

10 Temperament and social responsibility



An important developmental task for adolescents is to begin to play a part in the wider society. How do our adolescents see their roles in relation to the community, the nation and the world? At the ages of 15–16 and 16–17 years, we asked them questions about their awareness of and interest in politics, their involvement in political activity, and in voluntary community activities of various sorts. Other questions tapped their beliefs about where responsibility lies for addressing social issues, and whether individuals' actions can have an impact. We also asked parents to give their perspective on their adolescent's attitudes and behaviour in several of these domains.

The ATP adolescents expressed considerable concern about what the world will be like in the future: 52 per cent reported they 'sometimes' worried about this, and 26 per cent said they worried 'very often'. They also showed feelings of responsibility for helping other people (69 per cent 'sometimes', 23 per cent 'very often' felt responsible in this way). This was not limited to a personal sense of responsibility. The great majority expressed beliefs indicating that it is everyone's responsibility to address global social problems, and that individual action can make a difference. Only 10 per cent strongly endorsed the belief that finding solutions to problems is the responsibility simply of world leaders.

In terms of their actual behaviour, two-thirds of the adolescents reported following international news (although only 15 per cent reported doing so 'very often'). Rather fewer reported following Australian political news. Politics, whether local or international, evoked strong feelings in one-third, although only 9 per cent reported strong feelings 'very often'. The proportion who showed any active involvement in political affairs, such as attending meetings or rallies, and writing letters to local councils or Members of Parliament, was even smaller – 14 per cent 'sometimes', and 3 per cent 'often' or 'very often'.

Higher levels of activity at more local levels were evident, including quite high levels of engagement with school activities – 55 per cent were involved in the school organisation (being a class or sports team captain or a member of the Students' Representative Council). A similar proportion also reported active support, through voluntary work or giving money, for organisations which help disadvantaged people. Most were also involved in fund-raising activities; these were probably mostly school-organised projects such as the 40-hour Famine (to support World Vision), Red Nose Day (to support research into Sudden Infant Death Syndrome) and Community Aid Abroad's Walk Against Want. Over a quarter reported visiting elderly or disabled people to cheer them up, which is impressive (many of the visits may be to grandparents). One in five reported being active in a group working for social change, such as environmental or community groups. Thus a somewhat higher level of activity is evident where the focus is on local issues rather than national or international issues.

We included two questions concerning environmental problems in this questionnaire. Just over half of teenagers reported that they sometimes, or very often, encouraged others to conserve resources, while two-thirds said that they tried to protect the environment. On each of these questions, significantly more girls than boys endorsed

these views. Parents reported that 70 per cent of their daughters encouraged others to recycle, sometimes or often, while 52 per cent of their sons did so.

The Australian figures on attitudes to social issues are fairly comparable to data on social responsibility among US adolescents. Nevertheless, the discrepancy between the 80 per cent who are concerned about the future and the 20 per cent who are active in working for change is notable. We explored factors which might explain why some adolescents were active in these domains, and others were not. Socio-economic status of the family was not related to the adolescents' beliefs or behaviours in this area. A substantial number believed there were not enough opportunities available for them to engage in socially responsible behaviours, although these beliefs were not related to whether they were in fact active in this domain. A cooperative versus competitive orientation appeared to be one factor involved in adolescents' civic responsibility: those who most preferred to work in a cooperative environment were also more likely to be politically and socially aware and active.

Gender was clearly another relevant factor. This has been found by others (Bowes et al. 1996, in Australia, and Rosenthal et al. 1998 in the US), with girls reporting considerably more socially responsible attitudes than boys, along with stronger beliefs in the responsibility of everyone to work for a better world, and in the ability of individuals to make a difference. In contrast, although boys and girls themselves did not self-report any differences in levels of political awareness, parents reported boys to be more politically aware than girls.

Other important influences on teenagers' levels of social responsibility were patterns of behaviour, parenting styles, and relationships with peers. Adolescents showing more oppositional and hyperactive behaviour, tended to show less political awareness, less pro-social community behaviour, and less belief in the responsibility and efficacy of individuals' actions. Similar but slightly weaker and less consistent relationships were found for depression and anxiety.

Temperamental persistence at 15–16 years (sticking at tasks until they were completed) was related to higher levels of social responsibility overall. Shyer children were less likely to be involved in pro-social community activity. More active children tended to engage in less pro-social community activity.

In terms of parenting, adolescents whose parents reported higher warmth towards them, and who monitored their children's behaviour, tended to have higher levels of pro-social community activity and stronger beliefs in the responsibility and efficacy of individuals. Parents who were more likely to explain and discuss issues with their children had adolescents who were more politically aware/active. Parents using high levels of punishment had adolescents who were less politically aware/active, less pro-social, and with weaker beliefs in individuals' responsibility and efficacy.

The strongest single predictor of whether the project teenagers engaged in socially responsible behaviours was whether their friends did so. This again illustrates the influence of peers on behaviour at this adolescent stage.

Looking backwards in time at the earlier histories of young people with high levels of civic responsibility in mid-adolescence, we found that they had been very well functioning in a number of facets of their lives. They had been doing well at school and valued their school experiences, they tended to be caring and confident, had close friendships with peers, were interested in intellectual pursuits and came from more advantaged families.

Further reading

See items 71 and 75 in the list of Australian Temperament Project publications at the end of this book.