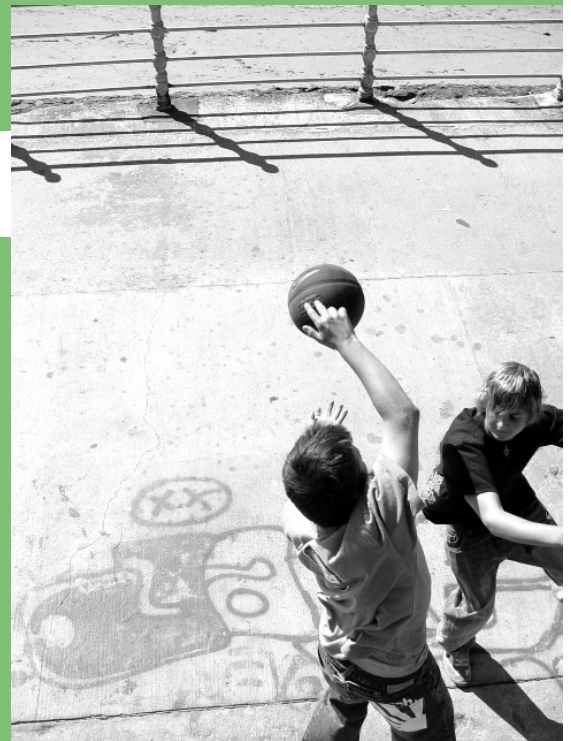


Making the Right Connections: Promoting positive mental health among BC youth

Focus on youth living in poverty

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 poverty.



The AHS likely underestimated the extent to which young people were living in households where poverty is a major concern, but was helpful at establishing the percentage of youth living in such extreme poverty that they went to bed hungry because there was not enough money for food at home.

Two percent of youth often or always went to bed hungry because there was not enough money for food at home. Youth who went to bed hungry experienced many challenges to their mental health and were among the least likely to report good or excellent health. They were also less likely to feel safe at school and over four times more likely to report a mental or emotional health condition (14% vs. 3% not living in this sort of poverty). They were also three times more likely to have considered suicide (34% vs. 11%) and over five times more likely to have attempted suicide (28% vs. 5%) in the past year.

Promoting positive mental health among youth living in poverty

Support networks

Eighty-one percent of youth who went to bed hungry because there was not enough money at home for food had found their friends to be supportive and helpful when they approached them with a problem. This rate is slightly lower than for youth overall. However, friends were still rated by these youth to be the most helpful source of support they received.

With regards to professional support, youth living in poverty reported higher rates of asking a school counsellor for help when compared to their peers who did not live in poverty. However, they were less likely to find the support helpful. Youth who reported finding the support of professionals (such as teachers, youth workers, doctors or nurses) helpful were more likely to report feeling good about themselves, to have good or excellent general health and to have post-secondary aspirations and less likely

This summary profile of the mental health of youth living in poverty 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.

to report self-harming than youth who approached these professionals for help but did not find it useful.

Extracurricular activities

Living in poverty limited youth's participation in some extracurricular activities such as weekly organized sports. Only 43% who went to bed hungry played organized sports and 55% played informal sports, compared to 60% and 69%, respectively, who were not affected by poverty to this level.

However, despite these challenges, there were mental health benefits to being involved. For example, among females who were living in poverty, those who took part in weekly clubs or groups were more likely than those who did not to rate their health as good or excellent (61% vs. 43%). Weekly participation in organized sports was associated with fewer males in poverty considering suicide and more females planning to move on to further education after high school. Furthermore, males living in poverty who were involved in dance or aerobic activities were twice as likely as their less-involved peers to report a positive body image.

Skills and competencies

Youth living in poverty have less access to sports activities. Yet those who did feel they had developed sporting skills reported higher self-esteem (37% vs. 22%), reduced rates of mental health conditions (7% vs. 16%), greater likelihood of having post-secondary educational aspirations and lower rates of self-harm and suicidality, when compared to peers who did not report these skills.

Also, feeling competent at school-related subjects was linked to post-secondary educational aspirations for males. Eighty-three percent of those who went to bed hungry but excelled in school-based skills planned to continue their education through university or college, compared to 45% of males who did not feel skilled in this area.

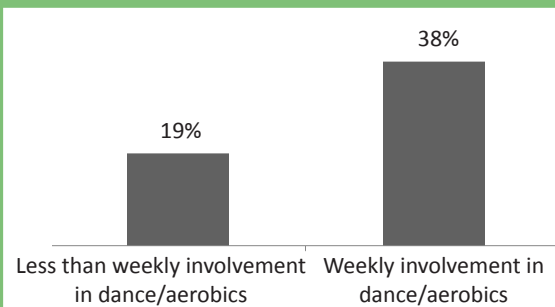
Family and school connectedness

Family connectedness was an important protective factor for many groups of youth, and was strongly associated with having post-secondary aspirations for females living in poverty. For males living in poverty, school connectedness contributed even more to reducing their odds of considering suicide than family connectedness.

Youth engagement

Having input into their activities and feeling that their activities were meaningful was an important factor in promoting positive mental health for young people. Males living in poverty who had input into their activities were five times more likely than those who did not feel that their voice was heard, to report good or excellent health.

Positive body image by weekly dance/aerobics (among males living in poverty)



Youth's response to the data

Youth recognized that poverty was a barrier for young people accessing extracurricular activities and healthy foods. They linked poor nutrition to difficulties concentrating, mood and other mental health concerns. For some youth in poverty, there was added stress from needing to contribute to family income and this pressure made it difficult to focus on their own goals and enjoy their youth.

Youth suggested providing additional support to young people who are living on their own or supporting family members, and to offer more free programs and community sporting activities.



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