



HBSC Briefing Paper 24

Mental and emotional well-being in Scottish adolescents

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Adolescence is a period of intensive physical and emotional development with long-term impacts on mental and emotional well-being. This Briefing Paper presents the findings from the 2014 Scottish Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) survey on key measures of subjective well-being: life satisfaction, happiness, quality of life, psychological complaints, and perceived stress. Many of these are included in the Children and Young People's Mental Health Indicator set established following a review of the evidence in Scotland in 2012¹.

Summary of key findings

- The majority (87%) of Scottish adolescents report being highly satisfied with their life, however life satisfaction declines with age between 11 and 15 years.
- Since 2002, life satisfaction has been consistently lower among girls than boys.
- Two-fifths (42%) of Scottish adolescents indicated that they are very happy at present, while 19% reported that they are always happy.
- Reported happiness has been consistently lower among girls and older adolescents since 2002.
- Health-related quality of life has declined since 2006 and has been consistently lower in 15-year old girls than boys.
- Almost a quarter (23%) of Scottish adolescents reported having experienced two or more psychological complaints (such as having difficulty sleeping or feeling low, irritable or nervous) within the past week.
- Reporting of two or more recent psychological complaints has been consistently higher in girls and in older age groups across six surveys (1994-2014).
- Girls and older age groups also reported higher levels of psychological stress.

The Scottish context

Improving children and adolescents' mental health is a national priority in Scotland. The initiative Getting It Right For Every Child (GIRFEC)² is the Scottish Government's approach to improving services to support holistic well-being in young people. In Scotland, adolescent mental well-being and subjective health have previously been shown to relate to socio-economic status, gender³ and geographic location.

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Life satisfaction

- Across all surveys, levels of life satisfaction declined with age. (Figure 1)
- An increase from 2006 to 2014 was observed for both the 11- and 13-year old groups.
- Overall in 2014, almost nine out of ten Scottish adolescents (87%) reported high life satisfaction.

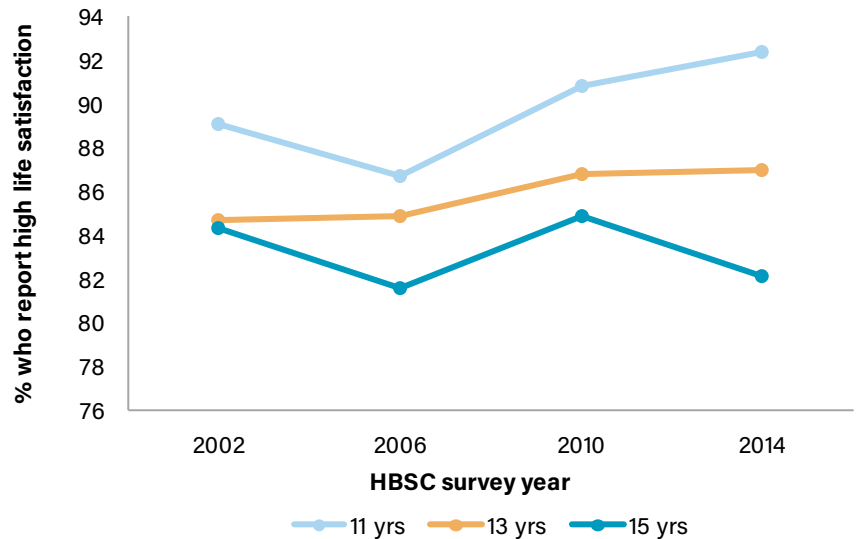


Figure 1. Life satisfaction by age and survey year

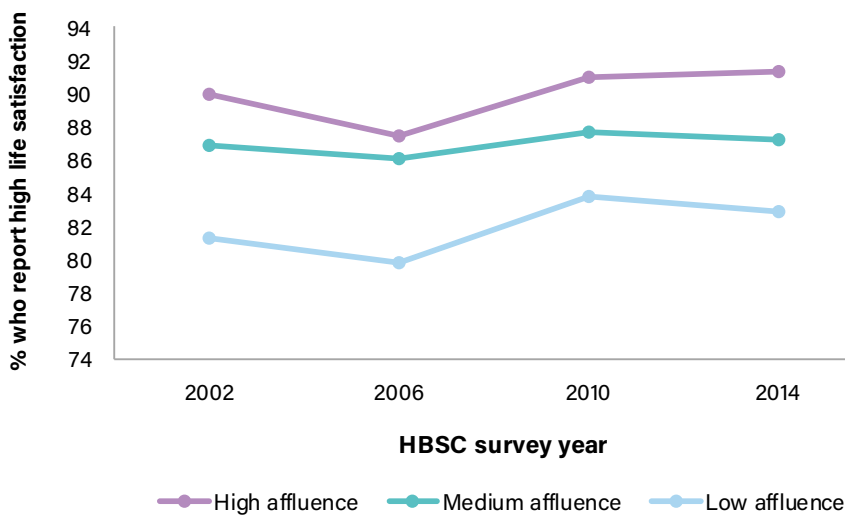


Figure 2. Life satisfaction by family affluence and survey year

- Boys (90%) were more likely to report high life satisfaction compared to girls (84%). (Figure 2-BP24 Supplement^a)
- Across four survey cycles, schoolchildren from low affluence families reported lower levels of life satisfaction compared to children from medium and high affluence families (Figure 2).

Happiness

- 42% of Scottish adolescents indicated that they are very happy at present, while 19% report they are always happy. (Table 1)
- Boys were more likely to report feeling very happy and always feeling happy.
- Both measures of happiness declined steeply with age.
- These trends have been consistent across surveys since 1994. (Figures 6-8 of BP24 Supplement)

	Very happy (%)	Always happy (%)
All	42	19
Boys	47	21
Girls	38	17
11-year olds	60	*
13-year olds	41	23
15-year olds	27	15

Table 1. Prevalence of feeling very happy and always happy

* This question was not asked of children of this age

Health-related quality of life

- Health-related quality of life (using the KIDSCREEN scale⁴) has been consistently lower in 15-year old girls than boys and declined over surveys since 2006. (Figure 3)

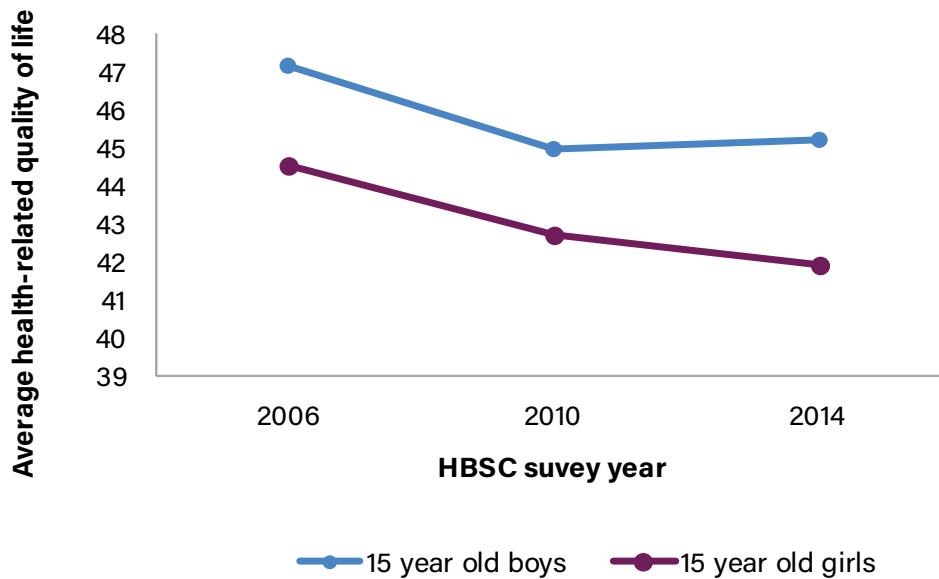


Figure 3. Health-Related Quality of Life by gender and survey year

Perceived stress in 13- and 15-year olds**

- 15-year olds (both boys and girls) indicated higher levels of stress compared to 13-year olds. (Figure 4)
- Girls in both age groups reported higher levels of stress compared to boys.
- Schoolchildren from low affluence families reported higher levels of stress compared to those from medium and high affluence families (*Figure 11- BP24 Supplement*).



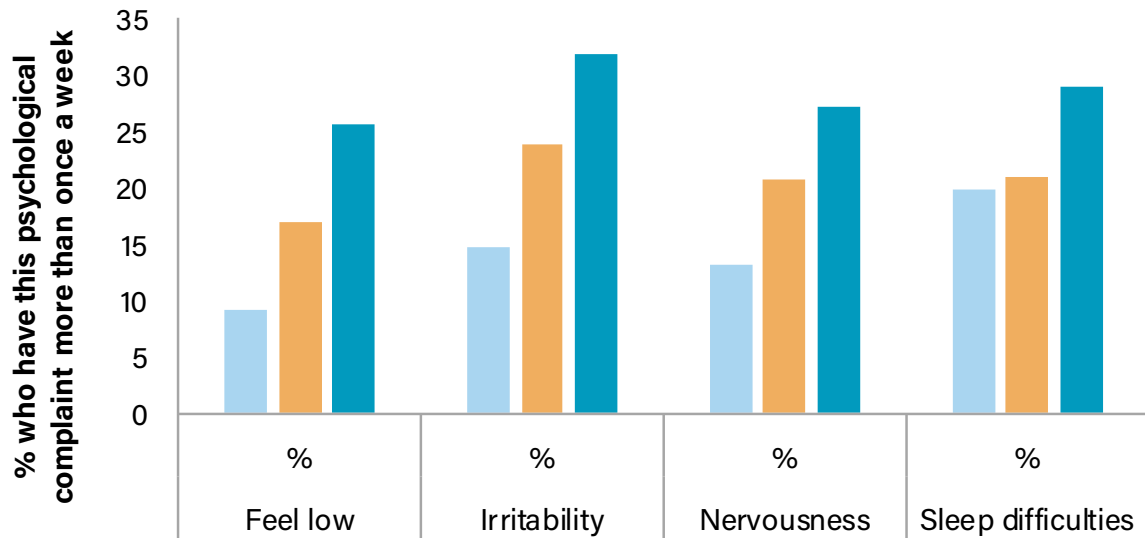
Figure 4. Mean levels for perceived stress by gender and age

** Cohen, S., Kamarck, T., & Mermelstein, R. (1983). A global measure of perceived stress. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 24: 385-396.

Psychological complaints

Adolescents were asked about how often they experienced different psychological complaints, including feeling low, irritability, nervousness, difficulty sleeping, and feeling dizzy.

- Almost a quarter of Scottish adolescents (23%) reported experiencing two or more psychological complaints within the past week, with difficulty sleeping being particularly commonplace. (Figure 5)
- Girls (30%) reported more frequent psychological complaints compared to boys (17%), and this gender difference widens with age. (Figure 6)
- 15-year olds (32%) experience psychological complaints more often than younger age groups (twice as often as 11-year olds).
- Since 2006 substantial increases have been seen in 13-year old and especially 15-year old girls.



Psychological complaints

Figure 5. Specific psychological health complaints by age (HBSC 2014 survey)

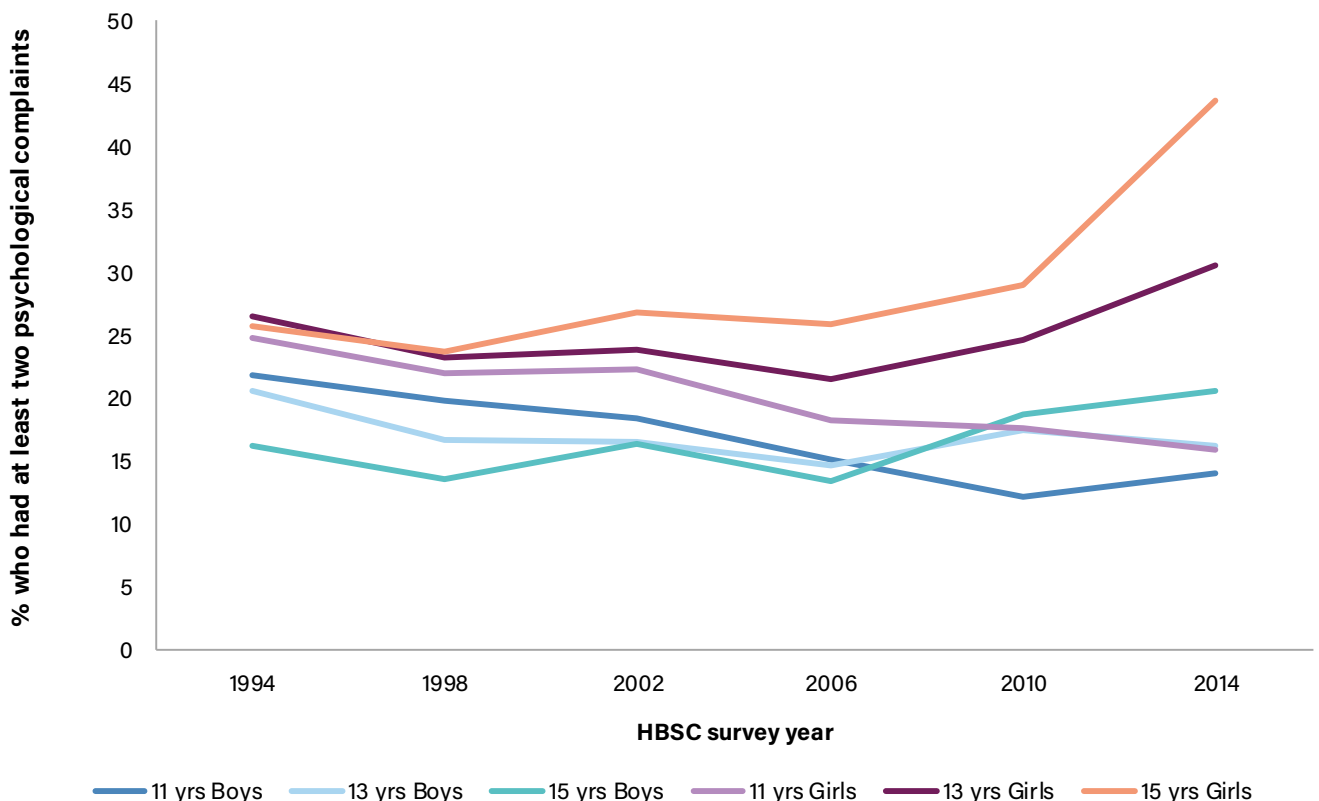


Figure 6. The experience of psychological complaints by age and survey year

Background

Adolescence is a time of dramatic changes in body and behaviour that can influence both current and future health. Research indicates that the peak age of onset for mental health disorders is 14 years⁵. Low life satisfaction is associated with psychological, social, and behavioural problems while high life satisfaction is related to positive mental and emotional well-being³. High life satisfaction among adolescents is positively related with interpersonal functioning (good relationships with peers and parents), self-esteem, and hope, and negatively related with perceived school experiences (negative attitudes towards school and teachers), social stress, anxiety, and depression⁶. School distress and feelings of school alienation decrease the chance for students to feel happy or very happy⁷, whereas perceived support from teachers, and overall satisfaction with school increase the likelihood of feeling happy⁸. The experience of chronic stress during adolescence has a wide range of physiological and psychological consequences which are associated with mental health and chronic disease risk in adulthood⁹. Psychological stress can be particularly disruptive during the sensitive developmental period of adolescence, with long-term negative consequences for academic and social development¹⁰. Nonetheless, in this period, factors such as school and family connectedness¹¹, including social support and communication from at least one caring adult, and supportive peer relations act as protective factors for positive mental health and life satisfaction¹².

Discussion of key findings

The HBSC findings presented in this Briefing Paper focused on main indicators of Scottish adolescents' mental and emotional well-being. Almost a quarter of adolescents experienced at least two psychological complaints in the past week, with irritability, sleep difficulties and nervousness being the most prevalent. Girls tended to report higher levels of psychological complaints and perceived stress, as well as lower levels of life satisfaction, general health-related quality of life and happiness. These differences may be partly explained by hormonal changes and pubertal timing (especially for psychological complaint symptoms)¹³. The present findings have implications for the design of targeted school interventions to promote psychological well-being among adolescents. Moreover, extensive research indicates that school interventions based on promoting positive emotions and well-being, could be effective also in decreasing distress, in particular anxiety and other aspects of mental and emotional well-being¹⁴.

Methods

Between January and June 2014, a nationally representative sample of 10,839 Scottish school children (aged 11, 13 and 15 years) completed the HBSC survey as part of the HBSC: WHO Collaborative Cross-National Study in 42 countries. This Briefing Paper presents findings from the 2014 Scottish HBSC survey on key measures of subjective well-being: life satisfaction, happiness, quality of life, psychological complaints, and perceived stress, as well as their trends over time (1994-2014). Questions pertaining to this Briefing Paper can be viewed at: <http://www.cahru.org/content/03-publications/03-briefing-papers-and-factsheets/briefing-papers-and-factsheets/14-scottish-questionnaire>

Acknowledgements

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