

Adolescents' personalities and coping habits affect social behaviors, MU researcher says

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Infants innately relieve stress by crying, turning their heads or maintaining eye contact. Adults manage emotional tension using problem-solving or by seeking support. A new study by a University of Missouri human development expert describes how adolescents' developing personalities and coping habits affect their behaviors toward others.

"We're each born with some personality tendencies; for example, we see that babies are fussy or calm," said Gustavo Carlo, the Millsap Professor of Diversity in the MU Department of Human Development and Family Studies. "Those characteristics can change over time as people experience certain events or as a result of their parents, peers or communities. At the same time, as we get older, our personalities become more stable."

Carlo and his colleagues surveyed 1,557 [students ages](#) 12-15 years old in Valencia, Spain, to measure the adolescents' feelings toward others, their past prosocial and physically aggressive behaviors, their [emotional stability](#), and how they manage stress.

Carlo found that empathetic adolescents were more likely to use problem-focused coping, which aims to reduce or eliminate the source of the stress. These adolescents also were more likely to perform prosocial behaviors that benefit others, such as volunteering, donating money or helping friends with problems. Conversely, emotionally unstable, impulsive adolescents relied more on emotion-focused coping

tactics such as venting, avoidance or [distraction](#), and they showed more frequent signs of [aggression](#).

"Empathetic kids are generally very good at regulating their emotions and tend not to lose their tempers," Carlo said. "When you're good at regulating your emotions, you're less concerned about yourself and more considerate of other people. On the other hand, impulsive children are more self-focused and have difficulty engaging in problem-focused coping."

Teaching adolescents multiple ways to handle stress will help them decide which coping techniques to use based on the unique situations, Carlo said. In some cases, people may use both emotion-focused and problem-focused coping, while in others, one might be more beneficial. For example, emotion-focused coping might be more constructive when children witness their parents' divorces because the kids cannot change those situations. On the other hand, planning ahead to study for tests or complete homework is a problem-focused coping technique that can help [adolescents](#) effectively ease academic stress.

"Sometimes we get stuck dealing with stress in one way because it was successful in the past; that coping style may not be effective with other stressors and in other situations," Carlo said. "There is more than one way to cope in situations, and people need to know when to apply which coping mechanisms."

More information: The study, "The interplay of emotional instability, empathy, and coping on prosocial and aggressive behaviors," was published in *Personality and Individual Differences*.

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