

Root of Teen Empathy Begins with Secure Relationships at Home, Study Finds

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Teenagers who have close, secure relationships with their families are more likely to extend empathy to their peers, according to a new study.

More specifically, when teens feel safe, supported by and connected to parents or other adult caregivers, they are better equipped to pass the empathy they receive on to others.

“I don’t think teens in particular like being told what to do, and I don’t think it’s going to work to tell teens they should empathize with other people,” said Jessica Stern, lead author of the study and a postdoctoral fellow in the department of psychology at the University of Virginia. “But what does work is showing them empathy, and they can pay it forward to the people in their lives.”

Stern’s work revolves around how having secure relationships contributes to prosocial behavior, or behavior driven by the intent to benefit others.

She studies parent-child relationships, also known as attachment theory, which is “the idea that all human beings have a fundamental need for connection,” but the quality of those connections may differ. Stern said those differences matter because they “shape who we become over time.”

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