



PARENT AND GRANDPARENT RELATIONSHIPS PLAY AN IMPORTANT ROLE IN ENCOURAGING ALTRUISTIC ACTS – NEW RESEARCH

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There are conflicting ideas about the role of the family in wider society. Some, particularly in the US, argue that family units are essential for a strong civil society, and make a big contribution to public life. Others – mostly in Europe – say that families act in self-interested ways.

We already know that families pass down certain traits and resources to benefit younger generations. They share skills and talents, or leave money to children and grandchildren in wills. However, our research team believes that young people's relationships with their parents and grandparents can actually help explain their participation in activities that help other people and the environment.

For our newly published study, we asked 976 teenagers aged 13-14 in Wales about their activities to help others, and their family relationships too. More than a quarter of teenagers in the study said that they did at least one activity to help other people or the environment often. While nearly two thirds said they did at least one activity either often or sometimes. Of these, the most popular activity was providing support for people who are not friends or relatives – for example helping out at a local foodbank – followed by giving time to a charity or cause.

The teenagers also expressed a range of different motivations for their involvement. The most popular response was to improve things or help people (43%), followed by personal enjoyment (28%). This suggests that they were inspired by a mixture of self-oriented and selfless goals, which is also reflected in the fact that a third of them said their involvement had been personally beneficial and had benefited others and the environment too.

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FAMILY INFLUENCE

The young people we spoke to identified family as the most important route into participation, and told us that their parents played a strong role in encouraging them to get involved in voluntary activities. Family was more important than both school and friends for these teens. Over half of them said that their parents encouraged their involvement – higher than all other options including friends (29%) and teachers (24%).

We also found that the better the relationship that teenagers felt they had with their mothers, the more likely they were to take part in activities to help other people and the environment. Having a good relationship with a close grandparent also seemed to be important. From what we found, the benefits of having a positive relationship with both of these family members doubled the likelihood that these young people would engage in activities to help others and gave a dual benefit (compared to if they only had a positive relationship with one family member).

When asked to focus on the grandparent they saw most often, four out of five of the teenage group said it was a female grandparent (mother's mother or father's mother). This finding gives strong support to arguments made by feminist scholars for better recognition of the role of women in civil society, and of the domestic or personal domain as a political space.

It is puzzling that the influence of fathers isn't visible in our data, especially as our follow up interviews with parents suggest that both mothers and fathers encourage their children to participate in activities to help others. This is something that we will need to investigate further.

Overall, our study reveals that parents seem to play a key role in providing a route into civic participation and encouraging young people to get involved. This link between family ties and civic participation suggests that some of the values that get passed between parents and their children might aid their participation in activities to help others and the environment. In this sense, it indicates that there could be an intergenerational transmission of civic participation.

Our research findings also undermine the idea that strong families do not contribute to civil society, and suggests instead that strong bonds forged within the family can lead to linkages outside it. This undermines the separation of "public" and "private" that runs through European conceptualisations of civil society.

Our data shows that family is far more important in developing a propensity for engagement in civil society than is commonly understood, even more important than school, perhaps. More research is needed but these results call for a re-evaluation of the family home as a potential site of civil society engagement, and a wider recognition of the role of women in civil society too.



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