

# Teenage boys who show empathy attract 1.8 more girlfriends than boys who don't

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Boys high in cognitive empathy attracted an average of 1.8 more girl

friendships than low empathy counterparts, as revealed by a landmark study - When Empathy Matters: The Role of Sex and Empathy in Close Friendships.

The Australian Research Council-funded research, led by Professor Joseph Ciarrochi at the Institute for Positive Psychology and Education at Australian Catholic University, has been published in the *Journal of Personality*.

It is the first study to examine the extent that adolescent males and females select empathic classmates as friends. And the conclusion based on a study of 1,970 Year 10 students in Queensland and New South Wales (average age of 15.7 years) is that girls are more likely to nominate empathic boys as friends.

In contrast, empathetic girls didn't rate quite so highly with the opposite sex. In fact, the study found girls with empathetic qualities "did not attract a greater number of opposite sex friends" at all.

And, what's more, it doesn't seem to bother girls who, regardless, reported an overall feeling of friendship support. "The more friendship nominations a boy received from either boys or girls, the more they felt supported by their friends; the number of friendship nominations received by [girls](#), in contrast, had no effect on their felt support by friends. Regardless of the quantity of friendship nominations, empathy was linked to more supportive friendships for both males and females," Professor Ciarrochi said.

The researchers defined cognitive empathy as the capacity to comprehend the emotions of another person.

They asked students to nominate up to five of their closest male and five closest female friends in the same year. Students were asked questions

such as "when someone is feeling down, I can usually understand how they feel," and "I can often understand how people are feeling even before they tell me".

And using what is called the 'Friendship Subscale' of the 'Student Social Support Scale', students made selections from the following: "My close friend(s)...", "give me advice," "helps me when I need it," "spends time with me when I'm lonely," "accepts me when I make a mistake," "calms me down when I'm nervous about something," "understands my feelings," and "explains things when I'm confused".

Professor Ciarrochi said: "Friends are essential to positive adolescent development. It's well established that in addition to providing companionship, close friendships promote the development of interpersonal skills, learning, and growth. Having friends has also been linked with lower rates of depression and, to people feeling good about themselves," he said.

"This research suggests it is critical to identify and teach young people the skills they need to develop supportive friendships. To that end, our study provides a contextual understanding of the role of [empathy](#) in selecting and maintaining [friendships](#)," Professor Ciarrochi said.

**More information:** J. Ciarrochi et al, When empathy matters: The role of sex and empathy in close friendships, *Journal of Personality* (2016). [DOI: 10.1111/jopy.12255](https://doi.org/10.1111/jopy.12255)

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