

# Catching ZZZ's

YORK HOUSE STUDENTS  
AREN'T GETTING ENOUGH  
SLEEP. WE GET AN EXPERT  
OPINION ON HOW TO  
CHANGE THAT.

By Jennifer Foden



“I’m just going to check my Apple Watch real quick,” says **FIONA CHEN**, an eleventh-grade student at York House School when I ask her about the average number of hours she sleeps each night. “Oh, my goodness! Oh wait—this looks horrible—my average sleep right now this week has been a little worse than usual. Three hours and 45 minutes.”

Chen’s sleep habits that week might be an anomaly, but York House students still aren’t getting enough rest. According to data collected by the school in February 2025 from students in grades 6 through 12, the average amount of sleep is just under seven hours per night. The reality: high school age kids need an average of nine hours of sleep and middle-schoolers need 10, says **DR. LISA DAMOUR**, clinical psychologist, author of three *New York Times* bestsellers and an expert on adolescent mental health.



She adds that girls can have a harder time falling asleep than boys. “Especially around puberty, teenagers go through what we call sleep-phase delay where their body wants to stay up later and sleep in later,” she says. “And given that this is driven by puberty, it actually hits girls earlier than it hits boys.”

Of course, not getting enough sleep can have some disastrous consequences. Tiredness, of course, but lack of sleep makes us more prone to sickness, accidents, emotional reactivity, and worsening mental health. Chen says her lack of sleep has caused “the craziest brain fog,” where she can’t remember things and she recently experienced vivid nightmares in which she couldn’t tell the difference between her dream and reality.

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Dr. Damour says there are many different things that can interfere with a kid’s sleep.

First and foremost, looking at screens before bed. “The number-one player in a lot of homes is where their digital technology is at night and how recently they were on it,” Dr. Damour shares. “What we consistently find is that it’s best for kids—and adults—to step away from their tech an hour or

Left: Dr Lisa Damour; above: Fiona Chen '26

# Supporting Student Sleep

## EXHAUSTION ISN'T A PREREQUISITE FOR SUCCESS

By Kelly Walker Schobel

The challenge of sleepy students is not new nor is it unique to York House School. In fact, students in Grades 6 through 12 across 15,000 student responses from 29 independent and private schools surveyed are getting an average of 7.2 hours of sleep a night, just a little more than the average Yorkie.

“Sleep deprivation has been a topic of much discussion in school administration and counselling offices for decades, so while our survey data seems concerning, it is not surprising,” says Hayley Jacobs, York House’s Senior School Vice Principal of Student Life and Belonging. “There isn’t a quick fix but there are actions we can take—students, parents, guardians, and as a school—to support student rest and recovery.”

Here are some ways YHS is supporting students to get the rest they need:

- Late start at 9:15 a.m. on Wednesdays for Grades 8-12
- Intentionally minimizing homework in the Junior School to ensure students have ample time in the evening to relax, connect with family, and maintain consistent bedtime routines
- We are tracking the extracurricular activities students do while also advising them not to overload their schedule
- Balancing the amount of before and after school co-curricular activities in the Junior School for different age groups
- University Admissions Counsellors work with Senior School students to identify the optimal course load for their unique needs
- Wellness, sleep hygiene, the importance of sleep, limiting screen time, and how sleep impacts learning and emotions are taught in socio-emotional learning sessions
- Wellness activities are built into the Senior School schedule to promote downtime, slowing down, and peer connections
- Instrumental band in Senior School has been moved from 7:15 a.m. to promote an 8:35 a.m. start time.
- Starting in the 2025/26 school year, Senior School will hold AP and other classes outside of their usual lunch time schedule, ensuring lunch is focused on nourishing bodies, minds, and spirits

“In a world that tells us to hustle, keep moving, and do it all, we need to help these young people slow down and listen to what their bodies need,” says Jacobs. “That starts with all of us modelling what healthy rest and recovery looks like ourselves, and having an open dialogue about the changes we need to make for our own overall wellness.”

so before sleep if they want to sleep well and best not to have it in their bedroom.” More than 70% of York House students in grades 6 through 12 keep their phones in their bedroom at night.

Secondly, caffeine. Chen drinks matcha on occasion, for example. “Today’s teenagers really enjoy coffee drinks or energy drinks and sometimes they’re drinking them late into the day and that interferes with their sleep,” Dr. Damour says. She says teenagers that are having any form of caffeine should stop doing so at least eight hours before bed.

Lack of physical activity is also a factor. “We consistently see that if kids get their heart rate up, if they move around, if they get themselves out into natural light, they can significantly improve their quality of sleep,” Dr. Damour says. Chen has ultimate frisbee practice twice weekly and **AVA SCHACH**, a York House School 5th grade student, swims four times a week and gets over 10 hours of sleep each night. “When I go to bed after swimming, I feel tired,” she says.

Sometimes, anxiety is the reason for lack of sleep. Dr. Damour says that in addition to mental health coping strategies—like meditation and deep breathing practices—if an adolescent is anxious, she’d want to evaluate what’s going on in



their life. “If they have too much work or they have too many activities, there’s too much on their plate, so they’re staying up late just trying to get everything done. And they may need to have some things come off of their plate so they can get the sleep they deserve.”

Dr. Damour also adds that there can be “real factors” that disrupt one’s sleep, like having a place to sleep that is quiet, dark, comfortable and cold enough. “We actually need it to be cool enough in order for people to sleep well,” she says. Having a routine before bed helps, too. “Maybe take a shower, brush your teeth, put on lotion, listen to music. Our bodies get accustomed to those patterns and that helps with sleep readiness and easing one’s way toward falling asleep.”

It’s always best if the kid or teen takes the lead with their bedtime—both Chen and Schach

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DR. LISA DAMOUR

do—but Dr. Damour says it’s always helpful when good sleep habits are modelled by parents and caregivers. She says when an adolescent is struggling with sleep it can be a “really nice opening” for the parent to say, for example: “You know what? We’re all taking our phones out of our bedrooms. Like, let’s just make it a universal family rule. It’s not good for any of us.”

Schach says it usually takes her 20 or so minutes to fall asleep, but sometimes, if she has a lot on her mind—like a school

presentation—she’ll have trouble doing so. In those cases, she knows what to do: she’ll talk to her parents, listen to sleepcasts on her mom or dad’s phone, turn on her white noise machine, take magnesium if she hasn’t already or practice cognitive shuffling. “I pick a word like ‘plant,’” she explains of the technique. “And I go through each letter of the word and name as many words for that letter.”

What about catching up on “sleep debt” on the weekend? “During the school week, they can’t get as much sleep as they need, but they’ll sleep in later on the weekend to make up some of that time,” Dr. Damour says. “In strictest terms, it’s not ideal. We really like to see kids go to bed and wake up at the same time all week, so they don’t run into what we would call a jet lag problem on Monday, where they suddenly have to shift their schedule back to regular time.” However, she adds, that if that’s where kids can make up some sleep, she’d rather they get extra sleep than not.

“Sleep is the glue that holds all human beings together,” Dr. Damour says. “And especially during periods of development, when there’s so much happening for kids and teenagers, they really need their rest in order to recover from the demands of their day and also to support all of the growth they are doing.” 🌞

Above: Ava Schach '32