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## Encouraging teens to work together can reap benefits

As my kids can attest, I've been rattling off the same rules and reminders for years. "Homework first, video games later," and "Please put your laundry in the hamper," are two of my favorites.

But now that the kids are getting older and seem more interested in socializing than studying, there's a new mom-ism in our house. If you have 'tweens and teens in your house, you might be saying it, too: "Don't pay attention to the other kids while you're in class. Keep your eyes on the teacher and stay focused on your work."

Good advice? Yes -- and no.

"Teachers and parents have traditionally urged kids not to worry about others in the classroom but to focus on themselves," said Cary J. Roseth, assistant professor of educational psychology at Michigan State University. "But for young adolescents, this is literally impossible. Identity development and peer relationships are a big part of this period of development. Young teens are constantly looking for opportunities to step closer to their peers."

Yet, according to Roseth, that's what we do. Desks are placed in rows facing the front of the room. And students rarely have the opportunity to interact with other students during class time in order to work together toward a common goal.

Of course, classrooms are supposed to be places for learning -- not chatting with friends. And it's critical that children develop good study habits on their own. But Roseth and his colleagues wondered whether learning can be enhanced when teachers and parents create an environment that works with the developmental needs of adolescents, rather than against them.

In a study of more than 80 years of educational research, Roseth and his colleagues found that cooperative goals (as opposed to competitive or individualistic ones) enhance outcomes.

"Cooperative goals allow peers to develop more positive peer relationships, fulfilling a developmental need while simultaneously promoting academic achievement," he said.

What are cooperative goals?

Cooperative goals are lessons or tasks that require kids to work together, rather than independently or competitively. "They send the message to students that their success will depend on everyone else's success," Roseth said.

This learning style is most successful when kids work in small, randomly assigned groups structured by their teacher. For example, students might be asked to master a math problem or a history concept, then teach it to their peers.

There's a lot of planning and coordinating, Roseth admits. But he cites many advantages: improved effort and test scores; a heightened sense of self-worth; enhanced relationships.

Things you can do to help your children benefit from cooperative learning:

- **Start early.** "Instead of asking one of your kids to clean his room, you might assign the task to both of your kids," Roseth suggested. "You can say, 'You're both responsible for finishing this job. When you're done, we can all go to the park together.'" He adds: "Be sure to encourage an older child to help the younger."
- **Find teachable moments.** Roseth encourages parents to find daily opportunities to engage their children in brainstorming and conflict resolution. For example, if each child wants to watch a different TV show at the same time, you might ask, "How do you think we can solve this problem?" Offer suggestions and guidance.
- **Host cooperative study sessions.** On occasion, encourage your child to invite friends to study at home as a small group. Take an active role and make it fun, Roseth advises. For example, you might ask each child to tackle a few problems, then teach them to his or her peers.
- **Get the word out.** "When possible, raise awareness about various teaching approaches like cooperative learning," Roseth said.

For more, visit [www.co-operation.org](http://www.co-operation.org), [www.jigsaw.org](http://www.jigsaw.org), [kc.vanderbilt.edu/pals](http://kc.vanderbilt.edu/pals), and [www.kaganonline.com](http://www.kaganonline.com).

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