

Editorial note

Two case studies were presented by Spain through the WHO/HBSC Forum 2007 process: from the Autonomous Community of Andalusia; and from Alcalá de Henares, Autonomous Community of Madrid. These are preceded by an introductory section that focuses on analysis of HBSC data and describes the national policy context. Editors wish to acknowledge Begoña Merino Merino, Chief, Department of Health Promotion, Ministry of Health and Consumer Affairs, Spain, for her collaboration in enabling Spain's contribution to the Forum process.

Spain: social contexts and psychological adjustment in Spanish adolescents

Carmen Moreno¹, Francisco Rivera², Pilar Ramos¹, Victoria Muñoz-Tinoco¹, Inmaculada Sánchez-Queija³,
Carmen Granado-Alcón¹.

¹ Department of Developmental and Educational Psychology, University of Seville, Seville.

² Department of Behavioural Sciences, University of Huelva, Huelva.

³ Department of Developmental and Educational Psychology, National University of Distance Education (UNED), Madrid.

Executive summary

The HBSC survey carried out in the spring of 2006 had access to 21 811 adolescent schoolboys and schoolgirls between 11 and 18 years of age. They came from various regions, belonged to families with a range of purchasing power and attended schools in both the private and public sectors. This study presents the most significant results regarding adolescent social relationships and mental health.

The results clearly demonstrate that there is a relationship between adjustment changes and age in adolescence. As adolescents mature, fights decrease, accompanied by decreases in ease of communication with their father and mother, parental supervision, enjoyment of school, school performance and satisfaction with life. Increases are seen in difficulties associated with psychological adjustment.

In addition, the variable of gender indisputably produces social inequalities. Girls are more likely to be closely supervised by parents (especially mothers), to be successful academically and enjoy secondary school. Girls are also more likely to have support from a close relationship with a special friend (usually a girlfriend) and are less likely to be involved in fights or abuse (as either victims or aggressors). It is also true, however, that girls are more likely to have problems in communicating with their father, are less satisfied with their relationships in the family, demonstrate lower levels of self-esteem and satisfaction with life and, in general, have more problems in terms of emotional adjustment.

The data demonstrate that, within the population of adolescent schoolchildren in Spain, there is one group that is particularly vulnerable: *immigrants*. More problems were found in the emotional development of this group (less satisfaction with life and more problems of psychological adjustment) and a significant number of immigrants have problems in their relationships with peers (a particularly important finding due to the importance at this age of feeling accepted and belonging). It is also more probable that they do not have a special friend (someone who acts as a confidant and a key support) and are more involved in fights and abuse (as both victims and aggressors). A significant finding, however, was their evaluation of school. Immigrants have a very positive perception of their academic performance and are also the group that most enjoys being at school. This latter finding calls attention to the need for schools to actively work to improve the social integration of immigrants.

The data also demonstrate that a significant proportion of differences in adolescent mental well-being are associated with *socioeconomic status*. Adolescents of families with lower purchasing power are, for example, more likely to have self-perceptions of problems in communicating with both parents, have less parental supervision and report less satisfaction with relationships within their family. It is these same adolescents who also indicate that they have lower academic achievement, more problems having a best friend, less satisfaction in their relationships with peers, less satisfaction with life and lower self-esteem, in addition to experiencing more difficulties in emotional adjustment in general.

Differences by *region* were not particularly significant. Nevertheless adolescents in the region of Madrid tended to be more supervised (especially by the father), had better communication with their mother and father (especially from the latter) and

were particularly satisfied with this aspect of the relationship with their parents. It was also in Madrid, however, that more fights and episodes of abuse among adolescents were found.

In Andalusia, key findings include high satisfaction in communication with siblings and family relationships (including the relationships between siblings and among parents as a couple). These adolescents also demonstrated the most satisfaction with life. Explaining these differences would require the analysis of a significant number of factors that would exceed the scope of this study, but differences in socioeconomic status certainly play a role in the differences found by region.

The HBSC study in Spain

The data on Spanish adolescents presented in this study have been taken from the last two HBSC surveys, completed in 2002 and 2006. These were made possible through a Collaboration Agreement between the Ministry of Health and Consumer Affairs (General Public Health Office) and the University of Seville.

As established by international methodological guidelines, a representative sample of adolescent Spanish schoolchildren aged 11, 13 and 15 was studied in 2002 and 2006. Samples of 17-year-olds and adolescents in the intermediate ages (12, 14 and 16) were also incorporated as a national option. Consequently, the Spanish sample in 2006 consisted of a total of 21 811 adolescents ranging from 11 to 18 years of age (Table 1).

The 2006 sample was somewhat larger than that obtained in 2002 (13 552 adolescents) due to the fact that a randomized, multiphase sample was taken. This allowed an independent representative sample to be obtained for each of Spain's 18 regions. Since this study focuses on the total national data and, specifically, those of the regions of Andalusia and Madrid, data referring to the samples taken from these two regions have been included in Table 1. Andalusia and Madrid have well-differentiated socioeconomic characteristics, with Andalusia being below the national average income per capita and Madrid being above.

Table 1

Total make-up of the Spanish HBSC 2006 national sample and of two regional samples (Andalusia and Madrid)

*National Institute of Statistics, 2006.

	Age	Girls	Boys	Total	Income per capita (*)
Total Spanish sample	11–12	2 884	2 985	5 869	€22 152
	13–14	2 748	2 751	5 499	
	15–16	2 801	2 932	5 733	
	17–18	2 065	2 645	4 710	
	Total	10 498	11 313	21 811	
Andalusia	11–12	241	254	495	€17 251
	13–14	216	216	432	
	15–16	239	245	484	
	17–18	123	192	315	
	Total	819	907	1 726	
Madrid	11–12	125	132	257	€28 850
	13–14	130	153	283	
	15–16	184	154	338	
	17–18	95	79	174	
	Total	534	518	1 052	

Below is a synopsis of some of the most significant results obtained in relation to psychological adjustment and development in social contexts. More details of the study can be found in the complete reports (1–3).

Positive health

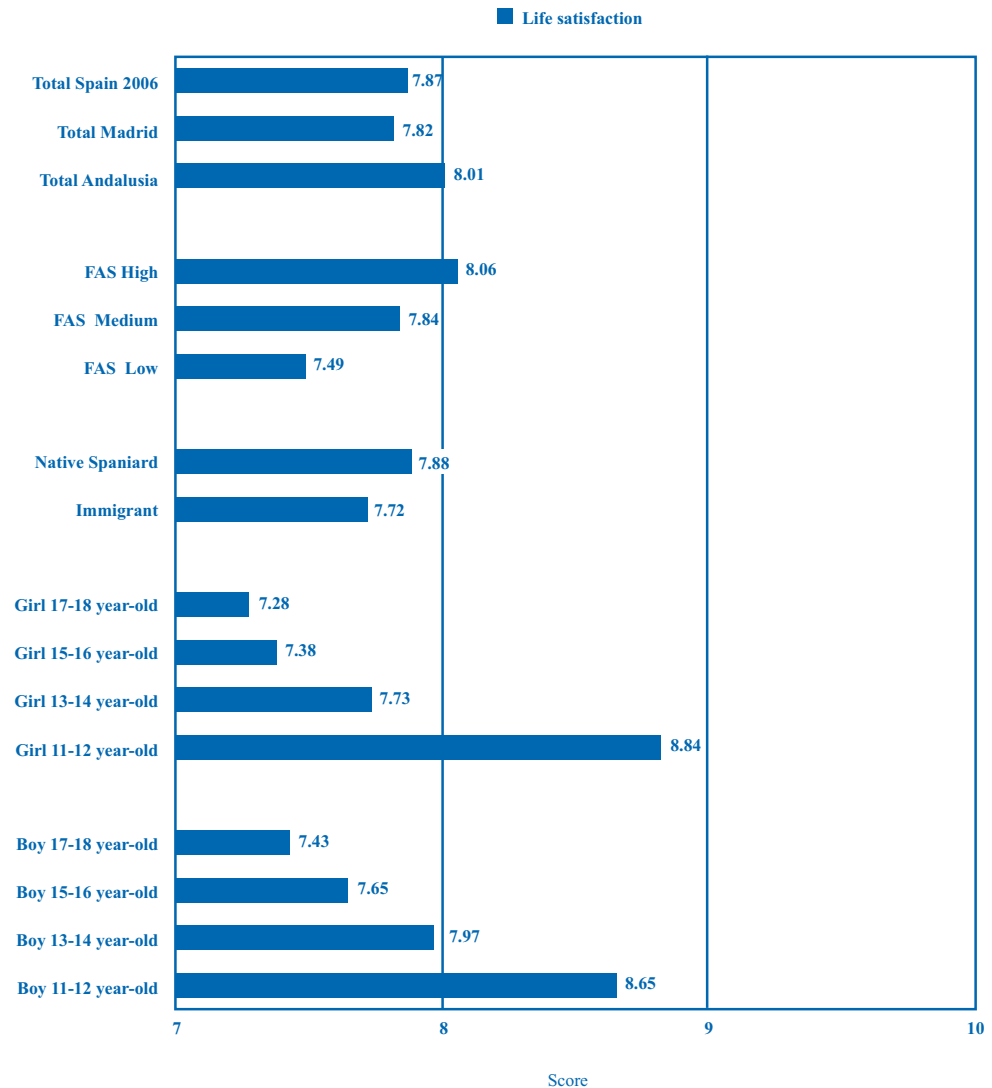
Life satisfaction

Age was clearly associated with adolescents' life satisfaction. As age increased, satisfaction with life decreased in both boys and girls. The decrease was particularly noticeable between the ages of 11 and 13 in both. Gender also played an important role; although 11-year-old girls expressed a higher level of satisfaction than did boys of the same age, girls systematically demonstrated lower scores than boys from that age onwards.

Differences were also associated with family purchasing power (adolescents from the most affluent families demonstrated greater life satisfaction) and with immigrant status (immigrant adolescents recorded lower scores). By region, Andalusian adolescents scored above the national average and those from Madrid scored slightly below (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1

Average scores given by adolescents to the question: "Here is a picture of a ladder. The top of the ladder, '10', is the best possible life for you, and the bottom, '0', is the worst possible life for you. In general, where on the ladder do you feel you stand at the moment?"



Psychological adjustment

Gender, age, family purchasing power and native/immigrant status were important variables in psychological adjustment (Fig. 2), with very similar results being found in relation to self-esteem (Fig. 3). Boys demonstrated better levels of well-being than girls of all ages, especially from 13 years onwards, but both boys and girls recorded poorer adjustment as adolescence advanced. Adolescents from families with better economic resources had higher scores for well-being, while immigrants (as opposed to native Spaniards) appeared to have more problems in this area. There were no significant differences by region.

Fig. 2

Average score of adolescents with different sociodemographic characteristics for psychological well-being (scores on the Mental Health Index, Kidscreen: maximum value = 100, minimum = 0)
Source: Ravens-Sieberer et al. (4)

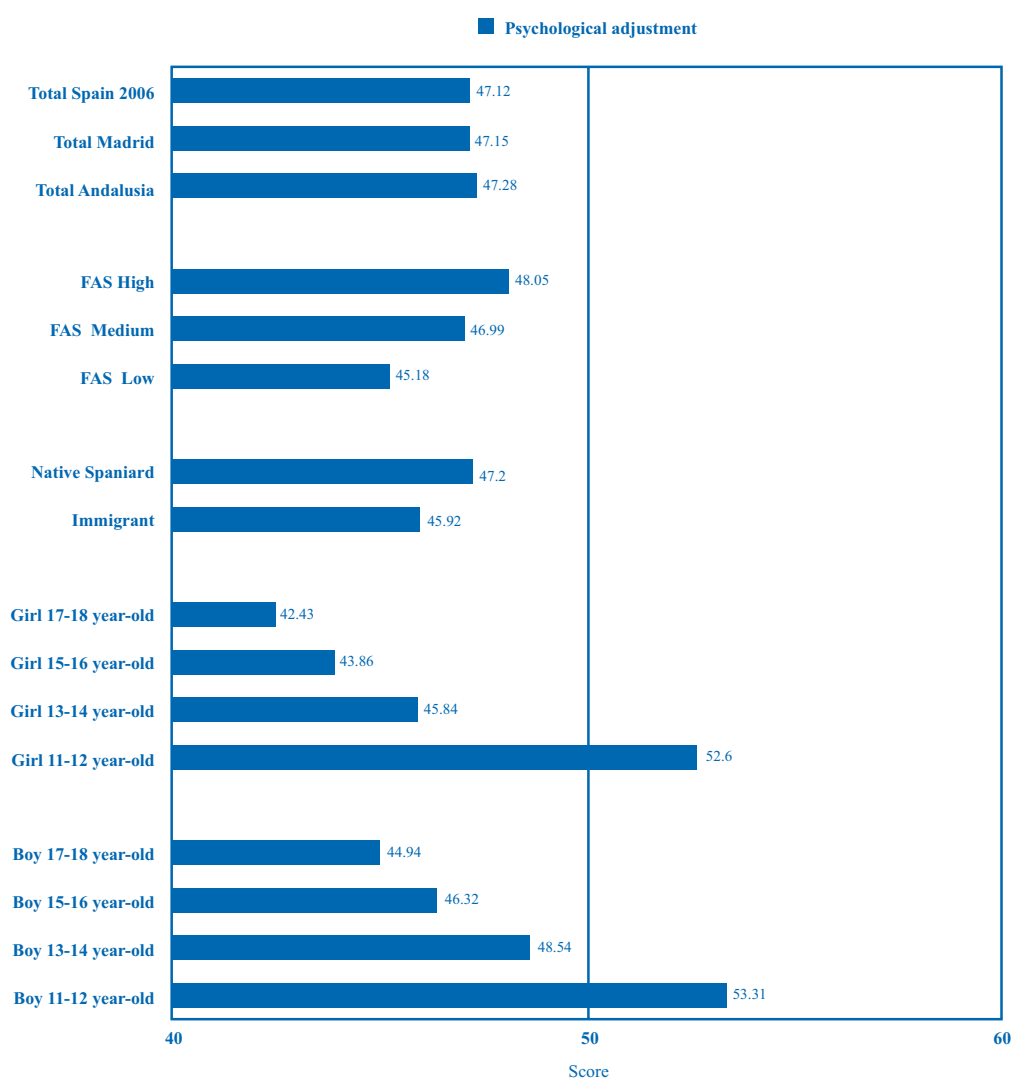
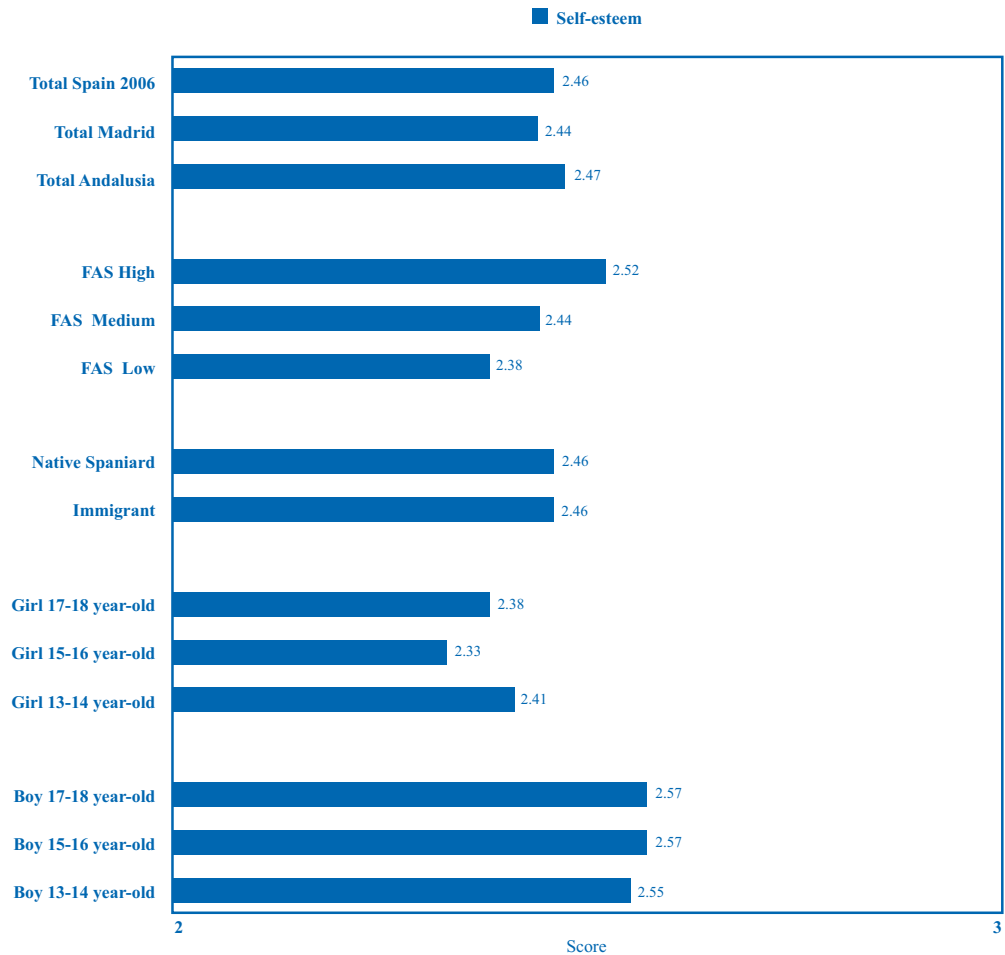


Fig. 3

Measurement of the self-esteem of Spanish adolescents according to different sociodemographic characteristics (values: 1 = low, 2 = medium, 3 = high)
Source: Rosenberg (5)



The family context

Family structure

Just over 83% of the households of Spanish adolescents interviewed in 2006 were biparental, with 10.6% being monoparental and 3.4% being reconstituted. The remaining 2.7% of adolescents lived in diverse family circumstances, such as with stepmothers or stepfathers, with grandparents as main caregivers, in foster homes, with siblings or in other types of households.

The 2006 data show that family structure in Spain has changed since 2002, mostly due to a decrease in the percentage of biparental households from 85.9% to 83.3%. Data collected in 2006 show that Andalusia maintained a higher biparental percentage than the national average (87.1%), while the region of Madrid was lower (80.4%).

The average number of adults in the households of Andalusian adolescents was the same as the national average (2.06 adults), while the average number of children was greater (2.54 compared to 2.33 national). Both values in Madrid were below the national average (1.99 adults and 2.23 children). An average of 4.22 people lived together in a household in Madrid, while the average household in Andalusia had 4.6 people; the national average was 4.39.

Communication with parents

Data on the ease with which adolescents communicated with their parents were similar between 2002 and 2006. The 2006 data seem to indicate a slight improvement in communication with both parents, but general trends established in 2002 remained unchanged. These are:

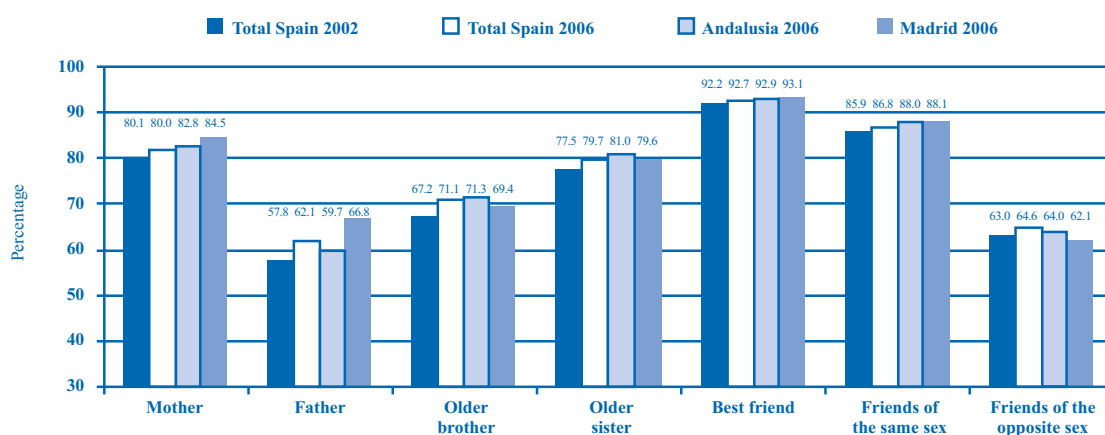
- self-perception of ease of communication with both parents decreases as age increases, although ease of communication with the mother is always higher; and
- boys and girls do not differ in their perceptions regarding ease of communication with mothers, but boys clearly indicate that they find it easier to communicate with fathers.

Fig. 4 shows the perceived ease with which adolescents communicated with a range of significant people.

Fig. 4

Adolescent responses (“Easy” or “Very Easy”) to the question: “How easy do you find it to talk to the following people about things that really worry you?” National data from 2002 and 2006, and regional data from 2006 (Andalusia and Madrid)

Note: The percentages were calculated once those subjects who replied “I don’t have/don’t see that person” were eliminated.



Focusing on the data from 2006, there were no appreciable differences between the two regions with regard to communication with friends, but differences did appear in relation to communication with parents. Adolescents in Madrid reported that they found it easier to communicate with the father (66.8% claiming it was “very easy” to talk to their father, against 59.7% in Andalusia and a national average of 57.8%), while those in Andalusia reported a better level of communication with older siblings (71.3% for older brothers and 81% for older sisters; the respective figures for Madrid were 69.4% and 79.6%, and for Spain 67.2% and 77.5%). The data indicate that while mothers continue to play a significant role in the lives of adolescents, peers (especially best friends) are of key importance. Older siblings are also an important source of support, especially when the older sibling is a sister.

Parental supervision

Answers to questions about mothers’ and fathers’ knowledge of the details of adolescents’ lives were similar in 2002 and 2006:

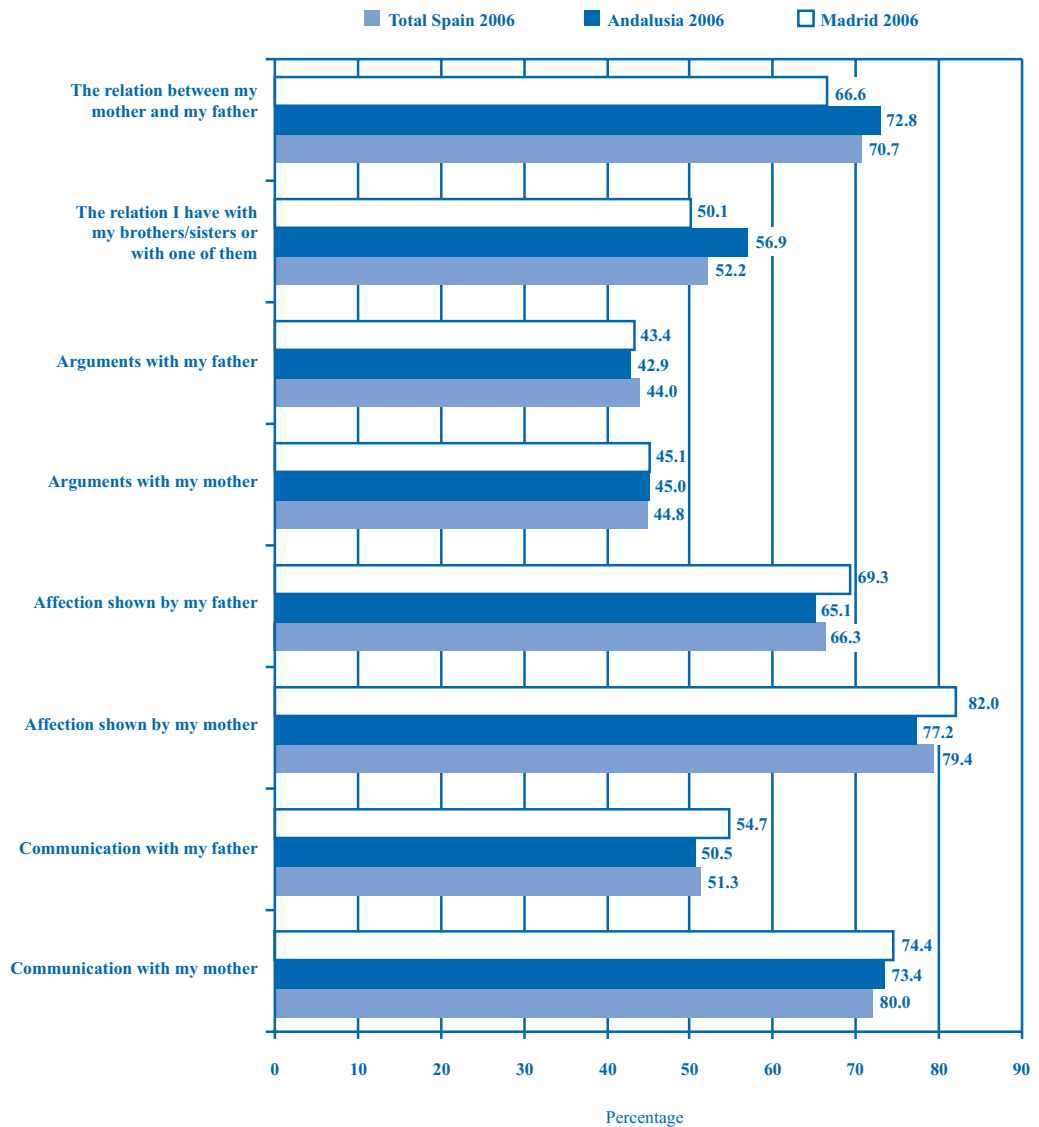
- adolescents, especially adolescent girls, felt more supervised by mothers than fathers
- maternal and paternal supervision ebbed as adolescence advanced.

The latter result deserves further analysis. It is important that adolescents are supervised by parents to prevent risky behaviours, but it is also important that parents know how to allow their children more freedom so they can develop their sense of independence. External paternal control is subsequently gradually replaced by internal control mechanisms; in other words, as children grow, adults reduce their supervision.

The 2006 data showed that children from families with higher purchasing power indicated that both their fathers and mothers knew more about them than did adolescents from families with lower purchasing power. This was also the case with those born in Spain compared to adolescents and parents who were born in another country. There were no significant regional differences between what mothers in Andalusia and Madrid knew about their offspring compared to the national average, but fathers from the region of Madrid knew more about their children than the national average, while those from Andalusia were below the average.

Fig. 5

Percentage of adolescents who responded “It’s OK” to the question:
“What would you like to change in your family?”



Perception of aspects of family life that need to be improved

Adolescents felt particularly satisfied with (in order of importance):

- affection from, and communication with, their mothers
- the relationship their father and mother have with each other.

The areas in which they want their families to improve are (in order of importance):

- arguments with the father
- arguments with their mother
- their relationship with their siblings (or some of them)
- communication with, and affection from, their father.

When examined by region, Andalusian adolescents were satisfied with their relationship with siblings and the relationship they perceived their fathers and mothers had with each other, while those from Madrid demonstrated satisfaction with affection from and communication with both their father and mother (Fig. 5).

Global satisfaction with family relationships

Data revealed that adolescents' satisfaction with their family environment was related to age (as they matured, satisfaction decreased), gender (boys reported more satisfaction than girls), family purchasing power (adolescents from more affluent households tended to be more satisfied), whether they were native Spaniards or immigrants (the former reported more satisfaction) and, to a lesser degree, the region in which the adolescent matured (adolescents from Madrid were below the national average in this variable and Andalusians were above) (Fig. 6).

The academic context

Academic achievement by girls (based on adolescents' self-perception of how their teachers felt about them) was higher at all ages, but it decreased with age in both girls and boys. Academic performance tended to improve according to the purchasing power of individuals' families. Regional differences in performance were seen, with Andalusians performing above adolescents from Madrid and the national average. Immigrant adolescents had better results than those from the native population and their enjoyment of school was particularly striking: immigrants reported the greatest satisfaction with school, after 11-year-old girls and boys (in that order) (Fig. 7).

The peer context

Having a special friend

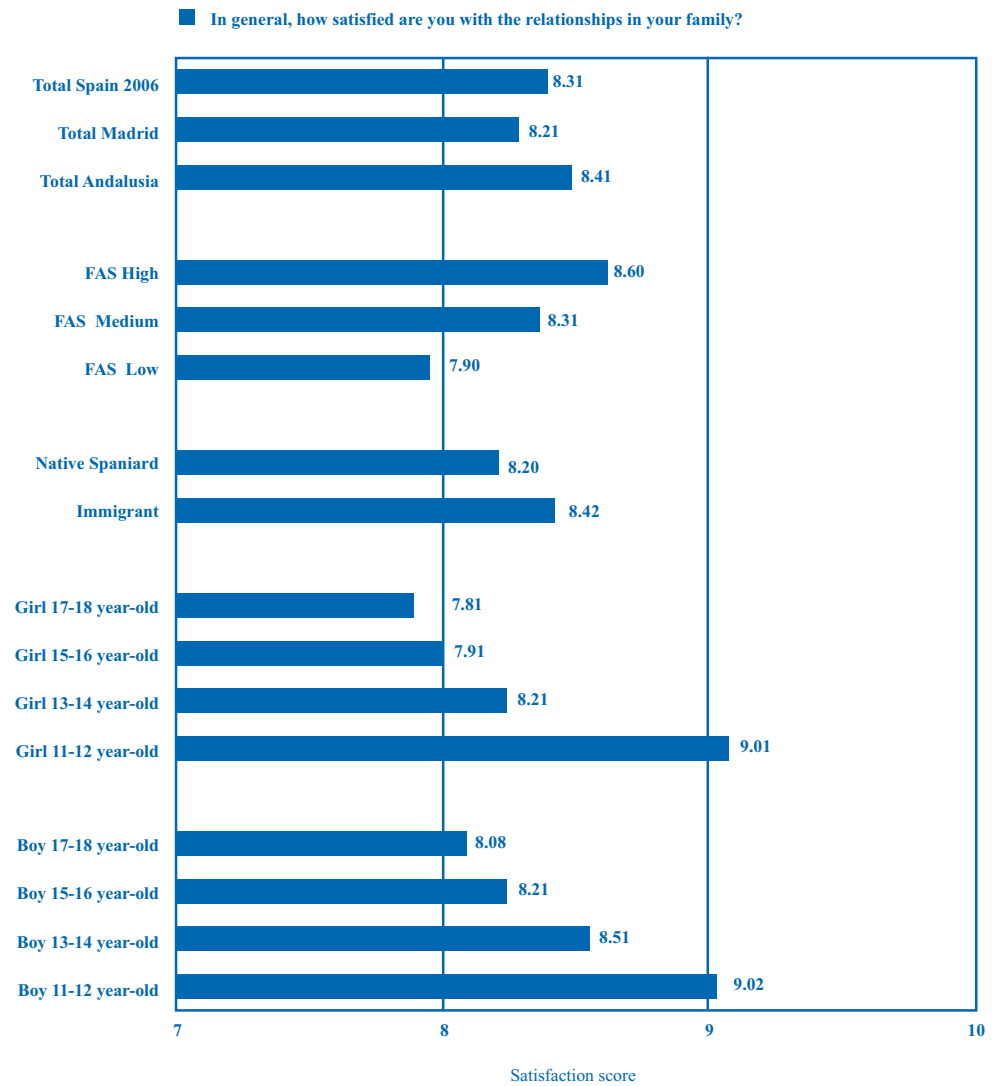
Adolescents, particularly girls, tended to identify with an especially important figure of support as they matured. It was more likely that those from families with higher purchasing power would have a best friend (97.3% of those scoring high on the FAS, against 92% scoring "medium" and 89% "low"). The most important differences, however, could be found in comparisons between those born in Spain and those who had emigrated from another country and had foreign parents: 92.6% of native Spaniards reported that they had a special friend, against only 79.6% of immigrants.

Satisfaction with the peer group

Girls and boys of all ages showed similar levels of satisfaction in their relationships with peers, with all groups demonstrating a similar decrease in the level of satisfaction with increasing age. While there were no appreciable differences in this topic by region, differences in satisfaction were seen in relation to family purchasing power (with adolescents from the most affluent families being most satisfied) and by immigrant status (immigrant adolescents were less satisfied).

Fig. 6

Average scores to the question: “How satisfied are you with the relationships in your family?” (0 = “In my family, our relationships are very bad”; 10 = “In my family, our relationships are very good”)



Fights and abuse among peers

There were clear gender differences in relation to fights with peers, with males being more likely to become involved in a fight (13–14-year-old boys reported being involved in 1.07 fights in the last year, while girls of the same age reported 0.53). Age also played an important role, with involvement in fights decreasing as age increased. Family purchasing power did not appear to be associated with fights, but immigrant status did; adolescents from immigrant families were the group most likely to be involved in physical fights (0.81 in the past year, against 0.55 for native Spaniards). Region was associated with participating in fights to a lesser degree, but adolescents from Madrid were involved in more fights in the last year (0.68) than those from Andalusia (0.54) and the Spanish average (0.56).

Peer abuse occurred most frequently among males. Adolescent males reported that abusive behaviour reached a peak at the age of 13, and then declined. There was also a clear decrease with age in relation to being a victim, a feature that was also

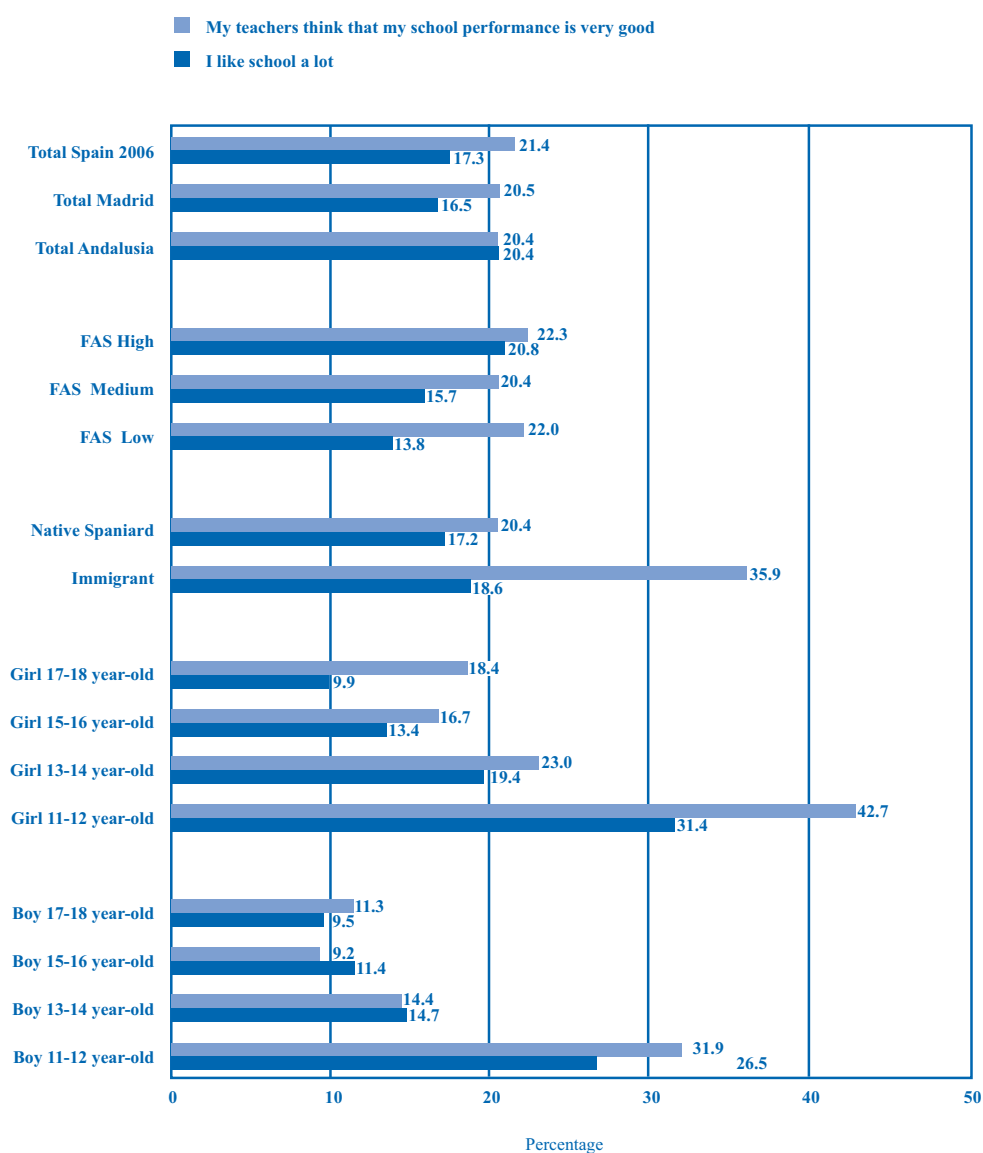
evident among girls. Percentages of perpetration and reception of abuse were lower among girls, with the peak of participating in abuse as aggressors occurring at the age of 15.

There were no significant differences by region in adolescents' perception of being victims of abuse, but a significant association in their participation as aggressors was observed, with those from Madrid being above both Andalusia and the national average.

No significant relationship was observed between family purchasing power and abuse, but there was a relationship between abuse and having immigrant status; adolescents with immigrant status tended to be significantly more involved in episodes of abuse, both as victims and aggressors.

Fig. 7

Percentage of adolescents who responded with "Very good" to the question: "Your teachers think that your academic performance, when compared to that of your classmates, is..." and: "I like it a lot" to the question: "Right now, how much do you like school?"



Conclusion

It is hoped that the national and regional focus of the Spanish HBSC 2006 survey will help the autonomous regions of Spain to identify key areas for action to improve education and health policies for children and young people.

The first national report of recommendations, *Ganar salud con la juventud [Improving health with young people]*, was approved in April 2002. It recommended the creation of an information and evaluation system integrated with the different sources of data on adolescents and young people. It also recommended that longitudinal studies reflect the social context of adolescents and young people, with the aim of obtaining the information required for the design of effective prevention and health promotion strategies. HBSC has enabled these recommendations to be fulfilled. A second edition of *Ganar salud con la juventud [Improving health with young people]* is forthcoming. It will be based on data from the 2002 and 2006 HBSC surveys.

The information on social context (covering the school, peer, and family) is important for the design of interventions that promote improved well-being. The two examples of interventions presented here profile community spaces (including health service points) that aim to promote mental well-being and prevent mental disorders, while strengthening social cohesion. The lessons learned through these experiences have influenced the first national strategy on mental health of the national health system, which was approved in December 2006.

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