In the wake of the 16th anniversary of the deadly Columbine High School shooting, a recent study suggests that high schoolers who feel less safe at school have decreased learning potential, and more socioemotional problems. The study, published in the Journal of Adolescent Health, calls for renewed attention to students’ feelings of safety.

The study investigated whether feeling unsafe at school interferes with classroom engagement and also considered whether this association is expressed through reduced student well-being, including symptoms of depression and aggressive behaviour.
The lead author, Professor Carolyn Côté-Lussier of the University of Ottawa Department of Criminology, 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.

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That said, Côté-Lussier adds that “factors typically linked to feeling unsafe, such as bullying or school violence, only partly explain why students feel less safe. We know from some of our previous research that youth who experience chronic poverty and those living in unfavourable neighbourhood environments also tend to feel less safe at school.”

While dropout rates in the U.S. and Canada have declined since the early 1990s, the countries’ current dropout rates of 7% and 10%, respectively, suggest that more multifaceted solutions are needed.

“Ensuring 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 study co-author Caroline Fitzpatrick, professor in the Department of Social Sciences at Saint-Anne University.

The report concludes with recommendations to increase feelings of safety and to promote classroom engagement, such as creating policies to improve the school and surrounding environment. For example, interventions could target student educational expectations, teacher support and school and residential neighbourhood features.

View the complete study

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