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ADOLESCENT ADJUSTMENT IN HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS: A BRIEF REPORT ON MID-ADOLESCENCE TRANSITIONING

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Abstract

The present study seeks to identify adjustment difficulties of high school students within a city. Ten schools, comprising of children from urban, rural, coeducational and convent schools were chosen and a student database comprising of 500 adolescent children was prepared. From this source list, 101 boys and 103 girls within age groups 14-18 years were chosen randomly. Students with behavioural problems, poor academic performances and health issues were excluded to ensure homogeneity. After obtaining informed consent, a self-report inventory -The Adjustment Inventory for School Students (AISS) was administered to small student groups over a period of 1 month to understand perceived adjustment. Scoring was done manually and descriptive statistics, Pearson correlations and the independent sample's "t" test, were used to analyze data. Findings revealed that there were problems noted across emotional, social and educational domains in both boys and girls. However, there were no significant gender differences. Brief scheduled interviews with children after test administration revealed contributing stress factors that have lead to maladjustment. In conclusion, adolescents present as a vulnerable group of children and therefore this is an important implication for parents and significant other professionals who need to help students develop adequate coping skills.

Introduction

Adolescence is believed to be a period of great stress and storm as rapid physical and mental changes occur during this period. Typically, it is divided into three periods: early (ages 13-14), middle (ages 15-18) and late adolescence (age 19). During early adolescence, the emergence of autonomy is viewed as an important developmental task (Allen & Collins, 1990). Previous models of adolescence emphasized detachment and disruption as the normative developmental course of parent-child relationships (Blos, 1979). Although adolescence involves a transition from a dependency relationship with parents to a mutual reciprocal relationship with others as in with parents, peers, and intimate partners. This shift need not require that adolescents detach themselves from parents. Although difficult and painful at times, the consolidation of identity and clarification of values assist adolescents in regulating their behavior independently of others around them. However, this process can pose risks for adolescents and their relationships with those they are close to.

Empirical studies of parenting style have established that responsive parental involvement, encouragement of psychological autonomy, and demands for age appropriate behavior combined with limit setting and monitoring as seen in authoritative parenting contribute to good psychosocial, academic and behavioral adjustment (Baumrind et al., 1995). With respect to adolescent adjustment, parental warmth/involvement and behavioral control are associated with greater social competence, autonomy, positive attitudes toward school and work, academic achievement and self-esteem, as well as with less depression, school misconduct, delinquency and drug use (Lamborn et al., 1996). Therefore, the family plays a pivotal role in providing the most congenial atmosphere in which the child forms his style of life and basic patterns of behavior. Most of the children who are successful and well adjusted come from homes where a wholesome relationship existed between them and their

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parents, whereas children who were discouraged and rejected at home, lacked concentration in school work (Bowlby, 1969). They failed to establish desirable skills in academics and sports. Psychological control has also been found to be negatively related to healthy functioning. Cohesion and harmony in parent-adolescent interactions appear to be linked to relationships that are more positive.

During adolescence, there is a desire to be grown-up but also a dislike of having to leave the security of childhood. As they search for their identities, they find themselves subject to peer pressures. There may be times when they can be inquisitive, curious, eager to learn, but may feign boredom if such behavior is more acceptable to peers. Intellectually, they grapple with conceptual ideas but may still hold on to concrete thinking. Adolescents often begin to question authority and are unwilling to accept societal norms but still want to try to please their parents. Often they encounter conflicts in understanding themselves and

Meeting demands at both home and school. Together it could contribute to a significant amount of stress and this often goes unnoticed by parents and educators. Adolescents may be more intensely aware the divergence in their thinking rather than the convergence between their beliefs, the beliefs that their parents hold, and the beliefs of peers and important others.

A conflict, which may devote weak or weakening interpersonal bonds, often occurs within parent adolescent relationships (Rueter & Conger, 1998). As adolescents differentiate their own beliefs and values from those of parents, peers and other social figures, there is an increased likelihood that they will detect conflict between these diverse sources of information (Collins, 1990; Moretti & Higgins, 1999). Conflict between one's own values and beliefs, and those of parents, peers and other significant social figures, is particularly acute during early to mid-adolescence when the capacity to represent multiple and possibly conflicting views outweighs the cognitive capacity to integrate these divergent perspectives (Harter & Monsour, 1992). Conflicts revolve around social activities, autonomy and are strongly influenced by peers and their pressures.

Adolescents account for about 1/5th of India’s population (Anon, 2004).Recent researches suggest that more young people are beginning to report of mental health problems, as they perceive more stress. It is estimated that six to nine million children and adolescents in the United States have mental or behavioral problems. Indian Council of Medical Research reported that about 12.8 per cent of children (1-16 years) suffer from mental health problems. According to findings (Vawda, 2002) 69.56 per cent of adolescents had suicidal behavior due to parent-child problems, about 17.39 per cent due to partner relational problems, 8.69 per cent due to adjustment disorders and 4.35 per cent of children due to depression. Adolescents in disadvantaged communities are at elevated risk for exposure to multiple stressors, indicating high rates of crime and victimization, family poverty, family conflict, increased prevalence of deviant peers and school with inadequate resources (Gonzales et al., 2001 & Seidman et al., 1994).

Adolescents are expected to strive to attain mature relations with age mates, learn to perform appropriate gender roles, ascertain autonomy, prepare for economic independence, make decisions on intimate relationships, and aspire to be responsible in community and to develop a set of values or morals. These could be Herculean tasks but most adolescents experience smooth transitioning provided; they get the emotional support as well as the needed encouragement from the family as well as determine largely what one will be as a person and as an adult.

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Adjustment therefore has been considered as an index to integration; a harmonious behavior of the individual by which other individuals of the society recognize the person as well adjusted (Pathak, 1990). Coping during adolescence is therefore essential in the modern society as life is becoming very complex and conflicting day by day. This trend is alarming and therefore it is important that we pay attention to adolescent adjustment processes. This study is tries answering three questions. Do school going students face problems in their social, emotional and educational aspects of life? What are the factors that influence their adjustment? Is there a gender difference?

Method

The objective of the study is to analyze if school-going children had problems in adjustment across emotional, social and educational domains. The interest of the study was on children who had no prior risk of having adjustment problems. Therefore, children with poor scholastic performances, ill health and behavioral issues were excluded from the sample. A source list of 500 students from ten schools within the city was prepared. To ensure homogeneity, Government organizations, private schools, convent, coeducational, rural and urban schools were included. From this list, students with health issues, behavioral problems and poor academic performances were excluded. The final sample comprised of 101 boys and 103 girls. Informed consent was obtained from the students after which a name list was prepared for each school and students were requested to report on specific days to take the test. The Adjustment Inventory for School Students (AISS) was administered on all 204 students. This Indian test was much relevant to use than Western tests and since it was already standardized on the Indian population, the norms were comparable. This test was translated into the vernacular language for children who belonged to rural schools. The AISS was administered in small student groups consisting of seven to ten children every day. The test instructions were read out and students were requested to give their first response to the question and not ponder too much on it. Scheduled interviews were used with children to identify factors that caused distress. Open-ended questions related to family, school and social life was asked to students. All these information were collected over a span of 1 month.

Measures

The Adjustment Inventory for School Students (AISS): This test is an Indian test and was designed by A.K.P Sinha and R.P Singh. This self-report inventory seeks to segregate well-adjusted secondary school students (age group 14 to 18 years) from poorly adjusted students in the three areas of adjustment- Emotional, Social and Educational domains. The test was standardized on 1950 boys and girls, belonging to 40 schools in Bihar and within class nine to eleven.

The inventory consists of 60 items, 20 items for each area of adjustment. The split half reliability is 0.95, the test retest reliability is 0.93 and the K-R formula reliability was found to be 0.94. Validity coefficients were determined for each item by the biserial correlation method significant level being .001. The inventory can be scored by hand. For any answer indicative of good adjustment a score of zero is given, otherwise a score of one is awarded. The inventory is designed to aid in counseling three areas included in the test. The total score on adjustment is obtained by summing the individual domain scores that indicates the general adjustment status. Scores greater than 11 on the emotional domain indicate unstable emotions while low scores indicate stable emotions. Individuals with scores greater than 11, on the social adjustment domain indicate that they are submissive and revering. Scores greater than 11 or above on the educational domain indicate that adolescents are poorly adjusted with their

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curricular and co-curricular programs while low scores indicative that they have interest in school programs.

Results

From Table.1a, we understand that mean values obtained on the emotional, social and educational domain for boys is higher than the normative values. This indicates that there are children with maladjusted behavior across the three areas. On the emotional domain, the mean value obtained is 7.91 for boys and 7.6 for girls (Table 1a. and 1b). The standard deviation for boys and are computed to be 3.74 and 3.64 for. According to the Adjustment Inventory, these values indicate '"unsatisfactory" adjustment levels. Both boys and girls are found to have struggles in emotional adaptation. At the 99% confidence interval, this difference is found between the sample and normative means is significant ($p<0.001$). However, there is no significant gender difference.

Domains	Normative Mean and S.D	Obtained Mean and S.D
Emotional	5.62 ± 3.12	7.91 ± 3.74
Social	5.91 ± 2.38	11.37 ± 2.48
Educational	6.38 ± 2.91	10.87 ± 2.50
Total score	17.91 ± 7.36	30.15 ± 7.11

Table.1a. represents the scores on adjustment scores on each domain for boys

On the social domain, we see that scores range from 4 to 18 and from 1 to 19 for girls. The computed mean value is found to be 11.37 for boys and 11.21 for girls (Table.1a and Table.1b) and the standard deviations obtained are 2.48 and 2.55. The scores obtained on this domain indicate a 'very unsatisfactory' adjustment level according to the test. The obtained values are greater than the normative values and at the 99% confidence interval, this difference was found to be significant. However, there is no significant difference between mean values of boys and girls (Fig.1a and 1b).

Domains	Normative Mean and S.D	Obtained Mean and S.D
Emotional	6.55 ± 2.81	7.6 ± 3.64
Social	6.21 ± 2.52	11.21 ± 2.55
Educational	5.35 ± 3.00	10.88 ± 2.65
Total score	18.11 ± 7.27	29.69 ± 7.61

Table.1b. represents the scores on adjustment on each domain for girls.

On the educational domain, we once again find high scores. From table 1a and Table.1b we observe that the mean value on the educational domain is 10.87 for boys and 10.88 for girls. These values are higher than the normative values and according to the test, reveal a 'very unsatisfactory' level of adjustment in both groups. The standard deviations computed are 2.50 and 2.65 respectively. At the 99% confidence interval, this difference between the sample and population mean is found to be significant. However between the two groups the null hypotheses is accepted (Fig.1a and 1b).

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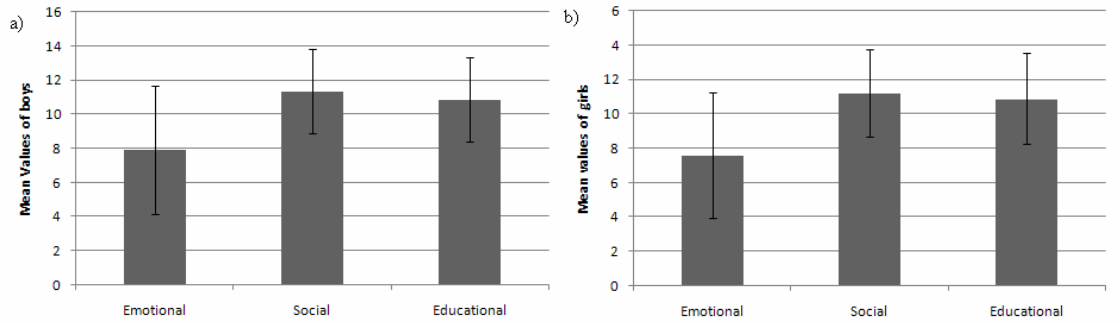
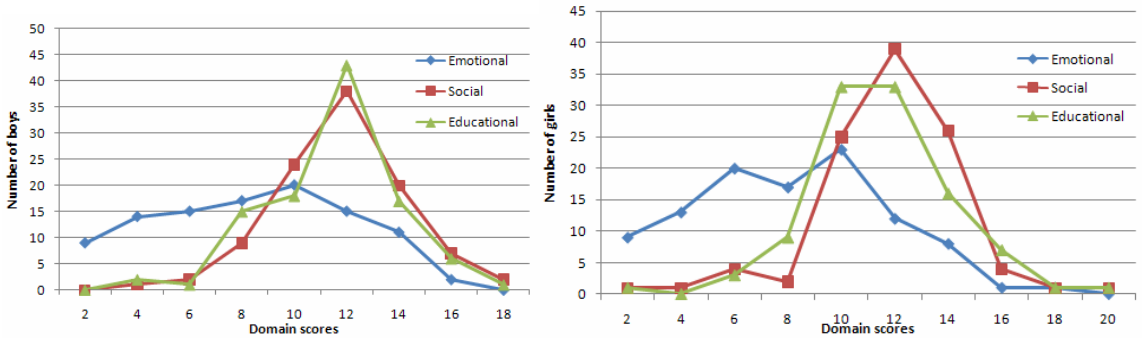


Fig.1a and Fig.1b Represents the mean and standard deviations for the 3 domains of adjustment for boys and girls.

For the frequency distribution of scores on the emotional domain for boys we observe that there is a gradual increasing trend in the number of boys scoring above 2 up to a score of 10 (Fig.2a). We see rising levels of "unsatisfactory" adjustment levels. There is similar distribution of scores on emotional adjustment for girls (Fig.2b). Children through the interviews expressed that parental demandingness and lack of support made it difficult for them to cope up with stressors. They were dissatisfied with the encouragement that they received from both parents and educators. They felt misunderstood and incapable of performing to the expectations. Perceived emotional autonomy is necessary for psychological well being (Teresa.F & Grayson N.H. 1995).

The social adjustment for boys depicts a gradual increase of scores from 2 on social adjustment up to a score of 6 (Fig.2a), after which there is a sudden and steep increase in the frequency of boys scoring higher values. According to the inventory, they present with more incidence of inadequate social skills since they are submissive. Most of the scores seen are greater than 8 indicating a rising level of 'unsatisfactory' adjustment. The results of this study contradicts other studies (Sujatha et.al.,1993 & Dutta, 1997) that found that there were no significant social adjustment problems in both early and late adolescence as well as no significant gender differences. There is a slow growing increase in the frequency of girls up to a score of 6 after which there is a steep and sudden rise in scores greater than 8 indicating "unsatisfactory" adjustment levels in social skills.



a) b)

Figure 2. a) Represents distribution of boys on the three domain of adjustment
b) Represents distribution of girls on the three domain of adjustment

Observing the distribution of scores on educational adjustment (Fig.2a), we find that there is a slow growing increase in scores beginning from 2 to a score of 6 indicating that fewer individuals present with good adjustment levels. We then see a sudden rise in the frequency of boys with scores greater than 6 up to scores of 12 indicating the increasing levels of 'very unsatisfactory' adjustment. We observe a symmetrical distribution of scores across the mean. For the distribution of scores on

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educational adjustment in girls (Fig.2b), we observe the linear plot taking a slow upward trend up to a score of 8 after which there is a gradual increase in the number of girls reporting higher scores. There is a plateau between scores of 10 and 12 indicating the scatter in the number of girls scoring values around the mean. Findings suggest that here too, girls are found to have increasing problems in educational adjustment similar to that of boys. Many students reported that parents were ignorant of their performances in school and perceived them as less involved. This can be understood since studies reveal that perceived parental lack of knowledge and understanding was associated with lower academic achievement and higher rates of deviant behaviors (Zeng-Yin Chen & Sanford M. D. 1998).

A positive correlation exists between all three variables (Fig.3). As emotional instability increases, social skills are also affected. Similarly, when there are problems in social skills it is seen to affect educational achievements and academic performances. There is an equal proportion of distress observed in both boys and girls but there are no significant differences however between the two groups.

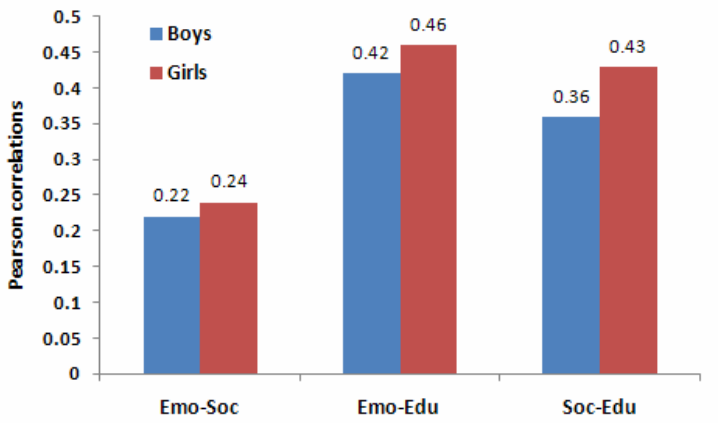

Fig.3 Represents the Pearson correlations for the three domains of adjustment in boys and girls.

The total adjustment scores in boys ranges from 3 to 45 for boys and from 3 to 54 for girls. The computed means are found to be 29.74 and 28.81 for boys and girls and their standard deviations are 7.11 and 7.61 respectively. The obtained values are significantly higher than the normative values at the 99% confidence interval. Results indicate that there is an overall “unsatisfactory” adjustment pattern in both boys and girls. Most boys and girls have scores more than 15 and less than 50 indicating that there is a growing increases in the levels of reported maladjustment (Fig.4a and Fig.4b). However, there is no significant gender difference.

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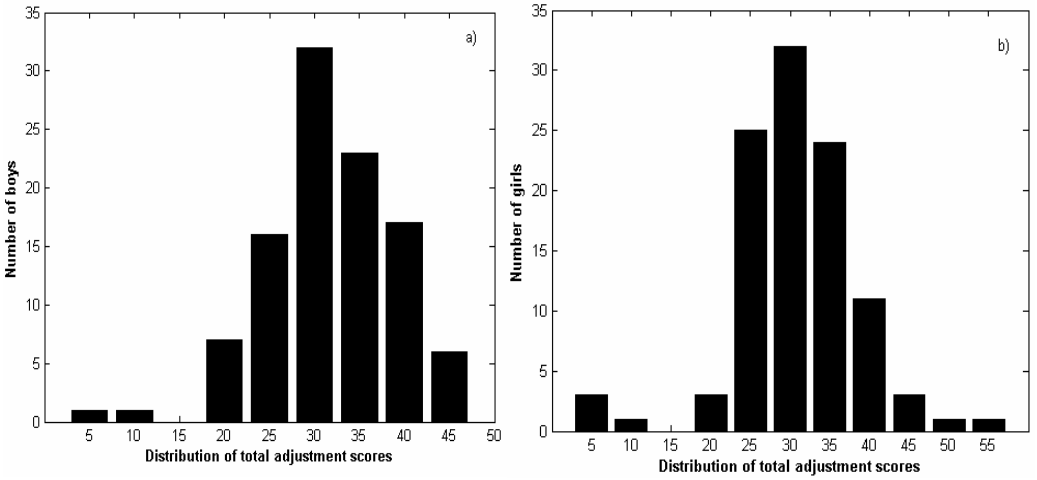

Fig.4. a) Represents distribution of boys on the three domain of adjustment
b) Represents distribution of girls on the three domain of adjustment

The results of this study contradict the findings of other studies that found no problems in self-esteem and competence in transitioning in adolescence (Nottelman & Editha, D. 1982). Adolescence therefore has to be understood as a transitional period that is characterized by conflicts and therefore they are a vulnerable to developing psychosocial problems. The observed values are significantly high across all three domains indicating a concerning level of distress. The scheduled interviews have helped in shedding light on important aspects that often go unnoticed. These micro stressors may cause double implications if not dealt with. Therefore as professionals and parents, we have a crucial role is protecting the adolescent students from experiencing stress and equipping them with adequate coping abilities.

Discussion

During the scheduled interviews with children, several problem areas revealed reasons for the distress experienced. Students not only talked about low satisfaction levels with parental relationship but also expressed that they did not enjoy the time that they spent at home. Parents had no quality time with children and even the little time at home was spent on discussing academic work. Many students complained of having been forced to attend tuitions after school hours. Family relationships apear as an important source of influencie on self-esteem and life satisfaction in boys and girls (Barber & Lyons, 1994; Conger & Scaramella, 1997; Helsen, Vollebergh & Meeus, 2000). Since many had issues related to the family environment, we cannot but accept that this is a particularly important predictor of emotional adjustment. However there is no significant gender difference since the p value is greater than 0.05 at 95 percent confidence interval. Adolescent assertion of independence not only is likely to lead to a renegotiation of parentally imposed restrictions but is also likely to fundamentally affect the nature of the parent–adolescent relationship (Youniss & Smollar, 1985). Increases in the expression of negative affect (Buchanan, Eccles, & Becker, 1992) and disinhibited behavior (Moffitt, 1993) are likely to further strain the relationships of at least some adolescents with their parents, resulting perhaps in greater conflict and emotional distance (Steinberg, 1987, 1990).
Scheduled interviews revealed unsatisfactory parent-child relationships. Decrease in perceived parental support during adolescence affects social skills (Olivia.A. 2009). We may therefore infer that this could have had an effect on the observed scores. Positive school experiences are linked to school motivation,

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engagement, and achievement for students in general and particularly for the majority of the population (Faircloth, B.S., & Hamm, J.V. 2005). Students expressed the lack of socializing experiences at home and at home and complained of how their play time was getting limited as they moved into higher classes. Students generally expressed dissatisfaction at not having adequate extracurricular activities. In their meta-analysis Laursen et al. (1998) concluded that parent– child conflict decreased somewhat in frequency and increased only modestly in affective intensity during the transition from early to middle adolescence. Paikoff and Brooks-Gunn (1991) similarly concluded that puberty had a small effect on parent– child relationships. Recent longitudinal research suggests, however, that changes in the parent–child relationship during adolescence, and especially through middle adolescence, may be larger than implied by cross-sectional research. For example, Kim, Conger, and Lorenz (2001) reported that adolescent negative affect toward parents increased markedly from age 12 through age 15 but decreased thereafter. Similarly, in a large cross-sequential study that spanned ages 6 through 18 years, Loeber et al. (2000) reported that positive aspects of parenting decreased markedly through middle adolescence even though parent–child communication changed little with age.

At school, children reported that they lacked of pleasant experiences and that they were often pressurized by teachers to strive beyond their potentials. They also expressed that monotonous methodologies and evaluation systems that made it more difficult to enjoy the experience of education. Sessions revealed that children had difficulty with parent-child relationships (David & Ofra.M. 2001). This is not to say that children in the study were not attached to parents but parent-child relationship during adolescence had conflicts that could have contributed to the observed high scores. Attachment to parents was significantly associated with better school adjustment. Secure children showed better adjustment to school that reflected in teachers' reports of scholastic, emotional, social, and behavioral adjustment, as well as in peer-rated social status. Avoidant and disorganized children showed the poorest adjustment. However there is no significant difference between the means of the two groups at the 95% confidence interval.

Conclusion

Findings from the study on the emotional, social and educational adjustment reveal the rising levels of boys and girls reporting adjustment problems. There are no observed significant differences however between the means of the two groups at the 95% confidence interval. Positive correlation between all three domains within the two groups is observed since, unstable emotions causes disruption in social skills and lack of socialization affects educational achievements. Interviews with children held after the debriefing session revealed that there were significant factors such as limited time with parents, sibling comparisons, parental demands, lack of recreation and stressors at school that contributed to the findings. This draws us to an important implication, as these are findings in a normal school population. There can be severe problems that may evolve, if the condition goes unnoticed. Counseling and the continued assistance of practitioners is seen as vital in providing adequate coping skills and are therefore necessary in resolving these early predictors of distress in mid adolescence transitioning.

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