

## SCHOOL CHILDREN AND LIFESTYLE: A SURVEY

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### The Health Behaviour in School Aged Children Study

This paper reports on preliminary analyses from the 1998 Health Behaviour in School aged Children (HBSC) study in the Republic of Ireland. The HBSC is a WHO/EURO collaborative study. It runs on an academic 4 year cycle and in 1998, 29 individual countries participated. Principal investigators from all countries co-operate in relation to survey content, methodology and timing and an international protocol is developed. In Ireland, sampling was conducted in order to be representative of the proportion of children in each of the eight Health Boards according to the 1996 consensus. Individual schools within regions were first randomly selected and class groups within schools were subsequently randomly selected for participation. In primary schools, both 5th and 6th class groups were included, while in post-primary schools all Junior Cycle and the first year post Junior cycle (Transition Year or the first year of Senior cycle) were sampled. A total of 187 schools and 8,497 students returned completed questionnaires, reflecting a response rate of 69% from primary schools and 77% from post-primary schools. Those returned reflected the geographical, gender and social class pattern among the wider school-population.

This paper presents patterns in the data according to age, social class and gender across a variety of variables relevant to the concept of the Health Promoting School. Students had been asked questions relating to their perceptions of their role in the school structure, their relationships with teachers, fellow pupils and parents. Although only about one third of pupils reported that they took part in making school rules, and this decreases across age and is particularly low among older girls, well over half agree that they are encouraged to express their views at school and a minority report that they are treated too severely or strictly at school. In general, students report having positive relationships with teachers, however this also decreases by age and is lower among the boys. Respondents are particularly happy about their relationships with other pupils, they report that they feel accepted, that pupils enjoy spending time together and that most of their classmates are kind and helpful. The role of parents in their education is also widely acknowledged and very high proportions of pupils report feeling supported and encouraged by both parents and teachers. Although there is little evidence of a social class gradient in responses, there are clear gender and age patterns. Girls and younger students (up to age 15) tend to be more positive about all aspects of their school life and associated relationships.

Therefore, these preliminary analyses suggest good news for the Irish Education system. There is little evidence of widespread disruption of students lives as they transfer between primary and post-primary school. In addition, the data illustrate remarkable stability across the various social groups. There is no evidence of large scale alienation from peers, schools or indeed from families. Nevertheless, some of the gender differences identified require further exploration. The next stages of analysis for the Irish HBSC data include comparing Irish children with those of the other 28 countries involved in the international study and determining the nature of the relationships between the school and relationship factors discussed here and health behaviours such as smoking, drinking, exercise and nutrition which were also assessed.

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