

School Wasn't So Great Before COVID, Either

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The litany of tragedies and inconveniences visited upon Americans by COVID-19 is long, but one of the more pronounced sources of misery for parents has been pandemic schooling. The logistical gymnastics necessary to balance work and school when all the crucial resources—time, physical space, internet bandwidth, emotional reserves—are limited have pushed many to the point of despair.

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We know the pandemic has created or exacerbated mental-health problems for many children. But what's less appreciated is that pre-pandemic schooling was already contributing to such problems. One large study from this year found that students reported feeling less happy while at school than in any other location. Another found that emergency psychiatric visits between 2009 and 2012 more than doubled when school was in session compared with during the summer and vacations. While the adult suicide rate has historically peaked in summer, the recent increase in youth suicides has shown the opposite pattern, with suicides dropping off in the summer and climbing when kids are back in school. Researchers have found that elementary-school students' levels of the stress hormone cortisol become elevated during the school year. Peter Gray, a psychology professor at Boston College who studies these issues, says that [if school were a drug, it would not receive FDA approval](#).

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Both long-standing instructional practices and more recent changes in curriculum may have contributed to these problems. For instance, traditionally age-stratified classrooms, which most people take for granted, represent an unnatural and potentially unhealthy way of organizing children's lives, experts now believe. Angela Duckworth, a University of Pennsylvania psychologist and the author of *Grit*, hypothesizes that the age segregation of schools can contribute to competition and stress. In a mixed-age group, she told me, "the 10-year-old takes the hand of the 5-year-old and looks both ways crossing the street. The 5-year-old looks up to the 10-year-old with admiration and trust, and does as they are told. In contrast, when you throw hundreds of kids of exactly the same age together, attention goes, unhelpfully, to comparisons within the group: Who is smartest? Who is fastest? Who is prettiest?" This steers children's values away from kindness, trust, and community and toward status competition, which can generate stress and bullying. This effect may be more potent than it used to be, because children spend more time away from their home and neighborhood than in previous generations.

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