

GROWING UP IN IRELAND

QUALITATIVE KEY FINDINGS



“You would be allowed to go more places on your own and call for your friends and that, so that would be exciting.”

NO. 3 **NINE-YEAR-OLDS’ EXPECTATIONS OF THEIR FUTURES**

This is the third in a series of Key Findings arising from the *Growing Up in Ireland* Qualitative study. It summarises the findings of the in-depth study with nine-year-old children and their parents in 120 families selected from the 8,570 who had participated in the Quantitative survey and were subsequently interviewed about their views and experiences. Analysis of children’s perspectives on the transition to second-level school, future peer relationships, physical development in adolescence, and their wishes and fears for the future is presented here.

IN BRIEF

- The next main transition for the nine-year-olds in the study is to second-level school. They looked forward to it with a mixture of excitement and anxiety.
- Peer relationships were expected to change during the transition, with old friends left behind and new ones gained.
- The children predicted that adolescence would offer more opportunities for doing things with friends such as going to the cinema, to parties, and “into town”, and having a girlfriend or boyfriend.
- Along with the new-found independence they associated with adolescence, the children anticipated taking on greater responsibilities, particularly in the home and on family farms.
- Looking further into the future, their main ambitions were to be healthy, to get a good job, and to stay close to friends and family. Broader concerns were also expressed about world peace and global warming.

SCHOOL TRANSITION

The transition from primary school to second-level school is an important milestone for children. It is associated with changes in peer relationships, new challenges in the school environment, and growing independence and responsibility.

The report *Growing Up in Ireland – The Lives of 9-Year-Olds*, based on 8,570 children (see www.growingup.ie/childpublications), provided a wealth of information on children's current academic performance, attitudes to school, and engagement with the education system. In the qualitative study which is the focus of this Key Finding, children talked about what the transition to second-level might be like and the changes it might bring in their lives.

Even at nine years of age, children showed a keen awareness of the difference between primary and second-level school. The practical differences were commonly the first mentioned: children talked about second-level school routine being different in terms of start and end times, more subjects, bigger classes, and the possibility of detention. For children living in rural areas, attending a small primary school, the prospects of having to travel further to school and of larger numbers of students were among the concerns raised.

Expectations of second-level school were influenced by siblings or other family members' reports on their experiences. The children's expectations reflected the contrasting themes of *excitement*, as in looking forward to new opportunities, and *anxiety* – “because school would be harder”:

“A few of my cousins are in secondary school and they are loving it so I'd say that it will be fun.” [Boy]

“My sister has just started and she says it is better than primary school but the work is definitely harder.” [Boy]

Children frequently talked about second-level school being “stressful” and, as sources of stress, identified extra homework, harder subjects, particularly science and maths, and exams. Bullying at school was also a cause of anxiety for some children, largely because of the presence of older teenagers:

“Well, I would be worried in case I would be beaten up in school.” [Boy]

Typically, children were looking forward to the prospect of making lots of new friends at second-level school:

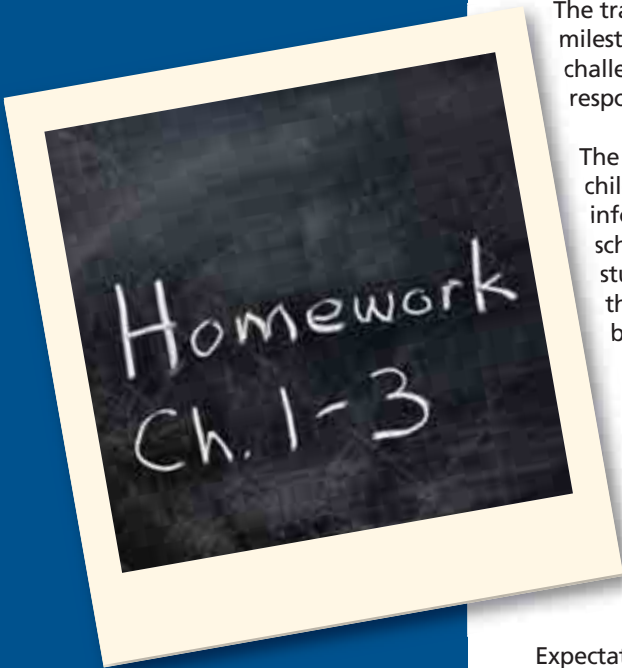
“When I am 13 I will have a heap of new friends.” [Boy]

However, some were anxious at the prospect of losing touch with close friends from primary school:

**Interviewer: “Is there anything that might worry you about being a teenager?”
Child: “Basically, if you are really good friends with someone and they are not going to the same school.” [Girl]**

The children's prevalent fears and concerns about the pressure of second-level school reflect the genuine demands that are placed on young people, but may also reflect the sources of their information, including non-representative anecdotes and hearsay.

In the interviews with parents about transition to second-level school, parents talked about more general hopes, including that their children would “settle in” and “fulfil their potential”, rather than the practical changes and challenges that face the children.



**“A few of my cousins are in secondary school and they are loving it so I'd say that it will be fun.”
[Boy]**

Understandably, children's expectations were a complex mix of excited anticipation and anxiety. Primary among their expectations was leaving behind old friends and gaining new ones, but the transition to second-level school is a time when children experience pressure to adjust to a new type of institution and educational experience.

Overall, these findings suggest that the lead-in to the transition to second-level school is a long one, with children trying to make sense of the information they gather on second-level school from nine years of age on, or earlier. More formal preparation for the transition, which gives a realistic picture of second-level school while children are still at primary school, could help them to prepare for the transition and might dispel some of their anxieties.

PEER RELATIONSHIPS

Not only did children talk about making new friends at second-level school, but also about the changes they expected in their relationships with their friends as they moved into their teenage years. Adolescence is consistently identified as a period of development when children spend more time with peers, while still maintaining their attachment to their family. For younger adolescents, peer socialisation most often takes place in groups before they go on to establish intimate one-to-one relationships in later years.

“If like you’re going out on a Saturday night or a Friday night or something you might want to have friends or people to go with.” [Girl]

The results from the quantitative survey indicated that the majority of children saw their friends at least two or three days per week. The in-depth interviews explored how children thought these relationships might change as they got older.

Most children talked about the enjoyment of time spent with friends in school, including during break times and extra-curricular activities. They expected that in future they would also begin to spend more time *“hanging out”* and *“hanging around”* with their friends.

The other themes that emerged when children talked about their future friendships were *communication*, *independence*, *peer pressure*, and *boyfriends and girlfriends*, as discussed below.

A fundamental theme on the topic of children's future peer relationships was the *value of friendship*. Friends are seen as people with whom to spend time and to share experiences:

“I’d get more friends ... so I can have more games to play and there’d be even more fun.” [Boy]

Typically, doing things with friends was contrasted with being alone, and fear of being alone or without friends was an explicit concern for some children:

“You would be really lonely and you would, if you were alone or were sad or anything ... you could go to your friend but you wouldn’t have any.” [Girl]

Illustrating the expanding world of young adolescents, the theme of independence includes references to seeing friends and to socialising independently when allowed to go *“into town”* or *“to parties”*:

“You would be allowed to go more places on your own and call for your friends and that, so that would be exciting.” [Boy]

“You would be really lonely and you would, if you were alone or were sad or anything ... you could go to your friend but you wouldn’t have any.” [Girl]



Children's worlds are also expanding through the use of electronic communication and social media. For the nine-year-olds, Bebo was the communication tool of choice:

"You go on to a page and you put decorations and there are photos and stars ... and you talk to your friends and give them messages and they all have Bebo pages as well." [Girl]

A small number of children were already using a mobile phone at nine years old. For others, getting a mobile phone was associated with the transition to second-level school, so they expected to have one by age 13. For some of the children, a mobile was seen as an essential means of communication, sometimes replacing other forms of socialising:

"We don't really meet. We text." [Girl]

Children understood that, as they got older they might experience peer pressure to do things, both good and bad, that they currently did not do. This included smoking and taking illegal drugs:

"If my friends started offering me cigarettes or people, you know, the way people try to offer teenagers drugs. Like I wouldn't take them but I hope no one would offer them to me." [Boy]

Discussions of boyfriends and girlfriends again brought up contrasts between the childhood of the nine-year-olds and their approaching adolescence. Some children represented the sex segregation common in middle childhood – *"I hate boys"* – while others already had older friends with boyfriends. There was an expectation that, as young adolescents, they might have boyfriends and girlfriends.

"You might like go to the cinema and maybe see your boyfriend." [Girl]

"At 13 I will probably have a girlfriend." [Boy]

In summary, children's expectations of future peer relationships showed children on the cusp of a major expansion in their social relationships, with peer relationships becoming more important. They also anticipated a further transition from large peer groups to closer relationships with a boyfriend or girlfriend.

Associated with these shifts, children's growing autonomy and greater access to means of communication were the strongest themes. Concerns about peer pressure and about social isolation in the future were also mentioned. The more complex and elaborate social world of adolescent peer relationships represents a challenge for young people, and it is one in which the support of parents remains important.

INDEPENDENCE AND RESPONSIBILITY

While adolescence is a time of growing independence, children also talked about an increasing sense of responsibility at home as they grow older. The change in family relationships was seen as a balance between trust and expectation.

On one hand, children said that as teenagers they would be ready to assume more responsibility and their parents would trust them more and allow them more independence. Children talked about how they *"could probably go to the shops on my own"* or *"will be able to cook on my own"*. Other children thought they would be allowed to babysit younger siblings. As one boy summarised it:

"If my friends started offering me cigarettes or people, you know, the way people try to offer teenagers drugs. Like I wouldn't take them but I hope no one would offer them to me." [Boy]



“You will be allowed to do more things because you are sensible.” [Boy]

On the other hand, the children recognise that, if parents trust them with appropriate levels of responsibility, they will also expect them to contribute accordingly:

“You would have to do more jobs around the house because you’re able to do more, and you’d probably have to do more at home.” [Girl]

For children in rural areas, work on their family’s or neighbours’ farms was expected from teenagers.

However, there were some mixed feelings about the responsibility that comes with independence:

**I: “And do you think it will be good to have more independence?”
C: “Yeah. Not really sometimes because my dad would say ‘You’re getting older. You have to make your own decisions,’ which is a bit scary because I might not know what to do.” [Girl]**

Independence and responsibility go hand-in-hand; the children’s understanding both of the value of autonomy and of the demands of independence was already well developed. There were understandable concerns about learning to manage their autonomy and the responsibility associated with it.

PHYSICAL DEVELOPMENT

Puberty is a continuum of development which peaks during adolescence. If unprepared for the changes that will take place, children can be anxious about the physical and emotional changes they face. In Ireland, recent school programmes in the area of Social, Personal and Health Education are addressing the issue, with one strand of the SPHE curriculum covering personal development.

Children have varying levels of knowledge around puberty. Interviewers did not explicitly raise puberty as an issue but it was frequently mentioned, in some form or other, by the children themselves. The following themes emerged: *physical changes*, *emotional changes*, and *sources of information*. Among those children who did talk about puberty, the main observations were that they would be “taller”, “stronger” and would “get pimples on your face”. Reference was also made to boys’ voices changing and to having “hairy armpits”.

“When you are older, your body gets different, you look different, and your face changes and hopefully it will get better.” [Boy]

Emotional changes are related to hormonal activity, and adolescence is a time when children have to learn to cope with a range of new emotions and even depression. Emotional changes were raised by a number of children who talked about being “bossy”, “angry”, and having “more fights” as teenagers.

C: “I might get angry with people.”

I: “Why would you get angry with people?”

C: “Cause growing ... and getting depressed.”

I: “Why do you think that is part of it, part of growing up? You might feel a bit up and down?”

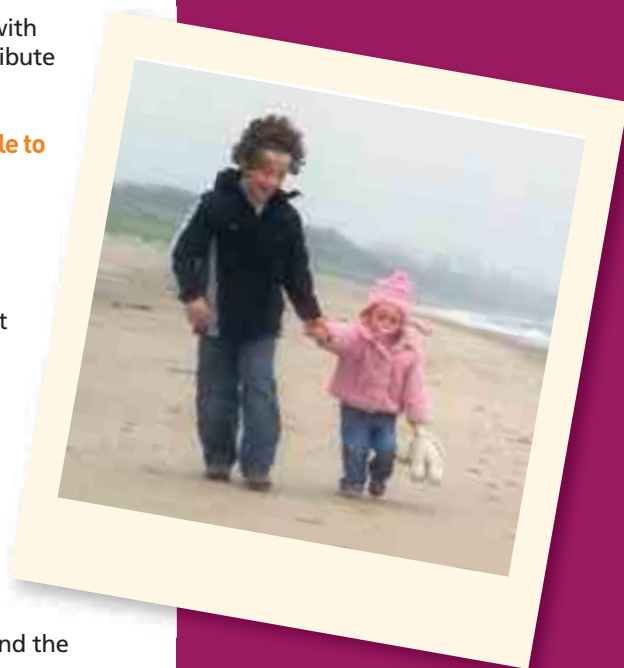
C: “Yes.” [Girl]

The other emotional change anticipated by children was related to peer relationships and sexual attraction.

C: “I forget the name of it but something that makes boys want to be interested in girls.”

I: “Do you think you might be interested in girls?”

C: “Probably. It happens to most boys.” [Boy]



“When you are older, your body gets different, you look different, and your face changes and hopefully it will get better.” [Boy]

“Because like if they die we’d all be very sad and ... my relations are always playing with me and if I go to places I’d be lonely without relations there.”

[Boy]

Apart from those who responded that they don’t know what life will be like when they are a teenager, the children who raised issues around puberty had gathered some information, albeit incomplete or inaccurate. As with school transition, older siblings and cousins are a common way for children to learn what to expect in puberty. While parents may not yet have started talking to their nine-year-old children about puberty, some children were aware of a new kind of conversation between parents and older siblings:

“My sister ‘says stuff’ to my mum when they are having a girl talk.” [Girl]

At nine years of age, these children already showed some awareness of the physical and emotional changes they will face in the years ahead, though there was more emphasis on the superficial physical differences.

The emphasis in the health education curriculum for nine-year-olds appears to be on physical health and nutrition rather than on sexual health. Open communication with parents and teachers, as well as with peers and siblings, is important to support children and to prepare them for puberty.

WISHES AND FEARS

The in-depth interviews invited the children to reflect on their ambitions and anxieties about their future lives. The discussions ranged from career ambitions to having their own children and grandchildren in the future. There were four broad themes around pursuing their wishes and avoiding what they feared: *financial security, health, relationships, and global events.*

The strongest theme was *financial security*. Children were concerned about having “a good job” and “a nice house”, and about avoiding “being homeless” and “having no money”. For some, the desire for financial security was on the more materialistic side, with references to “when I win the Lotto”, “a big mansion”, “a Lamborghini” and “a snow mobile”. Career ambitions were also high; a majority of boys wanted to be professional sports players (soccer, rugby or tennis), while most girls wanted to be professional performers, typically singers, dancers, or actresses.

Children’s career aspirations are generally not very stable, but it is worth noting that most of the professions mentioned would provide the financial security desired. While there were gender differences in the most popular professions aspired to, there were several to which both boys and girls aspired, such as doctor, vet, lawyer, garda, astronaut, scientist and writer. Only boys wanted to be farmers and chefs while only girls wanted to be hairdressers and nurses.

On the theme of health, children want to stay healthy and to avoid illness, injury and death. Taking drugs and smoking were included among risks to health that children wanted to avoid. The theme of relationships was closely linked to health, with children hoping that their friends, family and pets would not die young:

“Because like if they die we’d all be very sad and ... my relations are always playing with me and if I go to places I’d be lonely without relations there.” [Boy]



Some children whose parents were separated wished their family to be reunited; likewise, where family members had died, children wanted to have them back.

I: "What's the first picture that you've done?"

C: "That's my mum and dad."

I: "And what would you wish for there?"

C: "That they would get back together." [Girl]

Children also talked about their desire to have their own families. Those girls who mentioned having babies also talked about going to college and working as doctors, writers, hairdressers and scientists.

The interviews showed the extent to which children were aware of environmental and political issues. On the wishes side was a call for "world peace". The fears expressed by children were more diverse and included "global warming", "world war", "an earthquake", "tornados", and "tigers ... becoming extinct".

"Because if the world warms up the world would, like, the polar ice caps are melting and when they melt the world will flood." [Boy]

The children demonstrated considerable maturity in their expectations for the future. Apart from the prospective "trillionaire" and the professional footballers, children were modest in their ambitions and realistic in their fears. They are thinking about their lives well beyond the transition to second-level. These nine-year-olds are concerned about the world and current issues, to an extent that might surprise many adults.

"Because if the world warms up the world would, like, the polar ice caps are melting and when they melt the world will flood."
[Boy]





Growing Up in Ireland is the National Longitudinal Study of Children. It aims to track, from infancy through to adolescence, the lives of two representative cohorts of children in Ireland: an infant cohort (recruited at nine months of age) and a child cohort (recruited at nine years old).

The Department of Children and Youth Affairs is funding it in association with the Department of Social Protection and the Central Statistics Office. The Department of Children and Youth Affairs is overseeing and managing the Study, which is being carried out by a consortium of researchers led by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) and Trinity College Dublin.

The first wave of quantitative fieldwork surveyed 8,570 nine-year-old children and their parents. Following this, 120 families who had participated in that survey were selected to be interviewed as part of a qualitative study. This study complements the quantitative survey by using interviews to explore in more depth children's and parents' perspectives on some of the issues examined in the main survey. This document is one of a series that summarises some of the key findings arising from these interviews.



**Growing Up
in Ireland**
National Longitudinal
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