MDI Data Highlights and Trends 2019-2020

This *Middle Years Development Instrument Data Highlights and Trends 2019-2020* report provides information on key results emerging from participating BC districts for the most recent Middle Years Development Instrument (MDI) data (2019-2020). It is important to emphasize that MDI data were collected in January and February of 2020, before the current pandemic and its associated school and community centre closures, service interruptions, and widespread self-isolation and physical distancing practices were required.

MDI data are important now more than ever before. The data from the 2019-2020 school year provides us with an opportunity to hear students' voices and obtain critical information about their well-being and the assets in their lives – those factors that can support the well-being of children and that are actionable. This information will be invaluable to educators, community partners, parents, and others who are invested in helping students successfully navigate through this unprecedented time. The MDI data can provide a comprehensive portrait, at both a district and neighbourhood level, of the areas of strengths on which to build, areas where students are likely facing increased challenges, and areas where additional supports will be required to support their well-being.

Approximately half of BC school districts participate in obtaining MDI data from their students each year. Figure 1 provides information on the number of participating school districts along with the number of Grade 4 and 7 students who completed the MDI in the 2019-2020 academic year.

Figure 1: MDI School District Implementation and Student Participation in 2019-2020

MDI School District Implementation and Student Participation	2019-2020
Number of districts	28
Number of Grade 4 students	10,302
Number of Grade 7 students	12,761

In the 2019-2020 school year, in response to feedback from our MDI stakeholders, some important changes were made to the MDI questionnaire, including the addition of two new questions, and an update to the "Important Adults at School" question. This year's *MDI Data Highlights and Trends* reviews these changes and their potential impact on MDI results.

■ The MDI is Evolving: New Questions Added to the MDI Survey in 2019-2020

To support the increasing focus on children's mental health in schools and communities and the emphasis on the importance of regular physical activity, we reviewed existing research and consulted with education and health experts to identify and add relevant questions on the MDI. This year, two additional questions that asked children to report on their help-seeking behaviours and modes of transportation to and from school were added to the MDI Grade 4 and 7 surveys. Specifically, these new questions asked children to report on their help-seeking for emotional well-being (who they would talk to if they were feeling sad, stressed, or worried) and about school transportation (how they get to and from school, and how they wished to get to and from school).

Children's answers to these questions can provide educators, parents, and other community stakeholders with the critical information they need to support children's social and emotional health and physical activity. In addition, to reflect changes in how children's health is currently conceptualized, we also removed two questions on the MDI that asked children about their body weight and body image.

■ Improving Our Understanding of Children's Help-seeking Behaviours: Help-Seeking for Emotional Well-Being

Most mental health issues start in adolescence and early adulthood. In Canada, about 14% of children between the ages of 4 to 17 experience mental health disorders and about 70% of mood and anxiety disorders develop before the age of 15 (Government of Canada, 2006; Waddell et al., 2005). School-based studies of children who suffer from serious emotional disorders reveal that a large proportion of those who need mental health services do not receive them (Malti & Noam, 2008).

The help-seeking behaviours in which children engage during the middle childhood years are critical for their emotional well-being and their positive mental health. What remains important is that children seek help for their emotional well-being from appropriate and effective sources (Rickwood et al., 2005; Schonert-Reichl & Muller, 1996). Moreover, if children do not receive the support they need when experiencing distress, ensuing mental health problems could escalate and will remain a substantial obstacle to promoting the well-being of children in Canada. Therefore, understanding children's help-seeking behaviours for emotional well-being can help schools and communities design interventions that create stronger networks of support for children and that build capacity in those people that children are turning to for help.
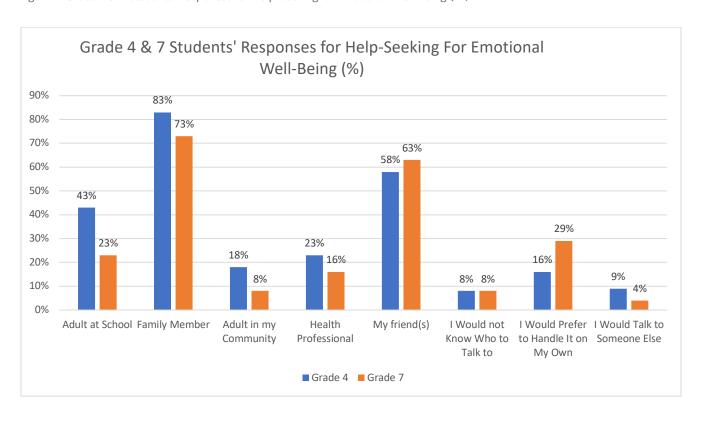
One of the new questions added to the MDI explores the help-seeking behaviour of children as it relates to their emotional well-being. Students who completed the MDI were asked:

- Who would you talk to if you were feeling sad, stressed, or worried (check ALL that apply for you)?

Students were provided with eight response options, and were able to select all of the options that applied to them: "An adult at school (for example, a teacher, school counselor, or another adult at school)," "A family member (for example, a parent, grandparent, aunt/uncle, older sibling or cousin, or another adult that lives with me)," "An adult in my community (for example, a coach, an elder, after-school program staff, or another adult in my community)," "A health professional (for example, a doctor, nurse, or a counselor)," "My friend(s)," "I would not know who to talk to," "I would prefer to handle it on my own," "I would talk to someone else (someone not on this list)," and "Who would you talk to?" (Children could describe in their own words). Figure 2 illustrates the percentage of children in Grades 4 and Grades 7 who chose each category.

Figure 2: Grade 4 & 7 Students' Responses for Help-Seeking for Emotional Well-Being (%)

Grade 4 & 7 Students' Responses for Help-Seeking For Emotional Well-Being (%)

As Figure 2 illustrates, a high percentage of both Grade 4 and Grade 7 students reported that they would seek help from a family member, with a slightly higher percentage of Grade 4s than Grade 7s who reported family members as someone from whom they would seek help. This finding is in accord with research that indicates that although peers increase in importance in the early adolescent years, family members – especially parents – continue to be an important source of support (Collins et al., 2002; Steinberg & Silk, 2002). A higher percentage of Grade 7 students reported that they would seek help from their friends (63%) compared to Grade 4 students (58%). These differences between Grade 4 and Grade 7 students align with research indicating that, as children enter adolescence, the influence of peers becomes more important (Del Giudice, 2014) and early adolescents increasingly turn to their peers for support/help (Schonert-Reichl & Muller, 1996). Additionally, for Grade 7 students who indicated that they would seek help from more than one source, seeking help from both friends and family was the most frequent combination.

A significant percentage of both Grade 4 and 7 students reported that they would seek help from an adult at school – with almost a quarter (23%) of Grade 7 students and 43% of Grade 4 students who reported that they would do so. There are several possible explanations for the lower percentage of Grade 7 students who reported that they would seek help from an adult at school. Given that early adolescence is characterized as a time when individuals report an increasing need for autonomy (Del Giudice, 2014), it may be that they feel they would rather "try to handle things themselves" (29% in Grade 7 vs 16% in Grade 4). It also may be that Grade 7 students believe that there are fewer adults at school from whom to seek help in contrast to Grade 4 students, as reflected in the MDI data on Important Adults at School.

Of particular concern are the students who reported that they would not seek help from anyone. These are students who had one of the following three response patterns: (1) they only responded that they would not know who to talk to; (2) they only responded that they would prefer to handle it on their own; or (3) they responded that they would not know who to talk to and they would prefer to handle it on their own. In Grade 4, a total of 217 students and in Grade 7, 873 students responded in one of these three ways indicating that they would not seek help from anyone. Though this is a small group of students, they may represent a more isolated and vulnerable population who need special attention.

Paying Attention to Regular Physical Activity: Transportation To and From School

When children use active transportation methods (e.g., walking, cycling, skateboarding) to get to and from school, it can help increase their physical activity (Faulkner et al., 2009; Pabayo et al., 2012; Voss, 2018) and may result in improvements in physical health (Voss, 2018). However, children do not always have a choice about how they get to and from school; factors such as perceived safety (Martin & Carlson, 2005), the built environment (e.g., sidewalks; Fulton, 2005) and distance to school can affect children's use of active forms of transportation (McDonald, 2007).

New questions were added this year to the MDI to help us learn more about students' experiences with transportation to and from school. Students completing the MDI were asked:

- How do you usually get TO school?
- How do you usually get home FROM school?

They were provided with the following response options: "Car," "School Bus," "Public transportation (public bus, train or ferry)," "Walk," and "Cycle, skateboard, scooter or rollerblade."

- They were also asked: If you could choose, how would you WISH to get TO and FROM school?

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Figures 3 and 4 illustrates the percentages of students who reported the various types of transportation they used to go to and from school, along with percentages of students' "wishes" for transportation to and from school.

Figure 3: Grade 4 Students' Types of Transportation for School: To, From, & Wishes (%)
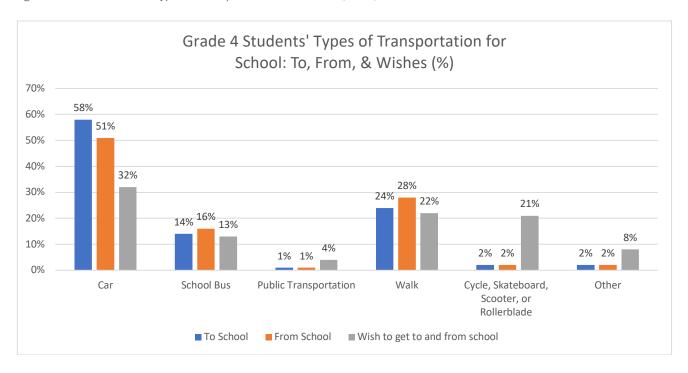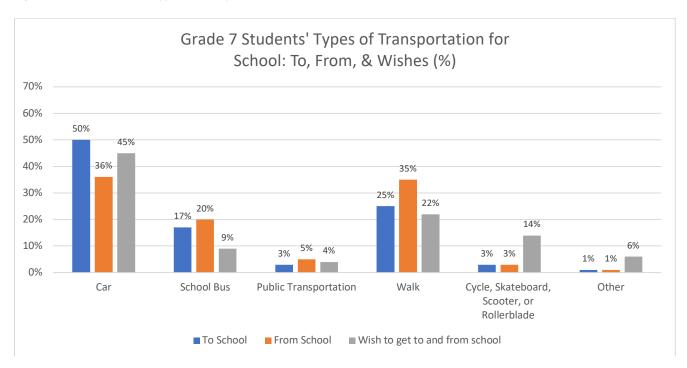
Grade 4 Students' Types of Transportation for School: To, From, & Wishes (%)

Transportation	To School	From School	Wish to get to and from school
Car	58%	51%	32%
School Bus	14%	16%	13%
Public Transportation	1%	1%	4%
Walk	24%	28%	22%
Cycle, Skateboard, Scooter, or Rollerblade	2%	2%	21%
Other	2%	2%	8%

Figure 4: Grade 7 Students' Types of Transportation for School: To, From, & Wishes (%)

Grade 7 Students' Types of Transportation for School: To, From, & Wishes (%)

Transportation	To School	From School	Wish to get to and from school
Car	50%	36%	45%
School Bus	17%	20%	9%
Public Transportation	3%	5%	4%
Walk	25%	35%	22%
Cycle, Skateboard, Scooter, or Rollerblade	3%	3%	14%
Other	1%	1%	6%

As can be seen in Figures 3 and 4, in both Grade 4 and in Grade 7, most students reported that they got to and from school by car. Walking was reported as the second most prevalent method of transportation to and from school. A greater percentage of Grade 7 students reported walking from school (35%) in contrast to Grade 4 students (28%). This is perhaps a reflection of the greater autonomy given to Grade 7 students.

However, although few students reported cycling, skateboarding, rollerblading, or riding a scooter to or from school (approximately 2% in Grade 4 and 3% in Grade 7), many more reported that they wished to use one of these active forms of transportation (21% of Grade 4 students and 14% of Grade 7 students). When combined with those who wished to walk to school, more than a third of students (43% of Grade 4s and 36% of Grade 7s) reported that they wished to use active transportation methods such as walking or cycling to get to/from school.

Data on students' regular travel to and from school can help school communities identify barriers and opportunities to increase students' active transport options. MDI data may also provide ideas for school activities such as lesson plans and school and community initiatives.

Exploring Changes in Trends: Important Adults at School Question

In 2018-2019, many school districts who participated in the MDI noticed a decrease in the number of children who reported "two or more important adults" and an increase in the number of children who reported "no important adults" compared to previous years. As noted in our *2018-2019 Data Trends Summary*, this decrease could have possibly been influenced by two factors: (1) the change in timing of data collection (previous to 2018-2019 data were collected in November; starting in 2018-2019 data were collected in January/February) and (2) by a change in the appearance of the question for children as they completed the MDI. In 2019-2020, we changed the appearance back to align with previous years (i.e., 2017-2018 and before). It is important to take both the change in time of year and change in question appearance into account when making comparisons between MDI data collected in the 2018-2019 school year with data from previous and current years. Please see last year's *Data Trends Summary* for more information: https://bit.ly/2018-19-mdi-data-trends

Conclusion

At the Human Early Learning Partnership (HELP), we strive to make sure the MDI is current and is grounded in scientific rigour. More importantly, we believe the information collected on the questionnaire is most valuable if it reflects the experiences and perspectives of today's children and youth. The feedback we receive on the MDI each year from school districts, parents, and students themselves are an important part of this process as we continue to work to make sure that the MDI remains an up to date and useful tool for schools and communities. We hope that this year's *Data Highlights and Trends* report has provided useful information that will help with the interpretation of school district and neighbourhood results. For more resources and tools to understand your MDI results, please visit DiscoverMDI.ca or reach out to us at mdi@ubc.ca.

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