

For teens, feeling safe at school means increased academic success Research shows the impact of student bullying, depression on classroom engagement

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Summary: Parents across North America are prepping their teens to head back to high school, hoping they will study hard to get straight A's. But new research shows that good grades aren't just based on smarts -- high marks also depend on a student's feelings of safety.

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The recent study published in the *Journal of Adolescent Health* by Carolyn Côté-Lussier of the University of Ottawa's Department of Criminology and Caroline Fitzpatrick, a researcher affiliated with Concordia's PERFORM Centre for preventive health, suggests that **high schoolers who feel less safe at school have decreased learning potential and more emotional problems.**

The researchers used data from the Québec Longitudinal Study of Child Development -- an ongoing study that began in 1998 with a cohort of 2,120 five-month-old infants -- to investigate whether feeling unsafe at school interferes with classroom engagement.

They also considered whether this association is expressed through reduced student well-being, including symptoms of depression and aggressive behaviour.

The outcome? Confirmation that being a victim of school violence and feeling unsafe both contribute to symptoms of depression, which are detrimental to students' learning potential.

"We found that students who felt safer were more attentive and efficient in the classroom. These students also reported fewer symptoms of depression, such as feeling unhappy and having difficulty enjoying themselves. Making sure that students are engaged and attentive in the classroom can contribute to long-term success above and beyond intellectual capacities such as reading or math skills," says Fitzpatrick who is also a professor of psychology at Sainte-Anne's University.

However, factors typically linked to feeling unsafe, such as bullying or school violence, only partly explain why students feel less secure.

"We know from some of our previous research that youth who experience chronic poverty and those living in 'bad' neighbourhoods also tend to feel less safe at school," says Côté-Lussier.

"We think that this might be the case because teenagers who live in disorderly, disadvantaged neighbourhoods 'carry' their fears to school every day. The features of the physical environments in which schools are located are also really important. For example, green spaces and well-maintained buildings are likely to make youth feel more at ease," she says.

While dropout rates in the United States and Canada have declined since the early 1990s, the countries' current graduation rates of 76 per cent and 79 per cent respectively suggest that more complex solutions are needed.

Fitzpatrick and Côté-Lussier recommend that in order to increase feelings of safety and to promote classroom engagement, concrete steps must be taken.

"We need increased monitoring of students' reactions and responses to incidences of bullying and violence. Through continued professional education, we can also increase teachers' awareness of the importance of feelings of safety -- as well as their understanding of how the wider school climate can improve engagement, says Fitzpatrick.

"Finally, parents, schools and communities can become advocates for wider environmental interventions that aim to improve the physical features of school and student neighbourhoods."

Journal Reference:

Carolyn Côté-Lussier, Caroline Fitzpatrick. Feelings of Safety at School, Socioemotional Functioning, and Classroom Engagement. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 2016; 58 (5): 543
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