

Chapter 4

Peer Relations in Adolescence



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Abstract The chapter discusses peer relations in adolescents which has a significant impact on their life. It colours and shapes the perception and behaviour of adolescents to a great extent. Peers and friends play an important role in the socialization process of children and affect various developmental aspects. The shifting influence of family to peers as children grow leads to generation gaps and may create negative parent–child communication and other behavioural problems including risk-taking behaviours. The chapter explains the development of peer relations, romantic relations, and the various factors affecting peer relations such as social media. Peer victimization affects the adolescent development and interpersonal relationship in a significant way. Finally, the chapter deliberates on managing peer relations so as to make a positive impact on the adolescent development.

Keywords Peer · Peer relations · Friends · Family · Peer victimization · Romantic relations · Identity development · Media

Introduction

Rahul, a 13-year-old boy was very excited to go to a new big city school when his parents shifted from Madurai to Delhi. In his first class, when his teacher asked him to introduce himself, he started off with eagerness. He had a regional dialect in his speech, although he spoke clearly and fluently. When a few students giggled while he was speaking, he became conscious. He felt that all his classmates were staring at him and he is being judged and made fun of. He did not speak much for the next two classes. During recess time, he was wondering if he would be able to have any friends and how he will survive in this new school, when suddenly he saw two boys from his class approach him. He was scared. Shardul and Binoy introduced themselves and sat down next to him, keeping their hands on his shoulders. They too had a regional dialect as one of them was from Jammu and the other one from

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Kolkata and had recently joined this school, just like Rahul. He felt relieved that he had found someone who could understand what he was going through.

The above case demonstrates how the behaviour of peers impacts teenager's thoughts and behaviour. The influence may be direct or indirect. Nevertheless, peers occupy an important place in adolescent's life. The nature of peer relations changes from early childhood through adolescence to adulthood across the entire lifespan. But it plays the most influential role during adolescence affecting their development and identity formation. Globalization and digitalization have significantly affected peer relations, as they have impacted every other aspect of life. It has facilitated peer relations and at the same time contributed to negative peer relations such as peer victimization and risk-taking behaviour. It is important to understand this crucial aspect of adolescent's life that has the potential to provide support and contribute to adolescent development in a positive way.

Peer Relations: Key Terms and Related Concepts

Peers are people who are similar to the individual in terms of age or grade level. *Peer group* refers to a group of individuals in a shared context and having similar biological age, e.g., Rahul's classmates were his peer group. A person may or may not know her/his peers very well, though they may be spending a lot of time together doing shared activities such as studying in the same classroom. The interpersonal interactions between these peers are termed as *peer relationships*. Since there is a shift from family to peer group as children enter into the adolescence stage, there is increasing independence and peer relationships often go unsupervised by adults.

Globally, schools provide easy access to peer groups for forming peer relations. In India, in the backdrop of joint family systems, the first peers a child comes across are within the family by way of same-age cousins. On the contrary, the person one chooses to spend time with and knows very well about is called a *friend*. For instance, Shardul and Binoy might become friends with Rahul. Friends seem to provide support and care, similar to what parents and family do at home. Friendship during childhood centres mostly around shared activities, however, it increasingly involves sharing of thoughts and emotions during adolescence. Peers may or may not share the same views, they may also be ethnically, racially different. However, such is not the case in case of friends. A person may not be able to select his or her peers, but can definitely choose who to be friends with, and this choice of companionship says a lot about the person in question. Thus friends provide a sense of psychological closeness mainly characterized by emotional support, and with whom one can share anything.

Peers and friends are an integral part of the socialization process of the developing adolescent, influencing not only the way one talks, walks, eats, and dresses up; but also the thoughts and beliefs one holds about the self and the world. Unlike the western cultures, in India, the majority of adolescents (even in late adolescence years) tend to stay with their parents only, while very few move out of their homes to stay with relatives or in a hostel (Palaniswamy & Ponnuswami, 2013). However,

adolescents coming from nuclear family report higher peer group influence than their peers from joint family systems (Palaniswamy & Ponnuswami, 2013). Adolescent friendships are defined by mutual liking, closeness, and loyalty, while in the earlier years, friendships were based on shared activities, reducing feelings of loneliness, and reciprocal interactions between peers. Adolescent peer relations are marked by reciprocal equality wherein they mutually learn behaviours and skills from their peers which helps them to deal with typical crises faced during adolescence (Kasaralkar & Jogi, 2016). Recent research shows that peer relations during early adolescent years such as ages 10–14, significantly predicted their current happiness levels (Caroline et al., 2018). Another cross-sectional study with middle school graders from American adolescents revealed that having supportive parents and peers helps in enhancing the overall satisfaction with life experienced by them (Siddall et al., 2019).

Throughout our life, we tend to form close interpersonal connections with individuals on a one-to-one basis, known as dyadic relations. However, during early adolescence, *cliques* which comprise of small cluster of closely connected individuals on the basis of close friendships and interests, develop (Rohrbeck & Garvin, 2014). For example, ‘jocks’ is a commonly used term in media, to denote the clique of athletic teenage boys who are part of their high school sports team and enjoy a relatively high status in their peer group. Another example could be a group of academically inclined students who get together to solve problems of their respective subjects. Members of a clique tend to be similar ethnically, racially, and/or behaviourally. This results from homophily- a condition where adolescents form groups based on their similar characteristics and also influence each other’s thoughts and actions on account of their group affiliation. Adolescents are more likely to be influenced by their peers (and/or) friends with whom they share a mutual bond, have close reciprocal interactions, and spend most of their time (Piehler, 2011).

Adolescents tend to view themselves in accordance with the views held by the clique they are a part of. As they move into late adolescence, cliques are replaced by *crowds*, i.e., large reputation-based peer collectives that encompass several cliques linked through direct/indirect ties. It moves from the dyadic relationship of friendships to close-knit groups of cliques to a crowd where there is less actual interaction and members may not even know each other. For example, a classroom or entire cohort of students in a particular grade can be called as a crowd. Crowds influence and also help developing adolescents from their social identities. Also, a movement from dyadic relations to cliques to crowds is indicative of the increasing need to form social connections and to be a part of social networks (Rohrbeck & Garvin, 2014). It helps them to place themselves in a social context, to define themselves, and facilitate their identity development. In the current context of COVID-19 induced pandemic, adolescents seem to be particularly affected due to the restrictions in movement and socializing in person. Even though internet has made it possible to stay connected with friends in the virtual space, it is difficult for adolescents who have been marginalized previously, thus making them feel isolated and constricting the opportunities to explore and express their identities, which is a crucial part of the age of adolescence (Settersten Jr et al., 2020).

Shifting Influence from Family to Peers

Adolescence is the time when the individual starts to spend more time with peers and is more likely to conform to their ideas and judgements as compared to parents and family (Vranda & Rao, 2011). Having someone who is similar in age and experience, makes it easier for the person to share their thoughts and feelings and to confide in. This also makes the situations seem less threatening for the adolescent because the peers/friends are also more likely to be facing the same situations, making the adolescent feel less alone, as they are able to relate well with their peers and friends who share the same experiences. This is probably one of the reasons behind the shift in the relative importance of family during adolescence. Often, the parents and adolescents struggle to understand each other's perspectives, leading to the commonly used phrase 'generation gap', which refers to the gap in communication between the young and the old, stemming from the differences in perspectives. It is marked by the insistence of parents to guide/direct the actions of their children using their wisdom and experience to avoid taking risks, while the adolescents seek an open, flexible and adventurous approach (Sukhabodhananda, 2012). "*You will never understand*" is the common phrase used by adolescents for their parents.

Recent research examined the social anxiety symptoms in adolescents in the context of their relations with their parents, teachers, and peers. The research revealed that for the adolescents who do not have very positive relations with their parents and feel less supported by their teachers, the only source of support available is through their peers. For this reason, these adolescents are likely to comply with their peers which are associated with an increased level of social anxiety symptoms (Weymouth & Buehler, 2018). Additionally, exposure to conflict between parents predisposes adolescents to perceive stress and vulnerability in the context of relationships. This perceived threat manifests in the form of social anxiety experienced by the adolescents which has implications for adolescent friendships, as they are more likely to feel lonely and unsupported by their friends (Weymouth et al., 2019).

Open and positive communication with parents can act as a buffer against the experience of peer victimization at school. On the other hand, poor parent-child communication can put the adolescent at risk for bullying and victimization, both in offline and online settings (Salmon et al., 2018). When children hold a fear of punishment, they often refrain from seeking advice from their parents, which can have negative consequences as parents would often remain unaware of what their child is going through, and thereby are unable to monitor/protect/guide their actions, leaving the adolescent vulnerable to negative experiences (Pells et al., 2016).

Recent research evidence (Llorca et al., 2017) hints at the link between parenting styles and subsequent peer attachment shown by adolescents and their academic achievement. For instance, a longitudinal study in Spain that traced the relationships of adolescents with their parents and peers from early adolescence years to late adolescence highlighted that when both parents, particularly the father adopts an authoritative parenting style, adolescents are less likely to engage in aggressive

behaviours or get victimized by their peers, and rather have positive peer attachments and bonds. On the contrary, permissive parenting style was not found to be effective. This research also added that adolescents who had more positive peer relations, tend to show higher academic self-efficacy and later academic achievement. According to Llorca et al. (2017), peer relations and the adolescents' belief about their own academic ability acts as a mediator between the parenting styles and academic achievement.

Qualitative research with 54 parents revealed that most of the parents provide ineffective advice to their children who are either victims of bullying or are bystanders. They either ask their child to inform an adult at school, avoid the perpetrator, or in case of bystanders, they advise them to take a stand for the victim. The research also suggests that adolescents are often reluctant to inform adults about their experiences of peer victimization because they feel that their parents, just like their teachers may not consider it to be serious, or may not be able to help them (Stives et al., 2018). This research highlighted the need to educate parents regarding more effective strategies to help them develop more friendly, frank, fair, flexible communication with their children.

Development of Peer Relations

Peer relations affect significantly various aspects of development, adjustment, and functioning of children and adolescents in different spheres. Bronfenbrenner (1979) remarks that peer relationships do not occur in a vacuum, but are embedded in the multiple contexts of youths' lives, extending from the most proximal (micro-system) to the most distal (macro-system) levels. Further, the factors at the micro level (family system, peer relations, school culture) also get affected by macro level contexts including cultural and political ideologies, stereotypes, and belief systems. Thus, the nature of peer relations and their development through the stages is influenced and informed by the socio-cultural factors around the individual.

During infancy, although the typical friendships may not be observed, infants do socialize with other infants, as they tend to smile at, vocalize or pay more attention when in the presence of another infant. As infants grow older, their sociability tends to increase with age. Playing social games like 'peek-a-boo' or imitating other infants, are important for the learning and development of social exchanges that require children to invite a response from others and subsequently react to them. This kind of social exchange between infants lays the foundation for learning new behaviours as well as their cognitive development, and it tends to persist even when they grow old (Feldman & Babu, 2018).

During pre-school years, one can see the early signs of friendships developing between peers. Around three to four years of age, pre-schoolers become 'friends' with their peers with whom they engage in shared activities. During this time, the development of theory of mind plays a reciprocal role in facilitating social interactions through make-believe play, which further enhances the development of

theory of mind (Babu, 2008). Gradually, as they get older, they learn to differentiate between peers and friends on the basis of abstract concepts like trust, support, and mutual interest. In middle childhood, different factors influence the development of friendships and peer relations across ages: reciprocal liking and time spent together doing shared activities (4–7 years); mutual trust, expectations, personal qualities of others (8–10 years); and lastly psychological closeness, i.e., intimacy and loyalty (11–15 years) (Feldman & Babu, 2018).

As children move towards adolescence, their ‘popularity’ or ‘status’ in the peer group determines their friendships as well as their overall adjustment in school. Adolescence is the age where the individual is dealing with a lot of changes physiologically, socially, and psychologically. It is at this time; the adolescent sees a shift in the relative influence of family (especially parents) to that of their peers (Rohrbeck & Garvin, 2014) in shaping the way they form their own identity.

Ecologically speaking, the family context, the peer group, the school, and (if applicable) the adolescent’s workplace, together form the immediate social contexts of everyday life that deeply influence the development of the adolescent (Palaniswamy & Ponnuswami, 2013). Having a high status in peer group, i.e., adolescents who are evaluated as playing a significant role in the peer group by their peers, tend to be the popular kids who are also more likely to have higher quantity of social interactions, which in turn can account for their relatively higher number of friends, than their lower status peers. Popularity seems to be contingent upon social competence like being helpful, cooperative, funny, effective communicators, and ability to understand others’ emotions well (Ladd et al., 2012). Whereas for the not so popular school kids, lower social competence tends to escalate into a vicious cycle as their apparent difficulty in relating well to others, leads to less chances to interact and form close association with their peers. This can further diminish their chances to regulate their own social skills by interacting with well-adjusted peers, which can thereby maintain their lower popularity.

Similarly, it is difficult for adolescents with disabilities to form healthy relations with their peers. Research suggests that for these adolescents to form relatively healthy peer relations, the ability to communicate and positive family interactions are crucial (Lyngnegård et al., 2018). Further research with adolescents with long-term health problems and those with disabilities highlights the preference for positive relations with peers over the ability to engage in domestic chores. This research also adds that even though the adolescents with relatively poor health status and impairments would want to have more positive relations with their peers, the opportunities to do so are often limited due to their restricted participation in routine activities (Lyngnegård et al., 2019).

Stereotypes related to gender, class, race, and ethnicity also influence the formation of friendship with peers among adolescents. Patterns of friendships among adolescents seem to be determined by the type of school, gender as well as the culture in which they are raised. For instance, research that compared adolescent friendships from American and Australian samples found that adolescents from American schools were more likely to emphasize upon closeness and assertiveness in their friendships as compared to their Australian counterparts. Likewise, girls preferred to

have more proximity and closeness while boys preferred more assertiveness. Similarly, adolescents from private schools were also more likely to be assertive than those who close with their friends as compared to students from Catholic and public schools (Bank, 1994). Stereotypes are widely held cultural beliefs, expectations, generalized attitudes, or evaluations about individuals who share a social position, such as ethnicity, race, gender, social class or nationality (Stangor & Schaller, 1996). They affect how adolescents and youth perceive themselves as well as others (Niwa et al., 2016). The significance of stereotypes as a macro-factor influencing adolescent peer relationships (Niwa, 2012; Way & Rogers, 2014) points out that though adolescents use the stereotypes to form boundaries with peer groups and peer discrimination, they also resist these stereotypes and peer victimization (Chu, 2014; Way et al., 2013). The fact that the youth both accommodate and resist stereotypes has implications regarding undertaking measures for challenging the stereotypes and forming cross-ethnic friendships.

Romantic Relations in Adolescence: A Special Case of Peer Relations

It should be noted that early adolescence, i.e., 11–13 years of age is the time when children hit puberty, and this is the time when a special kind of peer relationship, involving mostly the opposite sex comes into the picture—the romantic relationships. Empirical data confirms that the first stage of romantic development is triggered by puberty (Friedlander et al., 2007) and at this time adolescents become highly interested in matters of romance, and this is the main discussion and interaction topic among friends as well as internal fantasies (Tuval-Mashiach et al., 2009). This new, common interest in romance moves adolescents away from having only same-sex friendships, as is typically the case throughout childhood, towards the formation of mixed-group peer groups, which provide an opportunity to interact with romantically attractive others (Connolly et al., 2004). Having a romantic relationship is associated with enhanced self-esteem, popularity, social acceptance, and feelings of competence in managing day-to-day interactions with both friends and romantic partners (Grover et al., 2005).

However, there is a flip side to it as well, as romantic relationships are also associated with negative social and health outcomes. Research shows that social group norms and opinions of peers also influence the course of teenage romantic relationships and the impact it has on the development of problematic behaviours. Adolescents' idea of who is a desirable dating partner, whether to get involved in a romantic relationship, and how to proceed in the relationship are largely influenced by their peers. Additionally, when adolescents engage in relationships that contradict their peer norms, then boys and girls tend to develop externalizing and internalizing problem behaviours, respectively (van Zantvliet et al., 2020).

Just like peer group norms, culture also impacts the romantic relationships in adolescence. While it is relatively a routine in the Western countries for adolescents to be dating their peers and having open conversations about it with their parents. The adolescents in India have an opposite narrative about it as adolescent relationships are largely looked down upon in the Indian context. The situation seems to be far more complicated for adolescent girls in India. They face additional pressure from their parents and society at large that condemns their involvement in romantic relationships. They are also at risk for teenage pregnancy, running away from home, dropping out of school, and disturbed familial relations (Manjula et al., 2018). Also, just like in adult romantic relationships, when there is a failed romantic relationship, it impacts the young mind severely, and the impact is for both the partners involved. The partner who has feelings for the other, which are not reciprocated, feels rejected and may lead to low self-esteem; whereas the partner who rejected the other person's advances, is likely to be made fun of and may also experience guilt in some cases for having done so. However, more research is required to explore these claims in the Indian context.

Peer Relations and Adolescent Identity Development

Peer relations can affect adolescent identity development through peer pressure in both positive and negative ways. Peers can be the source of affection, fun, and emotional security, yet they can also influence the adolescent to try out drugs and alcohol (Rohrbeck & Garvin, 2014). Similarly, positive peer relations can provide a safe haven to explore and expand one's self-concept, making the individual more confident, better adjusted, altruistic, and less aggressive. It can also enhance their social skills while at the same time limiting the adolescent's internalizing problems and protecting them against difficult relationships at home and/or school, in turn making the adolescent more involved in school and showing greater work orientation than their peers who do not have positive relations with peers. The findings of a study by La Greca and Harrison (2005) indicate that various aspects of adolescents' peer relations and close relationships contribute to feelings of internal distress in a snowballing fashion.

Adolescents' peer crowd affiliations, positive interactions with best friends, and the presence of a dating relationship appear to 'protect' adolescents against feelings of social anxiety, while relational victimization and negative interactions in best friendships may contribute to feelings of social anxiety. In contrast, adolescents' affiliation with a high-status peer crowd appeared to afford some protection against depressive affect, but relational victimization and negative qualities of best friendships and romantic relationships were key factors associated with depressive symptoms. In particular, relational victimization was a substantial predictor of both social anxiety and depressive symptoms. Research indicates that adolescents' identity development and relations with peers are closely interlinked (Ragelienė, 2016). According to Ragelienė's (2016) systematic review of literature, there is a positive

link between adolescent identity development and attachment to peers. Research with 100 early adolescents (10–14 years of age) showed that those who show secure attachment patterns with their peers are more likely to report higher levels of happiness. This kind of close relationships with peers have important implications for healthy adjustment for the adolescent, along with relatively higher self-esteem and life satisfaction and less distress (Sharon et al., 2018).

Peer experiences significantly shape human development and the development of psychopathology. There is a general agreement among psychologists that children come to view themselves at least partly from how they are treated by peers. For instance, the relationships with peers provide rich opportunities for learning social skills like cooperation, gaining support, or developing interpersonal skills, whereas continuous difficulty in forming healthy and stable peer relations are linked with difficulties with others later in life and in some extreme cases, it may also lead to clinically significant behavioural and affective disorders (Parker et al., 2005). Also, having better quality relationships with peers was associated with a lower tendency to experience feelings of loneliness.

The relationship between adolescent identity and peer relations is bidirectional, as having reached a sense of personal and social identity is implicated in less nervous or competitive behaviour in interpersonal relations, more satisfaction in romantic relations, less controlling behaviour, and the ability to reflect on one's interpersonal relations. This could also be attributed to the fact that when an adolescent enjoys positive relations with his/her peers which are built upon mutual cooperation, negotiation, mutual understanding, it becomes less threatening to their self-image which subsequently gives the adolescent a chance to freely explore and commit to their goals and beliefs. Thus, adolescents' self-esteem is enhanced and these positive interactions with peers serve as a buffer against the anxiety related to the developing identity. When adolescents believe that their peer relations can be improved over time, i.e., they are malleable, or in simpler terms when they hold incremental beliefs about peer relations (and not fixed), they tend to focus more on fostering positive social relationships and improving themselves in the social realms.

Impact of Social Media on Peer Relations

In the age of internet, social media applications like Facebook, Myspace, Twitter, Instagram, etc., have dramatically altered the nature of peer relationships as they provide increased opportunities and contexts for peer relationships. Social media platforms are providing avenues to adolescents to make new friends, express themselves, and stay connected with their friends while simultaneously mitigating the barriers of physical space (Lenhart et al., 2015). These platforms make it possible for the adolescents to connect (virtually) with their peers whom they cannot encounter physically (Rohrbeck & Garvin, 2014). This increased 'availability', 'permanence', and 'publicness' of social media has created new avenues for both positive and negative encounters with peers (Nesi et al., 2018). During adolescence, feedback from

peers about one's likeability is an important determinant of the individual's reputation in terms of visibility and status in the peer group hierarchy. In this context, social media tends to create a heightened awareness of one's own as well as others' popularity or status among peers. Adolescents seem to be particularly concerned with how they are viewed by their peers and often resort to manipulated self-presentation means in order to fit in with their peers (Chua and Chang, 2016). They can also use social media to expand their 'popularity' beyond their immediate physical location and possibly attain 'celebrity' status (Nesi et al., 2018).

For example, current global star Justin Bieber initially became famous because of the content he shared on video sharing platform YouTube during his teenage years. Teenagers are also likely to alter their real-life behaviours in order to look more appealing virtually. For instance, many social awareness campaigns are now making use of popular 'hashtags' (example-#IceBucketChallenge) so that they 'trend' online. In order to get featured in these 'trends', many adolescents also join these social causes, to be able to post content with the 'hashtag' and get noticed and popular in the virtual world. However, maintaining one's social media popularity is like walking on a double-edged sword. On the one hand, social media is providing opportunities to express and maximize their potential and reach, and on the other hand, social media also leaves the adolescents vulnerable to new forms of peer victimization like cyberbullying and victimization. Also, adolescents who otherwise enjoy a relatively higher peer status stand a chance to gain more from social media as it can give them opportunities to enhance their popularity and social connections (social enhancement hypothesis). On the same lines, adolescents who are socially anxious, lonely or unpopular, also get a chance to enhance their social connections and peer status online (social compensation hypothesis). This change in adolescents' peer status because of social media is termed as the transformation framework (Nesi et al., 2018).

The loss of time and space restrictions on the development of peer relationships in the virtual world is seemingly responsible for the increasing instances of cyberbullying and aggression worldwide. Now bullying experiences are no longer restricted to school hours, as with social media, adolescents can pick on their peers in the virtual world whenever and wherever they want. This has led to an increased frequency and immediacy of peer victimization instances (Nesi et al., 2018). Additionally, it is believed that cyber victimization experiences are relatively harsher and more uncontrollable for the victims because of the anonymity of the perpetrator, minimal adult supervision, easy accessibility, as well as fear of being humiliated in front of a larger 'audience'. While the researches carried out so far have been inconclusive about the exact prevalence of cyberbullying, but researchers agree that if appropriate measures are not adopted, then cyberbullying poses a great threat to the well-being of adolescents. Also, there is a possibility that even individual isolated incidents of cyberbullying/victimization are prone to repetition as other students may help circulate, copy or share the hurtful online content that was posted by the perpetrator (Wachs et al., 2018).

Research shows that the availability of internet access at home has led to a significant reduction in the time spent communicating with the family (Varghese & Niveditha, 2014). This family time could have otherwise provided a buffer against the potentially negative experiences with peers both online and offline. However, in India, mobile phones and computers are generally shared between family members, and for most Indian children, physical spaces have not been completely replaced by digital or virtual ones (Banaji, 2015).

Initial evidence from India suggests that the majority of 17–23 years old who are active users of social media applications, showed more helping behaviour towards their friends. They are also less likely to try to maintain a healthy and positive interaction with their parents. These youth are also apprehensive that ‘non-friends’ may get access to their personal information online or others may use their information against them (Rajeev & Jobilal, 2015). Thus, research in the Indian context on the impact of social media on peer relations is still in its nascent stages. Another potential reason for worry is the increased vulnerability of the adolescents due to excessive data sharing online as the majority of teenagers tend to not only share their private pictures, but also contact information and live locations which poses threat to their safety. While most of them report having control over who can access their content, a survey report from the US suggests that over 90% of adolescents do not really bother much about third-party applications accessing their data (Madden et al., 2013).

However, as was mentioned in the beginning of this section, social media is not all bad. Research shows that in order to avoid awkward conversations such as matters pertaining to sexual health, adolescents often turn to online information sources, preferably ones that ensure confidentiality, presenting the desired information in a humorous way (Byron et al., 2013). This helps destigmatize the issue on one hand, at the same time there is a risk of information overload and misinformation due to limited control over who can access what information. It can be said that if used correctly, social media platforms have great untapped potential to spread awareness among youth, to reach out to the community. Spreading awareness about social media literacy and best practices for safe use of the internet can be an important agenda for the policymakers today.

Dark Side of Adolescent Peer Relations: Peer Victimization

As indicated, peer social experiences differ in multiple ways across individual adolescents. Having actual or perceived social support from peers and family is related to lower levels of reported victimization among adolescents (Chopra et al., 2017).

Adolescents with objective peer difficulties experience subjective distress due to their circumstances. It is clear that adolescents, who are liked by their peers, enjoy acceptance in their group, conversely, when a group rejects a particular individual, a consensus is formed among members about that individual being undesirable. Thus, having friends in the classroom and the features of these relationships has an important bearing on the adolescent’s success in school (Ladd et al., 2012). Research with

50 adolescent girls from Mumbai with regards to their peers by Kasaralkar and Jogi (2016) showed negative notions held by the participants with respect to their peers. They reported being dominated by their peers and being forced to conform to peer group norms so as to gain their acceptance and approval. Research evidence suggests that peer group rejection has adverse consequences for adolescents' engagement and achievement in school, thus making them poorly adjusted to school. And these adverse peer relationships can lead to the extreme form of peer harassment, i.e., peer victimization. 'School bullying' and 'peer victimization' are used interchangeably in the literature, to denote a phenomenon that involves intentional negative actions that are repetitive in nature, with an underlying imbalance of power between the perpetrator and the victim. This phenomenon has been defined as, "*Bullying occurs when a student, or groups of students, say or do bad, nasty or unpleasant things to another student. It is also bullying when a student is teased repeatedly in an unpleasant way or when he or she is deliberately left out of things. It is not bullying when two students of about same strength or power argue or fight or when teasing is done in a friendly and playful or fun way*" (UNICEF, 2017, p. 38)."

Peer victimization instances can be either carried out directly or indirectly. Direct peer victimization is a relatively open attack on a victim which involves overt behaviours (physical and/or verbal), observable by others. Such instances typically involve a face-to-face encounter between the bully and the victim. The student who indulges in bullying may choose to attack the victim through the use of physical or verbal aggression, or may simply scare the victim by staring, laughing at or making inappropriate gestures towards the victim. Indirect peer victimization is relatively subtler and more difficult to detect. It usually takes place in the background, with rarely the bully and the victim coming in direct face-to-face confrontation. Social bullying/Victimization and Cyberbullying/Victimization can be considered as examples of indirect peer victimization instances. Social isolation, intentional exclusion, manipulating the victim's social relationships, spreading of rumours, etc., are all examples of indirect ways of peer victimization (Chakraborty, 2018).

It should be noted here that not all forms of peer victimization are equally damaging for the students, some of them lead to scars on the outside, and some hurt the student internally (Skrzypiec et al., 2011). Adolescents who are rejected by their peers tend to cope by engaging in risky behaviours. They do so as to gain recognition from their peers or to establish a nonconformist identity (Forman-Alberti, 2015).

Peer Relations and Adolescent Risk-Taking

Research shows that adolescents are more likely to engage in risk-taking behaviours even if explicit information about the probable rewards and costs is available, in the presence (real or perceived) of their peers (Smith et al., 2014). This increase in risk-taking behaviours in the presence of peers is known as peer effect. Neurobiological

evidence also confirms the peer effect as fMRI studies have shown increased activation of the brain regions involved in prediction and valuation of rewards (orbitofrontal cortex and ventral striatum), and increased risky behaviour among adolescents when in presence of their peers (Chein et al., 2011). Experiences of social exclusion among adolescents who report having poor resistance to peer pressure are associated with enhanced behavioural risk-taking as confirmed by neuroimaging studies which show increased activity in temporo-parietal junction which acts as a mediator in this case (Peake et al., 2013). Adolescents' engagement in risky behaviour seems to be contingent upon the quality of their friendships. The positive quality friendships which are marked by high levels of support can serve as a protective layer and help promote socio-emotional competencies as well as prevent engagement in delinquent and risky behaviours. The friendships which are marked by high levels of conflict are known as negative quality friendships and are linked with delinquency, risky sexual behaviour, and substance use (Forman-Alberti, 2015). Similar results were obtained in a longitudinal study that required 46 adolescents to keep a track of their peer conflicts and support for a period of two years. Later on, fMRI scans revealed greater activity in striatum and insula regions of brain among adolescents having high levels of conflicts with their peers and received less peer support were more susceptible to risk-taking behaviours as was also indicated by their performance in a risk-taking task. On the contrary, adolescents having relatively healthier peer relations seemed to have developed a kind of stress buffer which diminished their tendency to engage in risky behaviours (Telzer et al., 2015).

Research has shown that life skills education or training in psychosocial competencies can help the adolescent in times of uncertainty, self-doubt, and disappointment, thereby help reduce the likelihood of their involvement in risky behaviours (Vranda & Rao, 2011). According to Kotwal et al. (2005), friends play an important role in adolescents' initial tobacco use and subsequent continual usage which leads to dependence on tobacco later on. They also suggested that adolescents tend to engage in substance use (especially tobacco and alcohol) due to peer pressure (Ghosh et al., 2014; Tsering et al., 2010).

Managing Peer Relations

When adolescents believe that their peer relations can be improved over time, i.e., they are malleable, or in simpler terms when they hold incremental beliefs about peer relations (and not fixed), they tend to focus more on fostering positive social relationships and improving themselves in the social realms. Given the importance and influence of peer relationships on the adolescent development, it is necessary to know the ways to foster good peer relationships. The benefits associated with positive peer relations are not limited to better social adjustment and personal growth of an adolescent. Peers can also help bridge the gap in adolescents' knowledge and subsequently help solve some of the common dilemmas faced by the young mind. For instance, the National Adolescent Health Programme launched by the Indian government in 2014,

also referred to as the Rashtriya Kishore Swasthya Karyakrama, emphasizes upon the physical, sexual, mental, and social health of adolescents. It has a peer education system as one of its key components. Under the rubric of this peer education model, four adolescent boys and girls are selected and trained from each village to conduct one-on-one sessions and activities targeting adolescents' sexual and reproductive health, nutrition, well-being, substance misuse, and so on. Frequently, group outreach programmes are also planned within this scheme to provide networking opportunities to the adolescents. These peer educators are called as 'sathiya' who reach out to adolescents in their respective communities and help empower the adolescents of that region (National Health Mission- Peer Education Programme, 2021). On the same lines, in the era of Covid-19, advocates of public health profess the idea of harnessing the power of peer influence on adolescents to influence each other to follow social distancing norms and help curtail the spread of the virus (Andrews et al., 2020).

The dual role of peer relations in being both a source of stress as well as comfort in terms of social support for the adolescents has been highlighted by research studies. While a lot of adolescents report feeling stressed about being accepted by their peers, they are equally likely (if not more) to open up about their problems with their peers and seek social support from them (Camara et al., 2013). Preliminary evidence from intervention-based researches that employ support from peers as a factor influencing adherence to behavioural interventions for depression shows promising results (Ho et al., 2016).

At the same time, the adolescent needs to know the ways to handle negative peer pressure. Since acceptance by the peer group and conforming to peer group norms is paramount in this stage, it is important to distinguish between positive and negative peer influence. Peers provide a sense of security and belonging during this transitional phase where they may get confused and anxious by drastic and vast changes at all fronts—physical, emotional, cognitive, and social. It may lead to the developmental crisis of identity confusion. Hence, it is important for the adolescents to fulfil this developmental need to form peer relationships and derive benefits from it, but at the same time to safeguard from the harmful effects of negative peer relations.

Two aspects can be mainly looked into with regard to managing peer relationships: (a) parental management of peers, and (b) social skills of adolescents.

Parental management of peers refers to the role of parents in the peer relationships of adolescents. The goals and beliefs held by the parents towards peer relationships in their adolescents affect the relationship positively or negatively. Mounts (2011) reported in a longitudinal study that the caregivers' goals and beliefs affect parental management of peer relationships, which in turn can lead to positive or negative outcomes. A greater number of caregivers' goals of improving peer relationships and higher beliefs about parental authority over peers were related to higher levels of consulting, guiding, and conflict about peers. This led to lower levels of assertion and responsibility in peer relationships over time. However, when parents were having greater number of goals of improving peer relationships without the beliefs about parental authority, it resulted in adolescents reporting higher levels of social skills such as cooperation, responsibility, assertion, empathy, and self-control over time.

Thus, higher beliefs about parental authority and conflict about peers put a barrier in parent–adolescent relationship that hampers effective communication and the development of social skills in adolescents. Hence, there is a need to look into the beliefs about parental authority and avoid peer conflict to improve peer relationships.

It highlights the importance of the type of parenting style adopted by the caregivers. Adolescents' perception of parental management of peers differs significantly across the parenting styles (Mounts, 2002). Parenting style was found to be a significant moderator between parental management practices of monitoring, guiding, prohibiting, and supporting, as well as the drug use outcomes. Further, parents' knowledge about adolescents' peer relationships and their direct involvement in peer-oriented activities shows a difference between the parents, with mothers reporting higher level of knowledge and most peer-oriented activities with their daughters (Updegraff et al., 2001).

Thus, parenting practices and parent-adolescent relationships play an important role in adolescent peer relationships and can facilitate the development of proper social skills to manage peer relations in an effective way. Adolescents can also learn social skills through the life skills education programme in schools.

Conclusion

As stated by Erikson (1968, p. 23), individual development is a constant “interplay between the psychological and the social, the developmental and the historical”. There is a significant influence of the macro-contexts on the micro-contexts of the adolescents leading to a dynamic nature of their development in various aspects. Peer relationships as a part of the micro-contexts of the adolescent's life develop and get affected by the factors at the macro level. This interaction determines the impact of peer relationships as positive or negative on the adolescent development. This underscores the importance of making concerted efforts by all stakeholders mainly the family and school system to provide conducive environments for building positive peer relationships. The present chapter discussed the concept and development of peer relationships and explained its role in adolescent identity development.

Peer relationships form an important milestone in the development of adolescents. It provides assurance, affirmation, confidence, and support to explore one's identity—the crucial developmental task in this stage. The challenge, however, lies in peer rejection, peer victimization, conformity pressures which may give rise to behavioural problems and negatively affect the personality and psychological well-being of the adolescents as they grow. Hence, there is a need to focus on this crucial aspect of adolescent development.

Time to Reflect

Peers occupy an important place in adolescents' life across cultures. They have a significant impact on adolescent development and behaviour in this transitional phase of life marked by developmental transition as well as shifting from family to peer influence. It is a universal power struggle between parents and peers where the adolescent finds peers more approachable and aligned than parents; although parents are always for the well-being of their adolescents. How do we take care of this situation where all the three stakeholders—the adolescent, parents, and peers can complement each other towards achieving the common goal of adolescent positive development?

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