



# Girls' Wellbeing

Insights from the 2021 Speaking Out Survey



### **Recognising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People:**

The Commissioner for Children and Young People WA acknowledges the unique contribution of Aboriginal peoples' cultures and heritage to Western Australian society. For the purposes of this report, the term 'Aboriginal' encompasses Western Australia's diverse language groups and also recognises Torres Strait Islanders who live in Western Australia. The use of the term 'Aboriginal' in this way is not intended to imply equivalence between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, though similarities do exist.

### **Content warning:**

This report explores young people's views on a variety of topics including mental health, feeling unsafe, and sexual harassment and assault. These issues may be distressing for some people. If you would like to speak to someone, options for support include Kids Helpline 1800 55 1800 and Lifeline 13 11 14.

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The images of Western Australian children and young people used in this report are generic and do not infer a particular school or student's involvement in the Speaking Out Survey.

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## Message from the Commissioner



**In 2021, my office undertook the second Speaking Out Survey (SOS21) collecting the views of 16,532 children and young people across Western Australia. One of the key findings of this survey was that female young people consistently rated their wellbeing below that of their male peers, with higher rates of stress and lower life satisfaction.**

This is consistent with a growing body of evidence, both nationally and internationally, that points to a gender wellbeing gap in children and young people.

According to SOS21, female young people were twice as likely as their male peers to report not feeling happy with themselves, feeling unable to achieve their goals or to deal with things in their lives.

The transition from primary school to high school is more difficult for female students with many reporting negative mental health experiences and low self-esteem. As they get older, they also begin to feel disconnected from their parents and feel that no-one is listening to them or providing them with the support they need. Female young people are also more likely to feel unsafe which is another contributing factor to poor mental health.

It is clear that there is an urgent need to bridge this wellbeing gap and to provide better support to our female children and young people.

Our female young people are being left behind and we need to address this.

Both government and non-government sectors have a responsibility to work together to ensure policies, programs and services are focused on improving wellbeing outcomes for girls. Every young person must be given the opportunity to succeed, regardless of their gender.

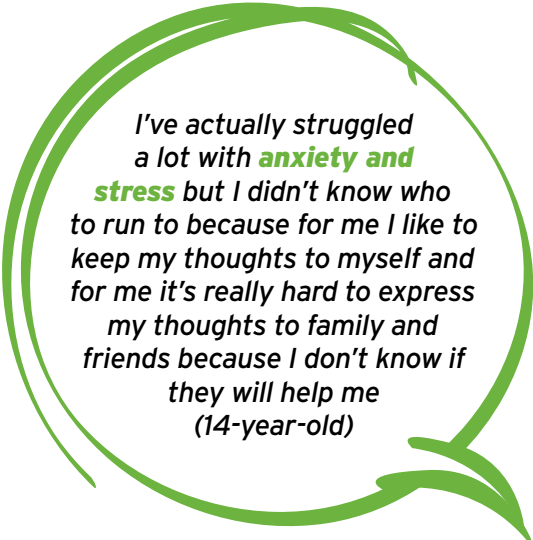
I would like to thank the Department of Education, Association of Independent Schools WA and Catholic Education WA for supporting SOS21 and facilitating the vital input of students right across the state.

I also thank every young person who completed the survey, for giving their time and wisdom and sharing sometimes difficult experiences.

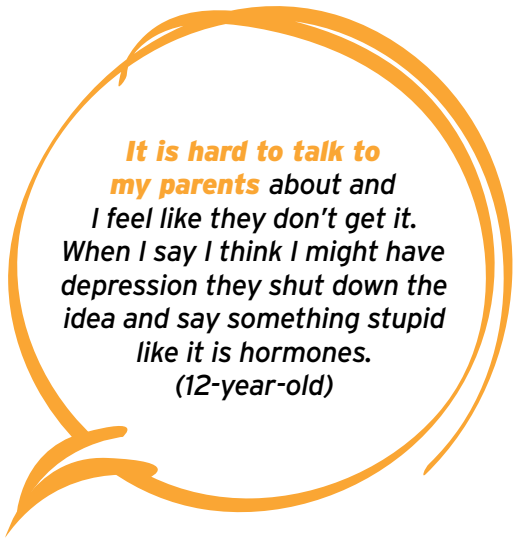
A handwritten signature in black ink, reading 'Jacqueline McGowan-Jones'. The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name 'Jacqueline' being the most prominent part.

**Jacqueline McGowan-Jones**

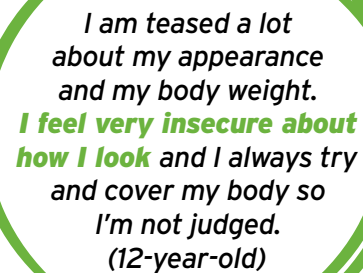
Commissioner for Children and Young People



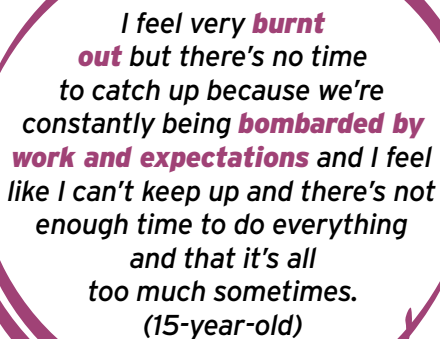
I've actually struggled a lot with **anxiety and stress** but I didn't know who to run to because for me I like to keep my thoughts to myself and for me it's really hard to express my thoughts to family and friends because I don't know if they will help me  
(14-year-old)



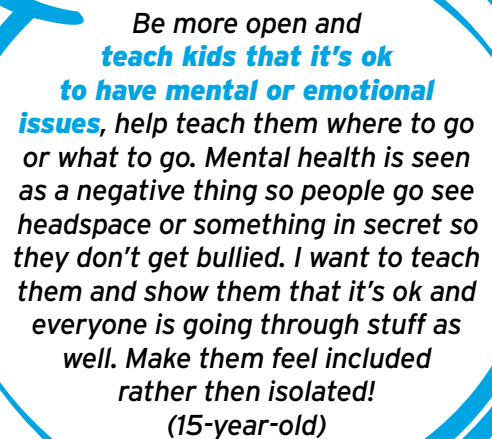
It is hard to talk to **my parents** about and I feel like they don't get it. When I say I think I might have depression they shut down the idea and say something stupid like it is hormones.  
(12-year-old)



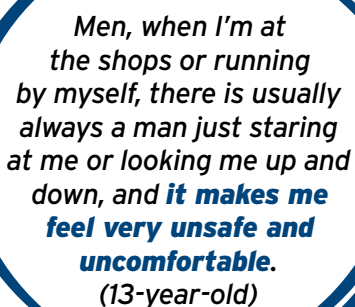
I am teased a lot about my appearance and my body weight. **I feel very insecure about how I look** and I always try and cover my body so I'm not judged.  
(12-year-old)



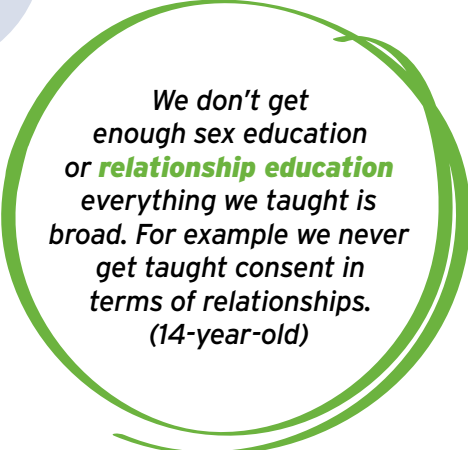
I feel very **burnt out** but there's no time to catch up because we're constantly being **bombarded by work and expectations** and I feel like I can't keep up and there's not enough time to do everything and that it's all too much sometimes.  
(15-year-old)



Be more open and **teach kids that it's ok to have mental or emotional issues**, help teach them where to go or what to go. Mental health is seen as a negative thing so people go see headspace or something in secret so they don't get bullied. I want to teach them and show them that it's ok and everyone is going through stuff as well. Make them feel included rather than isolated!  
(15-year-old)



Men, when I'm at the shops or running by myself, there is usually always a man just staring at me or looking me up and down, and **it makes me feel very unsafe and uncomfortable**.  
(13-year-old)



We don't get enough sex education or **relationship education** everything we taught is broad. For example we never get taught consent in terms of relationships.  
(14-year-old)



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# Executive summary

## Introduction

A critical finding of the Commissioner for Children and Young People's (the Commissioner's) inaugural Speaking Out Survey conducted in 2019 was that female young people in WA rated their wellbeing less favourably than male young people.

In response to this finding, the Commissioner researched and published the literature review: *Exploring the decline in wellbeing for Australian girls* in August 2021, which showed that in Australia and internationally, female children and young people have significantly lower wellbeing outcomes than their male peers across a broad range of measures.

In 2021, the Commissioner conducted the second Speaking Out Survey (SOS21) with 16,532 children and young people across WA. The results of this large-scale survey confirm these findings.

This report analyses girls' wellbeing using the SOS21 quantitative results and qualitative

responses captured through open text questions in the survey. The voices of female children and young people in this report provide a critical and unique insight into their views and experiences and how they explain their wellbeing. It shows that many female young people in WA rate their life satisfaction as very low, have low self-esteem, often feel unsafe in their local community and feel unheard and unsupported by their loved ones.

This report should inform a critical focus on girls' wellbeing in government and non-government policy, program and service design and cultural change in the community more broadly.



## Key findings

### Mental health

As female young people transition from primary school to high school they are significantly more likely than male young people to report low life satisfaction, negative mental health experiences and low self-esteem.

- Almost one-third (30%) of female students in Years 10 to 12 rated their life satisfaction as very poor (rating 0 to 4 on a scale from 0 to 10) compared to 14 per cent of their male peers.
- The top five sources of stress in the past 12 months for female students in Years 9 to 12 were: school or study problems (93%), body image (63%), mental health and wellbeing (61%), problems with friends (58%) and family conflict (55%).
- Analysis of the SOS21 data shows that for girls with low self-esteem there are strong associations with being stressed about body image, not having a parent or other adult at home who listens when they have something to say and/or not feeling safe at home.

### Belonging, friendships and technology

Positive friendships and feelings of belonging are critical for wellbeing. Female young people spoke about how important their friends are for support, yet they were also more likely to report they do not have enough friends or find it difficult to make or keep friends.

- More than one-half (58%) of Year 9 to Year 12 female students reported problems with friends as a source of stress for them in the past year (male: 31%).
- Analysis of the SOS21 data shows there is a strong relationship between feeling that your friends care about you or that you are good at making and keeping friends and self-esteem.
- Female young people were also less likely than their male peers to feel like they belong at school or in their community.
- In Years 10 to 12, one-in-five (20%) female students reported going without eating or sleeping because of their mobile phone (male: 11%).





## Feeling unsafe

Feeling safe is critical for mental health and wellbeing and to allow young people to engage in all the activities they want to do. When female young people do not feel safe they are less likely to feel comfortable being independent, expressing an opinion or pursuing their goals. They are also more likely to experience mental ill health and low self-esteem.

- Girls are more likely than boys to feel unsafe at home, at school and in the community.
- Female young people are more likely to have been hit or physically harmed at home, while male students are more likely to be hit or physically harmed at school and other public places.
- There is a very strong relationship between female high school students not feeling safe at home and having low life satisfaction.
- Almost two-thirds (63%) of girls who never feel safe in their local area rate their life satisfaction very poorly (0 to 4), while two-thirds of girls (65%) who feel safe in their local area all the time rate their life satisfaction highly (7 to 10).



## Supportive relationships

Young people who are supported by safe and positive relationships are more likely to have good mental health and wellbeing. The SOS21 data shows that many female young people feel disconnected from their parents and other supporting adults as they move through adolescence.

- Nineteen per cent of female Year 10 to Year 12 students report that it is not at all true that there is a parent or other adult where they live who they can talk to about their problems or worries (male: 10%).
- Girls who feel they are not listened to or unable to talk to their parents and carers about their problems are less likely to feel happy with themselves and more likely to feel they are unable to achieve their goals or cope with life's challenges.
- Male and female children in primary school (Years 4 to 6) have similar views on whether they feel supported by the parents or other adults at home. However, in high school, male young people continue to feel supported and heard, while female young people report a significant decline in support.



## Autonomy and equality

Experiencing a level of autonomy and independence is an important developmental phase for young people, yet, many female young people are not allowed to do the same things that their male peers are allowed to do. Further, many female young people do not feel they are able to make decisions about their own lives.

- Only 52 per cent of female students in Years 10 to 12 are allowed to cycle on a main road without an adult (male: 74%) and one-third (33%) are allowed to go out alone at night (male: 54%).
- Just under one-third (30%) of female young people in Years 7 to 12 strongly agree they are involved in making decisions about their lives, compared to 42 per cent of male young people the same age.



## Conclusion

This report highlights that many female children and young people feel like they are not being listened to when they discuss their lives, they feel like they don't belong, they feel unsafe at home, at school and in public spaces and they feel like their male siblings and peers are treated differently from them.

The views expressed in this report highlight key steps that can be taken now to improve the lives of female children and young people. Girls want their families to ask them how they are, listen to their views and be kind and supportive in their responses. Schools can provide an environment that encourages positive, supportive and respectful relationships across the school.

Urgent action is also required across all government and non-government sectors. There is a clear need for targeted services and programs to support girls' mental health, self-esteem and sense of belonging, however there is a broader requirement to continue to decrease gender inequality and gendered attitudes in Australian society.

The Commissioner will conduct further consultations with young people to discuss the results of the survey and gather their views on how to improve girls' experiences and reduce the gender wellbeing gap. The Commissioner will then report young people's views on the way forward and provide recommendations.





# Introduction

# Introduction

In November 2021, the Commissioner for Children and Young People published the *Speaking Out Survey 2021: The views of WA children and young people on their wellbeing – a summary report*. This report outlined the results of a landmark survey of 16,532 children and young people across WA.

The Speaking Out Survey is designed to provide a robust and representative data source relating to the wellbeing of children and young people in WA, with the inaugural survey conducted in 2019.

A clear finding in the 2019 survey, and confirmed again in 2021, was that female students rate their wellbeing much less favourably than male students across almost all areas.

In response to this finding, the Commissioner researched and published the literature review: *Exploring the decline in Australian girls' wellbeing* in 2021, which outlines current evidence regarding the wellbeing gap between male and female young people. This report shows that in Australia and internationally female children and young people have significantly lower wellbeing outcomes than their male peers across a broad range of indicators. Critically, the gender wellbeing gap has widened in the last decade.

The literature review also highlighted that there is limited qualitative data available on the views and experiences of Australian female children and young people across several areas including mental health, self-esteem, sense of belonging and gender equality.

Data from SOS21 has affirmed the findings of the literature review. A substantial proportion of WA female students in Years 7 to 12 reported poor life satisfaction, low self-esteem, high levels of stress and feeling they cannot cope with life's challenges.

This report provides further analysis of girls' wellbeing using the SOS21 quantitative results and qualitative responses from female children and young people across WA on selected topics such as mental health, belonging and safety.<sup>1</sup> It highlights their views and experiences and how they explain their wellbeing.

It is essential that female young people's voices are heard, and their views are given serious consideration when developing solutions for this complex issue.





# Background

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# Background

## Role of the Commissioner

The Commissioner for Children and Young People works closely with children and young people, their families, community and government to improve the wellbeing of children and young people under 18 years of age across Western Australia. To do this the Commissioner undertakes consultations, projects and research, as well as publishing reports and resources to positively influence legislation, policy, services and attitudes impacting children and young people.

One of the key roles of the Commissioner is to ensure that all children and young people have the opportunity to participate in decision-making that affects their lives, and to encourage government and non-government agencies to support the participation of children and young people appropriate to their age and maturity.

The Speaking Out Survey is designed to enable children and young people to provide their views and life experiences and report on their own wellbeing.

## Speaking Out Survey methodology

The Speaking Out Survey is a robust and representative survey of the wellbeing of children and young people in WA. It was developed to address identified gaps in available data on WA children and young people's wellbeing.

The sampling methodology was designed to generate reliable estimates of the wellbeing of students in Years 4 to 12 across WA and to understand changes in these estimates over time. Student responses were weighted so that the survey results are representative of the population of students for select cohorts of interest (e.g. gender, school year and region). The inaugural survey tool and methodology were developed in collaboration with Telethon Kids Institute.

SOS21 had separate surveys for Years 4 to 6 and Years 7 to 12. For Years 4 to 6

(Child Survey), the maximum total number of questions asked of a student was 119; for Years 7 to 12 (Young People Survey), the maximum total number was 203 questions. The survey employed standard survey response filter mechanisms.

To give participants the opportunity to further explain their responses, the SOS21 survey included some open text questions about essential wellbeing topics such as mental health, safety and their local community.

## Profile of participants

In SOS21, a total of 16,532 Year 4 to Year 12 students from 94 schools in all regions of WA consented to participate.<sup>2</sup>

The survey asked participants to identify whether they described themselves as a boy, a girl or 'in another way'. In the Young People Survey 51.6 per cent of students identified as female, 45.3 per cent as male and 3.1 per cent identified 'in another way'. In the Child Survey 49.8 per cent of students identified as female, 47.4 per cent as male, and 2.8 per cent 'in another way'.

In this report we compare the responses of those children and young people who identified as female to those who identified as male. It does not report on the views and experiences of children and young people who selected the option of identifying 'in another way'.

The language used in this report is girls, women, female young people, yet does not seek to exclude or dismiss the views and experiences of gender-diverse children and young people. Children and young people who selected 'in another way' in SOS21 will be the focus of a later publication.

Aboriginal students are represented in the main sample proportionate to their population in WA. In total, 1,145 or 8.4 per cent participating students identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander.

Student responses were weighted so that survey results are representative of the population of students enrolled in Years 4 to 12 by school sector (government, independent and Catholic) and region (major cities, inner/outer regional and remote/very remote schools).

This report does not explore the many inequalities and challenges faced by children and young people who are Aboriginal, culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD), have disability and/or those who identify as LGBTQIA+SB.<sup>3</sup> The views and experiences of these children and young people will be the subject of future consultations and publications.

### Analysis of data

The quantitative survey results have been analysed using a statistical software application. For further information on the SOS21 methodology and results refer to the report: *Speaking Out Survey 2021. The views of WA children and young people on their wellbeing – a summary report* on the Commissioner's website.

The qualitative (open text) data has been analysed using qualitative data analysis software (NVIVO).

The following open text questions were available in the SOS21 survey for high school participants to complete on a voluntary basis, and primary school participants had a subset of these.

- Please tell us what health problem(s) or condition(s) you have (remember you do not have to answer this question if you do not want to).
- Is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences with seeking help for health issues including mental health worries?
- If there was one thing you could change about your local area, what would it be?
- What are some of the things that make you feel unsafe?

- Thinking about mental health and other emotional worries like stress, anxiety or depression, what are some of the ways families, communities, schools or adults in general could be more helpful?
- Thinking about personal safety and feeling safe at home, school or in the community, what are some of things you would like families, schools, or adults in general to know?
- The majority of high school students feel stressed by school work or study. What do you think are the main reasons for this?
- Please tell us anything else that you thought about this survey or would like to share.

All open text responses were uploaded to NVIVO with some base demographic information. There were 11,450 participants with at least one response.

Overall, female children and young people were marginally more likely to respond to the open text questions (female: 51%, male: 45%, in another way: 3%).<sup>4</sup>

All responses were read and thematically coded where appropriate. Through this analysis, key themes were identified.<sup>5</sup> This report has been structured around these themes so that the key issues and concerns of WA's female children and young people are highlighted. All quotes in this report are from children and young people who identified as female in the survey.

This report presents the views of children and young people in their own words. The quotes are unedited to ensure the voice of the child or young person is authentically presented. Editing has only been done where necessary for clarity, understanding or for confidentiality, in this instance any changes or omissions have been marked with an [] or an ellipsis (...).



# Mental Health

***Well for months  
I was really sad,  
confused, angry, upset  
and felt unwanted and I  
did self harm and didn't tell  
anyone because I thought I  
could manage on my own and  
I was ashamed to tell anyone  
my problems in case they  
would judge me for it.  
(13-year-old)***

# Mental health

## Life satisfaction and mental health concerns

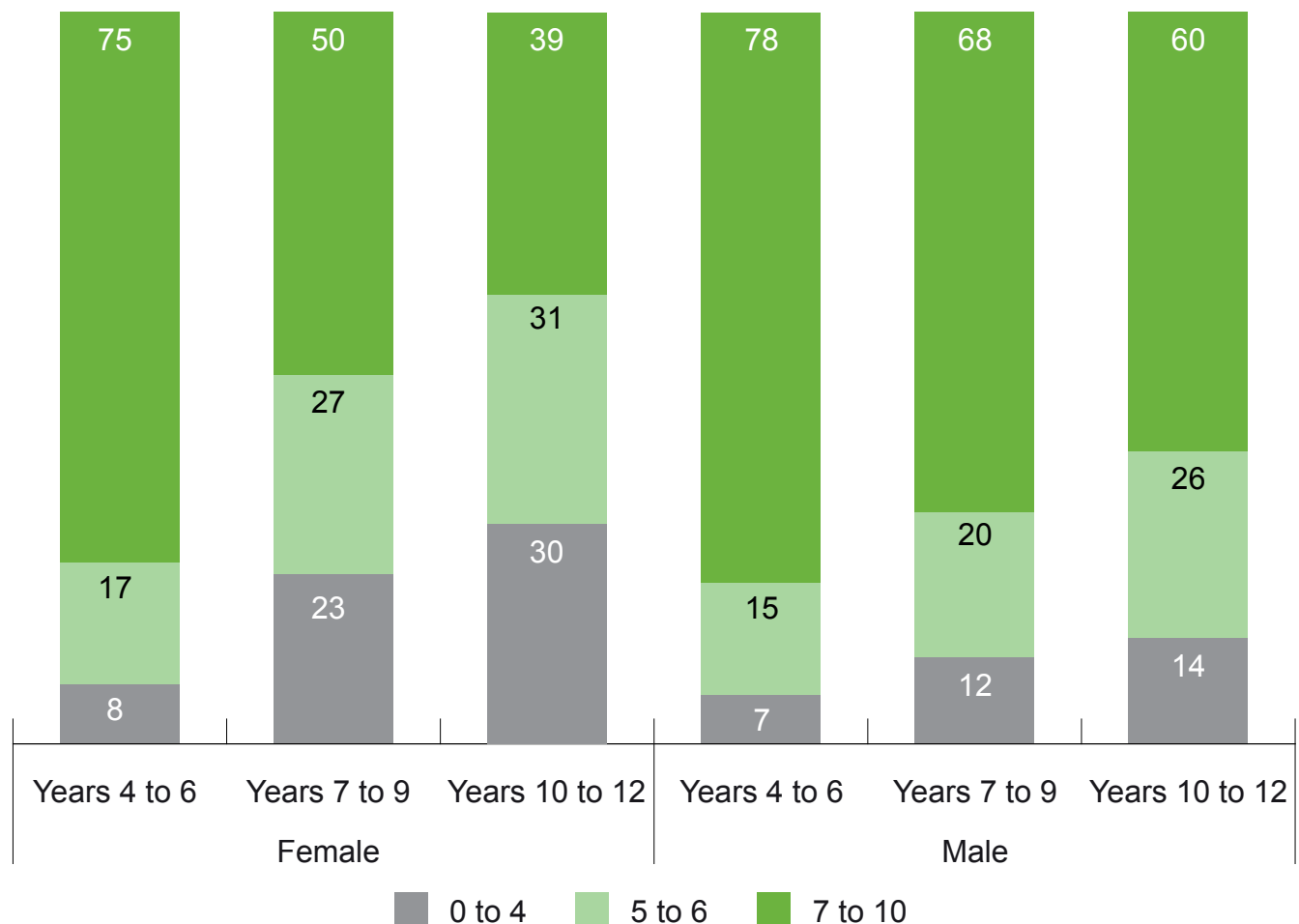
Good mental health is an essential component of wellbeing and means that children and young people are more likely to have fulfilling relationships, be able to cope with adverse circumstances and adapt to change.

In SOS21 (and SOS19) female high school students reported lower scores on life satisfaction, resilience, happiness and self-perception and higher rates of feeling sad or depressed compared to male students.

While male and female students' responses are similar in primary school, less than one-half (45%) of female high school students rated their life satisfaction as high (rating 7 to 10) compared to 65 per cent of their male peers.

Of particular concern, almost one-third (30%) of female students in Years 10 to 12 rated their life satisfaction as very poor (rating 0 to 4) compared to 14 per cent of their male peers.

**Proportion of students rating their life satisfaction where '0' is the worst possible life and '10' the best possible life, grouped responses by year group and gender, per cent**



Source: Speaking Out Survey 2021 Data Tables [unpublished]



The data suggests that female young people in WA experience a significant decline in their wellbeing during the transition to high school and/or the onset of puberty, which is less marked for male young people. This is consistent with international literature and research.<sup>6</sup>

Further analysis of the SOS21 data shows that while there are many intersecting factors, female students with lower life satisfaction are significantly less likely to feel safe at home, less likely to feel like they belong at school and less likely to have a parent who listens to them.

In the open text responses, a much greater proportion of female students than male students reported feeling general anxiety about life (female: 76%, male: 18%).

*I just get really anxious all of the time over little things... (11-year-old)*

*I think I worry a bit much about everything that is going on. (11-year-old)*

*...in a lot of situations I can't handle I have anxiety attacks and that also has an impact on my ability to overcome my fears and I have struggled a lot. (12-year-old)*

*The pressure we are put on to get good grades, have friends, be quiet and be happy. (12-year-old)*

*I sometimes worry and stress too much and I sometimes get anxiety or feel really down about life which that makes me worry for myself sometimes. And when I try talk to friends or family about it they don't seem to believe me. (13-year-old)*

In regard to having mental health concerns, over two-thirds (68%) of female students in Years 9 to 12 reported they had felt sad, blue or depressed for two or more weeks in a row in the last 12 months compared to almost one-half of male students (47%).

In the open text responses, around 1,000 students reported feelings of anxiety, depression or sadness and around two-thirds of these were female children and young people.

*I struggle with smoking addiction, problems, alcohol use. A lot of self confidence issues, self esteem issues, family problems etc (12-year-old)*

*I don't know how to handle with my anxiety because when it gets too much for me I struggle and my depression takes over my body and it doesn't make me feel good. I hate feeling alone. (13-year-old)*

*The problem with most kids/teens now a days is that so many of us feel stressed 24/7, not good enough, tired, upset with school or social life and the anxiety hitting at full speed leaving us with nothing to do but let it take us over in silence. There are so many kids who feel alone or feel lonely and it leads them to get depression, unhealthy thoughts, feeling worthless and so much more. That's how I feel and think many others do to from watching the way my friends and peers occasionally say or do things. (13-year-old)*

*It was very hard to get my diagnosis for adhd and it was very difficult for my mental health, I felt like no one was there to help me and that no one wanted to see me get better and that I was "weird" for being like this. (13-year-old)*

*Ask if I'm ok more and if I have my head down I'm probably crying. (14-year-old)*

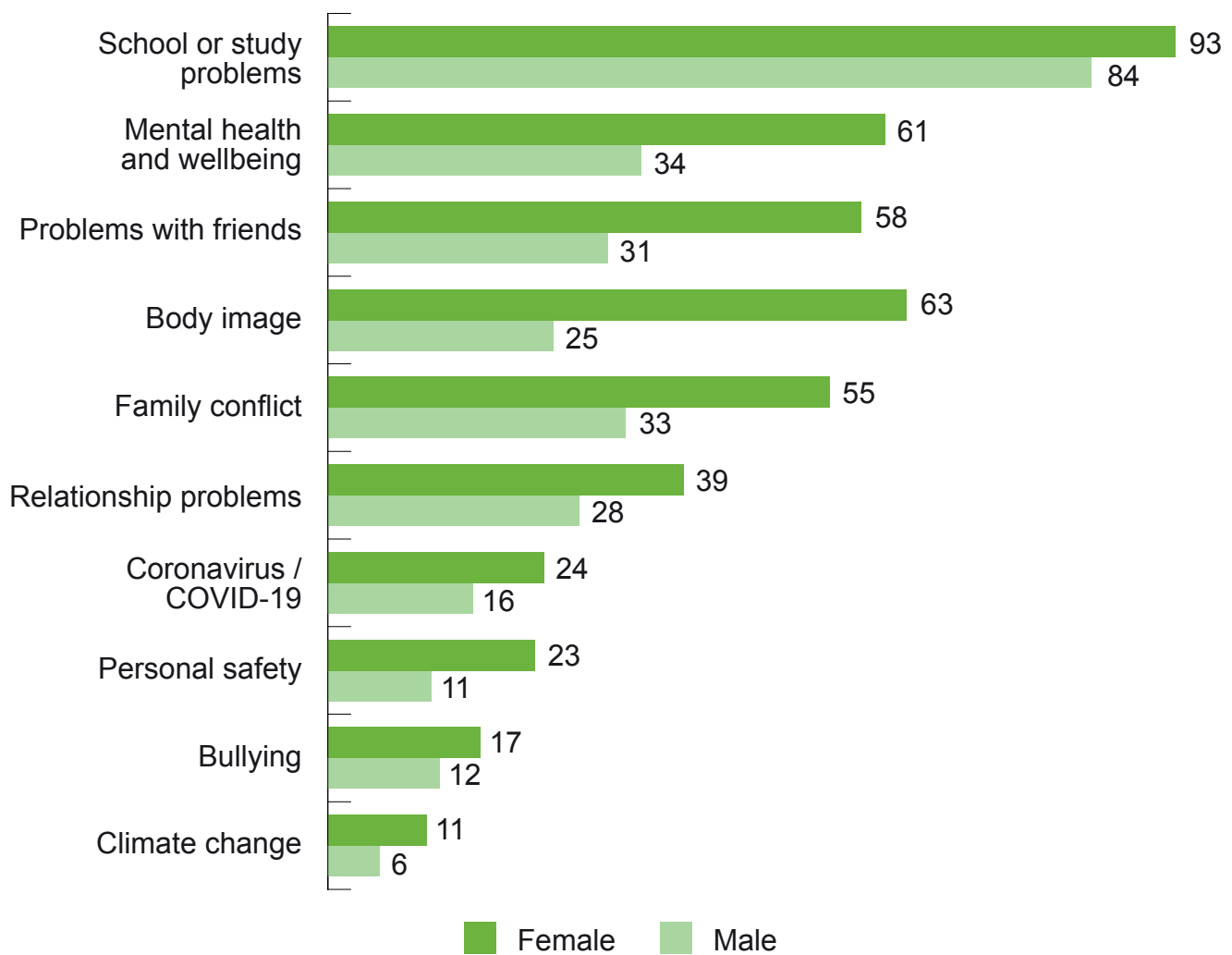
*I feel like I don't know which mental issue is may be dealing with or if it's just stress from school but I feel like I may have anxiety, but I don't know who to tell that to or where to seek help. (16-year-old)*

Students in Years 9 to 12 were asked about sources of stress over the last year. For girls, the top five sources of stress were: school or

study problems (93%), body image (63%), mental health and wellbeing (61%), problems with friends (58%) and family conflict (55%).

In the open text responses, female students were more likely than male students to describe multiple life stressors, including worries about schoolwork, body image, their friendships, feeling unsafe and being worried about their mental health but not feeling comfortable talking about it.

**Proportion of Year 9 to Year 12 students selecting multiple response items that were a source of stress for them in the past year by gender, per cent**



Source: Speaking Out Survey 2021 Data Tables [unpublished]

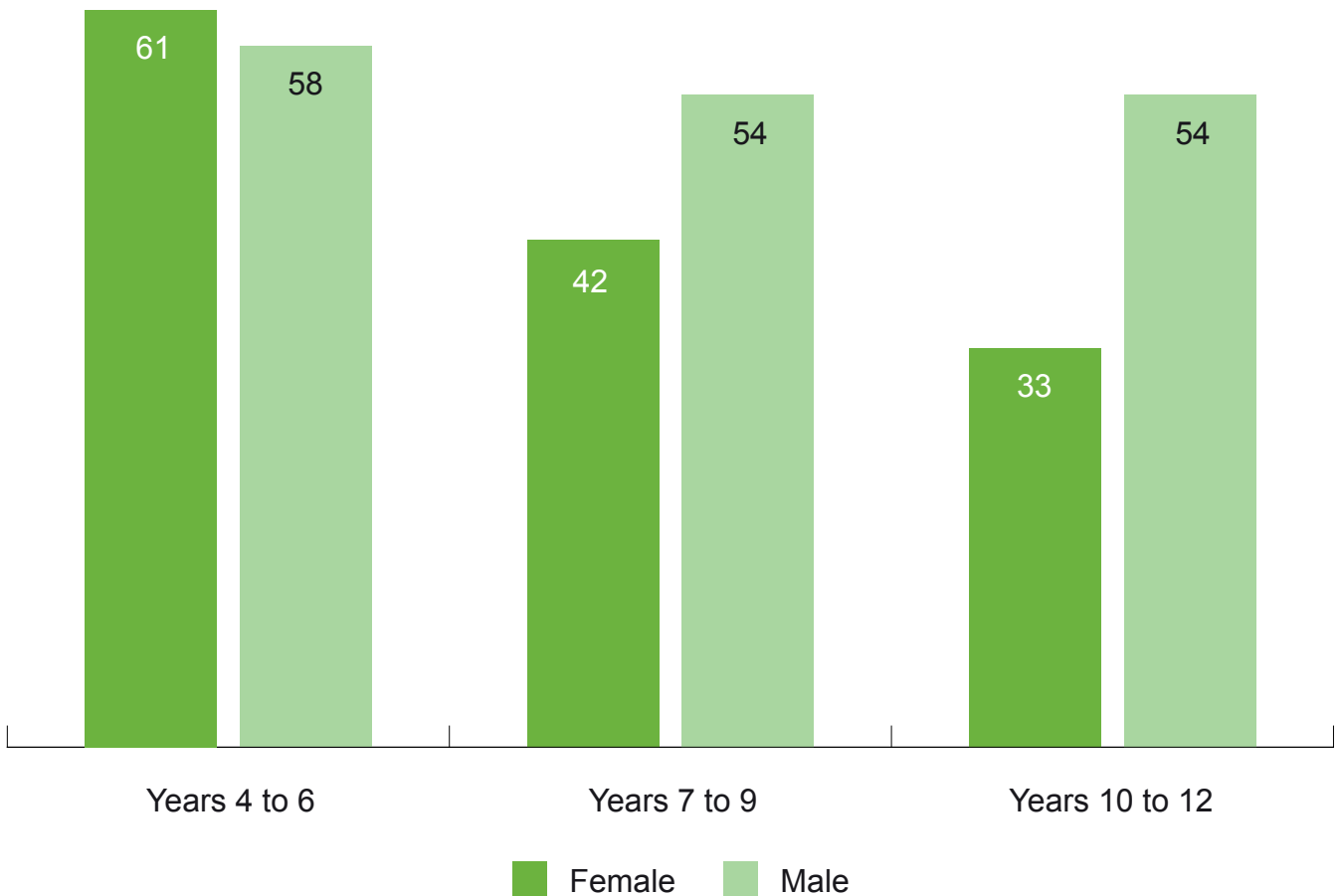
### General health

Research shows that feeling and being physically healthy has a significant impact on people's mental health.<sup>7</sup>

In primary schools, female and male children rate their general health similarly, while in high school, female young people are much

more likely to rate their general health lower than their male peers. Only one-third (33%) of female students in Years 10 to 12 rate their general health very good or excellent, compared to more than one-half (54%) of male students.

**Proportion of students rating their general health as very good or excellent by year group and gender, per cent**



Source: Speaking Out Survey 2021 Data Tables [unpublished]

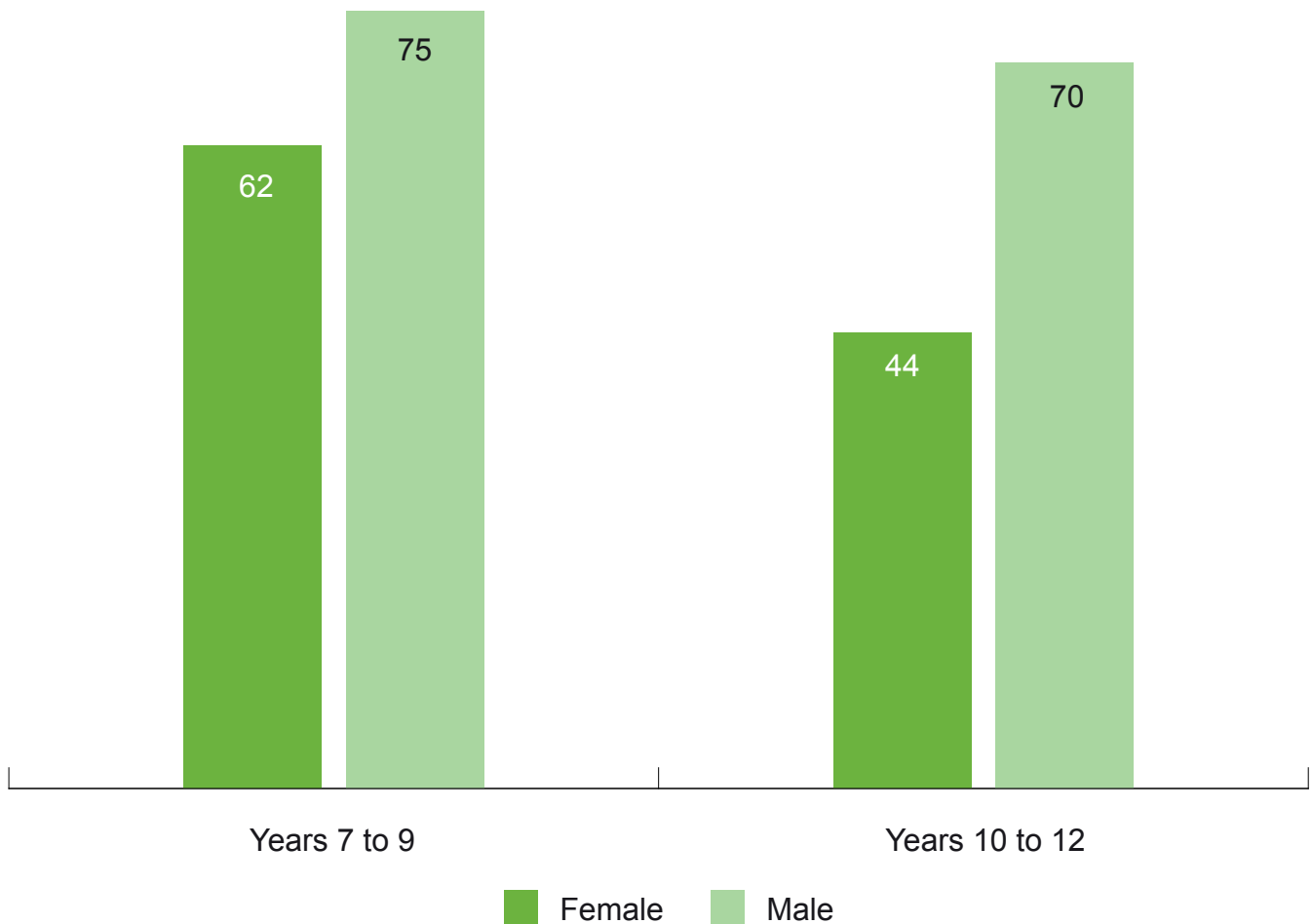
Female high school students are also far less likely than male students to do physical activity or exercise.

Research suggests that moderate levels of regular physical activity, particularly team sports, are protective for female young people’s mental wellbeing.<sup>8</sup>

Analysis of the SOS21 data also shows that for female young people in WA there is a significant relationship between doing exercise and sports and reporting better life satisfaction, self-esteem and mental health.

There were no open text questions on physical activity in SOS21.

**Proportion of students reporting that at least 3 times in the last 7 days they had done exercise or activity that made them sweat, breathe hard, or get their heart rate up by year group and gender, per cent**



Source: Speaking Out Survey 2021 Data Tables [unpublished]

### Stress from schoolwork

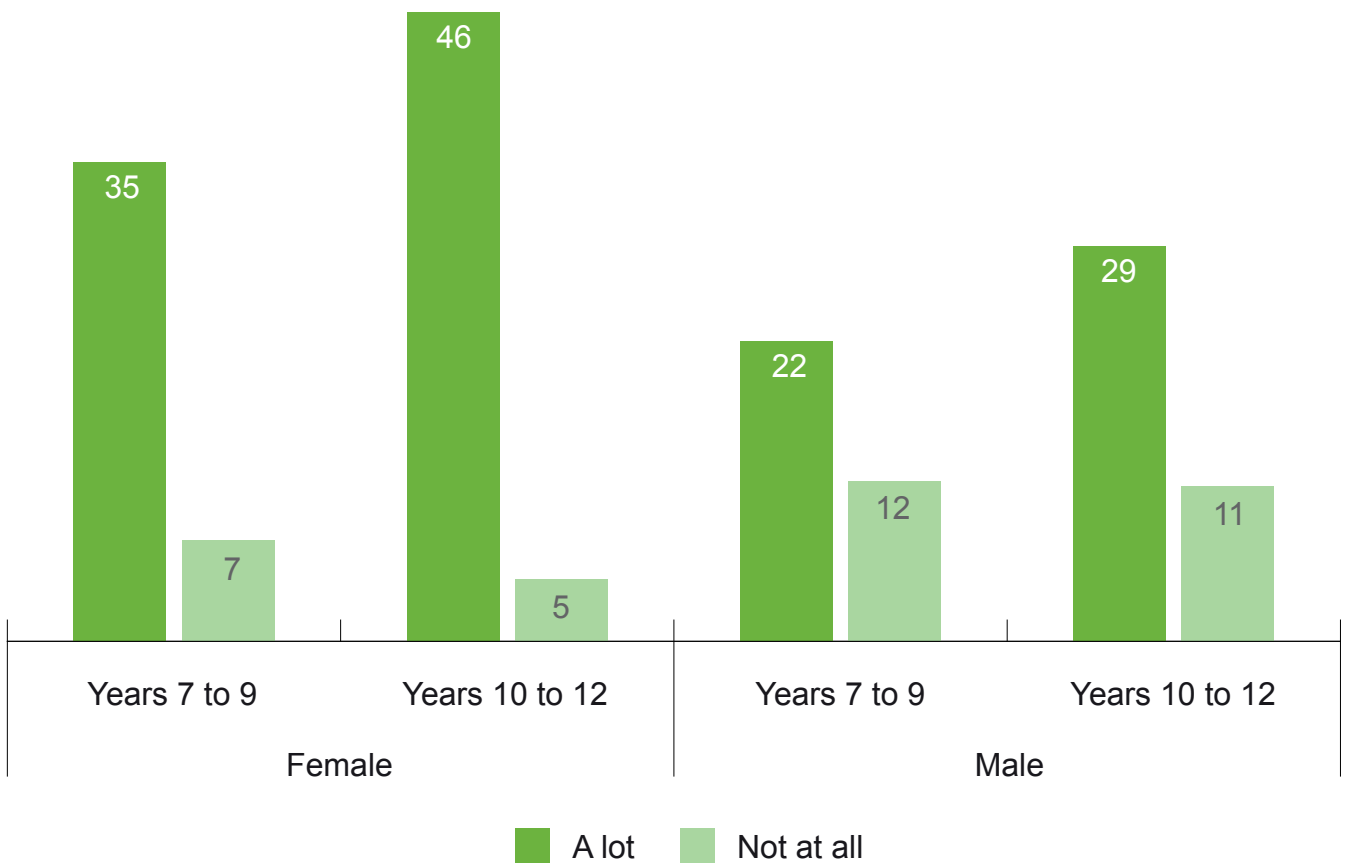
The survey found that school or study problems were by far the most frequently reported source of stress for students in Years 9 to 12 with 89 per cent of students saying they were affected by this in the past year (female: 93%, male: 84%).

Students in the SOS21 survey were asked: *How pressured do you feel by the schoolwork you have to do?* Female students were significantly more likely to feel a lot of pressure than male students.

There was a strong correlation across all students between feeling stressed about schoolwork and not feeling like there was a teacher who cares about them. Further, analysis of the data shows a strong relationship for girls between feeling stressed about schoolwork and having lower self-esteem.

Female students were also more likely than male students to specify they want to attend university (female: 60%; male: 51%), which was associated with feeling pressured by schoolwork.

**Proportion of students who feel a lot or not at all pressured by schoolwork by year group and gender, per cent**



Source: Speaking Out Survey 2021 Data Tables [unpublished]

When asked about feeling stress from schoolwork, many students reported feeling overwhelmed with too much work and overlapping deadlines. Of the students responding to this question 61 per cent were female and 35 per cent were male.

*We have a lot of different classes, and teachers, who assign us homework regularly, lets say that, just for one day every class you had on Monday or something, assigned you homework, that would mean that you have to do homework for six different classes, and say that the homework was due by Wednesday and you get even more homework on Tuesday, we have a lot of homework to complete, and not much time to do it. (12-year-old)*

*Most schools and teachers don't know how much pressure and stress they put on their students. Sometimes I have been so stress that I just cried. I just want to remind all schools that we as student can't handle 5 assignments and tests at once because it feels like the teachers and principles have forgotten how hard it was when they were students and as the world has grown it has become even harder. So please remember we are still young, give us room to breathe please. (12-year-old)*

*School goes for 7 hours and then we're expected to do 2-3 hours of home work per night which is just shocking, we are kids we deserve a life and we shouldn't have to feel this stressed at such a young age. (15-year-old)*

*That we aren't robots. We go to school in the morning at 8:55, work all day except for our breaks. Come home and are expected to do an hour of study, along with our own home chores and out of school lives like sport or jobs. And it get more hard and stress as we are going the our teen years which is the most challenging time for any human being. (14-year-old)*

*Pressures to do well and overloaded work. I sometimes sleep for 3 hours at night because of schoolwork. (17-year-old)*

Female students were more likely than male students to comment on pressure from teachers and parents to do well at school.

*School sometimes gives me stress, though it is mostly my parents putting a lot of pressure on me and sometimes even family problems give me anxiety and stress, and makes me cry myself to sleep, though I do not seek help because it doesn't work for me. (12-year-old)*

*That the teachers put so much pressure on us to finish our assignments and to get good grades and that we have to do our homework when we just want to have family time. (14-year-old)*

*The teachers seem to want us to be perfect and there is a lot of peer pressure, some teachers even tell us who is failing. (16-year-old)*

*Because we are overloaded with way too much work. Also, some families (like mine) have mega high expectations and always assume "oh if you didn't get an A you clearly aren't trying hard enough!!" It's like they always compare you to other kids which is such a massive factor to stress. (16-year-old)*

While this was mentioned less, some young people put pressure on themselves to do well. Three-quarters of young people reporting this were female.

*I think the main reason are because there is a lot of pressure to do well especially with NAPLAN where we have to do really well on top of the things we have to do for school. I put a lot of pressure on myself as well so that adds to stress. My parents want me to do well and so do my siblings. (14-year-old)*

*The pressure to be an A student - feeling like you have to be perfect. (16-year-old)*

*There is a lot of pressure from school and family. But personally, I mainly feel stressed because of the pressure that I put on myself to do well so that I can get into the course that I want to at University. (17-year-old)*

Similarly, many students (almost two-thirds were female) reported feeling stressed due to the ‘high stakes’ nature of school and the impact their results will have on their future.

*Because there’s a lot of pressure on us to get good grades, especially in our homes. Also the fact that these grades are what shape our future is a scary thought and a lot of people start worrying about that in higher years. This causes stress and anxiety. (14-year-old)*

*A lot of pressure to think about where you are going (what you’re doing after school). And if you want to go to uni, it’s like you have to dedicate your whole life to school and do perfect and get perfect grades, otherwise you won’t make it to uni. It’s like year 12 is make-or-break. (16-year-old)*

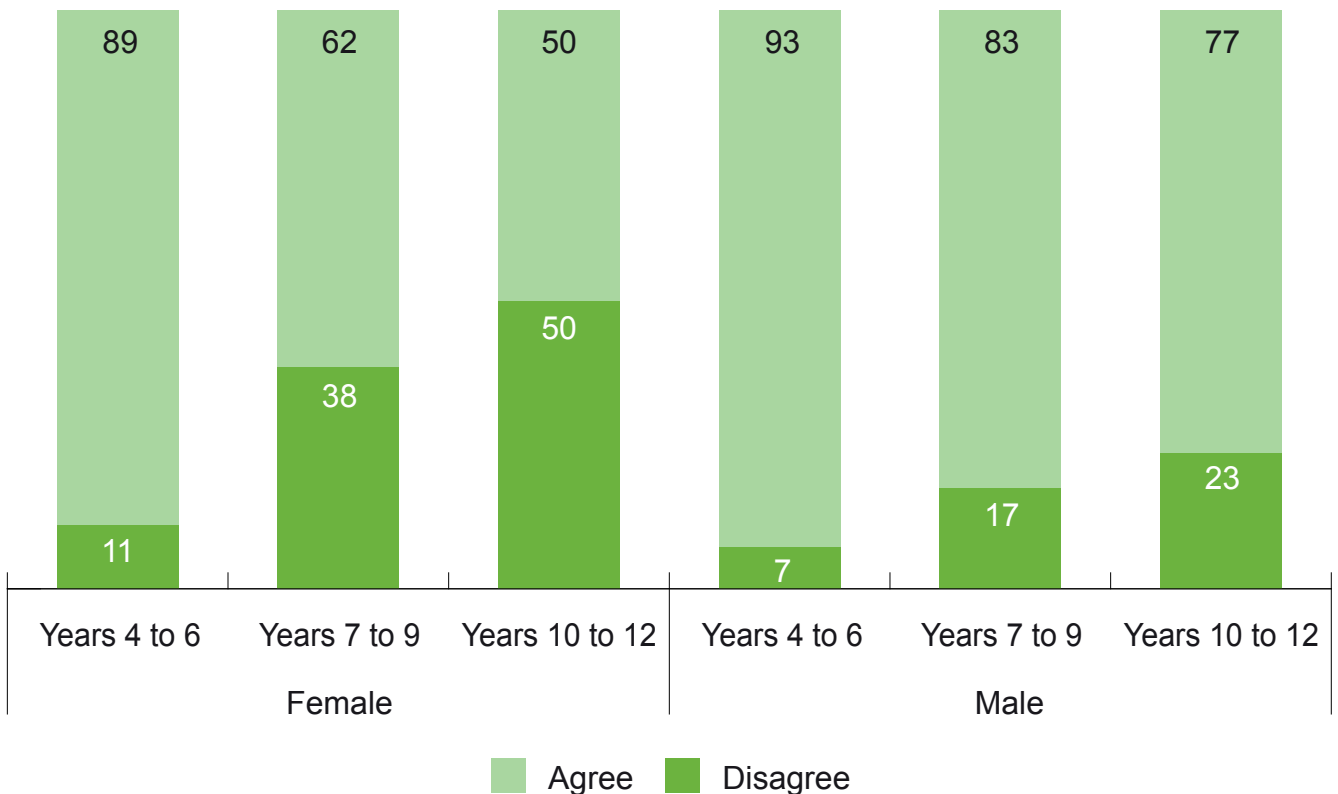
### Low self-esteem

Self-esteem has been shown to have a strong protective role against adverse stress and mental health outcomes.<sup>9</sup>

Female students in primary school are as likely as male students to feel good about themselves, however this changes in high school where girls are much more likely than boys to not feel good about themselves.

By Years 10 to 12, one-half (50%) of female students do not feel good about themselves, compared to almost one-quarter (23%) of their male peers.

**Proportion of students agreeing or disagreeing that they feel good about themselves by year group and gender, per cent**



Source: Speaking Out Survey 2021 Data Tables [unpublished]

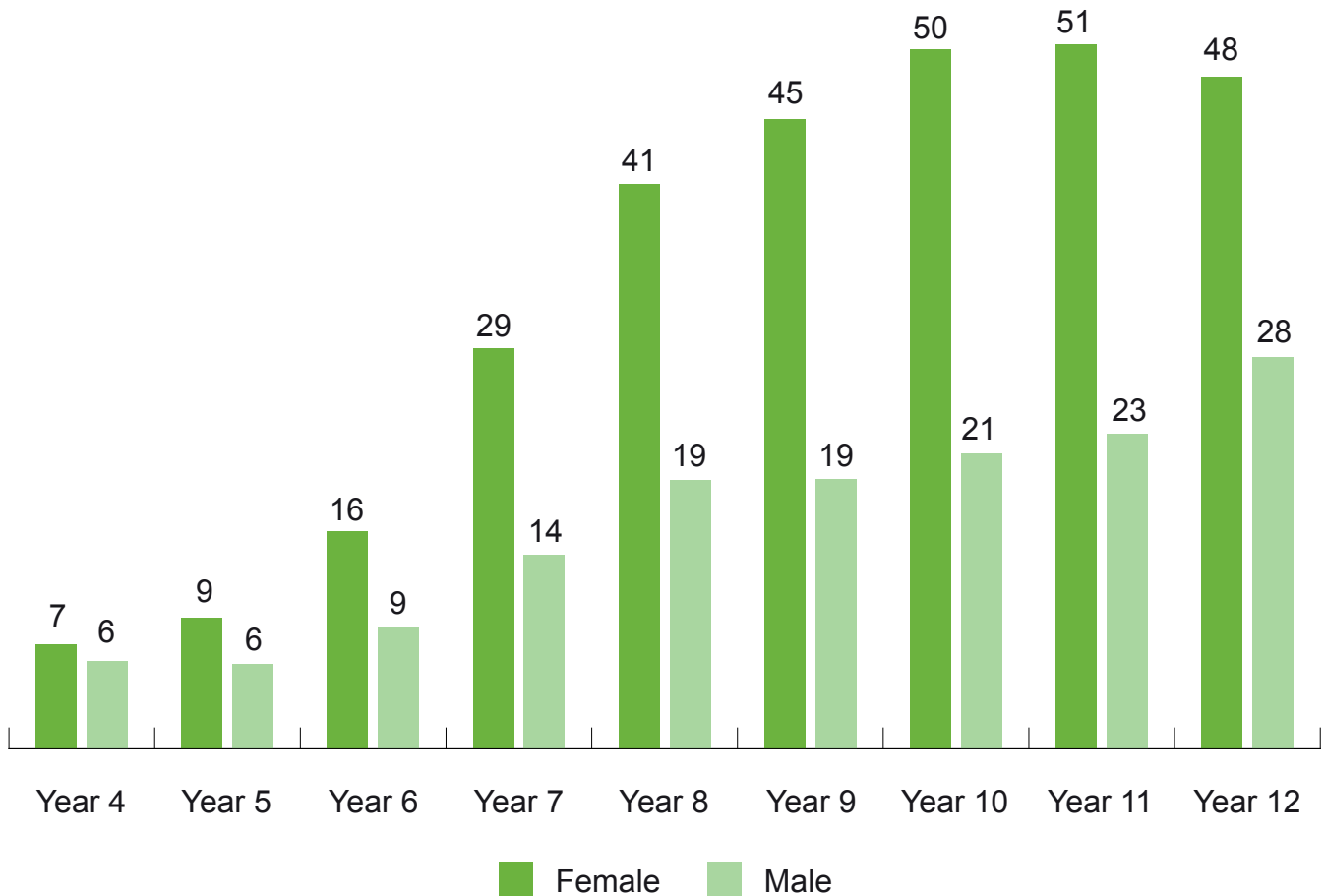
Similarly, 30 per cent of female Year 10 to Year 12 students felt that they were not able to do things as well as other people, compared to 17 per cent of male high school students.

The SOS21 data suggests that the gender gap in self-esteem begins to widen in Year 6 and as female children and young people move into high school many experience a significant and sustained decline in their self-esteem.

Analysis of the SOS21 data shows that for girls with low self-esteem there is a strong likelihood they will be stressed about body image, not have a parent or other adult at home who listens when they have something to say and/or not feel safe at home.

Research suggests that low self-esteem over the transition to high school could be due to the changing nature of relationships at high school and/or experiences related to puberty, however, there has been limited qualitative research asking girls about how they feel during this period.<sup>10</sup>

**Proportion of children and young people reporting they disagree or strongly disagree that they *feel good about themselves* by year and gender, per cent**



Source: Speaking Out Survey 2021 Data Tables [unpublished]



In the open text responses, many female students explained that they are worried about what other people think and feel they are not good enough.

*I do feel sad often although I try to act happy around everyone else. I overthink everything. I care too much about what others think. Every decision I make I think what everyone is going to think of me first. Even if it's a face I make or something I say. (11-year-old)*

*Through the past year or so, I've been more conscious about how I look and how people see me. I'm scared to go and see someone because I feel like they won't understand some things. I have breakdowns every once in a while because I can't keep up with life but I really do enjoy life. I have a mixture of feelings about myself. (12-year-old)*

*I would like to get diagnosed for adhd but my parents think I'm just faking for attention, and sometimes I feel like I can't do anything, am absolutely worthless and just in the way. (13-year-old)*

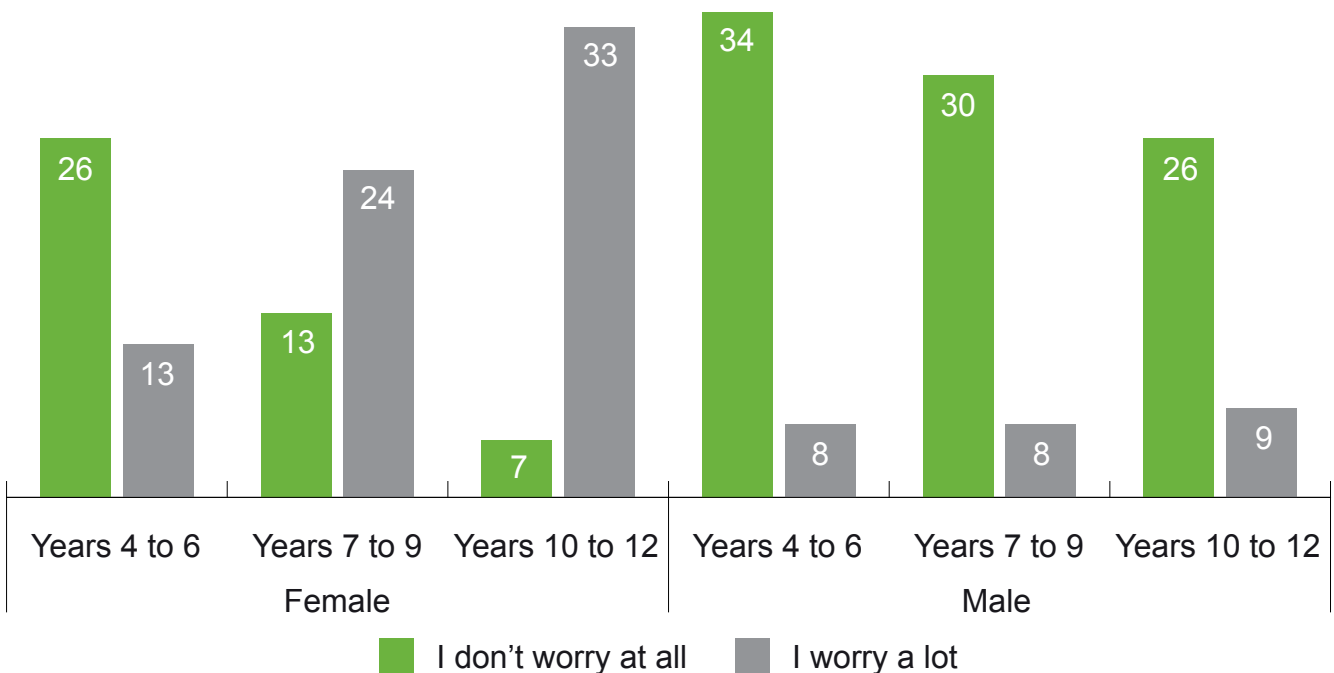
*Worrying about future and yourself eg career, getting the job you want, being compared to others, self worth, not being good enough. (15-year-old)*

### Body image

Body image was the second-highest reported stressor for female students in Years 9 to 12, with almost two-thirds (63%) of girls reporting body image as a source of stress in the past year (compared to 25% of their male peers).

Female children and young people are also significantly more likely than male children and young people to worry about their weight a lot and less likely to not worry at all.

**Proportion of Year 4 to 12 students reporting they worry a lot or not at all about their weight by year group and gender, per cent**



Source: Speaking Out Survey 2021 Data Tables [unpublished]

Body image and weight were specifically raised by some girls when discussing their mental health, self-esteem and experiences of bullying.

*One thing I would choose to change about the world is beauty standards. Big little short tall should all feel equal. I have cried to myself about my body fat and I would hate for anyone else to go through that. (11-year-old)*

*I am teased a lot about my appearance and my body weight. I feel very insecure about how I look and I always try and cover my body so I'm not judged. I also get teased and called mean names including my insecurity which is the fact I haven't hit puberty yet. I feel excluded from my friends and I feel like everything that happens there's nothing I can do to help myself feel this way. (12-year-old)*

*I always feel so insecure about how I look and I always compare myself to other people, I always compare myself to my big sister because I feel like she is so much prettier than me, I cry a lot because of this and I just don't know how to tell people about it. (12-year-old)*

*Well i have a really big issue when it come to the way I see myself. Some days I will fell,so ugly and i will fell like crying and rarely any other days I feel like I'm good enough. I don't want to tell my parents because I feel like they will just say that I'm pretending and I'll get in trouble. (12-year-old)*

*Body image is a big thing for teens, especially girls. Eating disorders are not talked about much at schools and we should talk about them more to help girls get through it. No one talks about experiencing eating disorders but so many people have them and just don't talk about them. (15-year-old)*

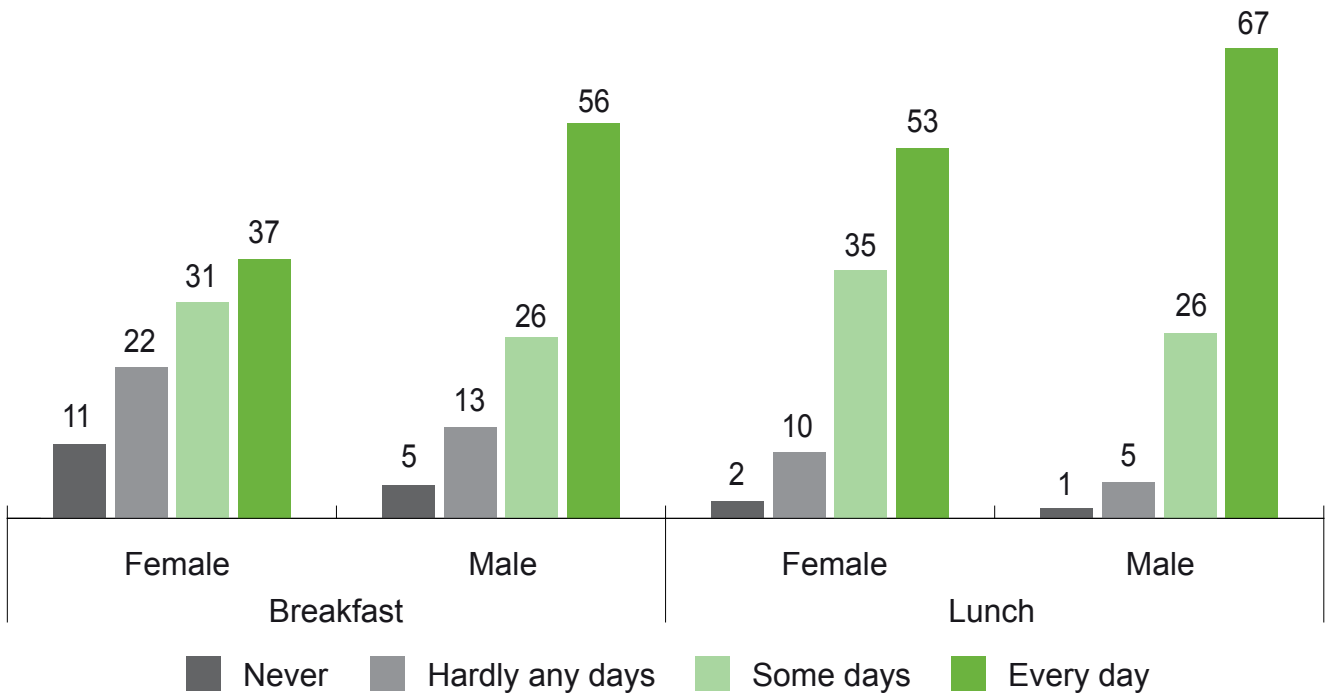
### Experiences of disordered eating

In the SOS21 data, female high school students were significantly more likely than their male peers to report not eating meals every day.

Almost one-third (32%) of female young people report they eat breakfast never or hardly ever (male: 18%) and one-in-ten (12%) eat lunch never or hardly ever (male: 7%).



**Proportion of Year 7 to Year 12 students reporting how often they eat breakfast and lunch by gender, per cent**



Source: Speaking Out Survey 2021 Data Tables [unpublished]

Analysis of the SOS21 data shows there is a very strong correlation between missing meals and girls not feeling happy with themselves and/or not feeling good about themselves.

The majority of comments that discussed having an eating disorder or a concern about their eating practices were from girls (91%).

*I struggle with an eating disorder called bulimia and I've been keeping it a secret from my family for more than a year now and I don't feel confident reaching out because I'm scared of how they will react. (14-year-old)*

*I don't know where to go, and am afraid that if I tell people why I need to get help they will be worried, I have a hard time eating and don't want to be in hospital for it so I keep quiet. (15-year-old)*

*The mental health system is not all that great. My doctor was trying to get me into a mental health facility because I was at high risk and the wait list for each place was over a month and I'm still waiting to be accepted - when I had an eating disorder it wasn't taken seriously until I was underweight and having health problems - headspace, SARC and psychiatrists have an extremely long waits and can be from 1-5 months before you get seen. Teenagers and people needing help deteriorate as they wait for help and parents are left feeling hopeless. (17-year-old)*

## Anxiety due to fear of sexual harassment and/or assault

Female young people aged 15 to 19 years are at a significantly higher risk of both physical and sexual assault than male young people in this age group. Female young people aged 15 to 19 years have the highest risk of sexual assault across all age groups.<sup>11</sup>

A significant topic raised by many female children and young people was how a general fear of men and/or sexual assault created everyday anxiety.

*I also get a little scared when I'm walking my dog when mostly men drive or walk passed so I pretend I'm on a call. (11-year-old)*

*When I walk past a older man having to fear if I will get raped or kidnapped. Because this is what our world has come to today... (11-year-old)*

*I feel unsafe around men that I don't know and that stare at me and my friends. (12-year-old)*

*That women feel scared, terrified of a male who is walking behind us to close to us or sexualising us in schools and out of school and WE want this to change. (14-year-old)*

*As a girl you usually feel a bit unsafe in public spaces alone after the kind of stuff you hear like rape. And your parents tell you to be very very careful all the time (15-year-old)*

## Mental health concerns are ignored

Many female students explained how their concerns about their mental health were ignored or dismissed by the adults they told. Girls and young people identifying 'in another way' were much more likely to report this than boys.

*I have a lot of insecurities that I try to talk to my parents about, but all they say is I'm overreacting and I need to get over it but it's not that simple. I want someone to talk to, someone to trust that won't judge me or be against me, if I asked for a therapist my parents wouldn't allow it and tell me to stop being so dramatic. (12-year-old)*

*I told my mum about my mental health and she said it was my hormones and phone this made me feel really bad about myself. (13-year-old)*

*My father does not believe in depression and anxiety or any other mental problem so would not allow me to receive medical help even if I had sought it out. (13-year-old)*

*I feel as though I can't see anyone because my parents think my potential mental health issues are invalid. (16-year-old)*

*When I've had a concern that has really worried me and I seeked help from my parents they didn't really believe that I was experiencing it and didn't think I needed help. (17-year-old)*

Correspondingly, a number of female students also talked about feeling like their mental health concerns were not valid.

*I don't think I have anxiety or like real stress but im finding it hard and I don't know whether it is serious enough to get someone to talk to. (12-year-old)*

*I feel as if all the things I am experiencing are all in my head and I make excuses for them saying I'm just tired or stressed when really I think it's more than that and i can't tell anyone about it because I feel they won't believe me or think I'm just being sensitive and dramatic. (13-year-old)*

*It's hard to seek help for mental health when you feel that others have it much worse than you and that your feeling aren't valid. (14-year-old)*

*I think that lots of young people my age are experiencing mental health challenges but are either unsure of where to go or are ashamed of how seeking help would look to others like our family members, peers etc. and because we all know it's so common to feel like this, we either just disregard it or invalidate our own emotions just because we know there are others that feel like this. (16-year-old)*

## Hiding their feelings

Some female children and young people specifically discussed hiding their feelings or smiling even though they felt anxious or sad.

*That sometimes when we say we are feeling fine, we don't always mean it. Even if we promise. (12-year-old)*

*When I get home I get super sad and lonely. But at school I look happy and I smile but my anxiety is really bad. (13-year-old)*

*Understand that even if someone seems like they are fine and happy, on the inside they can be struggling. (15-year-old)*

*Things are so hard for young people growing up and often we don't show how much we are struggling. (17-year-old)*





# Friendships, belonging and technology

*Whenever I am sad  
I always talk to my  
friends and they always  
support me and make me  
feel better. When I am sad  
they always check  
up on me as well.  
(16-year-old)*

# Friendships, belonging and technology

## Friendships

Research suggests that female children and young people generally have intimate and close friendships which provide them with critical support, however, due to the emotional intensity of these friendships they are also more vulnerable to relationship breakdowns, increasing the likelihood of distress.<sup>12</sup>

Many female students spoke about how important their friends were for support.

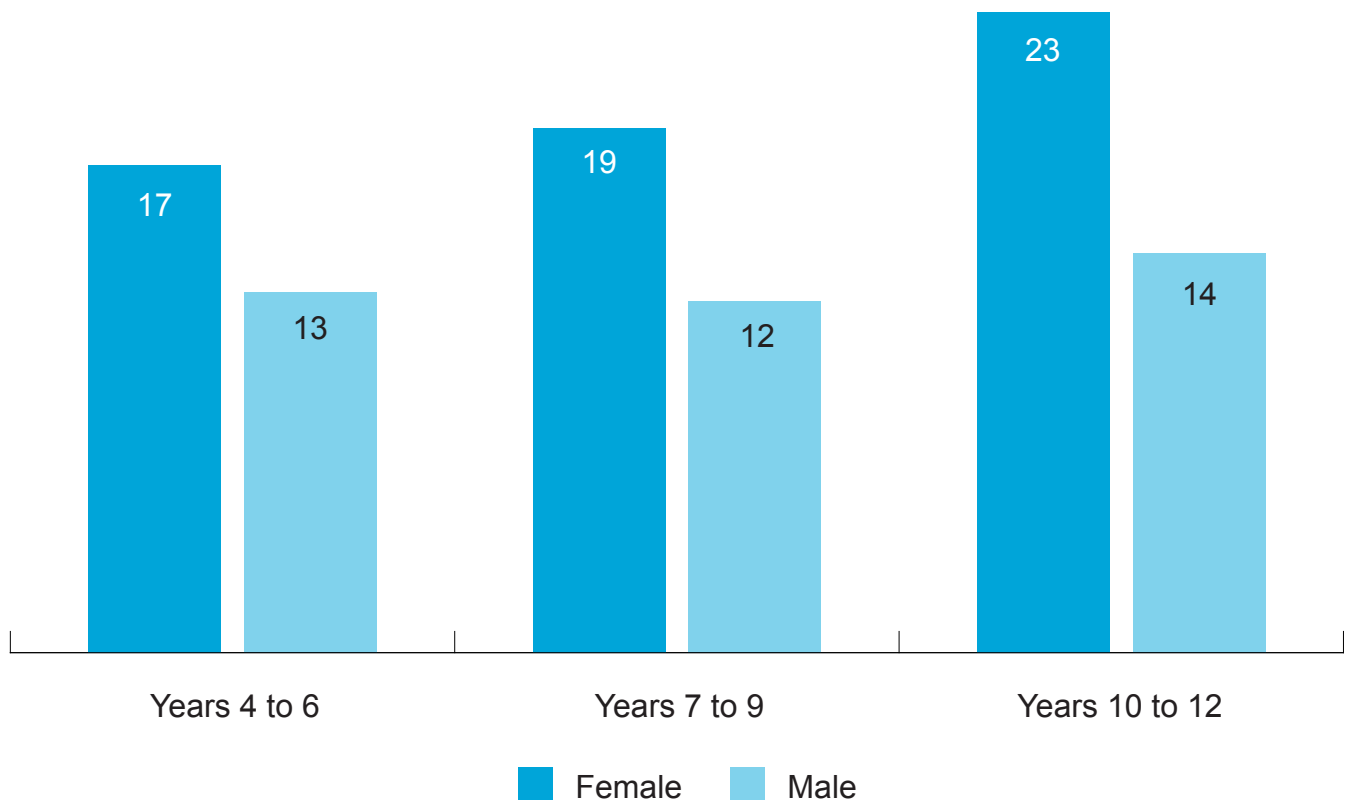
*I calm down from my anxiety [w]hen I get a hug from my best friends. (12-year-old)*

*Sometimes when I feel really anxious about school or my family, I talk to my friends and they usually cheer me up. (14-year-old)*

*Going to someone can be a massive stress relief and I feel like you should always go with a trusted friend that knows what your going through to make u feel more comfortable. (16-year-old)*

Female students were more likely than male students to report they did not have enough friends and this gap was greater for older students.

**Proportion of students reporting that they do not have enough friends by year group and gender, per cent**



Source: Speaking Out Survey 2021 Data Tables [unpublished]

More than one-half (58%) of Year 9 to Year 12 female students reported that problems with friends was a source of stress for them in the past year (male: 31%). This was the fourth-highest source of stress for girls, behind schoolwork stress (93%) body image (63%) and mental health and wellbeing (61%).

Analysis of the SOS21 data also shows that there is a strong correlation between feeling that your friends care about you, or that you are good at making and keeping friends, and self-esteem.

Consistent with this data, in the open text responses more girls than boys reported feeling lonely or having issues with their friendships.

*I feel like I don't have many friends. The friends I do have don't seem to want to just talk to me, rather use me to talk to someone else. I normally feel left out. (13-year-old)*

*I feel like I'm being ignored by my friends and it's making me sad. (13-year-old)*

*The problem with most kids/teens now a days is that so many of us feel stressed 24/7, not good enough, tired, upset with school or social life and the anxiety hitting at full speed leaving us with nothing to do but let it take us over in silence. There are so many kids who feel alone or feel lonely and it leads them to get depression, unhealthy thoughts, feeling worthless and so much more. That's how I feel and think many others do to from watching the way my friends and peers occasionally say or do things. (13-year-old)*

*I had a friend I could tell everything to, but that changed so now I have no one. (14-year-old)*

*I think that schools and families should be more aware of friendship groups because lots of people's anxiety and stress comes from problems in the friend group. (16-year-old)*





### School belonging

A sense of belonging is very important to a child or young person’s healthy physical and mental development. Australian data and research shows that female students’ sense of belonging at school is much lower than male students and has decreased substantially since 2003.<sup>13</sup>

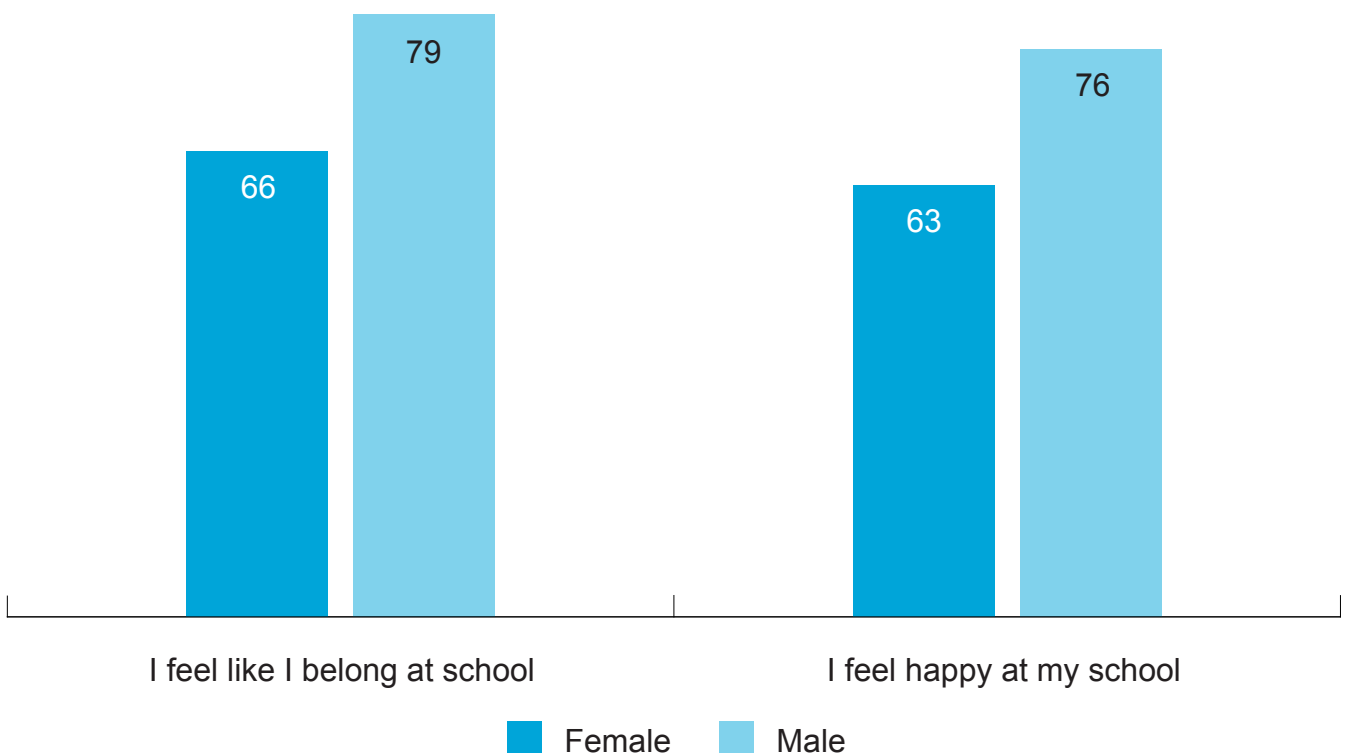
The SOS21 results similarly found that male high school students were significantly more likely than female students to agree that they feel like they belong at their school (male: 79%, female: 66%) or feel happy at school (male: 76%, female: 63%).

Belonging at school is impacted by the school environment including caring and supportive teachers, friendships and relationships with classmates.

Analysis of the SOS21 data shows a very strong correlation for girls between belonging at school and having a teacher that listens to them and/or getting along with their classmates.

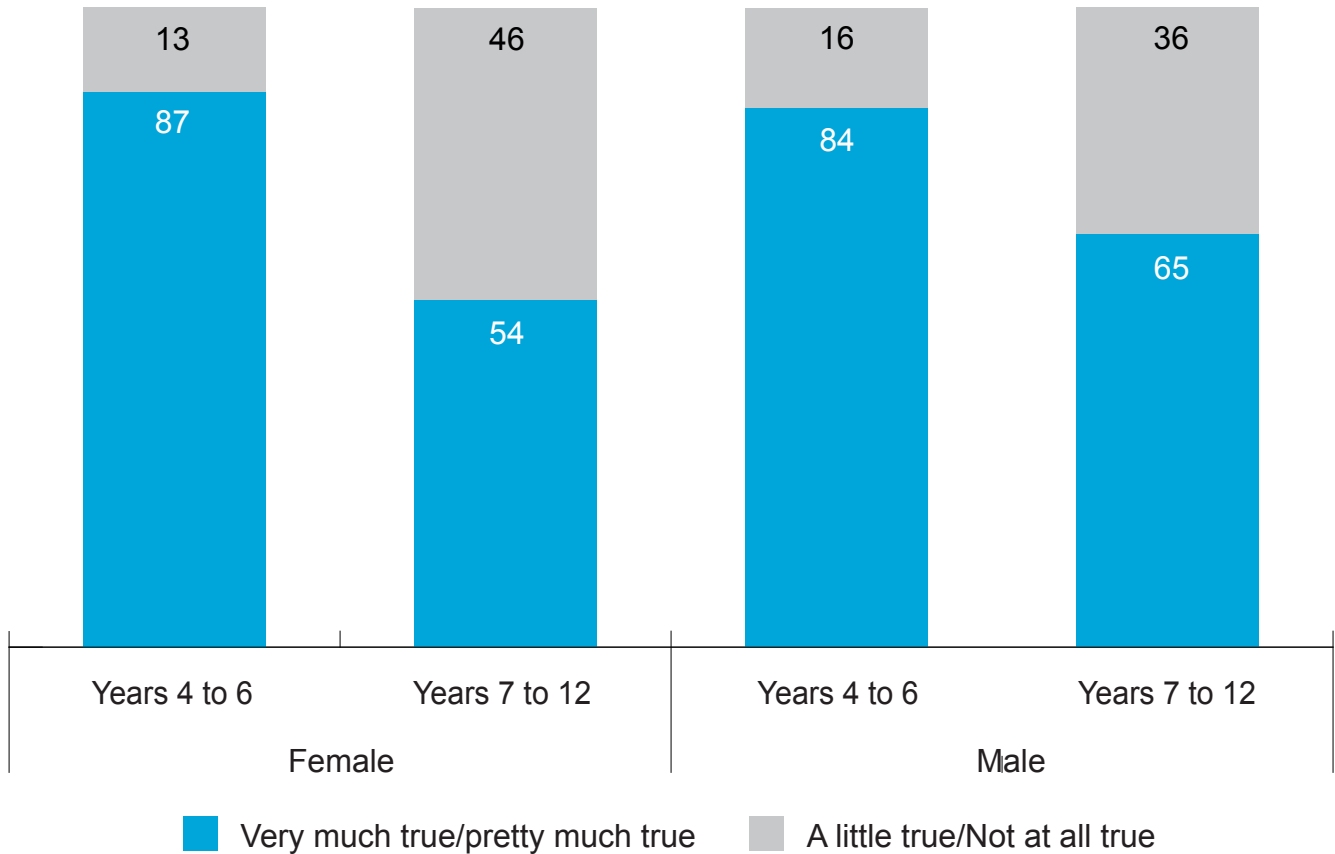
At the same time, girls experience a much greater decline than boys in feeling they have a teacher that cares about them from primary school to high school. In Year 6, almost one-half (49%) of female students report that it is ‘very much true’ that there is a teacher or other adult at school who really cares about them (male: 43%), whereas in Year 7 only one-quarter (23%) of female students report this (male: 28%).

**Proportion of Year 7 to Year 12 students who feel like they belong at school or feel happy at school by gender, per cent**



Source: Speaking Out Survey 2021 Data Tables [unpublished]

**Proportion of Year 4 to Year 12 students reporting whether at their school there is a teacher or another adult who **really cares** about them, by year group and gender, per cent**



Source: Speaking Out Survey 2021 Data Tables [unpublished]

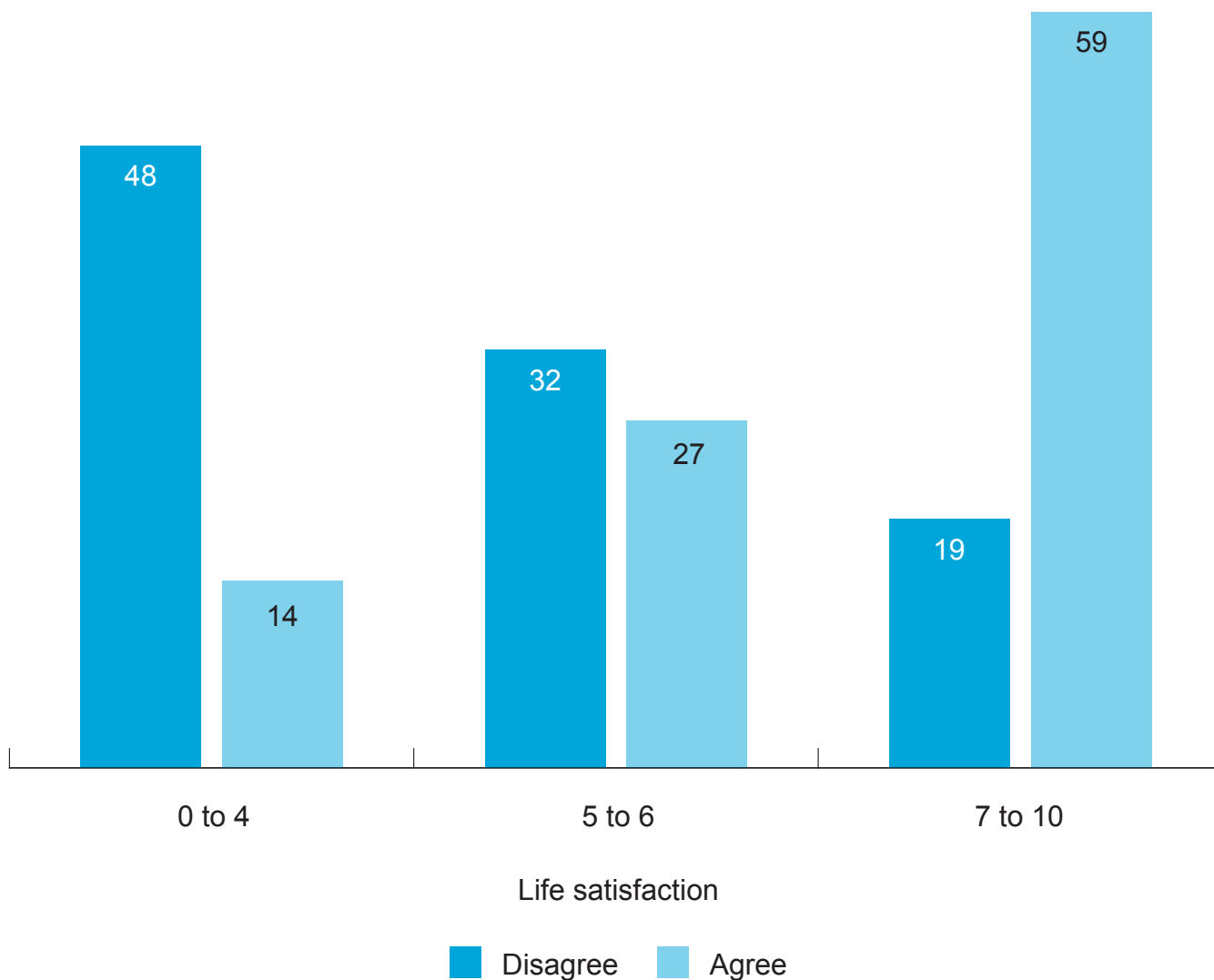
Female students clearly explained how having a friend or a trusted teacher impacted their sense of belonging at school.

*I didn't have any friends in primary school because I was different. Despite all of the "talks" about bullying ect, it didn't work, and I had no friends for all my primary school days.... I came to high school and found one friend who has been really nice to me, and treated me in such a way, that I am so grateful... She is my only friend, but she still makes me feel like I belong. I still don't fully fit-in school, but my new BFF makes me want to come to school. (12-year-old)*

*There was a time where my school really helped me when a was feeling down because of a bully once I told my parents and they got it to a teacher they fixed the problem strait away by gating me to talk to a well-being teacher that I could talk to and tell her all my problems it really helped me and made me feel a lot more better about myself and I didn't feel down anymore because I had her to talk to and not just my parents. (13-year-old)*

The SOS21 data shows that female students who do not feel like they belong at school are significantly more likely to have low life satisfaction.

**Proportion of female students who agree or disagree they feel like they belong at school grouped by life satisfaction, per cent**



Source: Speaking Out Survey 2021 Data Tables [unpublished]

The following responses from female students highlight that feeling like they don't belong can have a significant impact on their wellbeing.

*Be more gentler with people and let them join your groups to feel them more welcomed and feel a sense of belonging. Sometimes, I would feel alone and not belonged when no one talks to me. (12-year-old)*

*Friendships have been a bit rocky, moving from group to group, not knowing where I belong and who my true friends are it has been hard but I think I have found a good group of friends. (14-year-old)*

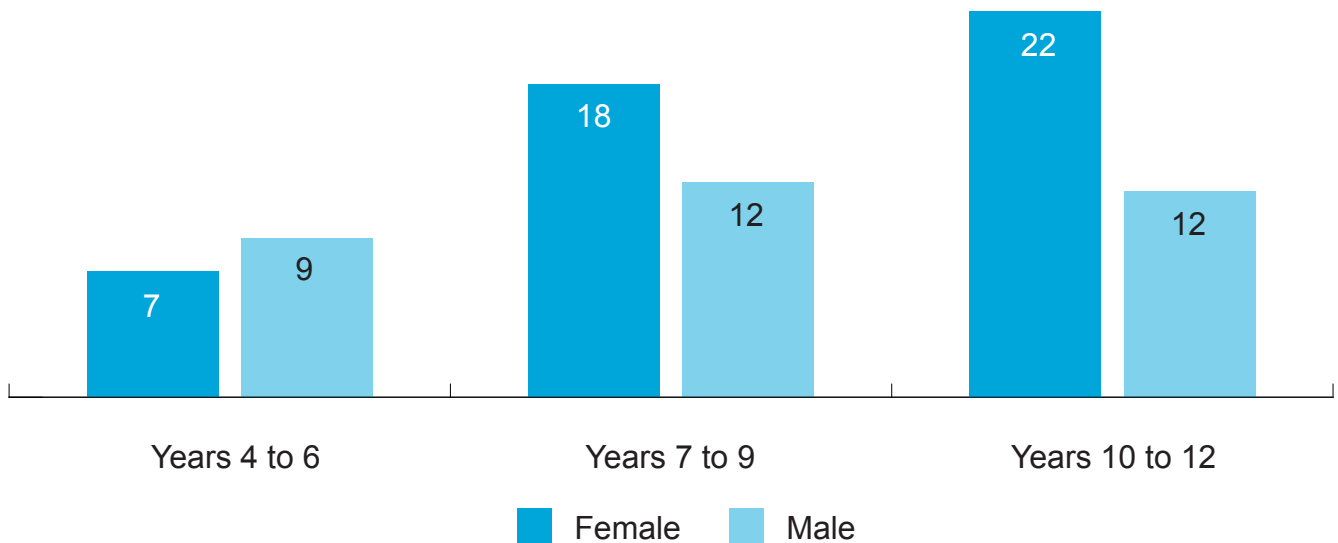
## Technology

Children and young people now grow up with internet access and social media as an integral part of their lives. While technology and social media can provide positive experiences through connections and support, research suggests that female young people are more negatively affected by their technology use than male young people – including stronger associations with negative mental health outcomes such as anxiety and depression.<sup>14</sup>

SOS21 data shows that almost all WA high school students have their own mobile phone (Years 7 to 9: 86%, Years 10 to 12: 97%).

While having a mobile phone can provide many benefits including access to support and a sense of safety, it can also be a mechanism for negative online experiences including cyberbullying. Female students are significantly more likely than male students to have experienced cyberbullying from students in their schools.

**Proportion of students who have ever been cyberbullied by students from their school by year group and gender, per cent**

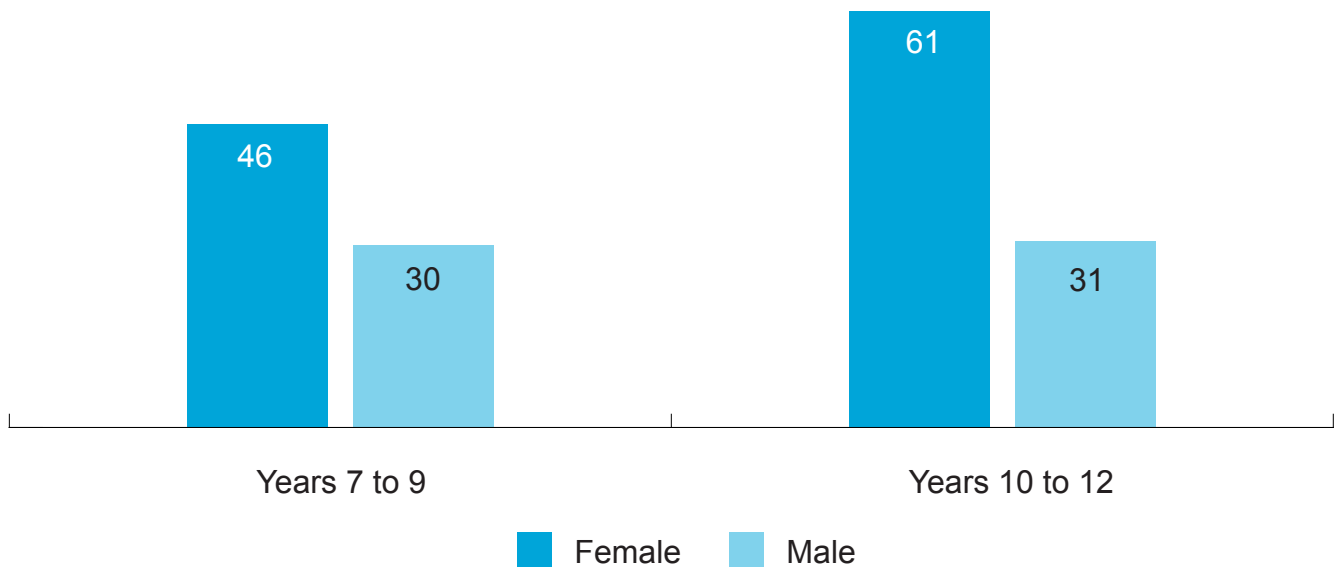


Source: Speaking Out Survey 2021 Data Tables [unpublished]

Female high school students are significantly more likely than male students to feel bothered when they cannot use their mobile (female: 45%, male: 30%). In Years 10 to 12, one-in-five (20%) female students reported going without eating or sleeping because of their mobile phone, compared to one-in-ten (11%) male students.

Almost one-half (46%) of female students in Years 7 to 9 and 61 per cent of students in Years 10 to 12 have been sent unwanted sexual content, like pornographic pictures, videos or words. For the girls who have received this type of content it has been overwhelmingly sent through social media (i.e. significantly less by text message or email).

**Proportion of students who have ever been sent unwanted sexual stuff, like pornographic pictures, videos or words by year group and gender, per cent**



Source: Speaking Out Survey 2021 Data Tables [unpublished]

While social media and technology was not the subject of an open text question, some young people provided their views.

*People act different messaging u through phones then talking face to face. (13-year-old)*

*My old friends started ignoring me and got all me other friends to ignore me. That talked about me behind my back and on social media. (13-year-old)*

*Social media has a big effect on mental health within the youth now. It can be good and bad. Social media is good to keep up with friends, know what's happening around the world and overall have fun. But it can also be used for cyber bullying and hate. (14-year-old)*

*Sexual assault and nudes - that kind of a thing is a HUGE issue for my age group... I've received many nude requests before. Most people I know send nudes and receive TONS too. So yeah, drugs and sexual stuff... and drinking. They're huge issues and most people get away with it. (15-year-old)*

*...punish those who forward on nudes without consent and those who show you nudes even if you told them repeatedly you don't want to see and this could be solved by banning VPN and Snapchat and other social media platforms. (15-year-old)*

At the same time, some students expressed clear views that social media and phones do not cause issues for them and should not be blamed for everything.

*I want some people to know that although teenagers and children are on their electronic devices quite a lot, that doesn't mean that they cause depression and anxiety because they don't. (12-year-old)*

*I think they [adults] could listen better and not blame everything on social media. (13-year-old)*

*I'm not addicted to my phone I just prefer the people on there. (14-year-old)*



# Feeling unsafe

**Young females shouldn't be scared to walk home at night, they shouldn't fear being sexually assaulted/harassed on a daily basis. Instead of teaching women to deal with these things schools should teach men how to behave themselves.**  
(12-year-old)

# Feeling unsafe

## Feeling unsafe at home

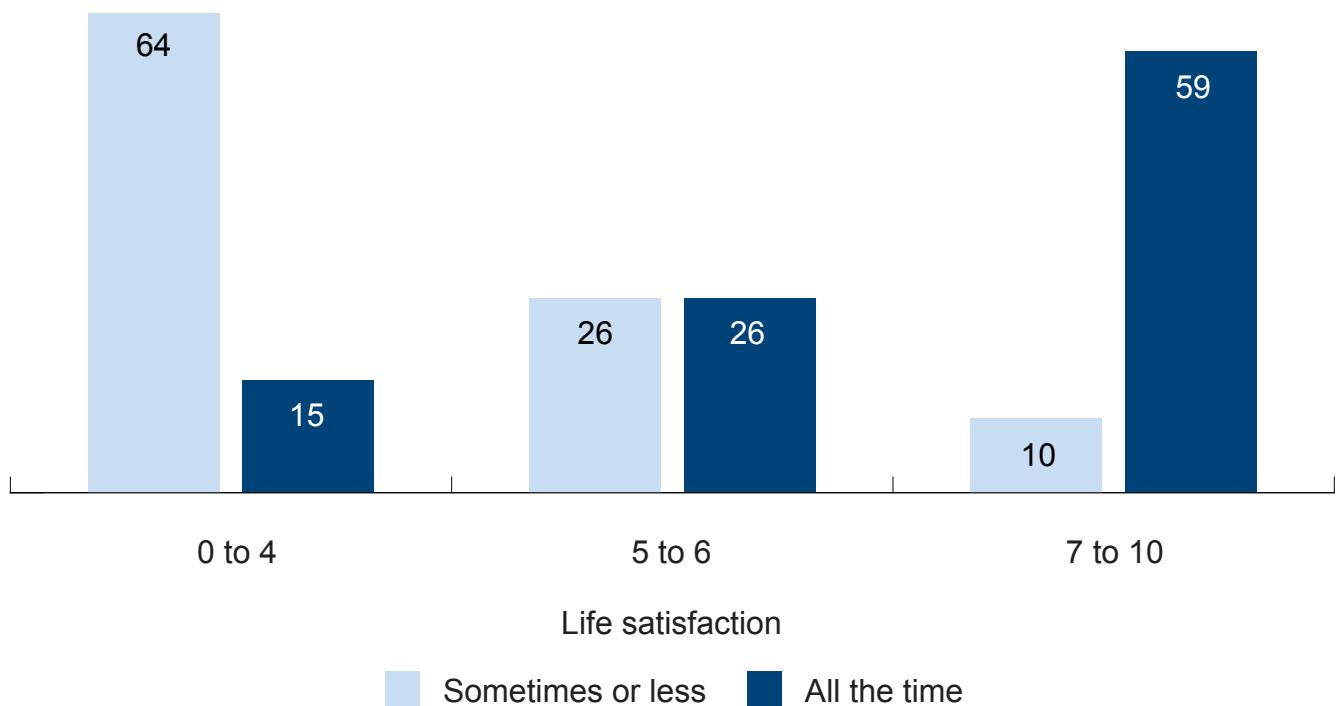
Analysis of the SOS21 data shows that feeling safe at home has one of the strongest relationships with better mental health and wellbeing. Female young people are significantly less likely to feel safe at home than male young people.

In Years 4 to 6, similar proportions of male and female children feel safe at home all the

time (male: 67%, female: 64%). In high school, the proportion of boys feeling safe at home increases (Years 7 to 9: 70%, Years 10 to 12: 75%), while the proportion of girls feeling safe at home all the time decreases (Years 7 to 9: 61%, Years 10 to 12: 63%).

There is a very strong relationship between female high school students not feeling safe at home and having low life satisfaction.

### Proportion of female high school students reporting they feel safe at home sometimes or less or all of the time grouped by life satisfaction rating, per cent



Source: Speaking Out Survey 2021 Data Tables [unpublished]

Female Year 9 to Year 12 students are less likely than male students to have been hit and physically harmed on purpose (female: 35%, male: 52%), however, they are most likely to be physically harmed at home while male students are most likely to be physically harmed at school and other public places.

The majority (75%) of female Year 9 to Year 12 students who were physically hurt on purpose in the last 12 months were at home when this happened. In comparison, 32 per cent of male students were hurt at home, while 58 per cent were at school (female: 32%), 24 per cent at a sports event (female: 8%).

Female students are much more likely than male students to have been harmed by an adult (female: 47%, male: 22%), while male students are more likely to have been harmed by another child or young person (female: 51%, male: 82%).

Of the young people harmed at home, more than one-half were hit or physically harmed by an adult (60% of female young people, 55% of male young people). Of the female young people who were physically harmed at home, the majority of them (83%) were worried about family conflict.

Those young people who had been hit or physically harmed (at any location) were significantly less likely to feel safe at home.

A large number of students (930) provided open text responses about feeling unsafe at home. Of these, 429 were in primary school and 501 were in high school. Of the students in high school, 64 per cent were female students.

The most-commonly cited reason for feeling unsafe at home was due to family conflict or worries about parents fighting.

*I don't feel safe when my step parents argue (11-year-old)*

*Sometimes I feel unsafe when my parents are fighting. It happens more and more now and I'm worried that they may no care for mine and my siblings safety. I know it sounds ridiculous but I feel like I need to say something. (11-year-old)*

*Sometimes when parents get mad or are in a mood they start yelling and sometimes but in very rare occasions they start throwing things. (16-year-old)*

Other students reported feeling unsafe around their parents and/or siblings.

*When my dad gets mad at me and smacks me well I do so things that are wrong but I try to do my best sometimes I feel like I want to run away. (9-year-old)*

*My brother isn't that nice to me at home or in public. He gives me bruises and cuts for nothing. And my stepdad is mean to my mum and brother. (11-year-old)*

*My father when he gets angry and/or drunk (11-year-old)*

*I don't feel safe at home because of my mum. (13-year-old)*

*Schools my safe place away from home (mainly my older brother). (15-year-old)*

*When my dad gets angry at me because he gets badly angry. (17-year-old)*



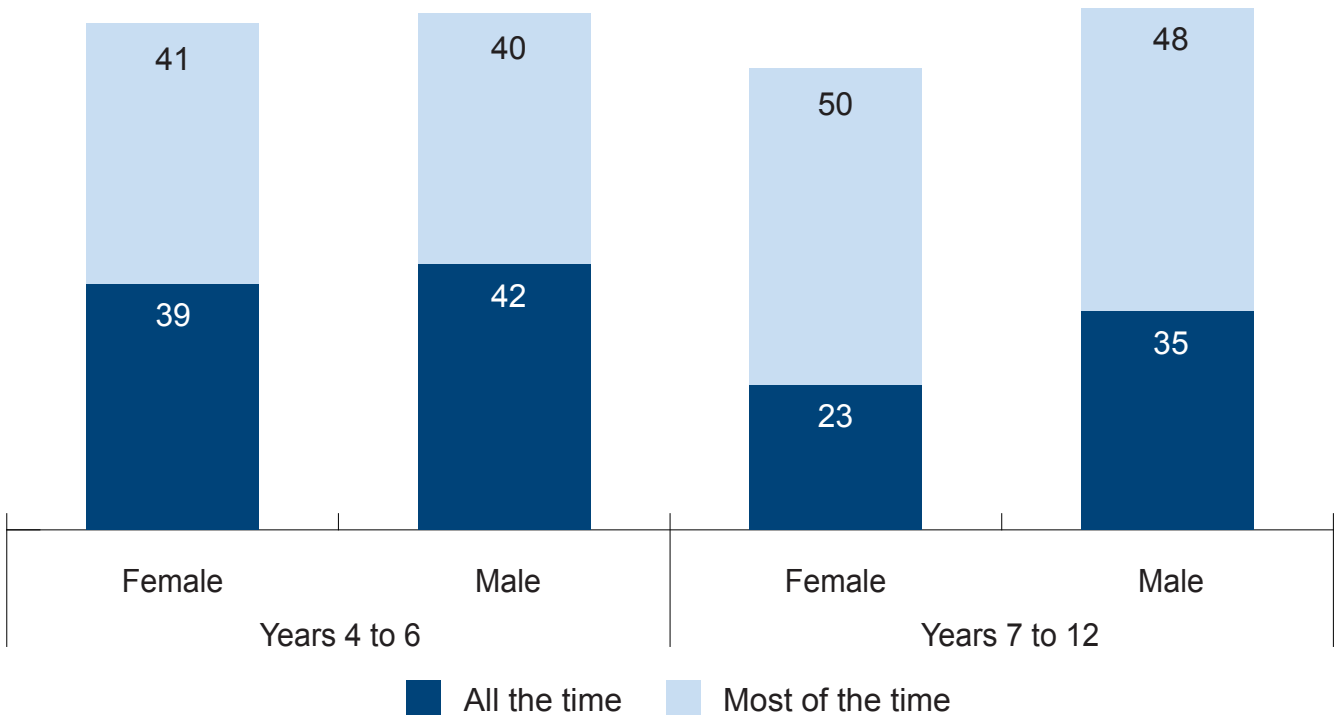
### Feeling unsafe at school

Feeling and being safe at school is essential for children and young people to be ready and able to engage with learning. When they do not feel safe it affects their behaviour, mental health and their feelings towards school and learning.

Across WA, female young people, particularly in high school, are more likely to feel unsafe at school than their male peers.

In high school less than one-quarter (23%) of female students feel safe at school all the time (male: 35%). For female students, this represented a significant decrease from Years 4 to 6 in primary school (39%).

### Proportion of students feeling safe at school all of the time or most of the time by year group and gender, per cent



Source: Speaking Out Survey 2021 Data Tables [unpublished]

Almost 10 per cent of female high school students feel safe at school never or only a little bit of the time (male: 5%).

The SOS21 data shows a strong relationship between feeling safe at school and life satisfaction and self-esteem. Of the female high school students who rated their life satisfaction as low (0 to 4), almost one-half (48%) felt safe at school only sometimes or less. Two-thirds (64%) of high school female

students who felt safe at school only sometimes or less were unhappy with themselves.

Male and female students experience 'traditional' bullying by students at school on a similar scale, however, female high school students were more likely than male high school students to report being both bullied and cyber-bullied (female: 16.5%, male: 9.6%).

Students who experienced bullying were significantly more likely to feel sad, blue or depressed and were more likely to rate their life satisfaction as low. These associations were stronger for female students than male students.

Most of the comments about feeling unsafe at school by all students were related to bullying.

*My parents know I get called mean names in school but they don't know how serious I actually take it I take it very personally (12-year-old)*

*[I feel unsafe when...] People at school being critical, and me not seeming to fit in, when my friends are talking about inappropriate stuff and when my friends ignore me or don't talk to me. (12-year-old)*

*School is very toxic the people here don't go care about others and make other people really sad and bully others a lot or talk behind everyone's back. (13-year-old)*

*That school is not a safe place. People say school is good for kids but it's not you constantly feel judged and looked at even if it's for your appearance or if it's for the size of you. I constantly feel like i am having to impress those around me to be friends with them. (17-year-old)*

Some of the girls reported that the male students sexually harassed or assaulted them.

*That the boys are disrespectful to all the girls and treat the girls like property Cat call the girls Extremely disrespectful to the girls And the male teachers see it and do nothing. (13-year-old)*

*I have been touched inappropriately by older students and so but I am fine... (13-year-old)*

*Being at school with someone who committed indecent assault to me and he was charged and arrested, but still the school has not removed him, therefore every time I see him I have a panic/anxiety attack. Makes me feel very unsafe. (16-year-old)*

A number of students (both male and female) highlighted that they felt their school did not manage bullying very well.

*That teachers are useless at punishing bully's they always let them get away with you and they never help you. (13-year-old)*

*Last time I was bullied online, I reported it to our teacher but they didn't do much. I wanted to move classes because I didn't feel comfortable around her but they kept saying that I should try to be friends with her, I did not want to. So since then, I feel like even if I report something happening to me, they will only try to solve it by "being friends". (13-year-old)*

*LGBTQI hate happens a lot at schools and is never addressed by teachers and it is hard as a student to speak up about it. (14-year-old)*

*I have tried telling the teachers but they couldn't do much they just told me to ignore the people that where being rude to me. (15-year-old)*

### Feeling unsafe in the community

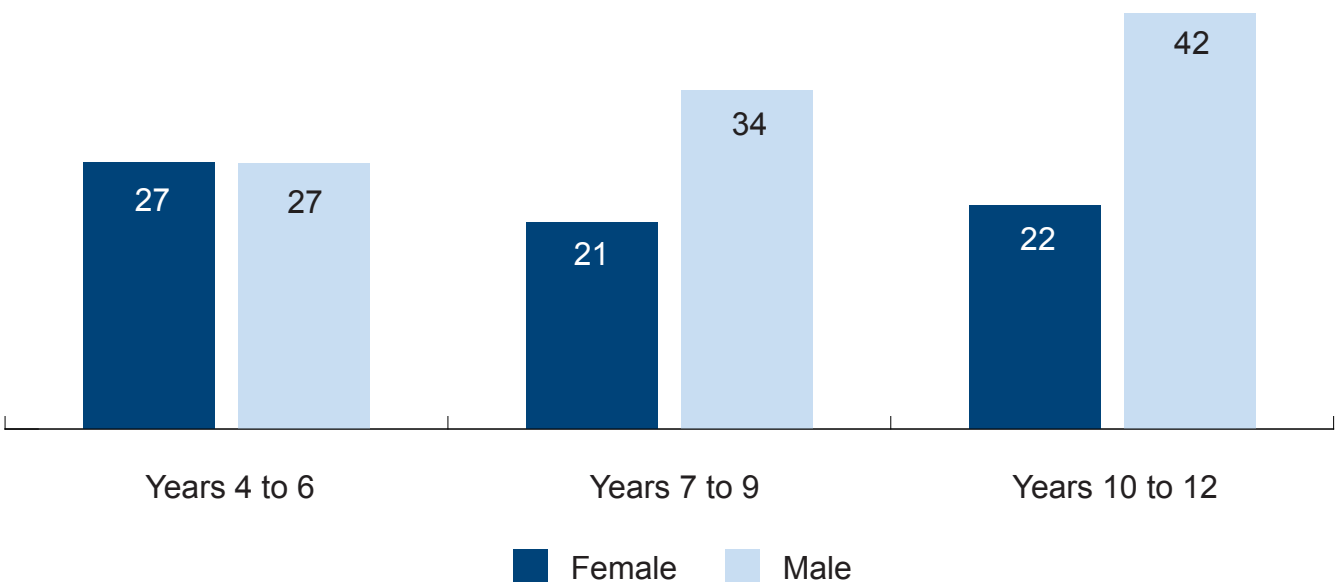
Feeling safe in their neighbourhood and other communities or groups is essential for girls to develop their independence, engage in physical activity outside their home and build positive relationships with other adults and peers.<sup>15,16</sup>

In primary school (Years 4 to 6) girls and boys have similar experiences of feeling safe in their

local community, however, once they start high school these feelings diverge.

A much lower proportion of female high school students than primary school students feel safe in their community all the time, while a greater proportion of male high school students feel safe in their community all the time. That is, the gender gap regarding feeling safe increases significantly.

**Proportion of students feeling safe in their local area all the time by year group and gender, per cent**



Source: Speaking Out Survey 2021 Data Tables [unpublished]

Girls who do not feel safe in their local area are significantly more likely to have low life satisfaction than those who feel safe. Almost two thirds (63%) of girls who never feel safe in their local area rate their life satisfaction very poorly (0 to 4), while two-thirds of girls (65%) who feel safe in their local area all the time rate their life satisfaction highly (7 to 10). This relationship between safety and life satisfaction was not as strong for boys of the same age.

Similarly, the data shows that female young people who do not feel safe in their local area are less likely to feel they are able to cope with things that happen in their lives and less likely to feel they are able to do things as well as most other people.

In the open text responses, around 2,300 female students reported feeling unsafe in their local community.

*When random adults start talking to me on the bus or train or even when I'm out doing my sports I just don't like it when strangers talk to me unless my parents know them. (12-year-old)*

*When I go out with my friends (usually around 1-2 of us) I get anxious around people I don't know and start to think things that could happen to me. (13-year-old)*

*Just being outside in general always makes me feel uneasy. I'm only ever comfortable when I'm with a group of people I am very close with or my mum. (14-year-old)*

*Being around people that stare and make you feel uncomfortable. (15-year-old)*

*Adults can be creepy sometimes, and please don't give us weird looks on public transport. (16-year-old)*

In particular, almost 500 responses were from girls reporting they felt unsafe around boys and men, mainly due to sexualised staring, sexual harassment or fear of harassment and assault.

*I feel unsafe] when I'm alone in shops or car parks and there are old men catcalling to staring at me, when I'm alone in public in general. (13-year-old)*

*A lot of the time I catch the public bus alone and there is always a few creepy middle aged men trying to look up my skirt or come close to me even if I try my best to ignore them. (14-year-old)*

*Public transport, being alone with older people (strangers), men. This is due to being followed and harassed by boys and men many times. (14-year-old)*

*The amount of creeps and scary people stops me from wearing simple clothes like leggings to go for a walk because they'll make it obvious to stare or whistle out/catcall. I'm talking about all ages, and boys. (16-year-old)*

*When I'm wearing an outfit that I liked and thought I looked good in, then men on the train or any where look at me as if I'm an object with something they like the look of, I'm 17 and I have men my age and older (no age limit) looking at my breast like it is okay or have a man once again of any age touch my bum or stare at me or make a gross comment as I walk by or am near them... (17-year-old)*

Experiences of harassment, assault and violence and the fear of these experiences impacts female children and young people's daily activities, reduces their independence and increases feelings of anxiety.

Many girls highlighted that feeling scared made them feel anxious about their place in the world.

*As a young girl, I have heard too many tragic stories about what has happened to other teens all around the world. Sometimes I don't feel safe in situations in others would, and I would like that to be recognised that everyone is different with feelings of anxiety and worry. I would like people to not tell me to "stop overreacting" or "stop worrying" when it's all that can take up my mind at times where I don't feel safe. (14-year-old)*

*Because I live regionally, it is not safe for me as a young girl, to be out at night without an adult/large group I would love it if I could feel more safe on my own in my community, (15-year-old)*

*I am a young girl, this means that I am automatically in danger when I am outside of my house. It doesn't matter if I dress in a certain way, unwanted stares can always happen. Sometimes I feel unsafe in public because of the potential danger that comes with being around strangers, as a girl, I do not feel safe. (15-year-old)*

*I'd work on making it a safer community so I can feel safe to go on runs early in the morning or late in the afternoon. I find that there are many creepy people (mostly men) in the area and many of my friends and I constantly talk about feeling unsafe in the city, the streets, neighbourhoods, parks, shops, stores, and transport stations. Just to let you know: many young girls in this area clutch keys in case something happens, hold deodorant to spray in a predators eyes. Fix this. We want to be safe and not taught that we have to be careful. (15-year-old)*





# Supportive relationships with parents and other adults

*I have a lot of insecurities that I try to talk to my parents about, but all they say is I'm overreacting and I need to get over it but it's not that simple.  
(12-year-old)*

## Supportive relationships with parents and other adults

Research shows that young people who are supported by safe and positive relationships are more likely to have good mental health, be resilient, able to learn and sustain healthy relationships into the future.<sup>17,18</sup>

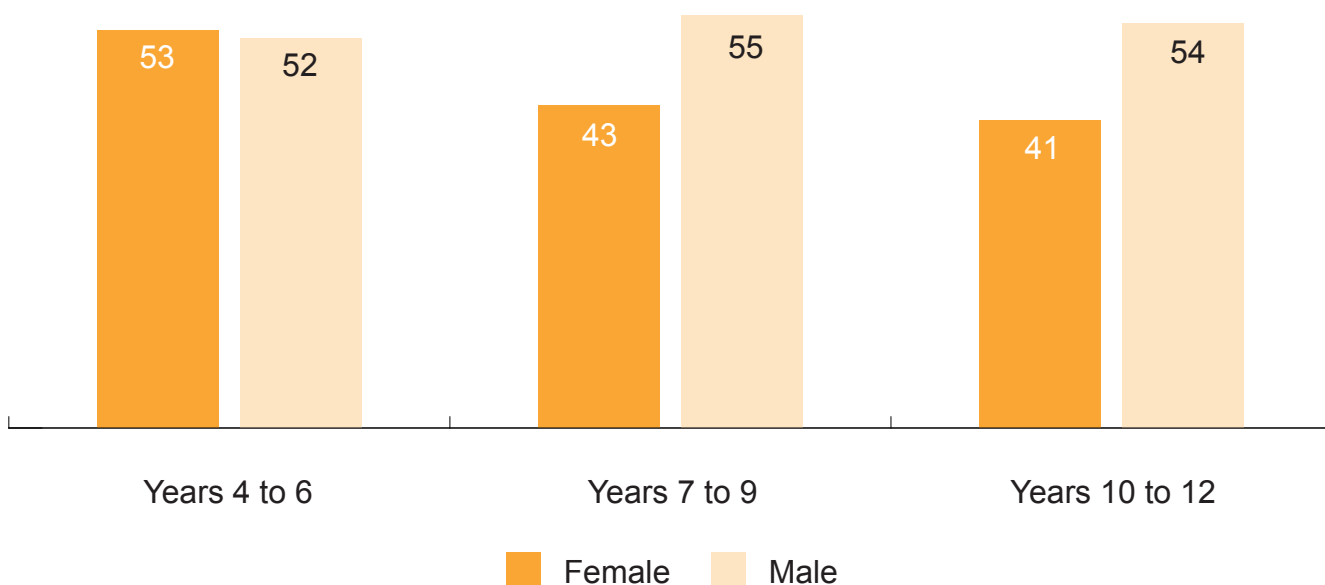
The SOS21 data shows that many female young people feel disconnected from their parents and other supporting adults as they move through adolescence.

Only 41 per cent of female Year 10 to Year 12 students report that it is very much true they have a parent or other adult who listens to them when they have something to say (male: 54%). Almost one-in-five (19%) female Year 10 to Year 12 students report that it is not at all true that there is a parent or other adult where they live who they can talk to about their problems or worries (male: 10%).

Male and female children in primary school (Years 4 to 6) have similar views on whether they feel supported by their parents or other adults at home. However, in high school male young people continue to feel supported and heard, while female young people report a significant decline in support.

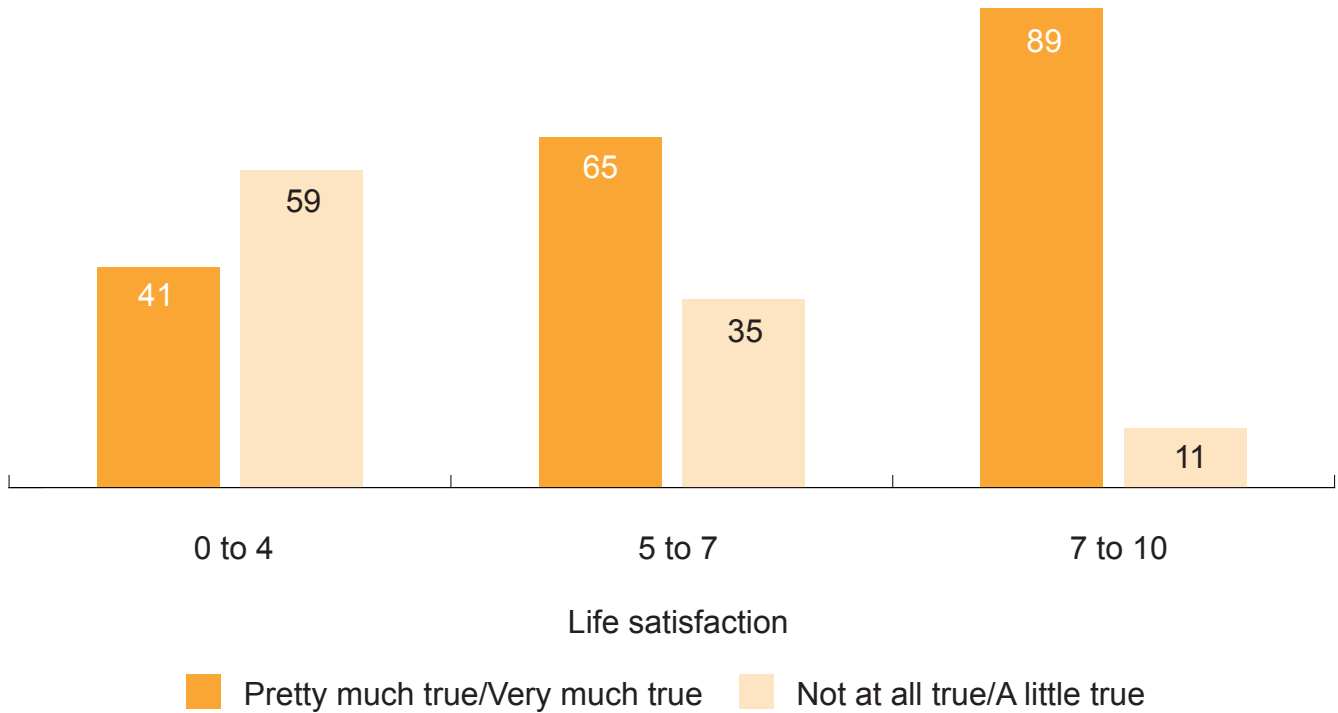
There is a clear and strong association between feeling like your parent or carer doesn't listen to you and having a low life satisfaction.

**Proportion of students reporting that it is very much true that where they live there is a parent or other adult who listens to them when they have something to say by year group and gender, per cent**



Source: Speaking Out Survey 2021 Data Tables [unpublished]

**Proportion of Year 7 to 12 female students reporting how true it is that where they live there is a parent or other adult who listens to them when they have something to say by life satisfaction rating, per cent**



Source: Speaking Out Survey 2021 Data Tables [unpublished]

Similarly, girls who feel they are not listened to or unable to talk to their parents and carers about their problems are less likely to feel happy with themselves and more likely to feel they are unable to achieve their goals and cope with life’s challenges.

These quantitative results are supported by the open text responses received from survey participants.

### Adults should check up, pay attention and listen

A key theme across open text responses was that children and young people (male and female) want their parents and other adults to check up on them, pay attention and listen to them. As part of this, they highlighted the importance of adults being open, understanding and not judgemental.

*They could be more enquiring because most of the time I’m not willing to say how I’m feeling until someone asks. I think it’s important for adults to know that just because kids don’t say their issues doesn’t mean they don’t have any. Sometimes being quiet is their way of showing it. (13-year-old)*

*They could be more supportive and be more understanding when we have an issue instead of thinking the worst straight away. (13-year-old)*

*Maybe by asking if you are okay at least once a week or by being more kind so that you feel more comfortable with talking to them about any of your worries that you have. (13-year-old)*



*That it's difficult for us and you need to listen to us openly knowing that we aren't all the same and that we have different opinions. (14-year-old)*

*Sometimes I feel like nobody ever really wants to listen. (14-year-old)*

*Parents should take time out of their day to check up on their child, think about others instead of just yourself. Understand and listen to you child when they have got something to say instead of jumping to conclusions and missing the whole point. (14-year-old)*

### **It's different for our generation - don't compare**

Another key issue raised by young people, particularly girls, was that adults do not try to understand their perspective and experiences.

*That life isn't the same as it was when they were kids. (13-year-old)*

*That they lived in a different time to us the world has changed we aren't going to live the way they did when they were younger because we have been exposed to things they haven't. (15-year-old)*

*To be more accepting and understanding of us. The world has changed since you were at school, there are different problems that we face. When we tell you something just try and listen and don't be so opinionated. Listen to us and love us for who we are. (15-year-old)*

*Be more open to our generation, as generations are different and values and customs are changing, don't base everything off the generation you grew up in as it is not the same. (16-year-old)*

*Don't make your children feel ashamed to be feeling these emotions. Their problems may not seem big to you but things have change and we face new problems that you may not understand. Don't judge before you understand. (16-year-old)*

## It's difficult to ask for help

A significant proportion of students also reported they find it difficult to ask for help, particularly when they are concerned about their mental health.

*It's very hard to reach out, in terms of mental health. Especially when you cannot even tell your own parents/guardians because you're scared and ashamed of your own feelings and that you'll be brushed off. In my own opinion, school is also a hard place to get help with mental help, even though my school is always reminding us that we can seek help, it's scary. I feel like my problems are not valid enough for someone to listen, it gets very hard when you're out of options and there's only yourself. (13-year-old)*

*Was always too scared to go my mum and dad because we don't really talk about feelings in our family as it is shown as being "weak" so I would keep it to myself and either talk my mates about it or sometimes my Aunty who is always there and I feel comfortable talking to about everything. (14-year-old)*

*Many people need help with their mental health issues but they don't want to tell anyone because they feel embarrassed. Some of us are just waiting for someone to notice that we aren't ok. Waiting for someone to realise we need to talk to them and we need a friend but no one ever does. (15-year-old)*

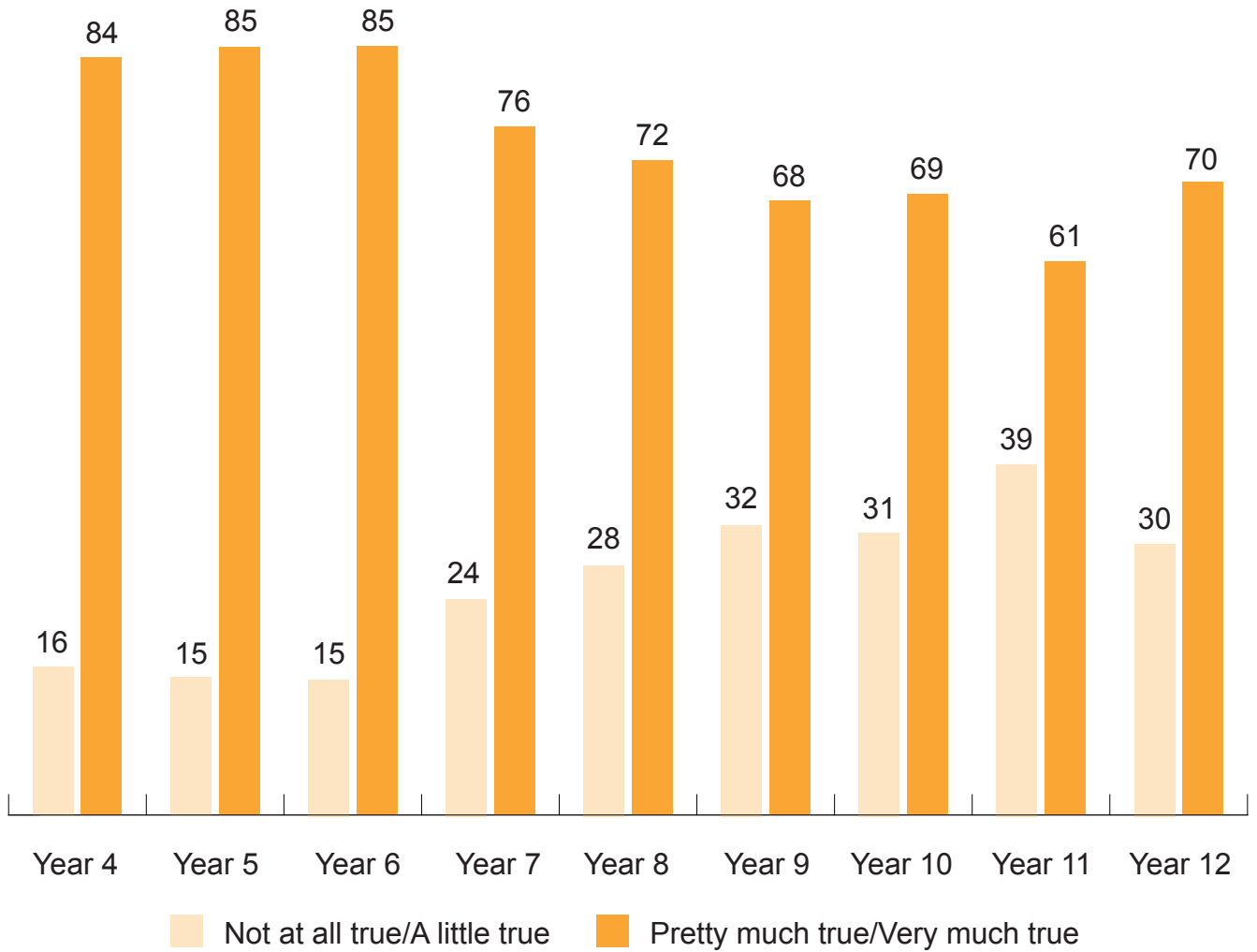
*I never speak out about my problems because I feel like nothing will happen if I do or don't. A couple of years ago I was sexually assaulted and I haven't told anyone about it. (15-year-old)*

## Support from parents

Research suggests that parental support is critical for the wellbeing of all young people.

The proportion of female young people reporting that they do not have a parent or carer who listens to them when they have something to say increases substantially in Year 7 and continues to increase through to Year 11.

Proportion of female students reporting how true it is that where they live there is a parent or other adult who **listens to them** when they have something to say by year, per cent



Source: Speaking Out Survey 2021 Data Tables [unpublished]

While there was no specific open text question on supportive relationships in the SOS21 survey, the responses provided across multiple questions reinforce the quantitative data, with many female students feeling unable to talk to their parents and/or carers about their concerns and worries.

*Well parents don't believe that anxiety can affect us me, and they also believe that stress can't be in young kids like me, so I don't bother to tell them. Although I feel like all the things that should help with depression never work for me. (12-year-old)*

*The fact that I can't tell my family anything that goes on without getting the feeling that I will get in trouble. (12-year-old)*

*I find it hard to communicate and I leave things to boil up inside and I get worried and it gets to hard for me. I don't really know who to turn to as I don't know who to trust and I don't want to tell my family about everything [because] I know they will judge me. (12-year-old)*

*Well I think I have depression but I'm too scared to tell my parents about my mental state I'm in or how I'm feeling, I'm scared they'll just say it's a "phase" that I'm going through.. I want help but I'm to scared to ask for it sometimes. (14-year-old)*

*I wish my parents understood how I feel. (15-year-old)*

*My parents normally don't see my whole side of the story, and they don't see it being as serious as I do, I find it hard to tell them everything. (15-year-old)*

The majority of female high school students who specifically reported feeling supported by their family were in the early high school years (Years 7 to 9).

*I sometimes feel stressed about little things but my family mainly mum and my friends help. (11-year-old)*

*I get anxiety from the school work, because the school work has change since primary school. My mom helps me with what she can but it is still very stressful. (12-year-old)*

*I find that I always go to my Mum first then I go to my dad with my Mum. I reveal my anxieties to my Mum and then create a solution with both my parents. (12-year-old)*

*I get bad anxiety and sometimes I start to feel depressed so my mum got me to write in a book... and just put down anything that comes in mind and helps me feel better. (13-year-old)*

*On my experience seeking health issue was never really a problem as I have a very supportive and helpful parents. When I have a hard time coping or I needed advice or I have made bad decisions, my parent was the only person that was able to help me get through it, without askin me "why did you do that." (13-year-old)*

### Support from other adults

Other adults, including other family members and staff and teachers at school, are essential supports for young people as they go through adolescence. While the responses were principally about mental health, many students reported feeling the school system and teachers and other staff were not supportive.

*I think again the school needs to cover more on mental health as I and I'm sure other students suffer from self harm, anxiety and depression. It's a serious topic that is definitely not talked about enough. (12-year-old)*

*A lot of kids are suicidal but none of the teachers see it, they just see it as being lazy or sending them to buddy for example I was saying I was gonna kill myself today and the teacher just put my name on the board. (13-year-old)*

*Teachers could be more supportive of kids that have anxiety or other mental health problems. (14-year-old)*

*Kids and teenagers need someone in schools they can go and talk to, students do not go to the counsellor at school because they do not trust them and feel they can talk to them. (16-year-old)*

*The teachers and the school put a lot of pressure on us to succeed and do well because we go to a fairly prestigious school but they do not offer the right assistance when it is needed most... I feel so much pressure to be mentally healthy at this school, and the school talks about mental health all the time to have a good public image but no one actually cares about it. People often doubt how I feel unless I have a written diagnosis for it - no one believes me and takes my word for it. (17-year-old)*

*Our school services are overbooked and they don't always remain as confidential as required. (17-year-old)*

Those students who have found someone they trust to provide support report this having a positive impact on their wellbeing.

*I found that I have this one teacher that me and my friend always go to talk to about our problems and they are really good because I have grown and truest full relationship with them and she has helped me through a lot and sees my side of the story. (14-year-old)*

*I have a lot of trust in my uncle and Aunty also in my HASS teacher. My uncle helps me a lot with my stress and makes sure that I am always okay and happy. (14-year-old)*

## Using support services

Many students, the majority female, reported having difficulties with the mental health service system. They raised concerns around waitlists, expertise and confidentiality.

*It's never immediate, like if I need help rather quickly I'm always put on a waiting list and left for weeks or even months. Parents say too hard and too expensive, don't feel comfortable telling people. (13-year-old)*

*I called a help line and no one picked up. (13-year-old)*

*Kids helpline took too long to respond, we ended the call. (15-year-old)*

*I wished that things were more confidential, especially with parents. I don't like that they have to know about drug use and other things. I understand why they need to alert parents but it makes me not want to open up completely. (16-year-old)*

*I feel like a lot of professionals don't understand the seriousness or what it's like to be living with bad mental health or disorders. Most don't understand how serious it is and can be dismissive when teens ask for help. (16-year-old)*

*I was supposed to receive a call from CAMHs and never got one. For a community advocating mental health, I feel like an inconvenience and a prop in a business. Nobody genuinely cares, the guy who sexually assaulted me got therapy but I didn't. (16-year-old)*

*There are not enough people that I trust that including professional help due to the fact they were male. (17-year-old)*

*There are limited options in small towns so if a professional doesn't suit your needs it's hard to find one that does. (17-year-old)*



# Autonomy and equality

*I wish I was allowed  
to go out of the house  
more often to spend  
some time alone, but my  
mum won't let me go out  
without an adult.  
(14-year-old)*

# Autonomy and equality

## Independence and autonomy

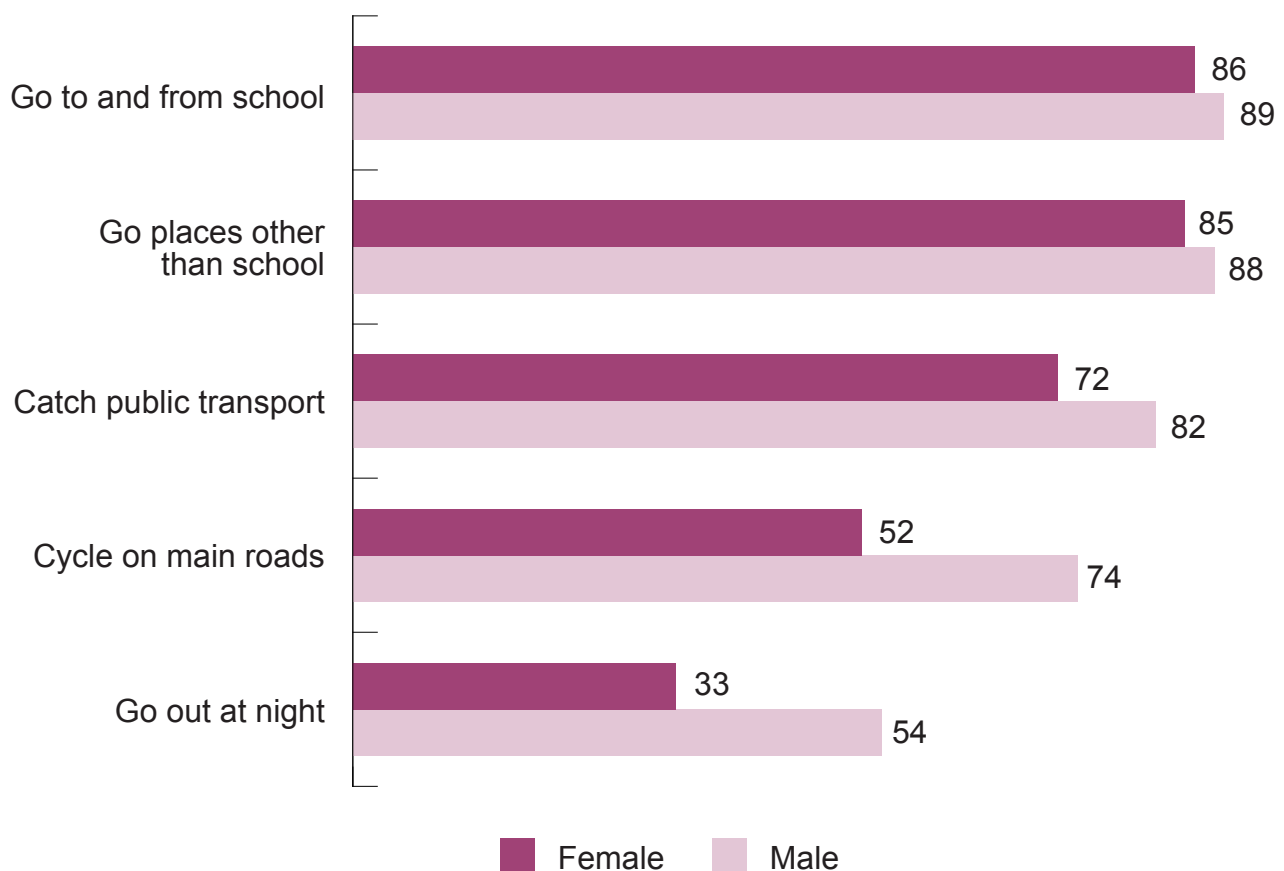
Experiencing a level of autonomy and independence is an important developmental phase for young people. Research suggests that many girls may have less independence and autonomy during pivotal developmental stages and are therefore less likely to be able to access the same opportunities as their male peers.<sup>19</sup>

This is supported by the SOS21 data, which shows that female students across WA are more likely to have less independence than male students.

Only 52 per cent of female students in Years 10 to 12 are allowed to cycle on a main road without an adult (male: 74%) and one-third (33%) are allowed to go out alone at night (male: 54%).

This pattern occurs across multiple daily activities, where many girls are restricted from activities that their male peers are allowed to do.

**Proportion of Year 10 to Year 12 students reporting being allowed to do selected activities without an adult by gender and activity, per cent**



Source: Speaking Out Survey 2021 Data Tables [unpublished]

Female students are also less likely to get pocket money from their parents than male students. In Years 10 to 12, almost one-quarter (24%) of female students reported that they do not get pocket money but would like to, while 17 per cent of their male peers reported this.

In the open text responses, more girls reported they had less independence than their male peers and brothers.

*The community I -and most people- live in are slightly sexist. They do not allow girls to go out at night or go to a friend's house for a sleepover if the friend has an older brother, while boys can go out after dark and have sleepovers in anyone's house. It really just isn't fair. They think we will be raped or harassed or something else, and they think boys can take care of themselves if something goes wrong, and we can't. I'd like if that was changed so I could actually have the same rights as a boy. Thank you. (11-year-old)*

*I want to be able to go shopping with my friends without adults so we can joke around and talk about things (not bad things just like interesting boys or girls and school stuff) but my parents don't let me for my safety and I understand that but I just wish we had a safer community so I can do that. (12-year-old)*

*I would like to have more freedom in my life but I know why my parents make these rules. I know they just want me to be safe. (13-year-old)*

*Lower the crime rate so I can be trusted to go outside. (14-year-old)*

*Things that make me feel unsafe are the amount of 'creeps' in my area. I'm not allowed to leave the house on my own because one of the girls who goes to my school nearly got snatched from some person in a white van up my street. (15-year-old)*

*When my parents don't let me go outside my house, I feel suffocated and lonely. (16-year-old)*

The data also shows a relationship between having independence and feeling a level of autonomy in terms of making decisions. For example, female young people who are not allowed to do certain activities are less likely to feel they are involved in making decisions about their lives.



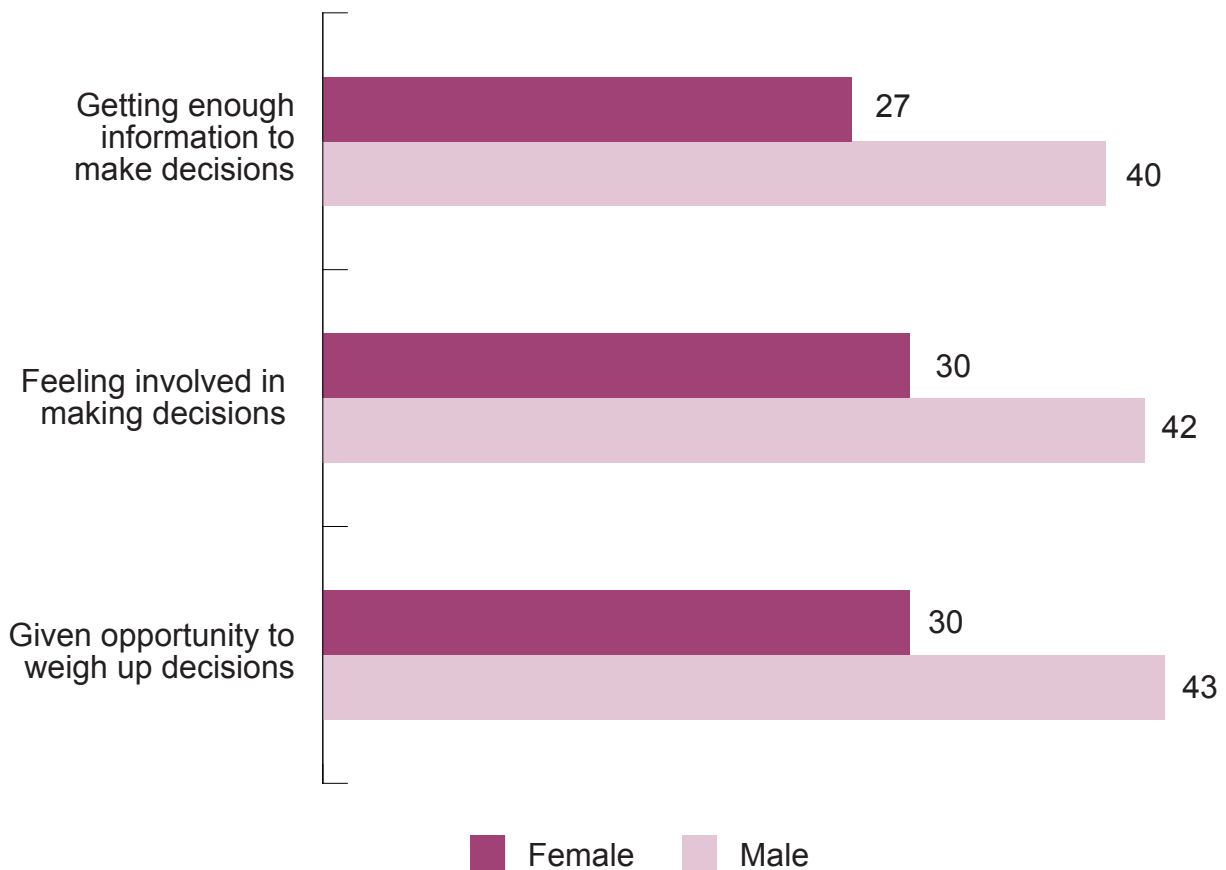
### Decision-making

Listening to young people’s opinions and encouraging them to be involved in decisions affecting them contributes to the development of self-esteem and identity. It also enables young people to learn how to develop and articulate opinions and make choices which can influence events.

Female young people are less likely than male young people to feel listened to by adults and are less likely to feel involved in making decisions about their lives.

Just under one-third (30%) of female young people in Years 7 to 12 strongly agree they are involved in making decisions about their lives, compared to 42 per cent of male young people the same age.

**Proportion of Years 7 to 12 young people saying they strongly agree with selected statements about making decisions by gender, per cent**



Source: Speaking Out Survey 2021 Data Tables [unpublished]

The survey responses are supported by the open text responses received from students, with the majority of responses about decision-making and independence coming from girls.

*Let children make more if their own decisions in life and don't force them to do things they don't want to do. (12-year-old)*

*The parent should let all of their child choose what they want to be when they grow up not them choosing for them. (13-year-old)*

*Listen more and be able to give advice when needed. Be more supportive of young people and their decisions. Listen to the issue and try to help as much as possible but sometimes it is best to just let them decide what to do, while other times they need the support and options being given to them. (15-year-old)*

*Space for independence would be much appreciated from parents. We're not misguided just for having a separate perspective or worldview from another generation and that's something that's often overlooked and dismissed as just a 'progressive teenager' trait that in reality will end up greatly contributing to our identities and decision making abilities in our futures as adults. (16-year-old)*

*We are old enough to make some decisions on our own, and weigh the consequences, without it being made for u. (16-year-old)*

*We try our hardest and wish our parents would understand We want to be able to make our own decisions. (16-year-old)*

*Let your kids make their own decisions! Stop being so controlling- if your child is not doing EXACTLY what you want, it's okay! They are not you and they do not need to achieve everything you didn't. (16-year-old)*

## Gender equality

Students were not asked about gender inequality or discrimination in society more broadly in the survey. However, many female young people expressed strong views about being treated differently to their male peers and siblings.

*I care take care of myself! If boys can take care of themselves, why can't we? We have Arms and legs and eyes and everything a boy has, but we can't do what guys can. Like go out with friends after dark, go for sleep overs, and doing fun things. It's just not fair. Apparently we can't even carry things. We never get picked to carry the drums or anything else heavy, even if we put our hands up and the boys don't. They get picked anyway. Like we're weak humans and like we can't do anything. Well, we CAN and we will, should people actually listen to my ranting. Thank you. (11-year-old)*

*I do not just care about my body or about my friends fighting because I'm a girl, I care about it as a person. I wish people were less sexist. (12-year-old)*

*As a girl I don't feel safe most places due to the world I was raised in. Society has made it so I fear being out because any day I could be hurt. I don't want to grow up as a girl because that means I will be discriminated against and will be payed less. (14-year-old)*

Some of the female students highlighted that there needs to be more education with male students regarding gender equality and respectful relationships.

*Young females shouldn't be scared to walk home at night, they shouldn't fear being sexually assaulted/harassed on a daily basis. Instead of teaching women to deal with these things schools should teach men how to behave themselves. (12-year-old)*

*That boys aren't really educated on what girls go through and they aren't educated on things that girls can't do for safety and they just think that it's a joke (13-year-old)*

*I think that boys our age should be educated that girls to get attacked and raped, because none of the boys think it actually happened and get mad at us when we're scared. This isn't all boys, some of the understand, but I feel they should be educated. (13-year-old)*

*You could teach men to grow up. Starting as a baby the parents need to take the time to teach their children right from wrong not "boys will be boys" you need to bring up boys to be respectful because it is a big problem in a lot of women's safety all around schools, homes and public places. (16-year-old)*

*Educate men to not be predators instead of teaching girls to be aware. It's messed up I don't want to be scared of going for a walk in the afternoon. (16-year-old)*





# Conclusion

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## Conclusion

All children and young people have a right to be safe, to belong, to be listened to and to contribute to decision-making in all areas of their lives.

This report highlights that many female children and young people do not feel that these rights are respected. They feel like they are not being listened to when they discuss their lives, they feel like they don't belong, they feel unsafe at home and in public spaces and they feel like their male siblings and peers are treated differently from them.

We must carefully consider the views expressed in this report and the SOS21 data more broadly and take action to make meaningful changes across multiple areas of life to ensure female children and young people are supported and given the opportunities to achieve their potential.

Parents, carers and other family members must consider how they interact with the children and young people in their lives. Children and young people who participated in SOS21 have said they need their parents and loved ones to ask them how they are, listen to their views and be supportive and kind in their responses.

School is also a critical environment for all children and young people. The SOS21 data clearly shows that the transition to high school is particularly challenging for many female students. It also indicates that having a positive and supportive relationship with at least one teacher or other staff member at the school makes a big difference to their sense of wellbeing.

These findings mirror those in the School and Learning consultation conducted by the Commissioner in 2016. Positive student-teacher relationships are an essential foundation of wellbeing for young people, particularly female young people. It is imperative that schools provide an environment that encourages positive and respectful relationships across the school.

Another key finding from this report is that female children and young people are much more likely than their male peers to feel unsafe at school, at home and in their local area. This significantly impacts their self-esteem, sense of wellbeing and, more broadly, their views on gender equality. Female young people want to feel safe – they do not want to be stared at, or their looks or body remarked upon, or feel like they are not allowed to do things 'for their own safety'. They also should never have to experience sexual harassment or assault. This requires significant cultural change, however, this change can start now in families, in schools and in communities across WA.

As part of the Girls' Wellbeing project, the Commissioner will conduct further consultations with young people to discuss the results of the survey and gather their views on how to improve girls' experiences and reduce the gender wellbeing gap. The Commissioner will then report young people's views on the way forward and provide recommendations.

# References

- 1 The topics outlined in this paper were principally drawn from the thematic analysis performed of the open text responses to the SOS21 survey. This analysis was performed using NVIVO by coding all open text responses to selected questions in the SOS21 survey.
- 2 This includes eight additional schools that were selected non-randomly. To ensure the data is statistically representative, the responses from these additional schools have not been included in the statistical analysis in this report, however the open text (qualitative) responses of these students in these schools have been included.
- 3 LGBTQIA+SB stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, Intersex, Asexual, Sistergirl and Brotherboy.
- 4 In general, female children and young people and those who selected 'in another way' were more likely to provide detailed responses than male children and young people – therefore the statements regarding proportion of responses by gender are possibly biased.
- 5 The thematic analysis was performed coding the raw data in inductively determined codes (i.e. the codes were created based on the participants' descriptions not pre-determined theory).
- 6 Commissioner for Children and Young People WA 2021, *Exploring the decline in wellbeing for Australian girls*, Commissioner for Children and Young People WA.
- 7 Naylor C et al 2016, *Bringing together physical and mental health: A new frontier for integrated care*, The Kings Fund.
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- 11 Australian Bureau of Statistics 2020, *4510.0 - Recorded Crime - Victims, Australia, 2019*, Table 7 Victims, Age by selected offences and sex, States and territories, 2019
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- 13 PISA data compiled by the Commissioner for Children and Young People from: ACER, *PISA 2018: Reporting Australia's Results. Volume II Student and School Characteristics: Data tables* and Bortoli L 2018, *PISA Australia in Focus Number 1: Sense of belonging at school*.
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- 19 Commissioner for Children and Young People WA 2021, *Exploring the decline in wellbeing for Australian girls*, Commissioner for Children and Young People WA, p. 94-95.





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