

Kindness researcher challenges the notion of mean teens

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A UBC Okanagan researcher is hoping to flip the switch on the pre-convinced stereotype that teens are mean.

Associate Professor John-Tyler Binfet, a researcher in the School of Education, says teenagers often receive a [negative reputation](#), sometimes showcased in mainstream media reports of bullying, cyber harassment or schoolyard battles.

Binfet's new research seeks to disrupt that notion by showing how adolescents demonstrate kindness.

"There's been a shift in schools in recent years to move away from anti-bullying initiatives to efforts that embrace and promote pro-social behavior," says Binfet. "There is an emphasis on kindness throughout [school](#) curriculum, but little is known about how youth actually enact kindness."

Binfet and his research team surveyed 191 Grade 9 Okanagan Valley students to determine the extent they see themselves as kind in online and face-to-face interactions. The students were then asked to plan and complete five kind acts for one week.

In total, the students accomplished 943 [acts of kindness](#), with 94 per cent of the participants completing three or more of their assigned acts. The kind acts ranged from helping with chores, being respectful, complimenting or encouraging others and giving away items like pencils or money for the vending machine.

"When encouraged to be kind, they surpassed expectations. It was interesting to see how adolescents support others with nuanced ways of helping that included helping generally, physically, emotionally and with household chores," says Binfet. "As educators and parents model kindness or provide examples of kindness, showcasing examples of subtle acts might make being kind easier for adolescents to accomplish."

The majority of the participants enacted kindness to people they know,

most frequently to family, friends and other students. As the bulk of the kind acts took place at the school, the findings show [positive effects](#) for school climate, student-to-student relationships and [student](#) behavior.

Following the one-week challenge, participants were interviewed once again to see how their perception of their own kindness had changed. The findings showed a significant increase in their self-ratings of face-to-face and online kindness.

"This has implications for school-based initiatives seeking to encourage kindness among students who may say, 'but I'm already kind'," says Binfet. "The findings suggest that by participating in a short kindness activity, students' perceptions of themselves as kind may be boosted."

For years, Binfet's research has focused on counterbalancing the bullying literature to elevate the discussion of kindness. Through this latest research, his goal is to challenge the negative stereotypes of teens.

"I think adolescents can be misperceived, especially in schools. By understanding how they show [kindness](#), parents, educators and researchers can gain insight as to how they actualize pro-social behavior," says Binfet. "We can find ways to best structure opportunities for youth to be kind to help foster their development."

More information: John-Tyler Binfet, Kinder Than We Might Think: How Adolescents Are Kind, *Canadian Journal of School Psychology* (2019). [DOI: 10.1177/0829573519885802](https://doi.org/10.1177/0829573519885802)

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