

What Defines Young Leaders? More Research Could Benefit Youth and Society Broadly

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***Editor's note:** This release is a slight modification of a release originally distributed by Northwestern University on November 9.*

Greta Thunberg, David Hogg and Malala Yousafzai, all teenagers when their activism caught the world's attention, are proof that leadership develops well before adulthood.

As essential as they are, and as complex the challenges they face as tomorrow's leaders, scientists do not understand the traits and experience that define young leaders. While there is clear evidence that leaders blossom early, little research exists about leadership development in adolescence.

[“Understanding the Leaders of Tomorrow: The Need to Study Leadership in Adolescence”](#) makes a case for adding a multidisciplinary developmental perspective to leadership research. The study was published November 9 in *Perspectives on Psychological Science*.

“The rapid development of personality, peer relationships, values and vocational identity during this

period, make adolescence an optimal time for developing leadership potential,” said [Jennifer Tackett](#), a clinical psychologist at Northwestern University and the paper’s corresponding author.

Tackett, who is also editor of APS’s [Clinical Psychological Science](#) journal, is director of the Personality Across Development (PAD) lab, and a professor of psychology at Weinberg College of Arts and Sciences at Northwestern University.

Arguing that an understanding of youth leadership would have immediate application for educators, parents, policy makers, and employers, the authors propose bringing together expertise from different areas of psychological science to study early leadership and how it emerges, develops, and influences leadership ability as adults.

They point out opportunities for taking concepts from the study of leadership in adults and extending them to adolescents, while simultaneously leveraging existing adolescent-focused research on peer influence and cognitive and behavioral development to form a more nuanced model of how leadership develops through life stages.

They also suggest new avenues of research including studying the environments adolescent leaders occupy, such as athletics, social justice efforts, extracurriculars, and social media, to better understand how early leadership takes shape.

In addition to the benefits research on leadership development in youth could have on society, it could also benefit the individual youth by helping them form a broader sense of their own leadership identity and an enhanced understanding of their own personal strengths and capacity, according to the authors.

Other goals of the research are to develop leadership interventions to maximize potential and facilitate better diversification of the leadership pipeline.

“We think that a lot of great leadership potential is getting lost as youth develop in the context of cumulative, multilayered systemic barriers, and that looking earlier in life may be a key to harnessing and fostering this potential well ahead of these later outcomes,” Tackett said. “Everyone stands to benefit from improving leadership skill and effectiveness in the leaders of tomorrow.”

Other leadership scientists contributing to the paper include researchers from Cleveland State University, the University of Southern California, Wayne State University, the University of Toronto, Ghent University, the University of Exeter, and Rice University.

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Reference

Tackett, J. L., Reardon, K. W., Fast, N. J., Johnson, L., Kang, S. K., Lang, J. W. B., & Oswald, F. L. (2022). Understanding the Leaders of Tomorrow: The Need to Study Leadership in Adolescence. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/17456916221118536>