



# Graduating from high school, enjoying life more, and being kinder to others: Goals and self-regulation in young people

Report on the development of the Goal Setting and Goal Striving Inventory

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## **Abstract**

In a series of four studies ( $N > 500$ ), we aim to establish meaningful links between goal perceptions and self-regulatory strategies as a crucial but under-investigated aspect of adolescent self-regulation. In order to examine these links, we will focus on goals that are generated by adolescents themselves. In Study 1, we co-created a list of 33 goals. In Study 2, we found that goals could be meaningfully classified into superordinate categories of independence, self-development, and goodness. In Study 3, we showed that adolescents primarily strive for goals related to self-development and independence and that ratings of goal feasibility lag behind on importance ratings. In Study 4, we demonstrated that adolescents employ a wider variety of strategies to achieve their goals when they hold less favorable goal perceptions. In contrast, more intense goal pursuit with fewer strategies was associated with favorable goal perceptions.

Keywords: self-regulation, goal setting, self-regulatory strategies, adolescents

Adolescence is a period of life that is characterized by important developmental steps. Transitioning from childhood to adulthood, adolescents gradually get more room for autonomous decision-making (Steinberg & Silverberg, 1986). The decisions adolescents need to make are related not only to their growing responsibilities (e.g., to finish homework or to decide about the next steps in their education), but also to the development of their personal and social identities: adolescents may explore what values they find important in life, what they would like to achieve, and how they relate to others. To be successful in these crucial developmental tasks, adolescents have to employ self-regulatory skills. They need to be able to determine what they find important, set personal goals, and employ strategies to achieve their goals. Indeed, adolescents who tend to be well able to let their lives be guided by long-term goals rather than short term temptations (Tangney, Baumeister, & Boone, 2004) show successful outcomes in various life domains such as academic achievement, health behaviors, and social relationships (De Ridder, Lensvelt-Mulders, Finkenauer, Stok, & Baumeister, 2012; Duckworth & Seligman, 2005; Moffitt et al., 2011). While the association between self-regulation and successful outcomes is theoretically clear, much less is known about *how* adolescents self-regulate. What goals do they have? How important and how feasible do they consider their goals? And what do they do to achieve their specific goals? The current paper aims to shed light on these issues by investigating ‘the what and how’ of self-regulation in adolescents. Specifically, our objective is to establish meaningful links between goal perceptions and self-regulatory strategies as a crucial but under-investigated aspect of adolescent self-regulation. In order to examine these links, we will focus on goals that are generated by adolescents themselves.

While specific definitions of self-regulation have been a topic of debate, there is consensus that self-regulation comprises two main components: goal setting and goal pursuit (Carver & Scheier, 1998; Mann, De Ridder, & Fujita, 2013; Oettingen & Gollwitzer, 2001). Goal setting refers to the process of determining which goals one wants to pursue. Goals can be defined as mental representations of desired outcomes that, by definition, involve a discrepancy with people’s current situation (Carver & Scheier, 1998). Goal pursuit involves the planning and execution of self-regulatory strategies that support attainment of the goal (Mann et al., 2013). Combined, these elements contribute to ultimate self-regulatory success in terms of goal achievement or well-being (Brunstein, 1993; Deci & Ryan, 2000). Given the importance of the topic, however, it is surprising to realize that in fact no studies jointly have investigated goal setting and goal pursuit in meaningful contexts. Most self-regulation research in adolescents

focuses on goal pursuit rather than goal setting, and within that area many studies either take a very generic approach (e.g., assessing self-regulatory capacity as a trait; Moilanen, 2007) or examine the use of specific self-regulatory strategies in relation to a specific goal (e.g., eating behavior regulation; De Vet et al. 2014). To contribute to a more complete understanding of self-regulation in young people aged between 16 and 25 years old, we will investigate goal setting and goal pursuit conjointly in a real-life context. We will start with a brief theoretical discussion of the literature on goal setting and goal pursuit that formed the basis for the current study. In doing so, we will draw on the theoretical framework of self-regulation. Although we acknowledge that different self-regulation theories exist, each proposing some unique features, there is general agreement on the fundamental notion that much of human behavior is goal-directed and that goal perceptions have an important influence on how individuals go about in trying to achieve their goals (Carver & Scheier, 1998; Gollwitzer & Oettingen, 2015).

**Goal Setting.** Having a goal is motivating and stimulates the development of action strategies (Locke & Latham, 1990). Moreover, the pursuit of authentic (i.e., self-concordant) goals is associated with greater well-being (Sheldon & Elliot, 1998). While this underlines the importance of goal setting as one of the two core dimensions of self-regulation, goal setting itself is relatively understudied in adolescents. That is, not much research has been conducted to identify when, how, or why adolescents spontaneously set goals and how young people's goals evolve over time – which may be particularly relevant to consider in this period of life in which important personal, academic, and professional developments take place, along with an increased independency and personal responsibility (Draijer, Bakker, Slot, & Akkerman, 2020). One approach to studying goal setting is to assess how a given (often assigned) goal affects performance. For example, people can be asked to what extent a certain goal (e.g., school achievement) is important to them, or alternatively people could be asked to set specific *types* of goals (e.g., mastery or performance goals; Chatzisarantis, Ada, Bing, Papioannou, Prpa, & Hagger, 2016). This approach allows for systematic assessments of how specific goal characteristics relate to successful outcomes. However, it precludes insights into the variety of goals young people may have and into their self-regulatory strategies within the complexity of their everyday lives. To get better insight into natural goal setting behavior and what people do to pursue their goals, it is important to consider idiosyncratic goals (Sheldon & Elliot, 1998) and study them on an idiographic basis (Emmons, 1986; Little, 2015). This is a methodologically challenging approach since people may have different conceptualizations of their desired future states (Gollwitzer & Oettingen, 2015). Moreover, the large variety of goals

that may emerge can make it complicated to systematically study any effects of the specific goals themselves on subsequent cognitions, emotions, or goal pursuit. However, this approach does allow for investigating perceptions and strategies accompanying people's currently most active personal goal. Given our ambition to investigate adolescents' goal setting and goal pursuit as it naturally occurs, in the current research we will consider idiosyncratic goals so as to document what young people think about their current goal and what they do to work towards it. In the documentation of goals young people have, our emphasis lies on explicit goals rather than implicit motives that may govern self-regulation (Brunstein, 2010). We consider this restriction justified as recent literature suggests substantial congruence between implicit and explicit motives (Thrash, Maruskin, & Martin, 2012). Moreover, a focus on explicit goals allows for documenting perceptions of goals.

Our first research question will be to investigate which goals adolescents find important and to what extent they consider their goals to be feasible (De Ridder & Kuijer, 2007; Mann et al., 2013). In addition to goal importance and perceived feasibility, other goal-related cognitions can be relevant in goal pursuit. For the current studies, we will focus on factors that have been found to be associated with self-regulatory behavior in previous studies on goal pursuit. Self-efficacy is known to be an important determinant of self-regulatory success: people with greater confidence in their own abilities are more likely to perform the behaviors necessary to achieve their goals goal (Zimmerman, Bandura, & Martinez-Pons, 1992). Whereas self-efficacy is generally defined as a personal belief of how well one is able to deal with a given situation based on the skills one has ('can do'), internal locus of control refers to the degree to which people believe that they have control over the outcome of events in their lives, and has been found to be positively related to goal attainment (Lee, Sheldon, & Turban, 2003). Controlled motivation comprises the extent to which a goal is pursued for reasons that arise from outside of the individual, such as external rewards (e.g., praise from one's parents). Autonomous motivation, in contrast, refers to goal pursuit that is motivated from truly within an individual and more often leads to successful goal achievement (Cerasoli, Nicklin, & Ford., 2014; Ryan & Deci, 2008). Task aversion refers to the perception of the specific actions that are required to achieve a goal, such as going to the gym or doing one's homework (Gillebaart & Kroese, 2020). People who find such a behavior itself to be pleasant are more likely to be successful than those who think it is very unpleasant to perform these actions. The final two goal perceptions that we will address are prevention and promotion focus. Having a prevention focus means that someone sees his goal as a responsibility and is inclined to think about what

he ought to do to prevent failure. Having a promotion focus means that someone is inclined to think about what he wants to obtain and is oriented toward achieving success. Prior research has found that both promotion and prevention focus can foster self-regulatory success, depending on the type of goal (Rothman & Salovey, 1997). Taken together, these cognitions as well as appraisals of importance and feasibility form an image of how people perceive the goals they set.

**Goal Pursuit.** Once a goal has been set, goal pursuit commences. Goal pursuit refers to the actions people undertake to get closer to their goals, i.e., the self-regulatory strategies they employ. This involves anticipatory actions meant to create good opportunities to achieve a goal, such as situation selection (e.g., creating a suitable practice area at home if your goal is to learn play the guitar) and actions to deal with present self-regulatory challenges such as redirecting one's attention away from temptations (e.g., call a friend when you feel the urge to give up on your goal) (Gillebaart & de Ridder, 2015; Hofmann & Kotabe, 2012). Also, actions related to the evaluation of goal progress such as monitoring one's behavior (e.g., keeping track of one's savings account) can be important strategies (Carver & Scheier, 1998). A similar but differently nuanced categorization of strategies would be that some strategies involve making adjustments to one's environment, while others involve cognitive appraisal (Duckworth, Gendler, & Gross, 2016). Our aim is not to provide a definitive and exhaustive categorization of self-regulatory strategies, but rather to use the available frameworks and categorizations as a basis to explore the range of strategies that adolescents report using for their goal pursuit. In the present research, we will focus on ten types of self-regulatory strategies that have been identified in previous studies as most likely to yield success, including self-control, initiation, persistence, seeking support, rewarding oneself, planning, monitoring, situation selection, cognitive reappraisal, and routine building.

Self-control or the effortful resistance of impulses is one of the most studied strategies that has proven an effective manner to achieve one's goals (De Ridder et al., 2012; Tangney et al., 2004). However, successful self-regulation not only involves resisting bad things; it also requires initiating 'good' behavior (De Ridder, De Boer, Lugtig, Bakker, & Van Hooft, 2011), and persistence after initial success (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007; Rothman, Baldwin, Hertel, & Fuglestad, 2011). Whilst we acknowledge recent debate about whether self-control refers to effortful inhibition only or also comprises less effortful strategies (De Ridder et al., 2012; De Ridder, Van der Weiden, Gillebaart, Benjamins, & Ybema, 2020; Gillebaart & De Ridder, 2015), in the present research we will employ the classic definition of self-control

with a focus on restraining oneself in the face of temptation. ‘Just say no’ can be a mantra that people use and that can yield behavior change in the short run, but this effortful strategy is less likely to be maintained over time when people may feel they do not have the capacity to ‘stay strong’ or just feel tired (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Muraven, & Tice, 1998). In that case, seeking social support can be an adaptive strategy (Helsen et al., 2000). Another strategy may be to install rewards for oneself. It is well-established that adolescents show relatively high reward sensitivity (Steinberg et al., 2008) and as a result will perform better when rewards are obtainable. Next to social support and reward as strategies that reduce the cognitive effort of self-regulation, smart planning (Gollwitzer, 1999) and monitoring (Gangestad & Snyder, 2000) strategies have been found helpful in achieving one’s goals. Also, people who are able to keep seeing the positive side of things (e.g., reappraise struggles as ‘challenges’) are more likely to attain their goals (McRae, Jacobs, Ray, John, & Gross, 2012). Following Mann and colleagues (2013; cf. Duckworth et al., 2016), another type of strategy that does not require a lot of effort is situation selection, where people may avoid environments that endanger their goal pursuit (e.g., avoiding the snack aisle in the supermarket when your goal is to reduce unhealthy eating) or actively seek situations that may aid goal pursuit (e.g., sitting down with your mother for a cup of tea when your goal is to get a better relationship with your parents). Situation selection plays on the unique human ability to imagine future events to the extent that individuals can identify situations that might either impose obstacles or provide opportunities for goal pursuit (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1997). Most studies on situation selection focus on the avoidance of situations that may hinder goal pursuit (Ent, Baumeister, & Tice, 2015; Milyavskaya, Saunders, & Inzlicht, 2020; Nielsen, Gwozdz, & De Ridder, 2019). Here we focus on situation selection as a strategy for identifying opportunities for goal pursuit (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1997). Finally, routine building is a strategy that requires no cognitive effort to execute the behavior for achieving one’s goals, making successful performance more likely (Adriaanse, Kroese, Gillebaart, & De Ridder, 2014; Galla & Duckworth, 2015; Gillebaart, Benjamins, Van der Weiden, Ybema, & De Ridder, 2020; Van der Weiden, Benjamins, Gillebaart, Ybema, & De Ridder, 2020).

**Current research.** Our overall objective is to establish meaningful links between goal perceptions and goal pursuit, taking self-identified goals as point of departure. This overall aim breaks down to four specific research questions: (1) What goals do adolescents have?; (2) How do they perceive their goals?; (3) What self-regulatory strategies do they use?, and (4) How do goal perceptions and self-regulatory strategies relate to each other? As these questions show,

we are not looking to determine which self-regulatory strategies are ‘the best’. As alluded to earlier, young people may have different perceptions of similar goals. For example, the goal to ‘save money for a trip’ may be perceived differently in terms of importance and feasibility, but also in terms of level of abstractness (do they have a specific dream trip in mind or is it more of a vague goal) or timing orientation (is it for the upcoming spring break or a world tour in ten years); this would yield different strategies that make sense in either individual case. To address the question of how goal perceptions and self-regulatory strategies are related, we will look across goals and propose that no specific strategies may be superior to others. Rather, it is the range of strategies people have at their disposal which determines their flexibility in employing different strategies that ultimately lead to successful life outcomes (Bürgler et al., 2021; Hennecke & Burgler 2020). For that reason, the notion of flexibility of strategies underlies our analytic approach for investigating adolescents’ self-regulatory strategies (Cheng, Lau, & Chan, 2014). Rather than separately considering individual strategies, we were interested in a composite score reflecting the range of strategies adolescents indicate applying to a currently active goal, both in terms of how much they are engaged with their strategies and how many different types of strategies they apply. Throughout a series of four studies, we developed and employed the *Goal Setting and Striving Inventory* (GSSI) to examine how young people self-regulate, i.e., determine which goals they have and how important and feasible they consider these goals; assess perceptions of the goal that they are currently most actively engaged with; and what they do to achieve that specific goal. In Study 1, a list of goals relevant to the target group was co-created with the help of experts and adolescents. In Study 2, we gathered bottom-up information on how these goals are categorized by adolescents themselves. In Study 3, we examine what goals adolescents endorse and how important and feasible they consider these goals. Finally, in Study 4 we examine the associations between perceptions of the goal that adolescents find most important and the strategies they employ to achieve this goal. We do not hold specific predictions about what kind of goals adolescents may have and how they go about in trying to achieve these goals. Rather, our research for the first time will document how goal perceptions of personally relevant goals affect goal pursuit in young people. We will do so by employing a diverse sample with specific attention for the inclusion of a wide variety of educational backgrounds that have been shown to affect the identification and pursuit of goals (Covington, 2000). All studies were approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Behavioral and Social Sciences at Utrecht University (file number 19-124).



## Study 1: Co-Creation of Goals

To determine what kind of goals adolescents care for, it was crucial to establish a list of goals that was co-created with the population of interest. Following the definition of goals as mental representations of desired outcomes (Austin & Vancouver, 1996; Carver & Scheier, 1998; Elliot & Fryer, 2007), we consider goals as an overarching construct that encompasses a wide variety of more specific constructs, including plans (Miller, Galanter, & Pribram, 1960), personal projects (Little, 2015), and personal strivings (Emmons, 1986) with the exclusion of current concerns (Klinger & Cox, 2004) and immediate urges and desires (Hofmann & Van Dillen, 2012) that tend to focus on instant satisfaction of (appetitive) needs such as food, alcohol, sex or shopping.

### Methods and Results

First, an initial list of 27 goals was conceived by the researchers in consultation with a group of experts on adolescent self-regulation.<sup>1</sup> To cover a wide variety of goals, the list varied on dimensions of concrete vs. abstract (e.g., to go to bed in time more often vs. live on my own), short term vs. long term (e.g., less screen time vs. saving money for a long holiday), and approach vs. avoidance orientation (e.g., to improve my sports performance vs. to reduce my energy drinks consumption) goals. Furthermore, multiple domains were represented, such as health (e.g., eating more fruits), sustainability (e.g., reducing single-use plastic), personal finance (e.g., saving), personal development (e.g., learning to play an instrument), and social goals (e.g., seeing friends more often). Second, this set of goals was presented to twenty-four adolescents (8 male, 15 female, 1 unknown) aged between 16 and 19 years old ( $M = 16.52$ ;  $SD = 0.90$ ) at a local high school (higher general secondary education  $N = 11$ ; pre-university education  $N = 13$ ) using a mixed quantitative/qualitative design. Specifically, the questionnaire was introduced as follows: “We are curious what you want to achieve in the future. For example, anything you would like to become (e.g., a nurse), to have (e.g., a car), to do (e.g., learn to play the guitar), or to stop doing (e.g., smoking). Anything you would like to become, have, learn or do in the future is what we call a goal.” Then, adolescents were asked to go through the list of goals and select goals that applied to them and indicate goal importance and perceived feasibility of each chosen goal. Afterwards, they were asked to comment on the list of goals and say whether the instructions and each goal were clear to them, and whether they thought the goals were appropriate for people like themselves. Moreover, they were asked to write down any goals they had that were not in the list. All participants reported that they

understood the instructions and that they regarded the presented goals as personally relevant ( $M_{importance} = 68.05$ ,  $SD = 13.30$ ;  $M_{feasibility} = 70.22$ ,  $SD = 9.05$ , both rated on a 1-100 Visual Analogue Scale). Based on this initial study, six new goals that were frequently mentioned were added, including earn a lot of money, enjoy life, get my driver's license, learn another language, take more time to relax, and adopt a healthier lifestyle.<sup>2</sup>

Subsequently, a second version of the list of goals was presented to another sample of adolescents ( $N = 86$ ; 52% female) with an age range of 16 to 25 years ( $M = 17.95$ ;  $SD = 1.87$ ), recruited from a post-secondary vocational college. To gain more insight into their goals regardless of the predefined list of goals, participants were first asked in an open-ended question what they would like to achieve in the next couple of months. Then, the extended and revised list of 33 goals was presented, and participants were asked to select goals they endorse and indicate goal importance and perceived feasibility. Again, participants reported that the notion of goals appealed to them, that instructions were clear, and that the presented goals were personally relevant ( $M_{importance} = 81.79$ ,  $SD = 10.77$ ;  $M_{feasibility} = 73.40$ ,  $SD = 14.57$ ). Based on these data, we decided to add four new goals, including becoming successful, become more self-confident, experience less stress, and to find a job. Four goals that had overlap with other goals or were rated as very unimportant (e.g., saving for a new pair of sneakers or clubbing less frequently) were removed. Also, some goals were reworded in such a way that they would imply a change over time (e.g. 'enjoy life' was rephrased into 'enjoy life more'). The final list includes 33 goals (Table 1).

**Table 1: List of goals**


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Saving money for a long holiday
Go to bed in time more often
Less screen time
Exercise more often
Finish my homework in time
Get to school/work in time
Quit smoking
Tidy up my room more often
Lose weight
Being more kind to other people
Reduce my alcohol intake
Reduce single-use plastic
Reduce meat consumption
Graduate from high school
Walk or cycle more often
Earn my own money
Increase fruit and vegetable consumption
Pay off financial debts
Reduce consumption of energy drinks
Decide about next steps of my education
Have a better relationship with my parents
Live on my own
Learn to play a music instrument
Becoming successful
Meet with my friends more often
Improving my sports performance
Earn a lot of money
Enjoy life more
Get my driver's license
Learn another language
Experience less stress
Become more self-confident
To find a job

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## Discussion

In two studies, comprising a total sample of 110 adolescents in the age range of 16-26 years and with mixed educational backgrounds, we co-created a list of 33 goals that were considered relevant and meaningful by adolescents themselves as indicated by their ratings of importance and feasibility. This list of goals allows for examining how adolescents perceive the goal they are mostly engaged with and how much effort they put in achieving this goal. Before we address these questions in Studies 3 and 4, we will first examine in Study 2 whether and in what way the 33 goals named by adolescents can be meaningfully categorized.

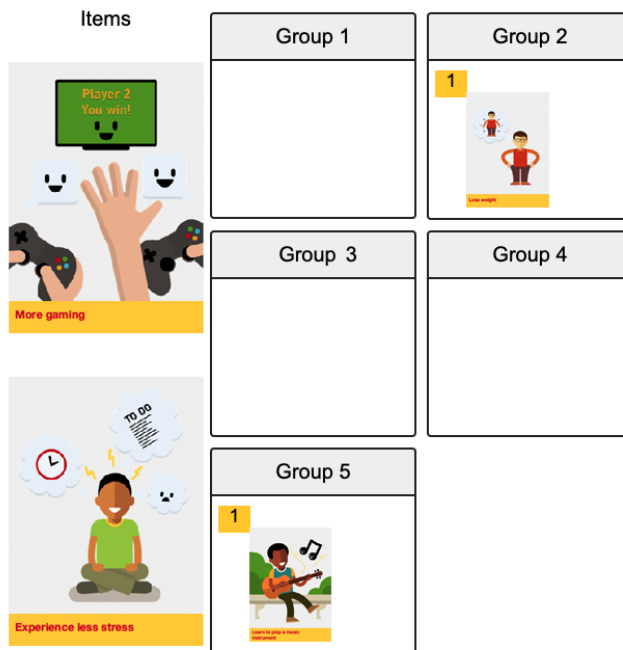
## Study 2: Categorization of Goals

According to both theory and research (Austin & Vancouver, 1996; Carver & Scheier, 1998), concrete short-term goals are often executed in service of longer-lasting, superordinate goals. Revealing the pattern that organizes these higher-order goals is important to find out whether different types of concrete idiosyncratic goals (e.g., learn to play an instrument or to be kind to others) may actually have something in common, i.e., serve the same higher-order goal of, in this case, self-development. Previous studies of goal taxonomies in adults have revealed different categorizations of ‘what people want’, focusing on needs that contribute to wellbeing (Deci & Ryan, 2000) or values that guide their personal goals (Schwartz, 2012). As far as we know, no specific categorization exists of what young people want, precluding insight into the guiding principles that motivate them to pursue the things important to them. Taking a bottom-up rather than a theoretical top-down approach (cf., Wilkowksi et al., 2019), we were curious how adolescents themselves would categorize the listed goals to find out whether specific idiosyncratic single goals represent common overarching themes. Therefore, we conducted a study in which adolescents were presented with all 33 goals and asked to indicate “which goals belong to each other”. By doing so, we aim to establish a meaningful grouping of goals based upon how adolescents themselves categorize their future plans and ambitions. This bottom-up perspective allows for a deeper understanding of what adolescents strive for.

### Methods

**Participants, Procedure and Materials.** Twenty six adolescents (21 female) between the age of 16 and 25 ( $M = 21.35$ ,  $SD = 3.55$ ) filled out an online survey using the Qualtrics platform to indicate how they would organize the goals available from Study 1. Cards that visually and textually represented these goals were presented in random order. Each card could be selected and moved to one of five available groups using an intuitive ‘drag-n-drop’ interface (see Figure 1). Participants were invited to categorize these cards according to their own preference by providing them with the following instruction which was derived from the existing literature on concept mapping, an established way of categorizing qualitative text data (Behfar & Trochim, 2002): “Below on the left you see 33 cards that show personal goals, i.e. things that could be important for you to get done. Divide the cards on the left into five groups by dragging them onto the groups. Place cards that you think belong together in one group. There must be at least one card in each group. Other than that, it is up to you to decide how you want to distribute the cards in such a way that you put together the cards that you personally think

belong to each other the most.” We subsequently asked five participants to comment on their categorization to probe whether these goal arrangements were meaningful to themselves.

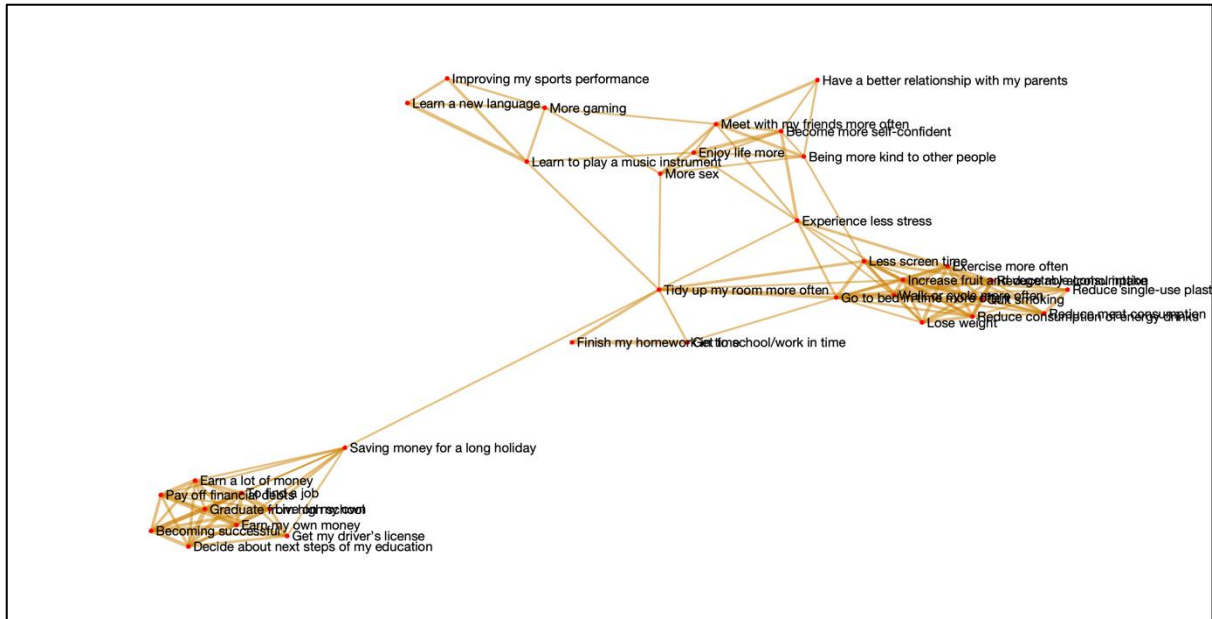


**Figure 1:** *Example of cards on the left and two cards already categorized in two groups*

## Results

Examining all goals that were put together into categories by participants, we found that many combinations were mentioned just once or twice. For some combinations, however, there was quite some agreement between participants. For example, the goals ‘reduce single-use plastic’ and ‘to find a job’ were rarely categorized into one group, whereas the goals ‘to find a job’ and ‘becoming successful’ were combined much more often. We therefore counted all combinations of goals as mentioned by participants and subsequently applied a number of more or less stringent criteria to determine the number of clusters that provided a meaningful pattern of goal combinations (full details of the analysis are described in the Supplementary Materials). This analysis revealed a consistent and coherent pattern of three goal clusters (see Figure 2). These clusters comprise (1) goodness (e.g., walk or cycle more often, reduce meat consumption, reduce single-use plastic), (2) independence (e.g., to find a job, earn my own money, live on my own) and (3) self-development (e.g., learn to play a music instrument, being more kind to other people, become more self-confident). Interviews with five participants corroborated this pattern and revealed that adolescents were able to reflect on their

categorizations. For example, one interviewee explained that she clustered goals that were related to school and work including becoming financially independent because these goals are obviously related to each other. Another interviewee explained that he clustered learning to play a music instrument and learning another language into personal development goals because they are different from career goals while he categorized less meat consumption and less single-use plastic as sustainability goals that contribute to a better world.



**Figure 2: Graphic representation of three goal clusters**

## Discussion

Spontaneous bottom-up (i.e., without direction) clustering of idiosyncratic goals by adolescents themselves reveal a meaningful pattern of three superordinate categories of goals that we label as goodness, independence, and self-development. Some categorizations may seem surprising. For example, “being more kind to other people” (categorized by participants among goals related to learning and personal wellbeing, which we labeled self-development goals) could also qualify as a goodness goal as it clearly represents prosocial behavior. Apparently, adolescents in our study think of “being more kind to other people” as something they (still) have to learn and not as a prosocial act they are already familiar with. As exemplified by interviews with adolescents performing the categorization task, this pattern suggests that young people distinguish three main types of goals that underlie their individual idiosyncratic strivings.

### Study 3: Goal Setting

Having established a set of goals that young people consider meaningful and relevant, we aimed to investigate what goals adolescents have, and how important and feasible they consider their goals. Previous research on goal setting has revealed that goal importance and perceived feasibility are two essential factors that regulate one's determination to reach a goal (De Ridder & Kuijer, 2007; Locke & Latham, 1990). Moreover, we wanted to investigate how goals that are considered to be important and/or feasible relate to the goal categorization that we identified in Study 2.

#### Methods

**Participants, Procedure and Materials.** A total number of 321 adolescents between 16 and 19 years of age ( $M = 17.46$ ,  $SD = 1.14$ ) participated in the study, of whom the majority (76%) were female (23% male, 1% other). Most participants were currently engaged in higher general secondary (53.4%) or pre-university (45.3%) education. Participants were recruited through convenience sampling by social media and completed an online survey consisting of the list of 33 goals, as established in Study 1. For each goal, they were asked to indicate whether it did apply to them. Furthermore, they were asked to indicate for each selected goal how *important* and how *feasible* they deemed it on VAS-scale yielding a score from 0 (not at all) to 100 (extremely).

#### Results

On average, participants selected 11.46 goals ( $SD = 5.54$ , range 0-32). The five most often selected goals were: (1) Graduate from high school; (2) Make a lot of money; (3) Enjoy life more; (4) Exercise more often; and (5) Experience less stress. Reducing behaviors related to an unhealthy lifestyle, such as less consumption of alcohol or energy drinks or quit smoking, were among the least frequently selected goals – which may be due either to adolescents not engaging in these behaviors or not considering to give up on them. The full list of goals along with ratings of importance and feasibility is presented in Table 2. It is noteworthy that the most frequently selected goals are not necessarily those that are rated as most important or most feasible. For example, goals like determining the next steps in education or being more kind to other people are considered very important but they are not in the Top 5 of most frequently selected goals, suggesting that these goals are not chosen by most adolescents but, if chosen, they are considered very important. Similarly, walking/cycling more often and getting one's

driver's license are amongst the most feasible goals but they do not appear in the Top 5 either. It is also noteworthy that generally speaking most goals (24 out of 33) are considered more important than feasible. For example, important goals like experiencing less stress, becoming more self-confident, enjoying life more or having a better relationship with one's parents are considered not very feasible with discrepancies between importance and feasibility ratings up to 15-30 points. On the other hand, it seems that especially goals that are considered as not so important are rated as quite feasible (e.g., tidy up one's room), which may be a sign of adolescents overestimating their capability for goal achievement in case they don't care so much about the goal.



**Table 2: Frequency and mean importance and feasibility of goals, sorted by frequency (N=321)\***

<b>Goals</b>	<b>This goal does not apply to me</b>	<b>This goal applies to me</b>	<b>Importance M (SD)</b>	<b>Feasibility M (SD)</b>
Graduate from high school	55	229	93.37 (12.55)	84.39 (15.14)
Make a lot of money	93	189	72.03 (18.20)	67.67 (16.85)
Enjoy life more	112	172	84.96 (14.22)	64.46 (20.21)
Exercise more often	113	170	74.94 (17.72)	64.67 (23.90)
Experience less stress	114	169	81.38 (15.30)	51.80 (19.68)
Becoming successful	117	168	76.82 (16.88)	66.89 (15.55)
Decide about next steps of my education	120	163	89.26 (16.14)	81.53 (17.28)
Become more self-confident	131	155	78.65 (16.00)	56.68 (19.58)
Increase fruit and vegetable consumption	129	155	69.21 (19.03)	77.48 (18.13)
Get my driver's license	133	153	78.29 (19.85)	78.02 (20.50)
Go to bed in time more often	133	149	70.94 (20.44)	58.67 (21.76)
Meet with my friends more often	141	145	79.48 (16.07)	63.27 (22.57)
Less screen time	145	141	64.65 (21.56)	56.65 (22.48)
Finish my homework in time	152	131	69.74 (19.04)	66.75 (22.32)
Improving my sports performance	154	128	72.69 (18.38)	72.13 (18.51)
Reduce single-use plastic	157	127	69.66 (21.30)	64.24 (20.21)
Tidy up my room more often	160	119	52.97 (22.90)	73.34 (23.11)
Live on my own	172	114	73.01 (22.28)	64.54 (21.92)
Saving money for a long holiday	174	111	71.50 (18.41)	65.61 (20.06)
Earn my own money	179	104	78.83 (17.98)	62.92 (22.99)
Find a job	190	97	78.80 (20.90)	77.91 (15.98)
Lose weight	189	94	69.17 (21.95)	54.44 (16.11)
Reduce meat consumption	196	86	70.25 (21.02)	71.39 (21.38)
Learn another language	201	85	55.12 (24.86)	62.41 (19.59)
Being more kind to other people	219	64	80.23 (19.32)	77.97 (20.74)
Learn to play a music instrument	226	57	62.02 (26.12)	67.02 (22.03)
A better relationship with my parents	233	52	78.83 (17.52)	61.81 (20.48)
Get to school/work in time	237	46	61.09 (25.66)	65.60 (23.48)
Walk or cycle more often	241	41	68.73 (17.84)	78.24 (21.26)
Pay off financial debts	261	26	75.80 (23.82)	65.68 (29.80)
Reduce my alcohol intake	257	25	55.64 (19.69)	61.84 (26.14)
Quit smoking	274	10	57.40 (37.13)	58.60 (39.10)
Reduce consumption of energy drinks	275	4	68.25 (30.82)	76.50 (16.82)

\*Note that on average 284 (range 279-287) participants (out of 321) filled out the list of goals.

## Discussion

This study demonstrates that adolescents pursue multiple goals at the same time, of which graduating from high school, making a lot of money, and enjoy life more are most often endorsed. Graduating from high school and enjoy life more are also among the most important goals. However, with the exception of graduating from high school, neither of the most often selected or most important goals is considered to be the most feasible. Rather, we found that for the majority of goals feasibility ratings were (far) lower than importance ratings, suggesting that what adolescents want most is not necessarily considered as realistic. This pattern corroborates the findings from another study employing the same list of goals (De Ridder et al., 2021). As this point, it is unclear whether adolescents hold great expectations about their future and that feasibility judgments may grow over time or, alternatively, that their ambitions are too high and that they may eventually learn that you can't always get what you want. Our findings also show that goals that are rated as most important and feasible fall into the superordinate categories of independence (e.g., graduate from high school, determine next steps of education) and self-development (e.g., experience less stress, enjoy life more) that emerged in Study 2. Goodness goals were absent from the Top 5. In view of recent statistics suggesting that adolescents from 'Generation Z' (born after 1995, like our sample) are more preoccupied with making money and having a successful career than adolescents from previous generations ([www.statista.com/statistics/1067367/leading-life-ambitions-generation-z-millennials-us/](http://www.statista.com/statistics/1067367/leading-life-ambitions-generation-z-millennials-us/); Twenge, Campbell, & Freeman, 2012), it is noteworthy that goodness goals relating to community values indeed do not hold a prominent position in the highest ranks of goals of young people in our sample.

### Study 4: Goal Perceptions and Goal Pursuit

Having established what kind of goals young people consider important and feasible, Study 4 will examine how they deal with the goal they are most engaged with, that is how they perceive this goal and how these perceptions relate to efforts to achieve the goal.

## Methods

**Participants, Procedure and Materials.** A total number of 66 students enrolled in higher vocational education (between 16 and 25 years of age;  $M = 17.85$ ,  $SD = 2.02$ ) participated in the study, of whom the majority (79%) were female (18% male, 3% other). They were

presented with the list of 33 goals, and asked to rate importance and feasibility. Next, participants were asked to select the goal they were currently most actively engaged with and indicate the time frame they employed to achieve this goal. Referring to this specific goal, seven single-item variables on goal perception were assessed using VAS scales ranging from 0 (not at all) to 100 (extremely), including self-efficacy, locus of control, controlled motivation, autonomous motivation, task aversion, prevention focus and promotion focus (see Appendix for the exact wording of these items). Still referring to the goal they were currently most actively engaged with, participants were subsequently presented with ten self-regulation strategies (see Appendix) and asked to indicate to what extent they employed these strategies, again using VAS-scales ranging from 0 (not at all) to 100 (extremely).

## Results

**Goal selection.** On average, participants selected 15.82 goals ( $SD = 4.29$ , range 3-25). Similar to Study 3 (but with the exception of becoming more successful that was endorsed less often in Study 3), the most frequently selected goals were: (1) Graduate from high school; (2) Become successful; (3) Make a lot of money; (4) Enjoy life more; and (5) Experience less stress/Exercise more often (the full list of goal selections can be found in the Supplementary Materials). The majority of adolescents (64%) reported to be working on this goal ‘continuously’ and 23% wanted to achieve their goal within a period of three months. Only 13% wanted to reach their goal within a month - suggesting that most adolescents regard goals as long-term projects. Next, we examined goal perceptions and self-regulatory strategies for the goal adolescents had chosen as the one they were currently most engaged with. Table 3 presents an overview of these goals that along with ratings of importance and feasibility. The average importance of this goal was 90.64 ( $SD = 18.68$ ), average feasibility was 85.36 ( $SD = 21.92$ ).

**Table 3: Top Ten of goals participants were currently most engaged with, sorted by frequency (N = 66).**

Goals	N chosen as currently most engaged with	Importance M (SD)	Feasibility M (SD)
Finish my education	23	93.92 (15.11)	87.02 (20.50)
A self-chosen goal*	8	89.12 (20.44)	79.96 (28.44)
Becoming successful	8	86.11 (21.03)	77.45 (22.00)
Lose weight	4	79.34 (28.16)	68.31 (26.22)
Experience less stress	4	81.67 (23.78)	60.54 (26.53)
Have a better relationship with my parents	3	83.11 (20.07)	77.05 (27.06)
Earn a lot of money	3	82.42 (21.21)	76.00 (22.80)
Enjoy life more	3	86.31 (21.85)	71.46 (26.43)
Get my driver's license	3	90.66 (18.67)	81.36 (26.75)
Exercise more often	2	77.08 (23.95)	69.31 (22.68)

\*Note. Examples of self-chosen goals are 'become happy', 'getting the best out of myself', and 'take care of my family emotionally and financially'.

**Goal perceptions and Self-Regulatory Strategies.** Table 4 (left panel) gives an overview of how adolescents perceive the goal they are currently most engaged with, showing that they are highly oriented toward opportunities for achieving their goal (high promotion focus) but at the same are attentive towards preventing failure to achieve their goal (high prevention focus). They also report high levels of autonomous motivation and low levels of controlled motivation, as well as low levels of task aversion. These figures indicate high goal commitment. In contrast, adolescents report relatively low levels of internal locus of control and self-efficacy, suggesting that they perceive few opportunities to act upon their goal. Table 4 (right panel) shows what kind of strategies adolescents employ for realizing their currently most active goal with persistence ('I persist when I encounter difficulties') as by far the most favorite strategy, followed by cognitive reappraisal, routine building, self-monitoring, rewarding oneself, and situation selection. Suppressing the inclination to give up, seeking help from others, and initiating actions to work on the goal are employed to a lesser degree. Together, these findings suggest that adolescents they employ a mix of self-regulatory strategies with a marked preference for persistence, a relatively reactive strategy, over more proactive strategies. A complete overview of correlations between goal perceptions and self-regulatory strategies is provided in the Supplementary Materials.

**Table 4: Goal perceptions and self-regulatory strategies pertaining to the goal participants are currently most actively engaged with (ranked from high to low).**

Goal Perceptions	Mean (SD)	Self-Regulatory Strategies	Mean (SD)
Promotion Focus	93.65 (12.08)	Persistence	81.56 (18.09)
Autonomous Motivation	90.63 (18.68)	Cognitive Reappraisal	76.30 (25.60)
Prevention Focus	87.91 (18.69)	Routine Building	73.26 (20.79)
Internal Locus of Control	67.74 (30.03)	Self-Monitoring	72.92 (24.91)
Self-Efficacy	64.98 (33.65)	Rewarding Oneself	70.97 (27.24)
Task Aversion	38.85 (30.28)	Situation Selection	70.20 (26.67)
Controlled Motivation	36.62 (34.95)	Planning	66.44 (31.21)
		Self-Control	58.63 (31.85)
		Social Support	58.64 (33.25)
		Initiation	53.12 (33.68)

Next, we calculated two composite scores of self-regulatory strategies: a self-regulatory\_effort scale representing the average effort participants employed in their strategies ( $M = 68.20$ ,  $SD = 14.74$ ) and a self-regulatory\_number scale representing how many different strategies they employed based on a minimum employment  $> 10$  ( $M = 9.36$ ,  $SD = 1.02$ ; range 5-10). Both scales were moderately correlated ( $r = .41$ ,  $p = .001$ ). Looking at associations between goal perceptions and the two composite scores of self-regulatory strategies (Table 5), it is noteworthy that self-regulatory effort is primarily related to feasibility considerations and the extent to which adolescents hold a prevention focus. This finding is in line with previous research showing that people with a prevention focus tend to see goals as opportunities to meet their responsibilities and are keen on what might go wrong if they don't work hard enough to achieve their goals. Adolescents also put more effort in achieving their goals when they are autonomously motivated ( $r = .23$ ,  $p = .066$ ), and when they do not feel aversive toward the required behavioral actions ( $r = -.24$ ,  $p = .053$ ), although these associations are only marginally significant. The number of self-regulatory strategies that adolescents employ reveal a different pattern, showing that using more different kinds of strategies is significantly associated with a low promotion focus. This suggests that adolescents who are not oriented towards thinking about what they want use a lot a strategies. This pattern of 'trial and error' is corroborated by marginally significant associations between the number of self-regulatory strategies that are being used and low self-efficacy ( $r = -.23$ ,  $p = .065$ ), low autonomous motivation ( $r = -.21$ ,  $p = .092$ ). Apparently, low levels of 'can do' and 'want to' are associated with untargeted efforts of doing a little a bit of everything.

**Table 5: Correlations between importance, feasibility, goal perceptions, and composite scores of self-regulatory strategies.**

<b>Goal Perceptions</b>	<b>Self-Regulatory Effort</b>	<b>Number_Self-Regulatory Strategies</b>
Importance	.21	-.17
Feasibility	.27*	-.09
Self-Efficacy	.14	-.23
Internal Locus of Control	-.02	-.12
Controlled Motivation	-.06	.13
Autonomous Motivation	.23	-.21
Task Aversion	-.24	.19
Prevention Focus	.26*	-.20
Promotion Focus	.19	-.28*

Note: \*  $p < .05$

## **Discussion**

The findings from this study corroborate the results from Study 3, showing that adolescents primarily endorse self-development and independence goals and are less engaged with goodness goals. We also found that adolescents primarily perceive the goal they are preoccupied with in terms of achieving success (high promotion focus) and that they are genuinely engaged with the goal (high autonomous motivation). A high promotion focus (and to a lesser extent, autonomous motivation), in turn, is associated with employing a lower variety of self-regulatory strategies. Relatedly, using more kinds of strategies tends to be associated with less favorable goal perceptions. This contradicts previous research, suggesting that adopting a wider variety of strategies would indicate flexibility (Cheng et al., 2014; Hennecke & Burgler 2020). Our findings suggest an opposite pattern, with using more different kinds of strategies seemingly being related to not knowing what to do. Many adolescents also view their currently most active goal in terms of a personal responsibility (high prevention focus), which is, in turn, associated with putting more effort into goal pursuit. Another significant driver of self-regulatory effort are the options for goal achievement (feasibility) that adolescents envisage – and even more than how important they consider their goal. In view of the low levels of internal locus of control and self-efficacy that adolescents report, it is remarkable that opportunities they discern in their environments are more strongly related to self-regulatory effort than an assessment of their own capability.

## General Discussion

In four studies, comprising a total sample of more than 500 adolescents, we documented and analyzed what kind of personal goals they endorse, how they perceive these goals and what kind of strategies they employ to achieve them. In doing so, we developed and employed the *Goal Setting and Striving Inventory* (see Appendix for full *GSSI*). In Study 1, we co-created a list of 33 goals, based on the input of adolescents and experts. Appeal to and relevance of the goals to the population of interest were leading in the compilation of the list. In Study 2, we examined whether these goals represent superordinate categories as judged by adolescents themselves. We found that the 33 goals, varying in themes and levels of abstractness and timeframe, could be meaningfully classified into three clusters of independence, self-development, and goodness. In Study 3, we investigated what kind of goals a large sample of adolescents pursue and how important and feasible they consider these goals. This study revealed that adolescents primarily strive for goals related to self-development and independence and that many goals are regarded important (with tidy up one's room being the least important with a score of about 52 on a 1-100 scale), demonstrating the relevance of the list. We also observed that ratings of goal feasibility lag behind on importance ratings, potentially leading to frustrated ambitions (De Ridder et al., 2021). In Study 4, we assessed goal perceptions and self-regulatory strategies of the goal that adolescents were most engaged with at that specific moment. This notion is derived from previous research, suggesting that the employment of self-regulatory strategies is determined by how individuals perceive their goals (Gollwitzer & Oettingen, 2015). We found again that independence and self-development goals are on top of the list and that adolescents are genuinely motivated to pursue their goal and think of these goals in term of high personal responsibility (prevention focus) and a chance of achieving success (promotion focus). We also found that adolescents employ a wide variety of self-regulatory strategies. However, our data suggest that 'less is more' insofar using a larger variety of strategies is associated with less advantageous goal perceptions, including being less oriented towards success and low self-efficacy. In contrast, the average effort they put in their strategies is related to favorable goal perceptions such as a high promotion focus and optimistic assessments of feasibility to achieve one's goal.

Overall then, this series of studies provide evidence that adolescents have a clear view of what they want to achieve in the future and endorse goals that go beyond immediate preoccupations in their daily life that were explicitly named in the list of goals they could endorse. Our findings on the timeframe adolescents employ for goal achievement corroborate these findings with the

majority of adolescents in Study 4 reporting that they work on these goals on a continuous basis. Only a very small minority views goals as projects that they could complete within a month. Moreover, young people in our sample hold favorable goal perceptions and employ a wide variety of self-regulatory strategies with medium effort.

A number of findings require further discussion. First, our research suggests that adolescents are primarily engaged in goals that relate to self-development and independence. While this focus is obvious given that they are in their teens and dealing with the tasks of becoming more independent from their families and developing their personal and social identities, it has been noted that adolescents born in the mid-nineties or later – also known as Generation Z or Generation Me (Twenge, 2006) - show little interest in intrinsic values such as concern for others or caring for social issues. Rather, they seem to be preoccupied with themselves and are more concerned with academic performance and job prospects (Twenge, 2006). Whilst there is debate about whether adolescents from this generation truly have shifted toward extrinsic values of money and success, our data suggest that typical intrinsic values such as issues relating to sustainability (reducing single-use plastic, reducing meat consumption, and walk/cycle more often) are endorsed to a lesser extent than independence and self-development goals. Nevertheless, sustainability goals are still regarded as fairly important with ratings of about 70 on a 1-100 scale. Other community goals than sustainability did not emerge in our conversations with adolescents. However, it should be noted that our way of asking adolescents about their personal goals may not have encouraged them to name societal issues that they find important but do not so much think about in terms of “anything they would like to become, have, learn of do in the future”.

Second, we observed considerable discrepancies between importance and feasibility of goals to the extent that specifically very important goals were rated relatively low in feasibility. We observed a similar pattern when we presented this list to adolescents during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic early 2020, which makes sense given the low opportunities for goal enactment during the lockdown and closing of schools (De Ridder et al., 2021). However, data of the present study were collected in 2019 when living circumstances were not restricted, suggesting that even during normal times adolescents may experience a gap between what they find important and what they find feasible. Previous research has shown that a lack of concordance between importance and attainability is a source of distress because people may maintain striving for goals in the expectation that goal progress will be low (Brunstein, 1993; De Ridder & Kuijer, 2007). Future research should therefore investigate in detail the



implications of this discrepancy for continued self-regulatory efforts. On a more general note, our findings suggest that adolescents have a large commitment to their goals but discern relatively few opportunities to act upon these goals, as shown in low reports of control and self-efficacy. This pattern of high ‘want to’ and low ‘can do’ may explain why their self-regulatory efforts are characterized by using a large number of different strategies.

Third, one of the leading assumptions in the present research was that young people with a larger self-regulatory repertoire may have a better chance of achieving this goal. This notion has been derived from previous research on coping with challenging situations, showing that people who have more strategies at hand are better able to adjust their response to what the situation demands from them, a phenomenon known as ‘flexibility’. Although the cross-sectional nature of our studies does not allow for examining to what extent adolescents were able to make progress in achieving their goal and how this may relate to the kind and the number of strategies they employ, it seems that employing more different kinds of strategies is not necessarily a good thing. In fact, rather the opposite pattern emerges from our studies as using a larger number of self-regulatory strategies is associated with less favorable goal perceptions. It thus seems that using more different kinds of strategies is not so much a sign of flexibility but rather of trying a bit of everything. Nevertheless, many adolescents in our sample used many strategies (on average about nine), but even relatively minor differences in the number of strategies being used already revealed a pattern with goal perceptions. In contrast, the average effort of self-regulatory strategies was associated with more favorable goal perceptions, in particular a high promotion focus. Due to the low sample size in Study 4, we did not observe any other significant associations although there was a clear trend that other positive goals perceptions encourage self-regulatory efforts as well.

A number of limitations to the present series of studies should be mentioned. First, although we have a fairly large sample size over four studies, the sample of Study 4 was relatively small and pointing to the need for replication in a larger sample to corroborate the observed associations between goal perceptions and self-regulatory strategies. Moreover, the samples in Studies 2-3 were recruited by convenience sampling and do not allow for systematic documentation of potential differentiation between age groups and education levels. With the exception of Study 2, the average age of the adolescents participating in our study was about 17 years and relatively young in view of the age range of 16 to 25 years. Future research should document the impact of age and other demographic characteristics on goals, goal perceptions, and goal pursuit. These issues will be addressed in our running longitudinal study that employs

a larger and more age-homogeneous sample ([www.10yup.nl](http://www.10yup.nl)). A second limitation is that we employed single-item measures for the assessment of goal perceptions and self-regulatory strategies. As a consequence, the phrasing of items assessing common psychological constructs may slightly differ from how they have been used in other studies, even though we made an attempt to represent the gist of these strategies. While these adjustments to ‘usual assessments’ have potential disadvantages – mostly in terms of the comparability of current findings to other studies – we believe they have actually enhanced the validity of our measurements as they allow young people to straightforwardly respond to immediate comprehensible constructs. Relatedly, as our list of self-regulatory strategies was derived from previous research, it may be slightly biased towards socially acceptable means of getting what one wants with an underrepresentation of socially less appreciated tactics such as, for example, cheating or lying. A third limitation lies in our reliance on self-report measures of goal perceptions and self-regulatory strategies, as is often the case in self-regulation research. Whilst this approach may not be problematic for analyzing how young individuals think of their goals and the ways of trying to achieve them as these comprise inherently subjective evaluations, self-reports need to be supplemented with more objective assessments when documenting self-regulatory success, which is an important next step in future prospective research on adolescent self-regulation.

Strengths of the current research include the exploration of idiosyncratic goals and goal pursuit in the everyday life of adolescents, which has not been done before and provides us with new insights beyond previous research into goal setting and strategies for goal achievement. Our studies give credit to a novel approach to self-regulation in young people, based upon their endorsement of idiosyncratic goals to generate goal perceptions and goal pursuit. Furthermore, the *GSSI* that was developed during this series of studies provides a tool for assessment that can be used and further developed in future research. For now, we can conclude that young people have a clear view of what they want to achieve in the future, beyond the daily hiccups and adventures that come with adolescent life.

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**Notes**

<sup>1</sup> All data of Study 1 were collected in 2019, as were the data from Studies 2-4.

<sup>2</sup> Take more time to relax and adopt a healthier lifestyle were removed for the final list of goals as they were considered not relevant by participants in the second part of Study 1.

**Appendix: Goal Setting and Striving Inventory****Part 1: List of goals**

---

Saving money for a long holiday  
Go to bed in time more often  
Less screen time  
Exercise more often  
Finish my homework in time  
Get to school/work in time  
Quit smoking  
Tidy up my room more often  
Lose weight  
Being more kind to other people  
Reduce my alcohol intake  
Reduce single-use plastic  
Reduce meat consumption  
Graduate from high school  
Walk or cycle more often  
Earn my own money  
Increase fruit and vegetable consumption  
Pay off financial debts  
Reduce consumption of energy drinks  
Decide about next steps of my education  
Have a better relationship with my parents  
Live on my own  
Learn to play a music instrument  
Becoming successful  
Meet with my friends more often  
Improving my sports performance  
Earn a lot of money  
Enjoy life more  
Get my driver's license  
Learn another language  
Experience less stress  
Become more self-confident  
Find a job

---

## Part 2: Goal Perceptions

- 
- 1 I am uncertain whether I can achieve this goal (Self-Efficacy) \*
  - 2 It is a matter of luck whether I will achieve this goal (Internal Locus of Control) \*
  - 3 I aim for this goal because other people expect me to (Controlled Motivation)
  - 4 This is a goal that I truly desire (Autonomous Motivation)
  - 5 I dislike the things I need to do to achieve this goal (Task Aversion)
  - 6 Achieving this goal will put me at ease (Prevention Focus)
  - 7 Achieving this goal will make me happy and proud (Promotion Focus)
- 

\*Reverse coding

## Part 3: Self-Regulatory Strategies

- 
- 1 I make a plan of action (Planning)
  - 2 I check whether I am on track (Self-Monitoring)
  - 3 I ask other people for support (Social Support)
  - 4 I am looking for opportunities (Situation Selection)
  - 5 I stay positive when I make little progress (Cognitive Reappraisal)
  - 6 I make a routine of things I need to do (Routine Building)
  - 7 I persist when I encounter difficulties (Persistence)
  - 8 I suppress the impulse of giving up (Self-Control)
  - 9 I know what I need to do but I keep postponing (Initiation) \*
  - 10 I reward myself when I make progress (Rewarding Oneself)
- 

\*Reverse coding

## Supplementary Materials

### Study 1

*First sample (N = 24)*

Goals	N <sub>not chosen</sub>	N <sub>chosen</sub>
Saving money for new shoes	16	2
Saving money for a long holiday	10	8
Go to bed in time more often	9	9
Less screen time	11	7
Exercise more often	10	8
Finish my homework in time	9	9
Get to school/work in time	11	7
Quit smoking	18	0
Tidy up my room more often	7	11
Lose weight	14	4
Be more kind to other people	7	11
Reduce my alcohol intake	16	2
Reduce single-use plastic	11	7
Reduce meat consumption	11	7
Graduate from high school	2	16
Walk or cycle more often	14	4
Earn my own money	13	5
Increase fruit and vegetable consumption	7	11
Pay off financial debts	16	2
Reduce consumption of energy drinks	17	1
Decide about next steps of my education	5	13
Have a better relationship with my parents	4	14
Live on my own	14	4
Learn to play a music instrument	13	5
Going out less	18	0
Meet with my friends more often	10	8
Improving my sports performance	9	9

The correlation between M<sub>importance</sub> (M = 68.05, SD = 13.30) and M<sub>feasibility</sub> (M = 70.22, SD = 9.05) is  $r = .95$ ,  $p = .018$ .

*Second sample (N = 86)*

Goals	N <sub>I</sub> want to attain this goal	N <sub>I</sub> already attained this goal	N <sub>not chosen</sub>	N <sub>most important</sub> goal
Saving money for new shoes	9	37	40	0
Saving money for a long holiday	48	11	27	1
Go to bed in time more often	32	29	25	2
Less screen time	26	13	47	2
Exercise more often	39	33	14	3
Finish my homework in time	23	53	10	1
Get to school/work in time	16	61	9	0
Quit smoking	10	7	69	0
Tidy up my room more often	12	55	19	0
Lose weight	26	12	48	2
Be more kind to other people	10	67	9	3
Reduce my alcohol intake	6	16	64	0
Reduce single-use plastic	20	21	45	1
Reduce meat consumption	9	20	57	1
Graduate from high school	79	4	3	30
Walk or cycle more often	7	54	25	0
Earn my own money	36	23	27	2
Increase fruit and vegetable consumption	31	39	16	1
Pay off financial debts	9	10	67	0
Reduce consumption of energy drinks	12	18	56	0
Decide about next steps of my education	36	31	19	0
Have a better relationship with my parents	13	63	10	2
Live on my own	50	9	27	2
Learn to play a music instrument	14	10	62	0
Going out less	6	19	61	0
Meet with my friends more often	22	52	12	1
Improving my sports performance	28	22	36	4
Earn a lot of money	62	19	5	11
Enjoy life more	32	52	2	3
Get my driver's license	57	22	7	7
Learn a new language	29	32	25	2
Live more healthy	37	32	17	2
Take more time to relax	33	39	14	0

The correlation between M\_importance (M = 81.79, SD = 10.77) and M\_feasibility (M = 73.40, SD = 14.57) is  $r = .43$ ,  $p < .001$ .

## Study 2

Results from the goal categorization show that each of the 35 goals that has been categorized by one participant (e.g., goal 1, 5 and 24 in category 2 by participant 1) could be categorized differently by another participant (e.g., goal 2, 5, 23 and 24 in category 1 by participant 2). This means that different group numbers could be used by different participants to categorize the same type of goals as they were free in how they used the drag-n-drop interface and the available categories. To compare the goals that have been categorized consistently across participants the following procedure was programmed in Matlab 2018b. For each participant and each category (1 to 5) goals numbers were collected, e.g. the number 1,5 and 24 for group 2 of participant 1. Each pair combination of these numbers (e.g. 1-5, 1-24, 5-24) was then counted across participants resulting in a square matrix in which the off-diagonal elements indicate how many times a particular pair of goals has been put together by all participants (with a maximum of 26 for each goal pair). Thus, in the example, pair 5-24 would have had a count of 2 if none of the other participants has categorized goal 5 and goal 24 in one group. For visualization (see Figure 1) of this matrix and for graph analyses the upper half of this matrix (above the diagonal) has been set to zero as these values are also in the lower half of the matrix. The resulting final matrix can be used as an adjacency matrix for *undirected graph* visualization of the data where each pair of goals can be seen as an *edge* and each goal as a *node* in a graph, the count of how often a pair (i.e. edge) is put together by participant becomes the *weight* of that edge. The edges between nodes can be visualized using Matlab's built-in undirected graph plot method. We did this for multiple filters of weights of the adjacency matrix to see what pattern of goal groups emerges. Using the analysis described above, we counted all pairs of goals that were put together by participants. The results of putting these counts into undirected graphs where the counts become weights between goal edges shows that at a low-weight filtering (weights lower than 5 set to zero) already a pattern is discernable where 'goodness' goals (e.g., 'lose weight', 'eat less meat', 'use less plastic') cluster together in one part of the graph and 'independence' goals (e.g., 'finding a job', 'finishing high school') are in another part of the graph. When the filter for the weights was increased (weights lower than 8 or 9 set to zero), these two clusters were teased further apart and a third cluster of 'self-development' goals emerges (e.g., 'learn to play a music instrument', 'be nice to others'). Importantly, the general pattern of clusters remains stable with more stringent filters resulting in a more fine-grained distinction of sub-clusters.

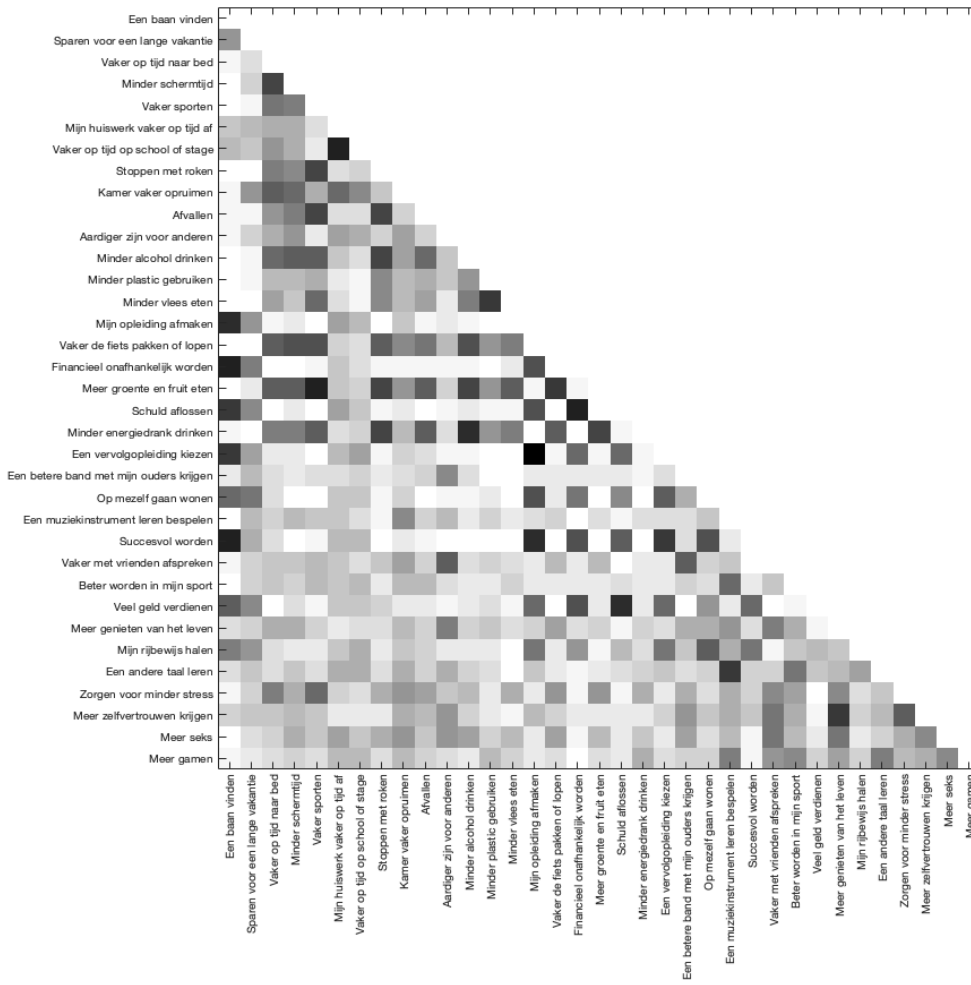


Figure 1. Visual representation of goal pair count results: a darker block indicates a particular pair of goals has been put together often in the same group (in our data for example ‘finding a job’ and ‘becoming successful’). Similarly, a light gray block indicates not many participants put together a pair of goals (in our data for example ‘finding a job’ and ‘game more’).

### Study 3

#### Correlations Goals, Goal Rating and Socio-Demographic Characteristics (N = 321)

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.
1. Number_chosen goals		.213***	-.040	-.091	.018	-.053
2. M_importance			.319***	-.029	.148*	-.031
3. M_feasibility				-.185**	-.082	-.110
4. Age					-.087	.739***
5. Gender						.039
6. Level of education						

M\_importance (M = 74.14, SD = 10.10)

M\_feasibility (M = 68.70, SD = 9.93)



## Study 4

**Table: Frequency and mean importance and feasibility of goals (N=66).**

<b>Goals</b>	<b>This goal does not apply to me</b>	<b>This goal applies to me</b>	<b>Importance M (SD)</b>	<b>Feasibility M (SD)</b>
Saving money for a long holiday	28	38	74.68 (22.44)	71.13 (21.23)
Go to bed in time more often	21	45	86.89 (18.91)	62.87 (26.57)
Less screen time	33	33	81.00 (16.29)	58.00 (28.14)
Exercise more often	18	48	77.08 (23.95)	69.31 (22.68)
Finish my homework in time	32	34	77.88 (22.96)	76.12 (23.65)
Get to school/work in time	41	25	82.48 (24.04)	72.08 (22.65)
Quit smoking	57	9	69.44 (32.75)	65.56 (38.21)
Tidy up my room more often	30	36	77.64 (21.98)	64.06 (29.94)
Lose weight	37	29	79.34 (28.16)	68.31 (26.22)
Being more kind to other people	41	25	79.36 (22.55)	72.80 (30.53)
Reduce my alcohol intake	63	3	39.67 (7.37)	74.67 (26.03)
Reduce single-use plastic	42	24	74.21 (29.52)	68.17 (27.27)
Reduce meat consumption	57	9	66.22 (32.85)	67.56 (32.24)
Finish my education	3	63	93.92 (15.11)	87.02 (20.50)
Walk or cycle more often	42	24	67.17 (26.50)	56.79 (29.11)
Earn my own money	33	33	76.58 (27.58)	70.03 (22.78)
Increase fruit and vegetable consumption	23	43	80.53 (19.82)	81.00 (21.17)
Pay off financial debts	57	9	79.78 (33.56)	76.78 (25.85)
Reduce consumption of energy drinks	44	22	67.09 (35.24)	54.95 (30.04)
Decide about next steps of my education	26	40	90.65 (15.04)	86.70 (20.13)
Have a better relationship with my parents	47	19	83.11 (20.07)	77.05 (27.06)
Live on my own	50	16	64.44 (29.67)	76.44 (25.43)
Learn to play a music instrument	56	10	57.10 (27.45)	73.60 (29.28)
Becoming successful	4	62	86.11 (21.03)	77.45 (22.00)
Meet with my friends more often	35	31	78.03 (23.42)	72.55 (25.52)
Improving my sports performance	41	25	86.44 (16.78)	80.96 (23.01)
Earn a lot of money	6	60	82.42 (21.21)	76.00 (22.80)
Enjoy life more	12	54	86.31 (21.85)	71.46 (26.43)
Get my driver's license	19	47	90.66 (18.67)	81.36 (26.75)
Learn another language	34	32	75.84 (21.23)	75.16 (22.91)
Experience less stress	18	48	81.67 (23.78)	60.54 (26.53)
Become more self-confident	36	30	78.57 (25.10)	64.30 (30.80)
Find a job	48	18	85.06 (24.34)	83.61 (18.53)

**Table: Correlations  
Goal Perceptions and  
Self-Regulatory  
Strategies (N = 66)**

	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	
1 Importance	.47**	.14	.18	-.28	.28	-.11	.27	.43**	.00	.22	.17	.01	.14	.25	.36*	.02	.09	.03	.21	-.17	
2 Feasibility		.50**	.21	-.23	.30	-.39*	.34*	.27	.01	.09	.14	.08	.28	.39**	.45**	-.04	.13	.17	.27	-.09	
3 Self-efficacy			.56**	-.42**	.40*	-.36*	.36*	.36*	-.08	-.07	.05	.08	.12	.33*	.37*	.02	.11	.00	.14	-.23	
4 Locus of control				-.42**	.20	-.37*	-.01	.23	-.16	-.08	.03	-.11	-.05	.28	.21	-.07	.14	-.18	-.02	-.12	
5 Controlled motivation					-.48**	.42*	-.24	-.44**	.16	.08	.16	.09	-.13	-.23	-.34*	.04	-.34*	.01	-.06	.13	
6 Autonomous motivation						-.18	.72**	.85**	.01	.05	.04	.07	.36*	.27	.58**	.09	.03	-.01	.23	-.21	
7 Task aversion							-.04	-.11	.13	-.04	-.07	-.10	-.33*	-.25	-.45**	.16	-.39*	-.12	-.24	.19	
8 Prevention focus								.63**	.02	.19	.08	.12	.26	.26	.46**	.20	-.10	.11	.26	-.20	
9 Promotion focus									.02	.11	.00	.08	.25	.29	.50**	.06	-.01	.02	.19	-.28*	
10 Planning										.60**	.09	.49**	.14	.25	.08	.29	.00	.35*	.62**	.46**	
11 Self-monitoring											.16	.50**	.42**	.43**	.37*	.34*	.08	.47**	.78**	.31	
12 Social support													.24	.28*	.19	.05	.02	-.04	.17	.42**	.32
13 Situation selection														.43**	.34*	.23	.34*	.12	.37*	.75**	.35*
14 Cognitive reappraisal														.20	.44**	.04	-.01	.59**	.61**	.06	
15 Routine building															.45**	.17	.16	.09	.55**	.26	
16 Persistence																.17	.23	.07	.50**	-.27	
17 Self-control																	-.03	-.01	.45**	.27	
18 Initiation																			-.10	.28	.04
19 Rewarding oneself																				.54**	.22
20 Mean SR strategies																					.41*
21 N of SR strategies (cut-off>10)																					

Note: \*p<.01; \*\*p<.001