

# Adolescents and older adults lack attention in social situations

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New research led by the University of Kent has found that adolescents and older adults pay less attention to social cues in real-world interactions than young adults.

The findings published by *Nature Human Behaviour* show that social attention undergoes age-related change, which has potential implications for how successfully we can interpret social interactions in [daily life](#) and throughout the lifespan.

Interpreting the facial expression, tone of voice and gestures of others is a vital element of [social interaction](#) that allow us to make rapid inferences about others' mental states, such as their intentions, emotions, desires and beliefs. Successful social interaction prompts perspective-taking and empathy along with other essential social skills, and plays an important role in enhancing our wellbeing.

The research led by Ph.D. student, Martina De Lillo, alongside Professor Heather Ferguson and other colleagues at the University of Kent's School of Psychology, is the first of its kind to examine how social attention is allocated during adolescence and whether it differs from adulthood. Furthermore, no previous research has examined the lifespan developmental differences of [social attention](#) while people actively participate in real-world interactive situations.

The researchers recorded participants in two real-world social interaction situations (a face-to-face conversation and navigating an environment) using mobile eye-tracking glasses to monitor their attention to social and non-social information. Adolescents (10-19 years old), young (20-40 years old) and older (60-80 years old) adults were assessed in both scenarios.

In the first experiment adolescents and [older adults](#) spent less time looking at the experimenter's face during conversation, and more time fixating the background, compared to [young adults](#). In the second experiment adolescents and older adults spent less time looking at people while navigating a busy University environment, compared to young adults. This is likely because adolescents and older adults found the

social situation more challenging to maintain than young adults, and they managed this difficulty by avoiding the complex social information of the face.

Martina De Lillo said: 'Using mobile eye-tracking technology allowed us to gain a unique understanding into social interaction and the everyday use of social cognition in real-world contexts. It can play a critical role in further understanding how social interaction develops across the lifespan.'

Professor Ferguson said: 'Focusing less on people and their faces means that adolescents and older adults miss important cues, and this could lead to larger impairments in social interaction, or less opportunities to engage in social interaction with others.'

'During adolescence, 10-19-year-olds are still learning and developing peer relationships, so they are experiencing a rapid change in their social experiences and preferences. For older adults, a substantial decline in social participation can lead to isolation, loneliness and poor health. Both groups can therefore be significantly impacted by a lack of social engagement.'

**More information:** Tracking developmental differences in real-world social attention across adolescence, young adulthood and older adulthood, *Nature Human Behaviour* (2021). [DOI: 10.1038/s41562-021-01113-9](https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-021-01113-9)

Provided by University of Kent

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