

Current trends in health, wellbeing and risky behaviours amongst children and young people: a synthesis of recent evidence

Recent data from three major surveys of children and young people's behaviours and attitudes – the [Health and Social Care Information Centre's smoking, Drinking and Drugs survey](#), the [School Health Education Unit \(SHEU\) Young People into 2015 study](#) and [the Children's Society's Good Childhood 2015 report](#) – and a recently-released [Cabinet Office analysis of risk behaviours amongst young people](#) provide a detailed insight into the lives of children and young people today. These reports show a mixed picture: while traditional risk behaviours such as smoking, drinking and drug use by young people appear to be in decline, there is growing concern about the apparent increase in children and young people suffering from poor emotional health. These findings demonstrate yet again why it is so important to have a PSHE programme focussed on pupil wellbeing on the curriculum in every school.

Smoking, drinking and drug use among young people in England (Health and Social Care Information Centre, 2015)

The Health and Social Care Information Centre (HSCIC) survey of smoking, drinking and drug use amongst young people in England in 2014 shows positive trends in relation to smoking and drinking in particular.

In 2014, fewer than one in five 11 to 15 year olds (18%) said that they had smoked at least once. This was the lowest level recorded since the survey began in 1982 and down from 42% in 2003. 3% of pupils reported that they smoked at least one cigarette a week, down from 2002, when 10% of pupils were regular smokers. According to the survey, pupils are also less likely to condone smoking by someone of their age than in 2003. In 2014, 26% thought that it was acceptable to try smoking to see what it was like, compared with 48% in 2003. Similar trends were apparent in terms of young people drinking: in 2014, 38% of 11 to 15 year olds had tried alcohol at least once, the lowest proportion since the survey began in 1982.

While drug use continues to decline, it appears that the rate of decline seen over the last decade is slowing. The report states that “the prevalence of drug use among 11 to 15 year olds in England declined between 2001 and 2010. Since then the decline has slowed.”

These trends are positive, but are no cause for complacency. Overall, 46% of pupils aged between 11 and 15 said that they had tried smoking, drunk alcohol or taken drugs at least once in their lives. 14% had done one or more of these recently. If the survey results were extrapolated for all children and young people in England, it would mean that 90,000 pupils aged between 11 and 15 were regular smokers, approximately 240,000 had drunk alcohol in the past week and 310,000 had taken drugs in the last year.

Young People into 2015: The Health Related Behaviour Questionnaire results for 78,451 young people between the ages of 10 and 15 (School Health Education Unit, 2015)

The School Health Education Unit (SHEU) *Young People in 2015* report backs many of the HSCIC findings in relation to reduced smoking, drinking and drug use, it suggests worrying trends in relation to children and young people's emotional health, particularly for young women. The report's authors, citing previous SHEU surveys, note that:

“In 2005 ... we thought that, while different worries came and went, young people's self-esteem was holding up well and even increasing. We suspect that this is no longer the case: the data shows a peak in the percentage of Year 10 females in the highest bracket of self-esteem scores in 2007, but the figures in that group have since declined.”

The report's authors offer some clues as to the potential causes of this trend, stating:

“We found . . . some links between use of social media ('talking and messaging online') and both risky behaviour and poorer emotional well-being. There is a very plain association between heavy social media use and poor emotional wellbeing. But the statistics don't tell us anything about cause and effect – for example, it could be that youngsters who are feeling down then spend more time online, maybe to feel better.”

The report does suggest, however, that many young people have been distressed by things they have seen online. 22% of year 6 males and 23% of year 6 females (aged 10 and 11) reported having seen pictures, videos or games

online which were meant for adults only; that figure increases to 57% of Year 10 males and 37% of Year 10 females.

Young women seem to be particularly distressed by what they've seen: 31% of Year 10 females have seen pictures, videos or games online which have upset them, 37% of Year 10 females reported receiving a message via mobile or social media which scared or upset them, while 28% said someone had posted something online about them in order to upset them. 23% said they regretted sending personal information or images to another person.

Other mental health related challenges seem more evident for young women too. According to the survey, only 45% of Year 10 girls say they get enough sleep for their health, while the proportion of female Year 10 pupils who say they worry a lot is over 90%. 64% of young women in year 10, 51% in Year 8 and 31% in Year 6 say they would like to lose weight.

The Children's Society: The Good Childhood Report 2015

Challenges relating to children and young people's emotional wellbeing are also apparent in the recent The Children's Society's [Good Childhood Report](#), based on surveys of 8,000 school pupils in England. According to the research, English children and young people are some of the least happy when compared to those from 15 other countries, particularly in relation to their self-confidence, appearance and their time at school.

Concerns about emotional wellbeing were much higher than about physical health, and were especially apparent for secondary school age girls who are particularly likely to feel negative about their appearance and experience low self-confidence. The report suggests that 17% of young women have negative feelings about their appearance, almost twice the proportion of young men. The report also raises concerns about bullying: 38% of those surveyed reported having been hit and 49% reporting feeling left out in the month leading up to the survey. A significant number also reported feeling anxious about the future, another worrying trend.

Children and young people's risk behaviours: discussion paper (Cabinet Office, 2015)

This report, from the Cabinet Office's Horizon Scanning Unit and a group of academics, practitioners, policy makers and young people, analyses emerging trends in the attitudes and risk behaviours of today's young people. Like the HSCIC and SHEU surveys it suggests a decline in risky behaviours such as drinking, drug use and smoking during the last decade, as well as crime and early pregnancy amongst children and young people. It does however note that while such behaviours do seem to be in general decline – this may mask different trends among certain groups, particularly the most vulnerable. They note, for example, that:

“Whilst the numbers of children and young people who drink has declined, among 15 year olds who report drinking weekly, 83% of boys and 57% of girls reported being drunk more than 10 times during the last 30 days. Similarly, whilst the numbers of first time entrants to the Youth Justice System has declined dramatically in the last 10 years, those in the Youth Justice System are now more likely to re-offend.”

The report also mirrors the findings of the SHEU and Children's Society reports about emerging risks for children and young people, noting potential increases in isolation and anxiety:

“It is possible that self-harm is on the rise. It is particularly an area of concern for teenage girls; around one third of 15 year old girls report having self-harmed. Figures for eating disorders and body image issues suggest that these are also significant problems, and are likely to be associated with poor mental health. Physical exercise may also be in decline amongst teenagers [and] chronic lack of sleep may also be an issue for many adolescents and could be associated with mental health problems.”

The report's authors discuss the role of new technology as one factor affecting the wellbeing of young people, making specific reference to social media use, online gaming, websites promoting self-harm and anorexia and exposure to adult material such as pornography. They note the many positive impacts of life online, but that, *“for a small minority of young people who use technology extensively, there could be a range of negative impacts [and] for some children and young people internet usage approaches levels where it could be classified as an addiction”*

The authors do note that there is as of yet little evidence of a causal relationship between new technologies and wellbeing and it is in many cases too early to tell what the long-term impacts of new technology use might be.

Conclusion

More information on national trends relating to children and young people's health, wellbeing and risk-taking behaviours will be published later in the year, including Hertfordshire University's forthcoming 4th National Report of the Health Behaviour in School-Aged Children survey, but the evidence cited above seems to confirm what PSHE Association members consistently tell us: that young people's emotional health, and the linked issues of self-esteem, body image and their safety, their relationships both online and offline, and their anxieties about the future are some of the most pressing challenges we have to face both in PSHE education specifically and as a society. These areas will continue to be priorities for the PSHE Association and we will continue to monitor emerging trends in the health, wellbeing and risk-taking behaviours of children and young people growing up across the country. We hope that this synthesis of the evidence will prove useful to PSHE teachers and leads working nationally, although we would always advise that a school's PSHE curriculum is tailored to the needs of local pupils using local data.