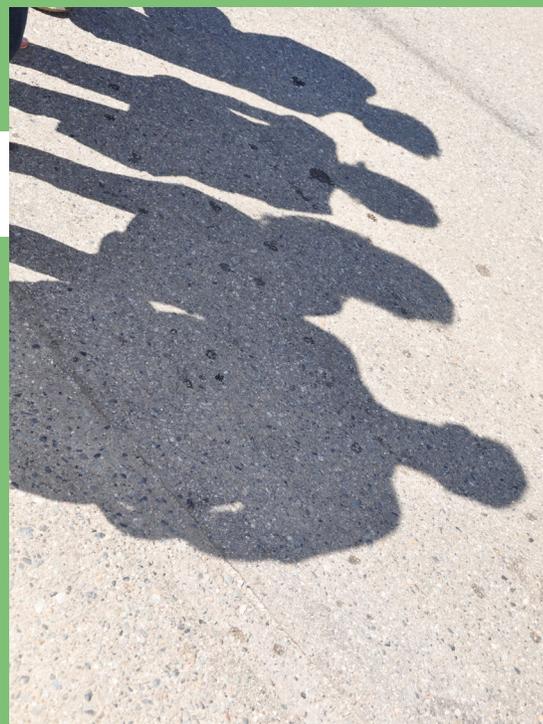


# Making the Right Connections: Promoting positive mental health among BC youth

## Focus on youth who had been sexually abused

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 youth who had been sexually abused.



Six percent of males and 16% of females had been sexually abused. Male and female youth who experienced any form of sexual abuse reported less positive mental health than those who had not been abused, including higher rates of stress, despair, self-harm and suicidal thoughts and suicide attempts. For example, suicide attempts in the past year were seven times more likely among students who had been sexually abused (21% vs. 3% of non-abused students).

Sexually abused youth were also less likely than non-abused youth to report positive indicators of health, including good or excellent general health (71% vs. 86%), feeling safe at school (29% vs. 43%), and planning to continue their education beyond high school (70% vs. 79%). Females who had been sexually abused were also less likely to have a positive body image, although this was not the case for males.

The definition of sexual abuse used in the analysis includes youth who directly reported that they had been sexually abused, as well as those who had been forced to have sex against their will or had sex at 12 years old or younger.

## Promoting positive mental health among youth who had been sexually abused

### Support networks

Supportive and caring relationships are important in developing positive mental health. Among youth who had been sexually abused, having supportive and helpful friends was associated with improved outcomes, including a lower likelihood of self-harm (39% vs. 53%), and a greater chance of having post secondary education plans (73% vs. 62%).

This summary profile of the mental health of youth who had been sexually abused 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](http://www.mcs.bc.ca).

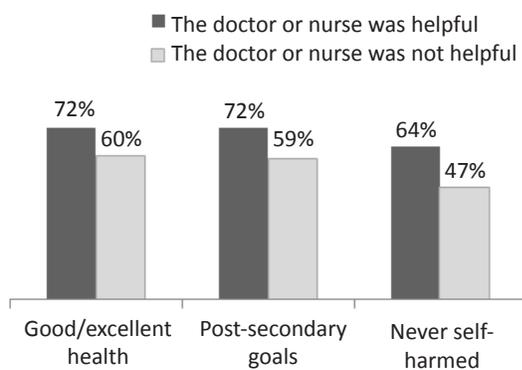
Adults also played an important role in promoting positive mental health. Twenty-one percent of sexually abused females with an adult in their family to talk to when they have a problem had considered suicide, compared to 47% of those who did not have that support. Additionally, having a supportive adult outside of the family was associated with lower rates of considering suicide (29% vs. 37%) and higher self-esteem.

Sexually abused youth were more likely than youth without an abuse history to have asked a variety of professionals (such as school counsellors or teachers) for help, but were less likely to find these resources helpful. Nevertheless, when professionals were helpful, there were positive links to mental health. For example, sexually abused youth who found a doctor or nurse to be supportive were more likely to feel good about themselves and their health, to have post-secondary goals, and were less likely to have self-harmed compared to their peers who did not find the support helpful.

### Extracurricular activities

Although sexually abused students were less likely to be participating in weekly sports, males who were involved in informal sports reported higher self-esteem and decreased thoughts of suicide (24% vs. 42%), and females taking dance or aerobics classes reported higher self-esteem than their abused peers not engaged in these activities.

Positive mental health among sexually abused youth who asked a doctor or nurse for help



### Family and school connectedness

Among abused youth, family connectedness was one of the most important protective factors for higher self-esteem. For sexually abused females, school connectedness was the strongest predictor of good or excellent health. Sexually abused males who were highly connected to school were over ten times as likely to have post-secondary aspirations as those who were least connected.

### Youth engagement

Sexually abused students were less likely to feel engaged in their activities. However, for abused females, those who felt that their ideas were listened to in their activities reported higher rates of good or excellent general health (82% vs. 47%) and lower rates of suicidal thoughts (22% vs. 53%) than those who did not feel listened to; and for both genders youth engagement was linked to post-secondary educational goals (77% vs. 49%).

### Youth's response to the data

Youth reported that there was a high level of shame and stigma attached to being sexually abused. Abused students found it difficult to trust people, and as a result, had a hard time building positive relationships with peers or adults, and felt unsupported by adults.

Youth suggested ensuring that all sexually abused youth had strong support networks in place (including access to help in a crisis). They also recommended providing more information to young people about sexual abuse so that they could recognize and identify abuse, and would know how to report it and access help.



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