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Jessie Stern, Ph.D. and Rachel Samson, M.Psych

The Heart and Science of Attachment

# How to Build Teens' Empathy

Teens with secure family bonds "pay it forward" with empathy for friends.

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Reviewed by Devon Frye



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## KEY POINTS

- Contrary to popular myth, adolescence is a key time for the growth of empathy.
  - Teens who are securely attached show greater empathic support for their friends in early adolescence.
  - But insecure teens' empathy also grows over time, catching up to secure teens by age 18.
  - Adults can help foster secure, empathic relationships with teens, so that teens can "pay it forward" in their social world.
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Teens naturally develop the capacity for empathy, but secure teens may have a head start.

Source: Emmanuel Olguin/Unsplash

Teens with more secure family relationships get a head start on developing empathy, according to our team's [new study](#) tracking adolescents into adulthood.

In contrast to popular myths about self-obsessed teens, research shows that adolescence is a [key stage of development](#) for the growth of empathy: the ability to stand in someone else's shoes, to understand and resonate with their emotions, and to care about their well-being. Empathy is a skill that develops over time, and it has major consequences for teens' [social interactions](#), friendships, and [adult relationships](#).

## How Do Teens Learn This Critical Skill?

Our team's [new findings](#), published on July 15 in the journal *Child Development*, suggest that teens who have secure, supportive family relationships provide more empathic support to their friends.

supported and connected—that's what empathic support is all about.

Our study, led by professor of psychology **Joseph P. Allen**, followed 184 adolescents from their early teens into adulthood. When the teens were 14 years old, we interviewed them about their family experiences and their relationships with their parents.

The interviews were designed to measure *attachment security*—teens' confidence that they can explore and build autonomy while trusting others to provide connection, safety, and support when they need it. Past research shows that experiences of receiving sensitive care from adult caregivers, especially in times of stress, **build secure attachment**. In each interview, we rated teens as secure if they expressed that they valued their family relationships and described them in a balanced, clear way.

Then we videotaped the teens at ages 16, 17 and 18, while they helped their closest friend talk through problems they were facing. From these videos, we quantified how much support friends sought from the teens we interviewed—for example, by asking for their opinion on a situation. To measure how much empathic support the teens provided, we looked for four types of behaviors: showing understanding, helping friends solve their problems, providing emotional validation, and actively engaging in conversations.

We found that teens who were more secure in their family relationships at age 14 provided more empathic support to their

lower levels of empathy at first but improved this skill over time and nearly caught up to more secure teens by age 18.

This finding suggests that teens naturally gain empathic skills as they get older, but those with more secure family relationships may get there faster.

What is especially interesting is that teens' friends were more likely to seek out support from secure adolescents, and friends who sought more help were more likely to receive it. Thus, friendships provide a key context for adolescents to practice giving and receiving empathic support.

## Why It Matters

Teens who are more empathic are less **aggressive**, exhibit less **prejudice**, and are less likely to **bully** others.

Our research suggests that empathy starts with feeling safe and connected. Building secure relationships, characterized by trust, emotional safety, and responsiveness, can give teens a firsthand experience of empathy. With this foundation in place, they can then share that empathy with others.

## What's Next?

There's still plenty we don't know about teens' empathy. For instance, what equips teens to empathize with individuals from marginalized groups, with new peers or dating partners, or with their own future children?



Friends were more comfortable seeking support from securely attached teens.

Source: Trung Thanh/Unsplash

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### References

Stern, J. A., Costello, M. A., Kansky, J., Fowler, C., Loeb, E., & Allen, J. P. (2021). Here for you: Attachment and the growth of empathic support for friends in adolescence. *Child Development*.  
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