

Nick Opie is the SHEU Data and Report Technician, Jim Podbery is the SHEU Data Manager, Angela Balding is the SHEU Survey Manager and Dr David Regis is the SHEU Research Manager. The [Schools Health Education Unit](#) is based in Exeter, Devon.

For communication, please email: [david.regis@sheu.org.uk](mailto:david.regis@sheu.org.uk)

## Nick Opie, Jim Podbery, Angela Balding and David Regis

# Emotional health and wellbeing in young people: a report about a million 8 to 15-year-olds

This article has been taken from the report, [“Emotional Health and Wellbeing in Young People in 2019”](#), (SHEU, 2019). The report is researched and written by the Schools Health Education Unit (SHEU).

SHEU provides a range of services to those involved in the planning, providing and commissioning of local health and education programmes. The survey work in schools uses the Health Related Behaviour Questionnaire (HRBQ), which has been evolving and developing since 1977 and collects robust baseline data. The primary and secondary versions of the HRBQ have been used in 14,894 separate school surveys, some schools repeating surveys of their pupils on many occasions, and nearly two million pupils between the ages of 9 and 16+ have taken part in the surveys from across the UK.

### Concern about emotional wellbeing and the evidence

We know there is much concern about young people’s emotional wellbeing. For example, we can see the headlines from the Telegraph in July 2015, "Mental health of pupils a 'top concern' for head teachers - Two-thirds of school leaders are worried about pupils' mental health" ([Telegraph, 2015](#)). However, solid data justifying these concerns are hard to find in the UK.

For example, there is a robust series of results from NHS Digital showing the prevalence of any emotional, behavioural or hyperactivity disorder among 5-15 year-olds, which has exactly three data points: 1999=9.7%, 2004=10.1%, and 2017=11.2%. The small rise is accounted for by a rise in emotional disorders from 4.3% in 1999 to 5.8% in 2017 ([NHS Digital, 2017](#)). This rise is of importance, but it is hard to account for what is

sometimes described as a generational shift in mental health problems.

A review by Pitchforth and colleagues looking at some other sources of robust evidence from surveys of young people concluded:

- “a striking increase in the reported prevalence of long-standing mental health conditions since 1995” (from about 1% in England in 1995 to 5% in 2014)
- “no consistent increase in reported psychological distress among CYP over the last two decades”, when measured using scores in validated questionnaires
- “some evidence of worsening trends in psychological distress and well-being of young adults in recent years” (since 2011)

([Pitchforth et al., 2018](#))

This provides both support and confusion for our thoughts about young people’s emotional wellbeing. The Pitchforth paper looked at national surveys, but there is a lot of variation under the surface, we expect. For example, Geulayov and colleagues in 2016 reported on trends in non-fatal self-harm in three centres in England, 2000–2012 ([Geulayov et al., 2016](#)). Among males since 2008, reports in Manchester went up, while in Oxford, if anything, they went down. This, we hope, shows the value of local data, such as that provided by our HRBQ surveys. You would draw very different conclusions about the changes in self-harm prevalence among males if you were in Manchester or Oxford.

### The consequences of poor emotional wellbeing

Poor emotional wellbeing is a problem in itself, and, we suspect, may lead to more serious mental health problems.

Health educators are also interested in emotional wellbeing as a factor in risky behaviours; we will see some of this evidence later. Why is poor emotional wellbeing associated with risky behaviours? Perhaps unhappiness leads young people to suppress negative emotions through substance use, or instead it could make young people more vulnerable to peer influence. (Or, both poor emotional wellbeing and risky behaviour are connected only through a third factor like poverty.) We will return to this issue later in the article.

### **The No Worries? report**

In 1998, we produced a report, "No Worries?" (Balding et al., 1998), looking into the worries and concerns that affect young teenagers in our society. In the two decades since publication, we have seen an increase in awareness of mental health as well as the introduction and spread of social media and smartphones, with little currently known about the affects these could have on the emotional health and wellbeing of the people using them.

The key findings from the 1998 report were:

- It is normal for all people to worry at some point in their life; the issue is identifying when worrying becomes a problem, and how to manage our worries better.
- The main worries for young people were: the way they look; friends; family and drugs.
- The most common worry among 12-15yo females was how they look (58% - the next highest worry was "family problems" at 46%).
- 63% of Year 10 females said they would like to lose weight.

As the title of the 1998 report suggests, much of the content focuses on worrying, particularly links between worries and responses to other questions.

For example, it was found that people who worry more were also:

- More likely to have used drugs
- More likely to have low self-esteem
- More likely to feel uneasy when seeing their GP
- More likely to report having accidents
- More likely to consider their health when choosing what to eat
- Less likely to have adults they can trust
- Less likely to live with their mother and father together

These findings are largely duplicated in the latest 2019 report, but we have been able to extend our analysis in a number of ways.

### **Emotional health and wellbeing in young people in 2019**

This new report summarises recent findings from large samples of young people surveyed in schools from local authorities across England between 1997 and 2018, with an in-depth analysis of the samples from 2017-18. The pupils were from Year 4 (8-9yo), Year 6 (10-11yo), Year 8 (12-13yo) and Year 10 (14-15yo).

#### **Headline Findings**

- Boys had significantly higher self-esteem than girls; this difference becomes more marked as children get older. 32% of boys in Year 4 had high self-esteem in 2018; this compares with 28% of girls in Year 4, 47% of boys in Year 10, and 29% of girls in Year 10. Scores for primary pupils are higher than ever.
- Pupils report decreasing levels of satisfaction as they get older, with the gap for girls widening more than for boys (74% of boys/75% of girls in Year 4 drops in Year 10 to 62% and 48%, respectively).
- Girls worry significantly more than boys, particularly as age increases. The biggest differences are for issues including school-work, family and the way they look.
- Family was the most common source of support or information for most topics.
- When young people have a problem or feel stressed, they often listen to music, but also report talking to family and thinking on their own. 6% of older females report self-harm when stressed.
- Boys feel more at ease when meeting people of their own age than girls.
- The oldest girls (Year 10, 14-15yo) score less well than all other groups for self-esteem, resilience, worrying (for any topic and multiple topics), satisfaction with life and social confidence; girls' scores on well-being scales are not much difference to those boys of the same age.

#### **Trends**

- Worrying about school-work increased among all groups since 2002, especially among 14-15yo girls.

- Self-esteem seems stable or improving in the primary phase, but self-esteem among 14-15yo girls has declined in the last decade.
- Satisfaction with life has declined among secondary-age pupils since 2013, and especially among the 14-15yo girls.

### Annual cycles

- Over the course of the school year, from September to July, there appears to be an overall fall in self-esteem of secondary pupils from Sept-Feb, a rise in fear of bullying Sept-July, and a rise in worry about schoolwork Sept-July. (These changes are not age-related, as we can see Y10 pupils' self-esteem is not lower than that in Y8, while their fear of bullying is lower.)

### Associations

- Lower self-esteem is associated with less happiness with their weight, with lower likelihood of exercising, of eating a 'proper' breakfast (of a drink and something substantial to eat), a lower likelihood of getting 8 hours' sleep, and is strongly associated with the experience of and fear of bullying
- Looking at computer games, media and Internet use, the highest levels of use are associated with lower self-esteem and wellbeing, while there is some evidence that moderate levels of phone and Internet use are linked with the highest levels of wellbeing. High levels of homework are also associated with poorer wellbeing.
- Low self-esteem is associated with increased use of cannabis, while high self-esteem is linked with lower use. We have previously reported this type of association for alcohol.

### Trends in associations

- High self-esteem was formerly associated with increased use of alcohol and cannabis, but in the last decade low self-esteem has been associated with increased use of both substances, while high self-esteem is linked with lower use - the reverse of the previous pattern.

### Conclusions

We believe there is much support in our data for the widely held belief that young people's emotional wellbeing has declined in recent years, as seen in results for self-esteem, satisfaction, and worries.

This decline is found in secondary school pupils rather than primary school pupils, and most strongly in Year 10 females (14-15yo).

There may be some important consequences of poor emotional wellbeing, as it is associated with greater levels of risky behaviour and lower levels of health promoting behaviour, including more skipping meals, lower levels of exercise, less time asleep, and higher levels of substance use and bullying. Directions of cause and effect are not shown, but poor emotional wellbeing is an outcome of importance in itself, whatever effect it may be producing in other behaviours.

There are many links between poor emotional wellbeing and various aspects of screen time, but these are not large enough to account for the trends and patterns that we see, and neither is the relationship straightforward.

We have reported here for the first time a decline in self-esteem during the school year, from September to February, while fear of bullying and worry about school work both increase during the school year. The last is perhaps an acceptable consequence of end of year exams, but the other findings are more surprising and unwelcome.

### References

- Balding, J.W., Regis, D. & Wise, A. (1998). No Worries? Young people and mental health. *Schools Health Education Unit*, 61pp
- SHEU, (2019). *Emotional Health and Wellbeing in Young People in 2019*. Retrieved Feb.18 2020, from: <http://sheu.org.uk/EHWB2019/twt>
- Geulayov, G., Kapur, N., Turnbull, P., Clements, C., Waters, K., Ness, J., Townsend, E. & Hawton, K. (2016). Epidemiology and trends in non-fatal self-harm in three centres in England, 2000–2012: findings from the Multicentre Study of Self-harm in England. *BMJ Open*, 6:4. Retrieved Feb.18 2020, from: <https://bmjopen.bmj.com/content/6/4/e010538.long>
- NHS Digital, (2017). *Mental health of children and young people in England*. Retrieved Feb.18 2020, from: <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/mental-health-of-children-and-young-people-in-england/2017/2017>
- Pitchforth, J., Fahy, K., Ford, T., Wolpert, M., Viner, R.M. & Hargreaves, D.S. (2018). Mental health and well-being trends among children and young people in the UK, 1995–2014: analysis of repeated cross-sectional national health surveys. *Psychological Medicine*, 49(8), 1275-1285. Retrieved Feb.18 2020, from: <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/psychological-medicine/article/mental-health-and-wellbeing-trends-among-children-and-young-people-in-the-uk-19952014-analysis-of-repeated-crosssectional-national-health-surveys/AB71DE760C0027EDC5F5CF0AF507FD1B>
- Telegraph, (2015). *Mental health of pupils a 'top concern' for head teachers*. Retrieved Feb.18 2020, from: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/educationnews/11751377/Mental-health-of-pupils-a-top-concern-for-head-teachers.html>

Emotional health and wellbeing in young people in 2019. SHEU



47% of boys and 29% of girls in Year 10 (aged 14-15y) have high self-esteem scores.



Pupils' self-esteem seems to decline through the school year (and recover over the Summer), while concerns about schoolwork and bullying rise over the year

More primary pupils score high for self-esteem than ever, but more Year 10 (14-15yo) girls score low now 10 years ago



Satisfaction with life declines as young people get older



Girls worry more than do boys



The source of support most often reported for most issues is family.

The most common worries for young people are school, and their appearance



The older females who are online the most report the poorest wellbeing, but that might not be cause and effect



Most pupils respond constructively to having worries or problems, but 6% of 14-15yo females report self-harm



Positive wellbeing measures are linked with each other; they are also linked with more positive lifestyle choices (although they haven't always been)