

Results from the Health-Related Behaviour Questionnaire provide an insight into the use of computers by approximately 30,000 young people.

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Couch potatoes? Not us!

Computer use is by no means associated exclusively with inactivity, shyness and unsociability but with a more affluent family background.

In the Health-Related Behaviour Questionnaire for secondary schools we find three uses of computers represented:

- ★ Use of console computer games, e.g. Gameboy, Play Station, after school last night
- ★ Use of computer for school work at home after school last night
- ★ Internet use at home in the last month

With respect to the Internet, we also ask if the pupils have unsupervised access. We looked at the answers from 29153 boys and girls in years 8 and 10 (12-13yrs and 14-15yrs old, respectively), from all the surveys carried out in 2000.

The sample sizes were:

Year 8 males	7166
Year 8 females	7544
Year 10 males	7034
Year 10 females	7409
Valid responses	29153

The basic statistics show us that:

- ✓ the most likely users of computer games are younger males (74%); only a minority of females report using these games (30%)

- ✓ the most likely users of a computer for homework are older males (30%)
- ✓ the most likely users of the Internet are older males (50% at home in the last month)
- ✓ unsurprisingly younger pupils are more likely to be supervised in their use of the Internet (16% of Year 8 users are often unsupervised)

These different uses are of course associated with each other: if you don't have a computer, you can't use it for anything.

Are users different to non-users? We looked at different aspects of these young people's lifestyles:

- ⇒ Family background: newspaper readership, car ownership
- ⇒ Personality: self-esteem, health locus of control
- ⇒ Substance use: smoking, alcohol, and illegal drugs
- ⇒ Leisure: meeting friends, exercise, enjoyment of physical activities, spending money, wearing cycle helmet when cycling
- ⇒ Relationships: loneliness, fear of bullying, confidence with opposite sex, dating

Aspects of lifestyle

We found computer uses were linked in different ways to aspects of lifestyle. One of the

		Year 8 males	Year 8 females	Year 10 males	Year 10 females	All
		%	%	%	%	%
Computer games (e.g. ...)	No time at all	26.3	64.8	32.9	75.7	50.9
	Some time	73.7	35.2	67.1	24.3	49.1
Used computer: for school work last night after school	No	73.3	75.4	70.1	74.7	73.5
	Yes	26.7	24.6	29.9	25.3	26.5
Have you used the Internet in the last month ... at home?	No	56.6	63.4	50.2	62.1	58.3
	Yes	43.4	36.6	49.8	37.9	41.7
Are you able to 'browse' the Internet without adult supervision?	Never/Sometimes supervised	84.8	83.4	88.3	88.8	86.4
	Often/Always supervised	15.2	16.6	11.7	11.2	13.6

most obvious things to look for was a connection between inactivity and heavy usage of computer games. We ask a question about activity: "How many days last week did you exercise and have to breathe harder?" Pupils choose from four possible answers: None, One, Two and "Three days or more"

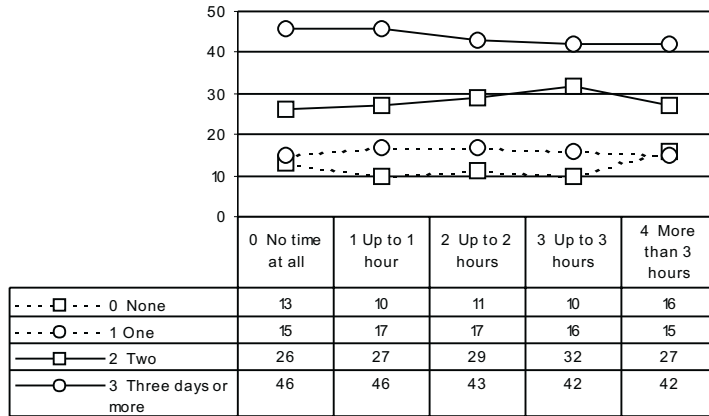


Chart: Relationship between hours of computer games use last night after school, and frequency of hard exercise last week (Year 8 Boys only).

Just reading across the bottom row of figures, we can see that there is a drop from 46% to 42% in the proportion of Year 8 boys exercising hard on three or more days last week.

While this difference in statistical terms is significant, the more realistic conclusion is, for practical purposes, there is no difference in reported exercise levels between non-users and even heavy users of computer games. This is contrary to our original guess, and rather interesting.

By doing lots of analyses similar to these, we can draw up a list of differences between computer users and non-users for each question. (For some questions, we know only that they didn't use a computer last night, not whether they ever use a computer.)

Computer games users are:

more likely:	less likely:
to have only popular tabloid newspapers at home	to have four or more bedrooms in their home
to have spent their own money last week	to have a high self-esteem score
to have drunk alcohol last week	to feel in control of their health
	ever to have smoked
	to be at ease with opposite sex

For all of these differences, we report them only if we could see a difference was greater than five percentage points and we found a difference in more than one of the four age/gender groups.

The difference in exercise levels shown in the chart is (just) less than the 5% we were looking for.

Pupils who used a computer for homework are:

more likely:	less likely:
to have broadsheet newspapers at home	ever smoked
to have more than one car at home	dating
four or more bedrooms at home	met with friends last night
feel in control of their health	feel lonely at night
enjoy physical activities	
wear a cycle helmet	
fear bullying at school	
less likely to watch TV	
exercise in previous week	

Pupils who used the Internet at home last month are:

more likely:	less likely:
to have broadsheet newspapers at home	ever smoked
to have more than one car at home	fear bullying at school
four or more bedrooms at home	met with friends last night
score high for self-esteem	
feel in control of their health	
drank alcohol last night	
enjoy physical activities	
wear cycle helmet	
at ease with the opposite sex	
watch TV last night	
did homework last night	
exercise last week	

Pupils whose use of the Internet is usually supervised are:

more likely:	less likely:
to have broadsheet newspapers at home	to have four or more bedrooms in their home
wear cycle helmets	score high for self-esteem
	to feel in control of their health
	feel lonely at school
	to be at ease with opposite sex
	to have more than one car at home
	spend £10 or more last week
	drink alcohol last week

Computer use is by no means associated exclusively with inactivity, shyness and unsociability; the most common associations seem to be with a more affluent family background. It seems that computer use is a common part of many young people's lives, whether they are rich or poor, active or inactive, shy or sociable, risk-takers or abstainers. The growth in computer use should not be thought of as being a good or a bad thing of itself, but be seen in the context of young people's lifestyles. If they have a good mixed diet of computers and friends, of home life and exercise and rest, then there need be no reason for concern.