

# Attention parents: Your teens aren't coping nearly as well as you think they are

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Most U.S. teens aren't always getting the social and emotional support they need, and most of their parents have no idea, according to a new report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

In a nationwide survey conducted after the most isolating period of the COVID-19 pandemic, only 28% of adolescents between the ages of 12 and 17 said they "always" received the social and [emotional support](#) they needed. However, 77% of their parents who responded to a related survey said they thought their children "always" had that support.

At the other end of the spectrum, 20% of the teens said they "rarely" or "never" had enough social and emotional support. That realization was shared by just 3% of their parents, according to the report published Tuesday by the CDC's National Center for Health Statistics.

This perception gap was shared to some extent by families in all racial and ethnic categories and across all levels of household income, the CDC statisticians found. The same was true for families with [teen girls](#) and for families with [teen boys](#).

Parents with college or advanced degrees underestimated their teens' need for social and emotional support, as did parents with a [high school diploma](#) or less. Likewise, parents misjudged their kids' feelings regardless of whether they were raising their families in large cities, rural areas and communities in between, the researchers reported.

Jean Twenge, who has spent decades studying the [mental health](#) of adolescents, said the new findings were in line with long-term trends.

"We know from research that a lot of teens are struggling and don't always share that with their parents," said Twenge, a professor of psychology at San Diego State University and author of "Generations: The Real Differences between Gen Z, Millennials, Gen X, Boomers and Silents and What they Mean for America's Future."

In part, those struggles can be traced to the fact that compared with their predecessors, today's teens spend less time hanging out with their friends

in person and more time communicating through smartphones and other digital devices, she said. That type of asynchronous communication can make people feel anxious as they wait for a reply.

What's more, reading someone's words instead of hearing them spoken face to face "doesn't feel as emotionally deep," Twenge said.

It may be tempting to dismiss the teens' survey responses as typical adolescent angst. But the CDC researchers found significant links between the frequency with which teens wished they had more social and emotional support and their physical and mental health.

For instance, 14% of those who said they "sometimes, rarely, or never" got the support they needed described their physical health as "fair" or "poor." That compares with 5% of those who "always or usually" felt socially and emotionally supported.

In addition, 67% of those with less social and emotional support rated their sleep quality as "poor," compared with 37% of those with more support.

Among those who "sometimes, rarely, or never" received the social and emotional support they needed, 33% had signs of anxiety, 31% had symptoms of depression, and 14% had "very low life satisfaction." The corresponding figures for those who "always or usually" had the social and emotional support they needed were 13%, 8% and 1%, the researchers reported.

While the link between emotional well-being and health is firmly established, the relationship between them is less clear.

"It could be that people who don't get the emotional support they need are thus more likely to feel anxiety," Twenge said. "It could also be that

when you have anxiety, you don't perceive that you're getting the emotional support you need. That's the key—this is not an objective thing."

Overall, 52% of girls said they "always or usually" received the social and emotional support they needed, compared with 65% of boys, the researchers found.

Additionally, 42% of Black teens, 50% of Latino teens, 61% of Asian teens and 66% of white teens "always or usually" had sufficient support, according to the report.

Finally, 44% of teens who identified as a member of a sexual or gender minority said they "always or usually" had sufficient support, compared with 64% of those who did not describe themselves as a member of one of these groups.

The CDC surveys were conducted between July 2021 and December 2022. That coincides with the period when COVID-19 vaccines became available to adolescents and schools that had leaned into distance learning required students to return to campus.

Other federal health surveys show that in-person social interactions were on the upswing between 2021 and 2022, but there's still a long way to go, Twenge said.

"People are coming out of that a little," she said, but "the numbers are still much much lower than they were in the '80s or '90s."

The pandemic's effects on children and teens prompted U.S. Surgeon General Vivek H. Murthy to issue a rare advisory on youth mental health in late 2021. The advisory noted that 20% of young people around the world were experiencing anxiety and 25% had symptoms of depression,

and that both figures had doubled since the start of the pandemic.

These and other signs of increasing [psychological distress](#) were more difficult to spot when schools were closed and other lockdown measures were in place, the advisory said.

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