

The Home Experience

A mounting body of evidence indicates a strong relationship between the way parents interact with their children and their children's social and physical health (Morrison et al., 1994). Adolescence is often a period of uncertainty when youth are expected to become more responsible and more autonomous in their lifestyle as they prepare for adulthood, but this does not necessarily lead to estrangement from parents. The vast majority of adolescents still tend to respect their parents, feel part of the family and share many of the same values as their parents. However, in some families parent-child conflict does increase during adolescence, and is exacerbated by marriage strains and parent substance abuse (deGoede and Spruijt, 1996).

Parenting style appears to be related to adolescent risk behaviour. When parents take a more democratic approach to expectations and relationships and provide emotional support, healthy adolescent development is encouraged (Congress of the U.S., 1991). Clearly stated expectations and reasonable rules regarding behaviour are considered to be the fundamental components of effective parenting. When parents are indifferent, exhibit inappropriate role modelling, or are inconsistent in setting standards of behaviour for their children, there is a much greater likelihood of problem behaviour and psychological problems (Dougherty, 1993). Adolescents who do not feel close to their parents or who are living in single-parent families are more likely to suffer from problems with self-esteem, depression and engage in risk behaviours such as smoking and drug use (Resnick et al., 1998). It is difficult to provide youth with models of satisfying adult relationships, meaningful work experiences and good marriages when tensions at home make parent-child relationships stressful.

Figure 3.1

Family structure, all grades and male/female combined (%)

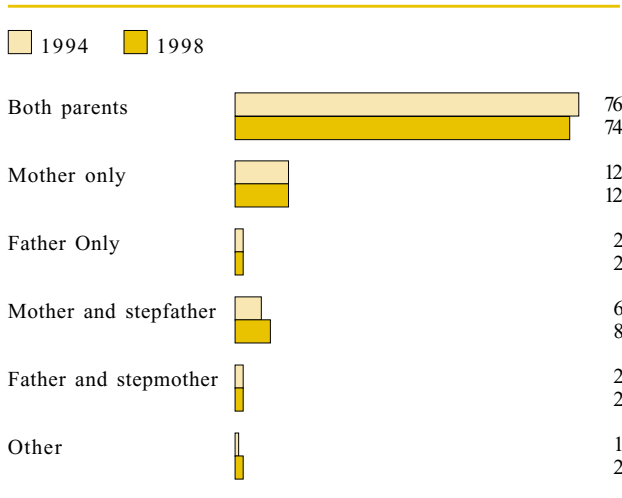
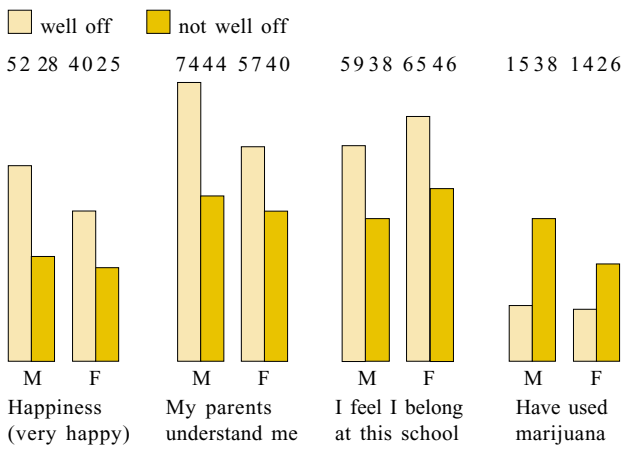


Figure 3.2

Responses of Grade 8 students to selected items by whether they believe their family is or is not well off, 1998 (%)



The findings presented in this chapter are designed to examine trends in family structure and parent relationships with their children, and to illustrate the importance of positive family relationships to the health of youth.

Family Structure and Socioeconomic Status

Over the past thirty years, significant social changes have dramatically affected family life in Canada. Greater reproductive freedom and changes in the workplace have increased women’s opportunities and, simultaneously, the complexity of family life.

Figure 3.1 illustrates that family structure has changed very little over the past four years. A small reduction in the number of young people living with both natural parents between the 1994 and 1998 surveys is associated with slight increases in all the other categories except “living with father and stepmother”. Nevertheless, it must be noted that nearly three-quarters of our sample of students did live with both natural parents. In the following discussion of students’ relationship with parents, it must be remembered that the respondents are not all talking about the same family structure.

The study was not designed to determine directly the impact of poverty on the health of youth; however, it was possible to consider the relationships between the respondents’ answers to the question “How well off do you think your family is?” and the measures of health and social adjustment. Some low to moderate correlations were found. Figure 3.2 illustrates some of these relationships by comparing the responses of those who said they were “well off” or “very well off” with those who said they were “not well off” on four factors. Those who indicated that their families were not well off were less likely to feel “very happy”, agree that their parents understood them and feel they belonged at school and they were more likely to have used marijuana.

Parent Relationships and Health

A scale designed to incorporate the key elements in parents' relationships with their children was developed. The scale scores are used to examine the association between parent-child relationships and other variables: each of the items that makes up the scale is discussed in the next few pages. Figure 3.3 illustrates the strong relationship between the nature of the relationship between parents and their children and the majority of other health-related variables. Those who have good relationships with their parents are also more likely to be well-adjusted at school, to feel healthy, to have high self-esteem, and to avoid health-risk behaviours.

Communication with Parents

Parents are the most significant source of social support through the early years of adolescence. There are important regulatory effects on biological and psychological health related to the quality of communication and degree of understanding of adolescent issues maintained by parents. Figure 3.4 deals with the students' ease with talking to their father about things that really bother them, and clearly illustrates the steady decline on this measure from Grade 6 to 10. Of particular concern is the relatively low proportion of girls who find it easy to talk to their father. This is particularly important because girls tend to value their father's views highly and need their support through the stressful adolescent period (Shulman and Seiffige-Krenke, 1997). Furthermore, serious psychosocial problems appear to be associated with poor communication with the father for both boys and girls. There was little change over the three surveys on this measure for the Grades 8 and 10 respondents, but on the positive side there were increases for both boys and girls at the Grade 6 level.

Figure 3.3

Factors associated with students' relationships with their parents



Figure 3.4

Students who found it “easy” or “very easy” to talk to their father about things that really bother them (%)

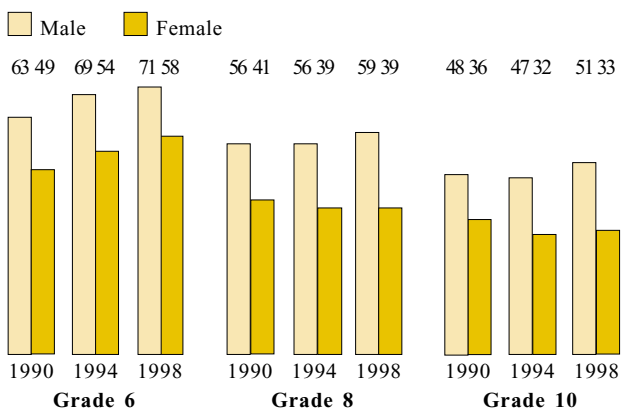


Figure 3.5

Students who found it “easy” or “very easy” to talk to their mother about things that really bother them (%)

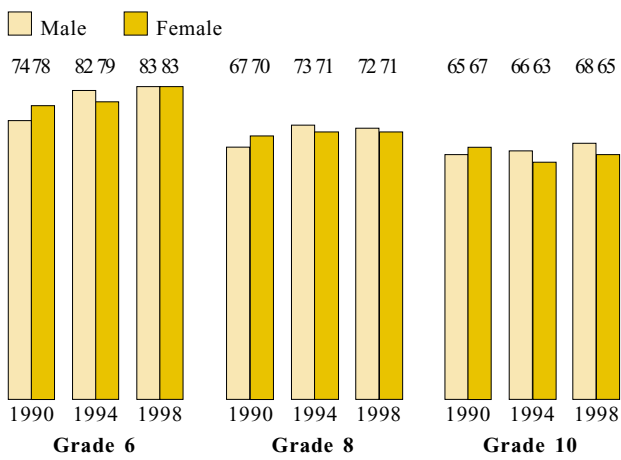
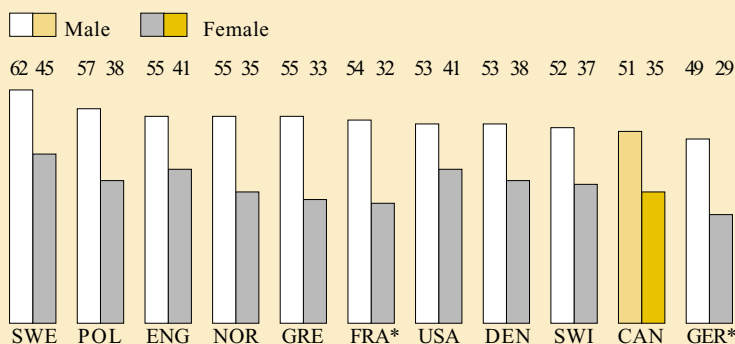


Figure 3.5 presents the students’ responses to the question “Do you find it ‘easy’ or ‘very easy’ to talk to your mother about things that really bother you”. In general, the respondents found it easier to talk to their mother than to their father. There was a drop between Grade 6 and Grade 10 in the proportion who found it easy to talk to their mother about things that really bother them, from over four-fifths to about two-thirds of the respondents. Unlike the question related to the father, there were very small gender differences. It is clear that in Canada mothers are seen by their children as more approachable than fathers and very likely play a more substantial role in helping them with their problems.

Figure 3.6

Fifteen year olds who found it “easy” or “very easy” to talk to their father about things that really bother them by country, 1998 (%)



*France and Germany are represented by regions: see Chapter 1 for details.

The father is an important role model for young people and there is a strong relationship between the extent that fathers interact with their children and their children’s social adjustment. Swedish youth had more success engaging their fathers regarding problem issues and German youth less success. Canada was no exception to the general pattern of poor communication between fathers and their daughters.

Parent-Child Relationships

Although a general view of parents' relationships with their children has been presented, it is useful to examine student responses to specific aspects of the parent-student relationship scale such as trust, understanding and expectations.

Figure 3.7 indicates the proportion of students who agreed with the statement "My parents understand me". By the time they are in Grade 10 almost half the respondents thought that their parents did not understand them. Perhaps surprisingly, more boys than girls in all three surveys and all three grade groups indicated that their parents understood them. The decline with age is perhaps consistent with youth seeking more autonomy and their feeling that their parents do not fully understand this transition. There was little change over the three surveys except for slightly more positive responses from Grade 6 respondents during focus-group interview sessions, in the later surveys.

During design of the questionnaire, survey items are tested with students in focus groups to determine how they understand the questions. In responding to the question on parents trusting them, students in the focus group interpreted trust to mean responsibility in completing tasks, handling money, and parental acceptance of their general behaviour. Figure 3.8 suggests that the vast majority of Canadian youth view their parents as trusting them. Gender differences tend to favour boys except for 11 year olds in the first survey, and there was little change over the three surveys. The general level of respondents' views of their parents' trust in them dropped 10 percent for boys and 12 percent for girls between Grades 6 and 10, although for both genders the main decrease occurred at Grade 8.

Figure 3.7

Students who felt their parents understand them (%)

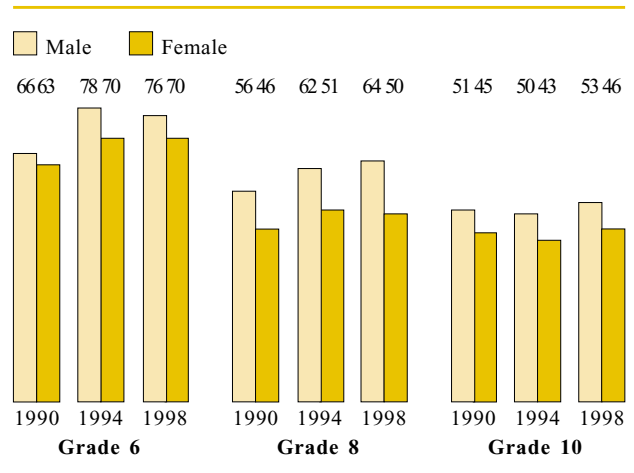


Figure 3.8

Students who felt their parents trust them (%)

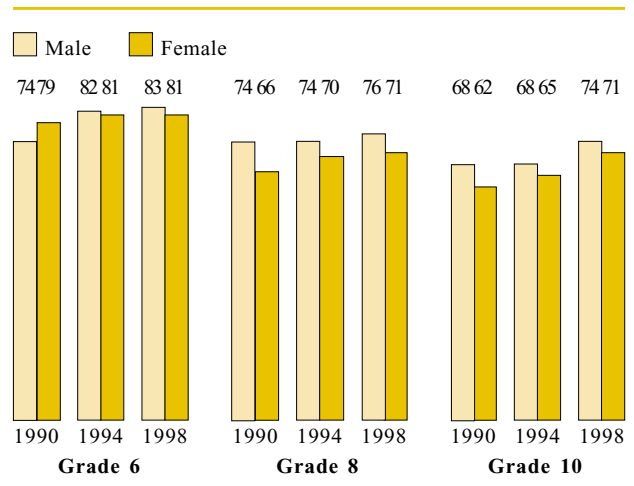
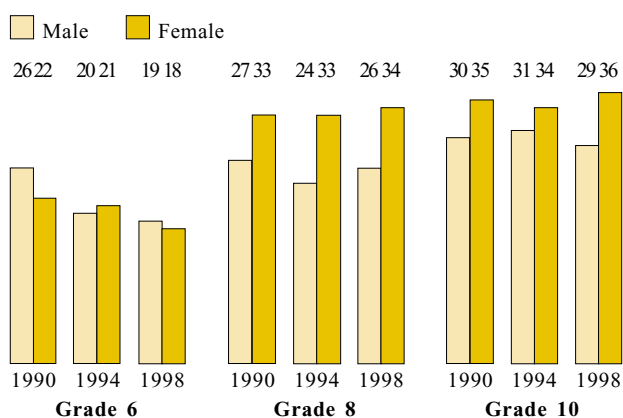
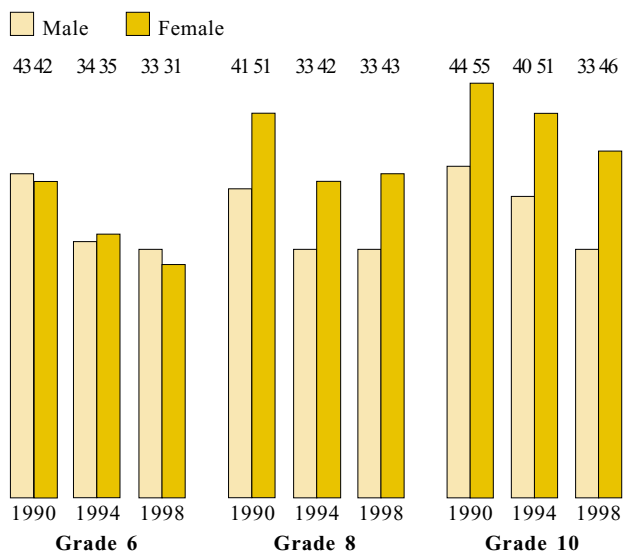


Figure 3.9

Students who felt they had a lot of arguments with their parents (%)

**Figure 3.10**

Students who indicated there were times they would like to leave home (%)



Conflict with parents tends to result in a disengagement from the home and a greater likelihood for young people to become involved in health-risk behaviour. One aspect of parent-child conflict concerns the extent to which there are arguments between them. Figure 3.9 presents the proportion of students who agreed with the statement “I have a lot of arguments with my parents”. Nearly one-third of the Grade 8 and 10 students indicated that they had a lot of arguments with their parents with significantly more girls than boys agreeing with the statement. Gender differences were small for the Grade 6 students as were differences between Grade 8 and 10 students. Over the three surveys there was very little evidence of significant changes except for a slight decrease for the Grade 6 groups.

The respondents were asked if there were times when they would like to leave home and their answers are summarized in Figure 3.10. This question lacks precision because it is difficult to know how seriously or how many times they had this feeling. Nevertheless, surprisingly large numbers of girls agreed with the statement, approaching one-half in the case of the Grade 10 girls. There were pronounced gender differences for the Grade 8 and Grade 10 respondents with significantly more girls agreeing with the statement. The steady increase in the proportion of girls who indicated that there were times when they would like to leave home was notable from Grade 6 to Grade 10 suggesting a difficult transition through puberty for some. There was no evidence of a similar pattern for boys. Over the three surveys, there was a slight decline in the proportion of respondents who agreed with this statement except for the Grade 8 respondents in the second and third surveys.

One of the great challenges for parents is to establish realistic expectations for their children particularly with regard to school achievement and effort. It is not surprising that most parents want their children to be successful as measured by marks and, ultimately, attendance at university. Of course, this level of attainment is not realistic for all children, and yet, many parents, through either word or deed, establish an atmosphere of unrealistically high expectations that can lead to stress and even conflict. There was a steady increase in the proportion of respondents who felt their parents expected too much of them as they progressed through the grades. Approximately one-third of the respondents from Grades 8 and 10 felt their parents expected too much of them (Figure 3.11). Numbers were lower for the Grade 6 respondents and declined slightly over the three surveys. Gender differences were small, which suggests that parents hold equally high expectations for their male and female children.

Figure 3.11

Students who felt their parents expect too much of them (%)

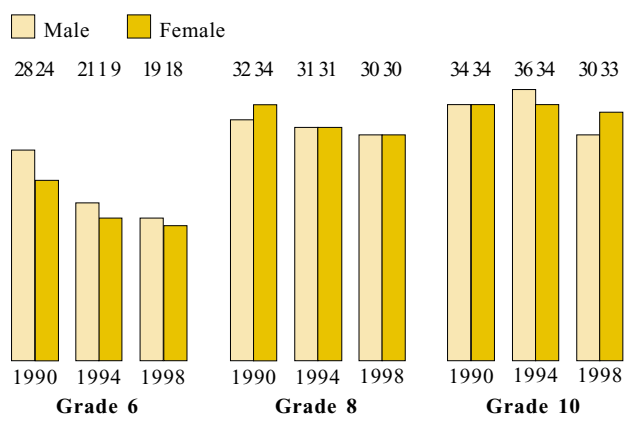
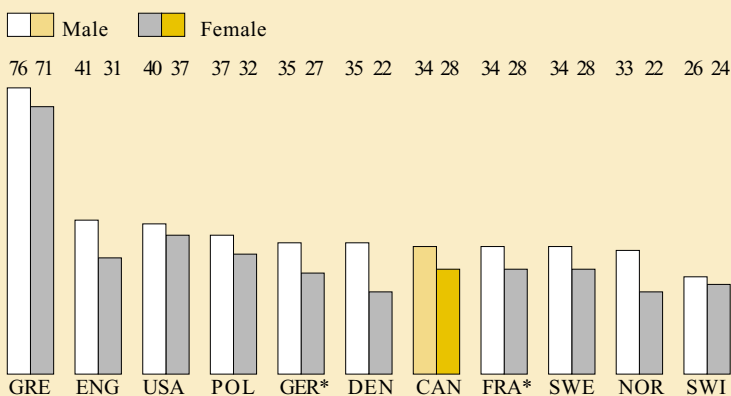


Figure 3.12

Thirteen year olds who felt their parents expect too much of them at school by country, 1998 (%)

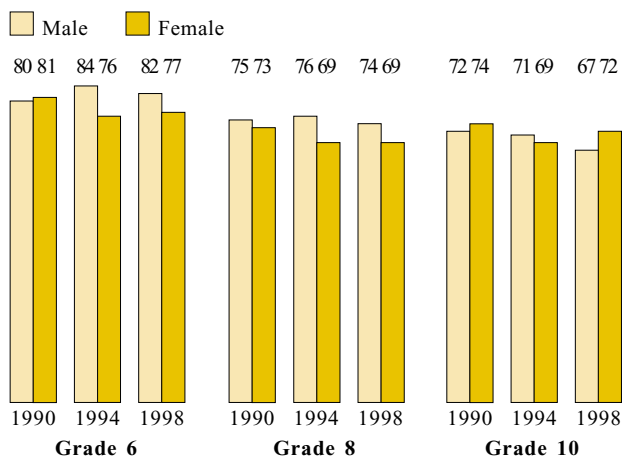


*France and Germany are represented by regions: see Chapter 1 for details.

Parent expectations of students' school performance were particularly high in Greece. Differences across the other countries were not substantial. In all the countries, proportionately more boys than girls felt that their parents expected too much of them at school.

Figure 3.13

Students who felt what their parents think of them is important (%)



A review of relevant research revealed that the vast majority of youth continued to value their parents' opinion of them as they proceeded through adolescence. Findings from this study are consistent with this research. Even though there was a slight decline across the three age groups, the vast majority of our respondents indicated they valued their parents' opinion of them (Figure 3.13). This is true in spite of stress and conflict evident in their responses to the questions discussed here. Gender differences were relatively small. In previous analyses of HBSC findings it was noted that Canadian youth tended to find it more difficult to talk to their parents than did youth from most European countries. It was also noted that young people who find it easy to talk to their parents are less likely to have emotional problems. It is extremely important for their general health that adolescents have free and easy communication with their parents about all issues related to their lives.

Summary

There have been major shifts in the structure of the family over the last few years. Increasing numbers of young people do not live with both their biological parents. However, three-quarters of our sample did live with both natural parents.

Parents' relationships with their children appeared to decline as the respondents grew older, particularly in the areas of trust and expectations. The number of young people in Grade 10 who indicated there were times they would like to leave home approached nearly one-half for girls and one-third for boys. Although the children valued highly what their parents think of them, in many cases relationships were strained. This was especially true with regard to parent expectations of school performance where nearly one-third of the respondents indicated that expectations were too high.

The proportion of children who communicated with their fathers about their problems decreased sharply from Grade 6 to Grade 10, especially for girls. Young people found it much easier to talk to their mother. It would appear that fathers are highly valued by their children and, by spending more time and communicating more effectively with them, can play a much more important role in their life than they now do. Canadian parents appear to be slightly more distanced from their children than is the case in a number of European countries.