



**Growing Up
in Ireland**
National Longitudinal
Study of Children

Cohort '08
Nov. 2018

GROWING UP IN IRELAND

KEY FINDINGS: COHORT '08 AT 9 YEARS OLD



NO.4

RELATIONSHIPS & SOCIO-EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING

INTRODUCTION

Growing Up in Ireland is the national longitudinal study of children designed to inform policy affecting children and their families. The study follows two cohorts of children, born roughly a decade apart. The families of **Cohort '08** (the **Infant Cohort**) were first interviewed in 2008/2009, when the child was 9 months old. They were re-interviewed when the child was 3 years, 5 years, and 7/8 years (the latter by postal survey) and between July 2017 and March 2018 when the child was 9 years old. The other cohort is **Cohort '98** (the **Child Cohort**) that includes children born in 1998 and recruited into the study when they were 9 years old in 2007/8.

This series of *Key Findings* draws on information provided by the **Cohort '08** 9-year-old and his or her Primary Caregiver (usually the mother, and henceforth in this report referred to as the mother). The series is based on the 7,563 9-year-olds whose families participated in the study at ages 9 months, 3 years, 5 years and 9 years old.

This *Key Findings* report is the fourth in the series from the latest round of data collection from **Cohort '08** at 9 years of age. It focuses on children's relationships with parents and friends; challenges and stressful life events they have experienced; their socio-emotional well-being, the activities they share with their mothers and screen time. Children's progress in developing social and emotional skills is important for building healthy relationships, as well as being an important part of their overall well-being.

For some outcomes, findings on the 9-year-olds of **Cohort '08** are contrasted with those of the earlier **Cohort '98**. There are important differences between the two cohorts at 9 years old, apart from being born a decade apart. The main difference is that the children in the '08 cohort at 9 years old have been living in Ireland since they were 9 months old. The cohort does not include children who had moved to Ireland when they were older than 9 months; or children whose families had dropped out of the study since they were 9 months old. Cohort '98, on the other hand, was recruited at 9 years old and represents all 9-year-olds living in Ireland at the time they were recruited in 2007/08.

Many useful comparisons can be made between the cohorts, but, for the reasons noted here, comparisons between them cannot be used to draw firm conclusions about differences between *all* 9-year-olds in 2017 and *all* 9-year-olds in 2007.

Growing Up in Ireland is funded by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA), with a contribution from The Atlantic Philanthropies in Phase 2; and managed and overseen by the DCYA in association with the Central Statistics Office.

PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIP

Mothers reported high levels of closeness and low levels of conflict with their 9-year-olds in 2017

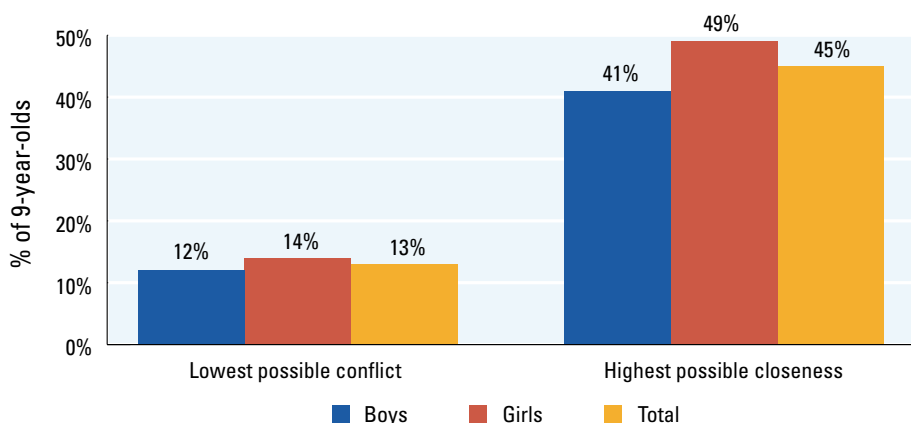
High levels of closeness and low levels of conflict are characteristic of strong bonds between parents and children. Overall, mothers of Cohort '08 9-year-olds reported high levels of closeness and low levels of conflict (as measured by the Pianta parent-child relationship scale); only 22% of mothers reported conflict levels above the middle of the conflict scale and fewer than 1% of the mothers reported levels of closeness that were below the middle of the closeness scale.

PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIP SAMPLE ITEMS:

Closeness: 'share an affectionate, warm relationship'
Conflict: 'always seem to be struggling with each other'

Mothers' reported conflict levels with sons and daughters were very similar (Figure 1), but larger differences were reported in terms of closeness: 49% of mother-daughter relationships had the highest possible closeness score compared to 41% of mother-son relationships.

Figure 1: Percentage of 9-year-olds of Cohort '08 whose mothers reported the highest levels of closeness and lowest levels of conflict in 2017



45%
of mothers reported
the highest possible
'closeness' score at age 9

13%
of mothers reported the
lowest possible 'conflict'
score at age 9

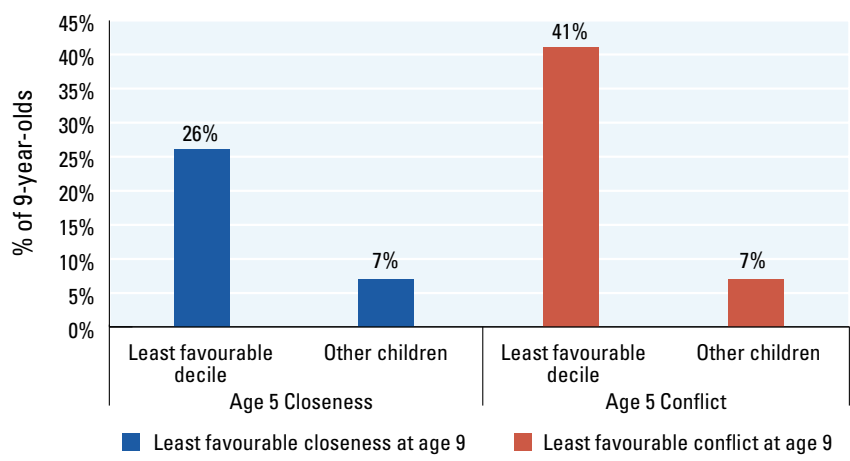
Less favourable conflict scores (those in the top 10%) and less favourable closeness scores (those in the bottom 10%) tended to persist over time, but there was also considerable change. Those mothers who had rated closeness in the relationship with the child in the 'less favourable' category at age 5 were more likely than mothers of other children to report less favourable closeness (26%) at age 9 (Figure 2). These figures also indicate quite a lot of change, however; 74% of those who had been in the less favourable closeness category at age 5 were no longer in that category at age 9.

Similarly, where mothers rated the relationship at age 5 in the less favourable conflict category (the top 10%), the relationship at age 9 was more likely to be less favourable in terms of conflict (41%). The association over time was stronger for high conflict than for low closeness in the parent-child relationship. Nevertheless, there was also a considerable amount of change; 59 per cent of those who were reported to be in the least favourable conflict category at age 5 were no longer in that category at age 9.



The persistence of relationship challenges was still present, but weaker, when scores at age 3 are compared to scores at age 9. Of mothers recording a 'less favourable' closeness rating at age 3, 22% also recorded a less favourable closeness rating at age 9. Among mothers who had recorded a 'less favourable' conflict score at age 3, 31% still recorded a less favourable conflict score at age 9. This suggests that while early difficulties are a risk factor for later relationship quality, improvements over time are likely for the majority.

Figure 2: Percentage of children in least favourable closeness and conflict groups at age 9 by whether they were in the least favourable group at age 5

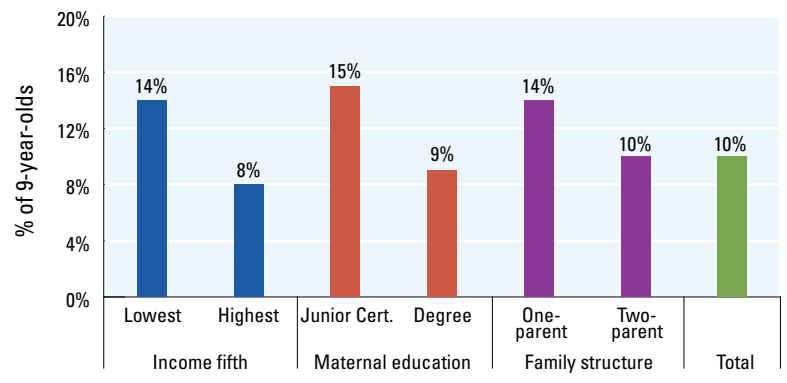


There was a tendency for parent-child relationship challenges at age 5 to persist until age 9, particularly for conflict

Mothers in families with higher income or with higher maternal education were less likely to report relatively higher conflict in the parent-child relationship (Figure 3). For example, 9% of mothers with degrees reported levels of conflict in the top group (top 10%) compared to 15% of those with a Junior Cert or less. However, this was in the context of generally low levels of conflict overall. Similar patterns were found for family structure categories.



Figure 3: Percentage of children in least favourable conflict group (top 10%) at age 9 by income, maternal education and family structure



Mothers in families with lower income or with lower maternal education were more likely to report high levels of conflict with their 9-year-olds.

Levels of closeness did not differ significantly by income, maternal education or family structure.

Note: Family income was based on total net disposable income from all sources, adjusted to account for the size and composition of the household (equivalised income). Each income fifth includes 20% of families.

SOCIO-EMOTIONAL AND BEHAVIOURAL WELL-BEING

Most 9-year-olds were doing well in terms of their socio-emotional and behavioural well-being

Information was collected from mothers on the child's socio-emotional and behavioural well-being (using the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire, SDQ). A 'total difficulties' score was constructed that measured potential problems in four areas (conduct problems, hyperactivity, emotionality and peer interactions). The average 'total difficulties' score for this group of 9-year-olds in 2017 (7.5) was slightly lower than the average for a large group of children aged 5 to 10 in the UK (8.6), indicating a lower overall level of reported socio-emotional and behavioural difficulties in Ireland.

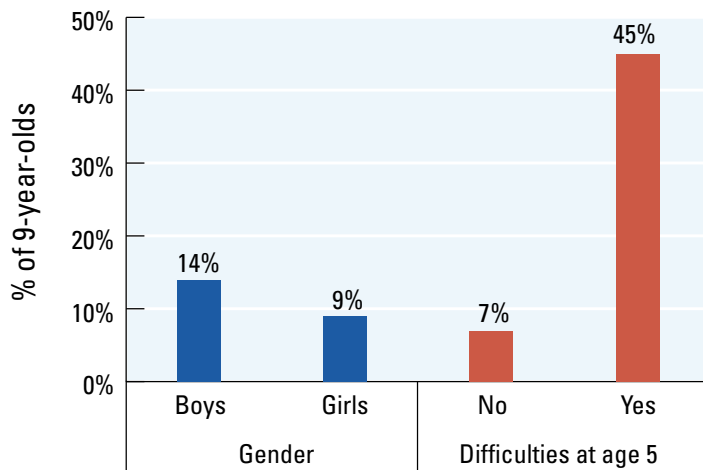
Compared to their scores at age 5, there was no significant change in 'total difficulties' socio-emotional and behavioural score among Growing Up in Ireland Cohort '08 children by age 9.

The 9-year-olds in Cohort '08 had a significantly lower average 'total difficulties' socio-emotional and behavioural score (7.5) than the 9-year-olds in Cohort '98 (8.0) ten years earlier.

Mothers were more likely to report emotional / behavioural difficulties for sons than daughters

Children in the highest 10% of the 'total difficulties' score are understood to have more socio-emotional and behavioural difficulties relative to their peers. At age 9, boys were more likely to have socio-emotional and behavioural difficulties, with 14% of them being in the top 10% compared to 9% of girls (Figure 4). Again, this is in the context of generally low levels of difficulties overall.

Figure 4: Percentage of 9-year-old boys and girls in 2017 with socio-emotional and behavioural difficulties and percentage with such difficulties by presence of difficulties at age 5



45% of children who had more socio-emotional or behavioural difficulties at age 5 were still having such difficulties at age 9.

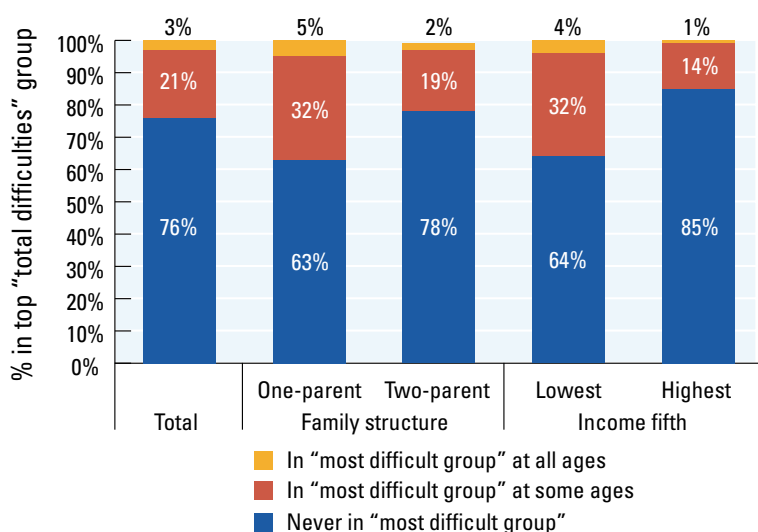
The presence of such difficulties at age 5 was strongly associated with later difficulties: 45% of children who had socio-emotional and behavioural difficulties at age 5 also had them at age 9, compared to just 7% of those who did not four years earlier. On the other hand, since 55% of those who did have such difficulties at age 5 were not in the group with the most difficulties at age 9, the figures also indicate that there was a comparative improvement for at least half of those who had earlier difficulties.



Most children with socio-emotional and behavioural difficulties at age 3 did not have such problems at age 9

Between 3 and 9 years of age, there was even more change in relative socio-emotional and behavioural difficulties. Overall, 3% of children had socio-emotional and behavioural problems at all three ages (3, 5 and 9 years) but a much larger group (21%) had them at one or two of the ages, but not all three. Most (76%) children had never been in the group with the highest level of difficulties (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Percentage of children in the group with the most socio-emotional and behavioural difficulties (ie. top 10%) at all three ages (3 years, 5 years and 9 years), at some ages and never in this group



3%
of children were in the group with the most emotional or behavioural problems at all three ages (3, 5 and 9 years)

21%
had difficulties at one or two (but not all three) ages

Children in the lowest-income families were more likely to have been in the group with the most socio-emotional and behavioural difficulties on at least one of the three time-points (36% compared to 15% in the highest-income fifth). The prevalence was also higher for children in one-parent families (37%) than in two-parent families (21%). However, even among these groups, the percentage of children who were in the group with the most difficulties at all three ages was very low (4 to 5%).

Mothers rated Cohort '08 9-year-olds' social skills favourably

Mothers also gave their children high ratings on positive social behaviour such as being 'considerate of people's feelings' and 'sharing with other children' (i.e. on the 'prosocial' subscale of the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire, SDQ). Overall, 52% got the maximum score of 10 (45% of boys and 59% of girls) and the average (mean) score for the whole group was 9.0 (compared to 8.6 for a UK sample of 5 to 10-year-olds).

Daughters were more likely than sons to be rated at the top score in terms of prosocial behaviour such as showing consideration and sharing.

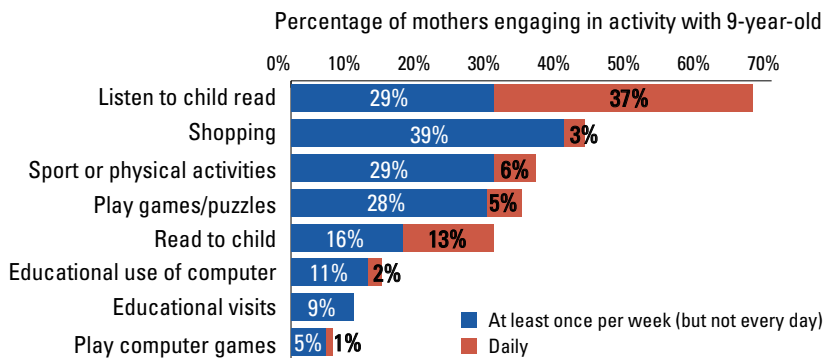
The average prosocial score for the Cohort '08 9-year-olds in 2017 (8.96) was very similar to that of Cohort '98 9-year-olds in 2007 (8.88).



COHORT '08 9-YEAR-OLDS' ACTIVITIES WITH MOTHERS

Engaging in activities together is important for strengthening the parent-child bond and fostering social and other life skills in the children. The activities in which mothers most often engaged with their children included listening to the child read (66% *at least once a week* including 37% *every day*), shopping (42% *at least once a week*) and sports or physical activities (35% *at least once a week*). Using the computer together at least weekly was less common, either for *educational purposes* (13%), or *for games* (6%).

Figure 6: Mothers' activities with 9-year-olds daily or at least weekly in 2017



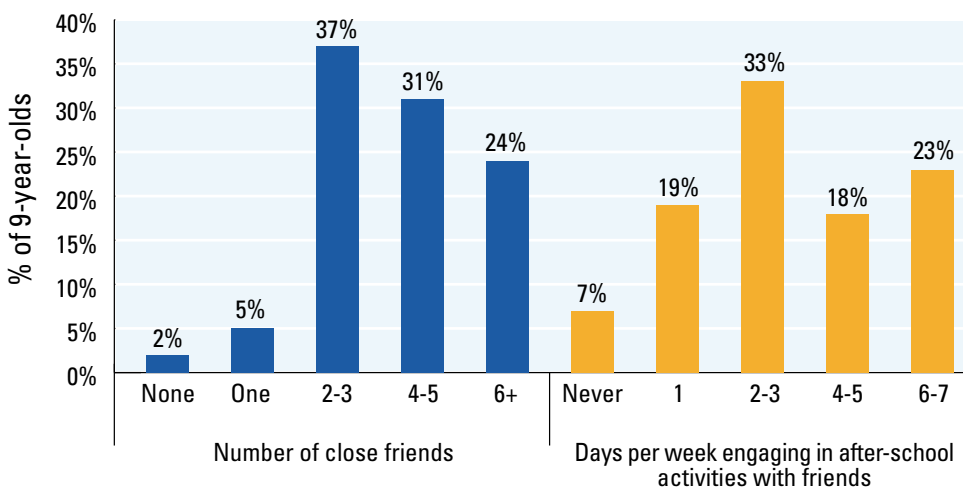
66%
of mothers listened to child read at least once a week

35%
of mothers engaged in sports or physical activity with their 9-year-old at least once a week

FRIENDS OF 9-YEAR-OLDS

Mothers reported that most Cohort '08 9-year-olds had four or more close friends (55%). On the other hand, 7% had none or just one (Figure 7). Nearly 75% of children engaged in activities with friends outside of school hours on at least two days per week, with 41% doing so on four or more days per week. Other analysis showed that boys were more likely than girls to have 6 or more friends (26% vs. 22%), but overall gender differences in number of friends and days engaging in activities with friends were very small.

Figure 7: Number of close friends and days per week when 9-year-olds in Cohort '08 engaged in activities outside of school with friends, as reported by mothers



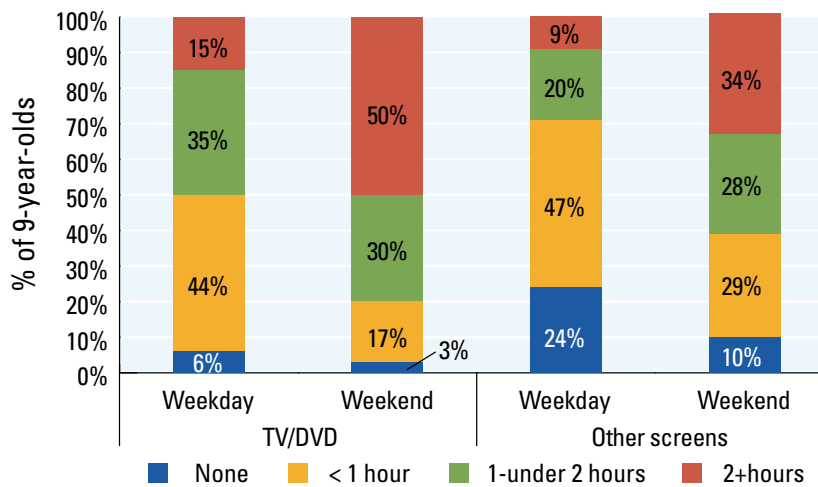
Most 9-year-olds had 4+ close friends and most participated in activities with friends at least twice a week.

There were small differences in friendship patterns between Cohort '08 and the earlier Cohort '98 at 9 years old: 55% of the later Cohort '08 had four or more close friends compared to 51% for Cohort '98; 74% of Cohort '08 engaged in activities with their friends at least twice a week compared with 78% of Cohort '98.

SCREEN TIME AND MONITORING

While screen time can be relaxing and educational for children, it can also reduce the time available for more active and social pursuits. Mothers were asked about the amount of time on weekdays and weekend days the 9-year-olds spent watching TV/DVDs or on other screen-based activities. Over 90% of 9-year-olds in 2017 spent at least some time watching TV on both weekend and weekdays (Figure 8). Half of them spent 2 or more hours watching TV/DVDs on a weekend day but only 15% did so on a weekday.

Figure 8: Screen time on weekdays and weekends by type of screen

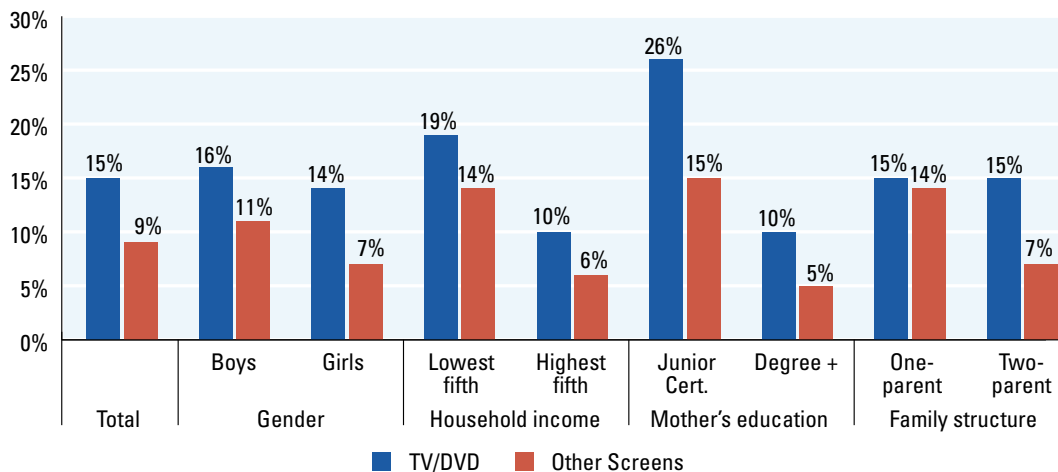


Mothers reported that screen time (other than TV/DVD) was most often spent on a mixture of different types of activities (51%), such as games and watching videos (e.g. on computer or tablet).

Apart from watching TV/DVDs, most 9-year-olds also spent time every day on other types of screen-based activities (such as on a computer). One-third spent over two hours on such activities per weekend day while just 9% did so on a weekday.

There were differences by gender and socio-economic status in time spent on screen-based activities. Boys and those from families with lower income or lower maternal education were more likely to spend 2 or more hours on screen-based activities of either kind on weekdays (Figure 9). The differences by family structure were significant for non-TV/DVD screen time, but there was no difference between one- and two-parent families in the percentage of children watching TV/DVDs for two or more hours per weekday.

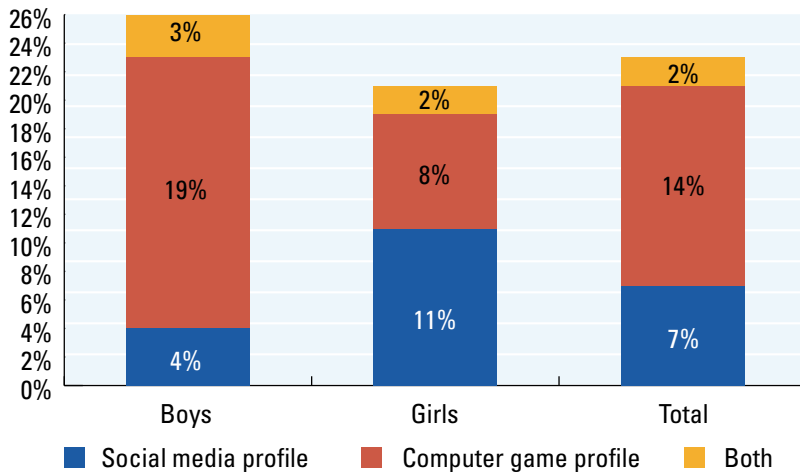
Figure 9: Percentage of 9-year-olds reported by mothers as watching TV/DVDs or engaging in other screen-based activity for 2 or more hours on a weekday, by socio-demographic characteristics



Screen time tended to be higher for boys than girls. It was also higher among low-income families and those where mothers had lower levels of education.

Mothers reported that 23% of 9-year-olds in 2017 had an online profile. The overall figure was higher for boys (26%) than girls (21%). There was a considerable difference in the type of profile in question, with boys' profiles largely being related to computer gaming and girls' more often related to social media (Figure 10). Very few children had both kinds of online profile (3% of boys and 2% of girls).

Figure 10: Online profiles of 9-year-olds as reported by mothers in 2017



22%
of boys were reported by mothers to have an online computer game profile, compared to just 10% of girls.

13%
of girls were reported by mothers to have a social media profile, higher than the 7% of boys.



Most mothers reported having rules to manage their 9-year-olds' screen time. The most common rules were about content (71%), the total time spent on devices (69%) and the time of day the child used the device (53%). In addition, 59% of mothers reported engaging the child in alternative activities in order to reduce screen time. The most popular method for parents to control children's internet activity was by always supervising their access (57%); 46% used software to control or monitor internet access and 39% used a PIN or password to control access to devices.

9-YEAR-OLDS WHO ACCESSED THE INTERNET AT HOME SAID THEY WERE MOST LIKELY TO USE IT FOR:

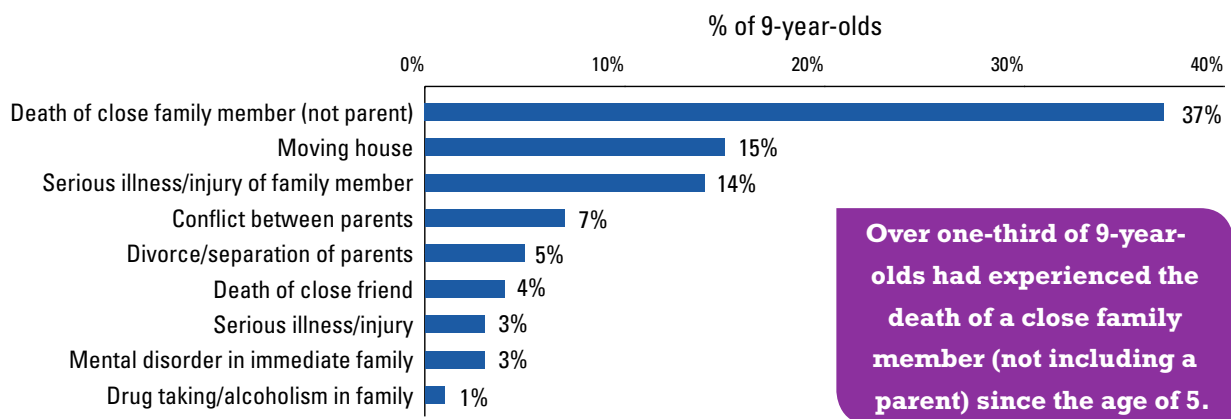
- Playing games (on their own) – 81%
- Watching videos on YouTube – 77%
- Searching for information on things that interest them – 55%



STRESSFUL EVENTS SINCE AGE 5

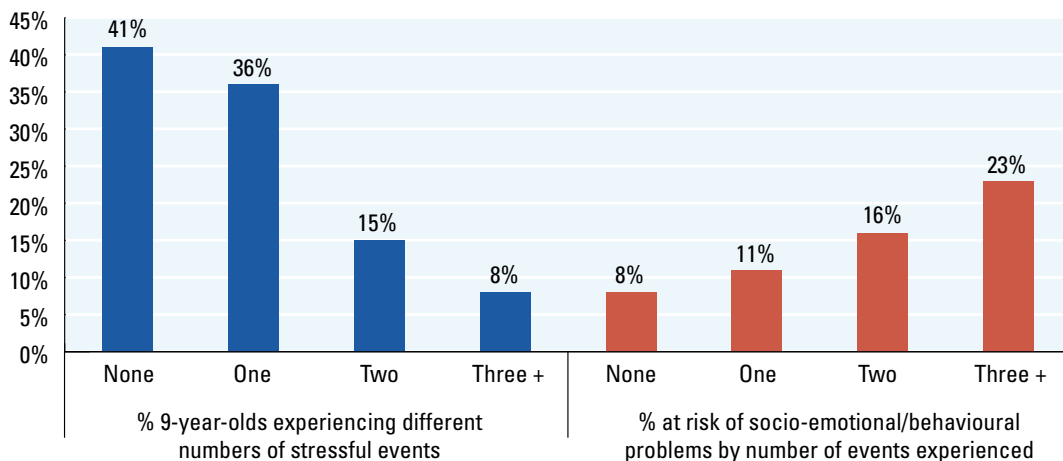
Although the experience of stressful life events can contribute to the development of resilience and coping skills, depending on other factors, such experiences can adversely affect the socio-emotional well-being of children. The mothers of the 9-year olds were asked whether the children had experienced any of a list of 14 specific stressful events since the age of 5. Most (59%) 9-year-olds in 2017 had experienced at least one of these. The most commonly reported events (as shown in Figure 11) were the death of a close family member (other than a parent, 37%), moving house (15%) and a serious illness of a family member (14%).

Figure 11: Stressful events experienced by 9-year-olds since age 5



Since the age of 5, just over one-third (36%) had experienced one stressful event, 15% had experienced two and 8% had experienced 3 or more (Figure 12). Children who had experienced a higher number of stressful events since they were 5 years old were more likely to be in the top 10% of emotional and behavioural difficulties.¹ Almost a quarter of children who had experienced three or more stressful events were in the group with the most socio-emotional difficulties (i.e. top 10%), compared to 8% of those who experienced no stressful event (Figure 12). It should be noted that a series of stressful events could be linked to one over-arching event; for example, a marriage break-up could result in 'Conflict between parents', 'Divorce/separation of parents' and possibly 'Moving house'.

Figure 12: Percentage of 9-year-olds experiencing multiple stressful life events and percentage in the top 10% of socio-emotional and behavioural difficulties by number of stressful events experienced



9-year-olds who had experienced several stressful life events in the previous 4 years were more likely to be at risk of socio-emotional and behavioural problems.

¹ Those in the top 10% of the SDQ 'total difficulties' scale were considered as having the most socio-emotional and behavioural problems, relative to their peers.

DISCUSSION POINTS

The quality of the parent-child relationship is a key influence on child development. Mothers reported high levels of closeness and low levels of conflict in their relationships with their 9-year-olds. Higher levels of conflict were observed in families with lower income or lower maternal education but levels of parent-child closeness did not differ by family income or maternal education.



Socio-emotional and behavioural well-being among 9-year-olds in 2017 was relatively high. Children with socio-emotional and behavioural difficulties at age 5 were more likely to experience such difficulties again at age 9; however only 3% of children were consistently in the group with the most difficulties (top 10%) at ages 3, 5 and 9 years.

Screen time usage was much higher at the weekend than on weekdays. Boys and those from families with lower income and with lower maternal education were more likely to spend 2 or more hours on screen-based activities on a weekday.



Most 9-year-olds spent time with friends after school at least once per week. However a small percentage of children were described as having no close friends (2%) and/or never doing activities with friends outside school (7%).

BACKGROUND

Growing Up in Ireland is the national longitudinal study of children and young people. The study is funded by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA), with a contribution from The Atlantic Philanthropies, and is managed by the DCYA in association with the Central Statistics Office. It is being carried out by a consortium of researchers led by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) and Trinity College Dublin (TCD).



The study tracks the development of two nationally representative cohorts of children over time. **Cohort '08 (Infant Cohort)** families were first interviewed on a face-to-face basis when the Study Child was 9 months and subsequently at 3 years, 5 years, and most recently at age 9. The families were surveyed by post at 7/8 years. **Cohort '98 (Child Cohort)** families were interviewed at 9 years (in 2007/08), at 13 and at 17/18 years and at age 20 in 2018/19.

There were just over 11,100 9-month-olds in the first round of interviews with the families of Cohort '08 between September 2008 and March 2009. The response rate was 65%. The second round of interviews (at 3 years of age) took place between January and August 2011; the third round of interviews (at 5 years of age) was completed between March and September 2013. The response rate (as a percentage of those who had participated in the previous wave) was 90% at both the second and third rounds. The fourth round of data collection (at 7/8 years old) was conducted on a postal basis (from March to October 2016), with a 55% response rate. The fifth round at age 9 was conducted on a face-to-face basis (from June

2017 to April 2018), with a response rate of 88.1% of those who had participated at age 5. These *Key Findings* reports analyse the 7,563 children whose families participated in the rounds at 9 months, 3 years, 5 years and 9 years (i.e. excluding children who missed the 3 year or 5 year interview).

The questionnaires can be found at: <https://www.growingup.ie>.

In any study that follows people over time, some will drop out. To account for non-response, information collected in the surveys was statistically adjusted on the basis of mother's education, family income and family social class. This ensures that the data are representative of the population as a whole - all 9-year-olds who had lived in Ireland since they were 9 months old. All figures presented in this *Key Findings* report are based on the statistically adjusted data. While the researchers have made every effort to adjust for any differences between those who left the study and those who continued to participate, it is possible that this adjustment is imperfect.

The figures presented here are purely descriptive and do not control for potential interactions or confounding effects.

All figures are preliminary and may be subject to change.

Access to Growing Up in Ireland data: Anonymised versions of all data collected in *Growing Up in Ireland* are available for research through the Irish Social Science Data Archive (ISSDA, <https://www.ucd.ie/issda/>) for quantitative data; and the Irish Qualitative Data Archive (IQDA, <https://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/iqda>) for qualitative data.

THANK YOU TO ALL PARTICIPANTS

The success of *Growing Up in Ireland* is the result of contributions from a large number of individuals, schools, organisations and groups, many of whom helped to recruit the sample and collect the data. The Study Team is particularly grateful to the thousands of families from every part of the country who gave so generously of their time on numerous occasions to make this study possible. A very big 'thank you' to all the children and their families.

For further information about *Growing Up in Ireland* visit www.growingup.ie or email growingup@esri.ie or Freephone 1800 200 434.