

Peer Relationships

Young people value involvement with a group of friends who share common values. Those young people who are not well integrated socially are far more likely to manifest physical and mental health problems (Page et al., 1994). The HBSC survey is designed to cover the critical developmental period when young people begin to seek greater independence, explore their sexuality, plan for their future and give increasing importance to friendship groups. During this extended period of adolescence they find themselves in limbo, perched precariously between childhood and the expectations of adulthood. It is a time of life when the need to have friends may become more important than the activities they engage in with their friends. Young people who see themselves as outsiders, not accepted by their peers, are more likely to withdraw, become depressed and be easy targets for bullying. A core of strong friendships can provide a protective framework from the pressures of the outside world (Rook, 1987).

Peers are a major source of health information for adolescents, especially information related to health-risk behaviours and sexuality (Millstein, 1995). More than just a source of information, peers are also interpreters: in this role they may “explain” smoking and drug use in acceptable ways that effectively legitimate the behaviours. It is a difficult challenge for health educators to penetrate peer groups with programs to reduce health-risk behaviour.

In this chapter, the nature of adolescent friendships, the time adolescents spend in each others’ company and the activities that they share are examined. The implications of associating with groups of friends who are involved with health-risk behaviours are also considered. In order to examine the relationship between students’ behaviour and attitudes and those of their friends, a series of items were added to the 1998 Canadian survey introduced by the phrase “Most of my friends....” followed by completion phrases such as “take drugs” and “smoke cigarettes”.

Figure 4.1

Factors associated with social integration

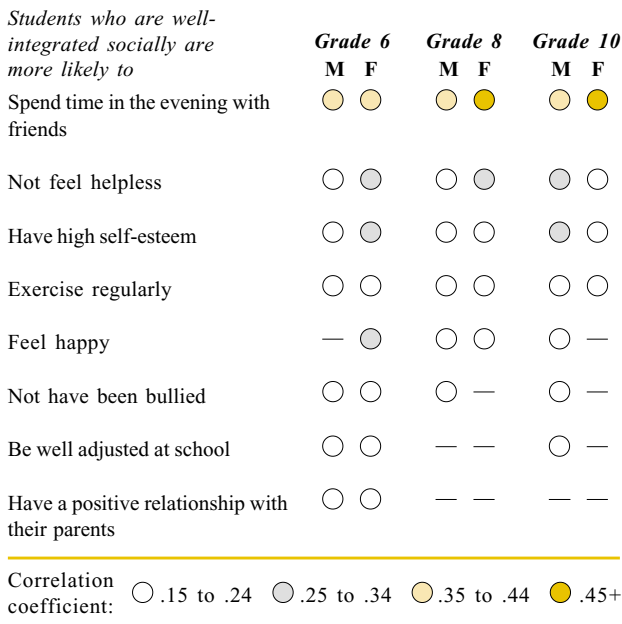
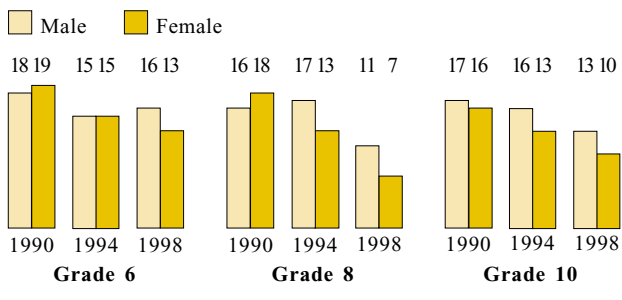


Figure 4.2

Students who had fewer than two close friends (%)



Social Integration

Social integration refers to the extent to which young people have friends with whom they can comfortably talk about important issues. A social integration scale incorporating five items was developed in order to determine the factors associated with positive peer relationships (see Figure 4.1). The scale incorporated the following concepts: number of close friends, time spent with friends, same sex communication, opposite sex communication and ease of making friends.

The moderate to strong correlations indicate that social integration is a fundamental component of good health and happiness. Those with high scores on the scale are less likely to feel depressed, helpless, or be vulnerable to bullying. They are more likely to have high self-esteem and enjoy school.

It must be remembered that social integration is a two-sided coin. While it is valuable in itself to have friends to provide support and acceptance, some friends spend a great deal of time with each other in the evenings, their friendship reinforced by a general dissatisfaction with school and involvement with health-risk behaviours such as smoking, alcohol and drug use.

Close Friends

Figure 4.2 presents the percentages of students who indicated they had fewer than two close friends. Gender differences were relatively small on this measure and there was a slight decline over the three surveys in the proportion of respondents who indicated this response.

About three-quarters stated they had two or more close friends, with Grade 10 girls slightly more likely than Grade 10 boys to have close friends. The Grade 9 figures dip slightly suggesting that students making the transition from one school to another for Grade 9 may have difficulty establishing relationships with fellow students.

The pattern in the figure presenting the percentages of students who said they found it difficult to make new friends is quite similar to that in the figure showing those who had fewer than two friends (see Figure 4.3). For these students the transition to a new school can be particularly difficult. Students in Grades 8 and 10 found it easier to make new friends than those in Grade 6. There was little change over the three surveys on this indicator.

Rejection by other students can adversely affect the health of youth. This is especially true when it is accompanied by bullying behaviour (Farrington, 1993). Figure 4.4 indicates the percentages of students in the 1994 and 1998 surveys who indicated that once a week or more other students did not want to spend time with them and they ended up being alone. The proportions are quite low, especially for Grade 10 students. Grades 8 and 10 girls were the least likely to feel this way. These figures are lower than those obtained on the loneliness question suggesting that “being lonely” does not necessarily involve being rejected by peers.

Figure 4.3

Students who found it “difficult” or “very difficult” to make new friends (%)

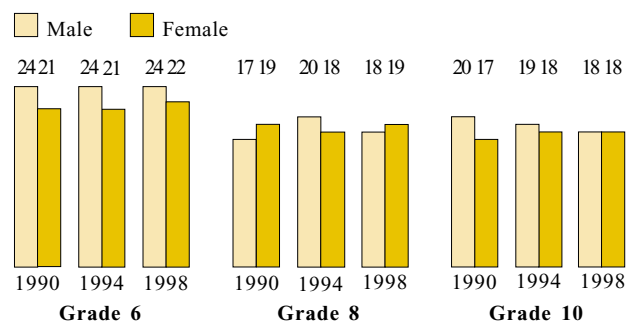


Figure 4.4

Students who indicated other students did not want to spend time with them and they ended up being alone once a week or more in the last term (%)

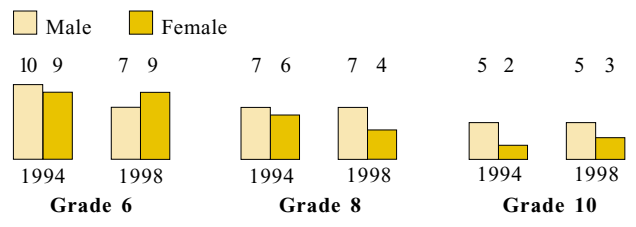
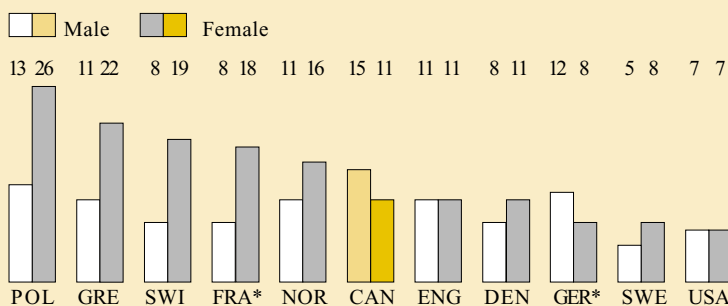


Figure 4.5

Eleven year olds who had fewer than two close friends by country, 1998 (%)



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

Girls were far more likely to have fewer than two friends in Poland, Greece, Switzerland and France. To a lesser extent the reverse is true in Canada and Germany. There must be fundamental cultural differences in how this younger group of female respondents relate to each other that explain such pronounced differences.

Figure 4.6

Students who found it “easy” or “very easy” to talk to same-sex friends about things that really bother them (%)

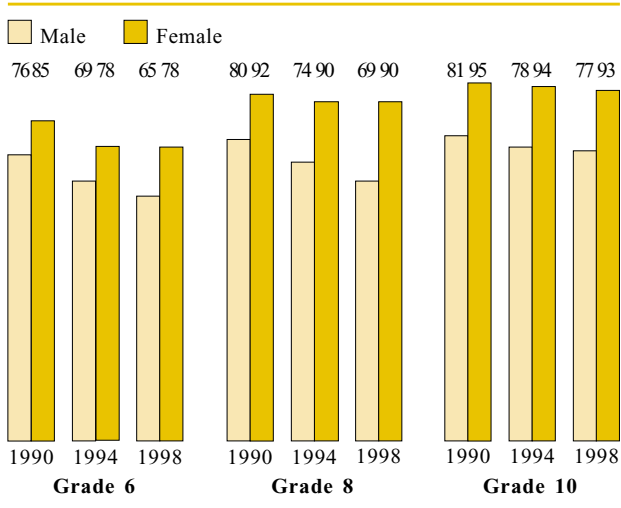
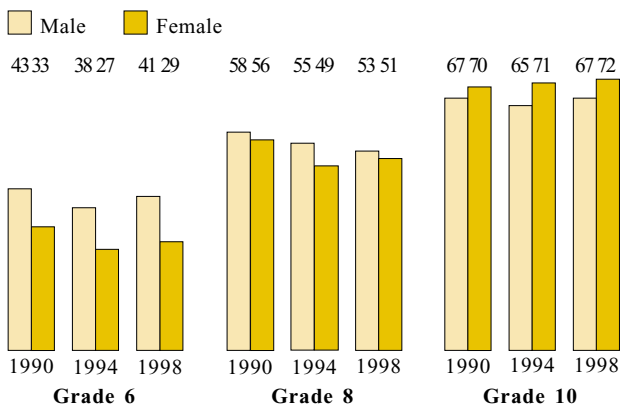


Figure 4.7

Students who found it “easy” or “very easy” to talk to opposite-sex friends about things that really bother them (%)



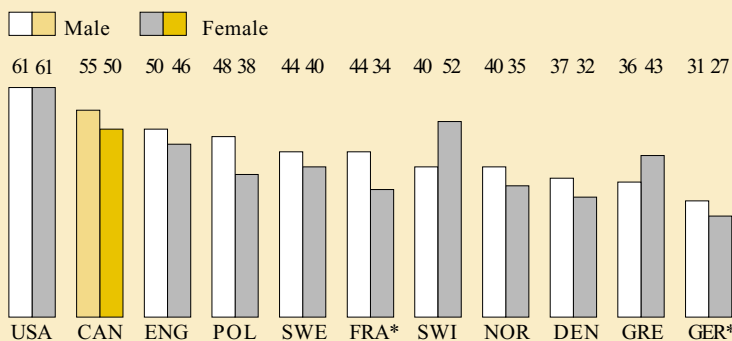
Communicating with Peers

One of the most important aspects of becoming socially integrated is the capacity to communicate with peers. The vast majority of respondents found it relatively easy to talk to same-sex friends about things that really bother them (see Figure 4.6). The older students were more likely to find it easy to talk to same-sex friends. However, over the three surveys and for both sexes there was a slight decline in positive responses on this item. Gender differences were significant with substantially more girls at all ages finding it easier to talk to same-sex friends.

It is clear that as young people move through early adolescence to the middle years of adolescence, their comfort level in talking to opposite-sex friends about things that bother them increases (see Figure 4.7). This pattern corresponds to the strengthening of ties that occurs in peer groups. Of the Grade 6 respondents, boys were far more likely than girls to find it easier to talk to opposite-sex friends, but by Grade 10 girls were slightly more likely to find communication with opposite-sex friends relatively easy. There was little change over the three surveys.

Figure 4.8

Thirteen year olds who found it “easy” or “very easy” to talk to opposite-sex friends by country, 1998 (%)



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

Generally speaking, North American youth found it easier to talk to opposite-sex friends than their European counterparts. Interestingly, in countries, such as Denmark, Norway and Germany, where schools make a real effort to develop social skills, the proportions are lower.

Time Spent with Friends

In order for students to develop social skills and maintain friendships they must have opportunities to interact. These opportunities should occur in settings where positive health behaviours and attitudes can be reinforced. During and shortly after the school day is an optimum time for friendships to develop and evolve. Spending time with friends can involve healthy activities such as playing games, listening to music, skateboarding and working on homework, but it can also involve social and health-risk behaviours such as smoking, drinking and using drugs.

Figure 4.9 summarizes the factors associated with the number of evenings students spend with their friends. Ironically, those who spend a great deal of time with their friends in the evening are more likely to be well integrated socially, but at the same time, to manifest health-risk behaviours, such as smoking and marijuana use. They are also more likely to have friends who smoke, drink and take drugs. It is important to note that those students who spend a lot of time in the evenings with their friends are more likely to be dissatisfied with their school experience and to skip classes.

Figure 4.10 indicates that boys are more likely than girls to spend a great deal of time right after school with their friends. This is in part related to the tendency for parents to be more protective of girls and partly related to the fact that girls spend more time on homework than boys (King and Peart, 1994). There was a decline in the proportion of respondents over the two surveys who indicated that for four or five days per week they spent time with friends right after school.

Figure 4.9

Factors associated with spending time in the evening with friends

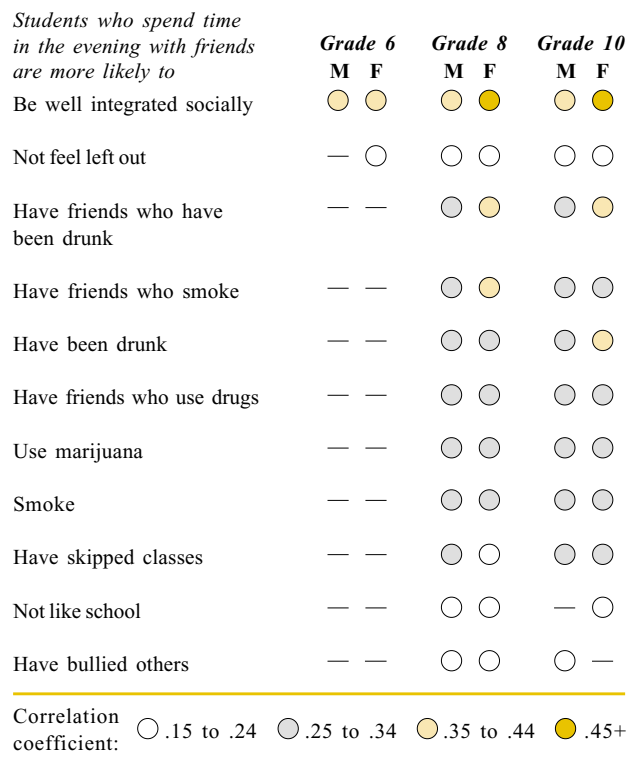
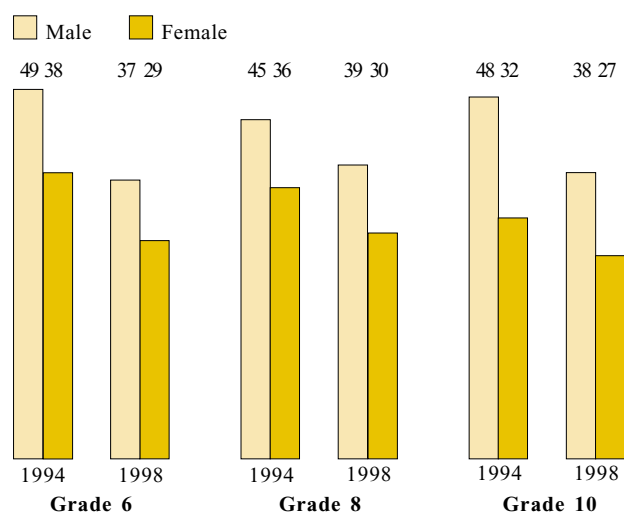


Figure 4.10

Students who spent time with friends right after school four or five days a week (%)



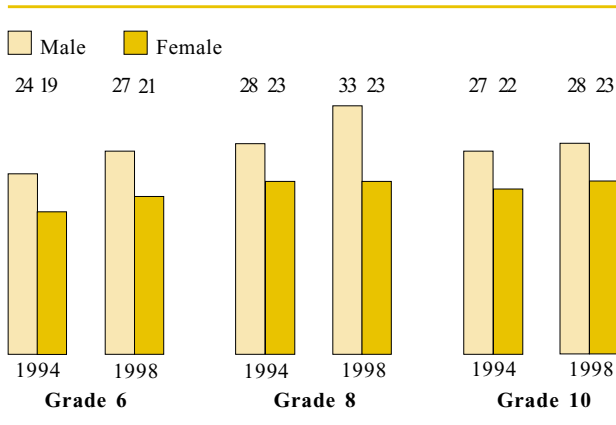
About one-quarter of our respondents indicated that they spend five or more evenings a week with their friends (see Figure 4.11). Although much of this activity involves organized teams and clubs, a great deal of it is unsupervised by adults. Boys were more likely than girls at all grade levels to spend five or more evenings per week out with friends, and there are relatively small differences between the Grade 6

and Grade 10 students. It is during time spent “hanging around” that health-risk behaviours tend to occur. Guiding their children’s free time is an important role for parents. This time can be well spent doing homework and interest activities. For example, music is an important part of adolescent lifestyle, and opportunities to listen or to play music should be made available.

Friends and Health-Risk Behaviours

Figure 4.11

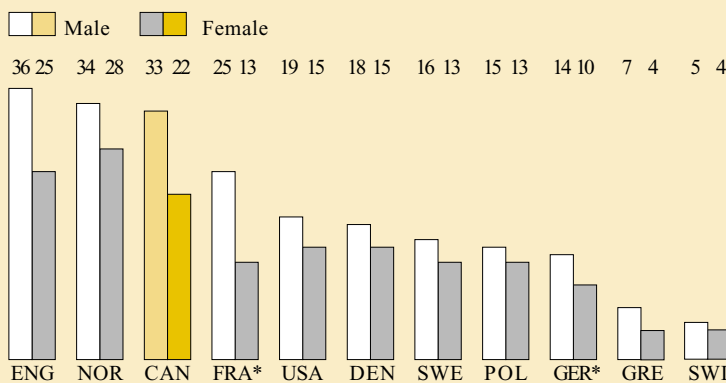
Students who spent five or more evenings a week out with friends (%)



If a student indicates that most of his or her friends smoke cigarettes or take drugs is he or she also likely to fall into that category? We asked a series of questions about friends’ behaviours and attitudes to shed some light on this issue. When smoking behaviour was correlated with perceptions of friends’ smoking behaviour it was found that 85 percent who said that most of their friends smoke also smoked themselves and 88 percent of those who said most or all of their friends take drugs also took drugs. However, only 58 percent who said all or most of their friends had been drunk had themselves consumed alcohol to excess.

Figure 4.12

Thirteen year olds who spent five or more evenings a week out with friends by country, 1998 (%)



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

There are substantial differences from country to country on this measure. Spending time in the evening with friends is a more common practice among young people in England, Norway and Canada than in most of the other countries. Surprisingly, there are significant differences between Canada and the United States and between the neighbouring countries of Norway and Sweden.

When Figure 4.13 is compared with the findings on smoking patterns in Chapter 10 it can be seen that about the same proportion of respondents indicated that most of their friends smoke as are smokers themselves. Figure 4.14 illustrates essentially the same relationship between having been drunk and perceptions of friends who had been drunk.

Perhaps more important is the evidence that some students spend time in groups where most or all are involved in health risks. Relatively few students engage in health-risk behaviours when they are not associated with a group of health-risk takers. Health-risk behaviours do appear to take place with friends in settings without adult supervision.

Figure 4.13

Students who indicated most or all of their friends smoke, 1998 (%)

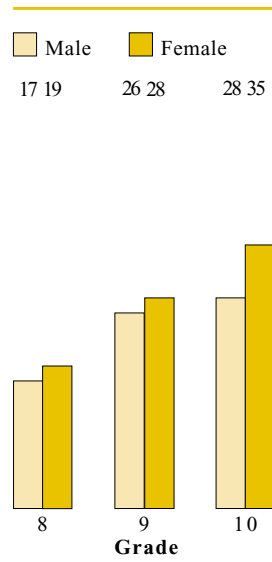
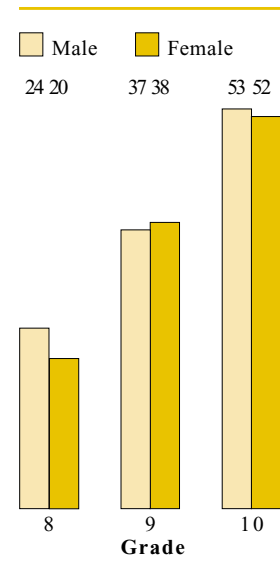


Figure 4.14

Students who indicated most or all of their friends have been drunk, 1998 (%)



Summary

Young people value highly having a group of friends in whom they can confide. When they have such friends they are more likely to have confidence, feel good about school, get along with their parents and, in general, feel healthy. When they do not they are vulnerable to bullying, depression and general unhappiness. The vast proportion of young people had two or more friends, but those who did not were more likely to have not only social adjustment problems, but also mental health problems, and in particular, depression. Most of the respondents found it easy to talk to their same-sex friends and the number who found it was easy to talk to friends of the opposite sex increased gradually from grade to grade.

Time spent with friends in the evenings was found to be associated with involvement in health-risk behaviours such as smoking, alcohol abuse and drug use. It was clear that there were groups of young people who not only shared friendship, but also shared health-risk behaviours. Perceptions of friends' risk behaviours, such as smoking and drug use, were found to be useful indicators of the respondents' risk behaviours.