



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

# GROWING UP IN IRELAND

## KEY FINDINGS: CHILD COHORT AT 17/18 YEARS

### NO. 3: LIFE SATISFACTION, RELATIONSHIPS AND MENTAL HEALTH



#### INTRODUCTION

This short report highlights some of the key findings relating to young people's views on life, important relationships and their socio-emotional well-being from the most recent wave of *Growing Up in Ireland*. These young people were aged 17/18 years at the time of interview, between Winter 2015 and Summer 2016, and this is their third time to take part in *Growing Up in Ireland's* Child Cohort study. The same individuals and their families were also interviewed at age 9 and 13 years.

The period around 17/18 years is of particular interest because of the number and nature of transitions around this time. Many young people progress from school to college or work at this age. Peer groups may be split up as individuals avail of new opportunities and phases in their lives. The dynamic of their relationships with parents evolves. New relationships such as with a boy or girlfriend are formed.

Emerging adulthood brings new opportunities, responsibilities and sources of stress. How a 17/18-year-old manages these changes will be influenced by their earlier experiences and, in turn, will influence their current and future well-being.

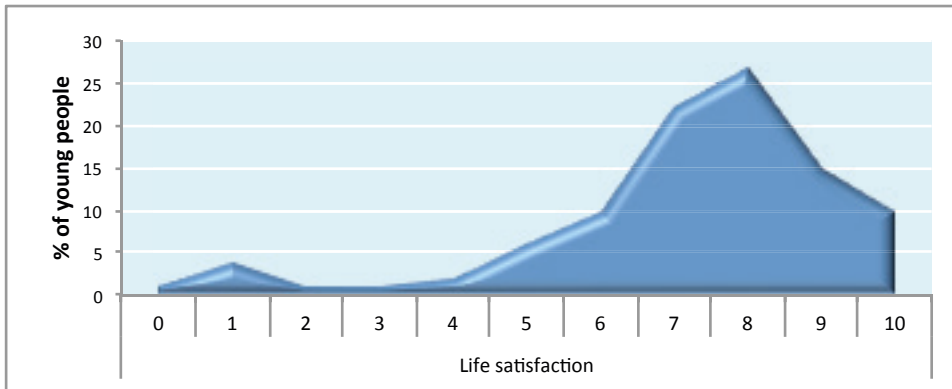


## LIFE SATISFACTION

### 17/18-year-olds were generally quite satisfied with their lives

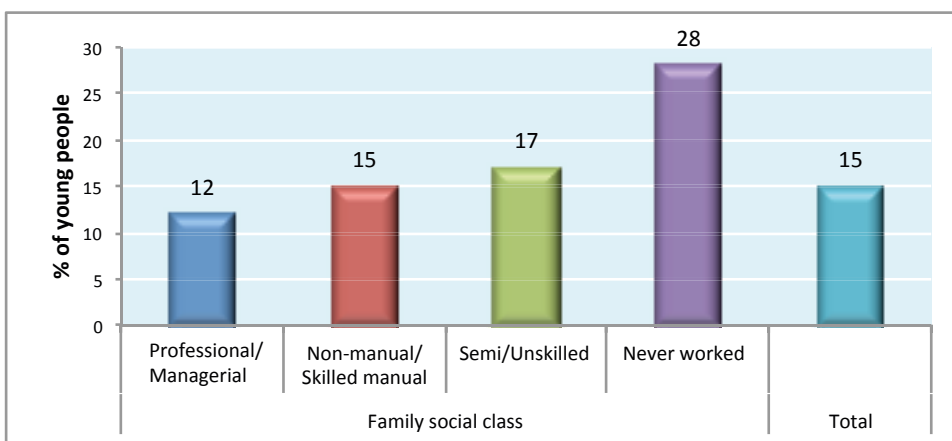
- The average (mean) score for general life satisfaction was 7.2 out of 10, suggesting that overall 17/18-year-olds were quite satisfied with life (Figure 1).

**Figure 1: General life satisfaction at age 17-18 years (where 10 = extremely satisfied)**



- 15% of young people rated their life satisfaction as '5' (the halfway mark between extremely unsatisfied and extremely satisfied) or less. Females were more likely to give this lower rating than males (18% compared to 13%).
- 17/18-year-olds whose families had less advantaged social class backgrounds (as measured at age 13) also tended to report lower life satisfaction scores – over a quarter of those from the most disadvantaged group ('Never worked') gave a rating at or below the halfway mark compared to only 12% of those from 'Professional/Managerial' backgrounds (Figure 2).

**Figure 2: Frequency of lower life satisfaction ratings (i.e. 5 or less out of 10) according to young person's family social class**



- When asked about whether they considered themselves to be adults, 44% of 17/18-year-olds said it was *true for the most part* and just 14% said this was *entirely true*. Over half of young people felt that it was *mostly* or *entirely* true that they were respected by others as an adult.

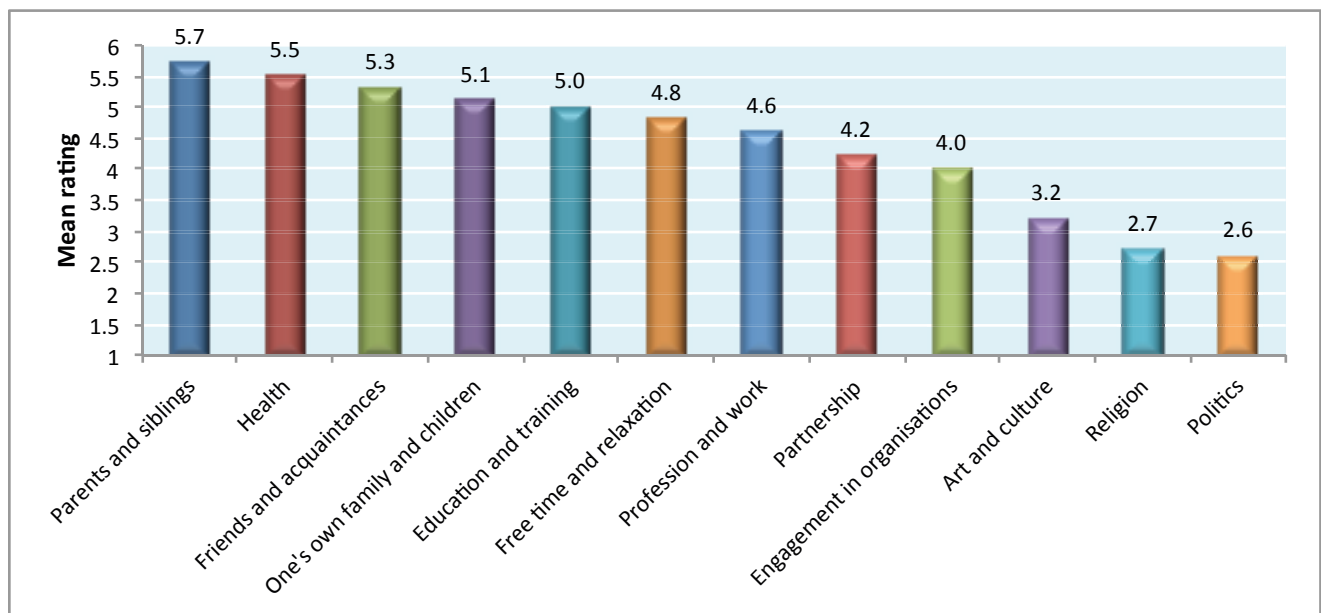
## IMPORTANT THINGS IN LIFE

### Family and health were rated as the most important things in life

17/18-year-olds were asked to rate the importance of twelve aspects of life on a scale of 1 (not important at all) to 6 (very important). The list included items reflecting future as well as current aspects of life.

- Out of 12 aspects of life, 'parents and siblings' and 'health' received the highest ratings with average (mean) scores of 5.7 and 5.5 respectively. These were followed by 'friends and acquaintances' (5.3) and 'one's own family and children' (5.1).
- The lowest ratings of importance were given to 'religion' (2.7) and 'politics' (2.6).

**Figure 3: Ratings of importance for different aspects of life (where 6 = very important)**



## RELATIONSHIP WITH PARENTS

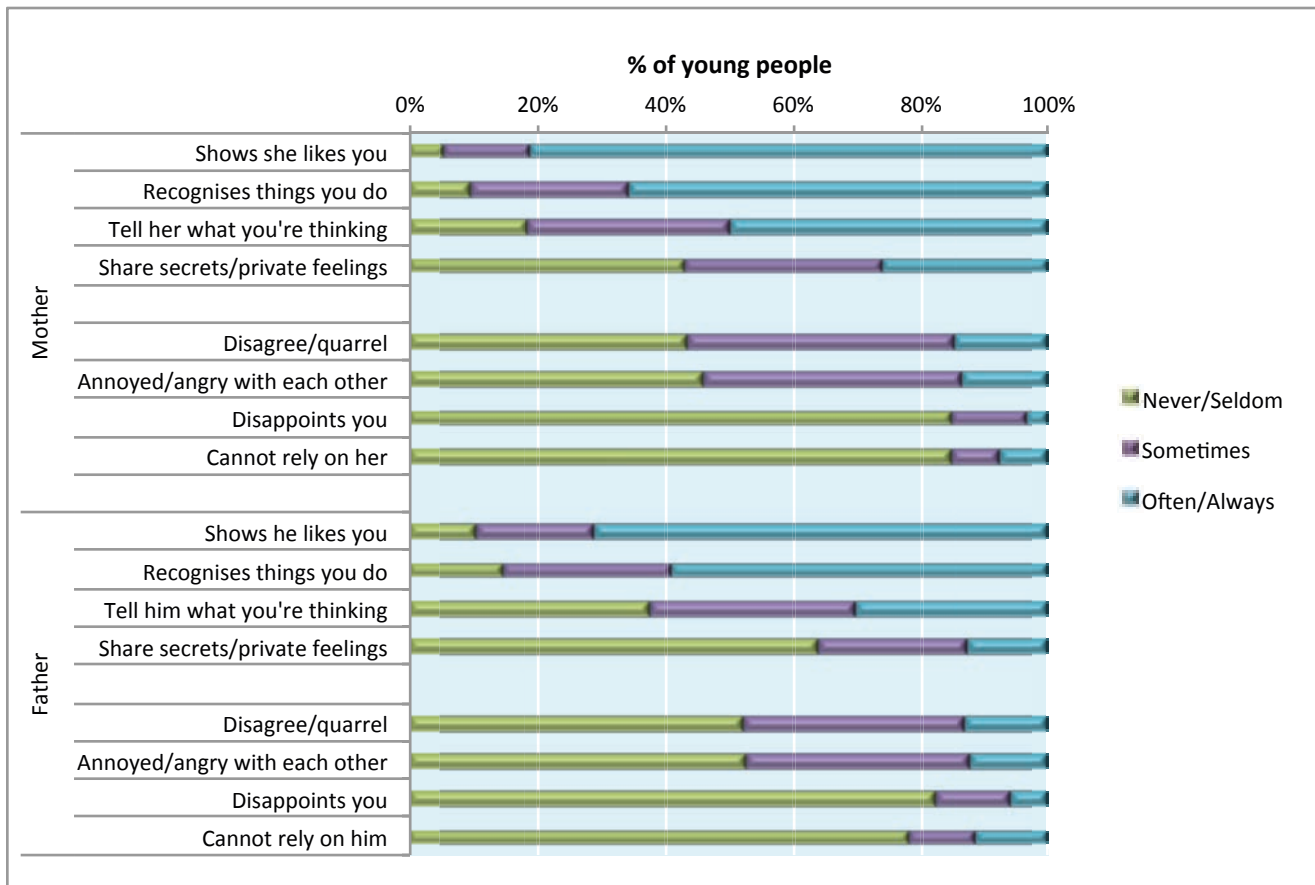
### Most 17/18-year-olds had a positive view of their relationship with parents but a substantial proportion never or seldom shared their private feelings with them

97% of 17/18-year-olds were in regular contact with their mothers and 88% with their fathers.

Figure 4 shows the frequency of each type of interaction<sup>1</sup> with parents (with whom they were in regular contact) on a three-point scale of never/seldom, sometimes and often/always.

- Just over 80% of 17/18-year-olds said their mother often or always "shows that she likes [them]"; the corresponding percentage for fathers was 71%.
- Almost two-thirds of young people said they *never/seldom* "share their secrets/private feelings" with their father, and over 40% *never/seldom* did so with their mother. Young people were, however, more likely to tell their parents "what [they're] thinking": around half *often/always* told their mother and just under one-third told fathers.
- Some degree of conflict might be expected in any relationship; and while 30-40% of young people said they *sometimes* "disagreed/quarrelled" or got "annoyed/angry" with their parents, much fewer said it occurred *often/always*.
- The vast majority of young people felt they could rely on their parents, and were not disappointed by them. Nevertheless this leaves a small minority (around 10% or fewer) who *often/always* felt let down by a parent.

<sup>1</sup> Items based on an adaptation by the PAIRFAM study of the Network of Relationships Inventory by Furman & Buhrmester (1985)

**Figure 4: Characteristics of the relationship between young people and their parents****One-in-ten young people felt they had no adult to turn to for help or advice**

- 10% of 17/18-year-olds said they had no adult to whom they could turn for help and advice. Males were more likely to report the absence of a supportive adult (13%) than females (8%).
- When asked specifically about their parents, most (80%) felt they could talk to their mothers about "difficulties or problems", but only 59% could talk to their fathers.

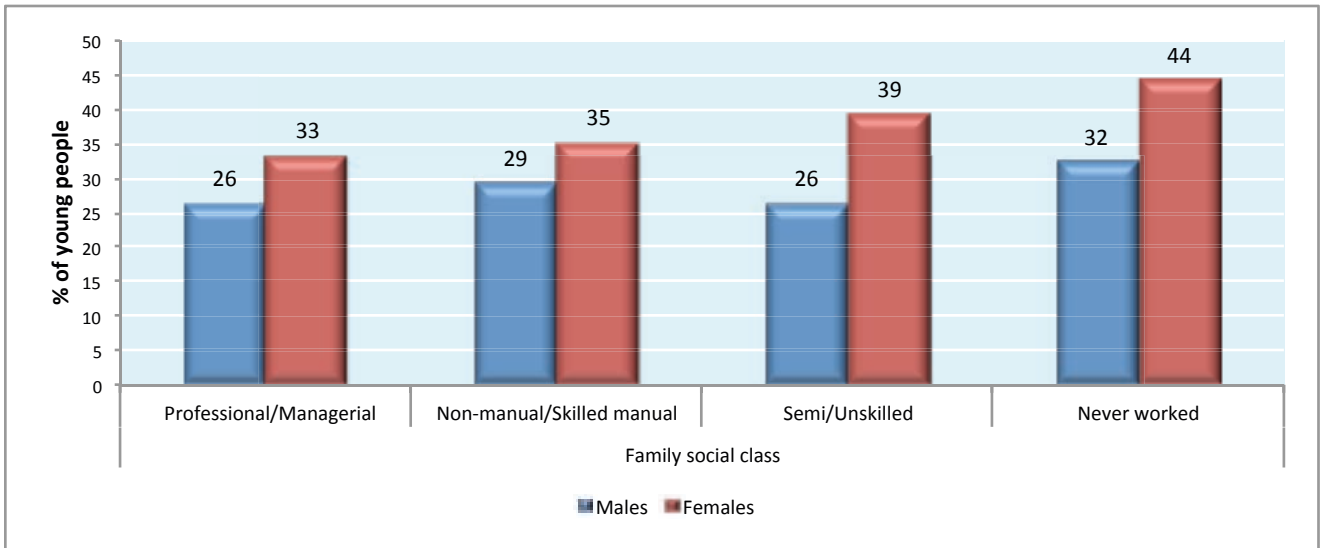
**BOYFRIENDS AND GIRLFRIENDS<sup>2</sup>****Just under a third of 17/18-year-olds had a boyfriend or girlfriend at the time of interview**

- Having a current boy or girlfriend was more frequently reported by females (36%) than males (28%). This type of relationship was more common among young people who had already finished (or left) secondary school (38% compared to 30%).
- 17/18-year-olds who came from the most disadvantaged social background were more likely to have a boy or girlfriend, but this trend was much stronger for females than males as shown in Figure 5: 44% of females in the 'Never worked' group were currently in a relationship compared to just 33% of those from a 'Professional/Managerial' background. Comparable figures for males were 32% and 26% respectively.

<sup>2</sup> This section deals with having a current boy/girlfriend at time of interview. Sexual activity/relationships specifically are discussed in Key Finding No. 4 in this series.



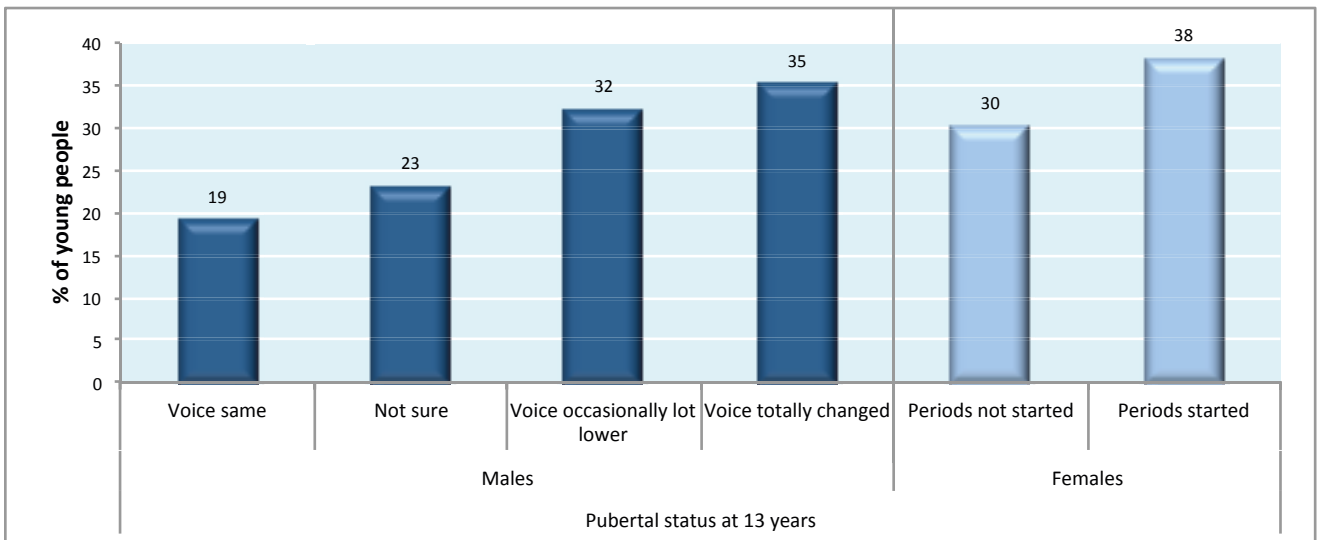
Figure 5: Having a boy/girlfriend by family social class separately for boys and girls



- Adolescents who started puberty earlier were more likely to report currently having a boy/girlfriend when they were 17/18 (Figure 6). For example, 35% of boys whose voice had completely changed at the time of the 13-year interview reported being in a relationship at age 17/18 years. This compares to just 19% of those whose voice had not changed at all by 13 years of age. A similar relationship was also apparent for females as measured by whether their periods had started by the time of the 13-year interview.
- Over a third of all young people (39%) had experienced breaking up with a boy/girlfriend by the time of their 17/18 year interview.



Figure 6: Having a boy/girlfriend at 17/18 years by pubertal status at age 13, separately for males and females



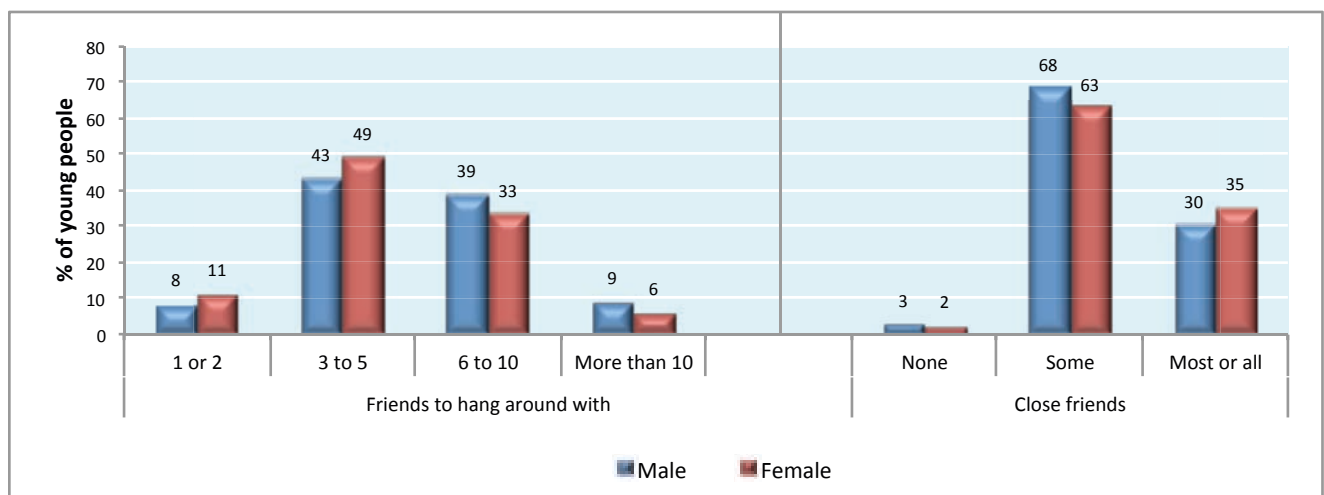
## FRIENDS AND FRIENDSHIP

### Young people typically had “3 to 5 friends” to hang around with

Spending time with friends or peers in various contexts is a key part of late adolescence and young adulthood.

- Almost all 17/18-year-olds had at least one or two “friends to hang around with”; a very small number had no friends.<sup>3</sup> Overall, 46% had “between three and five” friends and a further 36% said they had “between six and ten”. Around two-thirds of young people described *some* of those friends as ‘close’.
- In general, males were more likely to report larger groups of friends (Figure 7). Females, however, were more likely to describe most or all of their friends as “close” (35% compared to 30% of males).
- 39% of young people reported a smaller number of friends at age 17/18 than they had at 13 years, whereas 23% reported a higher number. However it is possible that how young people categorised peers as ‘friends’ changed over time as well as actual change in the size of the friendship network.

**Figure 7: Number of friends and proportion of close friends for males and females**



### Most young people had some friends of a different gender, but a mix of ethnicities and ages was somewhat less common

- Just under three-quarters of 17/18-year-olds described *most or all* of their friends as being around the same age as them. A majority of both males and females (over 85%) had at least some friends of a different gender and just under half had friends from a different ethnic background.
- Females were more likely than males to report that their parents had met most or all of their friends (61% compared to 46% of males).

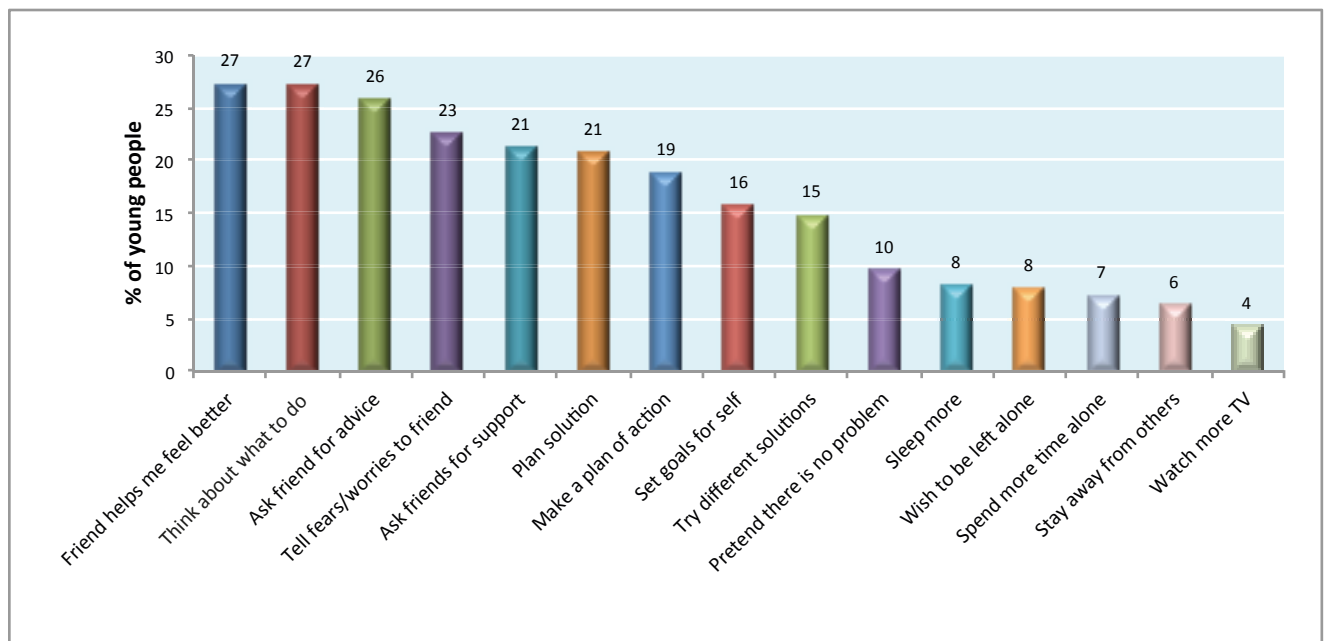


<sup>3</sup>The number of young people in this ‘no friends’ category was too small to analyse so they are not included further in these results

## Friends are an important source of support for young people when facing difficulties

- Young people were asked how often they used a selection of 15 'coping strategies'<sup>4</sup> when faced with difficulties. Those relating to friends made up four of the top five most popular strategies (Figure 8).
- Other popular coping strategies related to planning a solution or course of action (e.g. 'think about what to do' – 27%). More 'avoidant' strategies such as staying away from others were less frequently used but it is still noteworthy that almost 10% reported *often* or *always* using less constructive methods such as "pretend there is no problem" or "wish to be left alone".
- Around a quarter of young people said they would *very often* or *always* go to friends to help them feel better (27%), ask for advice (26%), tell them their fears or worries (23%) or ask for support (21%).

**Figure 8: Percentage of young people using different coping strategies – including seeking help from friends – *very often* or *always***



Note that graph shows summary labels and not original text.



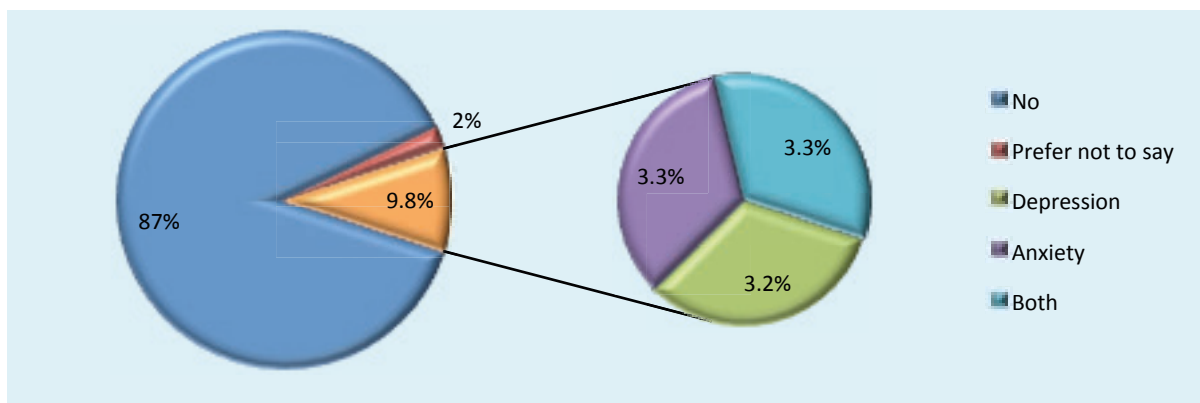
<sup>4</sup>Based on a scale adapted for use in the My World Survey (Dooley and Fitzgerald, 2012). Original scale by Amir Khan (1990).

## MENTAL HEALTH CONCERNS

### One-in-ten young people reported that they had been diagnosed with depression, anxiety or both

- Just under 10% of 17/18-year-olds said they had been diagnosed with depression or anxiety by a doctor, psychologist or psychiatrist. As shown in Figure 9, the type of diagnosis was approximately evenly distributed between depression, anxiety or both.
- Females were significantly more likely to report receiving a diagnosis than males (13% compared to 8%).
- Most young people with a diagnosis had received some treatment – 40% currently and 44% in the past.

**Figure 9: Percentage of 17/18-year-olds who reported a diagnosis of depression, anxiety or both**



### One-in-five adolescent girls had hurt themselves on purpose at some point

People who are distressed sometimes hurt themselves deliberately, often described as ‘self-harm’.

- 17% of 17/18-year-olds said they had ever “hurt [themselves] on purpose” (11% in the last year). Ever self-harming was almost twice as common among females (23%) as among males (12%).
- Two-thirds of young people who self-harmed reported *cutting* themselves and over half said they used *banging/hitting/bruising* (this amounts to 11% and 9% of all 17/18-year-olds respectively).

### Nearly 40% of teenagers who had a higher depressive symptoms score at age 13 years also had a higher score at age 17/18

Young people taking part in *Growing Up in Ireland* were asked to complete a set of questions measuring depressive symptoms<sup>5</sup>, such as feeling miserable or lonely, at both 13 and 17/18 years. Scores in the top quintile (i.e. the highest 20%) of this measure are used here to indicate higher levels of depressive symptoms – *note that this is not the same as a clinical diagnosis of depression*.

- At age 17/18 years, females (25%) were significantly more likely than males (16%) to be in the top 20% for depressive symptoms. As might be expected, other groups more likely to be in the ‘high’ group included those who had received a diagnosis of depression (49%) and those who had hurt themselves on purpose (53%).
- Additionally, 17/18-year-olds who said they had no adult to turn to for ‘help and advice’ (as discussed earlier) were more likely to score in the higher range (36%).
- Young people who had scored in the top 20% on this measure of depressive symptoms when they were 13 years old were twice as likely to be in the top quintile again when they were 17/18 years (37% compared to 17%).
- Having a higher depressive score at age 13 years was also associated with a greater chance of receiving a diagnosis of depression or anxiety by age 17/18 years (19% compared to 8% without a high score at 13); and with a greater likelihood of self-harming by 17/18 years (32% compared to 14%).

<sup>5</sup> Short Mood and Feelings Questionnaire – Angold et al. (1995)



## YOUNG PERSON'S EMOTIONAL AND BEHAVIOURAL WELL-BEING ACCORDING TO PARENTS

### 17/18-year-olds from socially-disadvantaged backgrounds had a higher risk of scoring in the 'problematic' range on a measure of emotional and behavioural difficulties

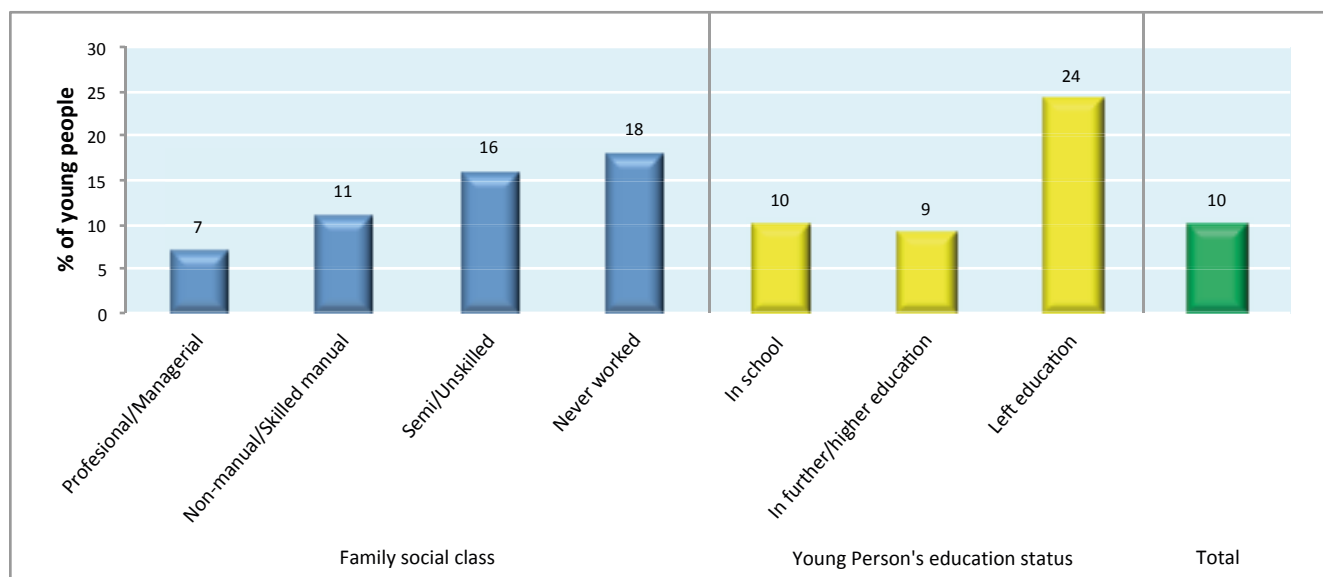
At each wave of *Growing Up in Ireland* (i.e. 9, 13 and 17/18 years), parents were asked to complete a set of questions called the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ<sup>6</sup>) on the socio-emotional and behavioural well-being of the young person. Typically individuals in the top 10% of scores (i.e. worst) are classified as 'problematic' relative to their peers.

- 17/18-year-olds who came from less advantaged family backgrounds were more likely to be in the 'problematic' category. Nearly one-in-five young people (18%) from the 'Never worked' family social class group were categorised as having 'problematic' levels of socio-emotional difficulties compared to just 7% of those from a 'Professional/Managerial' family background (Figure 10).
- Those 17/18 year-olds who had left education were more likely to be in the 'problematic' category (24%, also Figure 10) when compared to those who were still in school or in further/higher education (9%). It could be that individuals who have socio-emotional or behavioural difficulties find it harder to stay in full-time education or that the educational environment has a protective effect, although further analysis would be required to determine the direction.
- A higher percentage of females than males were in the 'problematic' category (12% and 9% respectively). Much of this is related to significantly higher scores on the 'emotional' subscale within the index. Females were, however, more likely to get higher scores on the positive subscale relating to pro-social behaviour.

### For many 17/18-year-olds, problems could be traced back to their childhood and early adolescence

- Young people who were scored in the 'problematic' category of the SDQ at age 13 years did less well in their subsequent Junior Certificate examinations. The average (mean) score on a summary measure for Junior Certificate 'points'<sup>7</sup> was almost 10 points lower (out of a maximum of 100) on both English and Maths among those with socio-emotional difficulties at age 13.

**Figure 10: Percentage of 17/18-year-olds in the 'problematic' category of SDQ scores according to family social class and their current educational situation**

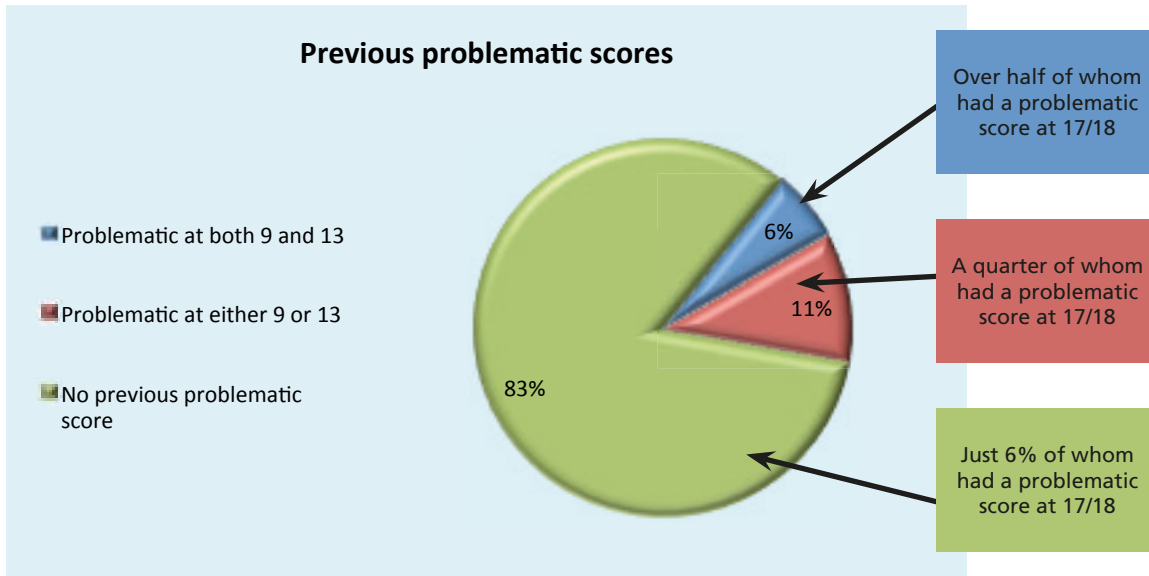


<sup>6</sup> Goodman (1997) – the 'difficulties' aspects of this measure relate to conduct problems, hyperactivity, issues with peers and emotional difficulties. The 'strength' aspect relates to pro-social behaviour.

<sup>7</sup> See Key Finding No.1 for further details.

- Figure 11 shows that young people who had previously been in the 'problematic' group were more likely to be also 'problematic' at 17/18 years. For example, over half of individuals who were in this category at both 9 and 13 years were again classified as 'problematic' when they were 17/18 years old. This means that around 3% of the overall group were consistently scoring in the 'problematic' range at all three time-points (9, 13 and 17/18 years).

**Figure 11: Association of 'problematic' SDQ scores at 9 or 13 years with 'problematic' SDQ scores at 17-18 years**



## SUMMARY

Most 17/18-year-olds will have 'a lot going on' in their lives between study, work, relationships and important life choices to be made. Ups and downs in one area can impact on other aspects of their socio-emotional well-being: for example, anxiety about exams can negatively affect relationships, and frustration with relationships could reduce overall feelings of satisfaction with one's lot in life. Therefore it is important to take a rounded view of the different aspects of life which contribute to the overall state of a young person's mental health and happiness.

The highlighted results featured in this Key Finding show young people as having an overall positive view of their lives as they are now. Relationships with family and friends were viewed as important, and a sizeable minority were also in a relationship with a boy or girlfriend. Nevertheless, for some young people this period in their lives is, or has been, marked by significant difficulties in terms of their socio-emotional well-being, with 10% reporting a diagnosis of depression or anxiety (or both) at some point, and 11% hurting themselves on purpose in the last year. These results also point to the persistent nature of difficulties for a minority of individuals, with those who were displaying problems with socio-emotional/behavioural well-being, or reporting depressive symptoms, at age 13 years among the most likely to be having problems when re-interviewed at 17/18 years.

Other patterns that emerged were the tendency for females to report more mental health issues than males. There were also differences between young people from a 'never worked' family background and those from more advantaged social class groups on a number of indicators including parent-reports of behavioural well-being, having a boy/girlfriend and lower life satisfaction.





*Growing Up in Ireland* is the National Longitudinal Study of Children. It tracks the development of two nationally representative cohorts of children: an 'Infant Cohort', interviewed initially at 9 months and with subsequent data collection waves at 3, 5 and 7/8 years of age; and a 'Child Cohort', interviewed initially at 9 years of age, subsequently at 13 and, most recently, at 17/18 years. It is the 17/18-year-olds in the Child Cohort who are the subject of this Key Findings series.

The *Growing Up in Ireland* study is funded by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA), with a contribution from The Atlantic Philanthropies for Phase 2. The project is overseen and managed by the DCYA in association with the Central Statistics Office (CSO) and an inter-departmental Project Team and Steering Group. The project is being implemented by a consortium of independent researchers led by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) and Trinity College Dublin (TCD).

The Child Cohort was recruited in 2007, when 8,568 9-year-olds, their families, teachers and school principals were interviewed. Just over 7,400 young people, their families (and school principals) were re-interviewed at 13 years of age (between August 2011 and February 2012) and just over 6,200 families from this cohort participated again at 17/18 years of age (between November 2015 and September 2016).

### **Methodology**

The data were recorded using a range of administered and self-completed questionnaires. The figures discussed in these Key Findings were statistically adjusted (or 're-weighted') to account for design and inter-wave attrition using a number of standard socio-demographic controls such as family type, young person's gender, family income and social class. The data presented in this Key Finding were collected in home-based, face-to-face interviews with young people and their parents.

### **Access to Growing Up in Ireland data**

An anonymised version of all quantitative and qualitative data collected in *Growing Up in Ireland* is being made available through the Irish Social Science Data Archive (ISSDA) (<http://www.ucd.ie/issda/data/growingupinirelandgui/>) and the Irish Qualitative Data Archive (IQDA) (<https://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/iqda/collections>).

**Thank you to all participants.** The success of *Growing Up in Ireland* is the result of contributions of time and effort from a large range of individuals, organisations and school staff. This landmark longitudinal research will benefit future generations of children. We are particularly grateful to the thousands of families from every part of the country who gave so generously of their time on three occasions to make this study possible. A very big 'thank you' to all these children, young people and their families.

(The figures presented in this Key Finding are purely descriptive. They do not control for potential interactions or confounding effects. All figures are preliminary and may be subject to change).



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