

Health Behaviour in School-Aged Children in Sweden – A WHO Collaborative Study English summary

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This report is primarily based on data collected from 11, 13 and 15-year-olds in November–December 2001 in Sweden, as part of an international cross-sectional survey *Health Behaviour in School-Aged Children*. This survey has been carried out every fourth year since 1985/86 in an increasing number of countries as part of a WHO initiative. Consequently, the report also contains data from previous years. International comparisons are, however, published in a separate WHO report.

A summary of some of the results presented in this report is given below, including any gender, age and trend differences that were discovered. Unfortunately, there is no in-depth analysis in this report but more thorough analyses will be published at a later date.

Giving a concise description of children's health at these ages is no easy task since the picture is different depending on which health issue is studied. In general, this report shows that health, lifestyles, social relations and attitudes towards school change over the age-groups and that there are often differences between boys and girls. As a rule, 11-year-olds describe themselves healthier, live healthier and have a more positive attitude towards school than older pupils (13–15 year-olds).

Self-rated health, somatic and mental disorders and general well-being deteriorate as children grow older and the disparities between boys and girls become more pronounced with age. The majority feel they are in good health and seen over time, the proportion of children who feel they are very healthy has remained constant. Over the years, somatic and mental disorders have increased both among boys and girls, with the exception of 11-year-old girls, among whom the proportion of very healthy individuals has risen and somatic disorders have not increased.

Girls are less happy with life than boys in all the age groups. This disparity has become increasingly apparent since the survey began in 1985 and up to 2001, during which time the sense of well-being primarily among 15-year-old and 13-year old girls has decreased.

As they grow older, boys feel that they are too thin and girls are of the opinion they are too fat and this influences their desire to change their weight. Fifteen per cent of 13 and 15-year-old girls say they diet or do something else to lose weight.

Both tobacco and alcohol habits are established during upper-compulsory schooling. Girls smoke more than boys, whilst boys use more moist snuff than girls. If we look at total tobacco consumption, 15-year-old boys use tobacco more regularly than their female counterparts. The proportion of 15-year-olds who smoke on a regular basis has dropped between 1997 and 2001, although not significantly among girls. Regarding alcohol, 5 per cent of 13-year-olds and 24 per cent of 15-year-olds say they have consumed enough alcohol to become drunk on four or more occasions. Seen over time between 1985 and 2001, this figure has increased among girls. Young people drink mainly beer.

A quarter of 15-year-old boys and just under a third of girls said they had had sexual intercourse and 82 per cent of these had used some kind of contraceptive on their most recent occasion to avoid pregnancy.

The proportion of young people who eat breakfast decreases as they grow older and 15-year-old girls eat less breakfast and lunch than their male counterparts. The fact that eating habits change and deteriorate as children grow older can also be seen if they are asked about their daily consumption of fruit, vegetables, confectionery and soft drinks.

The proportion of children who are physically active decreases with age whilst the percentage of those watching television or using a computer more than four hours a day increases as they grow older. More boys than girls are physically active for at least one hour five days a week but more of them also sit still for more than four hours a day.

The majority of young people have three or more close friends. Socialising patterns change with age in that the proportion of those who meet their friends after school decreases between the ages of 11 and 15, whilst more of them meet their friends later on in the evening, the older they get.

Common for both boys and girls is that they find it more difficult to talk to their parents but easier to talk to friends of the opposite sex as they grow older. Boys also find it easier to talk to their best friend and other boys the older they get, whilst there is no difference in this respect between the age-groups for girls.

School well-being decreases with age and in contrast to many other questions, the attitudes of boys and girls in this issue differ most in the youngest age-group, where more girls say they are very happy at school. As school well-being decreases with age, the feeling of stress associated with schoolwork increases and 15-year-old girls experience more stress than boys. Seen over time, the percentage of children who feel very happy at school has basically remained the same between 1985 and 2001.

Concerning more detailed questions about the school environment, there are differences between the age groups but not between girls and boys. As they grow older, more schoolchildren feel the demands increase whilst fewer of them feel they can influence their situation at school, they are treated fairly by their teachers and they receive help from the teacher when they need it.