

# Social-Emotional Wellbeing (SEW) Survey



## Background information on the Social-Emotional Wellbeing Survey.

### Introduction

The Social-Emotional Wellbeing (SEW) surveys were designed by Professor Michael E. Bernard from the University of Melbourne's Graduate School of Education, in order for schools to assess the levels of students' social-emotional wellbeing (SEWB). The surveys provide extensive data on the social-emotional wellbeing of groups of students (for example year level cohorts and whole of school cohort). Rasch measurement analysis and multi-level modelling (Bernard & Stephanou, 2017) validates and supports the use of the Social-Emotional Wellbeing Survey as an indicator of social-emotional wellbeing.

The SEW Survey is based on an ecological, positive psychology and multi-dimensional conception of wellbeing that encompasses not only the intraindividual and interpersonal characteristics of young people but also environmental contexts of family, school and community. The Social-Emotional Wellbeing Survey asks students about their feelings and behaviours, personal characteristics (character strengths/values, social and emotional skills), and also their experiences within the context of their families, schools and communities.

### What is social-emotional wellbeing?

According to the survey's author Professor Michael E. Bernard, social-emotional wellbeing of young people is a broad construct encompassing:

- (1) The range of positive and negative emotions and behaviours that young people experience on a regular basis in different areas of their lives (schoolwork, peer relationships, family, extra-curricular activities, involvement in community) such as achieving one's potential (academic, social, personal), engagement, happiness, helping others as well as (relative absence of) anger, depression, loneliness, under-achievement and substance abuse;
- (2) The extent of the character strengths and social, emotional and learning competence of young people such as optimism, resilience, caring and respect;
- (3) The degree of environmental nurturance, stimulation and connectedness young people experience in their home, school and community including but not limited to positive relationships, high expectations for achievement and behaviour, programs and activities that accommodate their interests and opportunities to be involved in decision-making.

(Professor Michael E. Bernard, Melbourne Graduate School of Education, University of Melbourne).

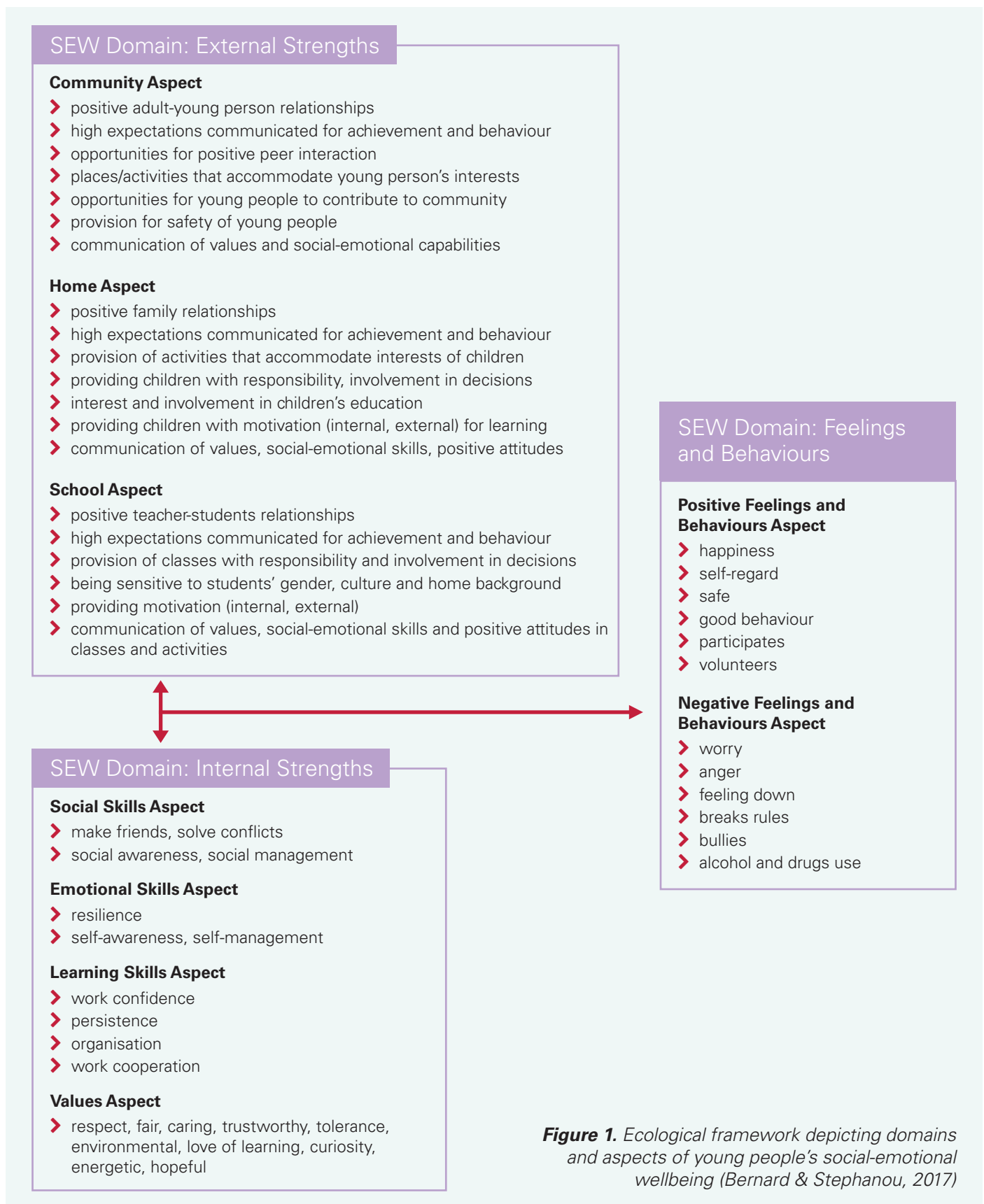
The theoretical framework of the survey is consistent with models that investigate resilience (see Durlack, 1998). Resilience in children and youth can, in part, be attributed to individual characteristics (for example good intellectual ability, positive temperament, high self-efficacy) and contextual characteristics (such as affectionate relationship with caregiver, effective parenting, connection with pro-social organisations, and access to high-quality schooling).

The survey is also consistent with the developmental assets model (see Benson, 1997), which represents external assets (support, empowerment, boundaries and expectations, constructive use of time) and internal assets (commitment to learning, positive values, social competencies, positive identity) as building blocks of healthy development that help students grow up to be healthy, caring and responsible.



## The SEWB Theoretical Framework

Figure 1 displays the framework that underpins the Social-Emotional Wellbeing Surveys. It describes the Environment factors (school, home and community) and Person factors (students' cognitive and affective characteristics) that influence the SEW outcomes of students. As indicated, the cognitive factors that research shows are associated with positive outcomes in young people are not measured directly by the Social-Emotional Wellbeing Surveys.



**Figure 1.** Ecological framework depicting domains and aspects of young people's social-emotional wellbeing (Bernard & Stephanou, 2017)



## Findings from 12 Years of Research using the SEW Survey

Between 2003 and 2014, 66 767 students in Years 2 to 12 from 404 government, independent and Catholic schools completed the Social-Emotional Wellbeing Survey. This research has revealed important insights into the social and emotional wellbeing of young people. It has demonstrated that the SEW of young people can be described in terms of different levels. That is, rather than considering wellbeing in terms of those young people who have it and those who do not, research reveals that the overall SEW of young people can be described on a continuum of five developmental levels.

**Level 1: Low**

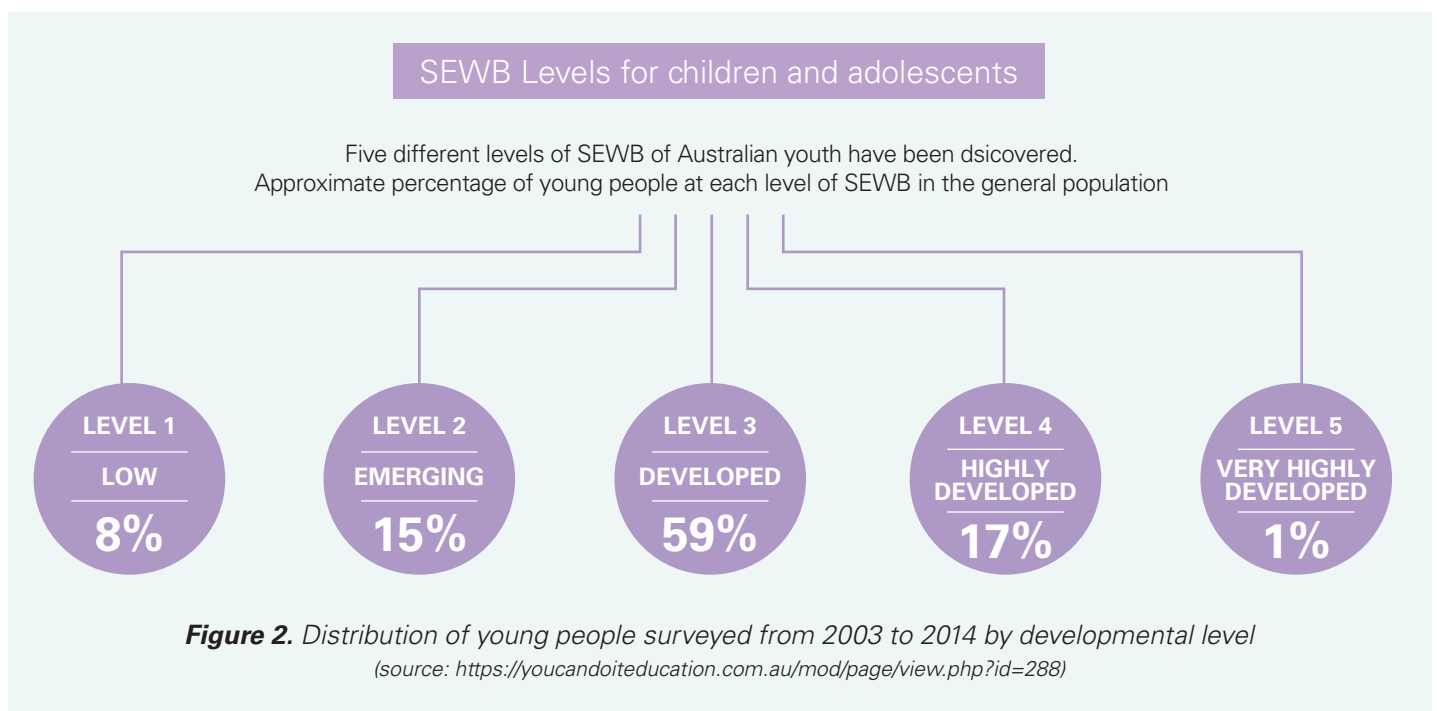
**Level 2: Emerging**

**Level 3: Developed**

**Level 4: Highly developed**

**Level 5: Very highly developed**

Different percentages of students are represented at each of the five levels of student SEW. Research conducted between 2003 and 2014 indicated that while the majority of students are considered having a 'developed' (level 3) social-emotional wellbeing, nearly a quarter of students were below this benchmark. For further details please refer to Figure 2.



The richness of the data collected between 2003 and 2014 also enabled the creation of described developmental levels of social-emotional wellbeing for each of the defined nine social-emotional aspects in the secondary schools survey and for the two domains reported in the primary survey. Summaries of these descriptions are available via the 'Levels Summary Descriptors' section of this report.



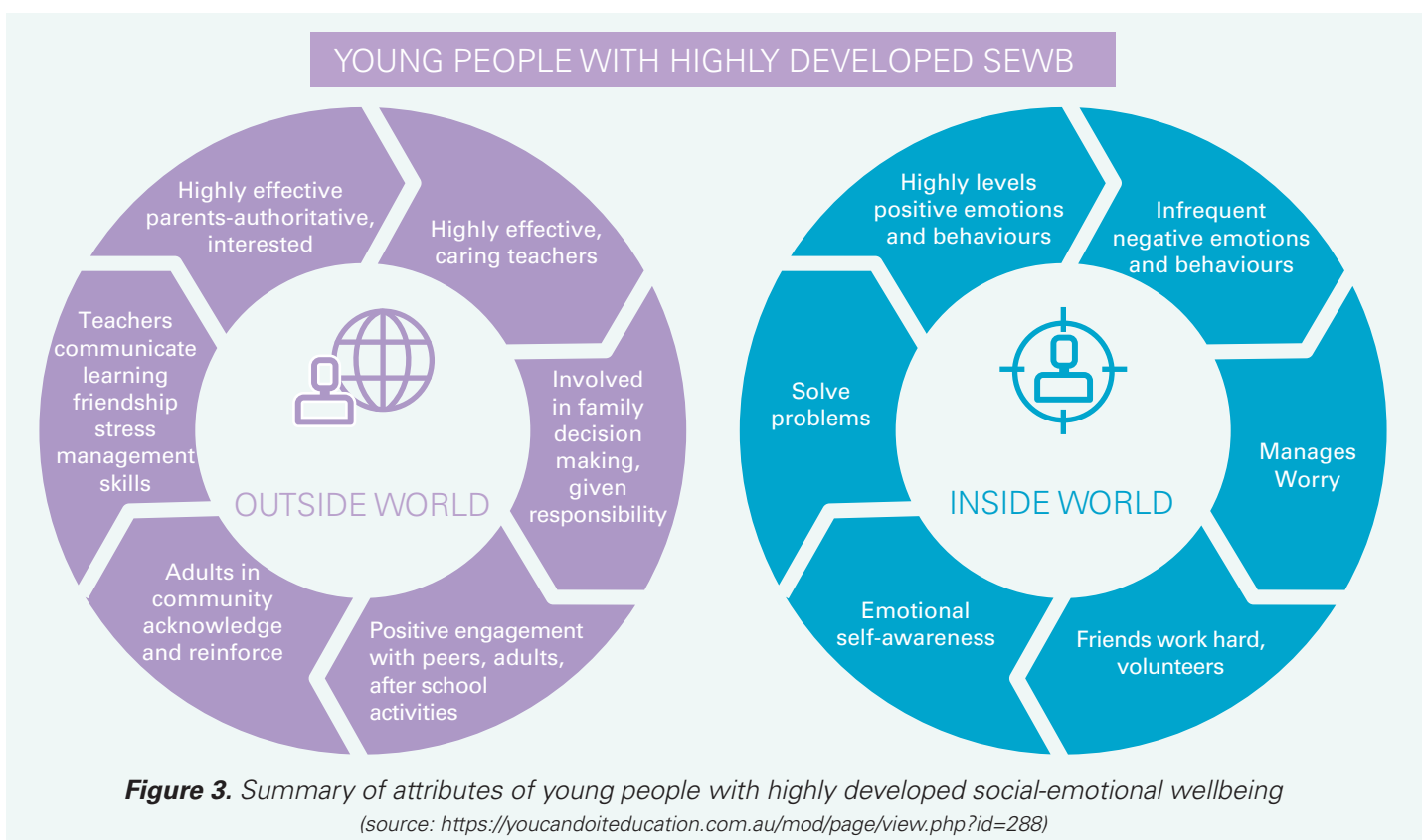
## Measurement Properties of the SEW Survey

Two Rasch measurement scales were constructed using Quest software, one with the student survey data and the other with the teacher survey data. This enabled us to qualitatively describe levels in the development of student social-emotional wellbeing. Young people with high levels of social-emotional wellbeing are located high on the scale, while students with lower levels of social-emotional wellbeing are located lower on the scale. The greater the agreement scores of a young person on the items in a survey, the higher the level of their social-emotional wellbeing (negatively worded items are reverse scored). The highly endorsed items are located low on the scale. These are items that even young people with low levels of social-emotional wellbeing are likely to endorse. The items that are higher on the scale are items that are likely to be endorsed by young people at high levels of social-emotional wellbeing but not by young people at lower levels.

Cronbach's alpha is a measure of the reliability or internal consistency of a psychometric test. It indicates the degree to which all items on a test are measuring the same latent trait. Possible values for Cronbach's alpha range from 0 to 1, with higher values indicating greater reliability. The analysis of fit of the data to the measurement model assured that a single construct has been measured with the student survey data and a single construct with the teacher survey data. The Cronbach's alpha reliabilities of the four surveys are of the order of 0.9.

## What are the attributes of young people with highly developed social-emotional wellbeing?

The analysis of SEW data shows that young people who come from environments (home, school, community) where they are well-connected to positive people (adults, peers) and programs, as well as displaying well-developed character traits and social-emotional competence, are likely to experience a wide range of positive emotions and behaviours and relatively few negative emotions and behaviours (Bernard, Stephanou & Urbach, 2007; Bernard & Stephanou, 2017). They have exceptionally strong positive feelings, pro-social attitudes, emotional awareness and self-acceptance. They forge strong peer relationships with other emotionally well-developed students. They work hard and collaboratively at school, are supported by teachers to discuss their feelings, values and behaviours, and feel their voice is valued in their own learning process. They display stress management skills, confidence, organisation and goal orientation towards schoolwork. Their parents and teachers spend time talking to them about life skills, such as making friends, managing stress, developing confidence and persistence. They volunteer in school and other communities in which they feel connected, cared for and supported.



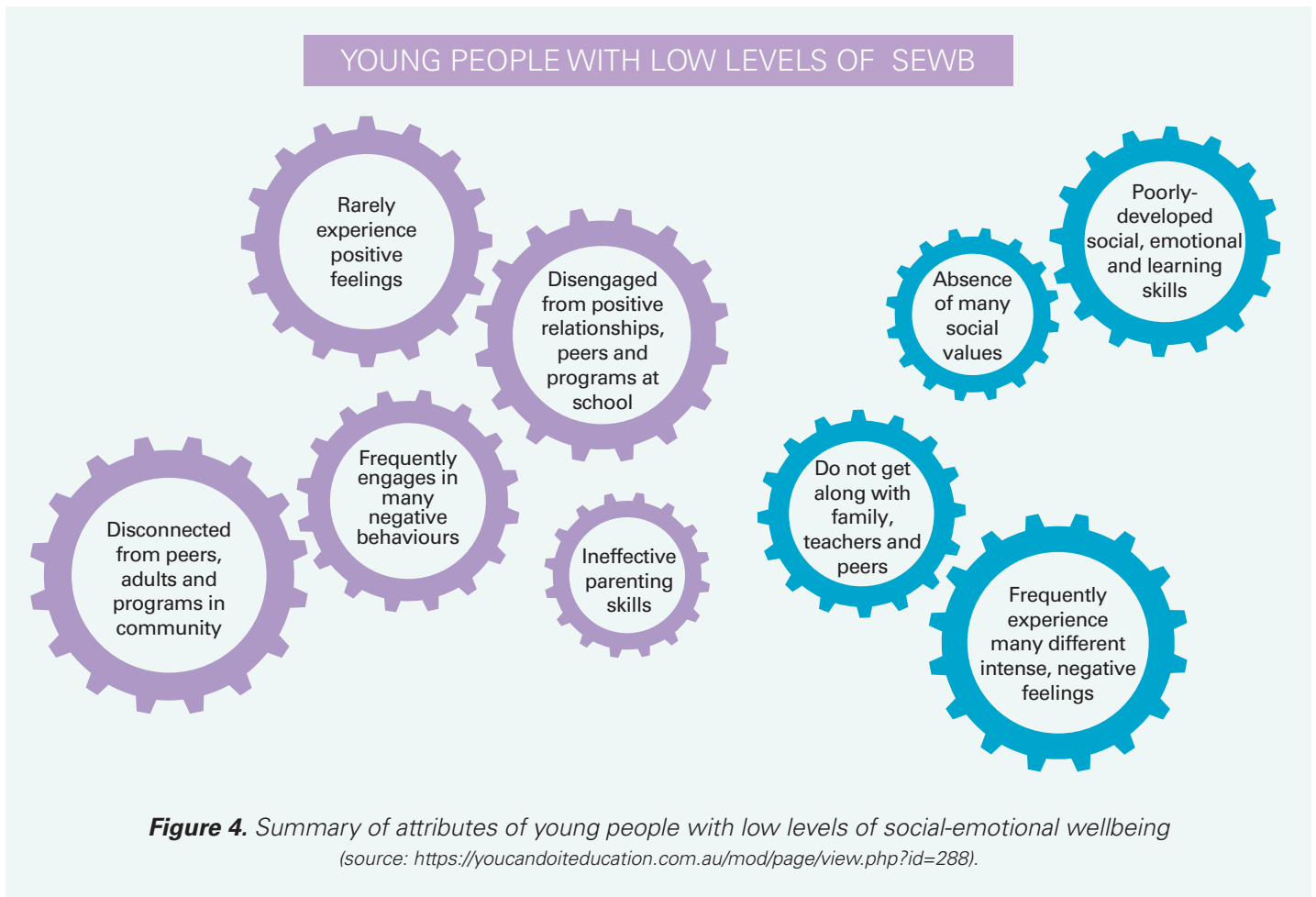
**Figure 3.** Summary of attributes of young people with highly developed social-emotional wellbeing

(source: <https://youcandoiteducation.com.au/mod/page/view.php?id=288>)



## What are the attributes of young people with low levels of social-emotional wellbeing?

Young people who come from environments where they are not provided with adequate levels of nurturance and stimulation or are disconnected from positive people and experiences, are highly likely to be delayed in the development of positive character traits and social-emotional strengths. As a consequence they experience many more negative than positive emotions and behaviours. They often feel lonely and down, and may not have the skills to manage stress or cope with anxiety. They are unlikely to have supportive peer relationships or experience best-practice parenting and teaching.



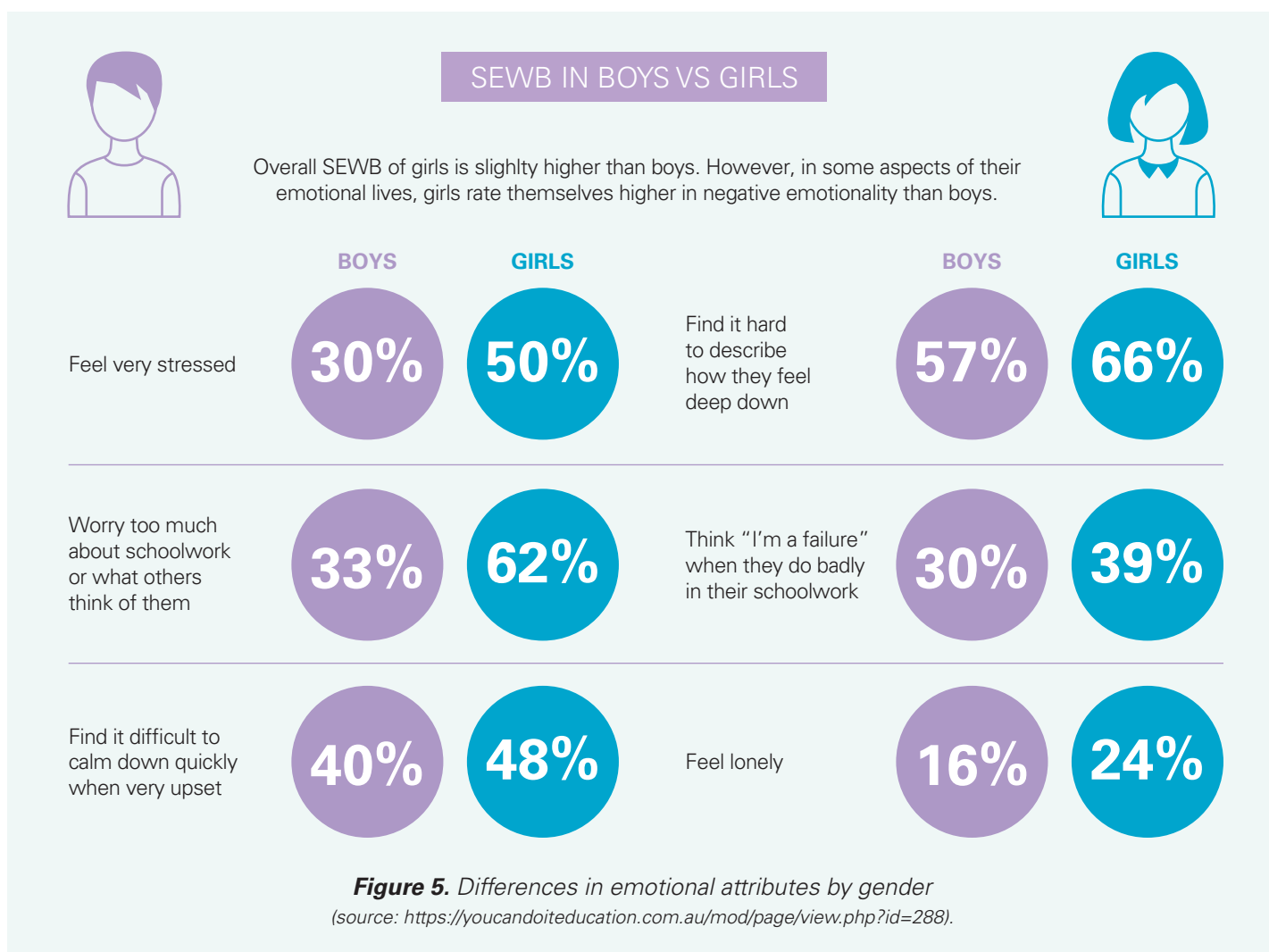


## Differences in social-emotional wellbeing between student groups

Results from ACER's Social-Emotional Wellbeing Survey show that the more internal and external strengths young people experience, the better off they tend to be, regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, geographic residence and socioeconomic background. However, there are some differences in the strengths and stresses on different groups of students.

### Gender differences

On average, girls have slightly higher overall social-emotional wellbeing than boys. However, as demonstrated in Figure 5, girls exhibit a tendency towards difficulties of an internalising nature (such as anxiety and depression). Data also indicates that boys are more likely to externalise difficulties through behaviour.



### Age differences

Student social-emotional wellbeing declines at the beginning of adolescence. Students become less confident and less persistent about their schoolwork. Stress, alcohol consumption and underachievement increases. Young people report that teachers provide less support for students to manage stress, make friends and solve problems in secondary school than they do in the earlier years of education.





## Differences over time

The overall levels of social-emotional wellbeing of students has stayed the same over the decade from 2003 to 2014. Few differences appear in the perceptions of young people in the strengths of their schools, home and communities. There are, however, some differences in particular aspects. Young people now display more empathy and more control over their anger than young people did a decade ago. However, today's young people report higher levels of anti-social behaviour and underachievement, less control over stress, and lower levels of confidence and ability to persevere when doing difficult or boring work (see Figure 6).

### 12 YEAR SNAPSHOT OF AUSTRALIAN SEWB IN YOUNG PEOPLE [2003-2014]

Over the past decade, the SEWB of Australian young people has remained relatively stable with some exceptions

	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
I am confident when doing difficult schoolwork	76%	67%	70%	70%	59%	64%	58%	61%	63%	60%	53%	58%
I feel very stressed	29%	32%	33%	19%	31%	32%	37%	36%	37%	37%	43%	41%
I worry too much about schoolwork	44%	41%	44%	38%	39%	40%	47%	49%	49%	49%	54%	54%
I could do a lot better in my schoolwork	61%	65%	74%	65%	66%	54%	72%	74%	61%	64%	75%	72%
I give up easily when I don't understand or am bored	32%	47%	35%	35%	39%	32%	40%	42%	38%	40%	44%	42%
I have difficulty controlling my anger	41%	37%	38%	32%	30%	27%	64%	36%	38%	32%	29%	30%

**Figure 6.** Differences in attributes over time

(source: <https://youcandoiteducation.com.au/mod/page/view.php?id=288>).

## How can schools support optimal social and emotional wellbeing?

The results from the Social-Emotional Wellbeing Survey show that young people who have the highest levels of social-emotional wellbeing are supported at school to develop their abilities to control their worries, describe their feelings, and solve problems without fighting.

Students at the very highly developed level of wellbeing agree very strongly that their school teaches them: how to make friends; respect others' feelings; cope with stress; and be confident, persistent and organised. These students say they have opportunities to discuss and act on ideas to make their schools better and safer. Additionally, they surround themselves with peers who behave well and work very hard.

School experiences are clearly very important in developing the social-emotional wellbeing of young people. Students depend on positive relationships with teachers and peers, and high teacher expectations for achievement and behaviour. They flourish when given opportunities to be involved in activities that accommodate their interests, and when given a voice in the making of school rules and planning activities. The healthiest students have teachers who deliberately and effectively develop students' resilience and interpersonal skills.

## Further information

[www.acer.org/sew](http://www.acer.org/sew)  
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## References

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