

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

Focus on youth with an unstable home life

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 living in unstable housing.



Eight percent of males and females had an unstable home life. When compared to youth without these experiences, youth with an unstable home life were more likely to report extreme stress (24% vs. 13%), despair (14% vs. 5%), a mental or emotional health condition (7% vs. 3%), to self-harm (30% vs. 16%), to consider suicide (23% vs. 11%) or attempt suicide (17% vs. 4%).

Furthermore, having an unstable home life lowered the likelihood that youth would report good or excellent health (74% vs. 85% of youth with a more stable background) or have post-secondary aspirations (64% vs. 79%). For females it also reduced the likelihood that they would feel safe at school. Only one in three reported that they always felt safe at school compared to 41% of females from more stable backgrounds.

Youth who had run away from home or had moved on three or more occasions in the past year were considered to have an unstable home life.

Promoting positive mental health among youth with an unstable home life

Support networks

Youth who were living in unstable housing were often more likely to seek out support from a variety of professional sources than the overall population, yet they were less likely to feel that the support they received was helpful. For example, youth with an unstable home life reported higher rates of asking a school counsellor for help when compared to their peers without this challenge (43% vs. 28%). However, they were less likely to find the support helpful (55% vs. 67%).

This summary profile of the mental health of youth with an unstable home life 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.

Having an adult inside or outside the family who young people can talk to if they have a serious problem is a key form of support. Among youth with an unstable home life, those who had an adult in their family they could confide in were less likely to have considered suicide in the past year.

Peer relationships are also important, and were the most sought after source of support by youth with an unstable home life. Additionally, having peers who had pro-social attitudes and disapproved of potentially risky behaviours was associated with higher self-esteem for these youth.

Family and school connectedness

Family connectedness was strongly associated with a lower likelihood of considering suicide in the past year, and emerged as one of the most important protective factors for good or excellent health and for self-esteem. Like family connectedness, school connectedness was a prominent and consistent protective factor for positive mental health among youth with an unstable home life.

Skills and competencies

Among youth who came from an unstable home life, feeling competent at sports, school subjects, arts, music, dance or interpersonal relationships were all linked to at least one positive mental health indicator for both males and females. However, those who reported that they had good listening skills were less likely to report high self-esteem than youth from similar

circumstances who did not report relational skills as a strength (34% vs. 41%). Perhaps this reflects the idea, shared by youth in focus groups, that taking on too much responsibility at a young age has a negative impact on young people's mental health.

Youth engagement

Feeling engaged and valued within the activities they were involved in was one of the more important protective factors for post-secondary educational aspirations for youth with an unstable home life. For example, 71% of those who felt that their ideas were listened to 'a lot' within their activities had post-secondary aspirations compared to only 44% who felt their ideas were not listened to at all.

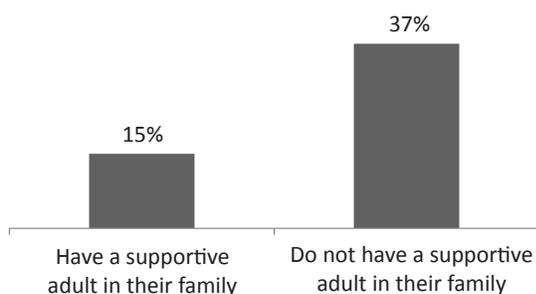
Youth's response to the data

Youth talked about how difficult it was to function in a school setting when they were dealing with disruptions in their home life. Those who had experienced unstable housing described the connection between having a place to call home and mental health, and linked their home life to poor health, binge drinking, and suicide attempts. They reported using alcohol as a way to help them cope with their housing problems, but that this compounded any mental health problems they may have.

Youth suggested targeting vulnerable families for support before youth have to leave home or go into government care. They also suggested improving conditions and training at group homes and foster placements so that these provide a supportive home environment.

At school, youth suggested offering a quiet and calm place for students to do their school work if they are too distracted by problems at home to sit in a classroom, and to offer homework clubs or other services to maintain a connection to school.

Considered suicide in the past year
(among youth who lived in unstable housing)



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