

Coping with Life

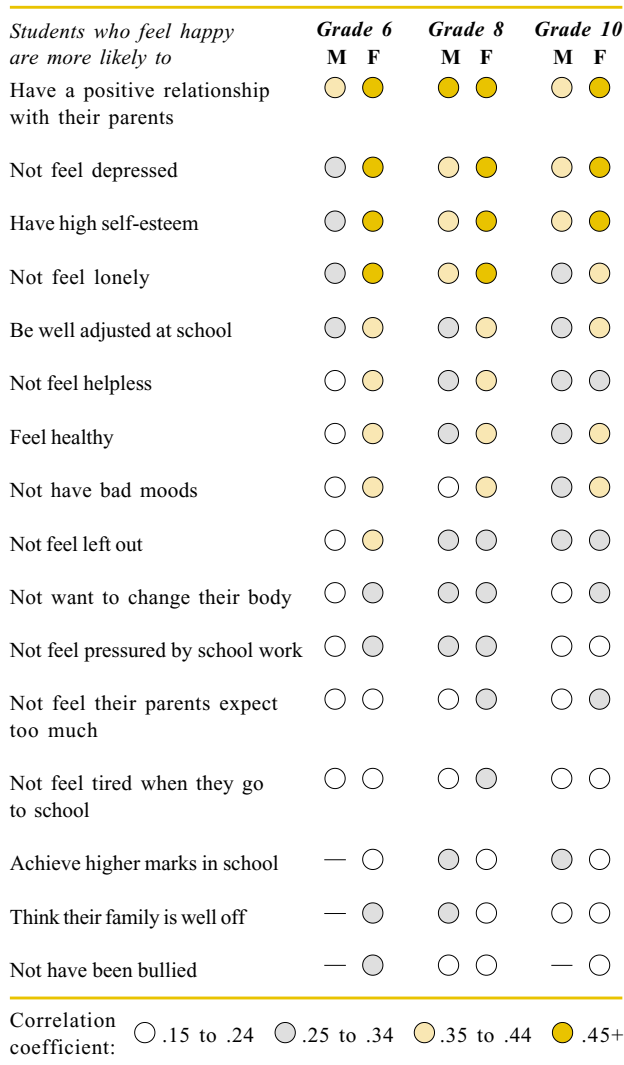
During adolescence, young people disengage from their parents' care and assume more independence. In the process, they develop new methods of coping with life. In this chapter, some responses to survey items that indicate how young people cope with the physical and emotional demands of living more independently are examined. The items discussed are designed to assess students' emotional health, their body image and their sleeping patterns.

It can be argued that the mental health of our youth is as important as their physical health. In fact, the two are strongly related in that those who suffer from emotional problems are also more likely to manifest both physical and mental health problems. Mental health can be viewed as the capacity to interact in ways that promote subjective well-being, the use of mental abilities and the achievement of personal goals (Health and Welfare Canada, 1988). To measure the broad concept of emotional health, information is presented on the general happiness of youth, self-esteem and its related elements, and mental health problems indicated by depression, loneliness and sleeping difficulties. For this analysis, items about self-esteem, valuing or taking pride in oneself were combined with those designed to reveal dimensions of respondents' self-concept. The self-concept of adolescents—how they describe their abilities, personality characteristics and relationships—is an important determinant of many other aspects of their life.

Body image is a key concern of adolescents as they go through significant physical and social changes. In particular, rapid growth and hormonal changes may alter youths' perceptions of their bodies. Fitting in with perceived norms of height, weight, attractiveness, and sexual development can preoccupy many students. The majority of youth who do not attain their physical ideal often rely on coping mechanisms to help accept their body image.

Figure 5.1

Factors associated with feeling happy



Sleep is a restorative process which is necessary for continued health. Sleep disturbance is associated with depression and anxiety among young people, although not to the same extent as it is among adults. Patterns of under and oversleeping may indicate, or be a mechanism to cope with, other health problems.

Health and Happiness

Respondents were asked how they felt about their life with response alternatives “very happy”, “quite happy”, “not very happy”, or “not happy at all”. The term “happiness”, for subjective well-being, was meant to incorporate a general positive attitude toward life and the absence of worry, anxiety and depression (Robinson et al., 1991). In order to understand more clearly the elements that combine to make young people feel happy, using the 1998 survey data, the items that were correlated with the measure of happiness were examined (see Figure 5.1). In general, happiness is related to young people’s relationship with their parents and their adjustment at school, but it also includes the absence of helplessness, loneliness, depression, bad moods and health-risk behaviours. Happy young people tend to have higher self-esteem, including acceptance of body image. There is a relationship between parents’ socio-economic status and the extent of youth happiness; that is to say, the better off the students think their parents are, the more likely they are to be happy.

Figure 5.2 presents the proportions of students from Grades 6 through 10 who indicated they felt “very happy” about their life. Overall, boys tend to be happier than girls and as is noted throughout the report, are less subject to other stressors. There is a sharp decline from grade to grade in the proportions of young people who feel very happy with their life except for girls in Grades 9 and 10.

Figure 5.2

Students who were “very happy” about their life, 1998 (%)

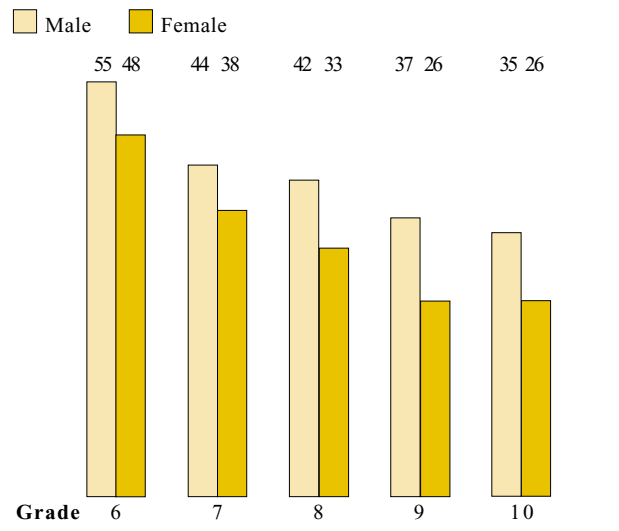
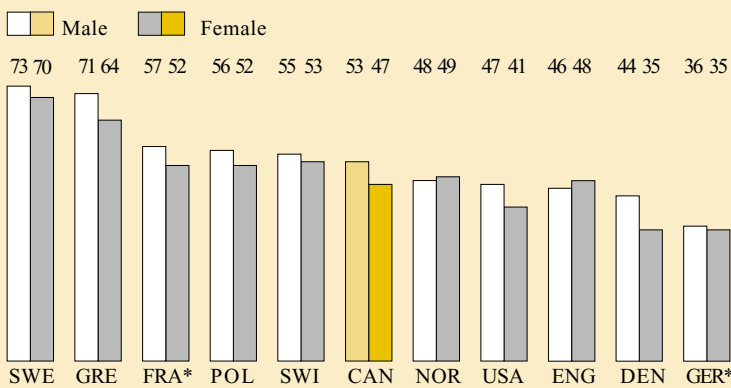


Figure 5.3

Eleven year olds who were “very happy” about their life by country, 1998 (%)



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

Canada was in the mid-range of countries on the happiness measure. Boys in most countries were slightly happier than girls. Interestingly, even though youth in Poland reported poorer health than Canadian youth they also reported being happier.

Figure 5.4

Factors associated with self-esteem

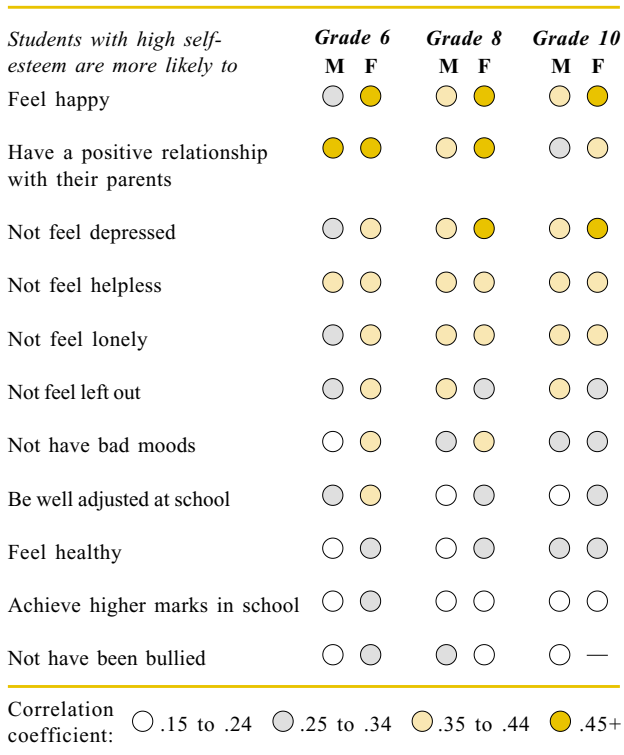
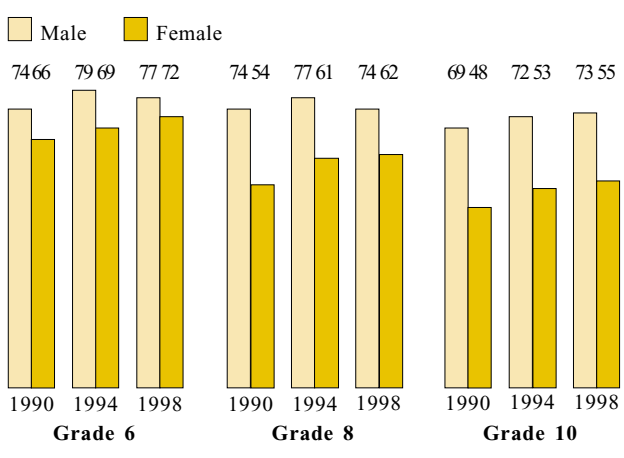


Figure 5.5

Students who had confidence in themselves (%)



Self-Esteem

A self-esteem scale developed over a series of surveys included the following items: “I like myself”, “I have trouble making decisions”, “I’m often sorry for the things I do”, “I have confidence in myself”, “I often wish I were someone else”, “I would change how I look if I could”, and “I often have a hard time saying no”. This scale has proven to be quite reliable for a scale involving a small number of items, with the reliability coefficients being somewhat higher for the Grade 8 and 10 respondents.

Figure 5.4 presents the relationship between the respondents’ self-esteem score and other items on the survey. Those students with higher scores on self-esteem were more likely to have a good relationship with their parents, to be well-adjusted and successful at school and to feel happy and healthy. They were less likely to feel helpless, depressed, lonely, left out; to have bad moods and to be bullying victims.

It must be remembered that self-esteem is typically defined as the value given to aspects of abilities and personality characteristics that young people find most positive (Harter, 1990). Often relationships with peers are given particularly high value even though the peers might be involved in high-risk health behaviours. For example, many young people who are involved with peer groups that share risky behaviours feel quite comforted and supported by such individuals and can feel quite happy.

Confidence

Young people’s confidence level has been found to be related to the extent to which they are integrated with their peers and how they feel about their appearance (Torres & Fernandez, 1995; Connolly & Konarski, 1994; Connor, 1994; Fox et al., 1994).

For girls, feelings about their appearance strongly determine their level of confidence. Confidence tends to be linked to a capacity to handle stress, to have good relationships at home and at school as well as with peers, and to feel generally happy. Figure 5.5 indicates that, as is so often the case, students' positive feelings about themselves seem to decline with age and confidence is no exception. Boys tend to be more confident than girls. Girls' confidence declines more sharply than boys from Grade 6 to Grade 10.

I like myself.

In spite of concerns about relationships and personal characteristics, the vast majority of young people say they like themselves (see Figure 5.6). This is an important finding because it indicates an essential element in emotional and psychosocial development. Over time, we integrate our self-perceptions in such a way that we accept who we are. There is no significant shift from grade to grade in the proportion of students who say they like themselves, and when this process is followed into early adulthood, it has been shown that by the time they are 20 years old nearly all young people say they like themselves (King et al., 1988).

I often wish I were someone else.

Even though young people evidently learn to accept who they are, a substantial number agreed with the statement, "I often wish I were someone else" (Figure 5.7). Far more girls than boys felt this way, but interestingly, the proportions changed little from grade to grade. For girls in particular there was a decline over the three surveys in the proportion who wished they were someone else. This may indicate a recent general increase in girls' self-esteem, regardless of other health and social indicators.

Figure 5.6

Students who liked themselves (%)

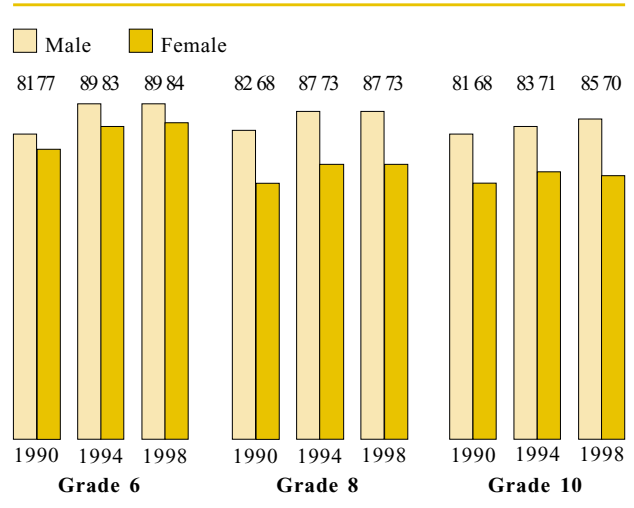


Figure 5.7

Students who often wished they were someone else (%)

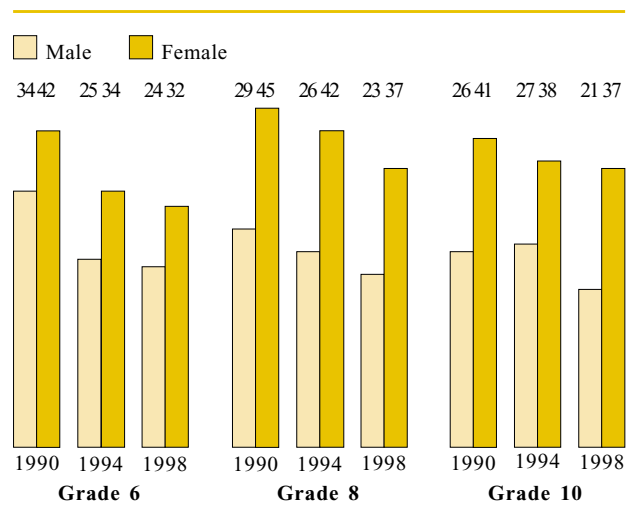


Figure 5.8

Students who had trouble making decisions (%)

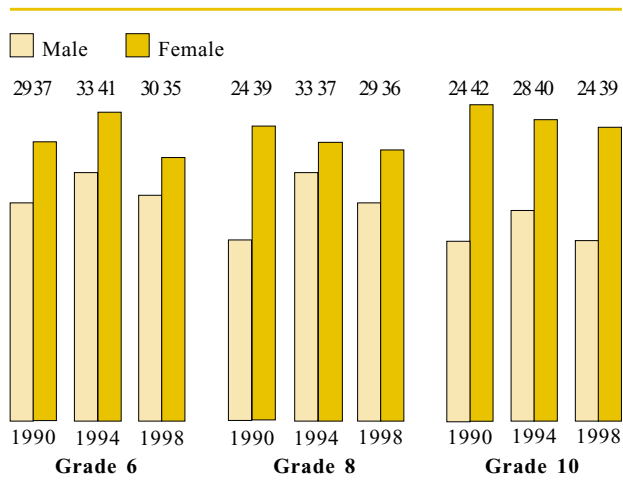
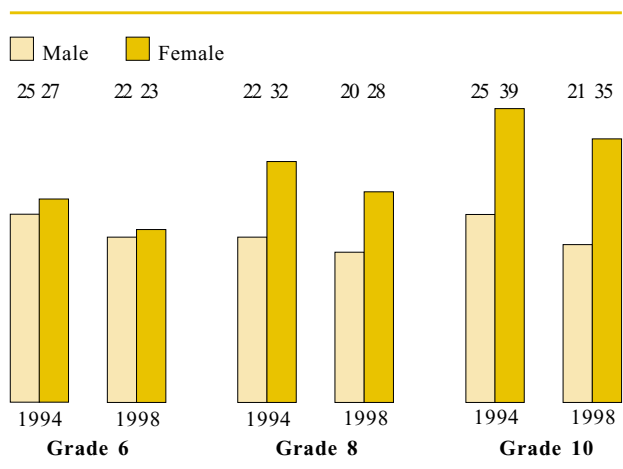


Figure 5.9

Students who felt depressed once a week or more during the last six months (%)



Making Decisions

The item “I have trouble making decisions” is an important component of the self-esteem scale and was designed to reflect uncertainty and feelings of helplessness in planning for the future or making decisions about roles and relationships. Figure 5.8 shows that the proportion of young people who agreed with the statement declined over the last two surveys. Girls were more likely than boys to agree with the statement and this difference increased distinctly in Grade 10. Similar to the previous item about wishing to be someone else, there has been a slight decrease in decision-making uncertainty for both boys and girls in recent years.

Mental Health

Depression

Depression can be highly variable in occurrence, ranging from a general feeling of sadness to thoughts of suicide (Dixon, 1987). There are gender differences in the way young people respond to depression. Girls tend to become uncomfortable about their physical characteristics; they lose their appetite and feel generally unhappy (Baron and Campbell, 1993). Boys are more likely to become irritable and easy to anger. They tend to withdraw from their friends and have sleeping problems. Bouts of depression seem to be associated with family problems and a lack of friends (Portegijs et al., 1996).

About a quarter of all respondents indicated they had felt depressed once a week or more during the past six months, consistent with other studies on depression in young teens (Figure 5.9). Girls are more likely than boys to have felt depressed with the differences becoming greater from grade to grade. In fact, there is very little difference in the proportion of boys who experienced depression from grade to grade, while girls show a steady and substantial increase from Grade 6 to Grade 10. There was a

slight decline in the proportion of young people with weekly bouts of depression from the 1994 to the 1998 survey.

Loneliness

Adolescence is a period of life when the peer group takes on great importance for self-validation and shared activity. However, for those young people who are not socially integrated, it is a particularly difficult time. One of the factors contributing to the relatively high proportions of Canadian youth who feel isolated by the time they are in secondary school is the way schools are organized and the manner in which classes are taught. The composition of classes changes from subject to subject and each subject is usually taught by a different teacher. There is little opportunity in these circumstances for stable social structures to form. Many students attend large composite secondary schools and are bussed in from nearby communities which makes becoming socially integrated especially difficult. To teachers, students may appear well adjusted, although they may have no close friends.

When the factors associated with loneliness are examined (Figure 5.10), it can be seen that there are groups of factors that seem to have precipitated or contributed to students' feeling lonely and factors that seem to be outcomes that flow from their isolation. Concerns about body image, poor relationships with parents, having been bullied, a sense of helplessness, and lack of confidence, seem to have contributed to their isolation. Ailments, such as headaches, depression and backaches, seem to be related to their being lonely. The vulnerable, isolated student is an easy target for bullies, and therefore, it is not surprising to find that lonely students were far more likely to have been bullied than those who were fully integrated with their peers.

Figure 5.10

Factors associated with feeling lonely

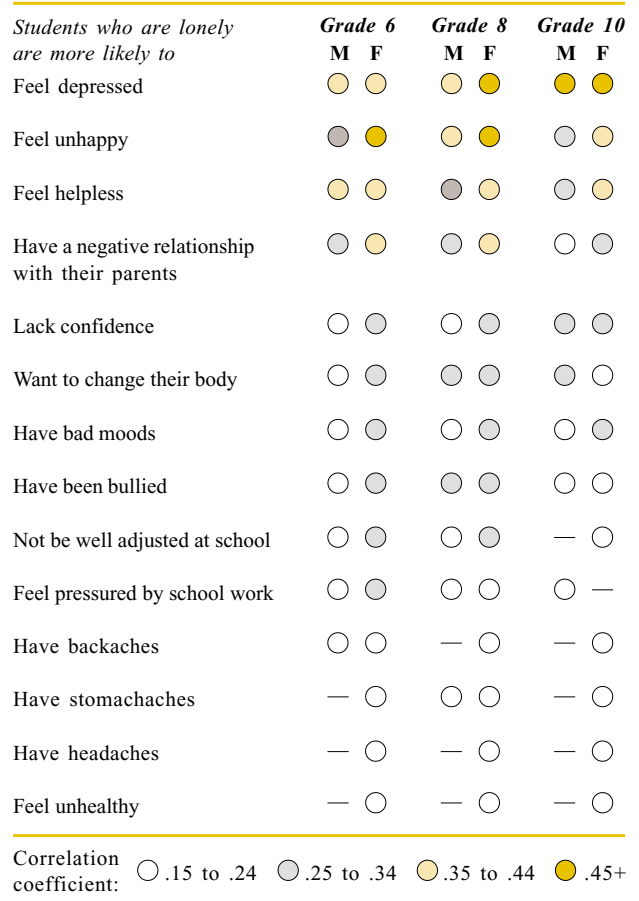


Figure 5.11

Students who “very often” or “rather often” felt lonely (%)

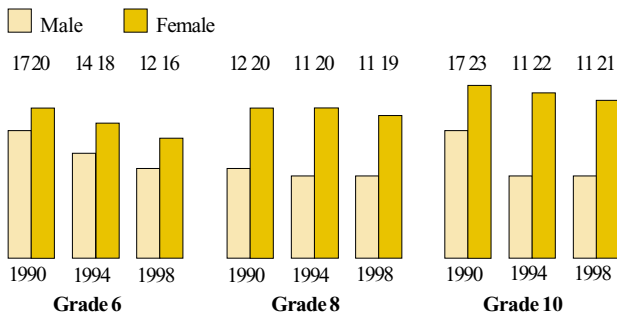


Figure 5.12

Students who “often” or “always” felt helpless (%)

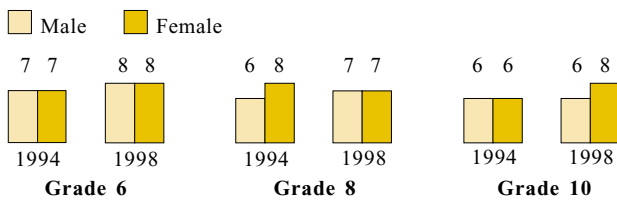
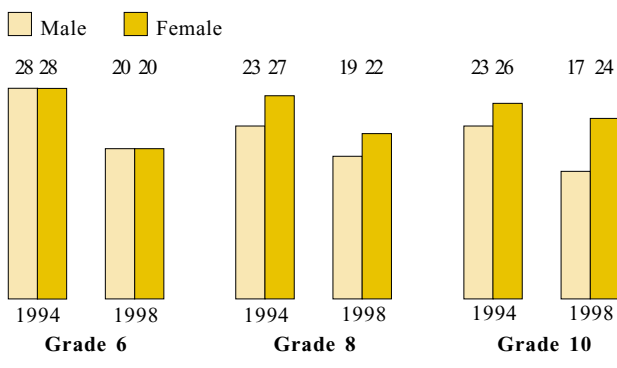


Figure 5.13

Students who were in a bad mood (irritable) more than once a week during the last six months (%)



Girls are far more likely than boys to feel lonely (Figure 5.11). About one-fifth of girls at all grade levels indicated that they very often or rather often feel lonely. More boys in the 1990 survey indicated they often feel lonely than was the case for the other two surveys.

Feeling Helpless

The concept of feeling helpless was introduced into the theoretical framework of the study because it seemed to be a powerful predictor of social adjustment problems. Students who feel helpless have difficulty making important career decisions and feel particularly vulnerable with regard to their capacity to shape their lives. Feeling helpless or powerless has been shown to be linked to poor social integration (Robinson et al., 1991, King et al., 1996). Feeling helpless may result from strains at home, especially those related to parental separation and the lack of a consistent framework of discipline (Resnick et al., 1998). Figure 5.12 indicates Canada has relatively few young people who “often” or “always” feel helpless. There are few or no gender differences on the measure.

Irritability

Periods of bad moods or irritability have been found to be linked to health-risk behaviours, such as smoking and drug use, and to health problems, such as sleeplessness and depression (Hill, 1994). About one-quarter of the girls and a slightly smaller proportion of the boys indicated that they were in a bad mood more than once a week. There was a slight decline in the proportions from the 1994 to the 1998 survey.

Body Image

Changing Body Appearance

Body image was addressed with items that asked about self-perception of body size and appearance as well as the desire to change one's body. These items may be related to a perceived need to diet.

Between one-third and three-quarters of students across the grade, survey year and gender groups indicated there was something about their body that they would like to change (Figure 5.14). Females in all groups were more likely than males to respond this way. This pattern was similar on both surveys. The proportions of males and females increased with age and levelled off in Grades 9-10 where about half the males and three-quarters of the females wanted to alter at least one aspect of their appearance (Figure 5.15).

Figure 5.14

Students who responded yes to the question "Is there anything about your body you would like to change?" (%)

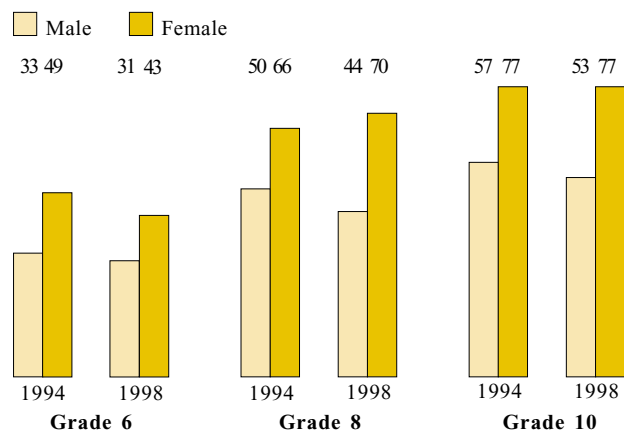


Figure 5.15

Students who responded yes to the question "Is there anything about your body you would like to change?" 1998 (%)

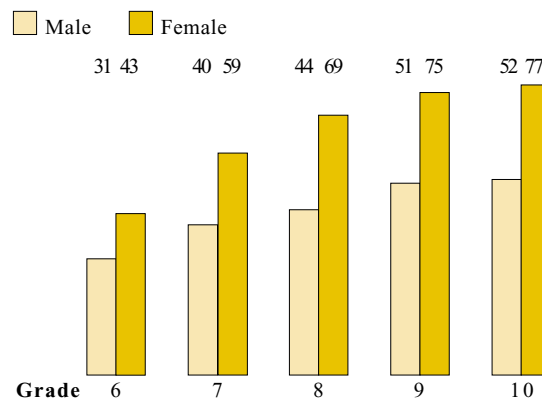
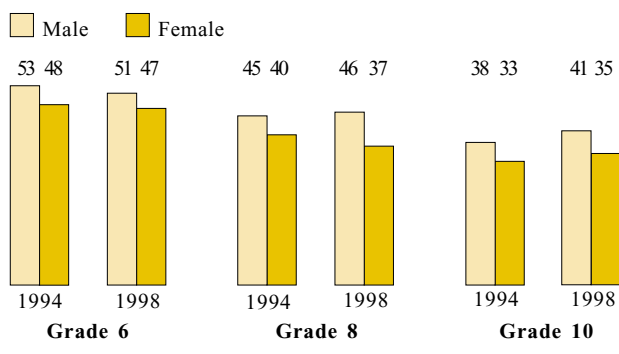


Figure 5.16

Students who felt their body is about the right size (%)



Body Size

When asked to rate their satisfaction with their body size, more males than females felt their body was about the right size (Figure 5.16). Differences between the 1994 and 1998 samples were small. Males in the higher grades were as likely to feel too thin as too fat. Females who were unhappy with their weight, for the most part, felt they were overweight. The proportions of students satisfied with their body size declined steadily from Grade 6 to Grade 9 and levelled off between Grades 9 and 10 (Figure 5.17).

Figure 5.17

Students who felt their body is about the right size, 1998 (%)

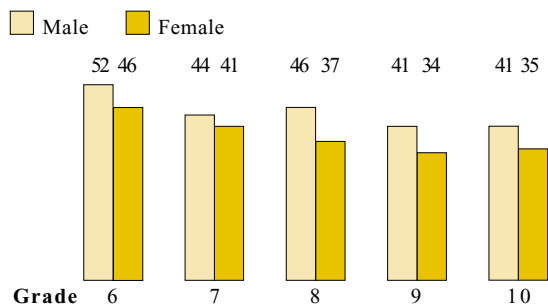
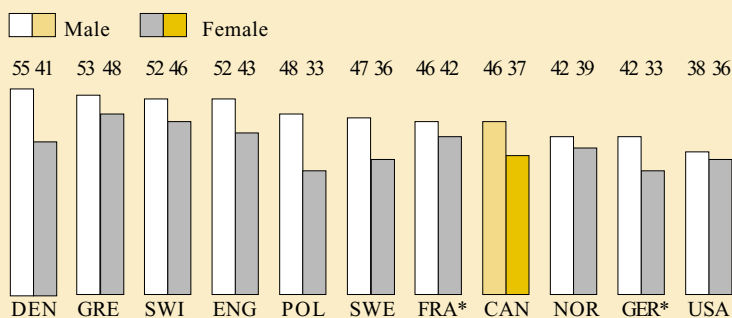


Figure 5.18

Thirteen year olds who felt their body is about the right size by country, 1998 (%)



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

Females reported more dissatisfaction with their body than males, but in some countries (the United States, France, Norway and Greece) these differences were minimal. For boys, satisfaction ranged from a high of 55 percent in Denmark to a low of 38 percent in the United States. For girls, satisfaction was greatest in Greece and least in Poland and Germany. Canada ranked in the middle on this measure.

Attractiveness

As with most questions regarding appearance, females were more negative than males when asked to rate how good looking they are (Figure 5.19). More females than males felt they are not very, or not at all, good looking, with 21 percent of female Grade 10 students responding this way in 1998. The differences among males from year to year were small, but females in 1998 were slightly more likely to feel they are not good looking than females in the 1994 sample. There is a sharp increase in the proportion of females who felt negative about their looks from Grade 6 to Grade 8, although this appears to level off after Grade 8 (Figure 5.20).

Figure 5.19

Students who felt they are “not very” or “not at all” good looking (%)

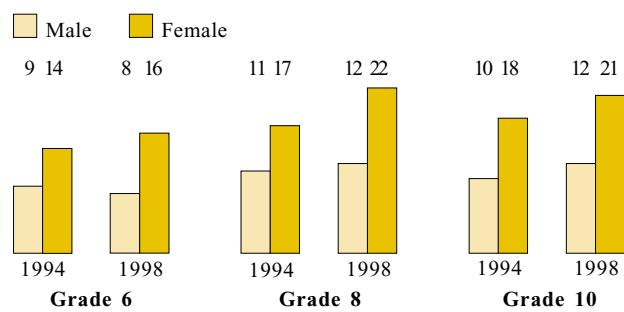


Figure 5.20

Students who felt they are “not very” or “not at all” good looking, 1998 (%)

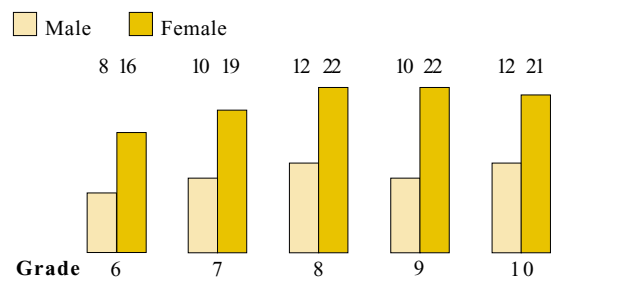
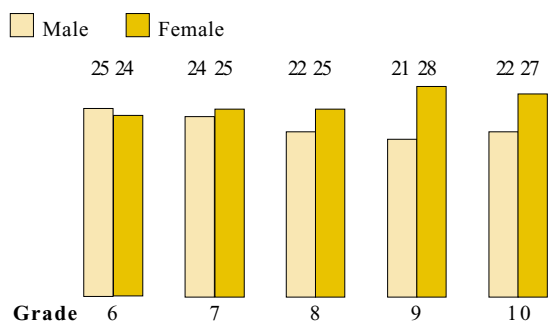
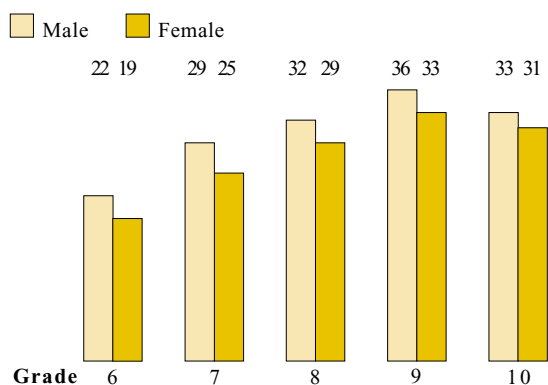


Figure 5.21

Students who had difficulty getting to sleep more than once a week, 1998 (%)

**Figure 5.22**

Students who were tired in the morning four or more times a week, 1998 (%)



Difficulty Sleeping

Students who often have difficulty sleeping may be reacting to problems in their social relationships (Wright and Wright, 1992). Figure 5.21 indicates that about 25 percent of youths reported difficulties getting to sleep. Gender differences appeared in Grade 8, with girls having increased difficulty and boys having less difficulty. There may be hormonal, physical activity, or social explanations for these gender differences. Alternately, sleep difficulties may be due to school stress or to involvement in multiple extracurricular activities. There do not appear to be marked changes in these patterns from 1994 to 1998.

Feeling tired in the morning may be the result of going to bed late or due to disrupted or inconsistent sleep. Figure 5.22 indicates that boys report slightly more morning fatigue than girls and that this trend peaks at Grade 9. In some regions, school scheduling has been altered such that some students must start school by 8:00 a.m. It is not surprising that some students begin school tired given the early school starting times and the long bus ride to school. The 1994 HBSC study suggested that some young people feel tired in the morning because they find attending school stressful (King et al., 1996). Figure 5.1 indicates a low, but positive, association between feeling happy and not feeling tired at school in the morning.

Summary

A general sense of well-being was found to be strongly related to a positive relationship with parents, satisfaction with school and involvement with a group of friends with whom the students could share confidences. Unhappy youth were also likely to be lonely, depressed, feel helpless, irritable and dissatisfied with their body image. Sadly, evidence of a sense of well-being declined from Grade 6 to Grade 10 among both boys and girls.

Boys scored consistently higher on self-esteem than did girls, with little variation across the age groups. About three-quarters of the respondents indicated they were generally happy with who they are, although substantial numbers of girls in particular stated that they wish they were someone else.

The number of respondents who indicated they felt depressed once a week or more in the previous six months was noticeably high, especially for Grade 10 girls. Since periods of depression can lead to serious mental illness and/or suicide, this finding indicates a need for prevention programs. About 20 percent of girls at all grade levels often felt lonely, but only about half as many boys by Grade 10 felt this way. Increased opportunities for social interaction in school settings might help to reduce these numbers.

Girls were far more likely than boys to say there was something about their body they would like to change, with the numbers increasing sharply from grade to grade. By Grade 10, over three-quarters of the girls and half the boys agreed with this statement. Girls were nearly twice as likely as boys to say they were not very or not at all good looking. It is clear that girls struggle more than boys with issues related to body image.

Finally, sleeping difficulties are a problem for a significant minority of young people. Girls report more problems in getting to sleep while boys report more tiredness in the morning.