

HOUSE OF US INSTITUTE FOR SOCIAL EMPATHY

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# Understanding the Development of Social Empathy in Youth

*A Comprehensive Review of Research Across Childhood and Adolescence*

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# Publication Information

An evidence-based review examining how social empathy develops across childhood and adolescence and the environments that may help strengthen it.

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This publication is intended for educational and informational purposes. It synthesizes selected research across developmental psychology, neuroscience, education, and social-emotional learning.

## OVERVIEW

# Executive Summary

Social empathy plays an important role in how individuals relate to one another and is particularly vital for today's increasingly diverse and interconnected societies. Research across developmental psychology, neuroscience, education, and social-emotional learning suggests that empathy develops progressively over time and can be strengthened through social experiences, supportive environments, and intentional developmental practices.

This research review explores the developmental foundations of social empathy in children and adolescents. It examines how empathy evolves across different stages of youth development, including early childhood, upper elementary years, middle school, and adolescence.

Current research indicates that adolescence may represent a particularly important developmental window for strengthening social empathy due to the rapid neurological, emotional, and social changes that occur during this formative period. Research further suggests that empathy and social understanding are not fixed traits but can be influenced through developmental experiences, such as storytelling, intergroup dialogue, cooperative learning, volunteering, reflective discussion, intergenerational interaction, and emotionally supportive educational environments.

Understanding how social empathy develops may hold important implications for education, youth programming, civic life, and community well-being.

## Central finding

Social empathy is not best understood as a fixed personal trait. Research suggests that it develops progressively and may be strengthened through meaningful relationships, experiences, and thoughtfully designed environments.

## FOUNDATIONS

# 1. Introduction

This research review examines current research on the development of social empathy across childhood and adolescence. It explores how empathy develops through different developmental stages and considers social empathy as a broader capacity that extends beyond interpersonal understanding to include awareness of social contexts, systems, and the lived experiences of others. Drawing on research from developmental psychology, neuroscience, education, and social-emotional learning, this review provides an evidence-based overview of how social empathy develops and the conditions that may help strengthen it.

## 2. What Is Social Empathy?

Empathy is often discussed as a singular concept; however, research commonly distinguishes between emotional empathy, cognitive empathy, and social empathy (Decety & Cowell, 2014).

Emotional empathy refers to emotional responsiveness to another person's feelings. Cognitive empathy refers to perspective-taking and understanding another person's thoughts or experiences. Social empathy expands further upon these two by incorporating awareness of larger social realities and contextual influences shaping human experiences (Segal, 2011).

Understanding these distinctions is important. Social empathy builds upon emotional and cognitive empathy while also encouraging awareness of the broader social conditions that shape people's lives. Together, these capacities help explain how social empathy develops throughout childhood and adolescence.

FIGURE 1

### Three Dimensions of Empathy

Empathy is a multidimensional construct that integrates understanding, sharing, and responding to the emotional experiences of others.

| COGNITIVE EMPATHY<br><i>Understanding</i>                                                                                                                   | EMOTIONAL EMPATHY<br><i>Sharing</i>                                                                                                                       | COMPASSIONATE EMPATHY<br><i>Responding</i>                                                                                                              |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| The ability to understand another person's thoughts, feelings, and perspectives.<br><br><i>It involves perspective-taking, interpretation, and insight.</i> | The capacity to share and resonate with another person's emotional state.<br><br><i>It involves emotional attunement, affect sharing, and connection.</i> | The motivation to care for others and take action to alleviate their distress.<br><br><i>It involves concern, responsibility, and prosocial action.</i> |

## DEVELOPMENT

### 3. Developmental Foundations of Empathy

Research across developmental psychology and neuroscience suggests that empathy develops progressively throughout childhood and adolescence rather than emerging as a fixed trait.

Attachment relationships, emotional modeling, social learning, and supportive environments all contribute to empathic development. Children often learn empathic behavior through observation, reinforcement, storytelling, dialogue, and meaningful interaction within families, schools, peer groups, and communities (Bandura, 1977).

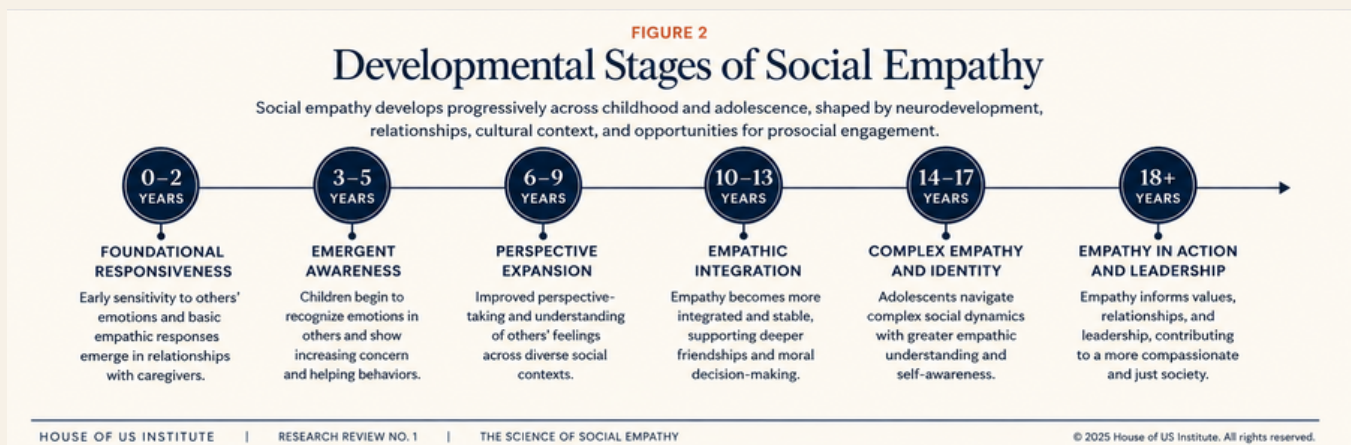
Neuroscientific research further demonstrates that empathy-related capacities continue developing throughout adolescence as the brain undergoes significant structural and functional changes (Steinberg, 2014).

#### Development occurs in context

Families, schools, peer groups, and communities influence how young people observe, practice, and make meaning of empathic behavior.

### 4. Developmental Stages of Social Empathy

Social empathy develops progressively across childhood and adolescence, with each developmental stage contributing to increasingly sophisticated perspective-taking, social understanding, and social responsibility.



## A CRITICAL WINDOW

## 5. Why Adolescence Represents a Critical Developmental Window

Research suggests that adolescents benefit from supportive environments that encourage respectful dialogue, critical thinking, intergroup interaction, reflective discussion, civic engagement, and exposure to diverse perspectives.

## 6. What Research Suggests Strengthens Social Empathy

Research suggests that social empathy can be strengthened through intentional social, educational, and relational experiences. Studies consistently identify several approaches that appear to support its development, including:

### 1 Storytelling

Stories can invite young people to encounter experiences and viewpoints beyond their own.

### 2 Dialogue

Respectful discussion and reflection can deepen perspective-taking and social understanding.

### 3 Cooperative learning

Shared tasks can create opportunities to listen, collaborate, and recognize mutual responsibility.

### 4 Intergroup interaction

Well-structured contact across differences may support broader understanding and reduce rigid boundaries.

### 5 Civic and community engagement

Meaningful participation can connect empathy with contribution and social responsibility.

### 6 Supportive environments

Emotionally supportive settings can make reflection, connection, and growth more possible.

## 7. Implications for Education, Youth Development, and Civic Life

Schools, families, youth organizations, community initiatives, and civic institutions can all play meaningful roles by creating supportive environments where young people have opportunities to connect, contribute, reflect, and develop these capacities throughout childhood and adolescence.

### Key Takeaways

- Social empathy develops progressively throughout childhood and adolescence.
- Development is influenced by relationships, experiences, and environments.
- Adolescence represents an important period for strengthening social empathy.
- Research identifies multiple educational and community-based approaches that may support its development.
- Developing social empathy has implications for education, community well-being, and healthy democratic culture.

## 8. Conclusion

Over the past few decades, research increasingly indicates that social empathy develops progressively throughout childhood and adolescence rather than existing as a fixed personal trait.

Current evidence suggests that social empathy can be strengthened through developmental experiences and supportive social environments. Storytelling, dialogue, intergroup interaction, cooperative learning, civic engagement, intergenerational relationships, and emotionally supportive educational settings have all been associated with increased perspective-taking and social understanding in youth.

Ultimately, research supports the view that social empathy develops gradually through human connection, reflection, experience, and meaningful social interaction across childhood and adolescence, all of which can be facilitated through targeted programs and practices.

While many questions remain, current research provides encouraging evidence that social empathy is not a fixed characteristic but a capacity that can be nurtured over time. Continued research will further deepen our understanding of how supportive relationships, meaningful experiences, and thoughtfully designed environments can help young people develop the skills needed to strengthen communities and contribute positively to society.

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