



## The sociocultural environment and lifestyle habits of adolescents: A better understanding for action

**TOPO** Summaries by the Nutrition –  
Physical Activity – Weight Team

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### IN THIS ISSUE

The influence of the sociocultural environment on eating and physical activity in adolescence.

And answers to the following questions

- What is the sociocultural environment of youth?
- What are the sociocultural cues for adolescents in terms of eating and physical activity?
- How do young people perceive messages about healthy eating and a physically active lifestyle?

The **TOPO collection** disseminates knowledge to inform practitioners and decision makers on the prevention of weight-related issues. Each publication addresses a theme combining a critical analysis of the relevant scientific literature with observations or illustrations in order to help use this knowledge in the Québec context.

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### Introduction

In early adolescence, young people adopt lifestyle habits that could play a determining role in their future health. At this early age, they begin to develop their independence, while continuing to be influenced by their sociocultural environment. Sociocultural factors have an impact on eating habits and physical activity,<sup>(1)</sup> and this is even more true in adolescence when youth are in the process of learning and experimenting.

The results of the Ados 12-14 study (see box, page 3) show that the promotion of healthy lifestyle habits among young Québec adolescents should take into account the influence of family and peers, as well as youth's perceptions of contradictory messages concerning lifestyle habits.

### The family setting as a point of reference

Youth's discourse captured during this study reveal the profound influence the family has as young adolescents begin to make their own choices regarding both eating and physical activity.

#### **THE FAMILY SERVES AS THE PRIMARY POINT OF REFERENCE IN TERMS OF EATING**

Although adolescents experience other relationships and other norms beyond those in their family setting, interaction with their family is a fundamental process through which they learn to define and assert themselves socially.<sup>(5-7)</sup> The personal accounts gathered through the study suggest that the family provides young adolescents with their primary points of reference concerning eating. These teens rely particularly on their parents to judge the quality of their diet.



Parents control their family's eating environment (food purchases, food preparation, rules regarding food intake...) and largely determine their adolescents' diet. Family values are transmitted through the food provided.

A family's eating environment has explicit and implicit rules that serve as vital cues for 12 to 14-year old adolescents.

*"Ah no... well... no, there aren't any rules really. [...] Oh, there's no question; we have to eat our main meal, basically, we can't just eat desserts. It's like that, we have a lot of freedom, but we definitely can't eat a whole box of cookies on our own. [...] I definitely can't eat at the computer and leave crumbs around or in front of the TV. If I make a mess, next time, they probably won't let me [have as much freedom]. Of course, sometimes my parents say 'no' and sometimes they say 'yes.'" William<sup>1</sup>*

### FOOD AND BODY IMAGE

Self-esteem is fragile in early adolescence, and promoting healthy eating among youth can prove to be complex. Associating eating with weight control, rather than regarding it as a source of enjoyment and good health, can create an obsession with weight among some adolescents and have a negative impact on their body image.

*"My dad told me: 'Look, you have to change your habits.' And I said: 'Ah, why?' He said: 'Well, you've been eating all kinds of unhealthy things, it's obvious from your physical appearance.' Then I said: 'What? Are you kidding?' And then I looked at myself; I spent like 15 minutes staring at myself in the mirror...."*  
Charlotte

## The main components of the sociocultural environment

CATEGORIES	EXAMPLES
<i>Social relationships</i>	The demography, social stratification, ethno-cultural diversity, family structures, social relationships (with neighbours, at work, with friends...), cooperation and competition, racism, sexism, social movements, solidarity, mutual aid, etc.
<i>Social rules</i>	The social norms, conventions, values, beliefs, customs, traditions, rituals, social climate, etc.
<i>Representations of reality</i>	The ideologies, doctrines, prejudices, science, artistic productions, communications (media, advertising...), etc.

Adapted from *Pour une vision commune des environnements favorables à la saine alimentation, à un mode de vie physiquement actif et à la prévention des problèmes reliés au poids*, MSSS, 2012.<sup>(3)</sup>

<sup>1</sup> All quotes were translated from French. To maintain data confidentiality, the names of the adolescents are fictitious.

## THE FAMILY SETTING CAN ENCOURAGE PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

While youth aged 12 to 14 are developing their autonomy regarding physical activity, parents still play an important role in influencing adolescents. Teens are especially sensitive to family recognition of their successes. Engaging in physical activities as a family, receiving support from parents (material and emotional), and having the family's positive attitude towards physical activity appear to have a favourable influence on youth, especially those who are less active.

On the other hand, parents' legitimate impulse regarding their children's safety can at times prove to be an impediment to youth being physically active.

*"I'm going to do some this winter [snowboarding]. I'll have my board and it'll be the first time I do it because, before, my mother didn't want me to, she said: 'It could be dangerous.' But then in [area], well, it's like the trails go like this right away [steep] [...]. I've got friends, like my best friend, she does it and she loves it. **So how did you convince your mother?** Well, she realized I was older, maybe more suited to participate in this sport. I told her I had a friend who had done it, that it's not dangerous, that there are helmets, that at the beginning there are beginners classes, and that it's only after*

*you've become very good, able to manage on your own that you can do it on your own."* Olivia

## SOME YOUNG PEOPLE PREFER PHYSICAL ACTIVITY IN AN INFORMAL CONTEXT

Formal contexts of physical activity (organized sports teams, physical education classes, etc.) can expose young people to embarrassing situations that can lessen their self-esteem and even make them uninterested in physical activity. For young people who perform at a lower level and whose skills are not in line with the norm, informal contexts seem to be associated with a better attitude towards physical activity and increased participation. More spontaneous and less structured activities in a familial context can provide favourable conditions for the development of their abilities.

*"I like to play football. At first, I wasn't that interested, but in the end yes. I just play with my dad. **Have you considered being on the school's football team?** No, I prefer to play with one of my friends or my dad. [...] Besides, football, well, I don't like to play with people I don't know."* Nathan

## IMPLICATION FOR PUBLIC HEALTH ACTION

From a public health standpoint, young people should benefit from direction within the familial context, which

## An overview of the Ados 12-14 project

The Québec government's strategy for promoting healthy lifestyle habits and preventing weight-related problems seeks to alter the physical, political, economic, and sociocultural environments so that the healthy choice becomes the easy choice.<sup>(4)</sup> In order to identify these environmental changes, research is required to better understand the relationships between the environments – notably the sociocultural environment – and the lifestyle habits of the Québec population. The "Ados 12-14" study was designed to meet this need for knowledge.

A qualitative research method was used to explore young people's viewpoints on their sociocultural environment. Semi-guided individual interviews were conducted with 50 adolescents aged 12 to 14 enrolled in four high schools from four Québec regions. The questions addressed such topics as the context of meals eaten at home and school, the context of organized and unstructured physical activities, as well as relationships with the people evolving in these various contexts.



includes some leeway for them to make their choices. Rules concerning food and eating are necessary within the family, and are generally well understood by young teens. It goes without saying that all families are concerned about the health of youth, but every family also has its own values, priorities, and ways of doing things. Consulting parents and supporting families in making changes are imperative in order to involve all stakeholders interested in promoting healthy lifestyle habits among adolescents.

Parents can encourage adolescents to adopt a physically active lifestyle by providing them with opportunities to be active and with a favourable family atmosphere. Parents at times worry about their children's safety. In some cases, they can be reassured through better information on organized activities. However, efforts are also needed to make the built environment safer and more conducive to a physically active lifestyle.<sup>(2)</sup>

The family should be the perfect place for promoting body diversity. Individual or collective decisions regarding healthy eating and physical activity must be based on improving well-being and on concrete benefits (enjoying the taste of food, sense of self-efficacy, conviviality and being sociable...). Trying to fit a unique beauty norm can be harmful at any age. Parents must be made better aware of their role as models and of the fact that they convey social norms about the body to their children.

## Relationships with peers: experimentation and socialization

Research findings demonstrate the major role played by peers in teens' choices regarding lifestyle habits.

### **PHYSICAL ACTIVITY, A ROUTE TO SOCIABILITY**

Personal accounts from Québec adolescents regarding their physical activity confirm what is found in the scientific literature.<sup>(5-8)</sup> For these young people, physical activity is a way to make friends and a place to learn social rules rather than a way to keep healthy.

*"They just asked why I wanted to register for soccer; I said that I liked it and I liked to join a group and with soccer, the activities at school, you make more friends. It's the social part, because I'm like that."* Maeli

### **THE SCHOOL AS A PLACE TO EXPLORE PHYSICAL ACTIVITY**

In terms of the positive aspect of physical activity at school, youth appreciate that they are given an opportunity to explore various sports and activities. However, some feel that they are not sufficiently consulted about the choice of activities. Also, the extra-curricular physical activities offered are not equally diverse and appealing in the participating schools.

Young people regard teachers as models. Physical education teachers can have significant influence on their students and, through their teaching, convey values like mutual respect, honesty, and cooperation. Youth appreciate physical education instructors promoting these values.

*“Here in high school [the phys ed teacher] understands girls a lot [...] He has lots of experience and, as he’s always saying, there are people who cheat at games, but among the students and with him, we must always tell the truth, be honest. He talks to us about real values among us. It’s interesting because it makes us think more maturely, and be less [focused on ourselves].”*

Olivia

Compared to girls, boys are generally more at ease in team activities, trying to make themselves look good through their own physical performance, while girls are more inclined to seek support and companionship. Thus, engaging in sports with teammates of the same gender or similar physical skills may be more appealing.

*“Oh skating! I like that; I skate in the winter, eh. We have a small rink, just beside our house. Sometimes I go with my friends, sometimes with my sisters, sometimes with my whole family. [...] Sometimes we play hockey [...] With my cousins and my sisters [...] But really just for fun, eh. It’s not all-out hockey we play, but it’s fun (laughter).” **Would it be different if there were guys?***

*“Well, you know, because we don’t skate super-fast, then with guys there’d be a lot more action, but we’d never have the puck!” (Laughter) Laurence*

### **SETTING THE SCENE FOR SOCIAL RELATIONS IN THE SCHOOL CAFETERIA**

After the family, the school is the most significant living environment for youth. For the most part, school is where relationships with peers are formed. At the school cafeteria, youth interact with each other and thus social relations are intensified. Those with strong social networks benefit and those with weaker social networks may suffer.

*“At noon I usually eat with a big gang of girls. [...] I get along with them well. But sometimes, I don’t know why, when I’m sitting with a bunch of people, I feel withdrawn because no one is talking to me.” Chloé*

Young people adopt various strategies to avoid being seen eating alone in the cafeteria: eating in a restaurant near the school, eating at home, eating while walking, or sharing

their meal with people with whom they are not completely at ease.

### **IMPLICATION FOR PUBLIC HEALTH ACTION**

The places for eating meals in schools would benefit from being reconsidered. The vast spaces usually set aside for a school cafeteria are cold and noisy; they are not conducive to either pleasurable eating or conviviality around a meal. Some schools have begun to alter the space for eating meals, by allowing eating in several designated places (student café, homework assistance room, ping-pong room, etc.), for example. Consulting youth about the physical set-up for mealtime can generate solutions adapted to their social needs. Such strategies are likely to increase the number of youth who stay at school at noon and thus improve the quality of their mealtime.

Engaging in physical activity at school provides an opportunity for developing social relationships among peers. It can also accentuate differences, and result in rejection and stigmatization of some students. The activities offered to adolescents should be considered for the social aspect of taking part in physical activity. A school can address social dynamics, in particular through the planning and carrying out of activities. Furthermore, teachers can serve as models.

Young people should be consulted about the measures and activities to be put in place, as well as the infrastructure to be built. Their participation in the planning and carrying out of activities improves their chances of success. Among their social networks, youth can also be influential promoters of a physically active lifestyle and healthy eating.

### **Contradictory signals in the sociocultural environment**

At a period in their lives when they have only begun to make their own choices, adolescents are subjected to influences from their family, peers, the school, media, and advertising, which are often contradictory.<sup>(7, 13, 14)</sup>

### **BETWEEN JUNK FOOD AND HEALTHY EATING: THE LINE IS BLURRY**

The young people interviewed appear to have adhered to the importance of “healthy” eating. However, their definition of healthy eating is usually confused. They often minimize healthy eating, restricting it to a limited

number of requirements, at times consistent with public health recommendations (to eat more fruits and vegetables), at times imprecise (not eating too much fat), and at times erroneous (equating fat with calories).

The personal accounts of youth on the topic of eating almost never mention the enjoyment of eating or the pleasure of meal sharing. They more often cite the warnings given by their parents and the school about the risk of gaining weight and becoming ill.

*“We have meetings at school on the Food Guide, where we learn how this or that can be bad for our health.”* Alexia

### **FOCUSING ON PERFORMANCE IS NOT ALWAYS A SOURCE OF MOTIVATION**

Being evaluated in physical education classes and the focus on performance in general perpetuate a social hierarchy. This hierarchy can be demotivating for certain young people. Some adolescents say they are put off by the compulsory nature of physical education courses and by some of the assessments of their physical condition. The perceptions some youth have of their sociocultural environment bring them to view their bodies as an obstacle to engaging in physical activities.

*“[Running] Do you do any? Well, not really, because of my legs. I would do more, I would sometimes run nearby, here. What would motivate you to do that? Well especially if I want to lose weight, because I think I’m fat. That would be it.”* Mathis

### **THE SOCIAL NORM ASSOCIATING BEAUTY WITH BEING THIN CAN CAUSE UNHEALTHY PRACTICES**

In adolescence, the body acquires a sociocultural dimension in the eyes of others and becomes a social marker.<sup>(9-11)</sup> Among adolescents, some exert their willpower over their bodies by engaging in restrictive eating practices that affect the amount of food eaten and by trying to control hunger and weight. Pressure to control their bodies is cited by youth more in relation to the family than the school context.

*“If you’re still hungry at suppertime, will you have another serving? I’ll either wait until the next day, at breakfast, but if not, I don’t eat after that. Snacks are*

*not filling enough, so I’ll eat more [too much], and that’s not a good thing. Do you feel that you’re stopping yourself from eating something else? Yes a little. Because I don’t want to get fat, you know...”* Alexis

### **IMPLICATION FOR PUBLIC HEALTH ACTION**

When plans are made to promote healthy lifestyle habits among adolescents, the sociocultural environment that often conveys contradictory messages should be taken into account. This could mean, for example, having decision makers be vigilant about the quality of the experience of young people (boys and girls) involved in physical activity, as well as the consistency of messages regarding healthy eating.

It would be wise to raise awareness and educate youth about healthy eating through stimulating activities, for example, by promoting healthy menus offered in the school cafeteria. The adoption of healthy eating practices by adolescents is more likely to occur in conjunction with a rich eating culture, developed through tasty discoveries and new opportunities for socializing

In terms of the conflict between the healthy eating discourse and the marketing of junk food, it would be logical to introduce legislation restricting the advertising of fast food to youth and to develop their critical thinking on this topic. Among other things, social marketing campaigns based on the denormalization of the industry have proven successful in tobacco control and could be advantageously adapted to food and beverage companies. The project *Gobes-tu ça?* being carried out by the Réseau du sport étudiant du Québec,<sup>2</sup> appears to be a promising venture. At school, in the family setting, and in the sociocultural environment in general, young people are exposed to messages promoting healthy eating and a physically active lifestyle that may at times be misunderstood. This can result in behaviour among youth that poses a risk to their health. Personal or collective decisions regarding healthy eating or being more physically active must be motivated by a desire for well-being and by the concrete pleasure drawn from achieving this. The message that one must be active and eat well to be healthy, not to control one’s weight, must be communicated more effectively. Interventions with youth could better link body image, eating, and physical activity, as does the “Healthy Mind-Healthy Body” program, for example.<sup>3</sup>

2 <http://rseq.ca/viesaine/initiatives/gobestuca/>

3 <http://www.equilibre.ca/documents/files/eng-hmhb-presentation.pdf>

Sociocultural pressure encouraging excessive concern about weight constitutes a risk to the health and well-being of youth. These socially constructed norms to which adolescents are especially sensitive can be altered, particularly through joint action by the social stakeholders involved. The *Charte québécoise pour une image corporelle saine et diversifiée*, implemented in part to respond to demands expressed by youth, is an example of action of this nature.<sup>4</sup>

Messages conveyed by the family, peers, and the school can also help social norms evolve. Along these lines, a number of authors have recommended interventions among circles of friends or through social networks in schools.<sup>(18, 19)</sup>

## A better approach with adolescents in their sociocultural environment

Scientific literature generally concludes that the interventions with the greatest chance of success in improving the lifestyle habits of adolescents to promote their health – especially in the school setting – are those taking an integrated, global approach. Such an approach seeks both to improve young people’s skills and to alter their environment, including sociocultural factors, to make it more supportive of healthy lifestyle habits. This approach

involves cooperation from the school, parents, and the community; it also closely links academic success, health, and well-being.<sup>(15, 16)</sup>

Social marketing techniques can help young people become more aware of the influence of their sociocultural environment. Far from being limited to communications aimed at youth, social marketing can include, for example, enhancing the awareness of decision makers, stakeholders, educators, and parents of their roles as models for youth.<sup>(17)</sup>

The perceptions young people have their sociocultural environment must be understood to more effectively intervene in this environment. Their perceptions and attitudes regarding eating, physical activity, and body image reveal the influences that affect their choices and motivations. Allowing young people to express their perceptions of social norms can help them step back and develop critical thinking.<sup>5</sup>

## Conclusion

When an effort is made to consider the practices of young people in the context of the influences of diverse environments, their choices and preferences are not all inconsistent. This must be taken into account when planning and undertaking interventions with youth.

### TO LEARN MORE

The full version of the research report entitled *Ados 12-14 : les dimensions socioculturelles des pratiques alimentaires et d'activité physique des adolescents. Rapport*,<sup>(20)</sup> as well as the literature review report prepared in the context of the research,<sup>(2)</sup> are available in electronic format (PDF) on the Institut national de santé publique du Québec’s Web site. [www.inspq.qc.ca](http://www.inspq.qc.ca)

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4 <http://www.scf.gouv.qc.ca/index.php?id=363>; also see the case study by Baril, Paquette and Gendreau<sup>(12)</sup> on the process involved in creating the Charter.

5 For example, the “Derrière le miroir” campaigns of the Équilibre group: <http://www.derrierelemiroir.ca>

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