



# KEY FINDINGS FROM THE HEALTH BEHAVIOUR IN SCHOOL-AGED CHILDREN SURVEY IN THE REPUBLIC OF KAZAKHSTAN, HBSC, 2022. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Zh.A. Kalmakova,  
Sh.Z. Abdrakhmanova,  
A.A. Adaeva,  
T.I. Slazhneva,  
S.A. Nazarova,  
N.A. Suleymanova

National Center of Public Health Care  
of the Ministry of Health of the Republic of Kazakhstan,  
Astana, 2023

In 2022, the National Center for Public Health of the Ministry of Health of the Republic of Kazakhstan, within the framework of the 'Healthy Nation' National Project, jointly with the Ministry of Education, with technical and financial assistance from the World Health Organization, and with participation of education departments and health departments of all regions of the country, conducted the second national survey to monitor schoolchildren's health- and well-being-related behavior. The survey was carried out in the year 2022, announced by the President of Kazakhstan, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, as the "Year of Children in Kazakhstan" under the motto "The harmonious development and happy childhood of the younger generation is our nationwide task."

Financial support for the translation and circulation of the questionnaires was provided by the World Health Organization.

HBSC is a multinational study conducted in collaboration with WHO in 51 countries every four years among children and adolescents aged 11, 13, and 15 years to assess their health, behavior, and living conditions by means of a survey.

In Kazakhstan, the national monitoring of children has been implemented since 2017; in 2022, 8,528 schoolchildren from 121 schools in all regions of the country were involved in it.

The purpose of the survey is to assess the health, quality of life, and behaviors of children in Kazakhstan, as a basis for assessing the effectiveness of measures taken to protect the health of the younger generation, and policy-making in the field of health development in the social and psychological context.

## **KEY FINDINGS**

### **THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON CHILDREN'S LIVES**

In children's opinions, measures against the COVID-19 pandemic, such as lockdowns, school closures, transition to online learning, social distancing, etc, affected the following aspects of children's lives: overall impact on life – 24.4% of children responded 'positive' and 40.7% of children responded 'negative'; on health – 'positive' – 31.9%, 'negative' – 32.8%, on mental health – 'positive' – 29.6%, 'negative' – 32.8%, on school performance – 'positive' – 30.3%, 'negative' – 40.2%, on physical activity – 'positive' – 31.3%, 'negative' – 37, 3%, on nutrition – 'positive' – 38.3%, 'negative' – 26.3%, on future expectations – 'positive' – 30.1%, 'negative' – 32.9%, on the financial situation in the family – 'positive' – 34.1%, 'negative' – 28.6%, on relations with friends – 'positive' – 33.1%, 'negative' – 34.6%.

The sources of information about the COVID-19 pandemic for children often or always were: for 44.3% of children – social media; 32.9% – television, newspapers, radio; 31.5% – family members; 27.8% – health authorities; 25.7% – bloggers; 25.5% – teachers; 21.6%–friends; and 18.5% – other sources.

Children often or always followed the below measures to reduce the spread of COVID-19: used a mask – 77.8%; washed hands regularly – 77.5%; used an alcohol-based hand sanitizer – 68.2%; refrained from touching their faces – 57.2%; avoided crowded places – 56.8%; did not leave home if symptomatic – 56.8%; coughed/sneezed into the inner side of the elbow or tissues – 56.0%; avoided contact with people at risk – 53.3%; social distancing – 48.9%; did not leave home – 49.3%.

## COMMUNICATION WITH PARENTS

It is easier for children and adolescents in Kazakhstan to talk about things that worry them with their mothers (89.4%) than with their fathers (80.4%), but by the age of 15, the quality of communication with parents deteriorates, especially among girls. Boys of all ages are more likely to report that it is easy for them to communicate with mother and father than girls. In 2022, compared to the 2018 findings, the percentage of girls of all ages who find it easy or very easy to talk to mother changed from 93.1% to 87.2% and to father – from 78.7% to 74.8%, but the percentage of boys who have easy communication with father increased from 83.2% to 85.5%.

## SUPPORT FROM FAMILY AND FRIENDS

Most adolescents (76%) feel great support from their families, this rate is higher for boys (76.9%) than for girls (75.0%), and it decreases as they grow older. From 2018 to 2022, there is a 5% decrease in the proportion of children with high level of family support. On average, 64.9% of children report great support from friends.

Every day, 78.4% of adolescents have meals at the same table with their families.

## SCHOOL

In general, 32.0% of children aged 11-15 like school very much, and 49.3% like school. As they grow older, by the age of 15, the proportion of adolescents who like school very much decreases significantly. Thus, while at the age of 11 (fifth-graders) 37.6% of boys and 41.3% of girls like school very much, at the age of 15 (ninth-graders) a much smaller percentage of children – 26.9% of boys and 24.4% of girls – like school very much.

From 2018 to 2022, the percentage of both genders who like school very much decreased from 43.1% in 2018 to 32.0%, both boys (from 41.3% to 31.8%) and girls (from 44.8% to 32.2%).

Overall, in 2022, every sixth student in grades 5,7,9 (17.8%) perceives the school workload as heavy. In 2018, fewer children (13.5%) reported hardness of learning.

Fifth-grade students (11-year-olds) feel more support from teachers – 68.8%, compared to ninth-graders (15-year-olds) – 55.8%. Great support from teachers in high school decreases for both boys and especially for girls by the age of 15, compared to 11-year-old students. Thus, 70.4% of 11-year-old boys and 67.1% of girls (fifth-graders) feel great support from teachers, while by the age of 15 only 60.9% of boys and 50.6% of girls (ninth-graders) report a high level of support from teachers.

Overall, boys (64.5%) feel greater support from teachers compared to girls (57.1%).

A comparison with findings in 2018 (71.7%) showed a decrease in 2022 (60.9%) in the proportion of children who feel highly supported by teachers, especially girls.

More than half of schoolchildren – 59.4% – feel great support from classmates, boys to a greater extent (63.7%) than girls (54.9%).

## LIFE SATISFACTION

The majority of children (88.0%) are very satisfied with their lives, and fewer girls (86.4%) are satisfied with their lives than boys (89.4%). In 2022, the proportion of children who were satisfied with their lives decreased by three percentage points.

## HEALTH SELF-ASSESSMENT

About half of the children (55.1%) think their health is excellent, and fewer girls (49.7%) than boys (60.1%). By the age of 15, the proportion of children who consider their health excellent

decreases from 62.4% at the age of 11 to 47.3%. In 2022, excellent health scores for girls decreased by five percentage points for 13- and 15-year-olds, while for boys the score decreased only for 11-year-olds by four percentage points compared to 2018.

## HEALTH COMPLAINTS

Every third adolescent – 36.4% – reported frequent health complaints. At the same time, almost half of the girls (46.4%) and significantly fewer boys (26.7%) have multiple complaints. At the age of 15, more children (38.6%) are concerned about psychosomatic complaints. The proportion of girls of all ages with various frequent health complaints has increased dramatically from 27.4% in 2018 to 46.4% in 2022. Boys also had a 6-percentage point increase compared to 2018.

## MENTAL WELL-BEING

Overall, 83.4% of children and adolescents aged 11-15 have good mental health/well-being. 16.6% of adolescents aged 11-15 showed poor mental well-being/signs of possible depression. By the age of 15, the proportion of adolescents with signs of poor well-being increases by 1.8 times to 21.8%. Among boys, the proportion of persons with good emotional performance is higher than that of girls. In 2022, the proportion of children with good mental well-being increased by 2 percentage points, mostly because of boys.

## INJURIES

In the past 12 months, 44.8% of children had one or more injuries, every second boy (50.3%) and every third girl (39.0%). In 2022, the proportion of both boys and girls who had serious injuries increased by more than fifteen percentage points.

## DIETARY HABITS

On weekdays, 61.1% of schoolchildren have breakfast every day, more boys (64.4%) than girls (57.6%). At the same time, 16.3% of children do not have breakfast. By the age of 15, about a third of girls (30.8%) and about one-fifth of boys (18.0%) do not have breakfast on weekdays. In 2022, the proportion of children having breakfast every day decreased from 62.6% to 61.1%.

One in four adolescents (26.5%) eats fruit every day, and one in three (36.1%) eats vegetables. Girls (38.7%) are more likely to eat vegetables every day than boys (33.7%). In 2022, the level of daily intake of both fruits (by ten percentage points) and vegetables (by 6 percentage points) decreased among children.

14.4% of adolescents consume coca-cola and other sugar-sweetened beverages (SSBs) daily. Boys have a higher rate (15.4%) than girls (13.4%). Daily consumption of SSBs increases generally in children aged from 11 to 15 years old, and in boys from 13.3% to 18.3%. Half of the children – 52.2% – consume SSBs from one to 5-6 times a week. Thus, the weekly consumption of these drinks by children makes up 66.6%.

In 2022, the proportion of children who drink sugar-sweetened beverages every day decreased from 16.7% to 14.4%, but the proportion of children who drink these beverages weekly increased from 60.1% in 2018 to 66.7%.

The daily consumption of sweets and chocolate is traditionally higher for girls (30.4%) than for boys (22.9%); overall, in 2022, it makes up 26.6%, which is slightly less than in 2018 (27.4%).

## CONSUMPTION OF ENERGY DRINKS

The majority of children (79.5%) drink energy drinks less than once a week or do not consume them at all. But at the same time, 3.0% of children consume energy drinks every day. 17.5% of children drink energy drinks from one to 5-6 times a week, with a higher rate in boys (19.1%) than in girls (15.8%). Thus, one-fifth of adolescents (20.5%) in total drink unhealthy drinks every week.

## ORAL HYGIENE

Less than half of children (47.7%) brush their teeth two or more times a day, more girls (55.1%) than boys (40.7%). In 2022, the proportion of boys brushing their teeth twice a day decreased by four percentage points, and among girls increased from 53.7% in 2018 to 55.1%.

## PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

Daily physical activity of at least 60 minutes was found in 32.4% of schoolchildren and tended to decrease by the age of 15, which was especially pronounced in girls. Overall, boys (36.4%) are more physically active than girls (28.2%). Over a four-year period, the proportion of children engaged in daily physical activity decreased from 34.0% to 32.4% by 2022, mainly due to a decrease of this rate among girls.

## SEDENTARY BEHAVIOR IN FRONT OF SCREENS

The proportion of children who spend two hours or more each weekday watching TV or videos, including such websites as YouTube, is 36.9%.

Half (51.3%) of schoolchildren spend two hours or more on weekdays playing games on a computer, gaming consoles, and other devices. In 2022, the proportion of children who spend much time playing games on computers and smartphones, increased by more than twenty percentage points compared to 2018.

More than half of adolescents (56.5%) spend two hours or more per day communicating in social media, and almost a third (30.5%) – searching for information on the internet. In 2022, more children spend time every day on social media and the internet compared to 2018, when the total estimate of the proportion of children behind gadget screens, communicating and searching for information online, was 30.1%.

## REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH

5.7% of ninth-graders (15 years old), 9.8% of boys, and 1.4% of girls had sexual experience. Among those who reported the experience of sexual relationships, 59.4% of boys and 44.4% of girls used a condom during intercourse. The use of contraceptive pills during the most recent sexual intercourse was reported by 21.2% of boys and 20.0% of girls. Fewer boys (9.8%) reported sexual experiences in 2022 than in 2018 (14%). The level of condom use has not changed significantly since 2018.

## **SMOKING, VAPING, CONSUMPTION OF ALCOHOL AND CANNABIS**

The proportion of adolescents who had ever smoked cigarettes in their lifetime, that is, had a smoking experience, was 6.0% and increased 2.7-fold from age 11 to age 15. Boys were more likely to report smoking cigarettes (7.4%) than girls (4.6%). Current smoking for at least 1-2 days in the past 30 days was 4.1%, with a higher proportion of boys (5.0%) than girls (3.1%). Recent smoking doubles from age 13 to age 15 among both boys and girls. In 2022, 1.2% more children began to smoke.

9.8% of children (11.3% of boys and 8.2% of girls) used electronic cigarettes (vapes) once or twice a day or more in their lifetime, and this proportion increases significantly with age among both boys and girls, nearly doubling from age 13 to age 15. Overall, 5.8% of children (6.7% of boys and 4.9% of girls) used a vape in the past 30 days. A big two-fold leap is observed in the indicator 'from age 13 to age 15', especially among boys. In 2022, more boys and girls began vaping both during their lifetime (3.6% increase) and within the 30 days prior to the survey (2.7% increase), compared to 2018 data.

Overall, 7.0% of children consumed alcohol for 1-2 days or more during their lifetime. Boys and girls reported equal rates of alcohol consumption. The proportion of adolescents of both genders who have a lifetime history of alcohol consumption increases as they grow older, reaching 11.4% by the age of 15.

The proportion of adolescents who reported drinking alcohol for 1-2 days or more in the last 30 days (current use) was 3.5%. In 2022, compared to 2018, alcohol consumption among adolescents increased both during their lifetime from 3.5% to 7.0%, and recently, over the past 30 days from 2.2% to 4.4%, respectively.

Overall, 4.6% of adolescents were intoxicated once or more in their lifetime and 2.3% were intoxicated over the past 30 days. In general, there is a higher rate of intoxication among boys than among girls. In 2022, significantly more adolescents reported experience of intoxication during their lifetime (3.0% in 2018), both boys and girls. And recent intoxication rates have not changed since 2018.

Overall, 2.3% of 15-year-olds used cannabis for 1-2 days in their lifetime and 1.9% over the past 30 days. In 2022, there were no significant changes in this rate.

## **FIGHTS, BULLYING, AND CYBERBULLYING**

Overall, 7.9% of children fought frequently, three or more times in the last 12 months, more boys (12.1%) than girls (3.6%). From the age of 11 to the age of 15, the frequency of fights decreases among both boys and girls. At the same time, a quarter of children (25.1%) had already fought once or more during the past 12 months, boys – almost three times more (36.9%) than girls (12.8%).

6.8% of children were bullied at school 2-3 times per month and more often over the past 2 months. Twice as many children – 17.5% – were bullied at school once or more often. The proportion of bullied children is highest at the age of 11. In 2022, there was almost no change in the rates of bullied victims in school compared to the 2018 survey data.



In 2022, the proportion of 11-year-olds who were bullied at school at least once, increased compared to 2018 data, and in general, there was no significant positive dynamics in terms of victims of bullying.

5.2% of children were involved in bullying others in school 2 to 3 or more times per month over the past 2 months. A large proportion of children (14.1%) bullied other people once and more often. The prevalence of this behavior is higher in 11-year-old children in general, and, in the gender aspect, – among 11-year-old boys. As they grow older, there is a decrease in bullying rates by the age of 15. There is a significant decrease in children's involvement in bullying others in school, from 20.2% in 2018 to 14.1% in 2022.

5.6% of children were victims of cyberbullying 2-3 times a month and more often. 13.4% were subjected to cyberbullying once a month or more. 11-year-old children were most frequently exposed to cyberbullying.

Overall, 4.6% of schoolchildren were involved in cyberbullying 2-3 times a month or more over the past 2 months, and 11.5% of children were involved in cyberbullying once or more often. The prevalence of cyberbullying generally decreases by the age of 15. Boys are more likely to be victims of cyberbullying and are more likely to participate in cyberbullying others as compared to girls. In 2022, the rate of children's exposure to cyberbullying increased by one percentage point compared to 2018 data, and the rate of children's participation in cyberbullying did not change significantly.

## **CHILDREN AND SOCIAL MEDIA**

The high intensity of online communication made up 19.1% among schoolchildren of all ages. About half of the children (56.8%) communicate online with medium intensity. Among boys there are more of those who communicate online with high intensity (20.0% vs. 18.3% of girls), among girls there are more of those who communicate with medium intensity with various people (59.2% vs. 54.5% of boys).

12.7% of children and adolescents are problem users of social media. Among girls (14.5%) the proportion of problem users is higher than among boys (10.9%) as a whole, both at the age of 13 and 15 years. Among girls, problematic use of social media increases dramatically by the age of 15.

In 2022, the proportion of children (12.7%) who are problem social media users increased as compared to 2018 (6.9%). The rate among girls has increased two and a half times.

## **CHRONIC DISEASES/DISABILITIES**

7% of schoolchildren have a long-term illness or disability that affects their attendance or activity at school. Another 2.5% of adolescents reported having a chronic illness, but it did not affect their activity at school, so a total of 9.5% of schoolchildren in Kazakhstan reported having a chronic illness or disability.

## **HEALTH LITERACY**

The overall average health literacy score of schoolchildren was 29.57 out of possible 40 scores, which may indicate an average level of health literacy among adolescents in Kazakhstan. A high level of health literacy was found in half of the schoolchildren aged 11-15 (49.2%), an intermediate level – in 39.6%, and a low level – in 11.3% of children.

## CONCLUSION

Most children in Kazakhstan are satisfied with their lives, have good mental well-being, positive, supportive relationships in the family, school, and among peers. However, persistent gender, age, and social inequalities, risk factors for non-communicable diseases such as unhealthy dietary behavior, physical inactivity, smoking, vaping, alcohol use, injuries, violence and bullying, and risky sexual behavior are delaying positive change and increasing the burden of serious consequences for children's health and well-being. Programmes and investments are therefore needed to address both the environment and the social and psychological needs of children and young people through an evidence-based approach.

The data obtained from the national monitoring of children's health and well-being can be used to develop sectoral programs, action plans, and strategies in the country to improve health and increase the child well-being index, including the development of concepts for maternal and child health and sexual and reproductive health. In addition, the survey should inform plans for key health priorities, such as prevention of non-communicable diseases, with consideration of risk factors already identified in school-age children, programmes to reduce health disparities, and improve social conditions. Moreover, the findings of the survey should become the foundation for clearly defined goals and cohesive work among the sectors of education, health, social welfare, and civil society toward measures to protect and strengthen the health of school-age children.

Zh.A. Kalmakova, Sh.Z. Abdrakhmanova, A.A. Adaeva, T.I. Slazhneva, S.A. Nazarova, N.A. Suleymanova. Key Findings of the Survey on Lifestyle Factors Affecting the Physical and Mental Health of Schoolchildren, Republic of Kazakhstan, 2022. Executive Summary. National Center for Public Health, Ministry of Health of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Astana, 2023