

Perceived Social Support From Friends as Determinant of Loneliness in a Sample of Primary School

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The peer group is the important social network in children's lives and has a high predictive value of an individual's later social and emotional adjustment. Therefore, the aim of this study is to examine the perceived social support from friends as predictor of the loneliness for primary school students. Two tools were used for data gathering. "Social Support Appraisals Scale for Children and Adolescents" used to evaluate the perceived social support from friends was developed by Gökler (2007). "The Children's Loneliness Scale" used for determining the level of loneliness of the children was developed by Kaya (2005). The study was carried out at three different socioeconomic statuses in Samsun. The sample of 222 primary school students (n = 132 girls, n = 90 boys) was selected randomly among three- to six- year primary school students. The average age of the students was 9.73 (S = 0.81). As a statistical analysis method, Pearson correlation coefficient and linear regression analysis were used. The results of the Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient showed that perceived social support from friends was related to loneliness ($r = -0.55, p < 0.01$). The results of the regression analysis indicated that perceived social support from friends predicted significantly children's loneliness ($R^2 = 0.31, t = -9.87$). The implications for school psychological counselors can be derived from the findings of this study. This study may help school counselors in order to provide preventive psychological help and to plan appropriate training programs at psychological counseling services for schools.

Keywords: social support, loneliness, friendship, primary school

Introduction

Humanity's need to establish relationships, to be with others, and to belong to something exists from the beginning of his life to the end of it. First relationship object of the individual is the family, and the quality of the relationship established with the family determines future life and behaviours.

According to Erickson, who discusses the importance of the childhood period as an influence on formation of the individual's character, children who are brought up in their 0-1.5 age period without the sense of security may in the future become self-distrusting individuals who abstain from making social relationships (Selçuk, 2005). While negative experiences in this period cause the formation of the perception of a "world of enmity", this perception results in remoteness of the individual from others, lack of confidence and failure in intimate relationships. In later years, relationships with friends become also important as well as the family. Family

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relationships which are more important at the beginning of the lifetime are replaced by the peer group and the relationships with them. Especially in the primary school period, the child's relationships with his/her mates rank in priority and these relationships determine future relationships, social concert, social closeness or loneliness. Therefore, the way these relationships are perceived and their influence on the person is important.

According to the nature of the relationships of the individual, perceived social support, which can be defined as being helped when needed, being loved and receiving respect and interest (Başer, 2006), is the individual's cognitive perception that he/she has reliable ties with others and he/she will receive support (Kozaklı, 2006). Researches show that social support plays an important role in the individual's life, and affects physical and psychological health in a positive manner. Whereas Jou and Fukada (2002), reported that the individuals receiving high social support also rank high in their health levels, the same researchers (Jou & Fukada, 1994) talked about the positive impact of social support on social adjustment. According to Barrera, Sandler, and Ramsay (1981), children and adolescents with high level of social support show less anxiety and depression under stress compared to others. Scarcity or lack of social support is an important determinant of unhealthy behaviours like use of drugs, committing crimes, etc. (Mason, 2004; Holt & Espelage, 2005). In children and adolescents, especially the received social support and perceived social support from friends is related to the feeling of belonging to a group, and the scarcity of support may cause alienation, desolation and loneliness (Manfusa, 2001; Lagana, 2004).

While the group of friends fulfils the need of belonging, the children who are rejected or denied by this group are known to have a high level of loneliness (Asher & Wheeler, 1983; Renshaw & Brown, 1992; McGuire & Clifford, 2000; Demir & Tarhan, 2001; Qualter & Munn, 2002). Loneliness, which is a feeling experienced due to the individual's perceiving his/her social relationships network as narrower or less satisfying than he/she desires (Peplau & Perlman, 1982; as cited in Buluş, 1996), is also related to many psychological and behavioural problems (Galanaki & Kalantzi-Azizi, 1999; Storch, Brassard, & Masia-Warner, 2003; CHEN et al., 2004). While closeness in friendship relationships helps to decrease the feeling of loneliness (Hoza, Molina, Bukowski, & Sippola, 1995), perception of being loved by the friends and receiving interest from them is a cure for many psychological problems. Therefore, in the primary school period when relationship with friends become important, factors contributing to these relationships should be encouraged, obstructions should be determined, and precautions should be taken. Besides, the period of childhood is very important for the research about the factors causing the feeling of loneliness, which is accepted to be related to psychological and physical problems, and the coping.

With this purpose, it is supposed that examination of the relationship between perceived social support from friends and loneliness in primary school students is going to contribute the literature.

Answers for the following questions are sought in this study:

- (1) Is there a meaningful relationship between perceived social support from friends and loneliness?
- (2) Is the perceived social support from friends a meaningful predictor for loneliness?

Methodology

Participants

The study was carried out at three different socioeconomic statuses in Samsun. The sample of 222 primary school students (n = 132 girls, n = 90 boys) was selected randomly among three- to six- year primary school students. The average age of the students is 9.73 (S = 0.81).

Instruments

Two tools were used for data gathering. “Social support appraisals scale for children and adolescents” used to evaluate the perceived social support from friends was developed by Gökler (2007). “The Children’s Loneliness Scale” used for determining the level of loneliness of the children was developed by Kaya (2005).

Social Support Appraisals Scale for Children and Adolescents. This scale developed by Gökler (2007) for the purpose of determining perceived social support levels of children. The scale consists of three factors representing the “friend support”, “family support” and “teacher support”. “Friend support” form was utilized for the present study.

The construct validity of the scale was investigated through factor analysis. In the analysis of that investigation, it was observed three factors accounting for 40.22% of the total variance.

“Depression inventory for children” was used to determine the reliability of “Social support appraisals scale” dependent on measure. The correlation coefficient between the total points of “Depression inventory for children and social support appraisals scale” was found -0.62 ($p < 0.01$).

Cronbach’s alpha reliability coefficient was 0.93, test-retest reliability coefficient was 0.49 and the split-half reliability coefficient was 0.82 (Gökler, 2007).

Children’s Loneliness Scale. This scale, adapted into Turkish by Kaya (2005) for the purpose of determining loneliness levels of children. Cronbach’s alpha reliability coefficient was 0.87 and the test-retest reliability coefficient was 0.76. Item-test correlations varied between 0.32 and 0.76. The construct validity of the scale was investigated through factor analysis. In the analysis of that investigation, only one factor was observed. Factor loads varied between 0.30 and 0.78 (Kaya, 2005).

Analysis of Data

Measurement was performed during students’ class time and completed in around 20 minutes. The data obtained from the collection procedure was then prepared for the appropriate statistical procedures on computer, using SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) 15.0. As a statistical analysis method, Pearson correlation coefficient and simple linear regression analysis were used.

Findings

Results concerning the questions to which answers were sought are provided below:

(1) Is there a meaningful relationship between perceived social support from friends and loneliness?

Pearson moments correlation coefficient results produced with the aim of answering this question were used. The results of Pearson moment correlation analysis indicated that the perceived social support from friends was negatively correlated with loneliness ($r = -0.55, p < 0.01$).

(2) Is the perceived social support from friends a meaningful predictor for loneliness?

Simple linear regression analysis was used to answer this question. The results are given in Table 1.

Table 1

Results of Simple Linear Regression Analyses Predicting Loneliness

Variable	β	t	p	R	R ²
Perceived social support from friends	-0.554	-9.873	0.000	0.554	0.31

As shown in Table 1, perceived social support from friends is a significant predictor for loneliness ($R^2 = 0.31, t = -9.873$).

Discussion

In this research, perceived social support by primary school students from their friends and their levels of loneliness was examined. With this purpose, the relationship between perceived social support and loneliness was examined using Pearson correlation, and then it was tested by simple linear regression analysis whether perceived social support by primary school students from friends is a determinant of loneliness or not.

Accordingly, a meaningful inverse relationship was observed between perceived social support from friends and loneliness, and it was also observed that perceived social support from friends is a meaningful determinant of loneliness. Similar works in the literature also support the conclusions of this research. In the research, Güngör (1996) had made on university students, students' perception of social support came out to be high whereas their levels of loneliness were low. While McElroy (1997) and Erdeğer (2001) found inverse relationship between social support and loneliness, Yeh (2004) examined the effect of living single, loneliness life and social support, and discovered that in individuals with high social support, although they lived alone, their levels of loneliness were not high. Whereas Kafetsios (2002) stated that perceived social support is a determinant of loneliness, Segrin (2003) informed that there is a negative relationship between the level of perceived social support by individuals and psychosocial problems like depression and loneliness. Arkar and Sarı (2004) found a negative relationship between the level of social support and loneliness in university students. Lunsky (2004) studied suicide in adults taking psychological counselling. Individuals with a high level of loneliness were discovered to have a low level of emotional support. Whereas Ponizovsky and Ritsner (2004) concluded negative relationship between social support level and loneliness, Wright (2005) examined the relationship between loneliness and social support in business life. In the research made on employees from various professions, the relationship between the work-based support received from managers and loneliness was studied. It is stated that when employees have a high level of social support, their levels of loneliness are low.

As it is also discussed in the literature, this research may also conclude that the relationship discovered between perceived social support by primary school students from their friends and their levels of loneliness can be explained by the fact that belonging to a group and being accepted by mates in a period when children become more independent from their families and friendship relations become more important helps individuals to perceive their social relationships as satisfying. Furthermore, the feeling that he/she is loved, valued and accepted may decrease the feeling of loneliness by avoiding the individual's negative assessment of both himself/herself and others.

Following suggestions may be made based on the results of this study: In schools, which are at the same time institutions that affect emotional and psychological development of students, social, cultural and sports activities in which children may express themselves and learn to share within a group should be organised. In cognitive activities in the class, teachers should accentuate group works, and through group guidance, both students and their families should be given information related to social skills. Furthermore, it is considered that sparing time for psychological counselling sessions and group works to develop friendship relations is of importance.

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