Family structure among schoolchildren in Ireland

Natasha Clarke and the HBSC Ireland Team, Health Promotion Research Centre, NUI Galway

Summary
HBSC Ireland 2010 has found that 74.4% of schoolchildren in Ireland are living with both parents; a percentage that has decreased since 2006 (80.5%). Overall no significant differences were found between boys and girls or across age groups with respect to living with both parents. Schoolchildren in Ireland who report living with both parents are more likely to report excellent health, feeling very happy about their lives and engaging in physical activity four or more times per week, similar to the findings of the 2006 HBSC survey. They are less likely to report emotional and physical symptoms, experiencing drunkenness, currently smoking, being injured and having bullied others. Living with both parents in this factsheet refers to young people living with their mother and their father and does not include stepmother or stepfather.

Why this topic?
There has been a continuing shift in the definition and composition of a family in recent years\(^1\), with one in six children in Ireland living in lone-parent households\(^2\). Children in family structures other than two-parent families tend to be at greater risk of emotional and behavioural problems\(^3\). Family structure is integral to young people’s healthy development\(^1\).

Change 2006-2010
The percentage of schoolchildren living with both parents has decreased from 80.5% in 2006 to 74.4% in 2010. This decrease is apparent among both genders from 2006 to 2010, with boys decreasing from 81.6% to 74.2% and girls from 79.4% to 74.7% respectively. This decrease is also apparent across all age groups, with the smallest decrease among girls aged 15-17 years (77.8% to 74.7%). A marked decrease is seen among boys aged 10-11 years (84.0% to 74.7%).

Family structure in context

- Children from higher social classes (SC) are more likely to report living with both parents (SC1-2: 82.5%; SC3-4: 77.5%; SC5-6: 73.3%).
- Children living with both parents are more likely to report excellent health (34.2% vs. 28.6%) and feeling very happy (52.2% vs. 44.9%) than children who do not.
- Children living with both parents are less likely to report frequent emotional (49.7% vs. 58.9%) and physical symptoms (50.3% vs. 59.7%) than children who do not.
- Children living with both parents are less likely to report having been drunk (25.5% vs. 35.8%) and current smoking (9.9% vs. 16.3%) than children who do not.
- Children living with both parents are less likely to report that they bullied others (15.5% vs. 19.6%) and have been injured (38.7% vs. 42.0%) than children who do not.
- Children living with both parents are more likely to report engaging in physical activity more than four times a week (51.6% vs. 46.9%) than children who do not.

Further information is available at:
http://www.hbsc.org
http://www.nuigalway.ie/hbsc/
With 72.9% reporting that they live with both parents, 15 year old schoolchildren in Ireland (boys and girls together) are ranked 17th among 39 countries in Europe and North America. Ireland is ranked 20th (72.7%) among 13 year old children, and 23rd (73.7%) among 11 year old children.

Implications

These findings highlight the continuous decrease in the number of school-children living with both parents in Ireland. Ireland ranks midrange internationally for 15, 13 and 11 year old children living with both parents. These illustrate the relationship between children living with both of their parents and many positive health outcomes and suggest that family structure is an important predictor of both positive and negative health behaviours. Children living with both parents are more likely to report positive outcomes such as; excellent health, feeling happy and engaging in physical activity, whereas those who do not live with both parents are more likely to report experiencing physical and emotional symptoms and engaging in risk behaviours. This highlights the need for greater supports in relation to these outcomes for children who do not live with both parents. This information is very important to all of those who work with young people to recognise and develop skills to respond appropriately.

References

