

Study: Blame biology for unempathetic adolescents

By Sue Shellenbarger, Wall Street Journal

The teen years are often fraught with door-slamming, eye-rolling and seeming insensitivity, even by kids who behaved kindly before. Some parents worry that they're doing something wrong, or that their children will never think of anyone but themselves.

New research shows that biology, not parenting, is to blame.

In adolescence, critical social skills that are needed to feel concern for other people and understand how they think are undergoing major changes. Adolescence has long been known as prime time for developing cognitive skills for self-control, or executive function.

"Cognitive empathy," or the mental ability to take others' perspective, begins rising steadily in girls at age 13, according to a six-year study published recently in *Developmental Psychology*. But boys don't begin until age 15 to show gains in perspective-taking, which helps in problem-solving and avoiding conflict.

Adolescent males actually show a temporary decline, between ages 13 and 16, in a related skill—*affective empathy*, or the ability to recognize and respond to others' feelings, according to the study, co-authored by Jolien van der Graaff, a doctoral candidate in the Research Centre Adolescent Development at Utrecht University in the Netherlands. Fortunately, the boys' sensitivity recovers in the late teens. Girls' affective empathy remains relatively high and stable through adolescence.

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