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Teens With Strong Family Relationships Display Greater Empathy For Friends

July 21, 2021 08:00 by [Elizabeth Pratt](#) *[About the Author]*



Strong family relationships gives teenagers greater empathy for their friends. Research published in Child Development found that teenagers who had supportive and secure family relationships had greater empathy for their peers.

“One of the fundamental questions that inspires me as a relationships researcher is, “How do we learn to care for other people?” This study aims to address this question by looking at how the care teens experience from their families (their attachment) might nurture teens’ own capacity for care (their empathy for friends). Contrary to popular myths about self-obsessed teens, evidence shows that adolescence is a pivotal period for the development of empathy,” Jessica Stern, author of the study and a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Virginia told Theravive.

In undertaking the study, the researchers follow 184 adolescents from their early teen years through to adulthood. At age 14, the teens were interviewed about their family experience and their relationships with their parents. At ages 16,17 and 18, the same teenagers were asked to come back and have a conversation with friends about a problem their friend was facing.

“Teens who were more secure in their family relationships at age 14 showed greater empathic support to their friends at ages 16 and 17 — but what’s really interesting is that insecure teens nearly caught up to secure teens by age 18,” Stern told Theravive.

“Another important finding is that the friends of secure teens were more comfortable asking for the support they needed during their conversations. To me, it’s amazing that a simple interview early in the teenage years can predict how empathy develops in real-life interactions with peers all the way into early adulthood.”

The findings of the study suggest that a strong sense of secure attachment among teenagers is strongly associated with the development of the capacity to give empathic support for their friends.

“Secure attachment is one’s sense of confidence to explore the world and build autonomy, knowing that ‘someone has my back when I need it.’ It’s the sense of safety that comes from experiences of receiving care, connection, and comfort in times of stress,” Stern explains.

“For children and young teens, secure attachment typically develops out of first-hand experiences with adult caregivers (often, parents) who are able to meet their fundamental human need for both connection and autonomy. As teens become older, they may form attachments to close friends and later, romantic partners. But even as teens gain independence (and may push parents away) their attachment to caregivers—their ability to turn to a trusted adult for support when they need it—remains vital for supporting healthy development.”

The researchers found that those who were less secure in their relationships with family members displayed lower empathic support towards friends at age 14. These teens also sought out support from their peers who were securely attached. Those who felt less secure may have had less empathy in adolescence, but their ability to show empathy grew over time.

“Empathy is the ability to take others’ perspectives, resonate with their emotions, and show concern for their welfare. It is a skill that can be built over time, with practice in close relationships. There’s a lot of hope for insecure teens in this regard—in our research we saw that insecurely attached teens increased in their empathy over time,” Stern said.

The researchers argue their findings emphasize the important of supporting adolescents who don’t feel security in their family relationships.

“Decades of research show that family relationships are important not just for teens’ empathy, but for their mental health and physical health as well. There are a few things we can do support teens’ secure relationships: First, we can better support families and caregivers (a) by reducing stressors (such as racism, inequality, poverty, and barriers to affordable quality childcare) and (b) by providing supports (such as access to physical and mental health care, home visiting, and family therapy),” Stern said.

“Second, we can use evidence-based programs like Circle of Security and Attachment & Biobehavioral Catch-up to help parents and other caregivers build secure relationships with children and teens. Third, we can support teens with difficult family relationships by connecting them with other trusted adults (a mentor, teacher, therapist, or coach, for example) and helping them choose safe, supportive friendships where they can learn to give and receive empathy.”

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