

Caring friends can save the world

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Craig Kielburger was only 12 years old when he travelled to India to see the plight of child laborers first hand. 14-year-old Malala Yousafzai took a stand against the Taliban with her campaign for women's education rights. Alongside these individuals, organizations like Teenactivist.org and Dosomething.org rally teens to make a difference in their communities and beyond.

Of course, it's not every teenager who will step forward and get involved. Under the right conditions, however, the desire to change the world can start early on in life. New research published in the [Journal of Youth and Adolescence](#) shows that caring in friendships stands between [apathy](#) and activism, and is directly related to a teen's concern with making a difference.

"Increasing our understanding of adolescents' relationships with [friends](#) can help us understand what kind of adults they might become," says Anna-Beth Doyle, Distinguished Professor Emeritus in Concordia University's Department of Psychology and member of the Centre for Research in Human Development. The primary author Heather Lawford, now a faculty member at Bishop's University, completed the study as her doctoral thesis within larger project on adolescent social development and adjustment, led by Doyle and Dorothy Markiewicz, who is now at Brock University.

The study is the first to explore how concern for [future generations](#) has its roots in adolescence. The researchers collected yearly responses from 142 teens from ages 13 to 16. The teens were asked to gauge how

concerned they were with contributing to the future by responding to statements like "I try to help others by sharing what I've learned in my life," and "Others would say that I have done something special for society."

Teens were also asked to describe their caring relationships with their [close friends](#) by reacting to assertions like, "I can tell when my friends need comforting, even when s/he doesn't ask for it," or "When my friend has a problem, I try to help him/her to come up with something to do about it."

The researchers found that adolescents who had caring relationships with their friends went on to develop a concern for others beyond their immediate circle. "The real-life experience of caring for friends seems to give teens an abstract model of the importance of offering care to future generations," says Lawford. "Adolescents may learn to apply this empathic concern to the welfare of their community."

The research also explored whether gender played a role in developing care-giving behaviours and friendships. It turned out that the girls in the study reported more care-giving behaviors than boys. However, the results underlined that anyone who valued caring behaviours would develop concern for others in a larger community, regardless of gender.

According to Lawford and Doyle, "This research has an important message for teachers, parents and psychologists involved with adolescents: if we can successfully foster young [teens](#) showing care for their friends, we have a good chance of also fostering a desire to leave a positive mark on their community and the world".

More information: link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10964-012-9888-y

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