# Sri Lankan Adolescents' Relationships with their Parents, Siblings and Peers: An Exploratory Study

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## ABSTRACT

The aim of the present study is to explore Sri Lankan adolescents' relationships with their parents, siblings and peers. To investigate this aspect a semi-structured interview schedule was used to interview 10 adolescents (6 girls and 4 boys aged at 15 to 18 years) from varied socioeconomic backgrounds, belonging to varied communities (sports clubs, plantation sector, urban, rural) . The results conveyed that parents, siblings and peers had an impact on the psychosocial wellbeing of the studied adolescents. However, positive relationships with parents, siblings and peers did not seem to be the only influence on adolescent wellbeing. Adolescents in the study who reported abusive and neglecting experiences from parents also reported well-being and attributed it to multitude of other factors.

*Keywords:* *Sri Lanka, Adolescents, Relationships, Parents, Siblings, Peers*

**A**s an intricate part of adolescents' personal and social lives, relationships fundamentally influence not only how they perceive themselves but also their perceptions of value or worth whiteness to society. Adolescent relationships are varied and may include parents, step-parents, siblings, peers, adult relatives, and other significant adults (i.e., teachers, mentors, religious figures). However, since adolescents are considered to be a time transition, relationships can become extremely complex during adolescence, making adolescents comparatively differing in their relationship needs compared to adults and younger children (Hauser, 1991; Jackson & Rodriguez-Tome, 1993).

### Adolescent and their parents
Parents have an effect on the development of adolescents' social competence and their ability to form and maintain satisfying and supportive relationships (Berk, 2010). During early and middle adolescent years, there may be more frequent conflict between adolescents and their parents (Holmbeck& Hill, 1991), signalling parents and adolescents that relationship structures and processes require attention and redefinition. Often, this is due to the fact that they are trying to

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assert their individuality and are exercising their independence. Hence they may rebel against their parents' rules and values as part of their identity development process. Therefore, literature conveys that adolescents relationships with their parents may become distant and aloof (Berk, 2010).

However, literature convey that pre-existing parenting styles, and family structures has dynamic impact on the parent-adolescent relationship to a great extent, with intact or stable families reported of having strong relationship with adolescence psychosocial wellbeing (Falci, 2006; Apel & Kaukinen, 2008). Compared to their intact family peers, adolescents with parental divorce or living in single-mother families tend to experience more psychological and socio-emotional challenges in a variety of areas including: scholastic achievement (Manning, &Lamb, 2003), conduct (Demuth, &Brown, 2004), substance abuse (Dube, 2003), psychological adjustment, self-esteem, social competence, and relationships with parents(Amato & Keith, 1991).

Literature conveys the family seemed to have a strong influence on Sri Lankan adolescent (both in school as well as out of school) in promoting their psychosocial wellbeing.  The majority of school going Sri Lankan adolescents perceived their families as intimate and close (60 %) unit, as a refuge (52%) for their problems and indicated their preference to spend their free time (40%) with their families (UNICEF, 2004). A significant proportion was proud of their families while for large proportion of adolescents considered their family member as the figure they could looked up to or a 'hero'. Mothers were identified as the most trusted, liked and the personal confidantes of adolescents irrespective of age and sex and socio-economic status. About three fourths of the school going Sri Lankan adolescents thought they could depend on their families and reported that they would love to spend time with their families (UNICEF, 2004). However, the bond reported between out-of-school adolescents and their families seemed to be relatively loose when compared to that of school going adolescents. Only 32 % of out-of-school adolescents saw their family as caring and warm while 40 % perceived it to be good. However, the proportion of out of school adolescents who wanted to leave the family was only 1 %. Nearly, 40 % of out-of-school adolescents were distressed by parental concerns about their current status.

*Adolescents' relationship with their siblings*
Investigations of specific processes involved in sibling relationships across all age groups, as well as adolescent siblings more generally, have been limited until the last few decades (Feinberg, McHale, Crouter, & Cumsille, 2003; Kim, McHale, Osgood, & Crouter, 2006). Research suggests that siblings continue to be important influences, even as adolescents begin spending less time with family members as they enter young adulthood (Carbery & Buhrmester; D'Amico & Fromme, 1997).Research on sibling relationships in early and middle childhood has examined some aspects of sibling relationships such as sibling conflicts(McGuire, Manke,

Eftekhari, & Dunn, 2000) and conflict  resolution strategies(Howe, Rinaldi, Jennings, & Petrakos,2002), and parental intervention (Ross, Filyer, Lollis, Perlman, & Martin, 1994).

Despite the many potential benefits of positive social relationships, sibling relationships can also involve conflict (Berry, Willingham,& Thayer, 2000; Herrera & Dunn, 1997). Furman and Buhrmester (1985) found that of six major relationships (mothers, fathers, siblings, grandparents, friends, and teachers), early adolescents perceived conflict as occurring most frequently with siblings. They also found that conflict with siblings was greatest during early adolescent. This may be attributed to increases in autonomy seeking. Hence, Buhrmester and Furman(1990) concludes that sibling relationships become less intense, both positively and negatively, as children move into adolescence with same-sex sibling dyads feeling closer than opposite-sex dyads.

McGuire et al.(2000) found that for sibling pairs in middle childhood, the most common issues of conflict involved sharing of personal possessions, and these issues were more common than conflicts over household items.When Campione-Barr, and Smetana(2010) explored the sibling conflict and association over the quality of adolescent relationships they found that early-adolescent older siblings reported having more conflicts over things such as borrowing things belonging to their siblings. However, Campione-Barr, and Smetana (2010) also found that for both older and younger siblings, more frequent and intense conflicts over invasion of the personal domain were associated with poorer relationships between siblings. However, they were not clear whether this is due to more conflicts over personal issues make it difficult to be in a close, trusting relationship, or whether siblings who have poor quality relationships feel free to more frequently invade one another's personal domain.

*Adolescents' relationship with their friends and peers*
As adolescents become more independent from their families, relationships with their peers become increasingly important, emotionally intimate, and strong (Berk, 2010) leading to greater trust among peers. Peers function as important sources of information; serving to expose youth to values and behaviors that differ from their families; provide opportunities to develop interpersonal skills; and act as references as adolescents explore their identity.

Conformity to peer pressure becomes increasingly important to adolescents providing them a sense security sense of, interpersonal safety and protection and affirming their acceptance into their chosen peer group. However, it is also often associated with negative outcomes such as conduct problems or substance abuse and social exclusion of adolescents who do not confirm with the group norms. For example, nearly one fifth of school going Sri Lankan adolescents strongly felt that they missed a close friend though this proportion declined with age (UNICEF, 2004). Nearly half of the respondents seemed to prefer the company of peers during their free times indicating the significant possibility of peer influence in their lives (UNICEF, 2004). Peer pressure can also exert a positive influence. Due to advanced cognitive and emotional maturity,

adolescents have the capacity to encourage each other to make wise decisions, and discourage peers/ friends from making harmful choices.

Considerable research evidence suggests that peer relationships contribute strongly to adolescents' psychosocial adjustment (Doyle, Markiewicz, & Hardy, 1994). Research findings have also consistently documented that friendships, as well as successful adaptation in the peer group, play an important role in children's social and cognitive development, protect them from feelings of loneliness and social dissatisfaction, minimize stress deriving from major changes in children's lives and work as "emotional supports" (Dunn, 2004).

The present study explores the Sri Lankan adolescence relationships with parents, siblings, and peers on their psychosocial' wellbeing. The existent literature revealed that different types of relationships play significant roles in adolescents' wellbeing. However, it has not been explored whether these relationships are also important in the wellbeing of Sri Lankan adolescents. It is expected that these relationships impact the psychosocial wellbeing of the Sri Lankan adolescence.

## METHOD

### *Participants*

When recruiting participants, diversity in their socio-economic back grounds as well as their varied experiences (e.g. experiencing abuse/neglect) was also considered in order to optimize the results of the study. Maximum variation, which allowed the space to gather different types of information pertaining to this topic, was utilized during participant selection. Before the participant selection, experts in the areas of psychology, educational psychology and research methodology were consulted in order to compile a diverse list of participants. Redundancy was reached with 10 (Girls = 06; Boys = 04) participants. Participants were selected from various back grounds such as plantation sector, rural and urban areas and coming from different socio-economic backgrounds and demographic contexts in Sri Lanka.

### *Instrument*

The primary data source of the study was an open ended, semi–structured interview schedule comprising of 19 open-ended questions, addressing three main areas: the participants' relationships with their parents (e.g. tell me about the relationship between you and your parents, when you are unhappy what do your parents do?), siblings (e.g. tell me about your brothers and sisters) and peers (Tell me about your friends, Are you in a romantic relationship). This interview schedule was developed based on experts in the field of psychology and sociology whose expertise lies in working with Sri Lankan adolescents reviewed the questionnaire. Based on their feedback the revisions were made. Subsequently, the interview schedule was pilot-tested with a girl and a boy (15-18 years) representing the sample.

*Procedure*

To ensure integrity and trustworthiness, all the interview questions were reviewed by a panel of experts. Based on the suggestions, revisions were carried out. Before conducting the actual interview, a pilot study was conducted to test the interview design with two participants (An adolescent girls and a boy). After the pilot interview interviews participants were asked whether there were questions that made them uncomfortable or whether they were offended when certain questions were asked. Questions were re-worded or eliminated based on participant feedback; during the pilot if it was noticed that they were irrelevant or offensive to the participants.

The interviews were conducted by a graduate student in psychology who had been trained to conduct semi-structured interviews with adolescents. Before the interviews the researcher and her assistant contacted the potential participants via telephone or visits, and the purpose of the study was explained. These visits/contacts consisted of a brief introduction including the detailed purpose of the study, and decision on when to meet.  If they agreed to be interviewed, during the initial contact, time and place for the interviews were arranged with the adolescents. Then authorization from the parent/s was received, if the adolescent was below 18 only their consent was taken. If the adolescent was 18 years their consent was taken. They all understood that the participation was voluntary and could leave the interview whenever they wanted.

The participants were allowed to choose the time and place of the interviews. When selecting the place, a location and place familiar to the participants was chosen. The interviews took place in homes of the adolescents and in the university. The duration of the adolescent interviews varied from 90 to 60 minutes. The researcher and her assistant used a tape recorder along with a notebook to keep records of each interview.

## RESULTS

The present research focuses on several questions when addressing issues pertaining to adolescents' relationship with their parents, siblings and peers as well as the impact of such relationships on their wellbeing. It primarily focused on the nature and quality of the relationship on the psychosocial wellbeing of adolescents. However, it also explored specific issues pertaining to each relationship. For instance, in the context of parents, the present study reconnoitered questions such as: 'Are some types of parenting "better" for the adolescent than others?' and 'Are there factors in the nonfamily environment that impinge on the parent–adolescent relationship in ways that enhance or attenuate parental influence?' Therefore, relationships that adolescents in the study reported pertaining to each relationship would be discussed under separate section.

*Adolescents' relationship with their parents*

Results conveyed that variation in parent-adolescent relationship to a great extent affect the development of the adolescents. If parents were perceived to be supportive and attentive adolescents in the study seem to find great comfort in their relationship with the parents. On the other hand if parents were perceived to be distant, aloof, uncaring or abusive, the parent-child

relationship seemed to be perceived as negative. Those who perceived close bond with their parents felt that '*they could tell anything to their parents*' and were seemed to be of the opinion that their parents accepted and supported them unconditionally.

Participants reported distant deteriorating and conflictual relationships with parents displaying highly controlling, restrictive, punitive styles. As a result, adolescents seemed to have shifted their attachments towards peers than those who reported having positive relationships with their parents. Moreover, patterns of low or even decreasing decision making opportunities created by the parents also seemed to have resulted in adolescents having comparatively close bonds with their friends or romantic partners. Those who had parents with high parental control also seemed to rely more on their peers, specially their romantic partners (girlfriends or boyfriends). They study also conveyed that girls experienced high parental control if they were in a romantic relationship than boys, in turn feeling more distance in their relationships with the parents.

*Earlier I used to come from school alone or go to tuition classes (extra help classes outside school) alone, at times come late even after 8pm...in spite of the fact that we lived near an inner-city area known for its crime and violence...but when they found out that I am having an affair they chaperon me everywhere. They drop me to my classes and come to pick me up...follow me everywhere. I though let them come after me as long they want...till they get tired of it. I know in my mind that I do not do anything wrong...more than my mother my father is always coming after me (meaning chaperoning)...the scold me a lot and compare me with others ....so even though Sometimes we have great fun...even me and my mother dance together...but the relationship is not close...I cannot say that she is like a friend to me...(8/F/18)*

However, even the participants who perceived close relationships with their parents reported of incidents of corporal punishment or severe verbal reprimands. Unlike the participants who reported distant relationship they seemed to have perceived such behaviors as disciplinary actions of the parents carried out for their own good'.

*My mother scolds me for small mistakes that I commit, for large wrong doing/ mistakes she hit me...I feel I am able remedy them because of it... when I do something wrong my mother hit me...my father goes to work at 5 and come back in the night...during holidays when he is at home and sees some wrong doing of mine he hit me (4/M/16)*

Adolescents who reported of having neglecting/abusive parenting styles also reported deteriorating or severed relationships with their parents. As a result, parents adolescent bond seemed to be even less intimate than those who perceived high demanding and controlling parenting styles.

Below is an excerpt taken from an interview of a 17 year old adolescent girl. She reported of having experienced psychological abuse and physical/psychological neglect from her mother and psychological neglect from her father. The results convey that the abuse and neglect of the mother was more severe and intense.

*I have brother, sister, mother and father...but I live with my grandmother...from childhood...since the time I was in year 3 (about 8 years) my mother did not speak to me...therefore, my grandmother took me... (meaning that her grandmother had been caring for her since then)...my father provides for me and love me...my mother does allow my younger brother and sister to talk to me...my mother and father stay in the same house...often my father's job keeps him away from home...Now I do not think of my mother so much...when I went to worship my mother on the new year day, she looked away...however, I love my father...but I love my boyfriend the most because he looks after me as both my mother and father (6/F/17)*

*My father used give money to me...but when he came to know about my affair he stopped giving...earlier also we had been caught...(meaning that her affair was known-----)but when my mother came to know about it she told my father...my mother wanted to stop my father from giving me money anyway...because she knows that I study...somehow my father stopped giving money to me (6/F/17)*

Results convey that she seemed to question the severing relationship and negative affection of her parents towards her and attributed them to varied causes such as being the first born of the family, or being in romantic relationships as the cause of the parental abuse and neglect.

### *Adolescents' relationship with their siblings*

The nature of the sibling relationship described by adolescents varied in the continuum of being extremely friendly to less intimate or not at all intimate. The bond between the siblings seemed to be close when the age gap was less between the adolescent and the sibling. Adolescents in the study also perceived conflict as occurring most frequently with siblings, over personal issues, and sharing personal items.

*My younger sister is only one year younger to me, sometimes we hit each other...for fun...we are very close...I tell all things which happen in my school...we don't have secrets from each other...she is like my friend...her ideas are mature (meaning the younger sister is mature enough to share things with) Yes, I can speak to my sister anytime...yes we fight with each other all the time...about four or five times per day...for small issues (1/F/17)*

*Yes, we fight...when they take things belonging to me or when I take something belonging to them...then they scold me saying do not take out things and I scold back asking 'Then why do you take things belonging to me?'...That's how fights begin...we do not fight everyday (2/M/16).*

However, when the adolescents have sibling who are young adults they mentioned less conflicts.

*Earlier me and my elder brother were not so close...now he understands and understand (meaning more mature). He is completing his training in the army, he hears whatever I do...since I do not do anything wrong, it does not really matter...he calls my mother because I do not have a phone and asks about the them, he has many friends here...all I have to do is answer in monosyllables to the questions that he asks from me...he is also like a friend...*

*When we were small we used to fight so often…when we were older fights did not last for long time…maybe five minutes…after that no more (meaning they did not keep grudges)*

*Since he is the eldest…he is given priority and importance…for example…if my mother serves rice…he is served first…I understand that, but when on occasion I am so hungry, I feel bit angry about it…when I do something which does not like, I get a tokka (being hit on the head using the knuckles of the hand) from him, I think it is okay because he is my elder brother (3/M/17)*

However, the girl who reported neglecting/ abusive parenting from her mother and father also reported abusive and conflictual relationships with her siblings (younger sister and brother who were close to her in age). She attributed it to the guidance and advice of the mother.

*I have a younger brother and sister, my younger sister is in year nine (about 15 years) and my younger brother is in year 6 (about 12 years), recently she hit me with a 'idala' (sweeping stick made of coconut which is used to sweep the garden)…one day I was wearing a clip which my boyfriend had given me as a present and my sister thought it was hers and she asked my younger brother to get it from me and I refused…then she told me 'don't lie' and kept on scolding me…when I tried to go way from her, she picked idala and hit me…my younger brother is good…he understands…he does not take a side…he is the one who came for help…when I had a severe gastric attack…and when my grandmother called for help (she lives with grandmother next door to her family because her mother does not care or talk to her)…*

*My younger sister is like my mother…earlier we had a good relationship…she could not stay without me…before my mother put things into their heads (meaning, that her mother say bad, vicious things about her to her sister and brother)…she does not allow them to talk to me…I do not like to watch television, but on my way to my older aunt's house I saw a television commercial…though I do not usually watch television it was something related to music…so I climbed on to their window sill to watch it…only for a short time I watched it through the window standing outside the house that my parents and siblings live…my younger sister saw it…the next day I noticed that someone has nailed the window…so I could not climb and watch the television…I think…it was from that day she became spiteful and vicious…it is okay (meaning she does not care, but it appears as she does) (6/F/17).*

***Adolescents' relationship with their friends and peers -*** Adolescents who took part in the study described peer relationships as important, and comforting. Friends were described as individuals sharing a close bond, with similar interests. All the participants reported of having at least one close friend to whom they can confide. Even though fights/ conflicts with friends were reported they seemed to be short lived.

*We share a close bond. We are like sisters. I can tell anything to them…we help each other in studies…we always try to be happy (1/F/17).*

*We have similar interests...earlier we used play Cricket a lot...but now my mother does not allow it (2/M/16).*

*I have three close friends in my class...earlier I was harassed a lot by some of my class mates. They did not even allow my desk to touch theirs...then last year...these friends asked me to come and sit near them...I like to be with them...we tell funny stories during free periods...which makes us very happy...I always read books when in the company of my friends...they are like my teachers...they take dictation...by doing so they try to improve my level of achievement...they never discriminate...we eat together (4/M/16).*

However, conflicts were also reported due to ethnicity (4/M/16), economic deprivation (6/F/17) experienced by some participants in the study.

## DISCUSSION

The aim of the present study was to explore the relationships between parent-adolescent, sibling-adolescent and peer/friends-adolescent relationships using a semi-structured interview schedule. The perceived quality of the relationships with parents, siblings, friends, peers and dating partners were indicated as sources of stress/ support by the participants; either promoting their wellbeing or creating distress. The findings are discusses under each theme explored.

### Parents

Contrary to the popular psychological perspective on family relationships of adolescents, majority of the participants who took part in the present study reported a happy, pleasant relationship, close bond and a non-conflictive parent-child relationship. These results do not seem to support the theory and global research findings which claim that familial storm and stress emerged in adolescence in most families (Berk, 2010). The explanation for the discrepancy between these studies and findings of the present study could be found in the fact that majority of the research on adolescents come from clinical samples carried out in the Euro-American milieu while the findings of the present study is based on a community sample from a collective culture. Hence while storm and stress maybe the norm in families of adolescents with depression and conduct disorders, conflict may not be normative in average Sri Lankan families. In fact a study carried out by UNICEF (2004) conveys that 60% of Sri Lankan adolescents positively concluded that their life is generally happy, their families as intimate and close (60%), considered the family as a refuge for a problem,   thought they could depend on their families and said that they would love to spend time with their families.

Those adolescents showing high leadership skills and responsibility described their parents as being more affectionate and supportive than did adolescents low on these characteristics. Murphy and Moriarty (1976) found that the availability of family supports increased children's resilience in the face of stress. Sandier (1980) found significant relations between stress and social support, on the one hand, and children's maladjustments on the other. In a 30-year longitudinal study of Harvard University male undergraduates, Vaillant (1974, 1977) found that

a supportive early family environment was correlated with positive adult adjustment and lack of psychiatric disorder.

Again, majority of the reviewed studies have been conducted in western cultures which emphasize on individuality and independence. However, the Sri Lankan milieu, which values collectivism, may consider the bond between parent child relationships as constancy. Hence, the findings may have to be interpreted differently. However, these findings pertaining to parents are consistent with the studies carried out in Sri Lanka (UNICEF, 2004).

The study conveys that adolescents were affected by the constant scolding and 'naggings' of their parents and seemed to be held on to the affect after these negative interactions with their parents. However, the past research reports different results (i.e. parents are more affected by the parents-child conflicts than the adolescents) (Sternberg, 1990). Hence, it is suggested that future studies in the Sri Lankan context also need to look into the parental perspective of the parent-adolescent conflicts.

However, the present study finds that when in severed relationships, adolescents reported storm and stress between them and their parents. However, adolescence in the study seemed to convey a remarkably resilience when in the face of abuse and neglect and mentioned the support of caring adults, friends or boyfriends as a source of comfort.

### Siblings

The study conveyed that majority of the adolescent in the study reported of having a close, positive social relationship with their siblings in spite of the minor conflicts which occurred over borrowing belongings and sharing personal space. Contrary to previous research (Campione-Barr, &Smetana, 2010) findings also conveyed that adolescents reported respect for older siblings. However, findings were consistent with the previous research conveying that (Buhrmester & Furman, 1990) sibling relationships were more unrestricted among older adolescents, with same-sex sibling dyads feeling closer than opposite-sex dyads.

However, this research came up with finding which are somewhat inconsistent with the previous studies (Buhrmester & Furman, 1990) pertaining to companionship and affection between adolescents and their older siblings, which is reported to be lower. Investigations of specific processes involved in sibling relationships across all age groups, as well as adolescent siblings more generally, have been limited until recently (Feinberg, McHale, Crouter, & Cumsille, 2003; Kim, McHale, Osgood, & Crouter, 2006). The research (Buhrmester & Furman, 1990; McGuire et al., 2000) suggests that conflicts between siblings also occur pertaining to personal issues and adolescents' perceptions that their sibling has infringed on their personal domain (e.g., one's personal space or friends). Campione-Barr and Smetana (2010) came up with the finding that conflicts of adolescent-sibling conflicts could be differentiated into personal domain conflicts or moral conflicts over equality and fairness of shared resources.

Research on adolescent-sibling relationships in the Sri Lankan context is almost non-existent. Since this study came up with interesting cultural differences in sibling relationship such as adolescent-sibling relationship dyad across different age groups, conflict resolution strategies used by adolescents with their siblings; a further investigation in this area seems to be warranted.

*Peers*
The study finds that friends, and peer relationships as important factors, which correlated strongly with adolescents' psychosocial wellbeing. As the results conveyed, absence of loving/caring relationships with parents seemed to generate more intimate relationships with peers and dating partners. When nurturing positive relationships with the parents were absent, peers and dating partners appears to fill that vacuum.

Research findings have constantly conveyed that friendships and successful adaptations on the peer group, play an important role in adolescents' social and cognitive development (Bedford, 1996; Hartup & Stevens, 1997). Research also suggests that peer relationships minimize stress and protects adolescents from feeling lonely/ socially dissatisfied (Doyle, Markiewicz, & Hardy, 1994), which the present study also confirmed.

There are several limitations to this study. First, inclusion of more variables such as dispositional factors (sense of identity, self-esteem, perceived mastery and other personality characteristics) could give a greater understanding of aspects that influence adolescents' relationships with their parents, siblings, peers, friends and dating partners. Second, the groups in the study could have been more homogenous regarding race, language and socio-economic status. Third, the findings of the present study are based on a small sample and could only be described as a pilot/preliminary study. Therefore, future studies should explore this factor with a representative sample of Sri Lankan adolescents.

Based on the outcomes of the study, following suggestion can be presented: 1. Conduct the study with preadolescents as the present study included adolescents Conduct the study with parent and siblings of adolescents to explore how they perceive the relationship with the adolescents and the stressors which they experience and ways that psychosocial support to be provided to them, 3. Conduct a study to explore ways that more time and energy be devoted help adolescents to cope with specific stressors if they experience difficulties in their relationships with parents, friends and peers.

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