

# **Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC), Ireland**

## **Pilot study report**

### **Background**

In 2006 the third national Health Behaviour in School-aged Children survey (HBSC) is taking place. The questionnaire used in the 2006 survey is similar but not identical to previous survey years. The mandatory questions, which are used by all 41 countries involved with HBSC, have remained the same as 2002. However, there are a number of optional questions which have been modified. Optional questions are those that countries can choose to include based on relevance to their country and use previously. Moreover, each country tends to include questions that are of particular national interest, e.g. in Ireland, being a member of the travelling community is of relevance. In addition, it is important to re-examine questions that produced a large number of missing values in previous survey years, and to validate certain questions. Thus, questions that met these criteria were piloted with a number of school-children in Ireland.

### **Aims:**

The aims of the pilot study were to examine and obtain feedback from children on the new questions for inclusion in the 2006 HBSC study and on questions used in previous survey years.

### **Technical information**

Seven classes from 3 schools in the West of Ireland were involved in this pilot process. Data collection took place in May, 2005.

Only research team members were present in class for completion of the survey and for the duration of the questionnaire discussion, which lasted a total of 35-40 minutes. Survey data was collected from 143 students, aged 12 -14 years.

## RESULTS

### Qualitative findings

#### 1. Missing weight and height data – reasons provided

Only 39% of students recorded their weight and height. Of those who did not respond the most frequent reasons given were not knowing their weight or height (56%), the question was too personal to answer (16%) or that they hadn't checked recently (11%). Other responses included that they had forgotten (9%), were too embarrassed (2%), did not know their weight without their clothes on (3%) or that they did not think about it (2%).

In the subsequent classroom discussions, few questioned the relevance of these questions to the study of youth health, but pupils did point out that the questions were potentially sensitive, personal and possibly embarrassing, especially for those who are overweight. This was particularly the case for the question on weight rather than height. Nevertheless, the classroom discussion confirmed that the most frequent explanation for these missing data were that children simply did not know the answers.

**2. Validation of the food poverty question** (Some young people go to school or to bed hungry because there is not enough food at home. How often does this happen to you?  Always,  Often,  Sometimes,  Never)

Seventy six percent of the students reported what they think this question means. The majority understood it as being hungry due to financial reasons (68%). For example, some thought the question was asking whether you are poor ( $n=30$ ), whether there is not enough money for food or if the family has a low income ( $n=26$ ). Others thought it was asking if there is a shortage of food at home ( $n=17$ ). One person suggested that the question is asking whether you are homeless.

Eleven percent of the children thought it referred to family disorganization ( $n=12$ ), with 10 mentioning parents who are neglecting their children and 2 suggesting that the parents are not feeding their children.

Few thought the question was about ever going hungry and not eating often enough (3%), with the same number believing the question refers to skipping breakfast (3%). Fewer again thought it means if you don't eat you will be hungry (2%) and the same number thought the question is about you bothering to prepare yourself food. One child suggested that it is about children not liking the food that is being served. Six percent of children reported that they did not know what the question means ( $n=7$ ) and 4% copied the question as it appeared on the questionnaire ( $n=4$ ).

In the classroom discussions, being poor, not having enough money to buy food or not enough food at home were what the children understood from the question. When prompted to give alternative reasons for going to bed hungry pupils suggested there may be no time for breakfast, parents are too lazy to prepare food, or that the children don't like the food that is given to them. Other suggestions included going to bed hungry as a punishment, staying up late and thus becoming hungry, or that a child has an eating disorder, but these answers were quite rare.

### **3. Class discussion**

A classroom discussion of the questions included in the survey took place once the questionnaires were complete.

#### Ethnicity

In all seven classes students were not familiar with the word "ethnicity". However, some thought they understood the meaning of the question by looking at the answer categories. As alternatives, pupils suggested the use of one or more of the following terms: nationality, race, group, community, culture, origin, original culture, colour or background. Some students claimed that this question is inappropriate and might be offensive to members of minority groups.

#### Physical development

Children were asked about their physical development compared to other pupils in their class. Some thought this question acceptable whilst others found it embarrassing and considered it inappropriate. The general feeling was that children would understand the question better if the term puberty was used, otherwise they might think it refers to one's height for example. Notably, a number of pupils said that they just don't know where they stand in comparison to their peers in terms of pubertal development.

#### Family food rules

The pupils were asked about their behaviour at family mealtimes. This set of questions did not arouse a lot of discussion in any of the classes. However, practical issues were raised such as those not living with both parents and parents who leave home for work very early and return late at night. The pupils said that these questions are examining what one is allowed to do, and about guidance/family rules. They also pointed out that an answer category of "sometimes" is missing.

#### Pets

Children were requested to answer a set of questions about pets. In discussing these questions few concerns were raised. The main issue that was raised repeatedly was “how do I know that my pet loves me?” Some of the statements were thought to be relevant only to certain types of pets, e.g. one can not exercise with one’s fish. Concerns were also raised about pets that are not living with the children, or about having had a pet in the past.

### Disabilities

All children understood the question about glasses, with or without prescription indication. A concern was raised whether the conditions described need a diagnosis in order to tick ‘yes’ and whether asthma and dyslexia also count. If yes, they suggested specifying that in the question. In one of the classes surveyed, a child was using a hearing aid and explicitly said he was not suffering from any disability as a result of using the hearing aid and hence would tick ‘no’ for hearing difficulties. Some pupils referred to having difficulties in general, regardless of disability e.g., boys having difficulties talking to girls. Children also suggested adding to the question a note about difficulties that are due to an accident.

### Mental health

After discussing physical disabilities, we asked the pupils how best to enquire about their mental health. Some suggested going for a very direct approach, claiming that children understand what mental health/condition means. Such suggestions included the following questions: “Do you feel depressed?”; “Have you ever been diagnosed with depression?”; “Would you have issues with your mental health?”; “Do you need to see a consultant or a psychotherapist?” A different approach was suggested whereby one asks about wellbeing in daily life: “Do you enjoy day to day life?”; “Are you happy?”; “Ask about well being of your mind”; “Long term anger”; “Do you feel well?” Furthermore, questions addressing issues of communication and self confidence were suggested: “Do you have difficulties making friends or speaking to people? ; “Is it generally hard for you to communicate or socialising?”; ”Are you confident?”

**Quantitative findings**  
**Frequency distribution**

<i>Variable Name</i>	<i>Value</i>	<i>Label</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Gender	1	Boy	45.5
	2	Girl	53.8
		<b>Missing</b>	<b>0.7</b>
Month of birth	1	January	6.3
	2	February	6.3
	3	March	11.2
	4	April	10.5
	5	May	7.7
	6	June	9.8
	7	July	11.9
	8	August	7.7
	9	September	8.4
	10	October	6.3
	11	November	8.4
	12	December	4.9
		<b>Missing</b>	<b>0.7</b>
Year of birth	1990	1990	5.6
	1991	1991	60.8
	1992	1992	32.9
		<b>Missing</b>	<b>0.7</b>
Born in Ireland	1	Yes	82.5
	2	No	16.8
		<b>Missing</b>	<b>0.7</b>
Ethnicity	1	White Irish	77.6
	2	Irish Traveller	0.7
	3	Other White Background	6.3
	5	Other Black background	0.7
	8	Other / mixed background	2.4
		<b>Missing</b>	<b>12.6</b>
Weight	25.4– 108.1	Weight in kg	53.8
		<b>Missing</b>	<b>46.2</b>
Height	121.9– 304.8	Height in cm	47.6
		<b>Missing</b>	<b>52.4</b>
Weighing scales at home	1	Yes	69.2
	2	No	28.0
		<b>Missing</b>	<b>2.8</b>

<i>Variable Name</i>	<i>Value</i>	<i>Label</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Last time weight was checked	1	Today	0.7
	2	This week	23.1
	3	This month	21.7
	4	More than a month ago	44.1
	5	Never	4.2
		<b>Missing</b>	<b>6.3</b>
Last time height was checked	1	Today	0.7
	2	This week	5.9
	3	This month	16.3
	4	More than a month ago	60.0
	5	Never	17.0
		<b>Missing</b>	<b>5.6</b>
Physical development	1	Much earlier	0.7
	2	Somewhat earlier	14.7
	3	About the same	73.6
	4	Somewhat later	7.0
		<b>Missing</b>	<b>15.4</b>
Breakfast with parents	1	Never	18.9
	2	1-2 days a week	25.2
	3	3-4 days a week	16.1
	4	5-6 days a week	10.5
	5	Every day	26.6
		<b>Missing</b>	<b>2.8</b>
Evening meal with parents	1	Never	4.9
	2	1-2 days a week	5.6
	3	3-4 days a week	15.4
	4	5-6 days a week	21.0
	5	Every day	51.0
		<b>Missing</b>	<b>2.1</b>
Frequency of dining in fast food restaurants	1	Never	9.1
	2	Rarely	47.6
	3	Once a month	28.0
	4	Once a week	10.5
	5	2-4 days a week	1.4
	6	5 or more days a week	2.1
		<b>Missing</b>	<b>1.4</b>
Family rules at mealtime	1	Strongly agree	4.3
	2	Agree	43.4
	3	Disagree	40.6
	4	Strongly disagree	9.8

<i>Variable Name</i>	<i>Value</i>	<i>Label</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
		<b>Missing</b>	<b>2.1</b>
OK for a child to make something else	1	Strongly agree	15.4
	2	Agree	42.0
	3	Disagree	29.4
	4	Strongly disagree	9.1
		<b>Missing</b>	<b>4.2</b>
Child should eat whatever is served	1	Strongly agree	2.1
	2	Agree	16.1
	3	Disagree	49.7
	4	Strongly disagree	29.4
		<b>Missing</b>	<b>2.8</b>
Manners are important	1	Strongly agree	29.4
	2	Agree	51.7
	3	Disagree	12.6
	4	Strongly disagree	2.1
		<b>Missing</b>	<b>4.2</b>
Don't have to eat the table	1	Strongly agree	7.0
	2	Agree	38.5
	3	Disagree	32.9
	4	Strongly disagree	15.4
		<b>Missing</b>	<b>6.3</b>
Hungry to bed	1	Always	1.4
	2	Often	0.0
	3	Sometimes	8.4
	4	Never	90.2
		<b>Missing</b>	<b>0.0</b>
Do you have a pet	1	Yes, of my own	29.4
	2	Yes, in the family	44.1
	3	No, but spend time w/ pet	5.6
	4	No	16.8
		<b>Missing</b>	<b>4.2</b>
I look after my pet	1	Strongly agree	44.8
	2	Agree	23.8
	3	Don't know	4.9
	4	Disagree	2.8
	5	Strongly disagree	0.7
	6	Don't have a pet	19.6
		<b>Missing</b>	<b>3.5</b>
My pets loves me	1	Strongly agree	35.0
	2	Agree	23.1

<i>Variable Name</i>	<i>Value</i>	<i>Label</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
	3	Don't know	16.1
	4	Disagree	2.1
	5	Strongly disagree	0.7
	6	Don't have a pet	20.3
		<b>Missing</b>	<b>2.8</b>
I really love my pet	1	Strongly agree	47.6
	2	Agree	21.0
	3	Don't know	4.2
	4	Disagree	4.2
	5	Strongly disagree	0.0
	6	Don't have a pet	20.3
		<b>Missing</b>	<b>2.8</b>
My pets keeps me company	1	Strongly agree	37.1
	2	Agree	24.5
	3	Don't know	4.9
	4	Disagree	7.7
	5	Strongly disagree	2.8
	6	Don't have a pet	20.3
		<b>Missing</b>	<b>2.8</b>
I exercise with my pet	1	Strongly agree	28.0
	2	Agree	24.5
	3	Don't know	6.3
	4	Disagree	14.0
	5	Strongly disagree	4.2
	6	Don't have a pet	20.3
		<b>Missing</b>	<b>2.8</b>
My pet cheers me up	1	Strongly agree	36.4
	2	Agree	20.3
	3	Don't know	11.2
	4	Disagree	4.9
	5	Strongly disagree	2.8
	6	Don't have a pet	20.3
		<b>Missing</b>	<b>4.2</b>
I am proud of my pet	1	Strongly agree	39.9
	2	Agree	23.8
	3	Don't know	7.0
	4	Disagree	4.9
	5	Strongly disagree	1.4
	6	Don't have a pet	20.3
		<b>Missing</b>	<b>2.8</b>

<i>Variable Name</i>	<i>Value</i>	<i>Label</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
I play with my pet	1	Strongly agree	41.3
	2	Agree	24.5
	3	Don't know	2.8
	4	Disagree	6.3
	5	Strongly disagree	1.4
	6	Don't have a pet	21.0
		<b>Missing</b>	<b>2.8</b>
Difficulty seeing things	1	yes	6.3
	2	No	87.4
		<b>Missing</b>	<b>6.3</b>
Difficulty hearing others	1	Yes	8.0
	2	No	88.1
		<b>Missing</b>	<b>4.2</b>
Difficulty speaking to others	1	Yes	6.3
	2	No	88.1
		<b>Missing</b>	<b>5.6</b>
Difficulty in moving around	1	Yes	2.1
	2	No	92.3
		<b>Missing</b>	<b>5.6</b>
Difficulties in handling objects	1	Yes	0.7
	2	No	93.7
		<b>Missing</b>	<b>5.6</b>
Difficulty breathing	1	Yes	9.1
	2	No	85.3
		<b>Missing</b>	<b>5.6</b>
Epileptic seizures	1	Yes	2.8
	2	No	90.9
		<b>Missing</b>	<b>6.3</b>
Difficulty learning	1	Yes	7.7
	2	No	86.0
		<b>Missing</b>	<b>6.3</b>
Disability affecting school attendance	1	Don't have disability	72.7
	2	Yes	2.8
	3	No	18.9
		<b>Missing</b>	<b>5.6</b>