

# The Kids Are Alright... **RIGHT?**



Psychologist and author Dr. Lisa Damour presented to students, parents, and guardians at YHS in November 2017. In January 2024, she facilitated a Head's Book Club discussion on her book *The Emotional Lives of Teenagers*.

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Leading psychologists and York House counsellors weigh in on what today's teens face and the best ways to support mental health and well-being through the adolescent years.

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**BY JOY PECKNOLD**

"Remember high school?" Psychologist and author Dr. Michael G. Thompson posed the question in a presentation based off his book, *The Pressured Child: Helping Your Child Find Success in School and Life*, to an auditorium of York House parents and guardians in October of last year. While working on the book, Thompson shadowed children through a school day, including a varsity athlete at Belmont Hill, the private, all-boys middle school in Massachusetts where he is supervising psychologist. Recalling that experience, he says, "I would creep home exhausted, wiped out—I never wanted to go back."

Google searching how hard it is to be a teenager produces a very scientific explanation from the abstract of a *Development Psychobiology* article titled "The Storm and Stress of Adolescence." It reads: "Adolescence has been considered, almost by definition, a period of heightened stress due to the many changes experienced concomitantly, including physical maturation, drive for independence, increased salience of social and peer interactions, and brain development." Add to that the over six hours a day spent absorbing knowledge, across language, science, math, social studies, and more.

But is it more difficult than it used to be? Psychologist and author of *New York Times* bestseller *The Emotional Lives of Teenagers* Dr. Lisa Damour does. “I actually think it is harder now to be and to raise a teenager than it was a generation ago,” she says. “Teenagers today deal with a lot more input and are expected to produce a lot more output. They swim in a digital environment that has them taking in information and connecting with peers all day, and sometimes all night. Then we ask, especially in schools like [York House], far more of them than we used to ask teenagers. In many ways, we’re helping them reach new heights, yet at the same time, I think today’s parents say quite readily that much less was asked of us in high school, and the college admissions expectations were much lower.”

Teens, in addition to adolescence’s typical challenges, now contend with social media and higher academic pressure. To help them navigate these storms and stresses, their emotional health is key, and the experts suggest some surprisingly simple remedies to bolster that. The first is sleep, close to nine hours of it. “Every human being knows that when you’re sleep deprived, you’re more anxious, more vigilant, and [therefore] more vulnerable,” says

Dr. Thompson. “If you have kids who are up doing homework then social media, going to bed at 2 a.m. and getting up at 6 a.m. to come to school, they’re likely to be pretty jittery and anxious.”

The second recommendation is time for play or restoration, which Dr. Damour says looks different for everybody. It could be socializing with friends, watching TV, spending time in nature, doing art—whatever it is, it should be a part of their weekly routine. She likens it to strength training. “We know that if you’re lifting heavy weights at the gym, that stress is healthy and important, it’s how you gain capacity. We also know that to prevent injury, it has to be paired with periods of recovery,” she says. “It’s the two together. Pushing beyond what’s comfortable and then having adequate rest actually contributes to growth over time.”

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*It’s also essential that no guilt is associated with resting, and Dr. Damour notes that girls in particular are more likely to feel bad about taking downtime or “me-time.”*

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Psychologist and author Dr. Michael Thompson visited YHS in October 2023 to speak with students, parents, guardians, faculty, and staff on understanding and managing the “hopes and fears” of children and parents.

As that training analogy nods to, the other aspect of building strength and resiliency is dealing with stress. Using the example of sleep-away camp, which is the topic of his most recent book *Homesick and Happy*, Dr. Thompson says, “The vast majority of kids rise to the challenge because their parents aren’t there and they actually want to do it on their own—I’ll add that to my list of anti-anxiety things: surmounting a developmentally appropriate challenge [like that] makes you less anxious,” he continues.

Dr. Damour points out that feeling and facing difficult emotions is also important, and unavoidable. “What really matters is how we handle negative emotions, not preventing them—they cannot be prevented. This is true for everybody,” she says. “This all gets a lot more anxiety provoking for parents, because teenage emotions are very powerful [and] they change or shift very quickly. Especially with teenagers, we need to remember that mental health is about having feelings that fit the context, even if those are negative, and having effective ways to cope with those feelings.”

In moments of emotional overwhelm or dysregulation, Dr. Damour suggests caregivers provide a steady presence. “We can reassure teenagers, that the situation is not as bad as it feels, and make it clear that we are not frightened of their negative emotions, and they don’t need to be frightened of those feelings either.”

York House students are learning emotional regulation skills at school too. Senior School Counsellor Monica Beck, a Registered Clinical Counsellor, says counsellors address it across the grades in different ways, drawing from research-supported therapies to help students develop emotional literacy, from naming their emotions to finding healthy self-care strategies for coping with them, such as sleep or exercise.

In addition to being available for one-on-ones with students, counsellors are also invited into classrooms to teach on these topics. Junior School Counsellor Susan Sobieski notes that this sometimes happens because a teacher notices issues arising, such as friendship tensions, and requests a lesson on conflict resolution or Zones of Regulation, a social-emotional learning curriculum for self-regulation.

At the Senior School level, Beck and her colleague, Counsellor, Ruth Andrews also address social media, helping students recognize its potential impacts on their emotions and self-esteem; how what they reveal online is used to push more targeted content, which can

exacerbate their vulnerabilities; and how to establish their own boundaries around its use. This kind of personal technology also distracts from learning and real-life connecting, so York House introduced a phone policy in September 2023 which requires Grade 8 and 9 students to leave their phones in their lockers and Grade 10, 11 and 12 students to have them turned off and put away while classes are in session.

Smartphones, emotions, stress, lack of rest—these aren’t just adolescent issues, they’re adult ones too. To help adults navigate their anxieties around their teenagers’ lives, Dr. Thompson and Dr. Damour, who also happen to be parents themselves, have some parting reassurances.

“Not everybody reaches their full potential in high school,” says Dr. Thompson. Recalling how his own parents felt he wasn’t living up to his potential as a young person, he says that now, as a 76-year-old author of 10 books, the first of which he wrote at 50, he feels he finally is.

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*“Trust your child’s journey,”  
Dr. Thompson says. “They’ll figure  
it out. Children are capable.”*

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With an eye towards the future too, Dr. Damour highlights that there is little correlation between happiness and professional or financial success. “What is correlated with wellbeing at midlife is having good relationships, doing work you find meaningful and being good at that work,” she says. “If we reverse engineer that, the adolescent precursors of those three things, it’s actually conscientiousness, being honest and upright.”

Helping develop the life skills that foster those character traits is a York House value too. “We’ve tried to be quite intentional about the wellbeing programming that we’ve developed beyond the academic program,” says York House’s Assistant Director of Senior School Katrina O’Connor. “It’s very important that students have an opportunity to grow in their understanding of themselves. These years are such an intense period of identity formation for young people, and providing a context in which young women are able to grow into their unique identities is very important. And it does feed into that notion of wellbeing and the confidence that comes from that.” 🌀