

FAITH

5:30 AM

LDS parents wonder if early morning seminary is worth risks to teens' health

Is rising before dawn for religious study laudable or lamentable? Research shows dangers of sleep deprivation for high schoolers.

By TAMARRA KEMSLEY

It's not that Harper Auston doesn't want to attend her 6:15 a.m. Latter-day Saint seminary class. Her friends are there, and the Denver 15-year-old likes starting her day learning about Jesus.

"But waking up early makes me really low energy," she said, "especially with ADHD [attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder]."

On the days she does attend the religious study program for high schoolers belonging to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, she tends to "run out of juice" for the day by lunchtime.

She said she forgets things and has trouble focusing on what's being taught. And though she tries to get to bed as soon as possible, homework and extracurriculars make it difficult — especially on the nights that a lack of energy and concentration combine to slow her down.

Harper's plight is hardly an anomaly. A mounting body of evidence indicates that teens not only need more sleep than adults but also that hormonal shifts make it hard for them to go to bed before 10 or 11 p.m. At the same time, researchers have gained a clearer picture of the risks associated with teenage sleep deprivation, among them serious mental health issues and substance abuse.

Taken together, these findings are prompting Latter-day Saint parents to reevaluate the benefits of sending their teens out to study scriptures at the crack of dawn.

TEENS AND SLEEP — THE RESEARCH

Latter-day Saint teens living in Utah and other areas with high numbers of church members often have the option of attending seminary during their school day in a building located just off campus. For all others, the four-year program represents more than a chance for teens to pore over their sacred texts together. It's a rite of passage, a way for young people to signal their commitment to their faith by laying sleep on the altar of scripture study. "I attended the seminary kick-off before the school year began," said Leisy Oswald Miller, a Las Vegas mother with two kids in seminary. "It was built up and presented as this life-changing experience that comes when you make the huge sacrifice involved."

But what if the sacrifice involves more than the comfort of one's blankets?

Teens, studies from the past few decades have shown, need up to 10 hours of sleep a night. And it isn't as simple as going to bed sooner.

As sleep expert Matthew Walker



Courtesy of Leisy Oswald Miller



Top ▶ Leisy Oswald Miller and Kent Miller appear with their children, including their seminary-age son. Seminary starts at 5:40 a.m. in her area of Las Vegas to give students enough time to arrive at school before the bell rings at 7 a.m. Above ▶ In addition to Sunday worship and weekly and summertime activities, Latter-day Saint youths often enroll in seminary.

explains in his 2017 bestseller, "Why We Sleep," adolescents are hardwired to hit the sack after most adults, thanks to a one- to three-hour shift forward in their circadian rhythm. In other words, adults and teens are essentially living in different time zones, in some cases as far apart as New York is to Los Angeles.

Meanwhile, researchers have begun to raise an ever-louder din regarding the dangers associated with sleep deprivation in young adults.

Tired teens, recent studies have discovered, are more prone to major depression and risky behavior, including drug experimentation. One study, published in 2023, found that sleep-deprived adolescents were about twice as prone to suicide ideation and consideration, even when adjusting for sexual identity, trauma, bullying and other related factors. Another, published the year before, suggested a possible link between poor adolescent sleep and an increased risk of schizophrenia.

Early mornings can be especially difficult for teens like Harper with ADHD. Her mother, Darice Auston, said multiple medical providers who happened to be fellow Latter-day Saints stressed this point and cautioned Harper to think seriously about whether attending was worth it for her.

Dallas resident Julie Rose had a similar experience with her seminary-age son with ADHD.

"His psychologist actually said

[waking up that early] is really problematic for developing brains and the ADHD diagnosis makes it even more challenging," partly because the associated medications can keep teens up later depending on when they take them.

In the end, her son opted to join his friends and enroll.

Church spokesperson Sam Penrod said in a statement that the faith "is aware of concerns raised by some parents and research involving the well-being of high school students."

Of equal note, he said, are studies indicating a "strong positive link between faith and religious community in the overall health and mental wellness of young people."

Penrod pointed out that the church made changes in recent years to "allow for increased flexibility for local leaders and parents to choose from a wider selection of class options best suited to local and individual needs."

That includes that option of holding seminary for an hour four days a week rather than 50 minutes five times a week.

And if an in-person approach doesn't work for a student, there's always the option of online seminary.

WEIGHING THE COSTS AND BENEFITS

Oswald Miller, the Las Vegas mother, said she and her husband, Kent, are aware of the latest

research on sleep and the teens. Together they "considered them heavily" in trying to decide whether to encourage their teens to attend seminary they ultimately left it up to their kids to decide about the 5:40 a.m. class.

"They're not the only ones. Jedd Fowers was both a parent of seminary-age kids and a volunteer seminary teacher himself when he took to Facebook in 2022 and, amid a group of fellow instructors, asked his colleagues 'an obvious, commonsense question: Is there a better way?'"

In his post, the Texas information technology consultant cited research around teens and sleep. Within a few days, he had close to 200 responses on a page that usually logged closer to 10 or 20.

Clearly, he had hit a nerve.

Of the responses, nearly 70 defended the current model. But just as many voiced similar concerns.

Fowers grew up in Utah's Davis County, where he attended what's known as release-time seminary during his school day.

"It was not a sacrifice, and it wasn't hard," he said. "It was great. I liked it a lot."

In contrast, Fowers, who lives in the Dallas suburb of Lewisville, said the students he taught often struggled to stay awake in the 6 a.m. class and that getting his own kids out the door in the morning often became "a source of contention" within the home.

He and his wife, Michelle, a pediatrician, bounced their concerns off one another before ultimately settling on the same decision as Oswald Miller and left the decision to their kids.

"I wish there was a better option," he said. True, there is a night class, which goes from 8:30 to 9:30. But it interferes with homework and sometimes other church activities. The online class, meanwhile, is short on the camaraderie that comes with meeting together in a classroom with peers.

"There are," he concluded, "no easy answers here."

'EVERYTHING IS TOO MUCH'

Morgan Wicker is in her fifth year of teaching seminary — sixth if you count the year she taught one of her kids using the home study program.

Wicker lives in Coppell, an affluent bedroom community of Dallas where rows of red-brick McMansions stand shoulder to shoulder along tree-lined streets.

By far the biggest complicating factor she has seen, Wicker said, are the students' demanding schedules. In recent years, local church leaders have moved the start time for seminary earlier twice — first from 7 to 6:45 a.m. and then to 6:30 a.m. Both times, they were responding to the wishes of parents.

"That's not the church entity

imposing that [time] on the students," she said. "That's something that families have wanted because they've had struggles getting kids ready for school or to activities before school starts after seminary, or whatever the issue is."

Fowers emphasized this point as well, explaining that it was not uncommon while he was teaching to have students leave class early for drill practice and other activities.

"It's reasonable," Wicker said, "to question [early morning seminary] and say, is this the only way?"

What she's less comfortable with is the secondary importance seminary seems to take in the scheduling of students' lives. Teens gathering to study the scriptures each weekday with an engaged and committed adult is powerful, she said, and deserves to be a priority.

"There's something really sacred about getting to spend time with these youth and really explore the scriptures in a deep way," she said, growing emotional, "and to have them choose to spend their lives with me musing that."

For example, "there is no reason," Wicker said, why parents and church leaders couldn't coordinate with schools to allow Latter-day Saint youths to gather during free periods during the school day much like their Utah counterparts. But that would take parents and students being willing to take one less elective, a scenario she doesn't see as going over well.

"I live in an area where everything that is asked of us in an educational sense is too much," she said. "Extracurriculars are too much. Everything is too much, so it's hard to single out seminary as the one thing causing concern there."

DIALOGUE WITH CES

One voice that has been conspicuously absent from the conversations these parents and seminary teachers are having is the church itself.

Fowers said he wishes there was "some kind of mechanism to engage" with leaders at the Church Educational System, which oversees the seminary program, about "how the current program is working and, perhaps, how it could evolve to better help youth deepen their conversion to the gospel."

After all, he reasons, isn't that the point?

"This is a topic which has no easy answers," he said. "I think we would have solidified on one if there was an easy answer. But sometimes through the dialogue process and conversation, we find better ways of doing things."

Editor's note ▶ This article mentions suicide. If you or people you know are at risk of self-harm, call or text the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline, or chat at 988lifeline.org.

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POOR