



# HBSC Briefing Paper 4

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HBSC is the Health Behaviour in School-Aged Children: WHO Collaborative Cross-National Study

## Mental-health and well-being in the context of school: Young people in Scotland

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### Introduction

The Scottish Executive has set a target date of 2007 for all schools in Scotland to be health promoting schools. Each will be working towards becoming a school in which, 'all members of the school community work together to provide pupils with integrated and positive experiences and structures, which promote and protect their health.'<sup>1</sup> The main aims of a health promoting school include:

- promoting the physical, social, spiritual, mental and emotional health and well-being of pupils and staff and
- working with others in identifying and meeting the health needs of the whole school community.<sup>2</sup>

The conceptual framework underpinning health promoting schools highlights the important effect school can have on, 'improving the health and well-being of pupils and staff... on raising achievement, fulfilling potential and improving the quality of life.'<sup>2</sup> Thus, schools have a key role in helping to promote and sustain the emotional and mental health and well-being of their pupils.

Many factors can affect mental well-being and, like quality of life, it is often difficult to define. For some, mental well-being may be closely linked to achievement or relationships with family, peers or teachers. For others, mental well-being may be closely linked to feelings or emotions, to environmental influences or other factors which, on a daily basis, impact on our lives.

This briefing paper focuses on responses from young people which reflect aspects of their mental well-being and their school environment. This is an increasingly important policy area and one where policy in Scotland recognises the link between emotional health and development, and academic achievement.

### Details of the 2002 Survey in Scotland

The Health Behaviour in School-Aged Children (HBSC): WHO Collaborative Cross-National Study was conducted in 35 countries during 2001/2.<sup>3</sup> A nationally representative sample of mixed ability classes in Scotland was drawn from both state and independent

### Main findings

#### Happiness

- ~ Overall, 45.9% of young people reported themselves to be 'very happy' and more boys than girls reported thus at each age.

#### Liking School

- ~ Overall, 23.9% of pupils reported liking school 'a lot'.
- ~ At age 11, 38.2% of girls and 29.2% of boys reported liking school 'a lot' as compared to 12.7% of girls and 14.7% of boys at age 15.

#### School Atmosphere

- ~ Overall, 25.3% of pupils viewed their school in a very positive light.

#### Perceptions of Peers

- ~ Overall, 28.2% of respondents reported very positive feelings about their peers.
- ~ At age 11, 41.3% of boys and 38.0% of girls had very positive perceptions of their peers as compared to 19.0% and 17.8% of 15 year old boys and girls.

#### Perceptions of Teachers

- ~ Overall, 37.8% of respondents reported very positive feelings about their teachers and only at age 11 were there any gender differences.

#### The School Environment & Mental well-being

- ~ Of those pupils who view their school environments in a very positive light, the majority also reported themselves to be very happy.
- ~ About 50% of young people who held moderately positive views about their school environment also reported themselves to be 'very happy'.

### Statistics

When the difference between two percentages is significant asterisks are used in the text to denote the level of statistical significance as follows: \*  $p < 0.05$  significant difference, \*\*  $p < 0.01$  highly significant difference, \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$  very highly significant difference

schools. In total, responses from 4,404 young people comprised the final sample of pupils in Primary 7 (1,743 eleven year olds), Secondary 2 (1,512 thirteen year olds) and Secondary 4 (1,149 fifteen year olds).

**Positive Mental Health and Well-being**

Positive mental health and well-being can mean different things to different individuals and within the HBSC study several parameters of mental well-being are measured.<sup>3,4</sup> These include reported general health status and symptom experiences, academic achievement, reported self-confidence and life satisfaction, as measured by a life satisfaction scale.<sup>5</sup> Each of these measures is related to reported happiness among boys and girls. Subjective assessment of happiness is a recognised marker of positive mental well-being.<sup>6</sup>

**Happiness**

Happiness was assessed by asking young people, 'In general, how do you feel about your life at present?' to which they could respond: 'I feel very happy'; 'I feel quite happy'; 'I don't feel very happy' and 'I'm not happy at all'.

Overall, 45.9% of young people reported themselves to be 'very happy', 44.7% thought themselves 'quite happy' and 9.4% saw themselves as unhappy ('I don't feel very happy' and 'I'm not happy at all' combined). Responses by age and gender are presented in Figure 1.

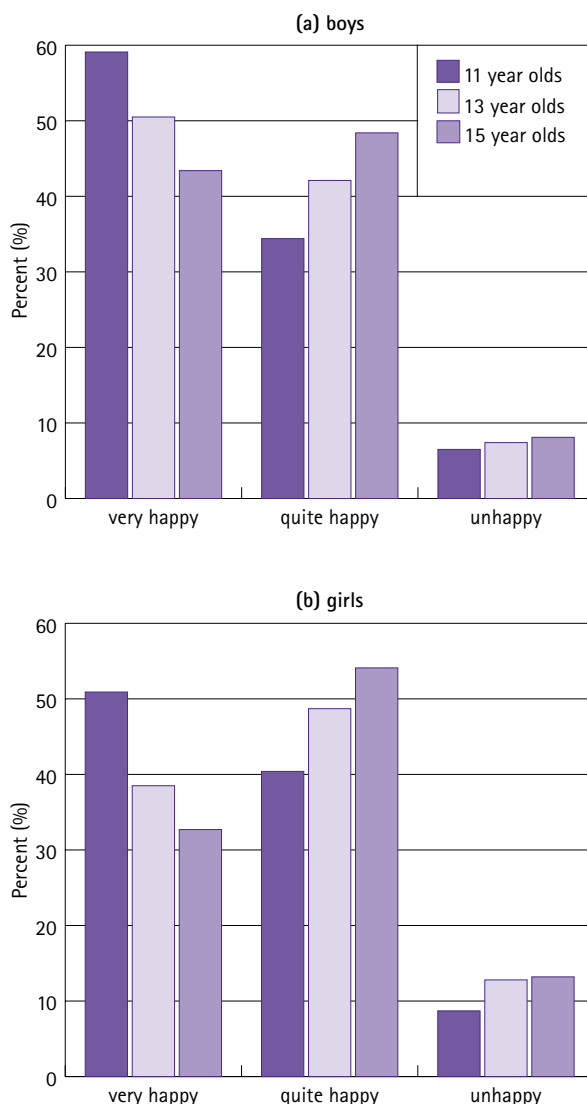
As can be seen from Figure 1, more boys than girls reported themselves to be 'very happy' at each age (\*\*\*). More girls than boys reported themselves to be unhappy at ages 13 and 15 (\*\*). The proportion of pupils reporting themselves to be 'very happy' was markedly less at age 15 as compared to age 11 for both genders (\*\*\*) while those reporting themselves to be unhappy rose significantly among girls (\*\*) but not boys.

**Aspects of the School Environment**

Most people agree that the school environment is a composite of many different facets of school life. It is likely to be affected by perceptions of school itself as well as notions about teachers and peers. In other words, if pupils perceive each of these aspects to be congenial then they are likely to have an overall positive perception of the school environment. Conversely, if pupils have negative perceptions, then they are more than likely to view school negatively. Four aspects of the school environment are examined.

First, whether or not a pupil reports 'liking school' is examined. This general measure is of importance as many pupils spend the majority of their days during school term at school.<sup>6</sup> Next, we examine pupils' perceptions of the atmosphere at their school, then their perceptions towards peers and finally, perception of teachers, each of which has been shown to be important in the development of young people.<sup>7-10</sup>

**Figure 1: Self-reported happiness among 11, 13 and 15 year old boys (a) and girls (b).**



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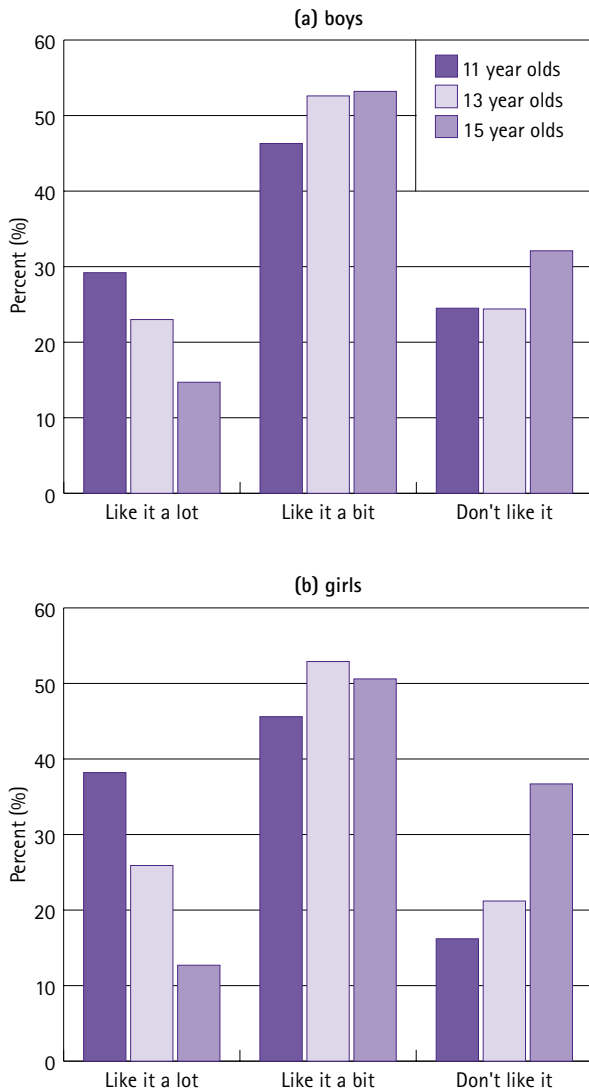
**Liking School**

Pupils were asked, 'How do you feel about school at present?'.<sup>3</sup> Overall, 25.9% of pupils reported that they did not like school 'very much' or 'at all', 50.2% reported that they liked school 'a bit' and 23.9% reported that they liked it 'a lot'.

As can be seen from Figure 2, feelings about school differed by gender and age. A higher proportion of girls (38.2%) as compared to boys (29.2%) reported liking school 'a lot' at age 11 (\*\*\*), although at ages 13 and 15, proportions among boys and girls were similar.

With respect to age, there was a marked decline in those who reported liking school a lot for both genders between ages 11 and 15. In both groups, significantly fewer pupils (\*\*\*) reported liking school 'a lot' at age 15; 14.7% of boys and 12.7% of girls.

**Figure 2a and b:** Proportions of 11, 13 and 15 year old boys (a) and girls (b) who reported liking school a lot, a bit or not liking school.



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**School Atmosphere**

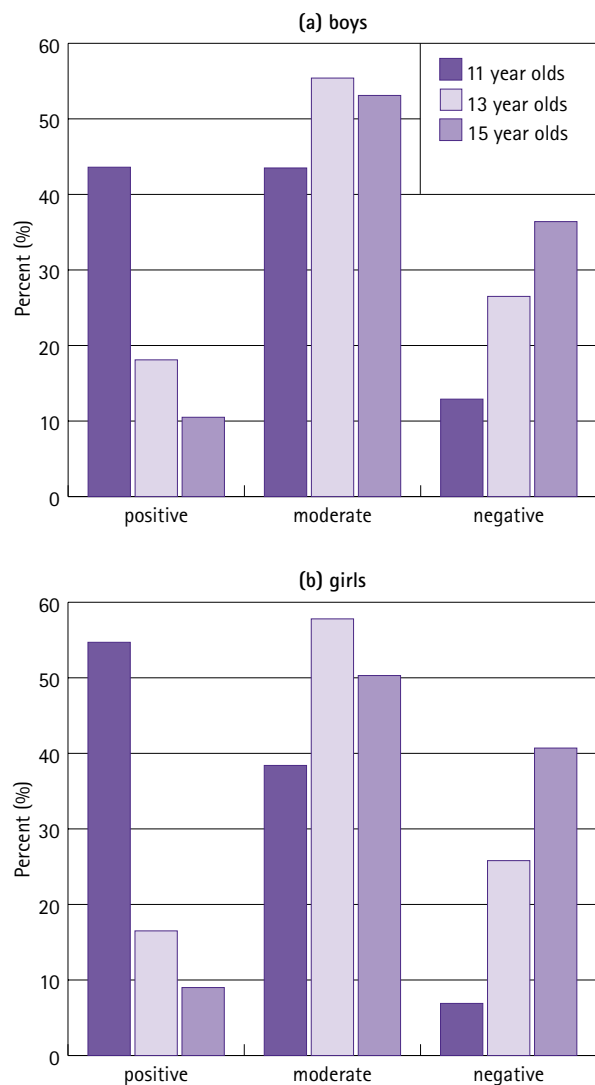
Six established items were used to measure general school atmosphere.<sup>3</sup> These were: 'In our school, pupils take part in making the rules'; 'The pupils are treated too severely/strictly in this school'; 'The rules in this school are fair'; 'Our school is a nice place to be'; 'I feel I belong at this school' and 'I feel safe at this school'. Pupils were asked to report whether or not they agreed a lot or a bit, neither agreed nor disagreed or disagreed a lot or a bit for each of these items. A composite score was produced for each pupil.<sup>†</sup>

Overall, 25.3% of pupils viewed their school in a very positive light, 49.8% of pupils fell into a middle band and 24.9% of pupils viewed their school negatively. Only among 11 year olds did these perceptions differ significantly by gender (\*\*\*) as more girls viewed school in a positive light (54.7%) as compared to boys (43.6%).

† The composite score reflected the positive aspect of five variables and the inverse aspect of the second.

As can be seen from Figure 3, perceptions of the school atmosphere change markedly with age for boys and girls (\*\*\*), especially between ages 11 and 13. For example, at age 11, 43.6% of boys and 54.7% of girls reported very positive views about their school as compared with 10.5% and 9.0% boys and girls respectively at age 15. This represents a decline of 33.1% among boys and 45.7% among girls (\*\*\*)

**Figure 3a and b:** Perceptions of school atmosphere by age and gender.



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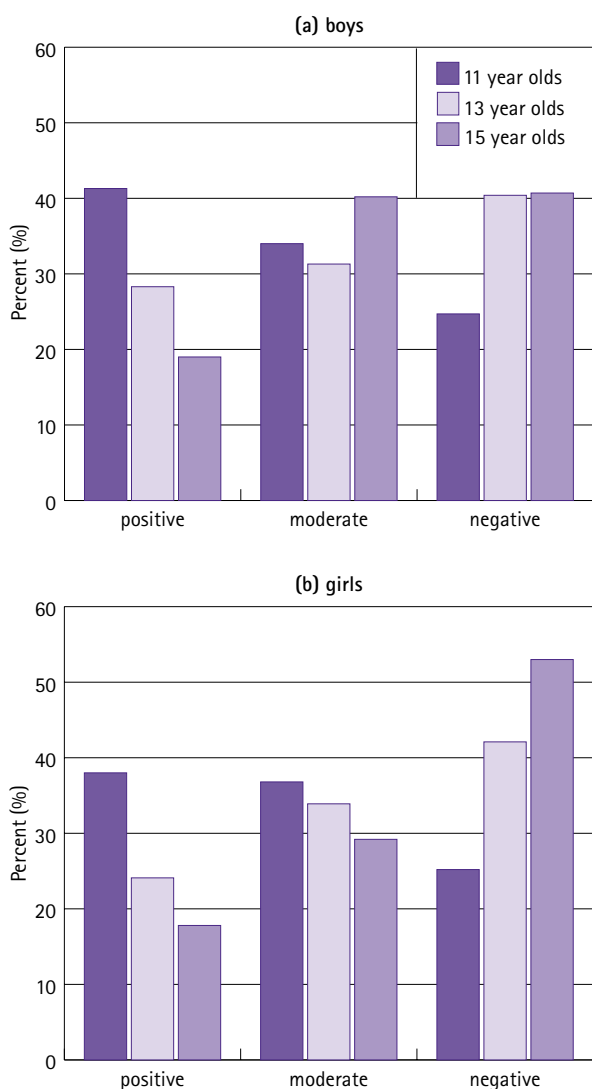
**Perceptions of Peers**

Three established items were used to measure perceptions of peers.<sup>3</sup> These were: 'The pupils in my class(es) enjoy being together'; 'Most pupils in my class(es) are kind and helpful' and 'Other pupils accept me as I am'. Pupils were asked to say whether or not they agreed a lot or a bit, neither agreed nor disagreed or disagreed a lot or a bit for each of these items. Responses from each pupil were summed to produce a composite score.

Overall, 28.2% of respondents reported very positive feelings about their peers; 34.2% fell into a middle band and 37.6% reported negative perceptions of their peers. While there were no significant differences in perception between genders, views of peers changed markedly with respect to age for both boys and girls (\*\*\*) as can be seen in Figure 4.

For example, at age 11, 41.3% of boys and 38.0% of girls had positive perceptions of their peers. However among 15 year olds, 19.0% of boys and 17.8% of girls reported very positively. This represents a decline in positive perceptions of 22.2 % among boys and 20.2% among girls (\*\*\*)

**Figure 4a and b: Perception of peers among boys (a) and girls (b) by age and gender**



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**Perception of Teachers**

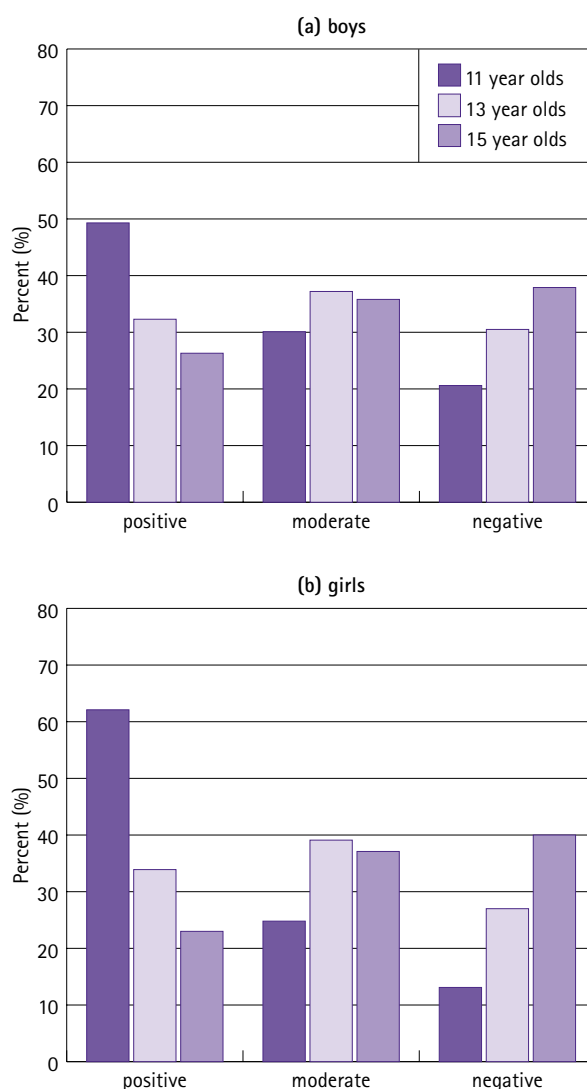
Four established items were used to measure perceptions of teachers.<sup>3</sup> These were: 'I am encouraged to express my own views in my class(es)'; 'Our teachers treat us fairly'; 'When I need extra

help I can get it' and 'My teachers are interested in me as a person'. As previously noted, pupils were asked to report the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with these statements. Responses from each pupil were summed to produce a composite score.

Overall, 37.8% of respondents reported very positive feelings about their teachers; 34.0% fell into a middle band and 28.2% reported negative feelings for their teachers. Only at age 11 were any significant gender differences observed as more girls reported very positively as compared to boys (\*\*\*)

While there were no significant differences of perception between genders at ages 13 or 15, views of teachers changed markedly with age (Figure 5). As can be seen from Figure 5, at age 11, 49.3% of boys and 62.1% of girls had very positive perceptions of their teachers as compared to 15 year olds of whom only 26.3% of boys and 23.0% of girls reported very positively. This represents a decline of 23% among boys and about 39% among girls (\*\*\*)

**Figure 5a and b: Perceptions of teachers among boys (a) and girls (b) by age and gender.**



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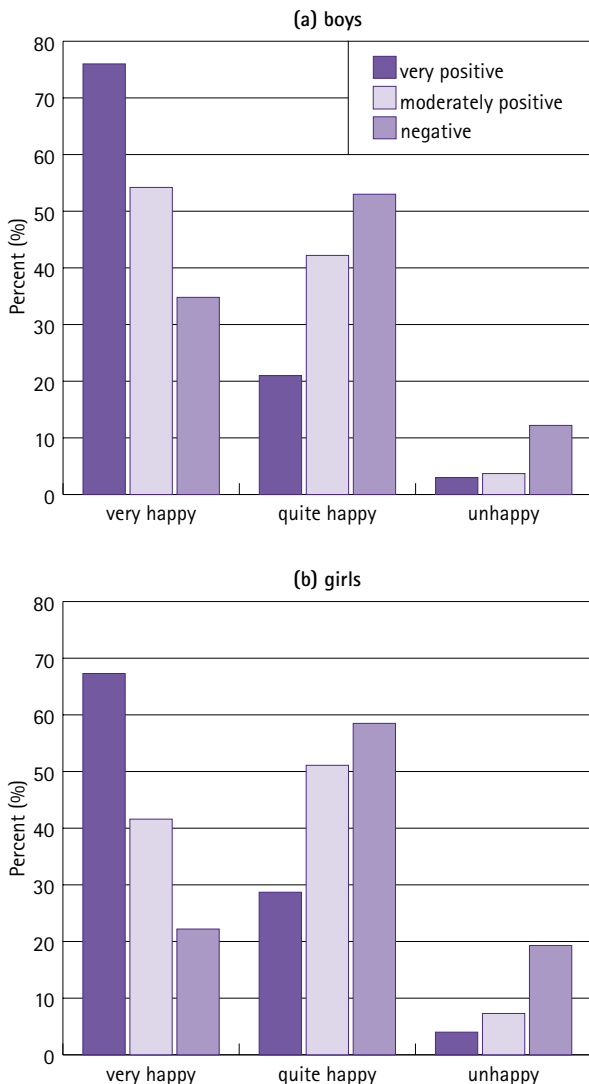
**The School Environment and Mental Well-being**

A composite measure, comprised of each of the school-related variables previously defined was used as a single indicator of the overall school environment. Young people’s responses were classed as either very positive about their school environment, moderately positive or negative

Overall, 27.8% of young people reported holding very positive views about their school environment (26.5% boys and 29.2% girls). A further 28.4% held moderately positive views (29.6% boys and 27.1% girls) and 43.8% held negative views (43.9% boys and 43.7% girls). Similar proportions were observed among boys and girls and, as has been noted previously, only at age 11 were gender differences significant (\*\*).

Perceptions of the school environment were compared with reports of happiness and these are represented in Figure 6a and b.

**Figure 6a and b:** Perceptions of the school environment among boys (a) and girls (b) and self-reported happiness.



Examination of Figure 6a and b shows that of those pupils who view their school environments in a very positive light, the majority also reported themselves to be very happy. However, more boys than girls who perceived their school environment in a very positive light reported themselves to be happy (76.0% and 67.3%, respectively (\*\*)). Of those pupils who held very positive views, more girls than boys reported that they were quite happy (21.0% and 28.7%, respectively (\*\*)). Relatively few young people who held very positive views about their school environment reported themselves to be unhappy.

Of those pupils who held moderately positive views about their school environment, more boys than girls also reported themselves to be very happy (\*\*). The reverse was the case among those who reported themselves to be quite happy, i.e. more girls than boys reported in this way (\*\*).

For those young people who held negative views about their school environments, the majority also reported themselves to be quite happy (53.0% of boys and 58.5% of girls). A further 34.8% of boys and 22.2% of girls reported themselves to be very happy.

**Discussion**

Clearly, there is an association between perceptions of the school environment and self-reported happiness. However, causality or the direction of this relationship cannot be determined from analyses of cross-sectional data. In other words, we cannot determine if feeling positive about school causes pupils to feel happy or whether feeling happy causes pupils to express positive feelings about their school environments.

What we can say is that almost half of young people in Scotland reported themselves to be very happy and about 28% held very positive views about their school environments. Furthermore, for each of the variables examined, there was a consistent trend which reflected less favourable reporting among older pupils. These are recognised patterns among young people and may reflect an increasing awareness of the world around themselves, increases in actual or perceived pressures at home or school (such as exams) or pressures regarding life decisions, relationships or financial matters. In addition, adolescence brings with it a host of physical and psychological challenges which have been shown to have an effect on well-being. Given that, in general, the largest differences in the reporting of positive perceptions occurs between primary 7 pupils (11 year olds) and secondary 2 pupils (13 year olds), for both boys and girls, particular attention should be paid to the provision of appropriate and useful support systems during this transition period.

The composite indicator of school environment was derived to encompass support networks, including peers. The fact that these are viewed less positively as young people mature suggests that many of the concepts integral to the sustainable development of a Health Promoting School framework both in Scotland and internationally<sup>11</sup> are likely to have a beneficial effect on young people.

It must be remembered that about one in three young people

reported negative views about their school environments while also reporting themselves to be very happy. This supports the idea that any individual's happiness is mediated by a number of factors, of which the school environment is just one. It is important to remember that young people of today can benefit from wide ranging efforts to safeguard their physical and mental well-being, both now and in the future.

## Acknowledgements

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## HBSC publications and HBSC information

Further information on the international report from the 2001/02 survey can be obtained from the International Study website, [www.hbsc.org](http://www.hbsc.org). The International Coordinating Centre of the HBSC Study is the Child and Adolescent Health Research Unit (CAHRU), The University of Edinburgh ([www.education.ed.ac.uk/cahru/projects/hbsc](http://www.education.ed.ac.uk/cahru/projects/hbsc)).

## Reports from this and earlier surveys include

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