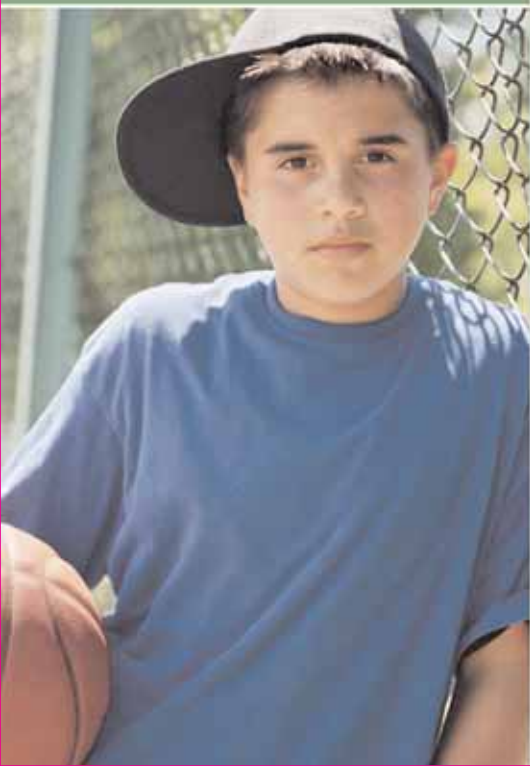




# Middle Childhood Inside and Out: The Psychological and Social World of Children 9 - 12





# RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

## A University of British Columbia/ United Way of the Lower Mainland Report March 2007



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# Why Focus on Middle Childhood?

Evidence is mounting that middle childhood development (children 6 to 12) is a more powerful predictor of adolescent adjustment and success than is early childhood development. Middle childhood is a time of great opportunity to optimize health and promote development.

## INTRODUCTION

During middle childhood out-of-home environments have an increasing influence on children's developmental pathways (Bianchi et al., 1997).<sup>1</sup> The average child in their middle years has approximately *67 hours of discretionary time* each week, which is more time than they spend in school.

### A TIME OF CHANGE AND CHALLENGES

Children today live in a different world than in previous generations. There are some core reasons for focusing on children in their middle years:

- Middle childhood represents a unique and critical developmental period in which important competencies are developed.
- Most children develop and grow into healthy teens and experience a productive and rewarding middle childhood period.

### AT THE SAME TIME...

- Changes in family composition, mobility, and parental employment have led to decreases in the family and community supports available to children than in previous decades. According to a recent report from the Canadian Council on Social Development (2001), 80% of mothers of school-aged children are in the work force. Over the last two decades this percentage increased by 42%, with most of the increase occurring during the 1980s.
- An increasing number of children are experiencing mental health problems that emerge during the middle childhood years.
- In Canada, a significant number of children in these years have been identified as being "at risk" for poor present and long-term outcomes.
- It is during middle childhood that many problems arise, that left unchecked, will become exacerbated as children move into adolescence.

<sup>1</sup> Bianchi, S. M., & Robinson, R. (1997). *What did you do today? Children's use of time, family composition, and the acquisition of social capital. Journal of Marriage and the Family, 59, 332-344.*

**In British Columbia in 2005, there were nearly 400,000 school-age children in Kindergarten to Grade 7. Almost 200,000 of these children were enrolled in Grades 4 to 7 (Information Department, BC Ministry of Education, 2005).**

What are the psychological and social experiences of children in Canada during the middle childhood years? How do they feel about themselves, their families, their peers, their schools, and their neighbourhoods? How do they spend their time during the after school hours? Are they enrolled in structured after school programs, such as lessons or team sports? Or do they just hang out with friends? Do their relationships with other adults in their expanding social world matter? Do parents still matter? And what is the relationship between children's time use during the after-school hours and their self awareness, social competence, health, and well-being?

To date, few data have been available in Canada documenting children's experiences both in and out of school of children during the middle childhood years.

Research, funded by United Way of the Lower Mainland and led by Dr. Kimberly Schonert-Reichl, is providing a first look at the after-school lives of children. Through this research, we are hearing our children's voices for the first time in Canada on this subject.

**This highlights document provides the key findings from the survey and draws some brief conclusions. It is a prelude to a larger and more detailed discussion that will be presented in a full research report prepared by Dr. Kimberley Schonert-Reichl of the University of British Columbia (UBC).**

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY: A BRIEF SUMMARY:

This study is based on a large (1,266 children) stratified random sample of 4th to 7th Grades (9 - 12 years old) drawn from seven school districts located throughout the Lower Mainland region of B.C. It was conducted via written surveys of about 90 minutes in length, focusing on obtaining children's self reports about their social and emotional development along with their experiences with families, friends, schools, and neighbourhoods. Additionally, the research collected data about children's after-school experiences via a daily diary of about 30 minutes in length, focusing in detail on children's time use the previous day. The study also surveyed more than 700 (711) parents who completed a one-page questionnaire in which they were asked to report their general levels of satisfaction with their child's after school time use as well as the barriers they perceived to accessing opportunities for their child during after-school time.

### HOW TO READ THESE HIGHLIGHTS:

- These highlights provide you with a glimpse of the in-depth data included in the full research report.
- Some charts make use of an "average rating." This rating is calculated by attributing a low score to less positive ratings and higher scores to positive and very positive ratings. These ratings are averaged to provide a single score that reflect relative significance.
- In each section, you will find charts that have been used to reflect on the finding described. It is very important to remember that these charts are not sufficient to reflect on the depth of data that has been collected. The chart provides you with a visual representation and you should refer to the full research report for more detail and a more comprehensive analysis.

### FOUR DIMENSIONS OF MIDDLE CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT:

Reflecting the important developmental tasks and contexts that characterize the middle childhood years, data collected cover four critical components:

- Social Emotional Competence
- School Experiences
- Physical Health and Well-Being
- Connectedness with Parents, Peers, School, and Community





# How are our children doing?

## CONNECTEDNESS: I HAVE PEOPLE IN MY LIFE WHO I CARE ABOUT AND WHO CARE ABOUT ME.

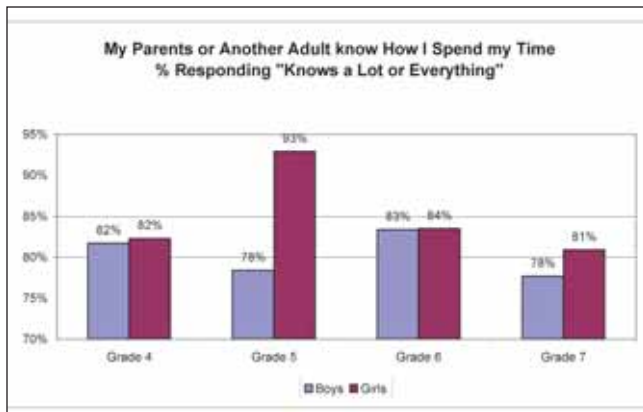
What does this mean? Connectedness refers to a child's feelings of being loved and feeling connected to a network of support.

### PARENT CONNECTEDNESS

As children move toward the end of the first decade of life, they begin spending more unsupervised time with friends and peers than they had before. Time with peers increases, especially the amount of time spent with peers after school. Parental monitoring - or the knowledge of and involvement in their child's friendships, activities, and time use - is considered to be one of the most important parenting practices during the late childhood and the early adolescent years. Research finds that adequate parental monitoring fosters autonomy while simultaneously protecting early adolescents.

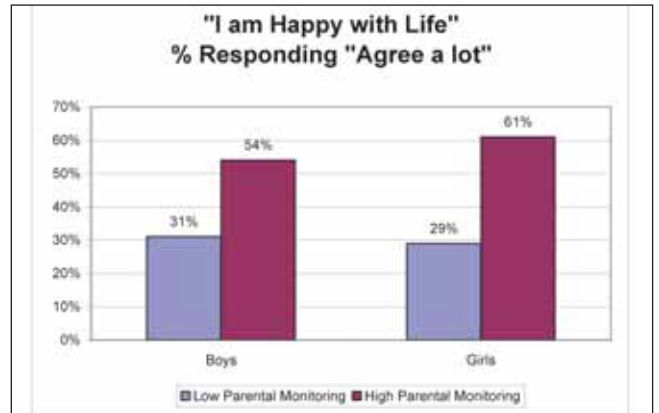
**FINDING: Chart 1** describes how, as children progress from Grade 4 to Grade 7, parents generally know less about how/where they are spending their time. Our research also demonstrates that parents of boys are less likely to know how their children spend their time than parents of girls.

Chart 1



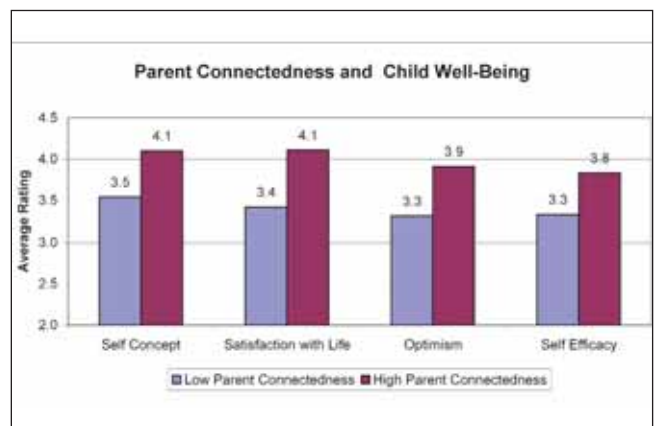
**FINDING: Chart 2** shows that children who experience higher levels of parental monitoring tend to have higher levels of reported well-being.

Chart 2



**FINDING: Chart 3** describes the relationships between children's reported sense of social emotional competence and parental connectedness. Children's social and emotional health indicators are higher on every measure with higher levels of parental connectedness.

Chart 3

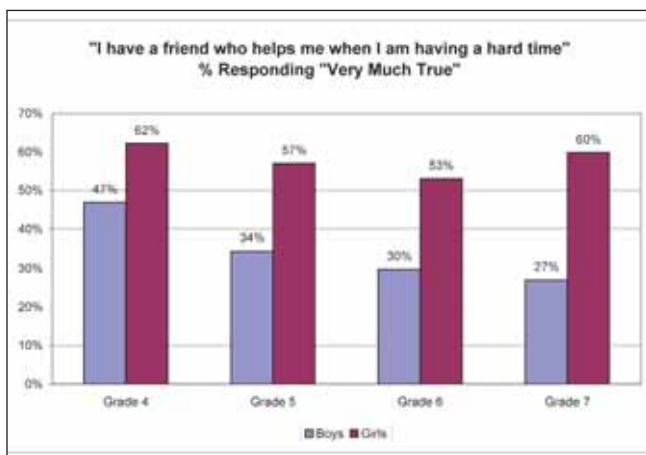


**PEER CONNECTEDNESS**

We know that children associate more with peers as they age. We also know as children get older they see friendship differently. Quality of friendship (having a friend who cares, talks to them, and helps with problems) becomes more important than quantity.

**FINDING: Chart 4** describes that for girls, the quality of their friendships remains fairly stable. Boys report a steady decline in the quality of their friendships from grades 4 to 7.

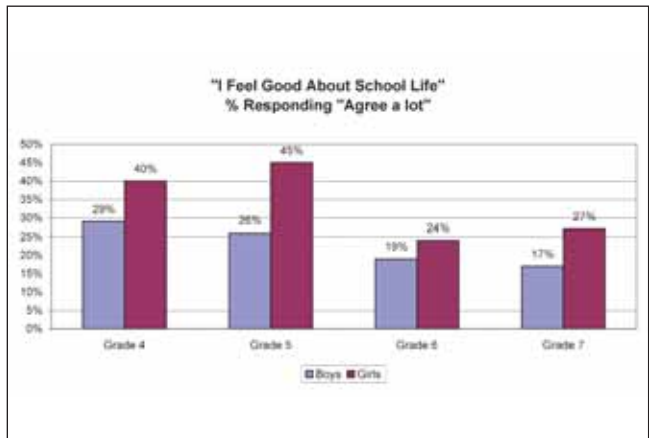
**Chart 4**



**SCHOOL CONNECTEDNESS**

**FINDING: Chart 5** shows that just as children are being asked to perform at a higher level at school, they are beginning to feel less of a sense of belonging to their schools. Again, this trend is more marked for boys than girls.

**Chart 5**

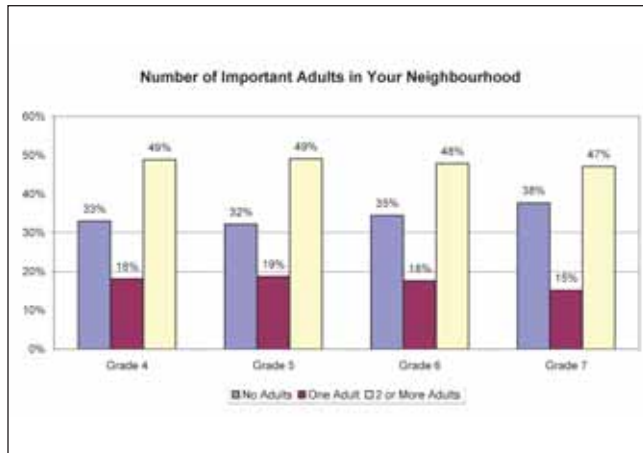


### COMMUNITY CONNECTEDNESS

Children reported consistently higher levels of well-being, against every measure, the greater the number of adults they can identify in their community as knowing or caring about them. The research asked children a range of questions related to connectedness to adults in the community, from knowledge of programs to places to go if you have problems.

**FINDING:** Chart 6 describes children’s responses to one aspect of community connection: identification of adults in the community. We know from research that the more adults with whom children could identify, the better their social and emotional health. The research shows that close to 50% of children (a consistent level across all grades) indicated more than two important adults, whereas almost one-third could not identify any.

Chart 6



A surprising number of children, approximately 32% of Grade 7 students, said that they did not know of organizations in their community that provide programs for them. A further 56% of Grade 7 students said they did not know of organizations which could help them in time of need.

### WHY IS CONNECTEDNESS IMPORTANT?

Parents matter: this is not the time to be pushing our children away but keeping them close and staying engaged in their lives. Parents need to know where their children are, care about how they spend their time and who they spend their time with.

Connectedness to schools provides children with a strong foundation: we know that the more adults in school children can look to for help, the higher their level of well-being.

Community connections ground children and give a sense of belonging that can help to counteract challenges in their lives. It is possible to create neighbourhoods and communities where children are valued, where their voices are heard and where they feel safe.



## SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL HEALTH: I FEEL GOOD ABOUT MYSELF AND CARE ABOUT OTHERS

### What does this mean?

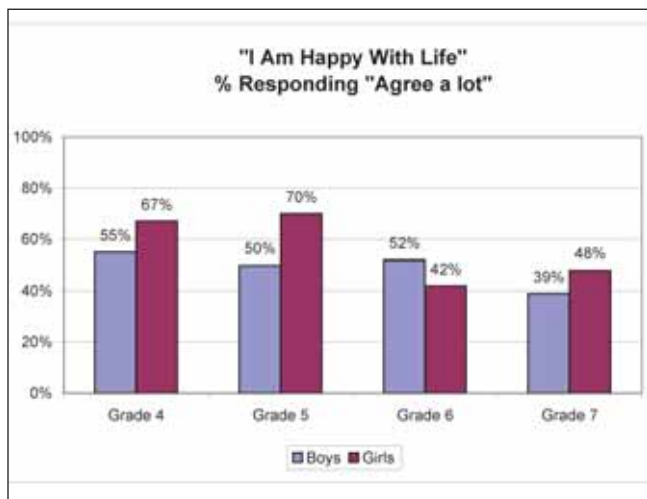
How a child feels about him or herself, levels of self esteem, satisfaction with life, and overall outlook are common elements of social and emotional health. These are often key indicators of a child’s overall health and well-being.

The following section covers a few of these indicators with significantly more detail on this topic being provided in the final research report. It is important to note that generally speaking, children’s social and emotional health is high.

### SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL HEALTH FROM GRADE 4 TO 7: A TREND

**FINDING: Chart 7** shows that there is a consistent downward trend in children’s social and emotional health from Grade 4 to Grade 7. We can also clearly see that this is more pronounced for boys than for girls. The research asked children whether they were “happy with their life.” By Grade 7, less than 50% of both boys and girls say they “agree a lot” with the statement, and for boys, the percentage drops below 40%. This finding is consistent with research that shows that girls are generally more optimistic than boys.

Chart 7



### WHAT IS “SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY?”

The term socially responsible behaviour highlights the importance of internalization, taking over the values and attitudes of society as one’s own so that socially acceptable behavior is motivated not by anticipation of external consequences but by intrinsic or internal factors.

Children’s composite responses to a series of questions that relate to “social responsibility” have been used to indicate their overall social awareness and responsibility.

**FINDING: Charts 8 and 9** below show that although levels of social responsibility are relatively high, we can also see that they drop consistently as children near Grade 7 and this trend is particularly marked for boys.

Chart 8

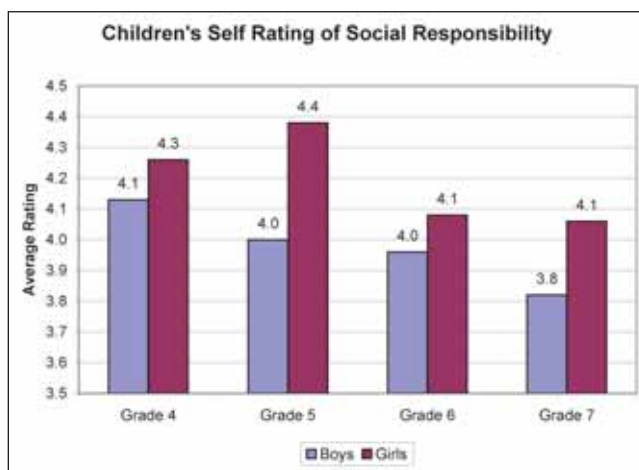
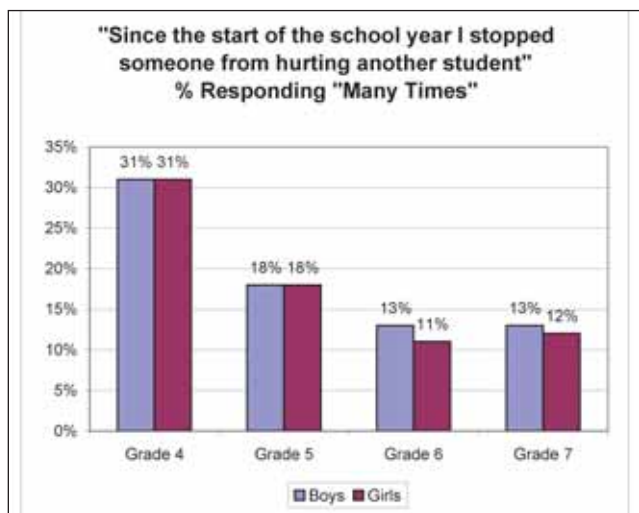


Chart 9



### WHY IS SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL HEALTH IMPORTANT?

Strong social and emotional health is linked to overall child well-being and provides a foundation for adolescence. Children with higher levels of social and emotional health do better as they make the transition to middle or to secondary school.

It is possible to be intentional about building systems and programs that can stabilize children’s declining social and emotional health so that they are better prepared to enter their teen years. Out-of-school, as well as school programs and activities can play an important role in maintaining and promoting social and emotional health.

## BODY IMAGE: HOW I SEE MYSELF

### What does this mean?

The research asked children a number of questions that relate to body size and how they perceive this in a social context. In particular, the research focused on whether children believe they are over or under weight and whether they have experienced any teasing related to their physical appearance.

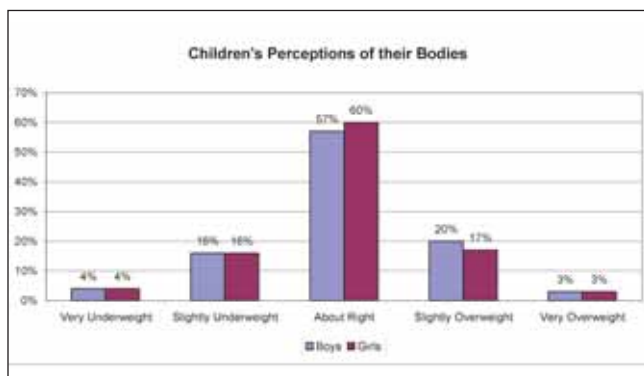
Health Canada defines body image as “the picture an individual has of his or her body, what it looks like in the mirror, and what he or she thinks it looks like to others.” (Health Canada, 1994, p.29)

- body image contributes to broader issues of self esteem and self concept, as well as eating disorders
- girls tend to be most affected by negative body image
- children worry about looking different than their peers
- negative body image means a diminished sense of self worth

The research did not address issues of more general physical health and well-being.

**FINDING: Chart 10** describes children’s responses when asked how they perceived their bodies. Almost 60% of children perceived their bodies to be about right, while fully 20% of boys and girls believed themselves to be overweight to some degree.

Chart 10

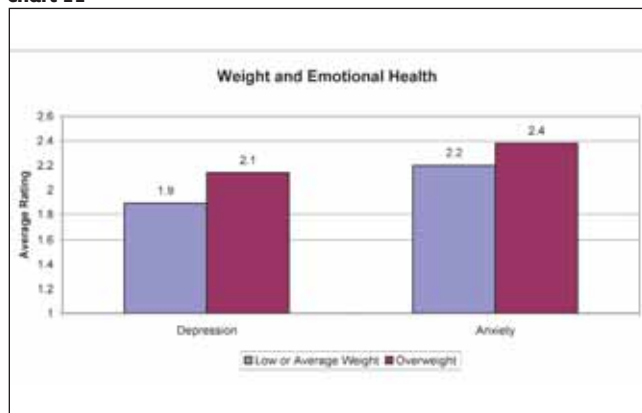


Note: In Canada the proportion of children aged 6–11 years who are overweight/ obese has doubled from 13% in 1978/9 to 26% in 2004.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> CCSD using data from Statistics Canada, Canadian Community Health Survey 2004 and Health Canada Survey 1978/9.

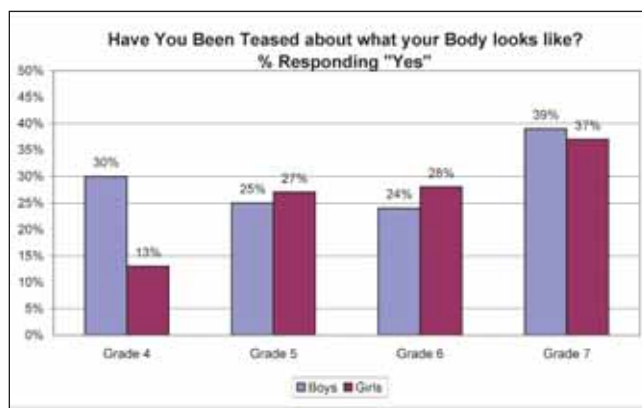
**FINDING: Chart 11** reveals a clear correlation between children’s self-reported perceptions of their bodies and self reports of depression and anxiety. It shows that children reported increased levels of depression and anxiety if they perceived themselves to be overweight.

Chart 11



**FINDING: Chart 12** indicates that nearly one-third of all boys and girls have been teased at some point about what they look like. The chart indicates that teasing goes up from Grade 4 to Grade 7. For girls this increase is more dramatic: in Grade 4, 13% of girls reported being teased about their bodies – by Grade 7, 37% of girls report being teased – a 24% increase. Interestingly, more boys report being teased about their bodies in Grade 7 than girls.

Chart 12



### WHY IS BODY IMAGE IMPORTANT?

There are strong connections between issues of body image and children’s well-being. Parents, educators and other adults can help children develop meaningful ways to feel good about themselves beyond weight and appearance. Children need support to resist the pressure to strive for the “ideal” body image. At home, families can ensure that children learn about how to take care of their bodies and about healthy lifestyles.

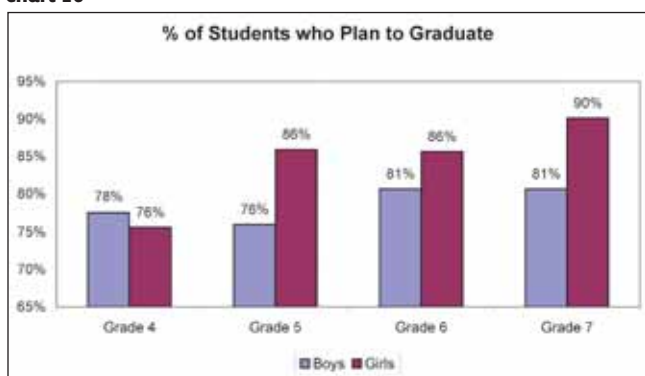
## COMPETENCE: I AM CAPABLE AND FEEL GOOD ABOUT MY FUTURE

### What does this mean?

Competence among school-aged children is defined by a sense of opportunity and achievement in those things at which they strive to do well, most notably school and the feeling of opportunity this creates.

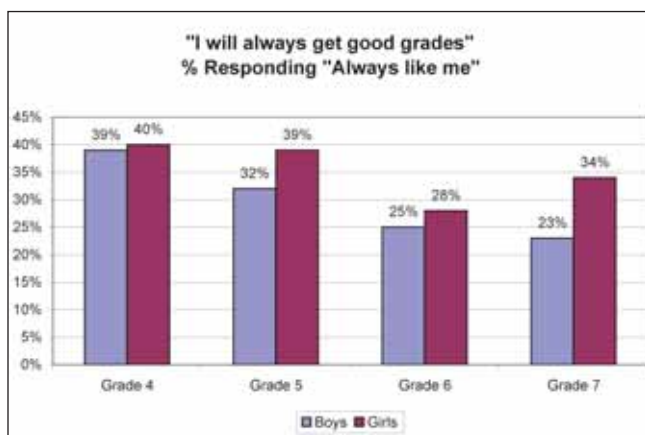
**FINDING: Chart 13** describes children's self reports when asked if they plan to graduate from high school. Most children do plan to graduate from high school and that proportion increases as children get older. However, a noticeable proportion of children self report that they do not intend to graduate. In Grade 7 close to 20% of boys compared to 10% of girls are more likely to consider dropping out.

Chart 13



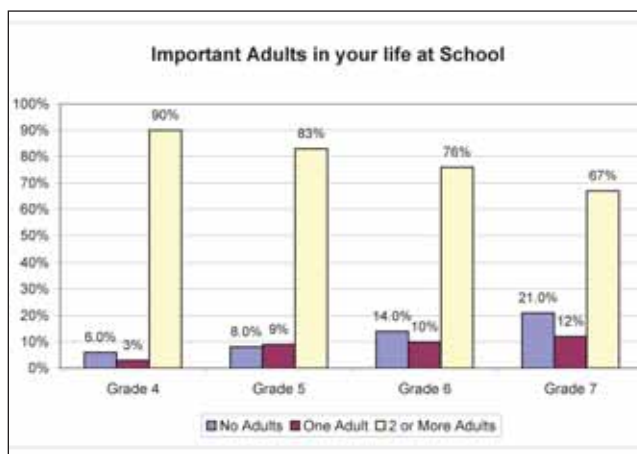
**FINDING: Chart 14** points towards a decreasing sense of school accomplishment by children in their middle years. The downward trend in perceived achievement is particularly true for boys where the percentage who say they get good grades drops from 39% to 23% from Grade 4 to Grade 7. Girls also decline from 40% to 34%.

Chart 14



**FINDING: Chart 15** indicates that as children move from Grade 4 to Grade 7, they also become less likely to identify important adults (to whom they can talk and turn to for help) at school. And this is happening in spite of the fact that we know that attachment to teachers or significant adults in school is connected in a significant way to feelings of self belonging and self worth.

Chart 15



### WHY IS COMPETENCE IMPORTANT?

Developing competency becomes particularly important during middle childhood when children are more heavily engaged in activities that require mastery over something - academics, sports, and music for example. A sense of personal accomplishment, optimism and hope helps to guide young people toward making good choices and toward building confidence as they become teens and adults. Failure to complete school presents a myriad of personal and social implications and costs. In the face of increasing globalization and a knowledge economy, we cannot afford a high secondary incompleteness rate.





# What are our children doing?

## CHILDREN ARE DOING A LOT

One focus of the research study was to record how children spend their after-school time. Fifty per cent of children are engaged in structured after-school activities. The other half are home or in other care arrangements and are more often spending time on sedentary activities that tend to dislocate them socially.

### EXISTING ACTIVITIES

#### Our children are doing a lot in their time outside school (from 3:00 to 6:00pm)

- About 50% of all school-age children in the study reported that they participated in enrichment activities, including sports, lessons, clubs or after-school programs.
- A significant proportion of children reported being engaged in a wide range of technology-related activities, such as on-line computer games, and instant messaging (MSN).
- 71% do their homework (average time = ½ hour to one hour)  
29% of children spend 1 to 2 hours or more on homework
- 35% play sports for fun
- 7% attend an after-school daycare program
- 6% volunteer or help at school

*These tables break down some of these activities by location and by grade.*

Table 1 – Activities at School 3:00pm to 6:00pm					
Grade	Gr. 4	Gr. 5	Gr. 6	Gr. 7	All*
Volunteered at School	1.4%	5.7%	7.4%	6.1%	6.1%
Sports Team Practice/Game	18.7%	15.5%	11.5%	17.6%	15.1%
Music & Drama Activities	8.0%	3.0%	1.7%	2.0%	2.5%

Table 2 – Out-of-School Sports Activities 3:00pm - 6:00pm					
Grade	Gr. 4	Gr. 5	Gr. 6	Gr. 7	All*
Played on a Sports Team	14.9%	13.3%	10.6%	11.9%	11.9%
Individual Sports Lessons	8.0%	9.5%	10.0%	6.5%	8.4%
Did Sports for Fun	34.7%	28.0%	41.3%	34.3%	35.3%
Exercised	37.3%	29.2%	24.0%	29.3%	28.0%

The research also collected data on children's technology use in the evening hours, from 6:00pm to bedtime.

*\*All: percentage is based on a weighted average for participants across all grades*

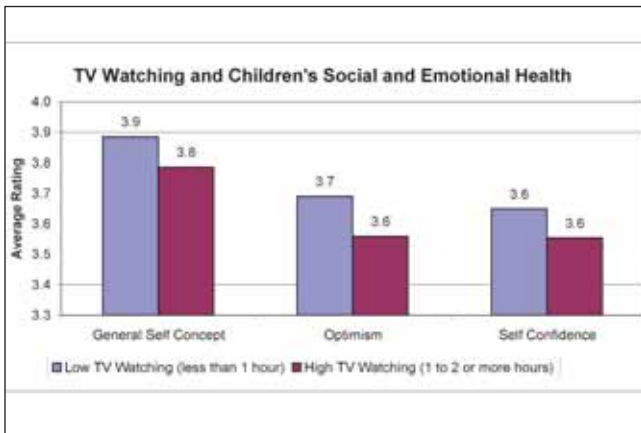
Table 3 – Technology Use 3:00pm - 6:00pm					
Grade	Gr. 4	Gr. 5	Gr. 6	Gr. 7	All*
Television (Including Videos)	64.0%	66.0%	76.8%	79.6%	74.7%
Online Computer Games	29.3%	36.0%	35.9%	41.3%	37.6%
Video /Computer Games	29.3%	27.2%	32.3%	35.8%	32.3%
Instant Messenger	18.7%	23.8%	37.0%	52.3%	38.8%
E-mail	9.5%	17.0%	23.2%	26.1%	22.1%
Homework on the Computer	12.0%	18.5%	20.1%	29.3%	22.7%
Browse the Internet	16.0%	23.4%	34.1%	43.0%	34.0%

Table 4 – Technology Use 6:00pm -bedtime					
Grade	Gr. 4	Gr. 5	Gr. 6	Gr. 7	All*
Television (Including Videos)	68.0%	71.6%	77.6%	82.4%	77.5%
Computer Work or Play	46.7%	61.4%	69.3%	79.2%	69.9%
Video Games	41.3%	41.3%	40.3%	45.6%	42.6%
Instant Message or Chat Online	18.7%	29.3%	47.7%	61.6%	47.2%

### TECHNOLOGY USE AND SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL HEALTH

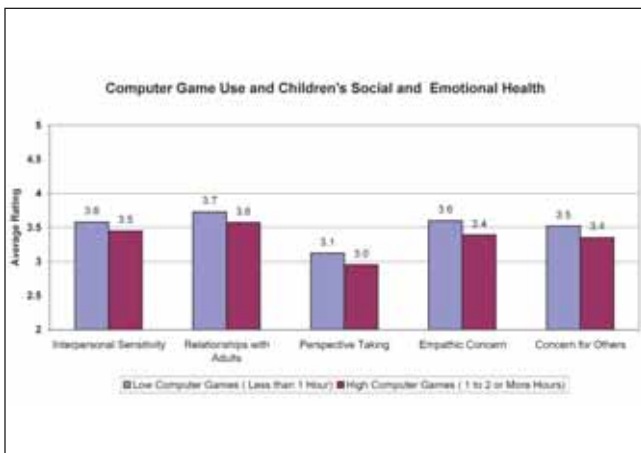
**FINDING: Chart 16** indicates the research finding that children who are engaged in excessive technology use during the after school hours, mainly in the form of on-line computer games and TV viewing, had more negative social and emotional adjustment and well-being than children who did not engage in such excessive technology use.

**Chart 16**



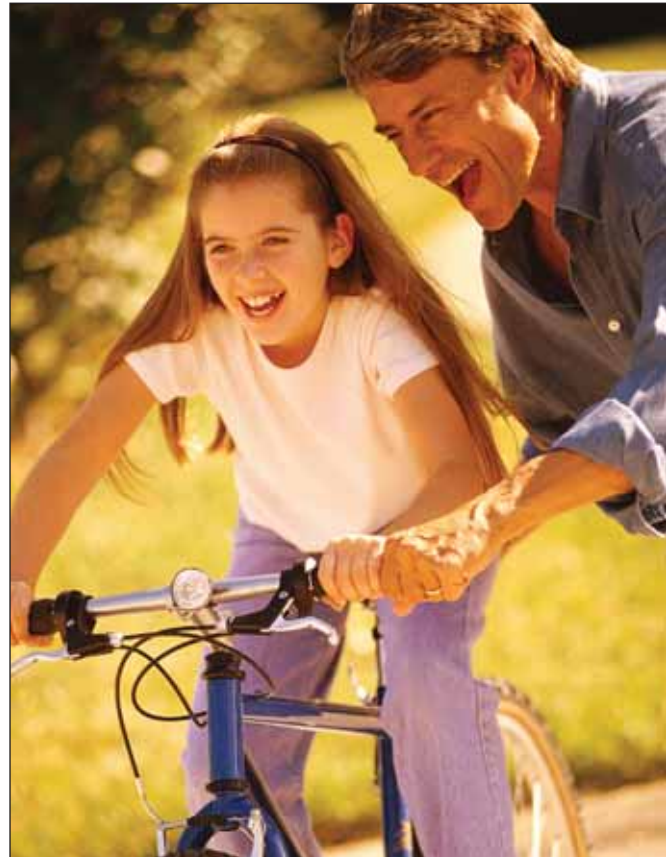
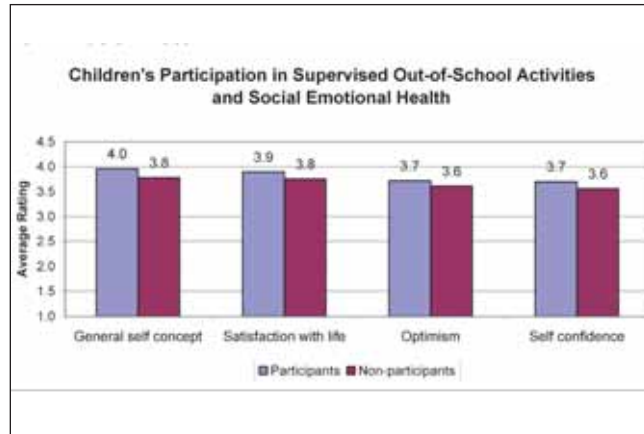
**FINDING: Chart 17** maps the relationship between children's reported levels of social and emotional health and time spent playing on-line computer games. It shows that as game playing increases, "social and interpersonal understanding" decreases.

**Chart 17**



**FINDING: Chart 18** describes a further research finding, that children who engaged in at least one supervised activity during the after-school hours (between 3:00pm to 6:00pm), such as team sports, academic lessons and drama, scored higher across almost all dimensions of psychological and social well-being in contrast to those students who did not or were unable to participate.

**Chart 18**



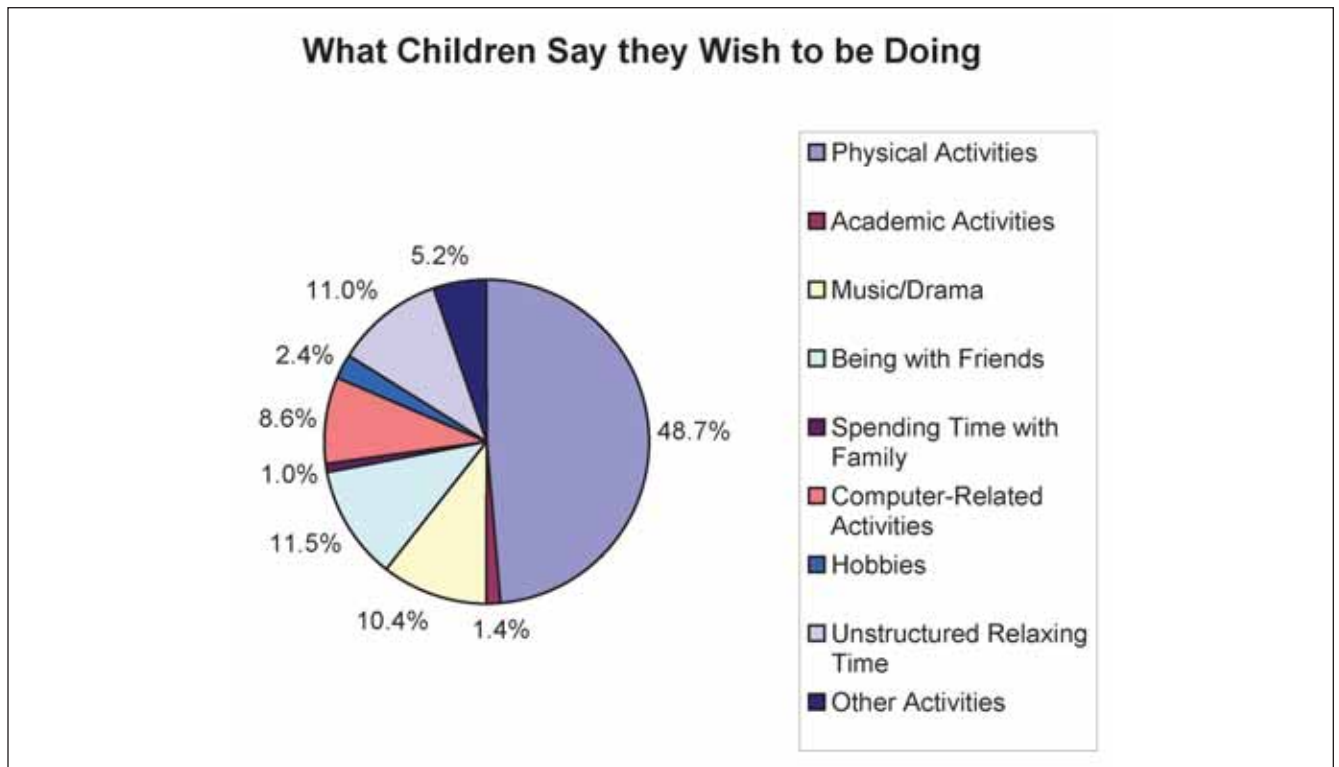


# What children wish to be doing?

## KIDS CRAVE TO BE ACTIVE, CONNECTED AND COMPETENT

Very few children (only 8.5%) in the research study said that they wanted to be spending more time on the computer. No children reported wanting to watch more TV. Indeed, the vast majority of children told us that they want to be engaged in activities that build their competence, their physical health, and their connectedness as shown in Chart 19.

### FINDING: Chart 19



### WHY IS CONSTRUCTIVE TIME USE IMPORTANT?

Children have a natural determination to excel at something and to be socially engaged. Given the chance, it is clear that they would do more of everything. At the same time our world is full of perceptions of children spending time doing things that could be judged to be dangerous or risky. We may be limiting our children based on our perceptions about risk. There is a gap between children's needs/wants and what is currently available. This gap can be filled.

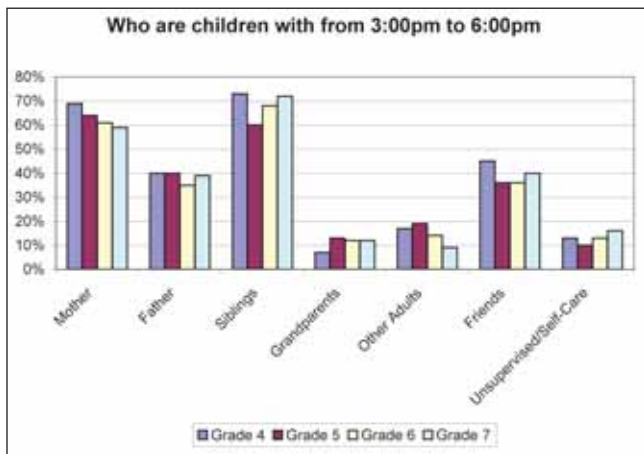
# Who are our children with during their after school hours?

## SOME KIDS WITHOUT ADULT CONTACT AFTER SCHOOL

This research study asked children who they spent time with after school. In many cases, children are with different people at different times from 3:00pm to dinner time.

**FINDING: Chart 20** indicates who children spent most of their time with after school from 3:00 to 6:00pm. Most children spend time with family members: mother, father or siblings. However over 10% of children reported that they are mostly unsupervised by an adult from 3:00 to 6:00pm and this figure rises to 16% in Grade 7.

Chart 20



**FINDING: Charts 21 and 22** provide a perspective on children who are on their own after school either for a portion or for most of the week. Roughly 25% of boys and 20% of girls are home alone for the majority of the week by Grade 7.

Chart 21

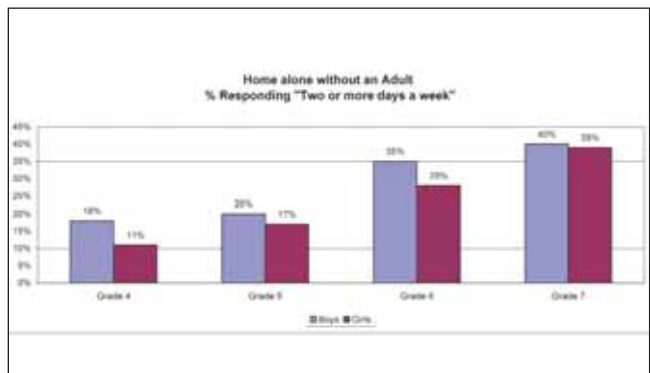
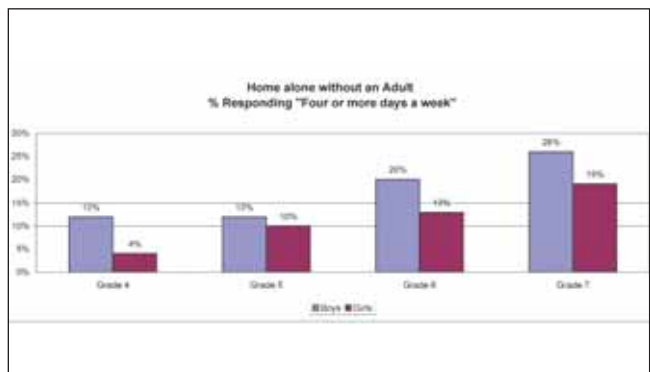


Chart 22



## WHY IS IT IMPORTANT WHO CHILDREN ARE WITH?

At a time when increasing numbers of parents are working, we are seeing significant levels of children alone at home in our communities. This is of concern because we know from our research that although children are beginning to become more independent, contact with adults and particularly attachment to parents remains a critical factor in the healthy development of children.

Children spending time alone also suggests a degree of social isolation and a lack of involvement in developmentally appropriate activities. It is important to consider how we can increase the accessibility of quality care and programs for children and how we ensure that parents have the information they need to get their children involved.



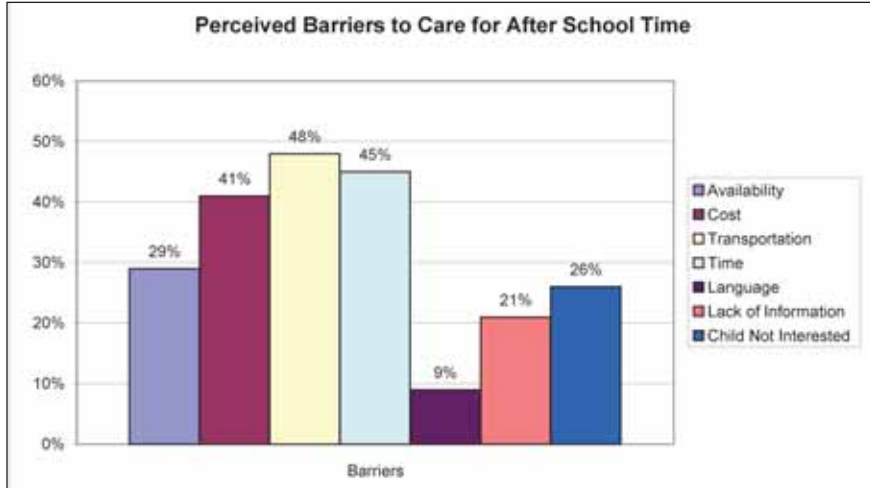
# What do parents think?

## PARENTS FACE MULTIPLE BARRIERS TO OUT-OF-SCHOOL SUPPORT

The research study involved several focus groups that asked parents about their experiences in accessing care for their child and involving them in developmentally appropriate activities. Specifically, they were asked about barriers to the involvement of their child in activities during out-of-school hours.

**FINDING: Chart 23** describes the barriers that parents report experiencing. The most significant barriers to children’s involvement from a parental perspective were transportation, time availability and cost.

Chart 23



**The research found that many of the parents who responded to the survey report multiple barriers to their child’s involvement:**

- 37% of parents report a single barrier to participation
- 63% of parent experience multiple barriers - two or more

With respect to levels of satisfaction with how their children spend their after-school time parents indicated:

- 30% - “Very Satisfied”
- 40% - “Somewhat Satisfied”
- 15% - “Neutral”
- 15% - “Very Dissatisfied” or “Somewhat Dissatisfied”

Parents were asked about program availability. Fully 20% of parents indicated that programs or services for their children during the out of school hours are not available in their community. Twenty one per cent indicated that there was a lack of information about the services offered for children in their community.

# Final Words

Erik Erikson (1959)<sup>3</sup> characterized this phase in life as a time of “industry” – a time when a child’s attention is directed at acquiring new competencies and skills and learning how to get along with others, including their peers and adults across a variety of contexts. In Erikson’s conceptualization of middle childhood, adults play a pivotal role in helping children develop a sense of industry. If adults provide tasks for children that are perceived to be interesting and worthwhile and they believe that they can accomplish, children are more likely to develop a sense of their competency. If they are not provided with opportunities to learn skills in supportive and

caring contexts, they can then develop a sense of inferiority and incompetence. Erikson argued that it is during this time that the radius of significant relations moves beyond that of the basic family to the neighbourhood and school. There is a much broader social sphere at work now. Parents and family are joined by teachers and peers and other members of the community at large in influencing a child’s development during this time period.

<sup>3</sup> Erikson, E. H. (1959). *Identity and the Life Cycle in Psychological Issues (monograph)*. Vol. 1 No. 1 New York: International Universities Press.

## FOUR KEY FINDINGS OF OUR RESEARCH

### Key Finding 1:

Children benefit significantly from participating in structured activities during the after school hours.

### Key Finding 2:

Children who engage in excessive use of technology during the after school hours consistently report being less happy and competent than their peers.

### Key Finding 3:

Parents matter, even in middle childhood. Children’s connections to their parents are central to their development. Children entering adolescence still function best if they experience high parent connectedness.

### Key Finding 4:

Relationships with peers and adults in the school and community are important in fostering children’s social and emotional competence.



# BEYOND THE HIGHLIGHTS

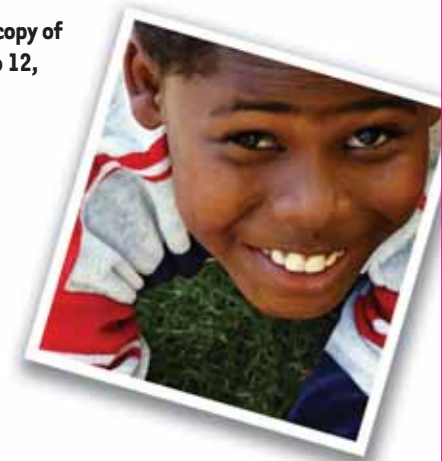
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The full report is scheduled for release in April. There are several ways to get your own copy of  
**Middle Childhood Inside and Out: The Psychological and Social World of Children 9 to 12,**  
**a University of British Columbia/United Way of the Lower Mainland Report**  
prepared by Dr. Kimberly Schonert-Reichl:

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**Middle Childhood Matters** is a major strategic initiative of the United Way of the Lower Mainland.  
United Way is committed to working with children in their middle years as a priority. Over the next  
few years this will translate into funding for programs and services that serve children 6 to 12.

It will also involve a significant investment of time, energy and funding in strategic activities that advance  
our knowledge of children and their needs; that convene learning opportunities for service delivery agencies,  
funders and policy-makers; and involve the community in making forward-looking strategic  
decisions about how United Way can support children most effectively.

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