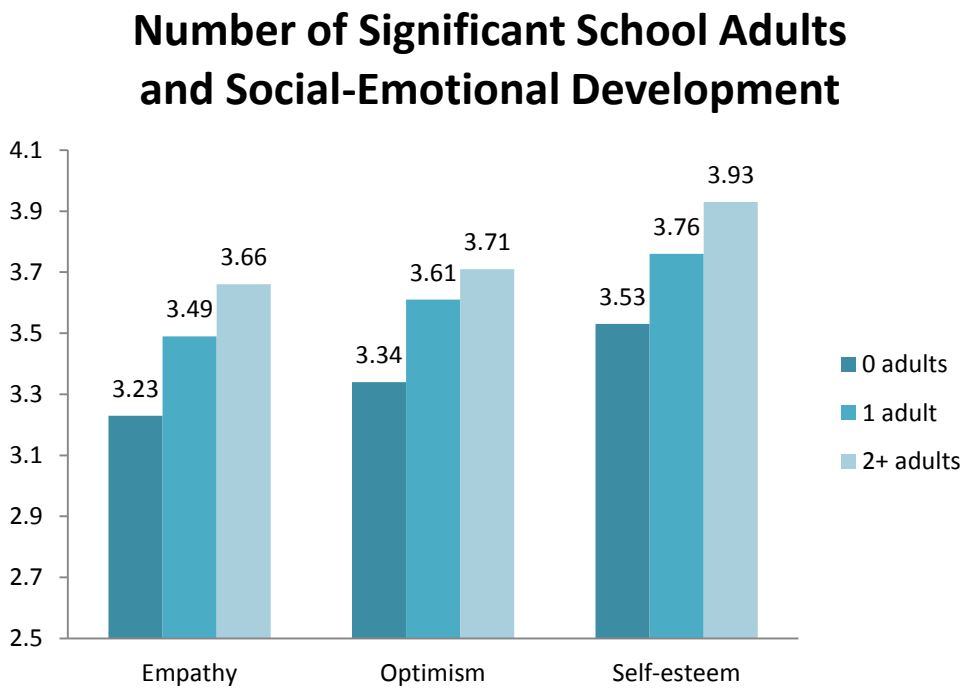
5a. Connectedness matters

In 2004, the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child out of Harvard University made the following conclusion regarding children's development:

> "Stated simply, relationships are the 'active ingredients' of the environment's influence on healthy human development. They incorporate the qualities that best promote competence and well-being – individualized responsiveness, mutual action-and-interaction, and an emotional connection to another human being, be it a parent, peer, grandparent, aunt, uncle, neighbor, teacher, coach, or any other person who has an important impact on the child's early development." (p. 1)

Results from the current study support the same conclusion; that is, relationships matter. Namely, children who reported feeling connected with parents, friends, school-related adults, and neighbours had more positive adjustment than those children who did not report such positive relationships.

Figure 50.



We asked children to list all the adults who were important to them in their school. We later grouped children into those who named 0 important adults, 1 important adult, or 2 or more important adults.

This graph shows levels of children's empathy, optimism, and self-concept (self-esteem) by the number of important school adults in their lives. Empathy and self-esteem were rated on a scale from 1 to 5. Optimism was rated from 1 to 4.

Figure 50: This graph shows that children who had more important school adults in their lives reported having greater empathy towards others, higher optimism, and higher self-esteem.

Figure 51.

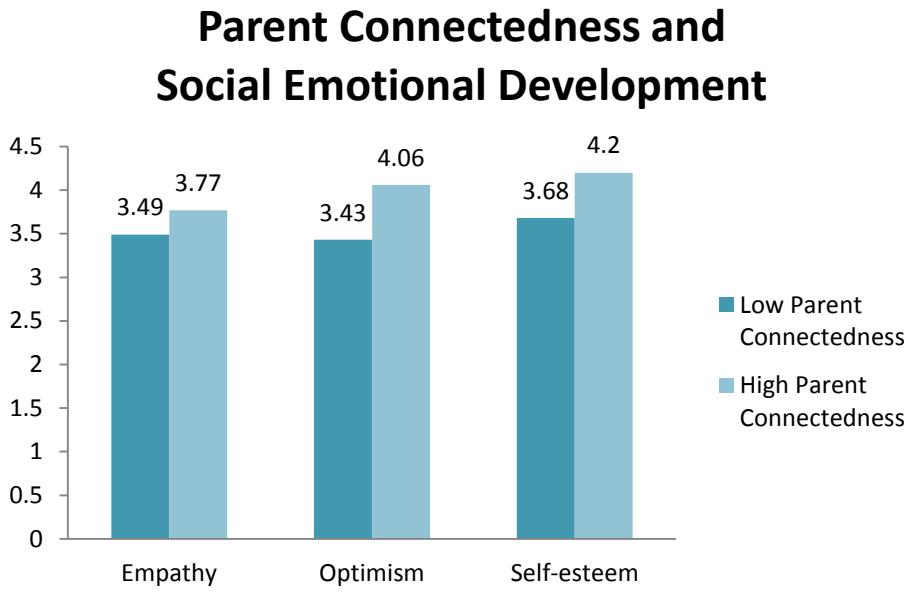


Figure 51: This graph shows that children who felt more connected to their parents (i.e., felt mutual trust and respect with a parent, felt encouraged by a parent, and felt happy at home) reported higher levels of empathy towards others, higher optimism about the future, and higher self-esteem.

"Parent connectedness" was a composite score that measured whether children felt happy at home, and felt their parents/caregivers were supportive of them.

This graph shows levels of children's empathy, optimism, and self-esteem by high or low parent connectedness. Empathy and self-esteem were rated on a scale from 1 to 5. Optimism was rated from 1 to 4.

Figure 52.

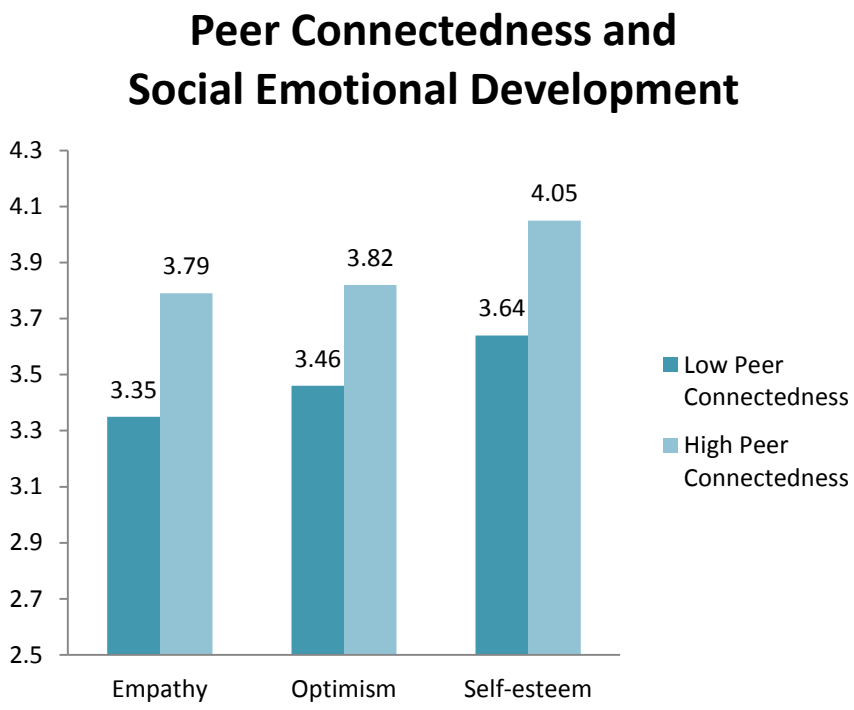


Figure 52: This graph shows that children who felt more connected to their peers (i.e., had a least one friend who they could count on to support them through a hard time and who really cared about them) reported higher levels of empathy, optimism, and self-esteem.

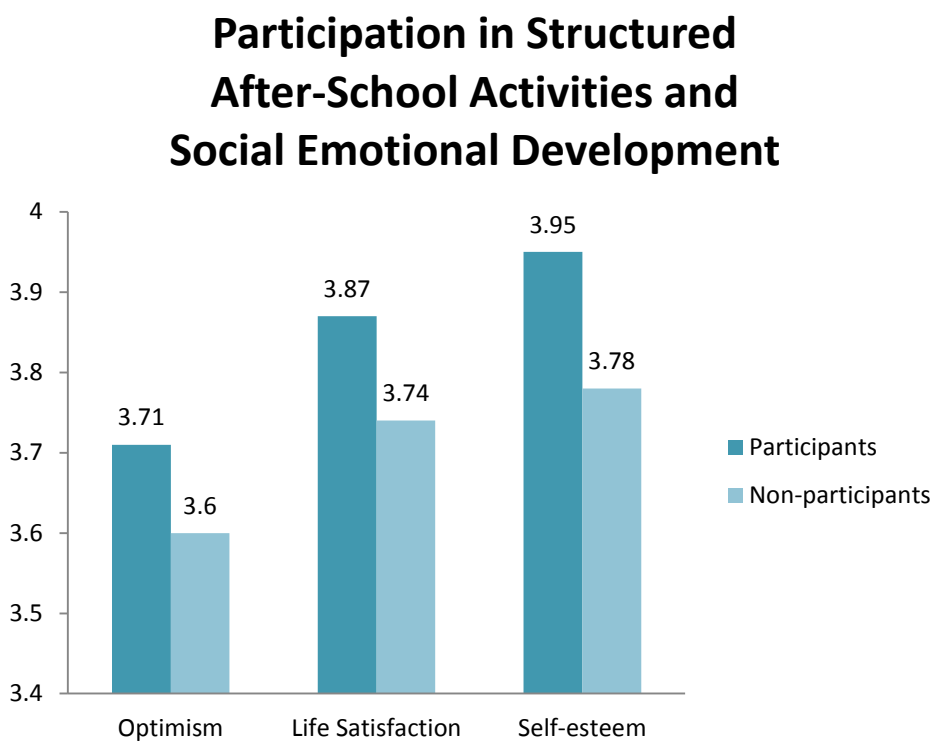
"Peer connectedness" was a composite score that measured whether children had a friend about their age who cared about them, talked with them about their problems, or had helped them during a hard time.

This graph shows levels of children's empathy, optimism, and self-esteem by high or low peer connectedness. Empathy and self-esteem were rated on a scale from 1 to 5. Optimism was rated from 1 to 4.

5b. The benefits of structured activities

The current study was one of the first of its kind to also investigate what activities children engaged in after-school. Similar to our conclusion about the benefits of relationships, we found that children who engaged in after-school "structured" activities scored higher across almost all dimensions of psychological and social well-being in contrast to those students who did not participate. These findings support existing research that links social isolation with depression and poor social emotional health (McHale, Crouter, & Tucker, 2001).

Figure 53.



Children were asked to indicate what activities they participated in yesterday after-school. Examples of structured activities include team sports, academic lessons, art and drama, and dance.

Children's levels of optimism, satisfaction with life, and self-esteem were rated from 1 (not at all like me/disagree a lot) to 5 (always like me/agree a lot).

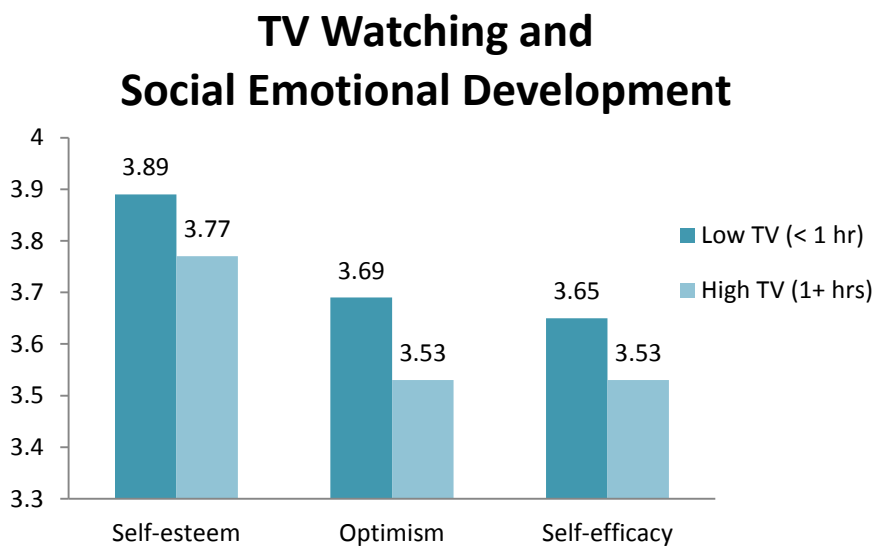
This graph presents children's average ratings by involvement in structured activities.

Figure 53: We found that those children who participated in supervised extracurricular activities reported having a greater sense of optimism, more satisfaction with life, and higher self-esteem than children who did not participate in structured activities.

5c. Child well-being and technology use

The most recent Kaiser Foundation (2010) report on youth media use in the United States found that youth are exposed to media on an average of 12 hours per day. The current study was the first wide-scale study to document technology usage in Canada. TV watching and media exposure have been cited as having both positive and negative impact on development. In the current study, we found that technology use steadily increased with age. For example, in Grade 4, 16% of children engaged in instant messaging between 3pm-6pm, whereas by Grade 7, 52% of children engaged in instant messaging after-school.

Figure 54.



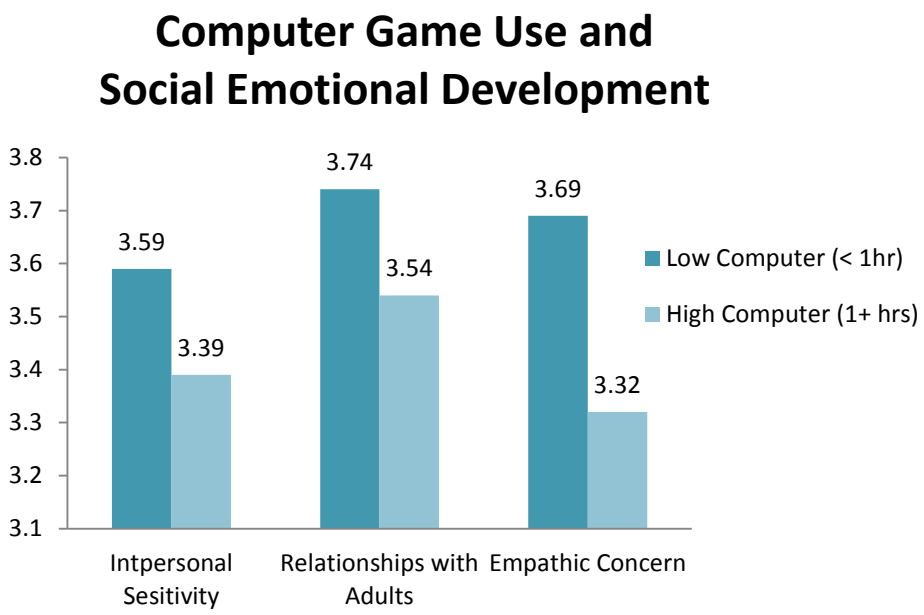
Children were asked to rate how long they spent watching TV yesterday after-school.

Children's levels of self-esteem, optimism, and self-efficacy were rated from 1 (not at all like me/never) to 5 (always like me/always).

This graph presents children's average ratings by TV viewing time.

Figure 54: This graph depicts the relationship between the amounts of TV that children watch on weeknights to certain aspects of social emotional health. In general, we found that children that who spent more than one hour watching TV on weeknights reported having lower self-esteem, were less optimistic, and had a lower sense of self-efficacy when compared to those children that watched less than one hour of TV.

Figure 55.



Children were asked to rate how long they spent playing computer games yesterday after school.

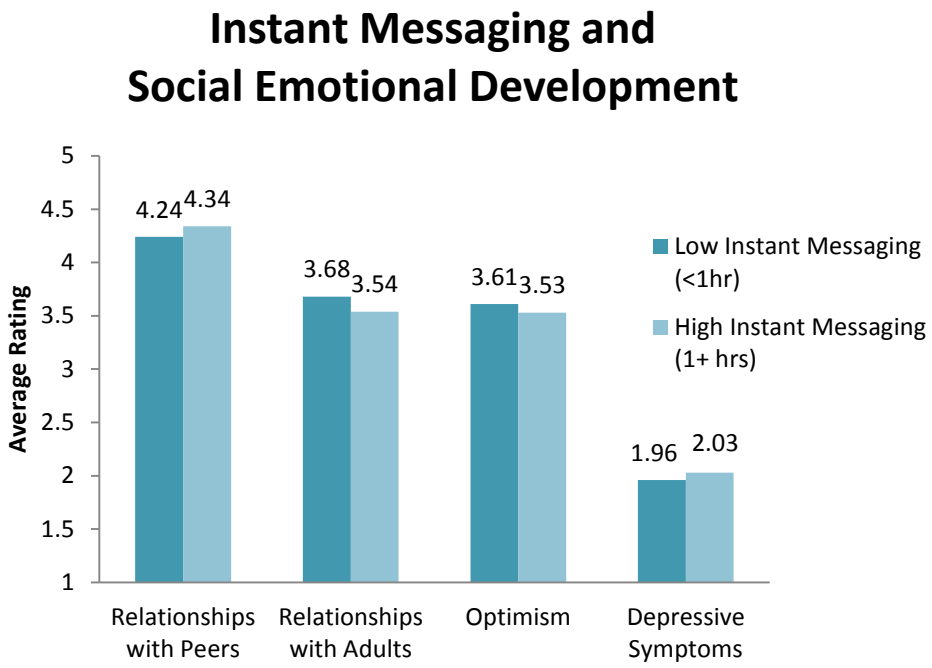
Children's levels of interpersonal sensitivity, relationships with adults, and empathic concern were rated from 1 (not at all like me) to 5 (always like me).

This graph presents children's average ratings by time spent on computer games.

Figure 55: We examined the relationship between children's reported levels of social emotional development and time spent playing on-line computer games. We found that as game playing increases, social and interpersonal understanding decreases. The most significant difference was in children's ability to demonstrate empathic concern for others. We found that children who engaged in excessive technology use during the after-school hours, mainly in the form of on-line computer games and TV viewing, had more negative adjustment than children who did engage in such activities.

Instant messaging is a common mode of communication that is frequently used by children and adolescents. Many researchers believe that electronic communication inhibits the development of interpersonal skills and an individual's ability to successfully communication emotions and feelings (Healy, 2000).

Figure 56.



Children were asked to rate how long they spent instant messaging yesterday after school.

Children's levels of relationships with peers, relationships with adults, and optimism were rated from 1 (not at all like me) to 5 (always like me). Depressive symptoms were rated from 1 (not at all) to 4 (always).

This graph presents children's average ratings by time spent on computer games.

Figure 56: We examined how instant messaging correlates to certain aspects of social emotional development. In regards to their interpersonal relationships, children that spent more than one hour instant messaging reported better relationships with peers and less satisfying relationships with adults than those children that spent less than one hour instant messaging. However children that reported high instant messaging also reported experiencing more depressive symptoms and less optimism than those children that spent less time instant messaging.

Summary

In sum, we found that children who more frequently engaged in technology use (primarily a solitary activity) had lower social-emotional well-being. Conversely, we found that children who engaged in at least one supervised, structured after-school activity, such as team sports, academic lessons and drama scored higher across almost all dimensions of psychological and social well-being than those who did not or were unable to participate.

5d. Concluding thoughts

Erik Erikson (1959) characterized middle childhood as a time when the child's attention is focused on acquiring new competencies and skills and learning how to get along with others, including peers and adults across a variety of contexts. In Erikson's conceptualization of middle childhood, adults play a pivotal role in helping children develop a sense of "industry" (perceived usefulness and self-worth). If adults provide tasks for children that are perceived to be interesting, worthwhile, and accomplishable, children are more likely to develop a sense of their competency. If they are not provided with opportunities to learn skills in supportive and caring contexts, they can then develop a sense of "inferiority" (worthlessness, incompetence). Erikson also noted that it is during these years that the radius of significant relations moves beyond that of the basic family to school and neighbourhood social networks. Therefore there is a much broader sphere of influence during this period that can serve to either boost children's sense of industry, or conversely, hinder their sense of competence.

This report supports the conclusions reached by Erikson and other current researchers, finding that children who are engaged in meaningful social interactions and structured activities within the home, school, and community, fare better socially and psychologically than children who are not given this same attention. It is therefore critical that governments, organizations, communities, and families support each other in creating formative experiences for children that will develop their competence, confidence, and positive views of themselves.

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