

Healthy Connections

Connectedness & BC Youth

Connections to family, school, friends, and community are important contributors to good health. Several researchers have found that a young person's sense of caring and connection to others has a strong impact on physical and emotional health.

The Adolescent Health Survey II used a number of questions to assess students' "connectedness," a term used to describe how youth feel about their social environment, including their family and school. Connectedness implies a sense of attachment to others; it is a resource that can be drawn upon in times of stress or in reaction to difficult experiences or decisions.

Connectedness is related to the concept of resilience, which is the ability to cope with and overcome negative events or circumstances. Adolescence is a critical period for the development of resilience. Connectedness to family and school, in addition to certain individual characteristics, seems to promote resilience and to protect against risks during the teenage years.

Results from AHS II indicate that connectedness is related to overall health and to choices about risky behaviour. These results also show that families and schools do make a difference in the health of BC youth.

Defining Connectedness

Questions on connectedness included in AHS II were derived from a major project in the United States, the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health. The survey items on family connectedness assess whether youth:

- feel close to their mothers and fathers.
- feel that their mothers and fathers care about them.
- think their parents are warm and loving and are satisfied with their relationships with their parents.
- feel that people in their families understand them.
- feel that they have fun with their families.
- feel that their families pay attention to them

Items related to school connectedness ask youth whether they:

- feel that their teachers **care about them.**
- have trouble getting along with their teachers.
- have trouble getting along with other students.
- feel that they are a part of their schools.
- are happy to be at their schools.
- think that teachers at their schools treat students fairly.
- feel safe at their schools.

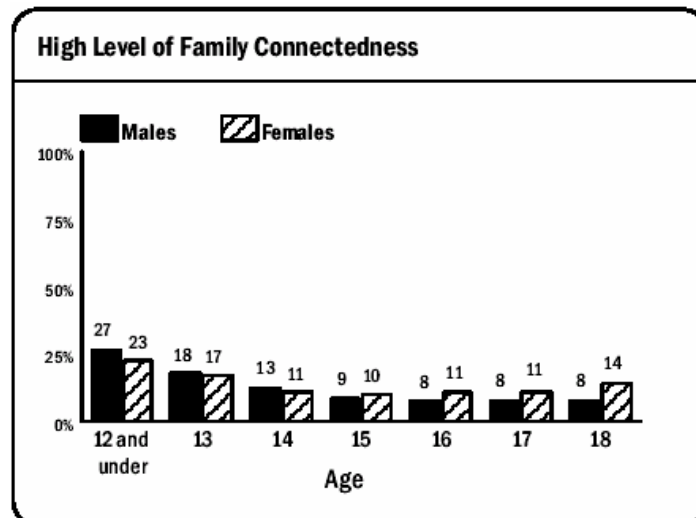
Responses on each set of questions were compiled to give each student a relative "score" that identifies them as having high, medium, or low levels of family and school connectedness. (Connectedness to one parent or to both parents was scored equally.) Students' responses to items about their health status and risk behaviours were then compared on the basis of their connectedness scores for family and school.

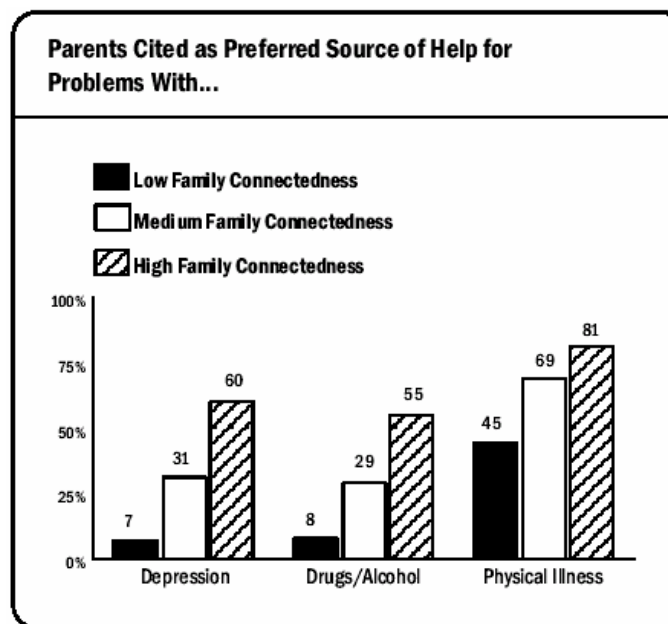
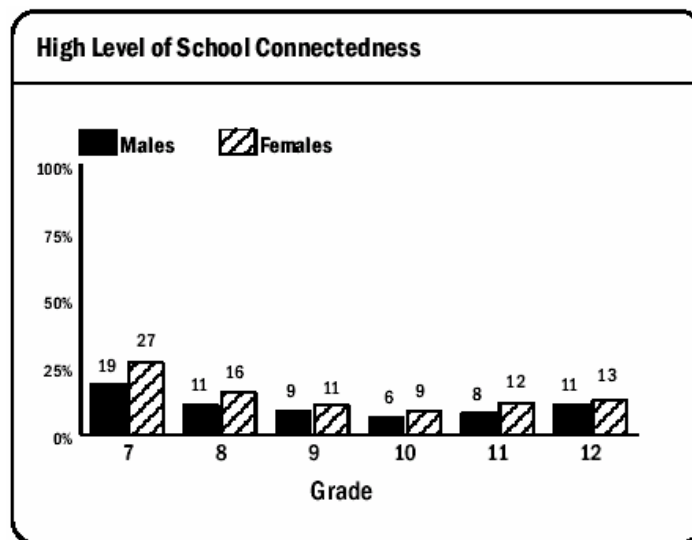
About three-quarters (72%) of BC students are classified as having a medium level of connectedness with family, and 15% are highly connected. A similar percentage (74%) has a medium level of connectedness to school, and 13% are highly connected. Younger students feel more connected than older students: 25% of 12 year olds are highly connected to family compared with only 9% of 17 year-olds (see figure). Connectedness to school drops between Grades 7 and 10, then tends to rise slightly in Grade 11 (see figure).

Youth who are highly connected to their families and schools also seem to have more connections to others in their communities. Highly connected youth are more likely to participate in organized extracurricular activities, such as supervised sports; dance or aerobic classes; art, drama or music lessons; or community groups and clubs. They also are more likely to be involved in volunteer activities, such as supporting a cause, fund raising, helping in the community, helping neighbours or relatives, or volunteering at school. Highly connected youth are more likely than youth with low levels of connectedness to be involved in more than just one extra-curricular or volunteer activity.

As might be expected, youth *who* are less connected to their families are less likely to report going to parents first if they have a problem (see figure below). Instead, they tend to turn to their friends, or to health professionals in the case of health-related concerns such as physical illness, STD's, or needing birth control

Family and school connectedness do not always go hand-in-hand, although two thirds of youth do have similar levels of family and school connectedness. Only about 1% of students reported low levels of family connectedness and high levels of school connectedness; another 1% reported high levels of family connectedness and low levels of school connectedness.





Less-Connected Youth

Compared to youth with a high level of connectedness, youth who are less connected to family and school are:

- less likely to live with both parents, and more likely to live only with their mothers
- less likely to have parents with a college or university education, fathers who are employed full-time, and mothers who are fulltime homemakers
- more likely to have parents who have received income assistance from the government
- more likely not to be spiritual or religious
- more likely to have a chronic illness or disability.

Connectedness and Risky Behaviour

Some behavioural patterns established during adolescence may have life-long consequences. The sense of connectedness that youth feel to those around them may play a role in whether or not they make healthy decisions (see figures). AHS II results indicate that students with high levels of connectedness to family and school are less likely to engage in a range of risk behaviours, including early sexual activity, smoking, alcohol and substance use, drinking and driving, or suicide attempts. They also are less likely to experience emotional distress or abuse.

Students with high levels of connectedness are more likely to attend school regularly and to have plans to continue their education. Relationships among connectedness, health and risk behaviour are present at all age and grade levels.

Connectedness and Resilience

Resilience enables individuals to cope with problems resulting from life circumstances- including abuse, illness, family conflict or poverty- or as a result of experimenting with risky behaviours. Once exposed to such stresses, some youth appear to be at higher risk for further negative outcomes, while others manage to function well despite these challenges.

AHS II results show that adolescents who have been bullied, abused, or who have a chronic illness or disability are at greater risk for negative health status and risky behaviour. However, this risk is reduced for those youth with higher levels of connectedness.

For example, although sexually abused youth are generally more likely to be emotionally distressed than non-abused youth (20% vs. 6%), those sexually abused youth who are more highly connected to their families are at lower risk for experiencing emotional distress (see figure). Thirty-five percent of sexually abused youth who have low family connectedness report being emotionally distressed, compared to 15% of sexually abused youth who have medium-high family connectedness. Similarly, youth who have a chronic illness or disability have a higher likelihood of being physically assaulted (25% vs, 15%). However, the difference between physical assaults in youth with a chronic illness/disability as compared to those without, is smaller in highly connected youth. The AHS also shows that youth who are bullied at school are more likely to attempt suicide (11% vs. 4%). The proportion of youth who have been bullied who have also attempted suicide, is lower for youth who are more highly connected to school. These and other findings from the AHS results suggest that high levels of connectedness promote resilience and enable youth to cope with challenges and negative experiences.