

Teens who help strangers have more confidence, study finds

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Parents should look for ways to help their kids help others this holiday season and throughout the year, says BYU School of Family Life professor Laura Padilla-Walker. Her new research shows it can help them have more self-esteem. Credit: Jaren Wilkey/BYU

Tis the season for helping at a soup kitchen, caroling at a care facility or shoveling a neighbor's driveway.

While those gifts of self surely help others, new research suggests that such selfless and serving behaviors have a specific benefit to teens.

BYU School of Family Life professor Laura Padilla-Walker, in a longitudinal study she coauthored with a former student (Xinyuan Fu, Central University of Finance and Economics, China) in the *Journal of Adolescence*, found that adolescents who exhibited prosocial behavior—such as helping, sharing and comforting—toward strangers had higher self-esteem a year later. The same was not true for those in the study who exhibited prosocial behavior solely to friends and family.

"This study helps us to understand that young people who help those with whom they do not have a relationship report feeling better about themselves over time," Padilla-Walker said. "Given the importance of self-esteem during the teen years, this is an important finding. It suggests there might be something about helping strangers that impacts one's moral identity or perceptions of self in a more significant way than helping friends or family members, although these are beneficial behaviors as well."

Padilla-Walker has authored multiple studies looking at prosocial behavior. While she's found that teens who exhibit these positive behaviors stay out of trouble and have better familial relationships, this was her first time tying it to self-esteem.

In the study, researchers looked at 681 adolescents, 11-14 years old, in two U.S. cities. They tracked them for four different time points, starting in 2008 through 2011. The participants responded to 10 statements such as "I feel useless at times" or "I am satisfied with myself" to assess self-esteem. Prosocial behavior was measured by self-

reports, looking at various aspects of kindness and generosity, such as "I help people I don't know, even if it's not easy for me" or "I go out of my way to cheer up my friends" or "I really enjoy doing small favors for my family."

"A unique feature of this study is that it explores helping behaviors toward multiple different targets," Padilla-Walker said. "Not all helping is created equal, and we're finding that prosocial [behavior](#) toward strangers is protective in a variety of ways that is unique from other types of helping. Another important finding is that the link between [prosocial behavior](#) and [self-esteem](#) is over a one-year time period and present across all three age lags in our study. Though not an overly large effect, this suggests a stable link between helping and feeling better about oneself across the early adolescent years."

For many adolescents, this time of life can be confusing for them. In a state of such self-exploration and self-identification, Padilla-Walker suggests that helping your kids find confidence, self-respect and self-worth can be of monumental importance.

"For teens who sometimes have a tendency to focus on themselves, parents can help by providing opportunities for their children to help and serve others who are less fortunate," Padilla-Walker said. "It is best if teens can directly see the benefit of their help on others. This can increase gratitude in [young people](#) and help them to focus less on their own problems. It is also a way to help them meet new friends or spend time with family. A [family](#) tradition of helping those who are less fortunate throughout the year or during the holidays is a great way to instill in children a desire to serve and a greater sense of self-worth."

More information: Xinyuan Fu et al, Longitudinal relations between adolescents' self-esteem and prosocial behavior toward strangers, friends and family, *Journal of Adolescence* (2017). [DOI:](#)

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