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Viewing Teens More Positively May Help Their School Performance and Strengthen Family Bonds

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Viewing Teens as Responsible in Family: Implications for Chinese Youth's Academic and Social Adjustment

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Western cultures tend to view teens as moody, irresponsible, and rebellious. However, in China and in other cultures, the teen years are viewed more positively and seen as a time of learning how to become responsible and fulfilling family obligations. Previous research shows that fulfilling family obligations is an important marker of maturity and that as adolescents continue to improve their skills, they can contribute more to their families.

Past studies also show that when teens are seen in a more positive light, they tend to do better in school. They are also more engaged, use self-regulated learning strategies and stay motivated. Researchers from Northwestern University, The University of Texas at Austin in the United States and Fudan University in China, were specifically interested in how Chinese middle schoolers' beliefs about the teen years may influence their academic functioning and the quality of parent-teen bonds.

The study was comprised of 554 Chinese middle schoolers ages 13-14 years old, 50% boys and 50% girls. Participants were recruited from three middle schools in Shanghai. Families were primarily from middle- and working-class backgrounds with 49% of mothers and 52% of fathers having an associate degree or above. For one year, researchers tracked the students through completed online surveys completed by teens. The surveys measured teens' general views about the teen years, as well as their self-expectation of becoming a responsible family member, their ability to delay immediate fun for academic tasks, their motivation after academic failures, and attachment bonds with their parents.

The research showed that teens who held positive general views of their age group were more likely to believe they should help their parents. Additionally, teens who embraced family responsibilities (such as respecting parents and completing daily chores) also prioritized schoolwork. These teens were also more driven to make improvements after receiving poor grades and had more trust and connection with their

parents.

These findings suggest the importance of helping families learn how to view adolescence as a time of growing responsibility as this may benefit both families and schools. Parents should encourage their teens to contribute at home, while schools can support their resilience and motivation. The findings are not limited to the Chinese context. Practitioners and program developers around the world can also help by promoting messages that highlight young people's potential rather than reinforcing negative stereotypes.

This research was featured in a new *Child Development* article, "Viewing Teens as Responsible in Family: Implications for Chinese Youth's Academic and Social Adjustment," by Dr. Beiming Yang, Varun Devakona, and Dr. Yang Qu from Northwestern University, Zexi Zhou from The University of Texas at Austin and Dr. Bin-Bin Chen from Fudan University.

The Society for Research in Child Development (SRCD) had the opportunity to speak with the author team to learn more about the research.

SRCD: Did anything in the results surprise you?

Author team: A key surprise for us was the consistent and parallel impact that teen's general views of adolescence had across two very different, and often separately studied, domains of their life: their academic functioning and their social relationships. One might assume that the factors driving academic success differ from those that foster strong family bonds. However, we found that the same underlying mechanism, which was teen's personal sense of responsibility to their parents, predicted positive outcomes in both domains simultaneously. Parents are often worried about teens' school disengagement and rebellion during adolescence. Our findings suggest that academic achievement and family connection may not be competing pursuits among adolescents. Instead, both are shaped by the general narratives about adolescence, and both are nurtured through the same lens of fulfilling growing responsibility.

SRCD: Can you please expand upon how this research might be helpful for parents, caregivers, teachers, school administrators, program providers, and others?

Author team: The key takeaway is to frame the teen years not as a period of inevitable "storm and stress," but as a window of opportunity for growth and responsibility. In China, where fulfilling family obligations is a

core cultural virtue, parents and teachers can actively leverage this. Instead of just focusing on academic pressure, which most Chinese parents do, parents can empower their teens with meaningful family duties and acknowledge their contributions. Teachers can connect academic effort to the broader cultural goal of being responsible member of the group, which can motivate students to delay gratification and persevere through challenges. These insights also have implications for the design of both school curricula and extracurricular activities. In China, middle and high school education is typically centered on discipline and achievement. Meanwhile, students' out-of-school time is often filled with after-school tutoring. To better support adolescents' holistic development, school administrators and youth program developers should integrate family and social responsibility into both the curriculum and extracurricular programs, while ensuring that these practices remain relevant and aligned with contemporary needs. For instance, out-of-school programs could engage youth in family responsibilities while avoiding outdated emphases such as the absolute authority of parents. Similarly, schools might incorporate family obligations into homework assignments while adjusting the overall course load to allow students the time and space to participate in extracurricular and out-of-school activities. Ultimately, placing a stronger emphasis on a responsibility-oriented vision of youth development could help foster resilience and strengthen family ties, which are foundational for adolescents' well-being. Importantly, this approach does not impose something new but instead draws on cultural traditions that already value care, responsibility, and connection.

SRCD: Can you please address some of the research limitations?

Author team: First, although our three-wave longitudinal design is a strength, the findings are correlational, which means we cannot make definitive causal claims. We observed meaningful association over time, but we cannot conclude that holding positive views of the teen years directly leads to better outcomes. Second, our model primarily examined a one-way influence from sense of responsibility to youth adjustment. It is entirely possible that the relationship is bidirectional, that is, doing well in school and maintaining strong family bonds may further enhance a teen's sense of responsibility. Finally, while these findings highlight promising connections, they are drawn from a specific cultural context (Chinese middle school students). Thus, policy implications should be taken with caution when generalizing to youth from other cultural backgrounds.

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

Author team: This study opens up several exciting avenues for future research, which are directly informed by its limitations. A crucial next step is to conduct cross-cultural research. The emphasis on family obligations is shared by many Asian (e.g., Filipino and Korean) and Latinx (e.g., Mexican and Colombian) cultures. Meanwhile, there are also many individualistic cultures that do not emphasize family obligations to the same degree. Examining whether holding positive views of teens as responsible family members is beneficial in various cultures is highly needed. It would help us understand what aspects of these beliefs are universal and which are culturally specific. Additionally, to move closer to establishing causality, more intervention studies are needed. For example, it is important to design intervention programs that address adolescents' existing negative stereotypes about this life stage (e.g., the "storm and stress" view). Such programs should provide youth with clear explanations of where these stereotypes come from, why they persist, and why they are often inaccurate. By doing so, we can help adolescents reframe their perspectives and begin to view adolescence as a positive period of growth and contribution. Evidence from this line of research can inform practical strategies for schools and communities, leading to measurable improvements in adolescents' academic engagement, social relationships, and overall well-being.

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Summarized from an article in *Child Development*, "Viewing Teens as Responsible in Family: Implications for Chinese Youth's Academic and Social Adjustment," by Yang, B. (Northwestern University), Zhou, Z. (The University of Texas at Austin), Devakonda, V. (Northwestern University), Chen, B.B. (Fudan University), Qu, Y. (Northwestern University). Copyright 2025 The Society for Research in Child Development. All rights reserved.