

# Compassionate teens are likely to feel a sense of belonging, study suggests

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When teens feel a sense of belonging and being cared for, they are more likely to show compassion for others, according to a study led by Blake Colaianne, assistant research professor at Penn State's Edna Bennett

Pierce Prevention Research Center.

"We wanted to know whether students who felt as though others cared for them and were cheering for them, would be more likely to internalize that care and then give it away to others," Colaianne said. "Interestingly, we found that the students who felt a sense of belonging were more likely to show compassion toward others."

For the study, 599 students attending a [high school](#) in western Pennsylvania completed [surveys](#) at the beginning, middle and end of the school year. The surveys focused on their sense of being cared for and connected to others and whether they thought they showed [compassion](#)—defined by researchers as the specific motivation to understand and lessen others' suffering—by the end of the school year. The findings were [published](#) in the *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*.

Colaianne said this research has implications for how high schools think about creating compassionate school environments beyond providing opportunities for volunteering or donating.

"We could give everyone in the school—including teachers, staff and [students](#)—ways to learn about relational security and what it means to be a 'secure base' for each other," Colaianne suggested, explaining that relational security is ensuring that people feel seen, heard and connected. "The pool for potential secure attachment figures bursts open in adolescence. Teens are seeking non-parental adults to root for them. They're looking for connections in friends, coaches, mentors, teachers."

Sometimes, [teens](#) may feel a deeper connection through other sources, such as listening to a Taylor Swift song or a walk in nature, Colainne explained.

"There's a lot of interest right now around how to get [young people](#) to be

more compassionate toward others," Colaianne said. "It might begin by ensuring that they know we care for them, they belong here, and they are worthy of receiving care."

**More information:** Blake A. Colaianne et al, The role of relatedness: Applying a developmental-relational view of compassion in adolescence, *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology* (2023). DOI: [10.1016/j.appdev.2023.101569](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appdev.2023.101569)

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