

Personal relationships and self-esteem

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Some information on personal relationships contained in the Health Related Behaviour Questionnaire results is examined for its relevance to the previous article on "Life at 15". The inclusion of a bank of questions aimed at measuring self-esteem promises to give new insights into the health-related behaviour of young people.

The work reported elsewhere in this issue by Cyril Simmons (see page 52) reflects the responses to open-ended questions addressed to 15-year-olds. Such questions are not used in the Health Related Behaviour Questionnaire, which has a more structured format aimed at generating easily-read tabular data. However, it has prompted us to examine the data bank for information related to Cyril Simmons' study.

His sentence 3, *The people I am happiest with are...*, has some connection with Question 45 of our Questionnaire: *Which adult do you get on best with?* The responses from boys and girls in Years 1-5 (11+ to 15+) are shown in Table 1. The numbers in each year group are substantial, ranging from 2171 in Year 1 to 7618 in Year 4, and 2271 in Year 5 – the 15-year-old age group examined in the study. The data was accumulated between the beginning of 1982 and the end of 1984.

"Best adults" for 15-year-olds

The following comments may be made:

1. *Mother* came out "top" for all year groups and for both sexes, with the

exception of the 1st-year boys. Her standing with the boys changed little from year to year, but it improved with the older girls.*

2. *Father's* standing improved slightly with the boys up to Year 3, but the girls' attitude differed little.
3. *Mother and father* together showed a large and consistent fall in popularity, with increasing age.
4. *Brothers and sisters* both "improved" their standing. This is not an easy statistic to interpret, since we need to know how old a sibling needs to be, to be counted "adult". If the criterion is legal adulthood (whatever that is), then an 11-year-old is less likely to have an adult sibling than is a 15-year-old, and the consistent trend in the table could be a reflection of "availability". If, on the other hand, adulthood refers to age difference,

* Please note that our analysis of these year groups is cross-sectional, not longitudinal. In other words, different individuals were responding in each year group. The assumption being made is that the 5th-year group is behaving in the way that the 1st-year group would if they were four years older.

Table 1. A study of 19,080 school pupils between the ages of 11+ (1st year) and 15+ (5th year), showing the adult with whom they feel they get on best. (Percentages.)

Year	"Best adult"												Total number		
	Mother		Father		Mother & father		Brother or sister		Relation		Friend			Outside agency	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls		Boys	Girls
1st	35.4	44.9	18.1	11.3	36.6	32.9	2.4	2.8	6.7	6.0	0.3	1.0	0.4	1.2	2171
2nd	39.7	50.4	20.0	13.4	28.6	24.4	3.4	4.0	6.4	5.9	1.5	1.1	0.3	0.8	2368
3rd	38.6	50.8	24.0	14.9	23.7	19.5	4.4	4.7	5.9	6.7	1.9	2.4	1.5	1.0	4652
4th	38.6	54.9	23.5	13.8	21.0	13.1	6.0	6.6	5.9	6.1	3.0	3.8	1.9	1.6	7618
5th	37.6	54.1	24.8	14.3	17.8	12.2	7.3	7.4	5.6	5.8	4.1	4.5	2.7	1.8	2271

then the figures could indicate a change of attitude towards elder siblings, since all age groups are likely to have a similar number of brothers or sisters who are, say, five years older than themselves.

show that the most valued support, for both sexes, is *Mother*, with *Friends* a strong second for the girls, and *No one*, *Friends*, and *Father* as runners-up for the boys. The categories *grandparent* and *other relation* have been combined.

Sharing problems

In another part of the Health Related Behaviour Questionnaire, respondents are asked *If you had a personal problem, with whom would you share it?* The possible answers are as follows: *Mother, father, mother and father, brother or sister, grandparent, other relation, friend, outside agency, no one*. It should be noted that the brothers, sisters, and friends referred to here need not be adults.

The "personal problems" are divided into career, family, health, school, friends, and money. Bearing in mind the great importance of "the family" in the lives of the 15-year-olds studied by Cyril Simmons, it is interesting to look at the combined results for all these problem areas, and to see where the 947 boys and 992 girls in the sample would be most likely to turn (Table 2). These figures

Self-esteem

In the new Version 10 Questionnaire, we have added a section on self-esteem, to give a new dimension on health-related behaviour. There are ten questions in this section, each one being scored 0, 1, or 2 according to the level of esteem indicated by the answer *Yes*, *No*, or *Don't know*. These questions, which were adapted, with permission, from the LAWSEQ questionnaire designed by Denis Lawrence to measure self-esteem in primary children,¹ are as follows:

1. Are there lots of things about yourself you would like to change?
2. Do you think that your parents usually like to hear about your ideas?
3. When you have to say something in front of teachers, do you usually feel uneasy?

Sex	Best person for sharing a problem								Total number
	No one	Mother	Father	Mother & father	Brother or sister	Relation	Friend	Outside agency	
BOYS	17.2	23.4	14.6	12.1	5.8	4.9	15.4	6.4	947
GIRLS	6.9	34.6	7.5	10.6	7.3	3.1	23.7	5.8	992

Table 2. A study of 1,939 pupils in the 5th year (age 15+), showing the individuals – not necessarily adults – to whom they would first turn if they had a 'problem'. (Percentages.)

Table 3. A comparison between 2,391 pupils in the 4th year (age 14+), showing the rating of self-esteem. (Percentages.)

Sex	Rating of self-esteem					Mean value	Total number
	Very low	Low	Moderate	High	Very high		
BOYS	1.6	7.7	22.5	41.0	27.1	13.96/20	1168
GIRLS	2.0	8.2	23.7	41.3	24.8	13.75/20	1223

4. Do other pupils in the school often fall out with you?
5. Do you often feel lonely at school?
6. Do you think that other pupils in the school often say nasty things about you?
7. When you want to tell a teacher something, do you usually feel silly?
8. Do you often have to find new friends because your old friends are with somebody else?
9. Do you usually feel foolish when you talk to your parents?
10. Do other people often think that you tell lies?

In the conclusion of the article by Cyril Simmons, some of the principal "joys and concerns" of the 15-year-olds are listed, including *the desire to be oneself, the delight in the company of friends, the dislike of oppressive teachers, and the importance of the family*. All of these aspects are reflected in our "esteem" questions, and the following analyses of data from pupils a year younger than those examined in the article may be of interest. They represent 1168 boys and 1223 girls aged 14+. The responses have been put into five groups, covering the range of possible self-esteem scores:

0-4 Very low 13-16 High
5-8 Low 17-20 Very high
9-12 Moderate

Table 3 shows how the whole group compare in our measure of their self-esteem. Bearing in mind the much greater dependence placed by girls on their friends as "problem solvers", could their lower rating of self-esteem be a reflection of the concern they feel over their friends' attitudes towards them?

Self-esteem and some health-related behaviours

We then examined several health-related behaviours in the light of the pupils' self-esteem measurement, to see what relationships could be discovered between them.

Social confidence Table 4 shows the results of relating self-esteem to Question 48: *When you meet new people of your own age and opposite sex, how do you feel?* There is a very high correlation here, one-third of those stating that they feel "at ease" having a very high value of self-esteem, compared with one-tenth or less of those who feel "very uneasy". This is not surprising, since part of the rating of self-esteem does examine the perceived attitudes of friends.

Meeting opposite sex	Rating of self-esteem						
	All pupils	Rating of self-esteem					
		Very low	Low	Moderate	High	Very high	
	Boys Girls	Boys Girls	Boys Girls	Boys Girls	Boys Girls	Boys Girls	
Very uneasy . . .	10.3 12.3	5.9 6.7	24.6 19.5	28.0 34.2	31.4 32.2	10.2 7.4	
A little uneasy . .	48.0 53.1	1.3 1.2	5.5 8.1	24.4 24.5	43.5 44.1	25.1 22.0	
At ease	41.5 34.6	1.3 1.7	6.3 4.1	19.2 18.4	39.6 40.9	33.7 34.9	

Table 4. A comparison between 1,142 boys and 1,208 girls in the 4th year, relating self-esteem to feelings when meeting new members of the opposite sex. (Percentages.)

Table 5. A comparison between 1,144 boys and 1,212 girls in the 4th year, relating self-esteem to the sex of their closest friends. (percentages.)

Sex of closest friends	Rating of self-esteem									
	All pupils		Very low		Low		Moderate		High	
			Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
More own	47.3	43.2	1.5	2.1	8.5	8.6	21.6	23.9	42.5	43.1
Equal	47.2	50.1	2.0	2.0	6.7	6.9	23.0	22.1	40.6	41.5
More opposite . .	5.5	6.7	1.6	2.5	9.5	16.0	20.6	32.1	31.7	29.6

Close friends Table 5 gives a similar analysis of Question 49, which asks if close friends include more of the same sex, the opposite sex, or a similar number of both. Although only a small percentage (5.5% of boys and 6.7% of girls) said that they had more close friends of the opposite sex, the comparison is interesting. Within this small group of 14-year-olds, the boys tend to have higher self-esteem than those in the other groups, while the girls have lower self-esteem. It would be most interesting to uncover the reasons for this contrast.

"Best adult" To return to the "family", let us examine Table 6, which relates self-esteem to our Question 45, studied at the beginning of this article: *Which adult do you get on best with?* Those categories with very low scores have been omitted. It will be noticed that the category *Friend* is related to rather low self-esteem, especially for the girls – remember that these are adult friends.

However, the line which provokes the most surprise is the *Mother and father*

response. It will be seen that 33.5% of boys and 25.2% of girls have nominated *both parents* as equally accessible, and this group of young people come out noticeably high in self-esteem, well above those in any other group.

Unlike the questions which refer to social confidence amongst their peers (a group to which reference is made in many of the self-esteem questions, therefore making a correlation more likely), the attitudes towards parents appears only in the second and ninth questions. Therefore, this apparent linking of high self-esteem with equal approval for both parents is particularly significant.

This linking of self-esteem with parental approval certainly supports the enormous value attached to the family by the 15-year-olds in Cyril Simmons' survey. Having this bank of new questions in our Version 10 Questionnaire will open the way to fresh insights.

Reference

1. Lawrence, D., The development of a self-esteem questionnaire. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 51, 245-251, 1981.

"Best adult"	Rating of self-esteem									
	All pupils		Very low		Low		Moderate		High	
			Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Mother	28.1	38.8	1.3	1.5	7.1	6.9	30.1	22.7	36.2	43.1
Father	14.3	9.5	2.5	1.8	9.4	8.8	22.6	25.7	41.5	41.6
Mother & father .	33.5	25.2	1.1	1.3	5.6	6.3	14.2	20.7	41.4	41.3
Brother or sister .	7.7	7.6	0.0	1.1	5.8	6.7	20.9	25.6	55.8	34.4
Friend	7.8	12.5	2.3	4.0	5.7	12.8	27.6	23.5	48.3	47.7

Table 6. A comparison between 1,110 boys and 1,191 girls in the 4th year, relating self-esteem to the adult with whom they feel they get on best. (Percentages.)