

02

RELATIONSHIPS are the Roots of Positive Development

Belonging and
Connectedness for
Halton Youth

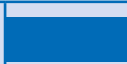
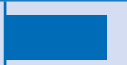


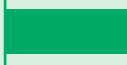






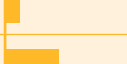






Key findings from the 2021 Halton Youth Impact Survey

In May and June 2021, 2599 young people completed the Halton Youth Impact Survey (HYIS). In November 2021, 44 youth participated in a Youth Data Party to validate the findings and share feedback on how their peers, schools, communities, and organizations serving youth can make a positive impact on young people in Halton. This is the second in a series of Data Action Bulletins to share findings from the Halton Youth Impact Survey and mobilize community partners to take action to support youth in Halton. For more information on the Halton Youth Impact Survey, visit [**HYIS Results**](#)

We partnered with UNICEF Canada, the Canadian Index of Wellbeing, Ontario Trillium Foundation and the Medivae Foundation on this project.

This bulletin analyses the responses of 1915 youth in the 13 to 18 age range.

Sociodemographic characteristics of this sample.

		N	%	
GENDER	Female	996	52%	
	Male	838	44%	
	Non-binary	27	1%	
	Another gender identity*	46	2%	
AGE	13-15 years	1010	53%	
	16-18 years	905	47%	
GRADE	Elementary school	132	8%	
	Secondary school	1620	92%	
MUNICIPALITY	Burlington	284	19%	
	Halton Hills	86	6%	
	Milton	427	28%	
	Oakville	729	48%	
IMMIGRATION	Newcomer**	220	12%	
	More than 5 years	256	14%	
	Born in Canada	1385	74%	
CONDITION	Living with chronic illness or disability	182	10%	
VISIBLE MINORITY***	Belongs to a visible minority group	986	53%	
INDIGENOUS	Identifies as First Nations, Métis, Inuit or other	176	10%	

* Participants could self-identify and enter their own gender identity. The most common response was non-binary. Other responses included: gender fluid (13), questioning/not sure (10), demigirl (3), agender (12), genderqueer (2).

** Living in Canada for five years or less.

*** The definition of visible minorities is employed here to make the data comparable to Statistics Canada census data. The Employment Equity Act defines visible minorities as "persons other than Aboriginal peoples, who are non-Caucasian in race and non white in colour".



Relationships and belonging in Halton and beyond

Relationships are essential for positive youth development. Studies have shown that young people with strong relationships are more resilient in the face of stress and trauma.¹ This is particularly important in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Young people have experienced significant changes to their routines and have had to deal with the challenges of isolation, fear of illness, and uncertainty about their future.

Relationships come in many forms and help build a sense of belonging. Research by the Search Institute highlights the importance of relationships with parents/caregivers, teachers, friends, program leaders, and other adults.² Young people do better when they have multiple supportive relationships. Supportive relationships and a strong sense of belonging are associated with lower levels of loneliness and more positive health outcomes. In fact, Canadians with a strong sense of community belonging report a 20% increase in good mental health;³ young people with strong relationships are 21 times more likely to manage their emotions well.⁴ Additionally, research has suggested that belonging can be measured in life expectancy.⁵

In 2016, two out of three Canadians, or about 66%, reported a strong sense of community belonging, up from 58% in 2001.⁶ At the provincial level, 66% of Ontarians also reported a very or somewhat strong sense of community belonging.⁷ Young people have generally reported higher levels of community belonging. According to a 2019 survey by UNICEF, 85% of Canadians between the ages of 12 and 17 years reported a strong sense of community belonging.⁸

So where do we stand on relationships and belonging in Halton?

Belonging is closely connected with relationships, and our relationships form networks of support. Findings from the Halton Youth Impact Survey indicate that having one or more strong, positive relationships is associated with lower social isolation and having a stronger sense of belonging to the community. In 2018, 91% of secondary school students in Halton had at least one friend they could trust.⁹ Unfortunately, the pandemic has made building and maintaining relationships challenging, especially for children and youth in school. In 2021, only 74% reported having friends with whom they can share their joys and sorrows, and 70% said they can talk about their problems with their friends.

There are many factors that impact belonging and relationships. In Halton, females were less likely than males to feel included in school activities or feel accepted for who they are,¹⁰ and those who had immigrated to Canada in the last 5 years were less likely to report a strong sense of community belonging.¹¹ Other research shows that lower income Ontarians are less likely to report a stronger sense of belonging,¹² and young people with a disability tend to have lower life satisfaction than those without a disability.¹³

Relationships and belonging are essential for positive youth development. All youth should feel a sense of belonging in their schools and communities, and all youth should have multiple, strong relationships with friends, family, peers, and mentors. Encouraging youth to build and access networks of support is an integral practice for those working with youth. It is incumbent upon everyone who works with youth to support the development of strong relationships and foster belonging in all areas of life. This is particularly important for those who are “disengaged, disenfranchised and furthest from protective and supportive environments.”¹⁴

Do young people in Halton have strong relationships and a sense of belonging, and how can we help them feel connected?





Key findings from the Halton Youth Impact Survey

It is essential to reflect on the data from an intersectional lens. The key findings section highlights differences between youth of diverse identities and backgrounds* as a way to build awareness of inequities that may impact the lives of young people living in Halton. However, to make meaning out of the statistical differences highlighted here, it is essential to combine these key findings with other sources of information and hear from youth themselves. These findings are intended as a conversation starter. It is one more piece of information to add to what you already know about children, youth, and families in Halton.

- **6 in 10 youth reported having a somewhat strong or strong sense of belonging to their community**
- **9 in 10 youth reported having at least one strong positive relationship either with their teachers, friends, or family**
- **2 in 10 felt isolated from others in their community, and 3 in 10 felt lonely**
- **2 hours was the median time youth spent on social media daily to connect with friends**

*Indicators were tested for differences between municipalities, genders, age groups, living with a chronic illness or disability, having an Indigenous identity, and immigration status.

Belonging and relationships in Halton: the numbers

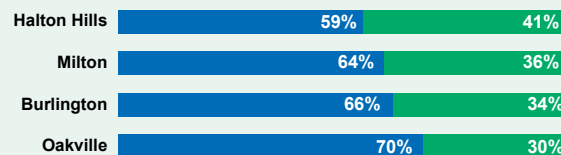
Belonging

Belonging measures community sense of belonging. It is measured on a four-point scale (very strong, somewhat strong, somewhat weak, very weak). Youth describing their sense of belonging to their community as somewhat strong or very strong were considered to have a sense of belonging.

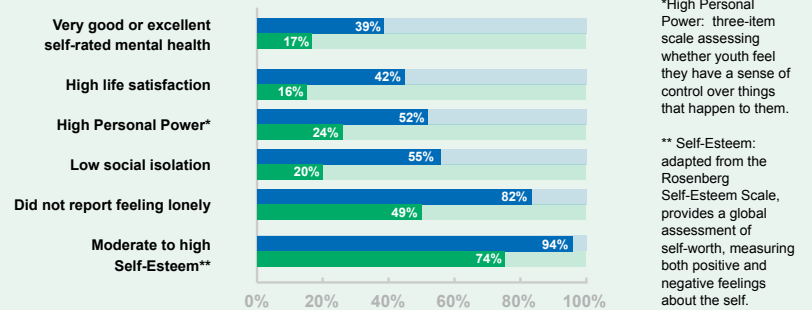
Sixty-five percent of youth across Halton reported having a somewhat strong or very strong sense of belonging to their community. Having a sense of belonging was associated with positive self-rated physical and mental health, higher levels of life satisfaction, high Personal Power,^{*15} having moderate to high self-esteem,^{**16} and lower levels of social isolation and feelings of loneliness.

Girls living with a chronic illness or disability were less likely to feel they belonged to their community (compared to girls that did not report a chronic illness or disability).

Sense of Belonging by municipality



Sense of Community Belonging: Impacts on mental health and wellbeing



*High Personal Power: three-item scale assessing whether youth feel they have a sense of control over things that happen to them.

** Self-Esteem: adapted from the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, provides a global assessment of self-worth, measuring both positive and negative feelings about the self.

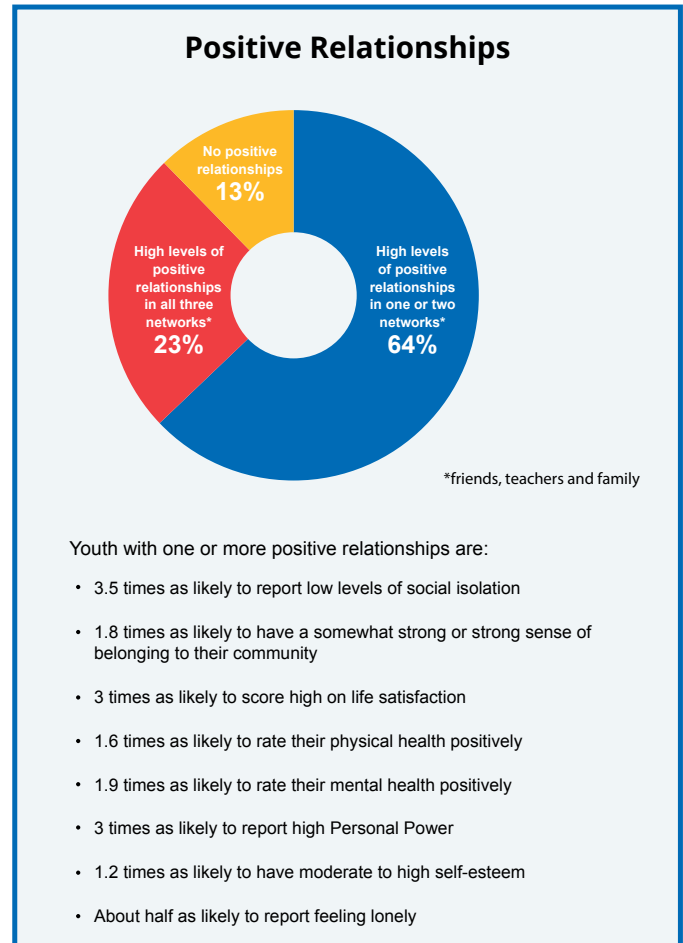
■ Somewhat strong or strong sense of belonging ■ Very weak or somewhat weak sense of belonging

Positive Relationships

Positive Relationships measures perceived support from family, teachers, and friends. It includes items such as “my family/friends really try to help me” and “I feel that my teachers care about me as a person”. The three scales (family, teachers, friends) were calculated separately, and scores higher than that of 64% of the sample were deemed indicative of a strong positive relationship.

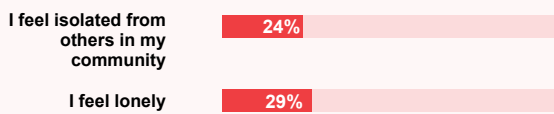
Positive relationships are the roots of positive development. Eighty-eight percent of young people in Halton had at least one strong positive relationship with their family, friends, or teachers. Having at least one strong positive relationship was associated with positive self-rated physical and mental health, higher levels of life satisfaction, high Personal Power, moderate to high self-esteem, and lower levels of social isolation and feelings of loneliness.

Youth identifying as Indigenous and youth living with a chronic illness or disability were less likely to report having at least one strong positive relationship.

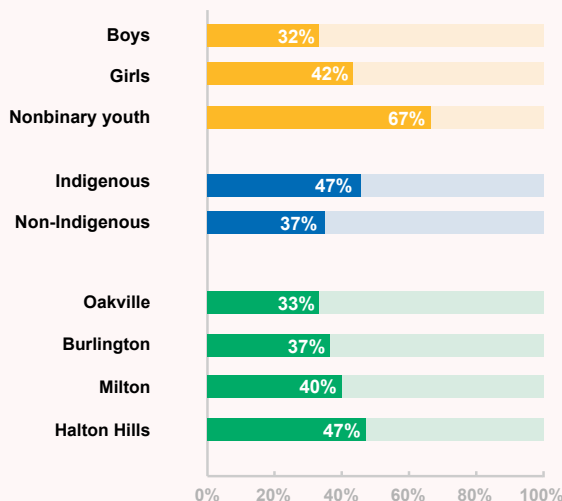


Social Isolation and Loneliness

Social Isolation and Loneliness



Percent Reporting high levels of social isolation



Social Isolation and Loneliness

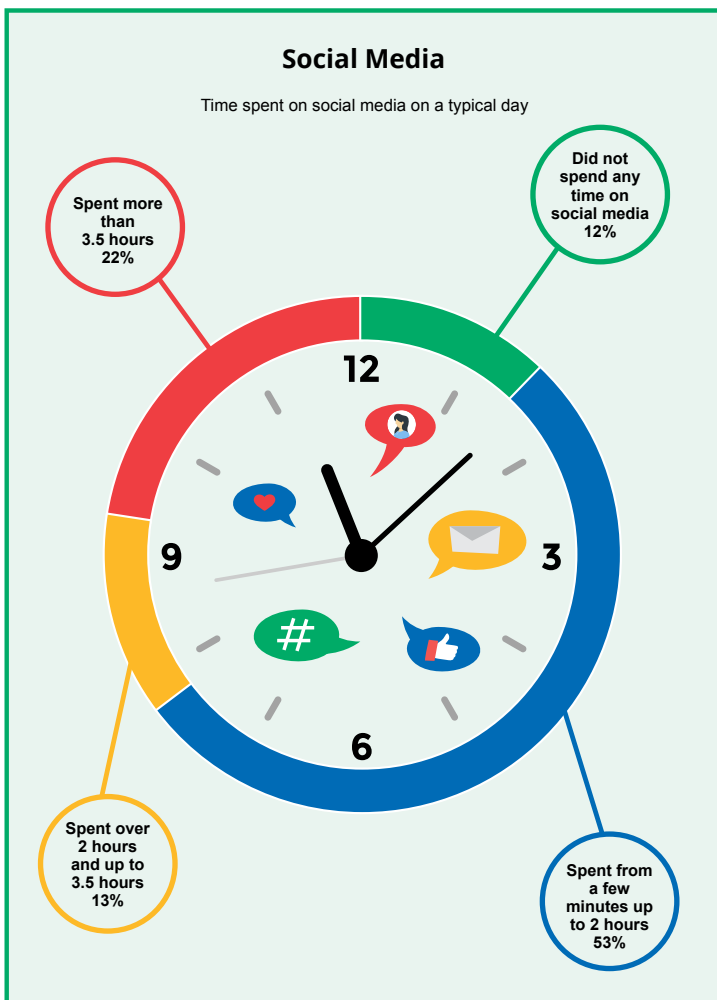
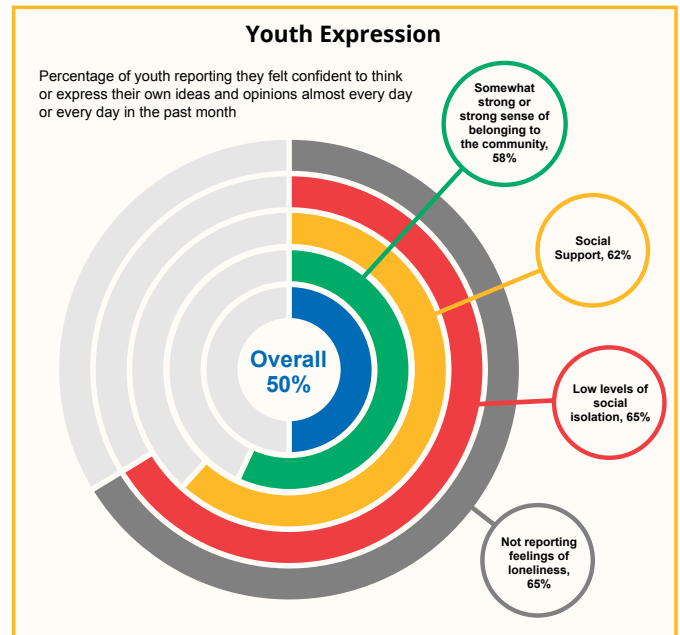
Social Isolation reflects a perceived lack of supportive relationships and connection, while **loneliness** is the subjective feeling of being alone. It is important to note that one can feel lonely even surrounded by people. A 3-item Likert scale assessed low, average, and high levels of social isolation, while loneliness was captured by agreement with one item (“I feel lonely”).

Twenty-four percent of youth felt isolated from others in their community, and 29% felt lonely. Girls and nonbinary youth, as compared to boys, youth living with a chronic illness or disability and youth identifying as Indigenous were more likely to report high levels of social isolation. Also, youth living in Milton and in Halton Hills were more likely to report high levels of social isolation compared to youth in Oakville.

Youth Expression

Youth Expression measures confidence to think and express one’s own ideas and opinions every day or almost every day in the previous month. Being confident to express one’s opinions and ideas is easier when youth feel accepted, included, and respected.

Fifty percent of youth in Halton felt confident to think or express their own ideas and opinions almost every day or every day. Having a sense of belonging to their community and positive relationships, not reporting feelings of loneliness, and experiencing low levels of social isolation were conditions more likely to be present for those who had high levels of youth expression. For example, those reporting having at least one positive relationship with their teachers, family or friends were almost twice as likely to report they felt confident to express their own ideas almost every day or every day compared to their peers who had not reported positive relationships.



Social Media

Social Media is the self-reported number of hours spent on social media on a typical day to connect with friends during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Youth in Halton reported spending a median time of 2 hours daily on social media to connect with friends. Twelve percent of youth did not spend any time at all on social media daily, and 22% spent 3.5 hours or more.

Youth reporting higher amounts of time (more than 3.5 hours) spent daily on social media were 28% more likely to report positive relationships with their friends, but there were no differences regarding belonging, social isolation, and loneliness.

Girls as compared to boys and youth in the 16 to 18 age range as compared to those in the 13 to 15 age range, were more likely to report higher amounts of time spent daily on social media. Youth identifying as Indigenous were less likely to spend higher amounts of time on social media on a typical day.

The majority of youth in Halton had access to the internet. Ninety-one percent reported that they often or very often use the internet when they want or need it. However, youth identifying as Indigenous and youth living with a chronic illness or disability were less likely to report the same level of access to the internet. Restrictions on internet access may impact social media use.



Relationships and belonging in times of COVID-19

COVID-19 brought specific challenges for youth. Out of 361 open comments in the survey, 37 (10%) either stated their frustration with COVID-19 constraints or longed for a return to their pre-pandemic lives. Youth wanted to go back to playing sports or participating in in-person school activities. They missed their friends and building relationships with their neighbours and peers. Impacts of COVID-19 on their social life and relationships were also highlighted by participants of the Youth Data Party. As one youth said:

“Grade 9 [is the] time to make strong relationships at school but [the] pandemic interrupted this” (Youth at the Youth Data Party)

Seventy-nine (22%) of the comments expressed the need for more opportunities to participate in their communities. Youth wanted to see more safe spaces where they can be with their friends and other people, such as parks, libraries, community centres and programs, skate parks, basketball courts, and youth spaces. Community initiatives, such as community gardens, fairs and festivals, protests, clean-up events and others were also highlighted as opportunities to foster connection and belonging. However, for youth to benefit from these opportunities, they suggested these events need to be promoted widely. In addition, easy access to public transportation, walkable and safe neighbourhoods and locally based initiatives are essential for removing barriers to participation and fostering a sense of belonging to their community.

Virtual spaces can also promote relationships and connection, but this must be intentional. One youth explained that they felt better learning online when the teacher was taking the time to build connections with the students.

Youth also reflected on the connection between belonging and inclusion. For example, raising the pride flag would help LGBTQ2S+ students feel accepted and included in their school. Meeting people from different backgrounds, ages and cultures with a respectful and open attitude was highlighted by some youth as an important way to build a strong sense of community belonging where all can participate.

Research¹⁷ has shown that, for some young people, learning online was beneficial because they felt shielded from invalidating and stressful experiences, such as racism and bullying or could manage their anxiety levels better. One young person at the Youth Data Party mentioned that being back in school was overwhelming, and they felt a lot of anxiety about being at school, especially after spending a long time at home. Twenty-one (5%) of the comments in the survey were from young people who were happy with their lives and their communities, even during the pandemic and online schooling. As young peoples' lives resume to in-person activities, it is particularly important to take notice of those who may still be isolated and lonely.



What next? Data to action

The findings from the HYIS provide our community with new, comprehensive data, informed by a youth engagement strategy, and validated by youth from across Halton. Now, it is time for organizations serving youth in Halton to move the data into action.

How can we support a sense of belonging for all youth in Halton and develop networks of strong relationships with young people?

STEP 1

Consider the conditions we want to see for youth belonging and relationships in Halton.

The findings from the HYIS suggest three key conditions we should strive for:

- Inclusive communities that foster a strong sense of belonging for all youth
- Multiple opportunities for youth to develop and maintain supportive, positive relationships
- Youth-friendly environments that support and engage all youth

STEP 2

Explore and share the findings. More data can be found on the [OKN Data Portal](#).

Have conversations about what the results mean, and how we can work together in Halton to respond to these findings.

STEP 3

This Data Action Bulletin posits a series of questions, or Data Actions, to guide discussion and, ultimately, action at your organization. We encourage you to work through and discuss each question as a group. It is our vision that the conversations catalyzed by these questions will be unique to your organization and create pathways for mobilizing the data within your organization and our communities.

How we achieve these outcomes will be determined by the actions we take, individually in our respective work, and collaboratively as a community. The Data Actions below are designed to guide discussion at your organization.

Inclusive communities that foster a strong sense of belonging for all youth

- In what ways do your programs and services reach youth of all backgrounds and create spaces where youth can connect with one another and their community, such as at schools, libraries, parks, recreation centres and virtual spaces?
- In what ways is your organization supporting authentic youth engagement and creating safer spaces for youth voices?
- What does belonging mean to the young people you work with and how can they be part of shaping the work of your organization?

Multiple opportunities for youth to develop and maintain supportive, positive relationships

- In what ways can your organization prioritize [developmental relationships](#) with youth, such as sharing power and expanding possibilities, and what does that look like?
- What are some daily reminders or actions you can share with your team or place around your office to positively connect with youth, such as acknowledging their successes, inquiring about their interests, and connecting them with others?
- How can we partner with others to intentionally build a strong network of positive relationships with and for youth?

Youth-friendly environments that support and engage all youth

- In what ways are youth able to make and inform decisions, be leaders and have their voices heard in the work of your organization?
- Do young people have opportunities to connect with like-minded youth across programs or different youth within programs to foster a web of relationships?
- What activities would reach youth of a variety of backgrounds, interests, and abilities so all youth feel represented and welcomed in their community?
- Some young people may feel more isolated than others, including girls, non-binary youth, and Indigenous youth. What are the ways in which your organization can connect with those youth?

Looking Ahead

As you take the steps to move the data into action, consider reflecting on what we still need to understand.

- Is something missing from these key findings?
- Has your organization identified an area that should be explored further?
- How can we work together to address these knowledge gaps?



Limitations

- This bulletin covers only responses of youth in the 13-18 age range.
- Open invitation sampling strategy (non-probabilistic).
 - Sample is not necessarily representative of all children and youth living in Halton.
 - It is not possible to determine a response rate.
 - However, considering the geographic coverage and the size of the final sample, it's fair to assume that we have a reasonably good cross-section of children and youth living in Halton.
- A higher degree of diversity within this sample calls for caution when interpreting overall ratios. For more details on the composition of the sample see the [sociodemographic table](#).
- The data are meant to provide a snapshot of youth wellbeing during COVID, and caution should be used when comparing across time.
- While each indicator is important, using multiple indicators as evidence of strengths and needs provides a more comprehensive representation
- This is a self-report survey and several types of response bias have been identified related to self-report surveys. Use caution when interpreting the findings.

Endnotes

- 1 Roehlkepartain, Eugene, Pekel, Kent, Syvertsen, Amy, Sethi, Jenna, Sullivan, Theresa, and Scales, Peter (2017). *Relationships First: Creating Connections that Help Young People Thrive*. Minneapolis, MN: Search Institute.
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- 5 UNICEF Canada (2019). *Where Does Canada Stand? The Canadian Index of Child and Youth Well-being, 2019 Baseline Report*. UNICEF Canada.
- 6 Children and Youth Planning Table (CYPT) of Waterloo Region (2021). *Building a Case for Child and Youth Belonging: Insights from the Children and Youth Planning Table of Waterloo Region*. Children and Youth Planning Table of Waterloo Region.
- 7 Office of the Chief Medical Officer of Health, *Connected Communities*.
- 8 UNICEF Canada, *Where Does Canada Stand?*
- 9 Our Kids Network (2018). OKN Data Portal: Positive Relationships. 2018. Burlington, ON: HealthLandscape. Available from: www.okndataportal.ca
- 10 Our Kids Network (2015/16). *Students Have Their Say: Relationships, Anxiety, Bullying, Screen Time and more: Summary of findings from the Tell Them From Me (TTFM) / OurSCHOOL Survey in Halton*. Our Kids Network.
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- 12 Office of the Chief Medical Officer of Health, *Connected Communities*.
- 13 Daley, Angela, Phipps, Shelley, Branscombe, Nyla R. (2018). The social complexities of disability: Discrimination, belonging and life satisfaction among Canadian youth. *SSM – Population Health* 5, 55-63.
- 14 UNICEF Canada, *Where Does Canada Stand*, 23.
- 15 Our Kids Network (2022). *An Outlook on Mental Health: A Priority for all Youth*. [01-Mental-Health-FINAL.pdf \(ourkidsnetwork.ca\)](#)
- 16 Our Kids Network (2022).
- 17 Vaillancourt, T., Brittain, H., Krygsman, A., Farrell, A. H., Landon, S., & Pepler, D. (2021). School bullying before and during COVID-19: Results from a population-based randomized design. *Aggressive behavior*, 47(5), 557–569. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ab.21986>

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