

Brigham Young University  
Family Studies Center Research Brief

## **Flourishing During the Teen Years: Why “Not Being Bad” Isn’t Good Enough**

Dr. Laura Padilla-Walker

Associate Professor and Associate Director, School of Family Life, Brigham Young University  
and

Madi Memmott, Graduate Student, Marriage, Family, and Human Development

When parents and the popular media talk about teenagers, more often than not the focus is on the bad stuff, the problem behaviors like risky sex, drinking, and drug use. While such a focus is certainly warranted, the vast majority of teenagers make it through these years without experiencing serious problems, and those who do struggle often stop participating in problem behaviors after the teen years. But the avoidance of such behaviors does not necessarily mean the presence of positive behaviors. In other words, “not being bad” is not good enough. If we ignore the good, we tell children what they shouldn’t do, but don’t replace it with what they should do. We focus so much on eliminating bad behavior, but it is important to know that you can discourage bad behavior by encouraging good behavior.

Thus, the purpose of this brief report is to highlight what we have learned through research about positive behaviors that can both replace and protect against negative behaviors. More specifically, we will discuss four aspects of flourishing during the teen years: self-control, self-esteem, values, and empathy. While these certainly are not the only strengths that will help youth to be successful, focusing on the development of these four strengths is an important starting point, and parents, leaders, and educators all play a key role in helping youth develop these behaviors.

(Side-Bar 1) The Research: Much of what we present in this brief is based on a unique, ten-year longitudinal study called The Flourishing Families Project (FFP). The FFP consisted of 500 families living in the northwestern United States and was conducted by a group of faculty at Brigham Young University. In this study, we interviewed and video-taped parents and their teenage child starting when the child was age 11, and then every year after that for 10 years. The goal of this project was to determine not only why families might struggle, but specifically, what helps families to flourish and be successful.

(Side-Bar 2) Flourishing Youth: Research on positive youth development has highlighted the 5 C’s of flourishing, or aspects of positive development that are influenced by parents and youth programs.<sup>1</sup>

1. *Competence:* Young people who flourish have a positive view of their abilities in a variety of areas, including social, academic, and vocational (related to a future career).
2. *Confidence:* Young people who flourish have an overall positive view of themselves, or global self-worth.

3. *Connection*: Young people who flourish have positive relationships with people and institutions, including parents, peers, school, and community/faith groups.
4. *Character*: Young people who flourish have a standard of correct behavior, or a sense of right and wrong.
5. *Caring*: Young people who flourish care about others.

## AN ESSENTIAL PRECURSOR TO FLOURISHING: SELF-CONTROL

An important precursor to any of the qualities in the “Flourishing Youth” sidebar (e.g., feel confident, connect with others), is self-control. Most of us are familiar with a child who just can’t seem to sit still, or who has emotional outbursts at inappropriate times, or who can’t seem to stick to a given task. These behaviors would signify a lack of self-control (or self-regulation). As children get older, these types of behaviors should decrease. Self-control is best defined as the ability to manage one’s thoughts and emotions so that one can set goals, solve problems, and control impulses.<sup>2</sup> If a teenager has challenges controlling herself, she will find it quite difficult to engage in positive behaviors and avoid negative behaviors.

Because the teen and young adult years are a pivotal and dynamic time in a person’s life, where many decisions that have lifelong consequences are made, it is especially important to consider self-control during these years, as well as what parents and others can do to help those who might struggle in this area. The first thing to realize is that much of self-control occurs in the frontal part of the brain, which isn’t fully developed until the mid-twenties.<sup>3</sup> This means we should not be overly surprised if a teenager loses his or her cool every once in a while, or is still ranting and slamming doors on occasion. That being said, overall we should see an increase in the ability to control thoughts and emotions as children get older.

(Side-Bar 3) The Benefits of Self-control:<sup>4</sup>

Self-control promotes:

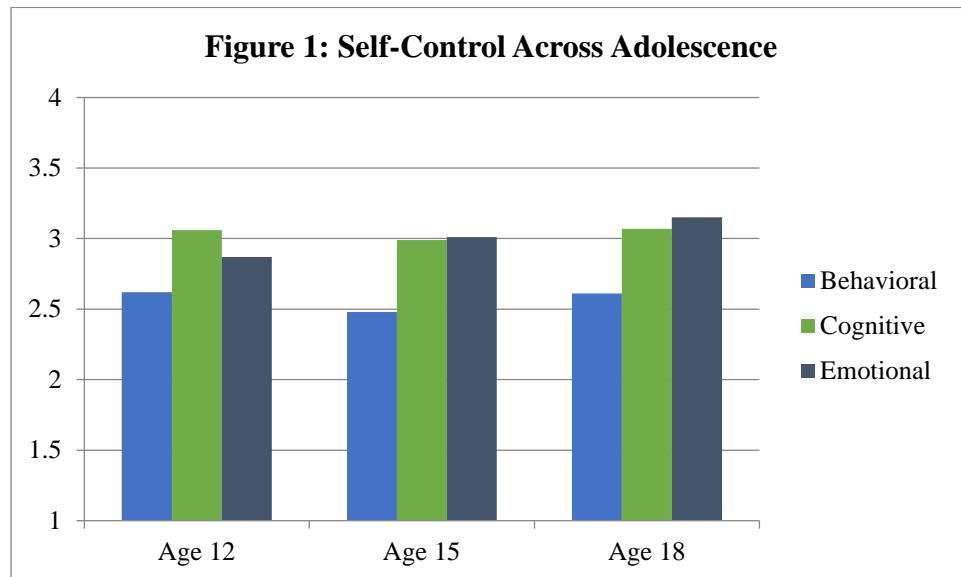
1. Relationship quality with parents, peers, and romantic partners
2. Healthy diet
3. Self-esteem
4. Academic achievement

Self-control protects against:

1. Problem behaviors (e.g., swearing, stealing, truancy)
2. Drinking and drug use
3. Depression

There are three types of self-control that children need to develop: behavioral (how children control their bodies and behaviors), emotional (how children control their feelings and moods), and cognitive (how children effectively set goals and follow through). At all ages, behavioral control has the lowest average levels, with emotional control increasing over time, and cognitive control staying fairly stable (see Figure 1). Note that the higher the y-axis number

the better the self-control, so it is clear there is room for growth during the teen years in self-control – especially behavioral control.



### How Parents Can Help Children Learn Self-Control

Parents, friends, siblings, and teachers/adults can all help children to develop self-control. The earlier they start, the better – but it is never too late to begin providing children with tools for success. Here are some ideas from our research for parents who want to help their child develop self-control:

- Allow children to struggle a bit with hard things so they can learn to problem solve and regulate the emotions that come with frustration.
- Give children opportunities to help others (in the family and outside the family) so they learn to put aside their wants for the needs of others.
- Model good self-control. If parents yell and slam doors and lose their temper often, children will model that behavior. No parent is perfect, but when parents display poor self-control, apologizing and discussing with children what the parent could have done differently are both effective ways to teach self-control.
- Help children think of more appropriate ways they could have responded in situations where they lost control (e.g., What could you have done instead of throwing your brother's iPhone in the toilet? What have you learned from this situation where you played video games all night so you didn't study and failed your test?)

A few other things that parents should be aware of: young boys often struggle with self-control more than girls do<sup>5</sup> (though this difference lessens by the teen years). However, in many ways that is because we teach boys that anger is the only appropriate way they can express themselves. So it may be particularly important to help young boys learn to control themselves that do not include aggressive or violent expressions of anger (e.g., distract themselves, count to ten, take deep breaths, etc).

Also, we have found that fathers are particularly important in teaching children to develop self-control, so while mothers are very important, this is a gentle reminder to fathers that they also matter.<sup>6</sup>

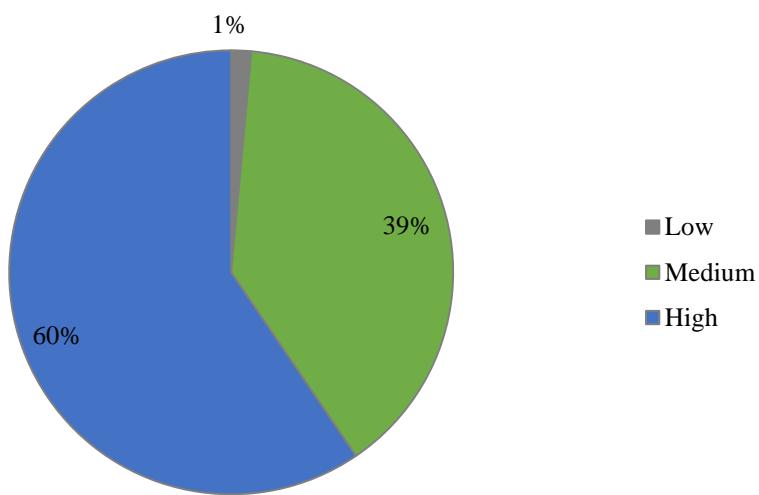
In sum, self-control is necessary for all of the other aspects of flourishing we will discuss, so it is an important and appropriate place to start.

## **HELPING CHILDREN TO BE CONFIDENT: THE DEVELOPMENT OF SELF-ESTEEM**

Sometimes when we think of being confident, we worry about the possibility of being overconfident or showy and prideful, but the type of confidence that helps children to flourish is not negative or self-centered. Self-esteem, or one's global sense of self-worth,<sup>7</sup> is fundamental to success and actually allows children to be more focused on others. A child or teenager who feels confident about who he or she is will not be as worried about what others think, which will free up resources that will enable them to focus on the needs of friends, family, and even strangers.

It is important to note that self-esteem is generally lowest during early- and middle-adolescence when teens are going through puberty and the stress of middle school or junior high. Any transition (e.g., elementary school to junior high) may result in a dip in self-esteem, but typically this will rebound once children acclimate to the new environment. That being said, our study suggests that the majority of teens report relatively high levels of self-esteem, with very few teens reporting low self-esteem (see Figure 2). While our sample is relatively well-adjusted and therefore might display higher than average levels of self-esteem, many teens report feeling good about themselves. However, a sizable group of teens report low-to-medium levels of self-esteem, leaving plenty of room for parents and others to help.

**Figure 2: Percentage of Teens with Low, Medium, and High Self-Esteem at Age 12**



(Side-bar 4): The Benefits of Self-esteem<sup>8</sup>

Good self-esteem promotes:

1. Happiness or well-being
2. Academic achievement
3. Helping behavior toward strangers

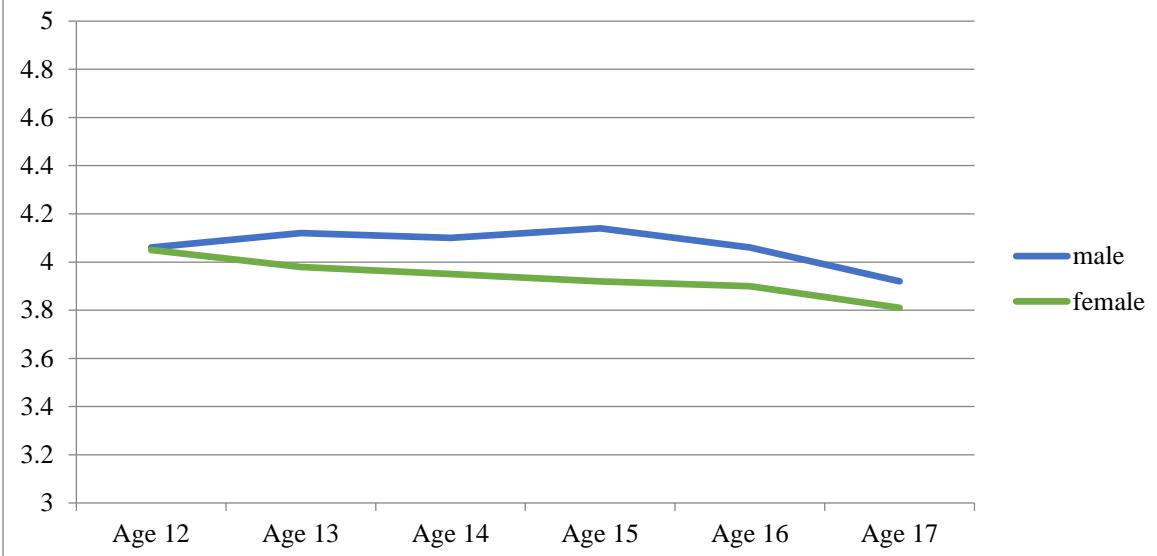
Good self-esteem protects against:

1. Depression
2. Drinking and drug use

## How Parents Can Help Children Develop Self-Esteem

- *Allow autonomy:* Autonomy is the ability for children to make decisions for themselves with guidance.<sup>9</sup> This allows children to feel that they can make good choices and be in charge of their own lives, which will facilitate continued confidence. When children make poor choices, parents can help them learn from their mistakes and guide them to better choices. This is accomplished by avoiding shaming approaches (e.g., shame puts the focus on the child as deficient or in some way unloved for bad choices) and instead helping the child to reflect on his or her good or bad decisions and think of ways to change (e.g., “What about *your behavior* can you change?” instead of “What about *you* can you change?”).
- *Avoid being overly critical:* Self-esteem is best fostered in environments where expectations are high, but not unrealistic.<sup>10</sup> If parents expect too much from their children or teens, they will be overly critical and this detracts from self-esteem. Knowing what children are capable of and helping them achieve their goals (with love and support), is most likely to foster confidence.
- *Avoid excessive praise:* Excessive praise can actually backfire, especially for children with low self-esteem.<sup>11</sup> If parents excessively praise children for everything they do, it may feel insincere and result in a need for external reward to be motivated. For example, if parents throw a party for their child every time she achieves something or give her money for all her good grades, she is likely to want external rewards (e.g., money, gifts) to do well, rather than valuing the internal joy of achieving one’s goals as a form of motivation.
- *Focus on the behavior, not the child:* Parents should also be careful how they praise. While telling children that they worked hard is very important, focusing on achievement or global statements like “You’re so smart!” tend to be less helpful. It is better to praise a child for a specific effort, such as studying hard for a test, than to praise his or her intelligence in general. If the child gets a low grade on a test, that would then signify that he or she needs to study harder for the next test, not that he or she is less intelligent.

**Figure 3: Self-Esteem Across Adolescence by Gender**



Another pattern to note in the development of self-esteem is that boys generally have higher self-esteem than do girls, in part because of the pressure put on girls to be physically attractive. As parents, we should ask ourselves if we treat our boys and girls differently when it comes to building confidence. Figure 3 shows that the difference in general self-esteem levels between teenage girls and boys isn't that large. Research suggests that teens should also develop confidence in specific areas, such as academics, athletics, or interpersonal relationships. While boys may struggle more with athletic confidence, girls may struggle with confidence in how they interact with peers. Each child will be able to identify his or her own strengths and weaknesses. The goal is for parents to help build confidence in several areas of their child's life. This strengths-based approach is often more important than overall feelings of self-worth. If we ask ourselves what our children really enjoy and then help to foster those strengths and teach the value of hard work as it leads to achievement, parents can have a significant impact on self-esteem.

## **TEACHING CHILDREN RIGHT FROM WRONG: THE DEVELOPMENT OF VALUES**

Another fundamental aspect of flourishing is the knowledge of the distinction between right and wrong, or the possession of good values that can serve as a guide for behavior. Values are beliefs or standards that motivate people to act.<sup>12</sup> Often the first thing that comes to people's minds when they think about values is that they are wholly positive. They might envision values like integrity, kindness, or tolerance. Interestingly, however, some values can be somewhat negative, especially when they are dominant values for the child. Some teens might value power or personal enjoyment above all else, which leads to domineering, bossy, or selfish behavior when interacting with friends or family. So while children are hopefully picking up positive values from parents, friends, and community groups, they can certainly pick up negative values as well.

It is especially important to consider values during early adolescence (ages 10-14) because it is a time when values are changing and gradually solidifying, resulting in more

variable behavior during the teen years than at later ages. Once values are internalized, or are a part of how a child sees himself, they usually don't change all that much. Establishing good values is a process that begins in childhood and continues through the teen years and even into young adulthood.

(Side-bar 5): The Benefits of Positive Values<sup>13</sup>

Positive values promote:

1. Helping behavior and civic involvement
2. Academic achievement
3. Identity development (a clear sense of who they are and what they believe)

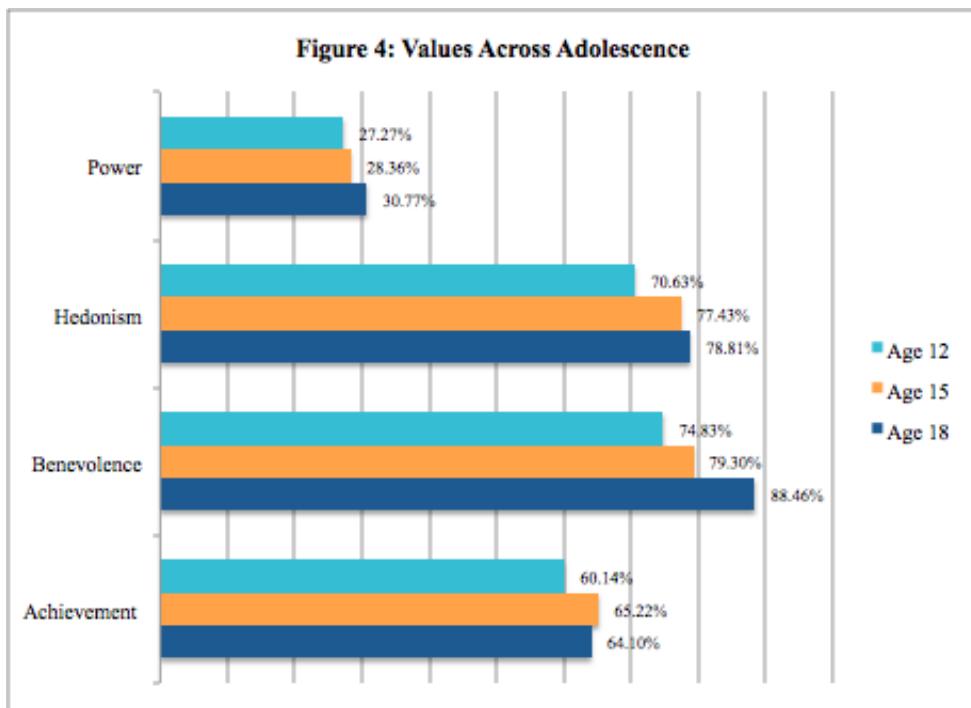
Positive values protect against:

1. Aggression
2. Delinquency
3. Drinking and drug use

As Figure 4 shows, values change somewhat over the course of adolescence, but not dramatically. This is true of both negative values (power and hedonism) and positive values (benevolence and achievement), as noted in the sidebar, "Different Types of Values."

(Side-bar 6): Different Types of Values

- *Power*: when a person values being better than and being in control of others
- *Hedonistic*: when a person values personal enjoyment.
- *Benevolence*: when a person values being kind and helping others
- *Achievement*: when a person values excelling at whatever he or she does and trying hard to be successful.



While power values are only salient for a minority of young people (about 30%), hedonistic values are quite salient, with nearly 80% of youth noting that a central aspect of their motivation is about doing what makes them feel good. As parents, we can certainly understand that part of life is being happy and feeling good, but it is important for us to help our children see that this should not be our primary value or motivation. While nearly 80% of youth also value being kind and helpful, hedonism is nearly as highly valued. Our role as parents is then to help our children to grapple with these competing values.

Clearly children and parents have a variety of values, so no one value is good or bad. Rather, it is the constellation of values our children develop, and which values drive their behavior, that are most important. We have only discussed four different types of values, and there are many more that can be either protective and motivating or negative and destructive. The development of values and the ability to distinguish right from wrong is often a cognitive process that becomes a part of who children are and how they see themselves. And the best way to encourage the development of an optimal assortment of values is to teach your values and then allow children a degree of autonomy. Values that are internally motivated (are part of how the child sees himself or herself) are more likely to lead to positive behaviors, while externally motivated values (because the child fears getting in trouble) are rarely protective and often lead to the opposite behavior than is desired.

### **How Parents Can Help Children Develop Strong Positive Values<sup>14</sup>**

- Model good behavior that reflects parental values. Actions usually speak louder than words when it comes to values.
- Children first need to accurately perceive parental values - so they need to know where parents stand. This can be achieved by:

- Being consistent and clear (e.g., if parents value education, always make sure children do their homework and make school a priority. If parents only stick to this on occasion or if only mom stresses this but not dad, it will be harder for children to accurately perceive parental values).
  - Convey to children how important certain values are to you (e.g., if honesty is important, don't lie to your children. Clarify this value's importance by providing reasons and examples).
- Children will then choose whether or not they will accept parental values. Children are most likely to accept values when:
  - They feel autonomous – or like they have a say in what they believe and do.
  - They feel parental discipline is appropriate (e.g., children never enjoy being yelled at or punished, but if they feel they are frequently unjustly punished or constantly belittled, they are less likely to accept what parents are saying).
  - As much as possible, parents should provide the “why” behind what they expect of their child. Parents should minimize the use of “because I’m the parent, that’s why” and talk with children about why certain beliefs and behaviors are important.

## **TEACHING CHILDREN TO CARE ABOUT OTHERS: THE DEVELOPMENT OF EMPATHY**

Another one of the key aspects of flourishing in children is learning to care about others, or developing empathy for the plight of another. Empathy is defined as feeling sad or concerned when someone else is in distress, and is one of the key character traits that leads individuals to help and be kind.<sup>15</sup> A girl who feels badly for her friend who got a poor grade on an exam, for example, might offer to help her study next time. Or a boy who feels worried for his brother who was left out of a social event, might offer to play soccer with him. We have all felt empathy at some point in our lives, and these feelings often draw us closer to others because we feel badly for them and desire to help them. Early signs of empathy can even be detected in babies and young children, and are learned by continued positive interactions with parents and others.<sup>16</sup>

### (Side-Bar 7) The Benefits of Empathy:<sup>17</sup>

Empathy promotes:

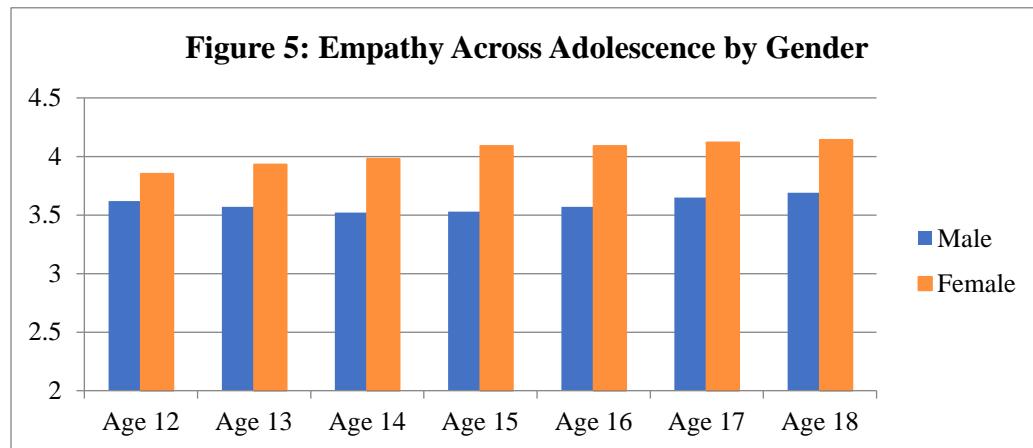
1. Helping behavior (sharing, volunteering, comforting)
2. Relationships with friends and family members

Empathy protects against:

1. Aggressive behavior (hitting, name calling)
2. Delinquency
3. Depression

Research has consistently found that boys have lower levels of empathy than girls<sup>15</sup> (see Figure 5). However, this isn’t found when biological measures are considered (e.g., heart-rate,

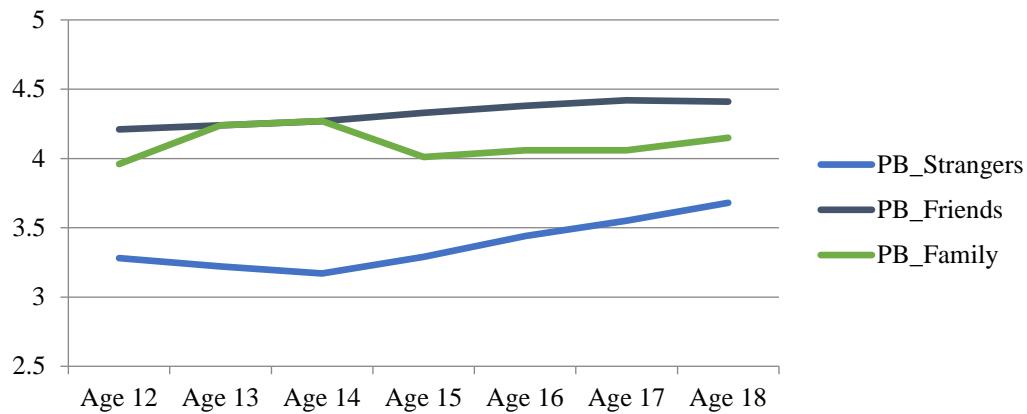
brain scans, physiology), so it suggests that boys are perhaps just less willing to say they feel badly for someone and over time may feel that empathy is not something they need to make a priority. Parents are usually much more likely to encourage their girls to think of the needs of others than their boys, so it is important that we encourage caring and helping in both girls and boys.



One of the most consistent behaviors that promotes empathy (and that empathy in turn promotes) is prosocial behavior, or voluntary behavior meant to benefit another.<sup>15</sup> Examples of prosocial behavior include helping, sharing, and volunteering. Prosocial behavior is one of the key behaviors that can replace bad behaviors and also promote good behaviors, especially empathy. In turn, empathy is one of the strongest predictors of prosocial behavior, so these are two aspects of caring that are really important for children.

Prosocial behavior can be directed toward a number of different individuals. Teens can volunteer at a local soup kitchen (prosocial behavior toward strangers), help their friends with homework (prosocial behavior toward friends), and share with their siblings (prosocial behavior toward family). Prosocial behavior toward strangers is the least common type of behavior across the teen years (see Figure 6), but it is the most strongly related to empathy and also the most directly protective against negative behaviors like delinquency and aggression. If parents then facilitate their children getting outside of their comfort zone and helping strangers, this activity can be especially protective. That being said, helping family members and friends is also a positive thing, and is especially effective at strengthening relationships.

**Figure 6: Prosocial Behavior to Various Targets Across Adolescence**



### How Parents Can Help Children to be Caring and Helpful<sup>1618</sup>

- When siblings or friends fight, help them to understand the emotions and needs of the other sibling or friend (e.g., How do you think your sister felt when you hit her? How would you feel if someone called you a mean name?). This allows children to take the perspective of another person, which can lead to empathy.
- Model empathy for children, taking an interest in how they feel and in their perspective. Foster good relationship with children and let them know they are loved.
- Point out examples on television, movies, or in books when characters engage in good or bad behaviors. Ask children how they think the characters might have felt or reacted (e.g., How do you think her mom felt when that character spoke to her that way? How do you think he felt when his friends teased and excluded him?).
- Provide opportunities for children to serve those who are less fortunate than they (especially strangers). Seeing those in need and being given the opportunity to help them is key to the development of a child's ability to act on empathic feelings. Just beware: sometimes children will feel too much empathy and they will become overwhelmed. Parents may need to help children learn to build healthy boundaries so they care about others, but aren't so overwhelmed that they can't help.

## CONCLUSION

In sum, in order to flourish, teenagers need competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring. The four behaviors that can best help them to achieve these traits are self-control, self-esteem, values, and empathy, all of which are promoted through connection with parents and family members. Parents' encouragement of these positive outcomes in their children will not only improve the chance that young people will avoid negative behaviors such as delinquency and drug use, but also that they will develop a pattern of positive behaviors that will serve them well in their future relationships and responsibilities. We encourage parents not

to settle for children only avoiding “bad behavior,” but instead to help children be on a genuinely good path – a path that will ultimately lead to long-term flourishing.

## Footnotes

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