

Making the Right Connections: Promoting positive mental health among BC youth

Focus on lesbian, gay and bisexual youth

In 2008, over 29,000 BC youth in Grades 7 through 12 completed the fourth BC Adolescent Health Survey (AHS). The AHS is a paper and pencil questionnaire that provides a current and accurate picture of the health of BC youth. The 2008 AHS was completed in 1,760 classrooms in 50 of BC's 59 school districts. Following the release of the results (*A Picture of Health*), focus groups and workshops were conducted, giving youth the opportunity to respond to the results.

Using data from the AHS and the youth focus groups and workshops, McCreary created a report entitled *Making the right connections* (2011). This report offers a detailed look at the mental health of BC youth, and the role of various protective factors in promoting positive mental health. This fact sheet summarizes the findings contained in the report for lesbian, gay and bisexual youth.



One percent of youth in grades 7 through 12 identified as lesbian or gay and 2% as bisexual. Lesbian, gay or bisexual youth (LGB) experienced many challenges to their mental health, even when compared to other at-risk groups (e.g., youth who had been abused or who were living in poverty). LGB youth were among the least likely to have post-secondary educational aspirations (64% planned to attend college or university) and among the most likely to self-harm (58%).

Furthermore, LGB youth were seven times more likely than heterosexual youth to attempt suicide in the past 12 months (28% vs. 4%), and lesbian and bisexual females reported much lower rates of good or excellent health (58% vs. 84% of heterosexual females).

Promoting positive mental health among LGB youth

Support networks

Supportive and caring relationships are important in developing positive mental health. Gay or bisexual males who had an adult in their family to talk to if they had a problem were less likely to report considering suicide in the past year than their peers who did not have this support (24% vs. 50%).

Compared to the overall population, LGB youth who were experiencing challenges in their lives were often more likely to seek support from a variety of sources, yet were less likely to feel that the support they received was helpful. For example, 42% of LGB youth asked a school counsellor for help (compared to 27% of heterosexual students), but only 51% found the support helpful (compared to 67% of heterosexual youth).

This summary profile of the mental health of lesbian, gay or bisexual youth is one of 8 fact sheets that accompany the report, *Making the right connections* (2011), all of which can be downloaded at www.mcs.bc.ca.

Extracurricular activities

LGB students were less likely than other youth to play sports on a weekly basis. However, gay or bisexual males were more likely than heterosexual males to do art, music, drama and dance classes; and lesbian or bisexual females were more likely to have a hobby than their straight peers (68% vs. 56%).

In addition, involvement in dance or aerobic activities was associated with having a positive body image. For example, gay or bisexual males who engaged in these activities on a weekly basis were three times more likely than their gay or bisexual peers who participated less frequently to report being very satisfied with how their body looked (31% vs. 10%).

Skills and competencies

Having a sense of competence can promote self-esteem and general mental health, and can help to build resilience among vulnerable youth. Feeling skilled in a trade such as car mechanics or woodworking was not associated with positive mental health in the general population, but was linked to lower reports of suicidal ideation, suicide attempts and extreme despair among LGB youth.

Being skilled in school-based subjects was linked to fewer reports of extreme despair. Among sexual minority females those who

reported school-based competencies were more likely than those who did not to have post-secondary educational aspirations (82% vs. 61%). Furthermore, gay or bisexual males who felt that they were skilled at school-based subjects were more likely than gay or bisexual males without these skills to report good or excellent health and to always feel safe at school.

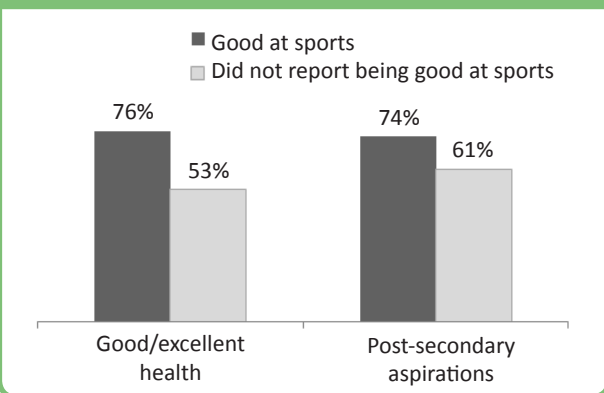
Family and school connectedness

For sexual minority youth, being connected to family and school were strongly associated with an increased likelihood of reporting higher self-esteem. In addition, for gay or bisexual males, the chances of having education goals beyond high school were also strongly associated with school connectedness.

Youth engagement

Feeling that they had a voice in their activities or that their activities were meaningful to them was protective for youth. For lesbian and bisexual females particularly, the likelihood of having plans to attend college or university were greater if they were involved in very meaningful activities than if they were involved in activities that they felt were not meaningful (73% vs. 36%).

Feeling competent at sports linked to positive health and post-secondary educational aspirations (among sexual minority females)



Youth's response to the data

Youth made a number of suggestions for changes to their schools in order to make them more supportive of LGB youth, including increasing non-heterosexual content in programs, developing active Gay Straight Alliances, encouraging teachers to use more neutral language, supporting teachers who are allies and having identified youth and adult allies available.

Outside of school, youth reported that there should be more LGBTQ drop-in centres and that professionals and community members should be trained to offer support to sexual minority youth.



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