

Influence of Peer Relationships on the Happiness of Early Adolescents

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ABSTRACT

Early adolescence- roughly between the ages 10 and 14 is a time in the life span in which individuals undergo a myriad of changes at different levels, such as changes due to cognitive development, physical development and psychosocial development. The present study investigates the influence of peer relationships on the happiness of early adolescents. This is a non-experimental study that describes the correlation between two variables using a survey method. The study was conducted on 100 participants (50 males and 50 females) between the ages of 10 to 14 years. The IPPA (Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment) (Armsden, G.C., & Greenberg, M.T.1987) was used in order to assess the adolescents' perceptions of the relationship with their close friends- particularly how well these figures serve as sources of psychological security (Reliability = 0.91; Validity = 0.57). The Oxford Happiness Questionnaire (Hills, P., & Argyle, M.2002) was administered in order to assess the current level of happiness in adolescents (Reliability = 0.92). Statistical analysis was done using Pearson's product moment correlation, independent samples t test, one-way analysis of variance and simple linear regression. The results of the data analyzed using Pearson's correlation revealed a positive correlation between peer relationships and the happiness level of early adolescents. However, based on gender and other demographic variables, the groups did not significantly differ. The study also found that the peer relationships among the adolescents predicted their current happiness level by 18%. Although the sample is small and limited to a specific geographical area, the results emphasize the importance of understanding the impact of peer relationships on the emotional well-being (happiness) of early adolescents. This study is relevant when identifying and working with individuals who are at risk for maladaptive outcomes such as social withdrawal and emotional distress, who lack healthy peer attachments.

Keywords: *Early Adolescents, Peer Relationships, Happiness, Gender Differences*

Early adolescence is one of the most challenging developmental periods of the life span. During this time, the nature of interpersonal relationships change as youngsters begins to

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function in a vast array of new environment. As a result of the challenging adult standards and parental authority, adolescents' find it reassuring to turn for advice to peers who are in the same position themselves. Therefore, the peer group is a source of affection, sympathy, understanding and moral guidance; a place for experimentation and a setting for achieving autonomy and independence from parents (Buhrmester, 1996; Gecas & Seff, 1990; Laursen, 1996).

The influence of peers is strongest in early adolescence; it normally peaks at ages 12 to 13 and declines during middle and late adolescence, as relationships with parents are renegotiated (Fuligni et al., 2001). By high school, adolescents of 10 to 12 years spend 40% of the day with their peers; it is not highly surprising that peers play an influential role in adolescents' lives. The credibility, authority, power and influence of peers are greater during this period than at any other time in life (Updegraff et al., 2001).

According to Santrock (2010), peers are individuals who are about the same age or maturity level. Same-age interactions serve a unique role in the culture of developed countries. One of the most important functions of the peer is to provide a source of information about the world outside the family. From the peer group, adolescents receive feedback about their abilities. Adolescents learn whether what they do is better than, as good as, or worse than what other adolescents do. Learning this at the home is difficult because siblings are usually older or younger, and sibling rivalry can close the accuracy of comparison. (Rubin et al., 2009)

In early adolescence, the relationship with parents starts to change remarkably. Individuation theory underlies that adolescents still need a close and supportive relationship with their parents. Often, the parent-child relationship changes into a less hierarchical, more partner like relationship (Collins & Steinberg, 2008). At the same time, early adolescents begin to spend increasingly more time with peers (Larson & Verma, 1999; Rubin, Bukowski & Parker, 2006). A major function of peers in adolescence is to support the individuation process from parents and the adolescent's identity development; this is one reason for the increasing relevance of belonging to a peer group and being accepted by the peers (Rubin et al., 2006).

Much of the past empirical research examining the correlates of peer relationships during early adolescence has been primarily focused on understanding the negative dimensions of peer relationships such as bullying, peer rejection and victimization and their long-term consequences including school withdrawal, mental illness and behavioral problems (Dijkstra et al., 2007; Gaazelle & Druhen, 2009; Nesdale & Lambert, 2007; Trentacosta & Shaw, 2009). Although these studies have furthered the understanding of the negative effects of peer relationships on the well-being of early adolescents, knowledge of the positive underpinnings of peer relationships is somewhat limited. So the present study focuses on the positive impact peer relationships have on the emotional well being of early adolescents and it also seeks to investigate the extent to which peer relationships predict happiness among the respondents.

Peer relationships and wellbeing in early adolescents

Peer relationships can be important sources of affection, intimacy, reliable alliance, feeling of inclusion and enhancement of self-worth (Erdley et al., 2001) and have been linked to both current and future well-being of children. Research studies have demonstrated that having positive peer relationships in early elementary school years is associated with an increase in social competence and acceptance throughout the later school years (Kuperschmidt & Coie, 1990), whereas poor peer relationships are known to forecast negative outcomes later in life

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such as early school withdrawal, delinquency, substance abuse and mental health problems (McDougall et al., 2001; Woodward & Fergusson, 1999). Engaging in positive relationships with peer has been linked to higher levels emotional wellbeing, increased adoption of values for prosocial behaviors and more positive belief about the self (Rubin et al.2006). Emerging evidence suggest that positive psychological traits such as happiness and optimism are significantly and positively associated with supportive relationship with peer in early adolescence (Schonert- Reichl et al. 2008).

Research is in accord suggesting that there is a heightened importance of peer group inclusion during the early adolescent years. For instance, early adolescents' close cohesion with peers report high levels of well-being (Berndt and Keefe. 1995), lower levels of emotional distress (Wentzel and Caldwell. 1997) and better school adjustment (Wentzel et al.2004; Vitaro et al. 2009). According to Argyle and Crossland (1987), happiness consists of three main components: the frequency and degree of (positive affect or joy ; the average level of satisfaction over a period; and the absence of negative feelings, such as depression and anxiety. Existing literature, discussed above show that the more intimate and satisfying peers relations, the adolescents tend to be more confident of their competence, more satisfied with life and it also contributed to positive well-being.

Studies have established that the happiness or subjective well-being of adolescents is influenced by both parental as well as peer relationships. Children's report of positive friendship qualities and lack of conflict in their best friendships were related to attachment to parents and this quality of attachment generalizes primarily to the quality of adolescents close relations with peers (Shomaker & Furman., 2009). The variable under consideration in this study is peer relationships, a major contributor to the overall well-being of adolescents. Adolescents have strong needs to be liked and accepted by friends and the larger peer group, which can result in pleasurable feelings (Santrock, 2010).

It is evident from several studies that these traits are determined by peer relationships. The present study is needed to understand the extent to which peer relationships contribute to the happiness of early adolescents and also to investigate the influence of demographic variables like gender and no. of siblings on the happiness of early adolescents.

METHODOLOGY

Sample

The sample consisted of 100 respondents (50 males, 50 females) of early adolescents within the age range of 10-14 years. They belonged to middle class families from different parts of Chennai. Of the 100 respondents, 73% belonged to nuclear families and the remaining 27% hailed from joint families. It was also seen that most of the respondents 87% had one or more siblings' (living with them in the same family) while the rest were single children. It was also noted that 77% of the children were involved in extracurricular activities, while the remaining 23% did not participate in any of the activities apart from academics.

Instruments

Two measures were used in this study,

1. **Oxford Happiness Questionnaire:** Happiness was measured using the Oxford Happiness Questionnaire (Hills and Argyle, 2002) consisting of 29 items. Respondents are asked how much they agree, on a 6-point scale (from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree) with the statements. Total scores range

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from 29 to 174, with higher numbers indicating greater happiness. The reliability of the scale is 0.92.

- Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment:** The IPPA was developed to assess adolescents' perceptions of the positive and negative affective/cognitive dimension of relationships with their parents and close friends. Responses were recorded on five-point scale ranging from "almost never or never true" (1) to "almost always or always true" (5). It is scored by reverse scoring the negatively worded items and then summing up the response values in each section. Scores can range from 25 to 125. The peer attachment subscales has 25 items where 3 dimensions are broadly assessed: degree of mutual trust; quality of communication; and extent of anger and alienation. The reliability and convergent validity of the peer attachment sub-scale is 0.91 and 0.57 respectively.

Procedure

Manual copies of the questionnaire along with a consent form and a form that collects their demographic details were administered to the participants after thoroughly explaining the purpose of the study. They were instructed to fill the forms as honestly as possible. Incentives were given to the children for participating in the study. The questionnaires were also sent to participants' siblings and/or parents as Google forms and online entries were accepted. Demographic details such as the age, gender and number of siblings were collected.

RESULTS

Table No. 1 Mean values of males and females on the self reported level of current happiness.

	<i>Gender</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std. Deviation</i>	<i>Std. Error Mean</i>
<i>Happiness</i>	Females	50	4.4803	.60094	.08499
	Males	50	4.4834	.57879	.08185

According to the Table I, the overall mean of the respondents on the happiness scale was 4.48 for both males and females indicating an above average level of happiness.

Table No.2 Pearson's coefficient of correlation between peer relationship and happiness of early adolescents.

<i>Variables</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std. Deviation</i>	<i>r</i>
Peer relationships	100	9.552	2.573	0.428**
Happiness		8.963	1.179	

** $p < .01$, significant at the 0.01 level, two-tailed.

Results inferred from table 2, show a positive moderate correlation, $r(100) = 0.428$, $p < 0.01$ was found between peer relationship and happiness of early adolescents. It can be observed that peer relationship has a significant relationship with happiness among early adolescents.

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Table No.3 Summary of simple regression analysis for variable predicting happiness (N=100)

<i>Dependent variable</i>	<i>R²</i>	<i>ANOVA</i>	<i>Variables loading significantly and beta</i>
Happiness	.183	21.93**	Peer relationships ($\beta = 0.249$)

** $p < .01$, significant at the 0.01 level, two tailed.

Hence a regression analysis was done and it revealed that peer relationships indeed contributed to the adolescent's happiness ($R^2 = .183$, $p < 0.01$). This model indicates that peer relationships are a predictor of happiness, with peer relationships accounting for 18% of the variance in happiness.

Table No.4 t-test for happiness between males and females.

	<i>Sex</i>						<i>t</i>
	<i>Males</i>			<i>Females</i>			
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	
Happiness	4.483	1.25	50	4.480	1.29	50	-0.026^{NS}

NS- Not significant

Independent t test was done to see if there were any differences in happiness between males and females. Mean and standard deviation scores were computed for the two groups separately. From the table, it can be seen that the mean of females is said to be similar to that of the male population. The t value was found to be -0.026, not significant. This shows that there is no significant difference between the males and females with respect to happiness $t(100) = -0.026$, $p > .05$, two-tailed.

Table 5, t-test for peer relationships between males and females.

	<i>Sex</i>						<i>t</i>
	<i>Males</i>			<i>Females</i>			
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	
Peer Relationships	3.77	0.14	50	5.75	2.43	50	.513^{NS}

NS- Not significant

Similarly differences between males and females in terms of peer relationships were analyzed using independent t test. The t value was found to be 0.513, not significant. This

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shows that there is no significant difference between males and females with respect to peer relationships $t(100) = .513, p > .05$, two tailed.

Table No. 6 t-test for happiness between adolescents belonging to nuclear and joint family type.

	<i>Family type</i>						<i>t</i>
	<i>Nuclear</i>			<i>Joint</i>			
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	
Happiness	4.437	.6101	73	4.60	.510	27	1.256^{NS}

NS- Not significant

Table 6 investigated the differences between family type in terms of happiness. The t value was found to be 1.256, not significant. This shows that there is no significant difference between family type with respect to happiness $t(100) = 1.256, p > .05$, two tailed.

Table No. 7 t-test for happiness between adolescent's participation or non-participation in extracurricular activities.

	<i>Extracurricular activities</i>						<i>t</i>
	<i>Participation</i>			<i>Non-participation</i>			
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	
Happiness	4.49	.575	77	4.42	.634	23	-.493^{NS}

NS- Not significant

Table 7 analyzed differences between participation and non-participation in extracurricular activities with respect to happiness. The t value was found to be -0.493, not significant. This shows that there is no significant difference between participation and non-participation in extracurricular activities with respect to happiness $t(100) = -0.493, p > .05$, two tailed.

Table No.8 Comparison of happiness of early adolescents having different number of siblings.

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Source of variation</i>	<i>Sum of squares</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>Mean square</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>'p' value</i>
Happiness	Between groups	1.212	3	.404	1.187 ^{NS}	0.319
	Within groups	31.99	94	.340		
	Total	33.21	97			

NS- Not significant

One way ANOVA was carried out to find out if there was significant difference between the numbers of siblings on the measure of happiness among early adolescents. The F value was

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found to be 1.187, not significant. This shows that there is no significant difference between the different groups of siblings with respect to happiness $F(3, 94) = 1.187, p = 0.319$.

DISCUSSION

Adolescence is considered an important transition period, because of the cognitive, biological, and social changes that occur during this time period (Elliot and Feldman, 1990). Furthermore, research does indicate that adolescence is a period of heightened risk as rates of depression, conduct disorders, suicide, and drug and alcohol use/abuse peaks during this period (Adams and Gullotta, 1989). While the vast majority of adolescents navigate this transitional period with much happiness, and confidence, a significant minority of adolescents experience much uncertainty and distress (Cauce et al., 1994). One important factor that distinguishes adolescents who navigate the transition with success and those who do not is the quality of relationships that the adolescent has with parents and most importantly with peers. Usually during adolescence the support of the peer group gradually usurped the parental influences, mostly because of intergenerational conflict over fundamental values, norms, and behaviors (Coleman, 1961).

Developing positive peer relationships and friendships is crucial in helping adolescents deal with developmental tasks such as forming identity, developing social skills and self-esteem, and establishing autonomy. High-quality peer relationships serve as a protective factor, with positive effects on adolescent health including decreased risk of emotional and behavioral problems (Cauce et al., 1994; Garneski and Diekstra, 1996; Coie and Dodge, 1997). Adolescents who participate in social networks are found to have better perceived self-worth and sense of well-being and take part in more healthy behaviors. Peers are therefore valuable social contacts who contribute to young people's health and subjective well-being.

This study investigated the relationships among self-reported happiness and peer relationships in early adolescence. Subjective well-being during this stage of psychological and physical growth is a topic of great theoretical and practical importance. We believe the most important findings of this research to be that positive dimensions of subjective well-being are significantly and importantly related to peer affiliations.

According to the results of the present study, the overall mean of the respondents on the happiness scale seemed to indicate an above average level of happiness. Similarly, the overall mean of the respondents on the peer attachment scale indicated a secure level of attachment. Thus, attachment theory holds that attachments to parents and the internal working models of these relationships continue to be influential into adolescence and adulthood, even if a new primary attachment figure replaces the parent (Ainsworth, 1989). The more secure the parental attachment the more likely it is to influence their attachments with significant others later in life. Hence close relationships with peers promote healthy adolescent adjustment, predicting higher self-esteem, greater life satisfaction, better college adjustment and less psychological distress.

It was also noted in table 2 that a positive moderate correlation was found between peer relationship and happiness of early adolescents. It can be observed that peer relationship has a significant relationship with happiness among early adolescents. In order to see if peer relationships predict happiness, a simple linear regression analysis was done. It was noted that a positive moderate correlation was found between peer relationship and happiness of early adolescents. Hence a regression analysis was done and it revealed that peer relationships indeed contributed to the adolescent's happiness. This model indicates that peer

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relationships are a predictor of happiness, with peer relationships accounting for 18% of the variance in happiness. Therefore, the null hypothesis, which states that there is no significant linear relationship between peer relationship and happiness, is rejected.

This finding is consistent with the results of the study done by Wing Hong Chul & Mathew. Y.H. Wong in 2015, which stated that having close friends is related to higher happiness among adolescents. When an adolescent's increasing reliance on peers for emotional support and attachment are met, it may be the result of many factors including an adolescent's emerging autonomy from the family, a new set of concerns and interests (including sexuality) which are more easily discussed among peers, and advances in cognitive development, increase in perceived self-worth as an individual and heightened sense of well-being.

The present study also found that there are no gender differences on the happiness (subjective well-being) of early adolescents. Independent 't' test was done to see if there were any differences in happiness between males and females. The 't' value was not significant indicating that there is no significant difference between the males and females with respect to happiness. Similarly there was no significant difference between males and females with respect to peer relationships.

Demographic variables, including gender, are sometimes seen as weak predictors of happiness. Even if we accept the proposition that gender has no direct association with happiness and well-being, such results do not rule out the possibility that gender might condition the effect of other variables; that is, the process of subjective well-being formation is different between boys and girls. Similarly, Tkach and Lyubomirsky (2006) found that males and females were equally happy in social relationships and they uncovered gender differences in the use of happiness enhancing strategies. These differences can also be attributed to the different domains from which individuals seek satisfaction in their lives. Girls are more satisfied than boys in learning and family and friends, and the opposite is true in physical activities, culminating in no significant difference in overall life satisfaction (Casas et al. 2007).

It was also found that other demographic variables like family type (nuclear/ joint family), participation in extracurricular activities did not influence the happiness among early adolescents. The 't' value indicated that there was no significant difference on the measure of happiness among those coming from different family types as well as their participation or non-participation in extracurricular activities.

The present study also determined that the number of siblings does not have a strong impact on the happiness of early adolescents. One way Anova was carried out to find out if there was significant difference between the numbers of siblings on the measure of happiness among early adolescents.

Therefore, the results of the present study emphasize that peer relationships are significant correlates and predictors of happiness among adolescents. One of the possible reasons might be that the peer groups maybe a resourceful asset in terms of providing assistance and support which in turn promotes the development of necessary social skills. Such fulfillment of one's social needs and desires might influence the child's self esteem as well as the child's happiness (subjective well-being). So peer relationships can be considered to be a key factor for increasing the adolescent's subjective well-being and also buffers the stress experienced by them.

STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS

The proposed study will make significant contributions, both to an understanding of support processes as they impact the subjective well-being of early adolescents, and to providing information to teachers and educational professionals as to how positive peer relations influence positive youth development. The teachers as well as the counselors can emphasize on the need for strong and healthy interaction between their peers, as this positive relationship among adolescents and peers even extend to adulthood. Therefore, techniques such as social skills training which includes communication and interaction skills as well as conflict resolution skills can be used to promote peer relationships.

Although the present study illuminates the importance of peer relationships in a sample of early adolescents, it is not without its limitations. First, in this study a small sample size of $n=100$ was utilized for data collection and then data was analyzed based on the responses given by these individuals in the sample. Secondly, the study was limited to adolescents within a certain geographical area (i.e.) Chennai. Furthermore, our study was cross-sectional as it focused solely on only one-time point in the developmental period of early adolescence, a period of critical transitions as well as cognitive, social and biological developments. (Eccles and Roeser 2009). Therefore, researchers focusing on early adolescents over the course of several years need to determine the extent to which the nature of the relationships that we found are fleeting or have significant impact beyond the early adolescent period. It is likely that this gender-specific pattern is at the same time age-specific. A final limitation of this study is the measurement of happiness. The shortcomings of the Oxford Happiness Questionnaire as a measure of happiness have been recognized (Cummins 2013; Kashdan 2004). As such, future studies would do well to at least adopt additional scales of happiness to ensure the robustness of the results.

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research on peer relationships should be designed longitudinally to investigate the impact of peer acceptance and relationships across different developmental periods. The understanding of happiness in early adolescents would benefit from longitudinal studies for three reasons. First, the factors that contribute to positive dispositions may change with age. For example, though the level of happiness may remain relatively similar with age, factors that contribute to happiness (e.g., excitement, family, and worker roles) may vary as we advance through the life cycle (Harry 1976; Lu and Lin 1998). Second, single age studies may underestimate the contribution of different variables to positive dispositions compared to longitudinal studies (e.g., Lucas et al. 2003). Third, the actual level of positive disposition may vary with children's age (e.g., Chang et al. 2003).

In addition, the role of ethnic background and gender should be investigated in detail. Also, further research and development in the field of adolescents should focus on identifying individuals who are at risk for maladaptive outcomes such as social withdrawal and emotional distress, who lack healthy peer attachments.

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