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25-Year Longitudinal Study Shows Mothers' Empathy for Teens May Predict Teens' Empathy for Friends and Future Parenting

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Empathy Across Three Generations: From Maternal and Peer Support in Adolescence to Adult Parenting and Child Outcomes

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Q&A with Child Development Author

A new *Child Development* study from researchers at the University of Virginia provides the first long-term, longitudinal evidence for the transmission of empathic care across three generations: from mother to teen to child.

The findings suggest that interactions with close friends in adolescence may provide a "training ground" in which teens can practice providing care in their peer relationships and pay forward the empathy they experience from their mothers, which may help strengthen their future parenting skills.

For families and service providers, supporting one generation of parents to model empathy toward their kids may have long-term ripple effects on relationships across adolescence and into adulthood.

Parents can recognize the importance of teens' close friendships for adult social skills, including parenting, and can encourage their teens to spend time with supportive peers and to become more supportive, caring friends themselves.

The Society for Research in Child Development had the opportunity to discuss these findings with the lead author of the research, Jessica Stern from the Department of Psychology at the University of Virginia in the United States.

SRCD: What led you to study empathy and supportive relationships across generations?

Dr. Stern: I've always been fascinated by how patterns of behavior are transmitted across generations. We know a lot about intergenerational cycles of trauma, adversity, and mental illness. But what about

intergenerational cycles of empathy, support, and resilience? We had a unique opportunity to look at this question in a really exciting 25-year longitudinal study spanning three generations.

SRCD: Can you please provide a brief overview of the study?

Dr. Stern: The KLIFF VIDA longitudinal study, led by Dr. Joe Allen at the University of Virginia, began in 1998. Our team tracked 184 teens for more than two decades, from age 13 into their mid-30s. Every year, we invited teens to the research lab with their parents and closest friend, and we recorded videos of their interactions with each other. When teens were 13 years old, we observed them talking to their mom about a problem they could use help or advice about, and we tracked how much empathy moms showed to their teen during that conversation. We looked for things like how emotionally engaged the mom was, whether she had an accurate understanding of the teen's problem, and how much help and emotional support she provided to the teen. Then, every year for seven years after that, we observed teens talking to their closest friend about a problem their friend needed help with. We looked for those same types of empathic behaviors in how the teen treated their friends when they were ages 13 to 19.

When some of those same teens were starting to have kids of their own about a decade later, we sent them surveys asking about their parenting behavior and their children's empathy.

What we found was that mothers' empathy toward teens at age 13 predicted teens' empathy for their closest friends across the adolescent years. For the teens who later had children, the ability to provide empathic support for close friends in late adolescence predicted more supportive parenting behavior in adulthood, and supportive parenting then predicted greater empathy in the next generation of young children.

SRCD: Why are these findings important today?

Dr. Stern: It may seem obvious that empathic parents tend to raise empathic kids, but we're showing just how important it is for parents to show empathy *toward* their teenagers when they're struggling, because teens appear to internalize these experiences and "pay it forward" to friends and their own children. If we want to raise empathic kids, we need to give them first-hand experiences of being understood and supported, as well as opportunities to practice and refine these skills with their peers.

Adults often underestimate the importance of teens being able to spend time with their friends. But experiences in close, supportive friendships as a teenager are actually really important for healthy development. Our findings suggest that adolescent friendships may be an underappreciated but essential context for developing critical social skills like empathy, responding appropriately to difficult emotions, and even later parenting.

SRCD: How does this research differ from what's been studied to date?

Dr. Stern: A lot of previous studies of empathy ask people to self-report how empathic they are, which isn't always accurate. In our study, we were able to actually observe mothers interacting with their teen and providing support when the teen had a problem and observe teens interacting with their best friends every year for seven years. From these real-life interactions, we could document specific empathic behaviors, like how much support the teen gives to their friends. And we could see how these behaviors develop over time, from the early teenage years into emerging adulthood.

Previous studies have looked at similarities in empathy between just two generations, parents and children, usually at just one point in time. We've extended this by looking across three generations: parents, adolescents, and their own children, over a much longer time period of more than two decades.

SRCD: Was there anything that surprised you?

Dr. Stern: The most surprising finding was that teens who showed more empathy toward their best friends during adolescence were more likely to engage in supportive parenting practices when they had kids of their own, more than a decade later. We often think that our parents shape the way we parent, but it turns out that our teenage friendships, do, too. What we think is happening is that when you're a teenager, close friendships are an important "training ground" for developing social skills and learning how to care for others in more mature ways. So, when your friend is struggling, you can practice showing up, trying to understand their perspective, empathizing with their plight, and offering help. By strengthening the "muscle" of empathy with their best friends, teens are building essential skills that seem to translate to effective caregiving when they become parents.

SRCD: What's next in this field of research?

Dr. Stern: We're continuing to follow these participants to understand how their teenage experiences with parents and peers might play a role in how the next generation develops.

Our study focused on empathy that teens experienced from their mothers, but in future work we're excited to look at fathers as well.

We also want to understand what factors might interrupt intergenerational cycles of low empathy and harsh parenting. It will be important to see whether positive experiences with highly empathic peers could compensate for a lack of empathy experienced in teens' family of origin. You can't choose your family, but you can choose your friends — so for teens, empowering them to *choose* friendships with a lot of mutual understanding and support could have long-term ripple effects for the next generation.

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Summarized from an article in *Child Development*, "Empathy Across Three Generations: From Maternal and Peer Support in Adolescence to Adult Parenting and Child Outcomes" by Stern, J., Bailey, N., Costello, M., Hellwig, A., Mitchell, J., Allen, J. (University of Virginia).