

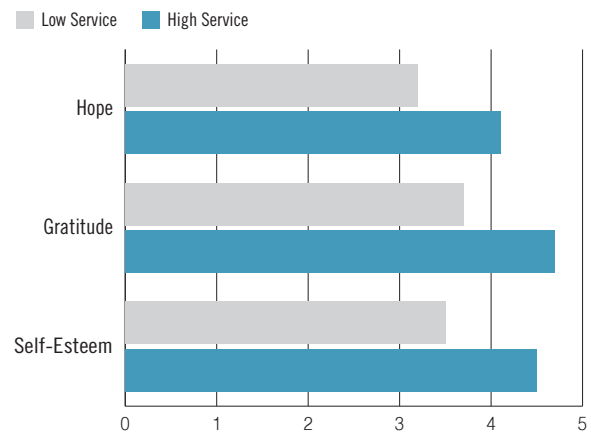
JustServe Strangers: Benefits for Teens Who Serve

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When we think of the benefits of service, we often focus on how service helps the “helpee,” or the person being helped. However, recent research highlights that service can also help the “helper” in a variety of ways and has focused on how helping others can benefit teenagers in particular. The teenage years are often a tough time for both parents and children, and though many teens are thriving and engaging in meaningful and unique service opportunities, countless youth are struggling with mental health issues and problem behaviors.

Recent research suggests that one possible help for teens is to get them involved in serving others—and not just any others, but strangers in particular. Researchers have been exploring this phenomenon for the past few years and suggest that teens who serve those they don’t know are protected in a variety of ways. For example, longitudinal research has found that helping strangers is associated with increases in adolescents’ self-esteem from ages 11 to 14.¹ In other words, during early adolescence, which can be an especially challenging time for young people, those who engage in high levels of service report feeling better about who they are. Figure 1 also suggests that teens who report high levels of service feel more grateful and more hopeful. Researchers speculate this is because serving strangers (compared to family members or friends) represents a relatively high-cost behavior, something that goes above and beyond. When teens engage in these sorts of behaviors consistently, they are less likely to focus on themselves and their own problems and are more likely to see the good in what they have and feel hopeful. They also gain self-confidence by helping others and seeing that they are important and needed in their communities.

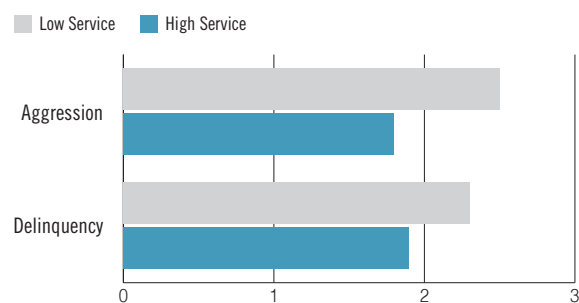
Figure 1: Service Promotes Positive Outcomes



Teens answered questions about feeling optimistic, grateful, and good about themselves on a scale of 0 (not at all like me), 3 (somewhat like me), and 5 (very much like me). For those who reported high levels of service toward strangers, they were closer to feeling like hope, gratitude, and self-esteem items sounded “very much like them” rather than “somewhat like them” (which was more characteristic of those low in service).

Research has also found that service toward strangers protects young people from getting involved in problem behaviors. One study found that prosocial behavior toward strangers (but not toward family members or friends) was associated with lower levels of aggression and delinquency two years later.² Figure 2 presents similar results, and researchers speculate that these findings may be explained because teens who serve are likely to become connected with friends who have positive values and behaviors, which protects from problem behavior.³ In addition, serving can help teens develop a moral identity, which is a teenager’s identity as someone who is helpful and moral, which is often incompatible with behaviors like aggression.

Figure 2: Service Protects Against Negative Outcomes



Teens answered questions about the frequency of their own aggressive behaviors (for example, letting others “have it” when they’re mad) and delinquent behaviors (for example, stealing, doing drugs, skipping school, and cheating). On a scale of 0 (never), 1 (rarely), 2 (sometimes), and 3 (often), teens who reported low service were somewhere between “sometimes” and “often,” while teens who reported high service were below “sometimes” in their reports of aggression and delinquency.

As parents and leaders, we are often looking for ways to build our youth and to help protect them against negative outcomes. Programs like JustServe are a great way to help young people get involved in serving strangers and neighbors in the community and can have a meaningful impact on positive outcomes for youth (including self-esteem, self-confidence, gratitude, and hope) as well as protecting against problem behaviors (such as aggression and poor self-esteem). Parents and leaders should look for high-quality opportunities where youth can see the benefits of their behaviors on others and where they can build positive relationships with friends and family members as they serve. This will not only help those they serve, but the teenagers will also benefit greatly as they put aside their own worries and concerns and serve others.

¹ Fu, X., Padilla-Walker, L. M., and Brown, M. (2017). Longitudinal relations between adolescents' self-esteem and prosocial behavior toward strangers, friends and family. *Journal of Adolescence*, 57, 90–98.

² Padilla-Walker, L. M., Carlo, G., and Nielson, M. G. (2015). Does helping keep teens protected? Longitudinal bidirectional relations between prosocial behavior and problem behavior. *Child Development*, 86, 1759–1772.

³ Carlo, G., Crockett, L., Wilkinson, J., and Beal, S. (2011). The longitudinal relations between rural adolescents' prosocial behaviors and young adult substance use. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 40, 1192–1202.