

Yale Study: Vast Majority of High Schoolers Unhappy at School

Most high school students are not happy at school. A new study by Yale researchers finds that nearly three-quarters of high schoolers report negative feelings toward school. The study surveyed more than 20,000 high school students in all 50 US states and found widespread dissatisfaction at school across all demographic groups, with girls reporting slightly more negative emotions than boys. According to Yale co-author Zorana Ivcevic,

It was higher than we expected. We know from talking to students that they are feeling tired, stressed, and bored, but were surprised by how overwhelming it was.

The Yale findings, which were published in the most recent edition of the academic journal *Learning and Instruction*, echo previous conclusions about young people's attitudes toward school. According to a 2016 Gallup student poll of nearly one million children from approximately three thousand different schools, enthusiasm for school dropped dramatically between fifth grade and twelfth grade.

In another large-scale 2003 study, psychologists tracked several hundred elementary and secondary school students over the course of a week. The students wore watches that signaled them several times a day to record, at that moment, what the students were doing and how they were feeling. The results revealed that children were unhappiest while they were at school, and happiest when out of school.

Is There a Better Way?

Perhaps these results are not surprising. School isn't supposed to be fun, right? Kids have to deal with the drudgery of school, buckle down, and do the work because *that's life*. Or so the thinking goes. What a horrible message to send to children, and to internalize ourselves: Life is drudgery, work is drudgery, and the sooner people learn this in school, the better off they will be.

It doesn't have to be this way. For young people who are educated outside of forced schooling environments, learning can be engaging, rewarding, and yes, fun. Free to pursue passions, explore talents, and set individual goals, young people who learn without schooling or who are educated in other non-coercive learning environments, retain and expand their curiosity and autonomy.

It's the lack of freedom and personal agency that leads to negative emotions toward school or life. When individuals are empowered to take charge of their living and learning, negativity diminishes.

Parents should take seriously these negative emotions in their adolescents, particularly as youth anxiety, depression, and suicide continue to soar. Researchers at Vanderbilt University found a correlation between adolescent suicidal thoughts and actions and school attendance, reporting that these tendencies decline during the summer months and spike at back-to-school time. This is an **opposite** pattern to that of adults, who experience the highest rates of suicide during the summertime.

In sharing the results of their latest survey on high schoolers' negative feelings toward school, the Yale researchers suggest that later school start times might help by allowing young people more time for sleep; but this merely puts a Band-Aid on a much deeper wound. Teenagers don't like school because their freedom is tightly controlled, they are micro-managed by adults, and they have no or little input in what, how, where, or with whom they learn. On the brink of adulthood, teenagers are increasingly treated like toddlers.

Not only is it dangerous to dismiss adolescents' antipathy toward school as normal and expected, it avoids an honest look at the impact of coercion on human flourishing. When people are free, they thrive; with force, they flounder.