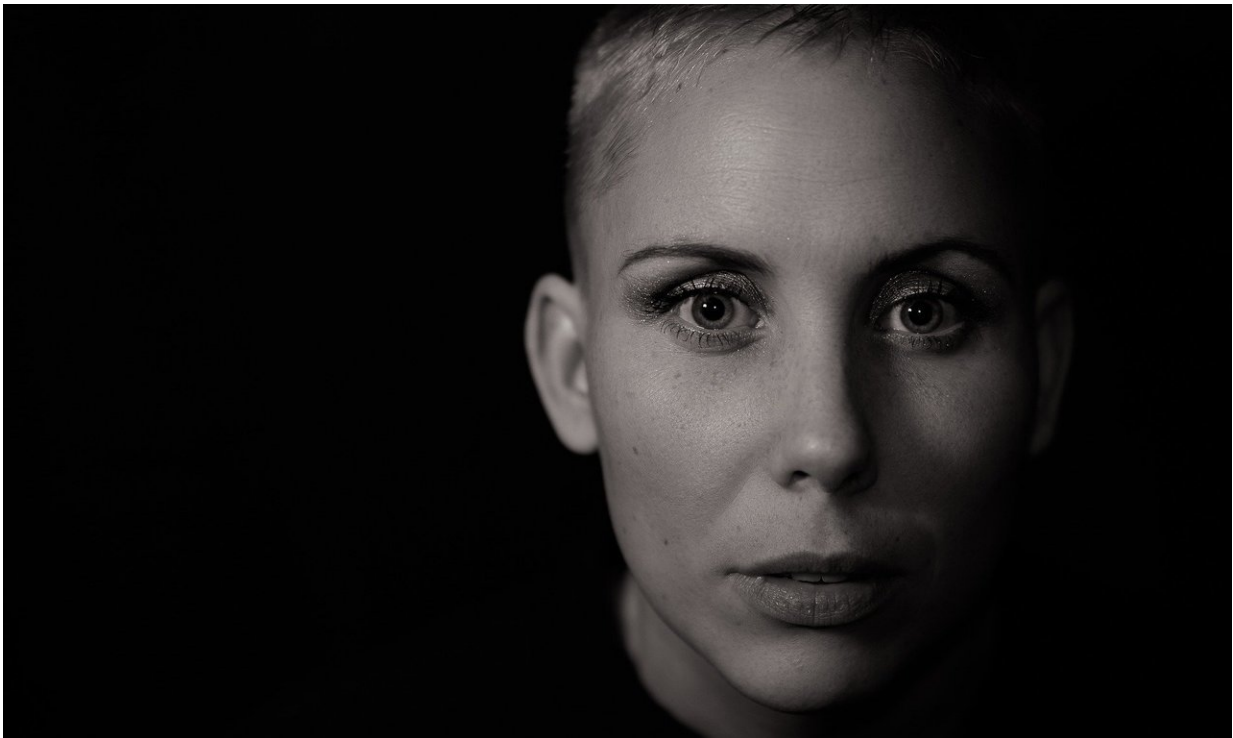# Families and schools may play key roles in promoting adolescent self-confidence

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Self-confidence is critical for teens as they prepare for the challenges of adulthood, and both families and schools may together play a vital role in boosting adolescents' confidence even in the face of difficulties with family, according to researchers.

The researchers examined how a variety of factors affected adolescents' self-efficacy—a person's belief that they have the ability to overcome challenges and be successful, similar to [self-confidence](#).

They found that adolescents who frequently witnessed their parents arguing or engaging in other forms of [conflict](#) experienced lower self-efficacy later on. But, success in [school](#) and support from peers were able to help compensate for [family](#) problems, and even boost self-efficacy higher than those losses.

Devin McCauley, a graduate student in Human Development and Family Studies, said the findings suggest that many factors can contribute to the development of a teen's confidence, and that schools may be an untapped resource for helping adolescents develop self-efficacy.

"Oftentimes, adolescents are in school all day where they're focusing on academics," McCauley said. "But this study suggests that we should continue thinking about schools in a developmental context, where we look beyond academics and at new ways to help improve other aspects of adolescent wellbeing."

Greg Fosco, associate professor of [human development](#) and family studies, added that the study—recently published in the *Journal of Adolescence*—is also a good reminder for parents about the importance of healthy co-parenting relationships.

"The healthier you can make the relationship with your partner, the better that is for your child," Fosco said. "Parents can get really focused on how they parent, and that's important, but their relationship with one another is an important source of strength for the family and for their children's development. Investing in a healthy couple relationship is going to promote a positive outcome for the child."

McCauley was inspired by his time as a school teacher to explore whether schools could help compensate for family-related losses in self-efficacy. He added that while self-efficacy is important at any age, it may be particularly important during adolescence.

"One of the goals of adolescence is to start to gain independence, form new social groups and eventually, down the line, start a family of their own," McCauley said. "If, as you encounter challenges in your life, your constant thought is 'I can't do this,' that can be stifling. But, if you have high self-efficacy, you're going to continue to pursue your goals, find more success, and that's going to reinforce and build on itself."

For the study, McCauley and the other researchers used data from 768 families, which included two-parent households with at least one adolescent in the home. Data was collected twice when the adolescents were in sixth grade and once when they were in seventh grade.

At each time point, adolescents reported data on conflict they witnessed between their parents, how threatened they felt by that conflict, feelings of self-efficacy, their school success and how much they felt supported by their peers.

After analyzing the data, the researchers found that higher levels of conflict between parents was linked to adolescents' feeling that their sense of security in the family was threatened. And this lower sense of security in turn was linked to diminished self-efficacy. But, greater success in school as well as feeling supported by peers contributed to higher levels of self-efficacy, enough to compensate for the losses stemming from teens' exposure to conflict between parents.

"If these adolescents are experiencing a lot of conflict at home, that can be offset to an extent by feeling successful in school or in their peer relationships," Fosco said. "Even though interparental conflict at home is

a risk factor for undermining their self-efficacy, these positive experiences out of the home will help offset damages to their belief in themselves, in their ability to overcome challenges.

McCauley said the study suggests there are multiple ways to help promote self-efficacy in adolescents, and that one set of solutions may not fit all teens.

"This gives us different avenues to work within when it comes to intervention or prevention strategies," McCauley said. "If it's difficult to work with the family, if it's hard to get them to come to programs or sessions, we can help teens be successful in other areas of their life. Adolescents are often in school day in and day out for nine months out of the year, and we can build this into how the school functions."

More information: Devin M. McCauley et al, Evaluating school and peer protective factors in the effects of interparental conflict on adolescent threat appraisals and self-efficacy, *Journal of Adolescence* (2018). DOI: 10.1016/j.adolescence.2018.12.005

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