

Study finds empathy training improves mother-child relationships, life satisfaction

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Any parent who has had a child reach middle school age can attest that adolescence can be a tough time. A new study from the University of Kansas and Baker University has found that an intervention focusing on empathy skills can improve relationships between mothers and children and life satisfaction.

Researchers delivered an [empathy](#) skills training to 108 mothers and their adolescent children, ages 13 to 15 in northwest China. They tested

participants' cognitive and affective empathy skills before the 20-day training and again three months later. The results showed participants reported improved mother-child [relationship](#) quality and general life satisfaction.

"We know that, during that adolescence time, there is often conflict between the adolescent and parent. We thought this might be a good way to help reduce that conflict and help people see the others' perspective within the context of this one relationship," said Meagan Patterson, professor of educational leadership psychology at KU and a co-author of the study.

The study used an intervention designed by Li Chen-Bouck, associate professor of education at Baker University and a former student of Patterson. Designed to help people consider the viewpoints of others and understand how they experience situations in life, the program aimed to improve empathy, and the researchers hypothesized those skills would improve other aspects of life, including relationship quality and life satisfaction, which was confirmed in the findings.

The study, written with co-authors Bixi Qiao of Northern State University and Anqi Peng, doctoral candidate at KU, was published in the *Journal of Adolescent Research*.

Chen-Bouck designed the intervention while conducting research on the role of gratitude in parent-child relationships as part of her larger body of work on parenting in China. The country is ideal for the research, as it has undergone significant cultural, educational and [social changes](#) in recent decades and parents and children are both facing new demands. Additionally, topics such as empathy have not been as widely studied in mainland Chinese society as they have in the West, the authors said.

"I could tell from the participants (empathy) was kind of a new idea. We

looked at two components of it, cognitive and affective, and asked them to identify the emotions of people in a picture, identify the emotions of a character in a video clip, take a character's perspective and assume their role, asked the participants to feel the feeling that a character was experiencing in the video clip, and asked the participants to observe and infer possible causes of behaviors and affective states presented in the video clip," Chen-Bouck said.

In interviews, participants reported they considered others' viewpoints and experiences more and that their [life satisfaction](#) and relationship quality improved as a result. However, [quantitative data](#) showed that empathy skills did not improve. That result was consistent with other research that has studied empathy skills training, according to the researchers.

"The participants felt happier with their lives in general and in their relationships but did not show a noticeable increase in empathy skills," Chen-Bouck said. "We think there are multiple reasons why that might be. It's possible empathy skills might not develop within the time frame of this study. It could be, that if we followed up in a year, we would know more about long-term effects."

The authors noted that getting people thinking about empathy is good, and not only for [parent-child relationships](#), as participants reported feeling higher levels of empathy for their co-workers, spouses, friends and others. In future research, they hope to further study both the current empathy skills intervention and empathy in general in other settings, including in schools, and if it has effects on bullying, both peer-to-peer and student-to-teacher, an occurrence that is more common than commonly thought, Chen-Bouck said.

The results also show the value in studying both parents and children in research.

"Both mothers and children seemed to show benefits. They reported there was a positive cycle where they were both working harder to understand the other," Patterson said. "In parenting interventions, we often just think about the parents, but this shows we should think more about children's perspectives as well."

More information: Li Chen-Bouck et al, Evaluation of the Effectiveness of an Empathy Training on Empathy Skills, Life Satisfaction, and Relationship Quality for Chinese Adolescents and Their Mothers: A Mixed Methods Study, *Journal of Adolescent Research* (2021). [DOI: 10.1177/07435584211064209](https://doi.org/10.1177/07435584211064209)

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