# Children's enjoyment of school halves in first year of secondary education, study reveals



Researchers have highlighted a troubling dip in children's enjoyment of school as they transition from primary to secondary education. A study conducted by the Research Commission on Engagement and Lead Indicators found that pupils' enthusiasm for school significantly diminishes in their first year of secondary education. Tracking data from over 100,000 students across England during the 2024/25 academic year, the report indicates that the decline in reported enjoyment typically occurs between Years 6 and 7, revealing a critical point in a child's educational journey.

The findings are worrisome, showing that Year 7 students consistently reported lower levels of enjoyment, trust, agency, and feelings of safety compared to their primary school years. The study's data indicated an average school enjoyment score plummeting from approximately 6 out of 10 in Year 6 to around 3.8 in Year 7, with a further drop to 3.2 by Year 8. This suggests that Year 7 is a pivotal moment when students' positive perceptions of school and engagement diminish sharply.

Socioeconomic factors also play a significant role in this decline. Students eligible for Free School Meals reported markedly lower levels of enjoyment and sense of belonging. Alarmingly, as students advance through their secondary education, these gaps appear to widen, raising concerns about equitable access to a nurturing learning environment.

The research also highlighted a critical decline in the feeling of safety among students. For girls, perceptions of safety fell from an average of 7.21 in Year 7 to 5.89 by Year 9, while for boys, the numbers dropped from 7.40 to 6.55 during the same period. This shift raises important questions about the implications of the school environment on student wellbeing, particularly as girls increasingly report feeling less secure.

Dame Sue John, chairwoman of the Research Commission on Engagement and Lead Indicators, emphasised the urgency of understanding these patterns. "It is crucial that we identify the points at which pupils are starting to disengage with school so we can intervene to prevent a disconnection that might lead to non-attendance and poorer outcomes," she stated. Similarly, Margaret Mulholland, a specialist in special educational needs and inclusion, noted the unsettling nature of this transition period, stressing that a drop in engagement can be detrimental to both wellbeing and academic performance.

In examining why these declines occur, some studies suggest that school practices may contribute to these trends. For instance, research into the 'bubble' system—where Year 7 students remain in one classroom for most lessons—revealed mixed effects. While some students appreciate the reduced anxiety and familiar surroundings, others feel limited by the lack of social interaction with different peers and teachers, indicating a need for a more balanced approach that fosters both security and independence.

Further investigations into transitions from primary to secondary school underscore the importance of robust support systems. A Scottish Government report found that while over a third of children viewed the move positively, a significant portion reported negative experiences. Similar findings from various studies indicate that students transitioning to secondary education often develop less favourable perceptions of their school environment, underscoring the necessity for strategic interventions to support students during this critical time.

Notably, interventions aimed at reducing transition-related stress have shown promise. Research led by Geoffrey D. Borman at the University of Wisconsin-Madison demonstrated that simple, low-cost strategies like brief writing exercises could improve academic performance and decrease absenteeism. Such findings suggest that proactive measures can enhance students' experiences during this unsettling phase, potentially mitigating some of the negative effects highlighted in recent studies.

As educational leaders reflect on the demands of transitioning to secondary education, it is imperative that they address both the psychological and social challenges that students face. A comprehensive understanding of these dynamics, coupled with timely intervention strategies, can help students navigate this significant change in their educational journey, ultimately leading to improved wellbeing and academic outcomes.

#### Reference Map

1. Paragraph 1, 2, 3, 4, 5
2. Paragraph 6
3. Paragraph 7
4. Paragraph 8
5. Paragraph 9
6. Paragraph 10

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/health-and-families/children-year-7-high-school-secondary-school-transition-b2753922.html> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03004279.2023.2186977> - This study examines the impact of 'bubbles'—a practice where Year 7 students remain in the same classroom for most lessons—on the primary to secondary school transition. The research found that while some students appreciated the familiarity and reduced anxiety associated with staying in one classroom, others felt restricted and desired more interaction with different peers and teachers. The study suggests that while 'bubbles' can provide a sense of security, they may also limit social integration and the development of independence, highlighting the need for a balanced approach in supporting students during this transition.
3. <https://www.gov.scot/publications/transitions-primary-secondary-school/pages/2/> - This Scottish Government report analyzes the experiences of children transitioning from primary to secondary school. It reveals that over one-third of children found the move positive, while 22% had negative experiences. The report highlights a decline in students' enjoyment and engagement, noting an increase in students who 'hate school' and a decrease in those who look forward to attending. It underscores the importance of providing support to maintain positive attitudes and engagement during this critical transition period.
4. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4740420/> - This research investigates the effects of transitioning from elementary to middle school on students' perceptions of the school climate. The study found that students who experienced the transition reported a decline in positive perceptions of the school environment, which became comparable to or lower than those of students who did not transition. The findings suggest that the transition period may negatively impact students' sense of belonging and overall school experience, emphasizing the need for strategies to support students during this time.
5. <https://www.wcer.wisc.edu/news/detail/new-study-shows-power-of-refocusing-student-stress-in-middle-school-transitions> - A study led by Geoffrey D. Borman at the University of Wisconsin-Madison explored interventions to reduce student stress during the middle school transition. The research involved over 1,000 students who participated in two 15-minute writing exercises aimed at managing academic tasks and navigating social groups. The intervention resulted in improved academic performance, reduced absenteeism, and fewer disciplinary issues, demonstrating that brief, low-cost strategies can effectively support students during this challenging period.
6. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4740420/> - This study examines the impact of transitioning from elementary to middle school on students' perceptions of the school climate. The research found that students who underwent the transition reported a decline in positive perceptions of the school environment, which became comparable to or lower than those of students who did not transition. The findings suggest that the transition period may negatively affect students' sense of belonging and overall school experience, highlighting the need for supportive strategies during this critical time.
7. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03004279.2023.2186977> - This study investigates the effects of 'bubbles'—a practice where Year 7 students remain in the same classroom for most lessons—on the primary to secondary school transition. The research found that while some students appreciated the familiarity and reduced anxiety associated with staying in one classroom, others felt restricted and desired more interaction with different peers and teachers. The study suggests that while 'bubbles' can provide a sense of security, they may also limit social integration and the development of independence, highlighting the need for a balanced approach in supporting students during this transition.