Social support helps protect against depressed mood in adolescence

Background

Adolescence is a critical transition period, during which youth are at increased risk of experiencing depression. Depressive symptoms, at even sub-clinical levels, can be associated with a range of negative impacts during adolescence, including poor school attendance, substance use, self-harm, and suicidal behaviour. Without effective interventions, depressed mood can worsen over time as youth transition into late adolescence and early adulthood. As such, there is a need to understand the different patterns of depressed mood seen in adolescents to help inform early intervention and prevention programs.

Previous studies have shown that sadness increases from childhood to adolescence, particularly in girls. However, not all girls have high levels of sadness with different girls having different patterns of sadness over time (e.g. increasing, decreasing, stable). In addition, while it is known that social support plays an important role in protecting against feelings of sadness, there is a lack of research on the value of different sources of social support for boys and girls (e.g. family, school, friendships).

Aims

This research explored:

1. The patterns of sadness for boys and girls from Grades 6 to 9 (age 10-16).

2. The protective effects of different sources of social support for boys and girls. The sources of social support examined included: schools, teachers, peers and family.

Figure 1 – Sources of social support examined in the current study

Source of social support	Example item from survey
Family	In my home, there is a parent or another adult who I can talk to about my problems
Peers (close friendships)	I have a friend I can tell everything to
Peers (peer belonging)	When I am with other kids my age, I feel I belong
Schools (teachers)	At my school, there is a teacher or another adult who listens to me when I have something to say
Schools (school climate)	People care about each other in this school

Key Findings

Patterns of sadness

We identified four different patterns of sadness from Grade 6 to 9 in boys and girls, but the shape of these patterns differed for boys compared with girls (see Figure 2).
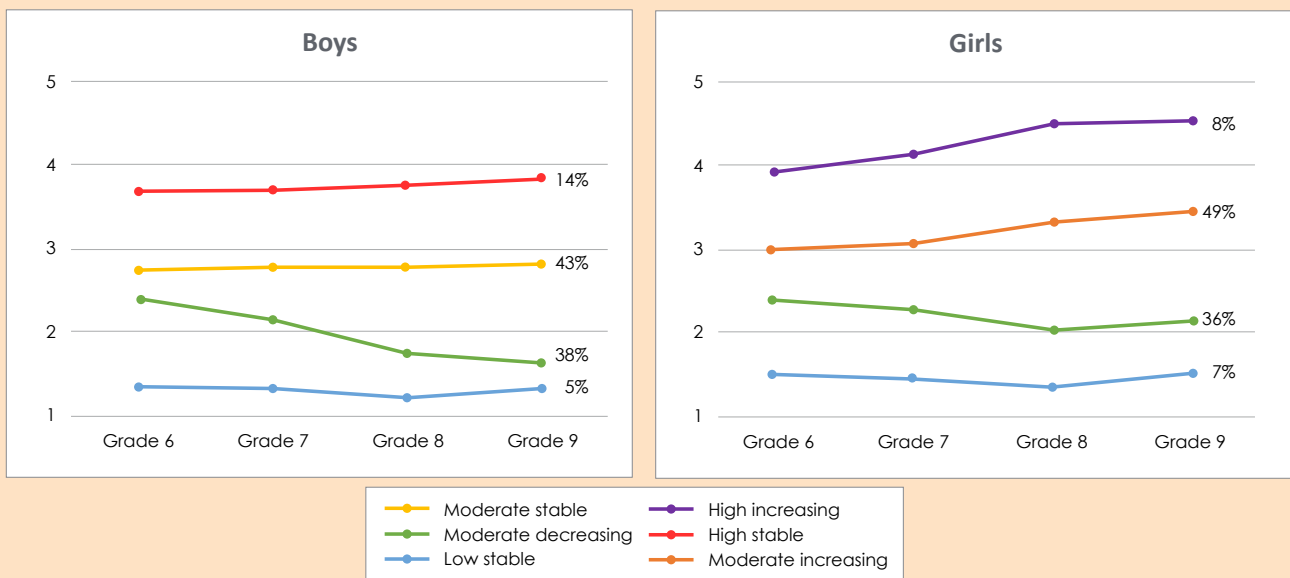

Figure 2 – Patterns of sadness for adolescent boys and girls

Sadness in girls

For girls, four different sadness patterns were identified. These were labelled Low Stable (7%), Moderate Decreasing (36%), Moderate Increasing (49%) and High Increasing (8%). During the transition from primary school to high school, girls' feelings of sadness tended to increase in severity, with more than half of all girls having moderate increasing or high increasing sadness patterns. However, about one third of girls had moderate decreasing sadness, suggesting the increases in sadness during adolescence are not inevitable and may be are avoided for some girls.

Sadness in boys

For boys, four different sadness patterns were also identified. These were labeled Low Stable (5%), Moderate Decreasing (38%), Moderate Stable (43%) and High Stable (14%). Therefore, across the transition from primary school to high school, boys' feelings of sadness tended to decrease in severity, with almost half of all boys starting with moderate sadness which decreased to match the Low Stable group by Grade 9.

Role of different types of social support

The results showed that all types of social support (family, peers, schools) helped to protect against high and increasing patterns of sadness in adolescence. However, the most important types of social supports differed between boys and girls. For girls, support from family members was the strongest protective factor against feelings of sadness. Conversely, for boys, a sense of peer belonging was the strongest protective factor against sadness. Overall, when all sources of social support were combined for both boys and girls together, a sense of belonging among peers, support from family members, and school climate were most protective against feelings of sadness.

Implications

This research shows that a significant number of adolescents experience high levels of sadness by the time they reach Grade 9, especially girls. Approximately 60% of girls started with a moderate or high level of sadness that increased by Grade 9. However, high levels of sadness are not inevitable, with a significant group of girls showing moderate decrease in sadness over time. Given the large number of adolescents experiencing high levels of sadness, there is a need to explore universal school-based programs to support the emotional wellbeing of students. There may also be a need to explore some targeted supports for those students with the highest levels of sadness (e.g. high increasing group for girls and the high stable group for boys).

This research also shows that social supports are important protective factors against feelings of sadness in adolescents. The research indicated that family relationships, peer relationships and school climate are key protective factors for both boys and girls. Overall, programs focussing on pro-social skills, relationships, and connections are likely to confer benefits with respect to reducing feelings of sadness and improving wellbeing among both boys and girls. It is important for schools to consider the aspects of children's relationships they can directly influence (e.g. building a positive school climate, reducing bullying, and supporting peer relationships) to assist in improving the mental health and wellbeing for students.

Study Details

The Wellbeing and Engagement Collection (WEC) is an annual self-report survey of student wellbeing completed by students in Grades 4 to 12 in South Australian schools. The survey helps teachers, school leaders and policy makers better understand the wellbeing and engagement of students. The WEC captures a wide range of domains, including students' social and emotional wellbeing, engagement with school, learning readiness and health and wellbeing out of school. The key measures used in the current study were a 3-item sadness scale, and five 3-item scales measuring different types of social support (family relationships, close friendships, peer belonging, relationships with teachers, school climate). All scales have been validated for use with Australian children and adolescents, and example items for each social support scale are presented in Figure 1.

This study's sample was the cohort of Grade 6 students from government/public schools who participated in the 2014 WEC (n = 4,450 students). These students were followed up in 2015 (Grade 7), 2016 (Grade 8) and 2017 (Grade 9). The study used Group-Based Trajectory Modelling to identify the patterns of sadness for boys and girls. Multinomial Logistic Regression was used to examine the associations between social supports and membership in the different trajectories of sadness for boys and girls. The regression models adjusted for language background other than English, socioeconomic status, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander status.

About the Fraser Mustard Centre

Working together to improve the development, education, health and wellbeing of young Australians, the _Telethon Kids Institute_ and the _South Australian Department for Education_ have joined forces in a unique approach to research translation. The Fraser Mustard Centre collaboration aims to:

• Improve and promote the health and wellbeing of all children and young people in South Australia through the unique application of multidisciplinary research

• Help shift focus from the historical delineation between health and education services to an integrated approach with a focus on child development

• Build capacity amongst public sector staff and academic researchers to design, undertake and use research to improve the environments in which children live and the service systems which support families

• Attract funding for shared priorities for research that leads to improved developmental, education, health, and wellbeing outcomes for children

The Fraser Mustard Centre brings forward-thinking policy makers and world class child health researchers. It reflects a shared view of policies and outcomes for children and young people. The Centre is a unique collaboration between two organisations passionate about making a difference.

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