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Teens with Secure Family Relationships “Pay it Forward” with Empathy for Friends

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Here for You: Attachment and the Growth of Empathic Support for Friends in Adolescence

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Teens' ability to empathize — to understand others' perspectives and emotions, and to care for their wellbeing — is an important contributor to their relationships, including with friends. Prior research shows that teens who have more secure family relationships report higher levels of empathy for others. But little research examines whether teens with more secure family relationships actually show greater empathy when observed in real-life interactions with peers, or whether their empathic capacities show different patterns of growth over time.

A new study tested whether teens' secure, supportive family relationships at age 14 related to their ability to provide their friends with empathic support across adolescence and into early adulthood. Findings indicate that secure attachment (reflecting on close relationships in an emotionally balanced, coherent, and valuing way) predicts teens' ability to provide empathic support to their close friends. Close friends were also more likely to *seek* support from teens who had secure family relationships in early adolescence. While having secure family relationships at age 14 predicted greater empathy with peers across adolescence, those teens who did not have secure family relationships in early adolescence showed a pattern of catching up, increasing their empathy towards close friends as they developed. This study is among the first to examine associations of attachment with the development of empathic support using longitudinal methods and observations of empathic support for friends across mid-adolescence.

The findings were published in a *Child Development* article, written by researchers at the University of Virginia and led by Joseph P. Allen, Hugh P. Kelly professor of psychology.

"Our findings showed that teens who were more secure in their family relationships at age 14 provided greater empathic support to their friends at ages 16, 17 and 18, and they were consistently able to provide that support over time," said Jessica Stern, postdoctoral fellow at the University of Virginia. "Teens who were less secure in their family relationships at age 14 showed lower empathic support for friends in early adolescence, but their empathic abilities grew over time. What's especially interesting is that close friends also *sought out* more support from securely attached teens."

The study featured a sample of 184 adolescents (86 males, 98 females) recruited from a public middle school (seventh and eighth grades) in a suburban and urban populations from the Southeastern United States. Adolescents in the study were 58% Caucasian, 29% African American, 8% mixed race or ethnic and 5% other

identity groups.

In the current study, teens at age 14 responded to an interview about their attachment relationships, unlike most prior studies which used self-report measures of attachment style and empathy. Teens who described their attachment relationships as supportive, who valued those relationships and reflected on them with coherence and emotional balance, were rated as more secure. At ages 16, 17 and 18, teens and their nominated closest friend participated in a video-recorded 6-minute task in which teens helped friends deal with a problem they were facing. Friends' bids for support, as well as teens' ability to provide empathic support, were coded from videos of this task.

The findings suggest a strong association between a teen's having a secure attachment state of mind, or perspective on attachment relationships as supportive, and the development of the capacity to provide empathic support to close friends across a 4-year period of adolescence. Results also suggest that friends' support-seeking develops alongside teens' ability to deliver empathy, with support seeking helping empathy to develop and empathy fostering support-seeking from friends as well.

"Investing in the quality of teens' family relationships early in adolescence may be important for building empathy and positive interactions with peers," said Stern. "Parenting programs, family therapy when needed, and school-based interventions that help young teens feel safe and supported in their relationships with adults—not only parents but teachers, mentors, and extended kin—may equip teens to 'pay it forward' in their empathy and care for others."

The authors acknowledge several limitations. First, the study analyzed support provisions among close friends, but teens may have different motivations for providing support with a range of peers, such as a sense of obligation, the desire to be viewed positively by others (including the researchers). Additionally, it is also important to examine whether adolescent attachment predicts caregiving behavior in other contexts (e.g., with other peers at school, with one's own future children). Future work could take into account other potential sources of friendship stability and change, such as closeness and trust, to provide a more complete picture of friends' support-seeking. Finally, although the sample was reasonably representative of the community from which participants were drawn, the majority of participants were white, and all were from the United States. The authors also note that the present study precludes drawing any causal conclusions. For example, it is possible that teens' ability to be empathetic contributes to their secure attachment, allowing them to take the perspective of others when discussing close relationships, or that the link is

bidirectional.

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Summarized from *Child Development*, Here for you: Attachment and the growth of empathic support for friends in adolescence by Stern, J., Costello, M., Kansky, J., Fowler, C., and Allen, J. (University of Virginia).
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