

Why some children don't enjoy school - what the research tells us in 2026

Recent national research and surveys conducted in the UK between 2023 and early 2026 paint a concerning picture regarding children's enjoyment of school. Studies consistently show that school is increasingly cited as the area of life young people are most unhappy with, and the UK currently ranks near the bottom in Europe for children's life satisfaction. For example, PISA (2022) data reveals that 15-year-olds in the UK have the lowest average life satisfaction among 27 European countries, with one in four (25.2%) reporting low contentment. This reflects a growing trend of declining wellbeing, particularly in relation to school attendance.

Based on major publications like The Children's Society's *Good Childhood Report* and analyses from the UK Parliament and educational research groups, the reasons children do not enjoy school fall into several core categories:

1. Bullying and Poor School Safety

A primary driver of unhappiness at school is the prevalence of bullying and feeling unsafe.

- **High bullying rates:** Data highlights that the UK has some of the highest rates of bullying in Europe. According to The Children's Society (2024), 25% of 15-year-olds in the UK reported being bullied at least a few times a month, and 21% of children reported being actively unhappy with their experience of bullying.
- **Lack of safety:** The UK ranked sixth highest out of 24 surveyed countries for the proportion of students who felt unsafe attending school. The long-term emotional toll of these experiences drastically reduces a child's desire to be in an educational environment.

2. Academic Pressure and a Narrowed Curriculum

The educational landscape is frequently described by young people as highly stressful and alienating.

- **Assessment anxiety:** Research points to "unwarranted pressures" surrounding testing and academic performance as a major cause of distress.
- **Curriculum constraints:** A narrowing of the curriculum, particularly in secondary schools, alongside reduced funding for creative and arts subjects, has left many students feeling disengaged. Students report finding the heavily academic focus restrictive, leading to boredom and a lack of motivation.

3. Escalating Mental Health Needs and Unmet SEN

A significant portion of school dissatisfaction stems from systemic failures to support vulnerable learners.

- **Anxiety and burnout:** Referrals for youth mental health services (CYPMHS), particularly for anxiety, have more than doubled since the pandemic. Many young people experience "emotionally based school non-attendance" (EBSNA) simply because they are too burnt out or anxious to cope with the school environment.
- **Lack of SEN support:** Parents and children consistently report that schools lack the resources to adequately support Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). When children's specific learning and emotional needs go unmet, the school environment becomes a source of daily frustration and exclusion.

4. Socio-Economic Pressures and Poverty

The ongoing cost-of-living crisis spills directly into the classroom, severely impacting how children experience school.

- **Financial strain:** Children living in households experiencing financial strain consistently report lower life satisfaction. Basic barriers, such as a lack of adequate food (highlighting the need for breakfast clubs) or transport difficulties, prevent children from arriving at school ready to learn or socialize comfortably.
- **Stigma and exclusion:** Poverty can exacerbate feelings of exclusion, limiting a child's ability to participate fully in the wider social and extracurricular life of the school.

5. Poor Relationships and a Lack of Belonging

Children are highly sensitive to the culture of their schools.

- **Peer and staff dynamics:** A breakdown in relational practices—whether through difficult peer dynamics or a feeling that school staff lack understanding and empathy—heavily contributes to disengagement.
- **Lack of respect:** Many older students report feeling a lack of mutual respect in the secondary school environment, drastically reducing their sense of belonging and their overall enjoyment of the educational experience.

Reference List

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