

# Young adults who give and receive help

by Anne Milan

Although Canadians, in general, have a reputation for helping others when needed, young people do not always enjoy such a positive image. Popular opinion and the media often portray youths in our society as lazy, or indifferent. However, many young people are actively engaged in positive and altruistic social behaviours. Famous young Canadians such as Craig Kielburger, children's rights activist, Ryan Hreljac, who spear-headed a campaign to build wells in Africa, and, of course, Terry Fox, illustrate how young people can touch many lives and inspire others to do the same.

While most helping behaviour occurs on a much smaller scale, it can still promote a sense of fulfillment and connectedness to others. Researchers have pointed out that, "anyone who treats another person in a kind and helpful way creates a small benefit that is likely to be passed along."<sup>1</sup> Running errands for a senior, mowing the lawn for a neighbour, or consoling a friend who has just experienced a relationship break-up or parental divorce—these are all valid forms of helping. As an additional benefit, young adults acquire social skills such as empathy and understanding as they learn to help others.<sup>2</sup>

Providing help, however, is only half of the story. Everyone, including those who prefer to give, needs help of some type from time to time. A willingness to accept help can make all the difference when coping with the challenges—large or small—of life.<sup>3</sup> It is, therefore, not only the



## GST What you should know about this study

Using the 2003 General Social Survey (GSS), this paper examines the extent of helping behaviours given and received by young adults aged 15 to 24. This age group was chosen because the positive social behaviours of young adults are not often examined. The results are based on a sample of nearly 3,200 youth representing 4.2 million Canadians in this age range.

Particular helping behaviours given and received in the month prior to the survey included providing emotional support; teaching, coaching, or giving practical advice; providing transportation or running errands; doing domestic work, home maintenance or outdoor work; helping with child care; or other forms of help. Unless a particular type of helping behaviour was specified, help given or received can refer to any one or more of these behaviours.

Respondents were asked to exclude help given to, or received from, those with whom they live, help given as a volunteer for an organization, or help obtained from an organization. In addition, respondents were also asked if they provided or received any of these forms of help on a regular basis, with regularity interpreted by the respondent.

ability to give help that is important, but also the capacity to receive it when required.

The 2003 General Social Survey (GSS) can be used to shed light on the extent to which young people

aged 15 to 24 provide, and also receive, various forms of help, such as offering emotional support; teaching, coaching, or giving practical advice; providing transportation or running errands; doing domestic work, home maintenance or outdoor work; or helping with child care.

### Most young people are both giving and receiving help

The majority of young people both give and receive many types of

assistance. According to the 2003 GSS, 87% of young people aged 15 to 24 provided some form of help in the month prior to the survey. In fact, they had a higher rate of providing help than any other age group, a trend which decreased with age to a low of 60% for seniors aged 65 or older.

A similar pattern exists for receiving aid. Nearly 8 in 10 (78%) individuals in their late teens or early twenties indicated that they

received assistance, compared with less than half of seniors (47%). These differences in the care behaviours of young and old Canadians may reflect the social situation they tend to find themselves in. While many seniors are retired, young people are more likely to be either in school or in the labour force, environments with ample opportunities for meeting people and exchanging assistance.

Many young people give and receive multiple forms of help. Some 55% provided, and 37% received, at least three different types of assistance in the month prior to the survey. Furthermore, many youths not only give and receive aid, but do so on a regular basis (as interpreted by respondents): according to the 2003 GSS, 42% of young adults aged 15 to 24 offered, and 33% accepted, assistance regularly.

### Helping is reciprocal

It has been said that people "get what they give," and it would seem that this holds true, at least in terms of helping behaviour. Data from the 2003 GSS show that young adults who helped others the most were also the most likely to receive help. About 95% of youths who provided four or more types of help in the month prior to the survey also received at least one type of assistance. In comparison, 68% of young adults who gave one type of help accepted aid during the same time frame, while only 27% of those who offered no help at all received assistance from someone else.

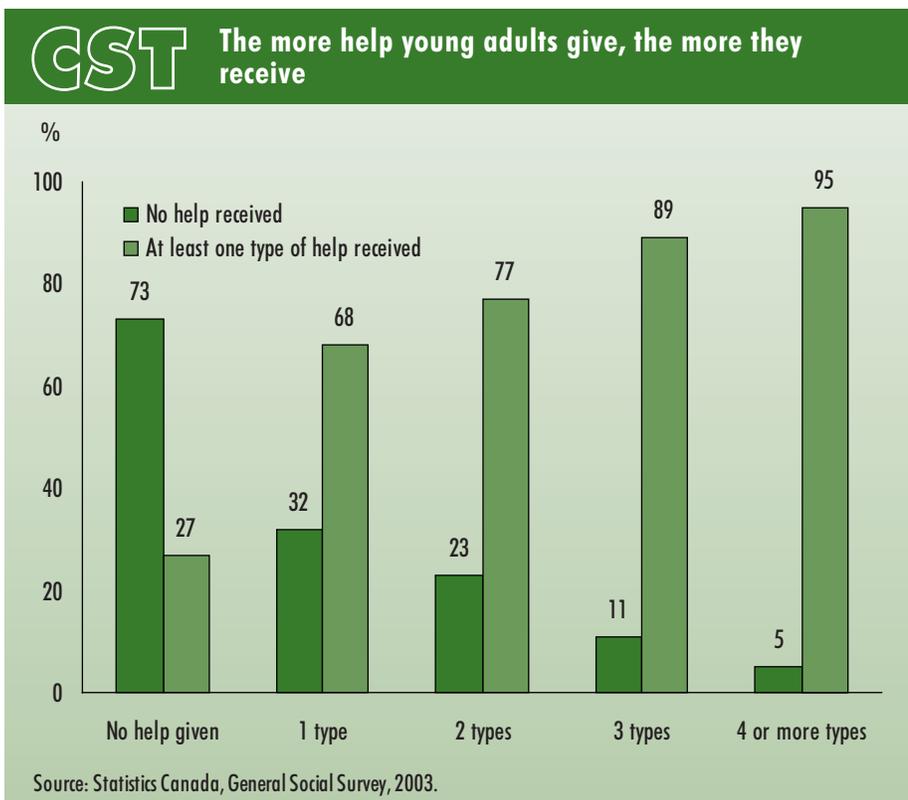
### Emotional support most common type of help exchanged

Emotional support can be a great source of comfort during challenging times such as employment difficulties, relationship breakdowns, or other interpersonal problems. It was the most common type of helping behaviour both offered and obtained by 15- to 24-year-olds: 67% provided a "listening ear" or a "shoulder to cry on", while 57% reported receiving such comfort.

**GST Many young adults give and receive several types of help**

	Help given	Help received
	% of 15- to 24-year-olds	
No help	13	22
At least one type of help	87	78
One type	13	20
Two types	19	21
Three types	24	22
Four or more types	31	15
<i>Total</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>

Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2003.



**15- to 24-year-olds who give or receive help**

Type of help	Give	Receive
	%	
Emotional support	67	57
Teaching, coaching, or giving practical advice	59	52
Transportation or running errands	50	46
Domestic work, home maintenance or outdoor work	45	21
Helping with child care	26	5
Other	13	10

Note: Percentages do not add to 100% as multiple responses were possible. Help given and received occurred during month prior to the survey.

Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2003.

**15- to 24-year-olds who give or receive help**

Relationship to young person	Give	Receive
	%	
Friend	74	62
Relative	30	33
Neighbour	9	7
Other person	7	8

Note: Percentages do not add to 100% as multiple responses were possible. Help given and received occurred during month prior to the survey.

Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2003.

Women are often thought to be more skilled at nurturing relationships than men, and therefore, may be more open to giving and receiving less tangible assistance, such as emotional support. This, in fact, appears to be the case as women in their late teens and early twenties were much more likely than young men to give emotional care to someone (76% and 58%, respectively). Similarly, a higher proportion of young women received emotional support (66% versus 49% of young men).

Women also provided childcare in larger proportions (36% compared with 17% of men), while young men were more likely to help with work

around the house (domestic work, home maintenance or outdoor work) than were young women: 52% and 38%, respectively. Whereas young men and women tended to give and receive help with different tasks, overall, they did so in similar proportions.

**Friends are most likely to be sources and recipients of help**

According to an earlier study, a strong feeling of support from one's social network increases feelings of attachment and community involvement.<sup>4</sup> For adolescents, who struggle to establish their own identity, that social network consists of peers—friends who become

increasingly important and who may, during these years, replace parents as a source of support.<sup>5</sup> It is, therefore, not surprising that young adults were more likely to offer help to friends than to relatives and other acquaintances. Among 15- to 24-year-olds who helped others, 74% provided assistance to friends, 30% to relatives, 9% to neighbours, and 7% to someone else. The pattern for receiving aid was similar.

In addition, the size of the peer support group was an important influence on help given and received: the more friends a young person had, the more help they gave and received. For example, 92% of 15- to 24-year-olds with six or more friends reported providing help, compared with 81% of those with two or fewer friends. The situation was comparable at the receiving end. In contrast, the number of close relatives was not as important a factor in the helping behaviour of young adults.

**Different types of help for different people**

Young adults provide different types of help to friends, relatives and others. Friends were most likely to be offered emotional help (among youth who provided emotional help to others, 89% directed this type of support to friends); teaching, coaching or giving practical advice (88%); and transportation (87%).

In contrast, relatives were more likely to be offered child care (47%) than emotional support (35%) or teaching, coaching or giving practical advice (35%). A similar pattern existed for receiving help from friends and relatives.

**Type of help exchanged varies with age**

In general, the types of help given and received vary by age. For example, young adults aged 20 to 24 were more likely to assist with transportation or running errands than were 15- to 19-year-olds (54% versus 46%), probably because many teens do not

yet have a valid driver's license. Doubtless for similar reasons, teens aged 15 to 19 were more likely to receive assistance with transportation than were people in their early twenties (54% compared to 39%). As well, a higher proportion of teenagers were offered help in the form of teaching, coaching, or practical advice than their older counterparts (59% versus 46%).

### **Group involvement increases helping behaviour**

Participation in either formal or informal organizations—ranging from casual get-togethers with friends to sports teams or religious associations—increases interaction with others and creates opportunities for offering and accepting help. According to data from the 2003 GSS, 94% of young people who belonged to three or more groups provided help to other people, compared with 82% of youths who had no group affiliations.

Similarly, those who were members of several groups were also more likely to receive help. Nearly nine in ten (87%) young adults who were

affiliated with at least three groups received some type of assistance during the month prior to the survey, compared with 72% of those who did not belong to any groups.

In addition to group membership, volunteering is also associated with providing assistance to others. For example, among those who volunteered, 65% reported teaching, coaching or giving practical advice, compared with 56% of those who did not volunteer.

Additional analysis of GSS data showed that quality of life factors, such as levels of stress, personal happiness, overall life satisfaction, religiosity, and sense of belonging to the community were not strongly associated with either giving or receiving help. Similarly, household income was not a central factor in young adults' helping behaviour.

### **Summary**

Overall, most young people aged 15 to 24 are providing, as well as receiving, help. Emotional support is the most common type of support given and received, and friends are the most likely givers and receivers of

all types of assistance. Belonging to groups, whether formal or informal, as well as volunteering, are activities which promote helping behaviour. To the extent that behaviour in youth continues throughout life, learned helping behaviour may set the stage for both providing and accepting help in later life.



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