

# Empathy in Youth in the Digital Era: An Experiential Workshop at the Giffoni Film Festival

Annarita Vignapiano<sup>1,2\*</sup>, Stefania Landi<sup>1\*</sup>, Francesco Monaco<sup>1,2\*</sup>, Antonella Boccia<sup>1</sup>, Anna Longobardi<sup>1</sup>, Raffaele Malvone<sup>1</sup>, Ernesta Panarello<sup>1</sup>, Benedetta Di Gruttola<sup>1</sup>, Luca Steardo Jr<sup>3</sup>, Giulio Corrivetti<sup>1,2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Mental Health, ASL Salerno; Salerno, Italy; <sup>2</sup> European Biomedical Research Institute of Salerno (EBRIS), Salerno, Italy; <sup>3</sup> Psychiatric Unit, Department of Health Sciences, University Magna Graecia of Catanzaro, Catanzaro, Italy

\* These authors have contributed equally to this work and share first authorship.

## Summary

**Introduction:** Empathy is a crucial socio-emotional skill for the psychological and relational development of adolescents. In the digital era, mediated communication may hinder empathic expression, increasing the risk of isolation, misunderstanding, and dysfunctional behaviors. **Objective:** The study aims to assess empathic tendencies using validated self-report measures and explore links with demographic or psychosocial factors. It also evaluates the feasibility of emotional education initiatives within youth cultural events, supporting adolescent development and advancing empathy research.

**Methods:** During the 2024 Giffoni Film Festival, two 60-minute workshops were conducted for young participants aged 16 to 25. Activities included active listening exercises, guided discussions, and administration of the Toronto Empathy Questionnaire (TEQ).

**Results:** The workshops helped identify both barriers and facilitators to empathy. The TEQ highlighted varying empathy levels among participants, supporting the need for targeted interventions.

**Conclusions:** Experiential and psychoeducational activities are effective tools to enhance empathic abilities in youth, particularly in a digital context that can often dampen emotional connection.

**Keywords:** Empathy, adolescence, Young Adulthood, digital communication, psychoeducation, TEQ, Giffoni Film Festival

## Correspondence

Francesco Monaco

E-mail: f.monaco@aslsalerno.it

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## INTRODUCTION

Empathy is broadly defined as the capacity to recognize, understand, and resonate with the emotions, thoughts, and perspectives of others. It encompasses both affective components such as sharing emotional experiences and cognitive components such as perspective-taking and mentalizing<sup>1</sup>. As a multifaceted socio-emotional construct, empathy plays a central role in moral development, prosocial behavior, social bonding, and the regulation of interpersonal conflict<sup>2</sup>. A growing body of research supports its fundamental contribution to emotional intelligence and psychological resilience across the lifespan.

During adolescence a critical developmental window characterized by neurobiological changes, identity formation, and increasing autonomy empathy undergoes significant transformation. Adolescents begin to refine their capacity for cognitive empathy, including theory of mind and abstract perspective-taking, which are crucial for navigating increasingly complex social environments<sup>3</sup>. Empathy in adolescence has been associated with positive peer relationships, reduced aggression, and greater academic and social competence<sup>4</sup>.

Importantly, individual differences in empathic capacity during youth have been identified as predictive markers of mental health outcomes. Lower levels of empathy are consistently linked to externalizing behaviors, such as conduct problems and bullying, as well as internalizing symptoms, including anxiety and depression<sup>5,6</sup>. A large-scale longitudinal study using data from the Adolescent Brain Cognitive Development (ABCD) Study examined the bidirectional relationship between prosocial behavior and various dimensions of psychopathology in children aged 9-12. Results showed stable, trait-like associations: prosocial behavior was negatively linked to general psychopathology and conduct problems, but positively associated with internalizing symptoms. Longitudinally, higher levels of psychopathology predicted slight decreases in future prosocial behavior, while prosocial behavior did not significantly predict later psychopathology<sup>7</sup>. Conversely, higher empathy is associated with greater psychological well-being, emotional regulation, and lower risk of psychopathology. This makes empathy a key protective factor in mental health, highlighting its relevance for early identification and intervention strategies.

However, in the current digital era, adolescents are increasingly immersed in mediated communication through social media and digital platforms. While these tools offer opportunities for connection, they often lack the richness of face-to-face interactions, including non-verbal cues such as tone of voice, facial expressions, and gestures, which are essential for the development and expression of empathic responses<sup>8</sup>. This shift in socialization context may hinder the development of deep interpersonal connections and emotional attunement, potentially leading to emotional detachment, diminished empathic concern, and an increased risk of anti-social or isolating behaviors.

Moreover, social and environmental factors including family dynamics, the quality of peer relationships, school climate, and media exposure play a crucial role in shaping empathic abilities. For instance, supportive family relationships and secure attachment styles have been shown to enhance empathy, while repeated exposure to violent or dehumanizing media content can desensitize youth to others' suffering<sup>9</sup>. These findings underscore the importance of structured educational and preventive interventions aimed at fostering emotional literacy, active listening, and reflective self-awareness from an early age. Moreover, social and environmental factors including family dynamics, the quality of peer relationships, school climate, and media exposure play a crucial role in shaping empathic abilities. For instance, supportive family relationships and secure attachment styles have been shown to enhance empathy, while repeated exposure to violent or dehumanizing media content can desensitize youth to others' suffering<sup>9</sup>. A two-part study conducted among Chinese high school students found that interpersonal emotion regulation (IER) strategies are influenced by individual empathy profiles. Students with high cognitive and low affective empathy preferred affect-improving strategies, while

those with low cognitive and high affective empathy were more likely to use affect-worsening strategies, underscoring the role of empathy in shaping interpersonal emotion regulation behavior<sup>10</sup>.

These findings underscore the importance of structured educational and preventive interventions aimed at fostering emotional literacy, active listening, and reflective self-awareness from an early age.

In addition, more than 90% of teenagers worldwide report daily use of social media, which has been increasingly associated with social isolation, cyberbullying, and diminished empathic skills<sup>11,12</sup>. Given this background, the Giffoni Film Festival, one of the world's leading youth cinema festivals, offered a unique context for this experiential workshop by providing an artistic setting that naturally stimulates emotional reflection, narrative exploration, and perspective-taking<sup>11,12</sup>. In this context, promoting empathy development among youth is not only essential for individual psychosocial growth, but also for broader public health objectives. Interventions designed to enhance empathy may contribute to reducing risk behaviors, improving mental health outcomes, and fostering a more compassionate and socially cohesive society. In this context, promoting empathy development among youth is not only essential for individual psychosocial growth, but also for broader public health objectives. Interventions designed to enhance empathy may contribute to reducing risk behaviors, improving mental health outcomes, and fostering a more compassionate and socially cohesive society.

## OBJECTIVES

This pilot project, implemented within the framework of the 2024 edition of Giffoni Film Festival, pursued the following specific objectives:

### *Intervention Aim*

- To strengthen the development of empathy in adolescents by raising awareness of both affective and cognitive components of empathic functioning, including emotional attunement and perspective-taking.
- To provide participants with practical tools and strategies to identify, understand, and appropriately express empathic responses in real-life interactions, through psychoeducational activities, guided group discussions, and experiential exercises.

### *Research & Feasibility Aim*

- To assess individual differences in empathic tendencies among participants by administering a psychometrically validated self-report measure, to collect standardized data on dimensions such as empathic concern, personal distress, and perspective-taking, and to explore possible associations with demographic or psychosocial factors.
- To evaluate the feasibility and acceptability of integrating structured emotional education initiatives within cultural youth events, leveraging the emotionally immersive con-

text of the Giffoni Film Festival to enhance psychological engagement and internalization of empathic values.

- These objectives reflect a dual purpose: to support adolescent emotional development through targeted intervention, and to contribute empirical insights to the field of empathy research and youth mental health promotion.

## METHODS

### Context and Participants

The initiative was conducted as part of the 2024 Giffoni Film Festival (GFF), an international youth-oriented cultural event that integrates cinema, education, and personal development. Two experiential workshops were held during the festival, each lasting approximately 60 minutes, with a maximum of 15 participants per group. A total of 30 adolescents and young adults (aged 16 to 25 years) took part in the project. Participants were recruited among the official jurors of the festival and represented diverse socio-cultural backgrounds. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained prior to the beginning of the activities.

### Team

The intervention was facilitated by a multidisciplinary mental health team composed of:

- One psychiatrist (specialized in youth and community mental health);
- One psychologist-psychotherapist (with expertise in group dynamics and emotional education);
- One psychiatric rehabilitation technician (experienced in creative and experiential methodologies for psychosocial development).

### Activities and Procedures

The workshops were structured to integrate psychoeducation, experiential learning, and group discussion, with the aim of promoting empathy awareness and skills. The main components included:

#### 1. Definition and Guided Discussion on Empathy:

Participants were introduced to the theoretical foundations of empathy, including the distinction between cognitive and affective empathy, and the role of empathic processes in interpersonal functioning. A guided discussion facilitated reflection on participants' personal understanding and experiences of empathy.

#### 2. Active Listening Exercises and Role-Playing ("The Masks of Emotions"):

A core component of the intervention involved structured role-playing and active listening techniques, designed to promote emotional attunement, perspective-taking, and non-judgmental communication. The exercise titled "*The Masks of Emotions*" consisted of dyadic interactions in which one participant wore a symbolic "mask" representing a specific emotional state (e.g., sadness, anger, fear), while the other engaged in active listening without interrupting or offering immediate feedback. This was followed by a role-

reversal and group debrief.

This method is grounded in experiential learning theory and aims to enhance the participant's capacity to recognize implicit emotional signals, tolerate emotional ambiguity, and suspend automatic interpretations. Evidence suggests that such interventions, especially when embedded in group settings, can improve empathic accuracy, reduce emotional avoidance, and strengthen relational competencies<sup>15,16</sup>.

#### 3. Exploration of Digital Barriers to Empathy:

Facilitators led a discussion on the impact of digital communication on empathic engagement, focusing on topics such as the absence of non-verbal cues, desensitization to others' emotions, and the superficiality of online interactions. Participants were invited to reflect on their own digital habits and the quality of their virtual social connections.

#### 4. Group Sharing of Personal Experiences:

Participants were encouraged to share relevant personal experiences in a supportive group setting. This phase aimed to foster emotional openness, mutual recognition, and the normalization of empathic vulnerability.

#### 5. Assessment of Empathy using the Toronto Empathy Questionnaire (TEQ):

At the conclusion of the workshops, all participants completed the **Toronto Empathy Questionnaire (TEQ)**, a brief self-report measure developed to assess the affective dimensions of empathy<sup>13</sup>. For the purposes of this study, the validated Italian version of the TEQ was used<sup>14</sup>. The instrument consists of 16 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 0 ("Never") to 4 ("Always"), which measure the frequency of spontaneous empathic responses to the emotional states of others. The TEQ yields a global empathy score and includes two subcomponents: Empathic Concern and Social Detachment (Insensitivity). The Empathic Concern subscale includes the following items: 1, 3, 5, 6, 8, 9, 13, and 16. The Insensitivity subscale includes items 2, 4, 7, 10, 11, 12, 14, and 15. Scores for each subscale are computed by summing the corresponding item scores (after reverse coding where required, as per the scoring guidelines). The TEQ has demonstrated good internal consistency (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .79-.87$ ), test-retest reliability, and convergent validity with other established measures of empathy, such as the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI).

The combination of experiential techniques and standardized assessment was intended to provide both an immediate educational impact and a preliminary empirical basis for evaluating individual empathic tendencies in a festival setting.

## RESULTS

### Sociodemographic Characteristics

A total of 23 participants completed the empathy workshops and the Toronto Empathy Questionnaire (TEQ). Demographic data were collected to provide context for interpreting the empathy scores.

### Gender

As shown in Figure 1, the sample was relatively balanced in terms of gender, with 13 female and 10 male participants.

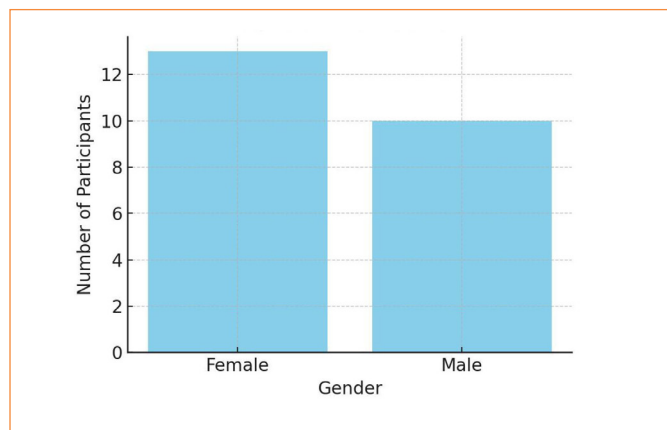


FIGURE 1. Gender distribution.

### Education Level

Figure 2 presents the educational background of participants. The majority were high school students (n = 12), followed by university students (n = 8), and a smaller group from middle school education (n = 3).

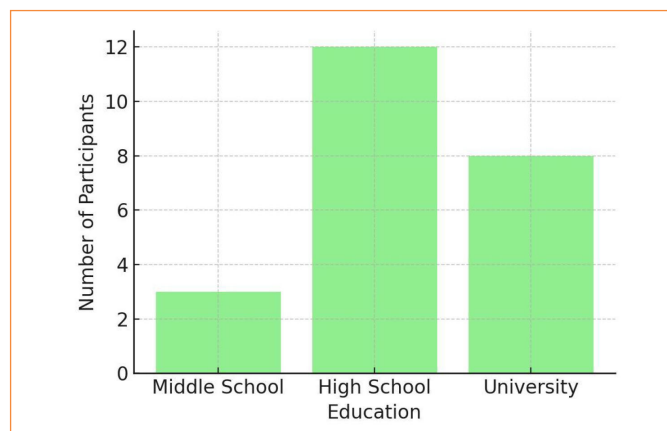


FIGURE 2. Education level.

### Geographic Origin

Figure 3 illustrates the geographic origin of the participants. Most respondents came from Southern Italy (n = 10), followed by Central Italy (n = 6), Northern Italy (n = 5), and the Islands (n = 2). This distribution reflects a moderate level of regional diversity.

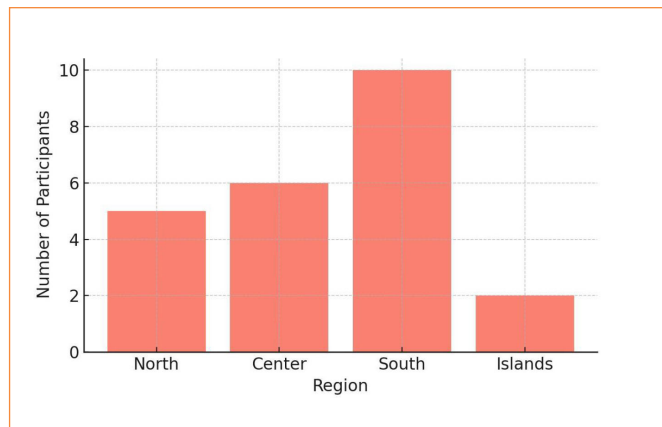


FIGURE 3. Geographic origin.

### Empathy Scores (TEQ)

Descriptive statistics for empathy and callousness were obtained using the Toronto Empathy Questionnaire (TEQ), a validated self-report scale measuring affective empathic responsiveness.

The results in Table I show a moderately high level of empathy (M = 29.87) among participants. Scores on the callousness subscale were moderate (M = 15.91), indicating variation in empathic responsiveness. The total TEQ score (M = 61.96) reflects a generally well-developed empathic capacity within the group.

These findings support the feasibility of brief experiential interventions for promoting empathy in youth settings outside traditional clinical contexts.

TABLE I. Toronto Empathy Questionnaire (TEQ) results.

Variable	N	Min	Max	Mean (SD)
Empathy	23	21	40	29.87 (4.00)
Callousness	23	8	27	15.91 (4.58)
Total TEQ Score	23	44	80	61.96 (7.77)

### DISCUSSION

The preliminary findings of this project underscore the persistent and meaningful need for emotional connection among adolescents and young adults, even in an era increasingly dominated by digital communication. Participants demonstrated a notable openness to engage in reflective, empathic exchanges when provided with a supportive and structured environment. These observations

align with existing literature suggesting that, although online interactions may reduce the frequency and depth of emotional attunement, the capacity for empathy remains robust and can be reactivated through targeted interventions<sup>8,17</sup>.

Small-group, experiential formats – such as those implemented in this study – appear particularly well-suited to enhancing empathic skills. Within a context perceived as safe and non-judgmental, participants engaged in exercises that facilitated both self-awareness and perspective-taking. These findings support the value of integrating emotional education programs into broader cultural or educational initiatives, particularly when they emphasize active participation and interpersonal engagement.

The intervention highlighted several core strategies that may effectively foster empathy development in youth:

#### 1. Active Listening:

Structured listening exercises improved participants' capacity to attend to verbal and non-verbal emotional cues, reduced impulsive or defensive communication styles, and promoted deeper mutual understanding. Literature supports the role of active listening in enhancing empathic accuracy and relational competence<sup>18</sup>.

#### 2. Open Communication:

Encouraging honest and emotionally open discourse in a psychologically safe space allowed participants to explore complex emotional experiences. This type of dialogic environment is essential for validating emotions and strengthening social connectedness.

#### 3. Emotional Education:

Through guided reflection and discussion, participants were introduced to key emotional literacy concepts, including emotion recognition, affect regulation, and the distinction between empathy and sympathy. Such competencies are critical for adaptive social functioning and have been associated with greater resilience and lower psychological distress<sup>19</sup>.

#### 4. Personal Responsibility:

Participants were invited to reflect on the relational consequences of their actions and to consider how empathic awareness can inform ethical decision-making in everyday life. This reflective process helps link empathy with prosocial behavior and moral development.

While the findings are promising, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the sample size was small (N = 30) and, as such, limits the generalizability of the results. The workshops were conceived as pilot activities, and the absence of a control group precludes any causal interpretation of observed effects. Secondly, the sample was self-selected, consisting exclusively of participants who voluntarily chose to attend the workshop within the Giffoni Film Festival setting. This introduces potential selection bias, as individuals with pre-existing interest in emotional or psychological themes may have been overrepresented. Finally, the sample is not representative of the general adolescent

population, given that participants were part of an international cultural event and may possess higher levels of social engagement or cultural capital than average. Previous research has shown that school-based interventions using techniques such as role-playing, perspective-taking exercises, and active listening can effectively enhance empathic skills in adolescents. Compared to these structured programs, our brief, arts-based approach offers a complementary strategy that leverages creative settings to stimulate emotional engagement<sup>21</sup>.

Mu et al. (2025) study provides valuable insight into the nuanced relationship between empathy and interpersonal emotion regulation (IER) in adolescents. By distinguishing between cognitive and affective empathy, the research highlights that not all empathic traits equally promote prosocial emotional support. The finding that high affective empathy, when not balanced by cognitive empathy, may lead to maladaptive IER strategies (e.g., affect-worsening) challenges common assumptions that empathy is uniformly beneficial. These results underscore the importance of fostering both cognitive understanding and emotional awareness in socio-emotional education to support healthier peer interactions and emotional climate in school settings.

Within a psychiatric framework, empathy can be conceptualized as a transdiagnostic dimension of social cognition, whose impairment represents a well-documented vulnerability factor across multiple psychopathological trajectories; consequently, interventions aimed at enhancing empathic functioning in youths are directly relevant to preventive psychiatry and early mental health intervention, rather than being limited to a purely psychological domain.

Future studies should aim to replicate these findings using larger and more diverse samples, including pre- and post-intervention assessments, and consider longitudinal follow-up to examine the durability of empathic changes. Furthermore, it may be beneficial to compare different modalities of empathy training (e.g., digital vs. in-person) and to explore the interaction between empathy, digital literacy, and psychological well-being in contemporary youth. A key limitation of this study is the absence of a control group, which restricts the ability to draw causal conclusions about the direct impact of the workshop on empathy levels. Additionally, the use of self-report measures such as the TEQ may be subject to social desirability bias, with participants potentially overreporting empathic tendencies to align with perceived expectations. Future workshops could benefit from integrating digital simulations, parental involvement, or follow-up online modules to reinforce empathic skills over time and extend their reach beyond the festival context.

## CONCLUSIONS

The present pilot intervention supports the value of experiential psychoeducation in enhancing empathy and relational skills among youth. The use of structured group discussions, active listening exercises, and validated psy-

chometric tools such as the Toronto Empathy Questionnaire proved effective in engaging adolescents in reflective practices that strengthen socio-emotional awareness. The intervention was conducted within a non-clinical, culturally rich setting, demonstrating the feasibility and utility of implementing emotional education outside traditional psychiatric or educational contexts. These findings suggest that empathy-building initiatives can be effectively integrated into artistic, community, and cultural environments, such as youth festivals, to promote psychological and social well-being. Such approaches may be particularly valuable in the current digital landscape, where mediated communication often reduces opportunities for face-to-face emotional attunement. Nonetheless, the study's limitations, namely the small, self-selected, and non-representative sample necessitate caution in generaliz-

ing results. Further quantitative studies with larger and more diverse samples, pre/post assessment designs, and long-term follow-up are needed to evaluate the stability and broader applicability of these outcomes. In addition to structured interventions, there is an urgent need for comprehensive public awareness campaigns and preventive programs focused on empathy as a core component of youth mental health. These campaigns should involve schools, families, health professionals, and policymakers and may include media outreach, curricular integration, and partnerships between the mental health and cultural sectors. Promoting empathy as a shared societal value and a skill to be cultivated is essential to building emotionally literate, socially connected, and psychologically resilient communities. Investing in empathy is investing in a more cohesive, emotionally resilient society.

### **Ethical consideration**

After receiving a complete description of the study and having the opportunity to ask questions, subjects provided written informed consent. Subjects were not paid for their participation according to Italian legislation.

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### **Conflict of interest**

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

### **Authors' contribution**

F.M., A.V. and S.L.: conceptualization; F.M, A.V., L.S.Jr.: writing - original draft preparation; A.B., A.L., S.P., and R.M.: writing - review and editing; E.P. and B.D.G.: supervision; A.L., A.B. and G.C.: investigation; L.S.Jr.: statistical analyses. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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