

Brief Report**Adolescent Self-Esteem, Attachment and Loneliness**

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: To assess self-esteem, loneliness and attachment styles among adolescents and examine their association with each other and with age and gender. **Method:** Adolescents (55 males and 55 females) from a public school in Delhi, aged 10-13 years were administered Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory (School Form), Attachment Scale and UCLA Loneliness Scale. **Results:** Adolescents aged 10-11 years reported higher self-esteem as compared to those aged 12-13 years ($p < 0.01$). Low global, general and home-parents self-esteem were associated with high levels of loneliness. Adolescents with high self-esteem were securely attached while those with low self-esteem had preoccupied and fearful attachment. **Conclusions:** Adolescents studying in a public school reported high levels of self-esteem, moderate loneliness and a secure attachment style. Students with low self-esteem and feelings of loneliness may benefit from psychological intervention.

Key Words: Adolescents, Self-esteem, Attachment styles, Loneliness.

INTRODUCTION

The transition from childhood to adolescence is characterized by the need to establish an identity that calls for autonomy and independence from parents, as suggested in the Eriksonian crisis of 'identity versus identity confusion'.^{1,2} Resolution of the crisis results in developing a sense of self in relation to others and to ones own internal thoughts and desires. The global evaluative dimension of the self is self-esteem.² Traditionally, self-esteem has been viewed as global, unidirectional and independent of sources of influence like individual and contextual factors, particularly the impact of relationships with significant others.³ However, previous studies have emphasized that secure attachment to parents may buffer emotional distress, facilitate social competence and enhance self-esteem.² Pubertal changes have been implicated in girls having a lower self-esteem than boys, which reaches a low point between ages 12-13 years.^{4,5} The perception of being an incompetent or rejected person may manifest into feelings of loneliness.⁶ Previous literatures suggests that due to gender stereotypes boys report a higher sense of self-worth, but feel lonelier and rejected as compared to girls.^{3,7}

Research conducted in the Indian context suggests that socio-emotional problems like loneliness, adjustment difficulties with parents and interpersonal conflicts are relatively common in adolescence, and may contribute to impaired feelings of self-esteem.⁸ In the present study, the levels of self-esteem and loneliness across age and gender, attachment styles and the relationship between self-esteem and loneliness among adolescents were examined.

METHODS

The sample comprised of 110 respondents (males=55; females=55), from a public school in Delhi, aged 10-11 years (early adolescents, N=61) and 12-13 years (late adolescents, N=49) belonging to classes 6 and 7 respectively. More than three-fourths of the sample was Hindu (80%) and came from nuclear (78%) and supportive (84%) families (78%). About 52% were first born and 42% were second born. Prior written consent was taken from the School authorities as well as parents of the children before conducting the study.

Self-esteem was assessed using Coopersmith Self- Esteem Inventory (School Form),⁴ consisting of 50 items pertaining to General, Social-Peers, Home-Parents, and Social-Academic self-esteem and 8 lie-scale items. The cut-off score for high self-esteem was 60. Attachment styles were assessed using the Attachment Scale,⁹ comprising of four paragraphs pertaining to four attachment styles: secure, dismissing, preoccupied and fearful; which were rated on a 7 point scale (1=very unlike me; 7=very like me). In 'secure attachment' individuals easily become emotionally close to others and don't worry about being alone or others not accepting them. In 'dismissing attachment' persons are comfortable without close emotional relationships and prefer not to depend on others or vice-versa. In 'preoccupied attachment' persons want to be emotionally intimate with others but often find that others are reluctant to get close. In 'fearful attachment style' persons want emotionally close relationships but find it difficult to trust others and worry about getting hurt. Loneliness was assessed using UCLA Loneliness Scale that consists of 20 items reflecting satisfaction and dissatisfaction with social relationships and is rated on a 4-point scale (1= never; 4=often).¹⁰ Data analysis was done by computing chi-square, t-ratio and Pearson's product moment correlation.

RESULTS

About 87% of adolescents had high and 13% had low self-esteem. Two thirds of adolescents reported high level of loneliness while one third reported low levels of loneliness. The distribution of attachment styles was as follows: secure (34.5%), dismissing (29.1%), preoccupied (20%), and fearful (16.4%).

Early adolescents (71.3±12.1) had significantly higher self-esteem than late adolescents (63.1±18.5, $t=2.66$, $p<0.01$). The two groups of adolescents did not differ with regard to loneliness (early adolescents: 50.2±7.5, late adolescents: 50.6±7.1). No significant gender differences were noted in self-esteem (boys: 67.9±16.2, girls: 67.4±15.4) and loneliness (boys: 49.9±7.3, girls: 50.8±7.3).

There was a significant association between self-esteem (cut off score of 60) and attachment styles ($\chi^2=8.77$; $df=3$, $p<0.05$). High self-esteem was associated with secure attachment style; while preoccupied and fearful attachment styles were associated with low self-esteem (high self esteem: secure 37.5%, dismissing 31.3%, preoccupied 17.7%, fearful: 13.5%; low self-esteem: secure 15.2%, dismissing 15.2%, preoccupied 35.7%, fearful: 35.7%). Self-esteem was significantly negatively correlated with loneliness ($r=-0.21$, $p<0.05$), in particular, this relationship was significant for general ($r=-0.33$, $p<0.01$) and home-parents ($r=-0.24$, $p<0.05$) self-esteem.

DISCUSSION

The selection of the sample from a single public school limits the generalizability of the study. However, the present study suggests that majority of such adolescents report high self-esteem. Early adolescents reported higher self-esteem as compared to later adolescents, which is partially in keeping with previous research that a decline in self-esteem in girls sets in around the age of 11 years, and reaches a low point between the ages 12-13 years due to certain developmental changes like onset of puberty and emergence of formal operations thought.^{2,8}

Majority of adolescents were securely attached; however, a greater proportion of adolescents with low self-esteem had preoccupied and fearful attachment style. Most participants in the present study reported having a supportive family environment. It is likely that warm and accepting parents impart a feeling of acceptance and competence in their children, which results in their having a positive sense of self.¹¹

Low self-esteem was associated with feelings of loneliness. Individuals with low self-esteem are likely to feel rejected and are disapproving of others, in addition they may lack self-confidence and social skill required for initiating and developing relationships; factors that are related to loneliness.⁷ Students with low self-esteem and feeling of loneliness may benefit from psychological intervention.

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