Introducing Professor Fiona Brooks

Professor Fiona Brooks is a medical sociologist and a professor of child and family health at University of Technology Sydney (UTS) who has published widely on topics relating to young people’s health and well-being.

Since 2008, she has been principal investigator for England on the WHO Health Behaviour in School-aged Children study (HBSC). The study is undertaken in 43 countries and aims to gain new insights into young people’s health and well-being, health behaviours and their social context. Among the issues Fiona and other HBSC researchers are looking at are eating, sleeping, self harm and the use of social media by adolescents.

In 2014, Fiona was invited by Public Health England to brief all head teachers, college principals, teachers and school governors in England on the relationship between health and well-being and attainment. She has also advised the UK Cabinet Office, Public Health England and the UK Department of Health.


1. Over the past decade, studies covering many countries including the UK, have found increasing proportions of adolescents report poorer mental health and wellbeing.
2. At the same time studies are showing less teenage drinking, smoking, drug use and pregnancy.
3. It is important to know that the vast majority, about 80% of adolescents are reporting high levels of life satisfaction and tell researchers they have supportive parents and are enjoying school.
4. The rise of digital technology presents unique challenges for this generation of adolescents. Digital technology has benefits for example, it can improve wellbeing by increasing connections (particularly helpful for the isolated); give a global perspective and provides access to vast quantities of information, however, it can also be harmful and reinforce negative pressures. Parents and other adults need to help our young people navigate the digital world successfully.
5. A couple of hours of playing computer games does not appear to have any negative impact and can increase prosocial skills.
6. Online, adolescents are only a few clicks away from really disturbing, shocking and harmful images including those advocating self-harm and violent and aggressive pornography. We must be having proactive conversations with children about how they can navigate the digital world safely and we must build a relationship with our children that shows them they can tell us anything, ask us questions and we will listen and give a straight answer.
7. Many studies have shown that a negotiating parenting style is most effective. A very authoritarian style is associated with low wellbeing as is a lax, disinterested parenting style.

8. An authoritarian parenting style can have unintended negative consequences. To avoid getting in trouble with their parents, young people may be more willing to take dangerous risks. For example, rather than miss their curfew they take a lift from a drunk driver, or they don’t tell their parents what they have seen on the internet for fear of being told off and punished.

9. Positive wellbeing in young people is really strongly associated with a negotiating parenting style. Where boundaries are discussed, understood and set as part of a conversation. Where young people feel able to talk to their parents, ask questions and receive a straight answer.

10. Remember, if you are not the source of information and advice for your children then the internet will be! Young people will be exposed to confronting information on the internet, they are going to have to know how to deal with sexting, pornography and inappropriate contacts. They need help, guidance and support in navigating the digital world. Just like we help our kids safely navigate in the real world (crossing the road, not talking to strangers and so on).

11. Latest (2018) data from the HBSC England survey is showing a small increase in poor emotional wellbeing amongst boys and in some measures a slight improvement around girl's wellbeing. Data needs to be looked at further to confirm and understand these slight shifts.

12. Latest (2018) data from HBCS England data on self-harm is very similar to 2014 which found that 32% of 15 year old girls and 11% of 15 year old boys reported self-harming behaviours in the past year.

13. Various studies have indicated that not feeling able to communicate with a parent is a significant risk factor for self-harming, as is not having any supportive adult in your life.

14. Teacher connectedness (a sense that your teacher takes an interest in you and supports you) is very protective for overall young person wellbeing.

15. What is often overlooked but came out very strongly was the association between feeling connected to your community/neighbourhood and a lower risk of self-harm. Prof. Brooks explained, if adolescents feel safe, welcomed and part of their community they experience greater wellbeing. Community connection and feeling safe in the neighbourhood seems to be an incredibly powerful protective factor.

16. Several studies have indicated where daughters report a close and warm relationship with their fathers (or a father like figure) they are less likely to engage in risky behaviours.

17. There is no evidence to suggest that lone parenting has a negative impact on wellbeing.

18. A very positive finding is that even though teenagers might be slamming doors, declaring we don’t understand and we might feel like there are endless rows, teenagers tell researchers that they do listen to their parents and supportive adults and do want to have a good relationship and conversations with their parents.