PROMISING FINDINGS IN SURVEY OF IRISH CHILDREN

The newly released Health Behaviours in School Children (HBSC) survey 2014 shows encouraging findings on consumption of fruit and vegetables, teeth cleaning, and a drop in smoking levels and consumption of sweets and soft drinks. However, many children said they find it easy to get cigarettes, too many children are going to bed hungry, and there are concerns about levels of cyber bullying.

A total of 13,611 pupils were surveyed with questions on topics like general health, food and dietary behaviour, exercise and physical activity, self-care, smoking, use of alcohol and other substances, bullying including cyber bullying, and sexual health behaviours. It was carried out by the Health Promotion Research Centre at the National University of Ireland, Galway. The HSE welcomed the publication of the survey particularly the significant declines in smoking behaviour.

SMOKING
• 58pc decline in the number of children aged 10-17 who say that they have ever smoked since 2006.
• 47pc decline in the number of children aged 10-17 who describe themselves as “smokers” since 2006.

Commenting on the survey findings, Dr. Stephanie O’Keeffe, HSE National Director, Health and Well-Being, said, “Legislative changes such as plain packaging, restrictions on advertising, tobacco free parks, playgrounds, the creation of tobacco free workplace campuses, a successful QUIT campaign and QUIT support service have all contributed to the significant declines in smoking. More children are now seeing their parents and other adults around them trying to quit smoking.

Those parents and adults are sending a positive message to the children around them – that it is better not to start smoking in the first place.” Recent studies have shown that early age at first smoking is causally related to subsequent levels of nicotine dependence. Therefore, reducing access to tobacco products for adolescents will reduce the total population burden of nicotine dependence and the substantial associated morbidity and mortality.

ALCOHOL USE
There were also steady, gradual declines in alcohol use:
• 21pc decline in the number of children (aged 10-17) who report that they have ever had an alcoholic drink since 2006.
• 35pc decline in the number of children (aged 10-17) who report that they have ever been “really drunk” since 2006.
• 50pc decline in the number of children (aged 10-17) who report ever being drunk in the last month since 2006.

Dr. O’Keeffe commented, “While the declines in alcohol use and drunkenness are welcome, the fact remains that over 40pc of children have consumed an alcoholic drink and 20pc have been really drunk.

There is no safe level of alcohol consumption for children under 18 years of age.

It is important to address environmental factors that influence underage drinking and change adult attitudes and behaviour before we can reasonably expect children to follow suit.”

HEALTHY EATING AND ACTIVE LIVING

The trends in relation to fruit and vegetable consumption have slightly improved since 2006 but there has been a significant decline in the daily consumption of soft drinks. Levels of physical activity are stable since 2006.
• 50pc decline in the number of children aged 10-17 who report that they drink soft drinks daily or more since 2006.
• Consumption of fruit and vegetables remains low with three out of every four children not eating enough fruit and vegetables daily;
• Only 23pc of children aged 10-17 report being active seven days a week.
• The trend for reported levels of activity to decline as young people progress to late teens is particularly marked among girls.

Dr. O’Keeffe went on to say: “Poor habits and unhealthy attitudes that develop in childhood and adolescence can be very difficult to break in adulthood. The best way that parents, teachers, youth workers or coaches can encourage children and young people to be healthy is by modelling healthy habits themselves.

The best way that parents, teachers, youth workers or coaches can encourage children and young people to be healthy is by modelling healthy habits themselves and praising children and young people for any efforts they make towards leading a healthier lifestyle.

Schools also play an important role, by having healthy eating policies that don’t allow soft drinks and other unhealthy foods, as well as ensuring that students get the opportunity to be active throughout the school day,” she added.

FRONT cover of the newly released Health Behaviours in School Children (HBSC) survey 2014.