

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Civilian

Adolescents' Empathy and Prosocial Behavior in the Family Context: A Longitudinal Study

Yoo, H., Feng, X., & Day, R. D. (2013). Adolescents' empathy and prosocial behavior in the family context: A longitudinal study *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 42(12), 1858-1872. doi:10.1007/s10964-012-9900-6

SUMMARY: Children and adolescents' empathy and prosocial behaviors are important for their social competency. To explore these variables, adolescents completed questionnaires regarding parent behaviors, parent-child relationships, and their own prosocial behaviors. Results revealed that certain parent behaviors may promote adolescent empathy and prosocial behaviors through a balanced parent-child relationship.

KEY FINDINGS:

- High levels of parent solicitation (i.e., parent efforts to know children's activities, locations, and friendships) and low levels of parent psychological control (i.e., parent behaviors that intrude upon children's psychological autonomy) were associated with good parent-child relationships.
- A balanced parent-child connectedness (i.e., a parent-child relationship that allows both closeness and autonomy) was related to adolescents' empathy and prosocial behaviors.
- Direct associations between parent behaviors and adolescent prosocial behaviors were not found.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MILITARY PROFESSIONALS:

Military professionals could:

- Educate military parents about parent behaviors that could increase the quality of parent-child relationships
- Work with military parents to help them determine specific changes to current behaviors that may have a significant impact on child well-being

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Design workshops for military parents to increase their parenting skills and foster healthy parent-child relationships
- Encourage military parents to increase parent solicitation and decrease psychological control

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Recommend training for professionals who work with military families regarding the impact of parent-child relationships on children's prosocial behaviors
- Continue to support parenting education programs that aim to increase positive parenting in military families

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METHODS

- The sample was selected from the Flourishing Families Project, which was a longitudinal study that studies families with adolescents.
- Measures included parent behaviors (monitoring and psychological control), parent-child connectedness, and adolescent prosocial behaviors; all measures were reported by adolescents at three time points, respectively.
- The associations among parent behaviors, parent-child connectedness, and adolescent prosocial behaviors were analyzed.

PARTICIPANTS

- Participants were 335 married couples and their adolescent child (49% female).
- The average age of the adolescents was 11.29 years (SD = 1.01, age range = 10-13 years) at the start of the longitudinal study.
- The majority of the participants were White (88%), followed by Black (5%), Latino (1%), Asian-American (2%), and other (4%).

LIMITATIONS

- All measures were self-reported by the adolescents, therefore the results may be biased by their perspectives.
- All participating families were two-parent and the couples were mostly in long-term marriages, so the family structure composition of the sample is different from the composition of the general American population.
- Parent behaviors, parent-child relationships, and adolescent prosocial behaviors were assessed at three different years, therefore the results may be inaccurate due to the large gaps in between.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Use measures from multiple informants, including adolescents and both of their parents
- Increase the diversity of participants by not only recruiting high-functioning families, but also families that are distressed and unstable
- Observe parent-child interactions in the home or naturalistic environment

ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



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