

# Empathy helps explain how parental support can prevent teen delinquency

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A new study of nearly 4,000 school children has found that youngsters who feel they have empathic support from their parents and caregivers are verging away from a wide range of delinquent behavior, such as committing crimes.

Published in the peer-reviewed *Journal of Moral Education*, the research, which drew on data surveying children over a four year period from when they were aged 12 to 17, also shows that those who received [empathy](#) were less likely to execute acts of serious delinquent [behavior](#), compared to those who simply felt they had supportive parents.

In addition, the new findings—out today—demonstrate that parents/caregivers who display greater empathy enhance their teenagers' own development of empathy, or the ability to acknowledge and understand the feelings of others.

The results follow an investigation of the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children data source, which features a series of interviews with 3,865 boys and girls across Australia over the period when delinquent behavior first tends to appear.

Author of the paper, Professor Glenn Walters from Kutztown University in Pennsylvania, U.S., states his findings demonstrate that [parental support](#), as perceived by the child, plays a "small but significant role" in the development of empathy in early adolescent youth.

The Associate Professor of Criminal Justice adds: "Empathy in youth also appears to have the power to mediate the negative association between perceived parental support and future juvenile delinquency."

The study was launched to expand on results of several previous articles which investigated the [relationship](#) between parental support and delinquent behavior in teenagers. The proposition is that strong parental support reduces the propensity for such behavior. However, the results have been mixed.

Forensic psychologist Professor Walters wanted further clarification. Could parental support and delinquent behavior include an indirect

relationship, rather than direct, and be mediated by another factor: high levels of empathy?

To find out, he first scrutinized two interview sessions where the children were asked about their level of parental support as they perceived it, and their development of empathy. To determine parental support, they were asked to rate statements such as "I trust my parents" and "I talk to my parents". To assess empathy, they were asked to rate statements such as "I try to empathize with friends", and "I try to make others feel better".

In the final session, when they were 16 or 17, they were asked how often they had engaged in 17 delinquent acts in the past year. These acts varied in their seriousness, from drawing graffiti in a [public place](#) to purposely damaging or destroying property to using force or the threat of force to get money or things from someone.

Using a variety of statistical techniques, Professor Walters found that empathy did indeed appear to mediate the relationship between parental support and delinquent behavior. Children who reported more parental support tended to have higher levels of empathy, and these [children](#) were less likely to engage in delinquent behavior.

"What the current study adds to the literature on the parental support-delinquency relationship is a mechanism capable of further clarifying this relationship," Walters says. "The mechanism, according to the results of the present study, is empathy."

He does concede, however, that other factors such as social interest and self-esteem may also play a role in mediating the relationship between parental support and teenage delinquency, and says these factors should be explored in future research.

Walters also suggests, in future research, empathy should be measured from a younger age and that new criminalities such as cybercrime—not included in this data set—should be assessed.

**More information:** Glenn D. Walters, In search of a mechanism: mediating the perceived parental support–delinquency relationship with child empathy, *Journal of Moral Education* (2021). [DOI: 10.1080/03057240.2021.1872511](https://doi.org/10.1080/03057240.2021.1872511)

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